

Sermon 05/25/25

We continue today with our series “Teach us to Pray” from the gospel of Luke where Jesus’ disciples see him praying and ask him to teach them how to pray. How often, in our doubt and uncertainty, do we wish we could be one of those disciples and learn directly from Him, how to offer prayers to God.

But of course, we can do exactly that whenever we want. At least we can read the words He said to them. All we have to do is read from Luke 11:1-4.

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished one of his disciples said to him,

“Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

He said to them, “When you pray, say

“Father,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Jesus makes it seem so easy and simple. Why then do we find so many books out there telling us how to pray? I must be honest. I have one of those books. It’s by Tim Keller and it’s called Prayer. I also have another book by Keller, called Preaching. I mean, it’s one thing when all you have to do is pray; it’s a little bit harder when you have to preach about praying.

Keller walks us through so much. Did you know, for example, that Martin Luther devoted three hours a day to prayer? But of course this is not a book of trivia. Keller says that prayer is a duty and a discipline but is also a conversation with God. Prayer requires us to accept our dependence on God, yet also leads us to restful trust and confident hope in Him.

But one statement from Keller really struck me - it seems to put things in perspective and really meshes with what Jesus has told his disciples. “Prayer is a balanced fourfold integration of praise, petition, thanks, and confession.”

Praise. Petition or asking for help. Thanks. Confession.

This is what we do in the Lord's Prayer and that's great, but we have to be careful as we go through prayer. Nervousness can make us a bit too rigid in our prayer as if we have a checklist we're using. I think pastor Dan told us a couple weeks ago that this prayer, the Lord's Prayer, doesn't have to be prayed using precisely the same words. He used the example of Gene Peterson's rendering of this scripture passage in his paraphrase translation that we all know as The Message.

But what if we can't find words. Sometimes we struggle to pray at all. We choke up and can't say anything. When I came back to the church 9 years ago, I couldn't pray. I mean I could join in when we all said the Lord's Prayer, but when I was alone I just choked up and I don't mean choked up with emotion. I was unable to say or even feel anything.

How did I learn to pray? I watched a teacher - it was Jerry Sittser many years ago - standing in front of a classroom, while he prayed Psalm 139 aloud. And it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen. This is one of the longer Psalms, but it wasn't the fact that he recited it perfectly from memory. It was the way he spoke, in the most natural voice, the most calm and natural manner. Once I heard him, within a few days I was free to pray to God as if He was in the room with me, as if I could have a natural conversation with Him. And of course He was in the room with me. He still is.

So Tim Keller offers us a way to organize our prayers. Remember the four parts – praise, petition or asking for help, thanks, and confession. He also offers us a way to orient ourselves as we pray. He tells us there are three orientations in prayer - upward, inward, and outward. We see the upward orientation in the first two lines of our scripture passage. "Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." Pastor Dan and Natalie Mauer have led us through these first two parts of Jesus' prayer in the last few weeks. Now we move on.

We see the outward orientation in the next line "Give us each day our daily bread." Here we are asking for help from God, and I love this line. Now at first it seems like a "Gimme" line. You know, gimme this, gimme that. Is God going to cave in and give us all we want? Well of course not. We all probably remember times when we ask God for something, and later realize that our request was inappropriate. We asked for the wrong thing, or too much. Maybe we were just being greedy.

Once again, back to that great line from our passage, "Give us each day our daily bread." This is about bread, not chocolate cake topped with ice cream. We are to pray for the essentials that we need each day, not all those luxury goods we'd like to have. Jesus tells

us to actually ask him for what we need. This is the God that the same author, Tim Keller, has written about in his book, Prodigal God, that some of us have read in our Roots groups, the God that lavishes love and care on his children. He gives us what we need.

Remember once again, our three ways of orienting ourselves in prayer – upward, outward, and inward. We’ve discussed upward and outward prayer. But when we pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us,” we are turning our eyes inward on ourselves, looking into our heart and realizing that when it becomes bent and misguided, we sin. Oh, how often we stray, often in small ways, but sometimes in the larger and more important aspects of life.

And so we ask God for His forgiveness, for His grace. But we are not alone in this world. We live in relationship with others – our scripture again - “for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.” It is here, that Jesus’ prayer reminds me of the Ten Commandments. The first four of the commandments are about our relationship with God, but the last six are about our relationship to those with whom we live – we honor father and mother, we honor our spouse by not committing adultery, we do not steal, we do not bear false witness, we do not covet what our neighbor has, and finally we do not kill.

In the same way, when Jesus says to pray the words, “for we also forgive everyone who sins against us,” he is telling us that when a person with whom we live in community sins against us, we must forgive them. We don’t want to be the person who devoutly prays for God’s forgiveness and grace when we do wrong, yet never extends such grace to those who have wronged us.

In our last line from today’s scripture we again turn outward to ask God for help. “And lead us not into temptation.” Well, temptation is just a normal part of life. One interpreter tells us that this plea for help asks God to rescue us from those tempting situations which without God’s grace we would not be able to withstand. At times when we know that what we are about to do is wrong, when we feel the urge getting stronger, when our resistance is weakening, then we say to God, “Lord, lead me away to safety.” When we do this we are confessing our weakness and praying for God’s faithfulness.

John Calvin, writing 500 years ago, saw another temptation, not one that leads us to fall into the everyday sins, but a much bigger temptation. The temptation to believe on one hand that we don’t need God, or on the other hand to cultivate resentment and hatred for God. One leads us to believe that our life is fine without faith, the other to live in

deep bitterness at our own misfortune. One voice says in smug indifference, “God can do nothing for me. I have all I need.” The other voice calls out in anger, “God has never done anything for me. Why should I thank Him?”

Many people today have split off the true way, to either dismiss God as unimportant, or to rage and rail against God, and have stumbled into a life without belief, without faith.

But it seems that often, even those of us who do believe become, not indifferent, but let’s say no longer awestruck by what we believe. There is a saying everyone knows – “Familiarity breeds contempt.” I don’t think it’s always true, but it is true that “familiarity breeds complacency and indifference.” And I think our familiarity with the Gospel message, with God’s grace and generosity can easily lead us to take all this for granted. We’ve heard it all so many times, we know it all so well.

Imagine that we are all living thousands of years ago in the ancient near east, the land that gave birth to Judaism and Christianity, where the loving message of God was born. There were peoples living in that time and place, living under a much different religion, a religion that taught that the people were nothing but slaves whose sole purpose was to serve the Gods, Gods who luxuriated in the heavens above.

Imagine the shock of a belief like ours entering that world - that God will give us what we need for life, that our sins and wrongdoing will be forgiven, and that God will help us each to stay on the right path through life.

God, the God that we know reigns over all, the God that sent us His Son is generous beyond belief. So generous that we needn’t be bashful when we talk to Him. Scholar James Edwards says that we are often tentative in our prayer requests. We say “Lord can you or might you or would you do X, Y, or Z.” But Edwards, who knows his Greek very well, tells us that the Lord’s Prayer in its original Greek tells us NOT to pray to God in polite timidity, but instead in bold confidence. That we are free to expect that God will fulfill His promise to us, to extend to us His grace, mercy, and love.

So with bold confidence, say with me
Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
GIVE me today my daily bread.
FORGIVE me my sins, for I also forgive everyone who sins against me.
And LEAD me not into temptation.”

Amen

