

The School of Prayer

Part 1 – Praying Like Jesus

Luke 11:1-4

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 7, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.”² So he said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, may your name be revered as holy.

May your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.” (Luke 11:1-4, NRSV)



Imagine you could spend three years studying with Jesus. If you had all that time together face to face, what would you ask Jesus to teach you? Here is the smartest person in the history of the world, the one who understands all mysteries, the Son of God who holds all power in a single spoken word. Think of all the knowledge he could impart. Imagine the wondrous things he could show you how to do. I’d like to learn how to walk on water. How about turning water to wine? That might be dangerous! Or multiplying bread? That would definitely be dangerous! I’d ask Jesus to teach me to be a better preacher. Imagine learning to preach from Jesus! Show us how to heal, Lord. Help us learn how to share our faith. Make us better leaders. What would you want Jesus to teach you?

Did you know that in the three years his disciples spent with him there is only one recorded instance of them asking Jesus to teach them something? According to Luke, one day they were watching Jesus pray, maybe even eavesdropping on his prayer, and then one of them asked Jesus if he would teach them how to pray like him. He immediately agreed to do so. Jesus taught his disciples lots of things, but the only thing he taught them by request was how to pray. If given the chance, is this the first thing you would ask Jesus to teach you?

Some of us might. When it comes to prayer, some of us know we have a lot to learn. Do you consider yourself

somebody who excels at prayer, who prays like Jesus prays? Many people in the church would prefer to leave prayer to the professionals, people like me who are supposed to be good at prayer. But what if pastors don’t find prayer easy? That’s always been the case for me.

Years ago I read a quote from the Dutch priest, Henri Nouwen, whose life and writings have inspired millions. What he said about prayer shocked me: “So what about my life of prayer? Do I like to pray? Do I want to pray? Do I spend time praying? Frankly, the answer is no to all three questions. After sixty-three years of life and thirty-eight years of priesthood, my prayer seems as dead as a rock...”¹ Funny enough, his words not only shocked me, they encouraged me. If Henri Nouwen can struggle with prayer, maybe it’s okay if you and I struggle as well. Even Paul acknowledges this struggle when he writes, “...for we do not know how to pray as we ought...”² So maybe it’s good if we, like those first disciples, also ask Jesus to teach us how to pray.

As we do, notice that his first disciples don’t ask Jesus to teach them *about* prayer. These are not students studying for an exam, but disciples learning to live like their rabbi. That means that they don’t simply want to know what Jesus knows, but they want to become *like* Jesus, even do the things Jesus does. That’s what it means to be a disciple. That’s what it means to be a Christian, to learn to live life as Jesus would live life if he were in your shoes. So Lord, teach us how to pray like you pray.

And this is the first thing that we need to understand here about prayer, that it is meant to be learned. Notice that when his disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he doesn’t say, “Just pray. Just do what comes natural. There’s no wrong way to pray.” That’s not what he says, not at all. In fact, by *teaching* them how to pray, here and elsewhere, Jesus is making clear that prayer doesn’t come naturally to us, that there are in fact wrong ways to pray, and that prayer is a discipline which, like all disciplines, must be learned over time and by great effort.

¹ Source unknown.

² Romans 8:26. This and all other biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

What this means is that none of us can say, “I’m just not good at praying.” That does not qualify as a legitimate excuse, as if prayer is an ability you are either born with or without. To say you don’t often pray because you are not good at prayer is like saying you don’t speak Spanish because you are not good at speaking Spanish. Did you know that children born in Spain are not good at speaking Spanish! It doesn’t come naturally. To learn a language you have to work at it. It takes practice. Same with prayer. As has been said before, there is no formation without repetition.³ This means that learning to pray comes down to a question of intention. Everyone can learn to pray. We have a willing teacher, the best teacher we can imagine. So the question is whether or not we are willing to let him teach us? Do you want Jesus to teach you how to pray? Do you believe that you can learn to pray like Jesus? Apparently Jesus believes that with his help it’s possible.

In response to their request, Jesus gives his disciples a prayer we have since titled The Lord’s Prayer. We have this prayer recorded here in Luke 11, and again in Matthew 6, though Matthew’s version is different, and likely more familiar to you. Most scholars agree that Jesus probably taught this prayer on different occasions, which would have been expected because most of us don’t learn things the first time. By Jewish standards, this was a very short prayer. It’s only 38 words in the original Greek. Except for its length, however, it is otherwise a thoroughly Jewish prayer. Every bit of it can be replicated in the Old Testament, or in other Jewish prayers of that day. Any devout Jew in Jesus’ days could have sincerely prayed every word of this prayer.⁴

But it’s not just a prayer stuck in 1st century Israel. We live in a world that in many ways is quite like the world Jesus lived in, a world crying out for justice, and bread, and mercy, and deliverance. That means that Jesus prayed a prayer here that is as relevant in our day as it was in his. This is not a prayer that has its head stuck in the clouds. At its heart, it’s prayer for the Kingdom of God to be realized here and now, heaven on earth.⁵

In this introduction to the Lord’s Prayer today, I want to show you five things I believe Jesus is teaching us here when he gives us this prayer. There is a lot more we will learn along the way, but we will start with these five. I already gave you the first one, that prayer is not something which comes naturally to us, but something which we all have to learn. The second thing we learn

here is that in giving us this prayer, Jesus is not only giving us a *script* to pray, but also giving us *categories* for prayer, and an *order* for those categories to be prayed.

For most of my life in the church I was taught to pray this prayer straight through as we have it handed down to us. That’s often how we still pray the Lord’s Prayer today, and that is certainly one way to pray like Jesus. In fact, in Luke’s version Jesus says, “**When you pray, say...**”, seeming to imply that these are the words we should use. But in Matthew’s version we discover another alternative. There Jesus says, “**Pray then in this way...**”⁶ This seems to suggest categories and order, rather than a script, a sort of “Here, try something like this...” suggestion.

Many of you are familiar with the analogy often used here of a Christmas tree.⁷ Think about each line or phrase of the Lord’s Prayer as an empty branch on the tree. As you pray your way down the tree, go slowly and decorate each branch, letting Jesus’ words inspire you to pray along those lines. For example, instead of just asking God to bring heaven to earth and then moving on to daily bread, pause to expand your prayer to include different ways that you want to see this realized. If heaven came to earth, hungry people would be fed, sick people would be healed, wars would dissolve into peace, grief would transform into joy, death would be replaced by life. So take some time to pray specifically for these things. There is far too much in this category to cover in one sitting, even in one lifetime, but allow the Spirit to lead you to pray for the things in this category which come to mind on whatever particular day you are praying. Once you’ve decorated that branch, move on to the next one and do the same. If this seems confusing to you, be patient. Over the next two months we are going to model this way of praying the Lord’s Prayer many times, and give you plenty of opportunities to practice yourself.

But it’s not only categories which Jesus is giving us here, but an order. When you sit down to pray *without* guidance from Jesus, where do your prayers typically begin? I don’t know about you, but my prayers usually begin with me. My needs. My desires. My frustrations. My sins. That’s natural, because we are naturally self-centered. But Jesus is teaching us here to begin with our focus on him. The first whole half of the prayer includes God-centered petitions, that *his name* would be hallowed, that *his kingdom* would come, that *his will* would be done. Only then are we taught to

³ I’m borrowing this line from Jon Tyson, pastor of Church of the City in New York.

⁴ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015), 330.

⁵ I’m indebted here to N.T. Wright, *The Lord and His Prayer* (Eerdmans, 1996), x.

⁶ Matthew 6:9

⁷ Ben Patterson, “Five Ways to Pray the Psalms”, *Christianity Today*, October 24, 2008. Were blessed to have Ben come and teach us this in person some years ago at our fall retreat.

move to human-centered petitions, for provision, pardon, protection for ourselves.⁸ Jesus wants us to ask him for daily bread, but he doesn't want us to begin there. He wants us to begin by praising the one who is the Bread of Life. The order invites us out of self-centeredness and into wholehearted worship.

The third thing Jesus teaches us here about prayer is connected to the second. When we use the Lord's Prayer not only as a script, but as categories and an order, we quickly realize that we will never come to the end of this prayer. Consider the example I just used, taking Jesus' cue to pray for heaven to come to earth and praying specifically about ways that needs to happen. Can you think of examples of how things in this world, even things in your own life, are not currently playing out according to God's will? Of course you can! The list is endless. Even in my own life alone the list is endless. When could I ever get to the end of that prayer? Never! The list is far too long. It's why the American preacher and abolitionist Henry Ward Beecher once wrote, "I used to think the Lord's Prayer was a short prayer, but as I live longer and see more of life I begin to believe there is no such thing as getting through it. If a man, in praying that prayer, were to be stopped by every word until he had thoroughly prayed it, it would take a lifetime."⁹

Let me tell you something that many of you already know. This prayer will never become tired, as long as we pray it with our hearts and minds engaged. Some of you have told me that at those times in life when you don't know what else to say in your prayers, when self-generated words escape you or seem empty, you have found this prayer to be a refuge, a place you can return to time and time again. Everything we might possibly pray is here: praise, thanksgiving, hope, lament, desperate pleas for help for ourselves and others. In fact, every prayer we offer should be some form or another of this prayer. If you are praying a prayer that does not fit into these categories, than you are likely not praying the way Jesus prays. Every longing in this life that we might possibly want to lift up to God is being routed through what Jesus taught us here about prayer. We will never come to the end of this prayer.

The fourth thing Jesus is teaching us here is that prayer is never just about me and God. As you may have noticed before, every single pronoun in the Lord's Prayer is plural. Jesus doesn't just pray for his own daily bread, but asks his Father to provide daily bread for everybody. So should we. As we let him teach us to

pray, Jesus will reorient our individualistic tendencies and help us remember just how connected we really are. Every phrase of this prayer reminds us of the second great commandment, that we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, as it leads us to pray for our neighbors as we pray for ourselves. *Our Father. Give us this day... Forgive us...as we forgive... Lead us... Deliver us...*

Finally, perhaps the most important thing Jesus teaches us here in the Lord's Prayer is that it truly is the *Lord's* prayer. I've heard people sometimes rename this as The Disciples Prayer, because Jesus gives it to disciples to pray. But that's not quite right. Jesus isn't *giving* us a prayer, as much as he is teaching us *his* prayer. Each phrase gives us a window into his life and his relationship with his Father. The prayer is a portrait of his life as he embodied what he prayed. As one commentator put it, "[Jesus is] the invisible background of every one of the Lord's Prayer's petitions."¹⁰ Each phrase points to him even though he isn't mentioned by name in any of them.

The 2nd century Christian author Tertullian called The Lord's Prayer "a summary of the gospel." Anglican New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, puts it this way, "When Jesus gave his disciples this prayer, he was giving them part of his own breath, his own life, his own prayer."¹¹ And as Jesus prayed, Jesus lived...and lives! As we embrace this prayer and let Jesus teach us how to pray through it, we will find ourselves drawn closer and closer to him, who is at the center of this prayer. And not just closer to him, but formed in him, and he in us. The Lord's Prayer is therefore not a prayer for everybody to pray, but a prayer given to those who are following Jesus on this kingdom journey.¹²

I want to invite you into this journey. Better yet, Jesus wants to invite us all into this journey. For the next two months we are going to take a deep dive into a prayer many of us know by heart, words we have recited more than any other words in scripture, but perhaps have only skimmed along the surface. And as all disciples should understand, we don't just want to learn from Jesus *about* prayer; we want him to teach us *how to pray*. That means that we are going to have to practice. With that in mind, let me offer you four very practical suggestions on how you might do so. I'm not expecting that we all will take all four, but maybe there

⁸ I'm indebted here to J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Crossway, 2007), 22-23.

⁹ Cited by Jon Tyson, "God Comes Where He's Wanted 2.0: The Lord's Prayer", preached at Church of the City New York, March 20, 2023. Listen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BP5i4DwXg40>

¹⁰ Helmut Thielicke, cited by Wesley Hill, *The Lord's Prayer: A Guide to Praying to Our Father* (Lexham Press, 2019), 4.

¹¹ Wright, x.

¹² N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 135.

are at least one or two you can embrace these next couple of months and beyond.¹³

First, if you haven't done so already, I encourage you to commit the Lord's Prayer to memory. Any version will do, but I'd suggest the one printed in the bulletin this morning, the one we pray as a congregation when we are together. You will never regret making space in your mind and heart for these timeless words because once you do you will be able to call upon them at any time, in any place, and in any circumstance.

Second, I would encourage us all to embrace the time-honored practice of making the Lord's Prayer the framework of our daily prayers. Praying it straight through is fine, as long as you can keep your mind and heart engaged and not let the all-too-familiar words thoughtlessly tumble out as your attention is distracted elsewhere. Better yet, treat the prayer like an empty Christmas tree and try and decorate each branch as the Spirit leads. Spend some time praising our Father in Heaven, for his name to be hallowed. Spend time praying for ways earth needs to be transformed into heaven, for daily bread of all kinds for all sorts of people, for forgiveness and forgiving, for protection from evil and even from ourselves. In the weeks to come we will talk in depth about each branch and model for one another what it looks like to decorate each one.

Third, some people have found it very beneficial to repeat the prayer slowly again and again, in the rhythm of your breathing, so that the calming and nourishing medicine of this prayer sinks into your heart and mind, becomes second nature. You might do this on a slow walk around your neighborhood, or along the river. Turn off the radio and do this while you drive – with your eyes open! The French philosopher, Simone Weil, who prayed the prayer in this way, once wrote,

I recited the Our Father every day before work, and I repeated it very often in the vineyard. Since that time I have made a practice of saying it through once each morning with absolute attention...The effect of this practice is extraordinary and surprises me every time, for, although I experience it each day, it exceeds my expectation at each repetition.¹⁴

Finally, pray the Lord's Prayer together in community, both as a script, but also allowing it to prompt categories and an order. We already do this often here at Faith on Sunday mornings. We will do it every week during this series, sometimes praying it straight through, but more often taking time to decorate one

branch each Sunday. In addition to Sunday mornings, I encourage your Life Groups to set aside time for the Lord's Prayer each time you meet. Don't just talk about this prayer together, *practice this prayer together!* Best yet, pray the Lord's Prayer in your families at home. If you have children, take this opportunity to teach them this prayer, and then pray it together regularly. There are few things more important to teach our children than this prayer Jesus teaches us. How might life be different for them if our kids grow up knowing how to pray like Jesus prays?

I've never been to the Holy Land myself, but I've talked to many people, including some of you, who have had the opportunity to visit some of the most sacred sites in the world. You stand at a place like the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where people seeking God have gathered to pray for thousands of years, and you have a sense that you are on hallowed ground.

The Lord's Prayer is similar ground. Consider that for 2000 years countless followers of Jesus have prayed these same words in every known language, in every corner of the world, and in every imaginable circumstance. Peter, James, John, Mary, and Paul prayed these same words. Augustine prayed these words, as did Origen, Ignatius and Benedict. Thomas Aquinas prayed these words, along with Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Billy Graham, C.S. Lewis, they all prayed the Lord's Prayer, along with millions of unknown but faithful brothers and sisters whose names have been long forgotten but who will, along with us, one day see every petition in this prayer completely fulfilled by the one to whom we pray. When we take these words on our lips and into our hearts we stand on hallowed – and crowded! – ground.

Last week Ron challenged us all to think about resolutions we make this New Year, especially considering how we might resolve to do the things Jesus wants as much as the things we want in 2024. It's hard for me to think of a better New Year's resolution than resolving to let Jesus teach us how to pray. For all the times the disciples asked Jesus boneheaded questions, they got this one right. If there is anything that we might want Jesus to teach us, it is to pray like he prays. The 19th century Scottish minister Robert Murray McCheyne once put it this way: "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is – and no more."¹⁵ If this is true, as I suspect that it is, then we all should ask Jesus to teach us to pray like he prays.

¹³ I'm indebted here to N.T. Wright in *The Lord and His Prayer* for these suggestions, xiv-xv.

¹⁴ Cited by Jon Tyson

¹⁵ Cited by Packer, 15.

When he agrees to grant our request, which he always does, we then should make ourselves the most willing of disciples.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What's been your experience with the Lord's Prayer? How has this prayer been meaningful to you over the years? Can you think of a time when it was particularly meaningful?
2. Read Luke 11:1-4 again. Try to read these words as if you were reading them for the first time. What do you notice here?
3. Do you think prayer is something that comes naturally to us, or is prayer something that we have to learn?
4. When Jesus gave this teaching on prayer, how do you think he intended it to be used?
5. Do you agree that in a sense every prayer be a mirror of the Lord's Prayer? Why or why not?
6. What specifically would you like Jesus to teach you about prayer? How would you like to grow in this area of your life this coming year?
7. Of the options presented as possibilities for engagement with the Lord's Prayer in the coming months, which one(s) would you like to embrace:
 - Memorizing the prayer
 - Praying the prayer daily, as a script but also 'decorating the Christmas tree'
 - Praying the prayer slowly and repetitively
 - Praying the prayer in community (worship, Life Group, family, other)
 - Teaching your children or grandchildren to pray the prayer
 - Other...
8. Take time, either as a group or on your own, to pray through the Lord's Prayer in one of the suggested ways.

Table to Table: A Question for kids and adults to answer together.



Which part of the Lord's Prayer is your favorite part? Which part is confusing to you?