

Why Do We Pray?

Luke 11:1-13

John Breon

When I asked for questions about prayer, one person shared a testimony of how they have come to see prayer:

I have struggled with the idea of prayer many times. My grandmother had some small plaques on the wall with sayings (I have been told they were sold during the depression by door-to-door salesmen). One said, "Jesus Never Fails." Another said "Prayer Changes Things." I thought as a young adult that prayer could change me—how I thought about a person or a situation. [Through Disciple Bible Study this person had a heart-warming, life-changing and perspective-changing experience.] I finally got it: prayer changes the world. Even though I still have doubts from time to time, I now know that God exists and blesses us with what we need (if not always what we want), and that prayer is necessary to our existence as Christians. When I talk with skeptics, I truly empathize with the doubts they share with me. I share with them that even though it may seem foolish, I continue to pray with the knowledge faith gives me that prayer is needed and that God listens.

We're continuing to examine questions about prayer. Last week, we looked at some definitions and descriptions of prayer. Today, we're looking at motivation for prayer as we try to answer the question "Why do we pray?" What's the point of praying? If God already knows everything and already has a plan, where do our prayers fit in?

If we were anthropologists, we could look at different cultures throughout history and see that some kind of praying is universal. People in many places at many times pray in some way to someone or something. Could that desire for connection with some "higher power" or something beyond ourselves be part of our homesickness for God? Could it be that God has given us that desire so we will seek and reach toward God?

Those are questions worth exploring. But I want to focus here on why we as followers of Jesus Christ pray. What's our motivation? What do we look for in prayer?

Philip Yancey is an outstanding author. He's written several books about various issues and questions people have about God and the Church and faith. He writes theology for people who are seeking. As a journalist, he brings a unique perspective to the issues he addresses. One of his books is *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*

Yancey's answer to *why pray?* is that Jesus did. For followers of Jesus, that's pretty good motivation. *We pray because Jesus prayed.* As a good Jew, he went regularly to the synagogue where people gathered for prayer and worship. He probably followed the custom of praying three times a day. Just skimming the Gospels, we see Jesus praying at his baptism. He no doubt prayed during his temptations in the wilderness. During his public ministry, he often slipped away to a quiet a place to pray. Parents asked him to place his hands on their children and pray for them. He prayed for various people. At the Last Supper, he told Simon Peter that he was praying for him and the other disciples. John 17 records what Jesus prayed not only for his disciples then, but for "those who will believe in me through their message" (v 20). Jesus prayed for us.

Yancey says that

The Gospels record just over a dozen specific prayers by Jesus, along with several parables and teachings on the subject. ...We can safely assume that Jesus often prayed in private too, for when his disciples asked for instruction on prayer Jesus said they should seclude themselves. Such prayers made an impression on his followers: five times the Gospels mention Jesus' practice of praying alone. (78)

At one of those times when Jesus was praying, one of his disciples said, "Teach us to pray." Just think about the fact that Jesus prayed. We might wonder, if Jesus was God in the flesh, who was he talking to when he prayed? This is one reason we have the doctrine of the Trinity—to distinguish between God the Son who was incarnate and God the Father

whom Jesus addressed in prayer and who empowered Jesus with the Holy Spirit as he prayed.

We might also notice that if Jesus needed to pray so consistently, how much more do we need to pray. And we can learn to pray. This passage in Luke treats prayer as something to be learned, not just a release of feelings. Discipline is involved in learning to pray.

So we pray because *Jesus prayed. Also, we pray because Jesus tells us to.* He expects that his followers will pray. Giving instructions, he says, "*When you pray.*" Jesus wouldn't have taught so much about prayer if he didn't expect his followers to do it. Here in Luke 11, Jesus gives a model prayer and he teaches about prayer. In his teaching we see another reason we pray. *We pray because we need what Jesus teaches us to ask for.*

We pray because we're part of the community of God's people. In response to the disciples' request that he teach them to pray, Jesus first provides us with a model prayer or an outline of prayer. This is a prayer for the community of the kingdom (note "us" and "we"). The prayer Jesus teaches his disciples is essential for making the disciples into the new community who know God as Father. The habit of praying along the lines Jesus gives serves as an ongoing means of forming and shaping this community. By practicing such prayer, we develop a worldview centered on the gracious God Jesus reveals. We learn to depend on God and to imitate God. And we see all of this in light of God's coming in his kingdom (Joel Green, *Luke New International Commentary New Testament*). Praying this kind of prayer and praying this prayer that Jesus teaches sets us apart as his people. It's one of the ways we identify as followers of Jesus.

We pray because we need to know God. Jesus wants to show his people, to show us, who God is and what God is like. He said earlier that he reveals the Father (10:22). He's doing that now. Jesus himself refers to God as Father and speaks to God as Father. The beginning and end of this section (11:1-13) speak of God as the Father of the disciples and the whole section conveys Jesus' teaching about God's generosity and faithfulness. Because of God's faithfulness we can live without the anxiety and agitation Martha experienced in the previous story (10:38-42). Seeing God the

Father's goodness helps disciples respond with trust and faithfulness (Green).

Jesus makes prayer intimate. He was probably the first to use "Father" to address God in personal prayer. We are sometimes reminded that "father" is not a positive image for everyone. People who were abandoned or abused by their fathers may have a hard time relating to God as Father. It's helpful to remember that God is Spirit and is neither male nor female. We call God Father because Jesus did and because God is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We don't imagine God as an earthly father, only bigger and stronger. Instead, we see that the best qualities in earthly parents come from God. When we think of God as Father, we need to think in terms of adoption and relationship. In Christ we become part of a family or household whose head is God the Father. As God's children, we are called to represent our Father in our character. The idea of "father" carries not only implications of authority that call for obedience, but it also expresses other qualities of fatherhood like love, nurture, mercy, and delight. That's the kind of God Jesus is revealing and the God to whom we pray.

We pray to focus on God and get lined up with God's program. Jesus' pattern of prayer starts with God and centers on God. We seek for God's name, God's nature, to be revealed and honored. We pray for God's kingdom—God's reign, rule and authority—to be manifested. And so we submit to God's rule. We both look forward to the day when everyone will honor God's name and we seek to honor God's name now. We look forward to when God's kingdom will come in all its fullness and we live now as citizens of God's kingdom. Already, right now, we experience some of the peace and love and power of that future reality.

Within that context, *we pray because we trust God to provide what we need.* To pray for daily bread is to recognize that we depend on God daily for all that sustains life. This reminds us that our lives are not our own. Life, and all that is essential to it, is a gift from God. Daily bread recalls the manna God provided for the Israelites in the wilderness. There was enough for each day, but the people could not gather extra to hoard for the days to come. We rely on God that consistently. The phrase about daily bread may

also point to the meal of the kingdom, the Messiah's feast when he comes in glory.

We pray because we need to be forgiven and to forgive. The request for forgiveness calls us to be honest about our sin and to repent. The line about forgiving others shows that we can't ask God to forgive us if we hold grudging and unforgiving feelings toward another person. Forgiveness is vital for good relationships and community. The currency of God's kingdom is relationships. And forgiveness keeps that currency in circulation.

In the riots following the first Rodney King verdict in Los Angeles, Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten by a raging gang. After his painful recovery, he met face to face with his attackers, shook hands with them, and forgave them. A reporter, commenting on the scene, wrote, "It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage" (Willimon and Hauerwas, *Lord, Teach Us* 78). Forgiveness can seem outrageous. Our society may view someone who dares to forgive as brain damaged, not thinking clearly. But that kind of forgiveness is one of the marks of followers of Jesus, of the community gathered around him and his word.

If we take what people do seriously enough to forgive them, that says something about how important those people are. If we tell someone, "What you did doesn't matter," we're saying, "You don't matter." Forgiveness may be one of the most difficult expressions of discipleship, but it's one of the most vital.

We pray because we need help dealing with temptations and testing. We ask God to keep us from temptation. We don't want to tempt God. We also need God to protect us from getting into situations that will not only test our faith but can wreck it. We're not so bold as to think we can handle any situation on our own. We want to stay close to God. For those who are on a journey with Jesus, opposition is already a given. So Jesus advises his disciples to ask God for the favor of being excused from further testing (Green). We're admitting that we don't have heroic faith and power to endure. Every day we need God's help to live the way God wants us to.

In Luke's version, the Lord's Prayer ends abruptly. Then Jesus tells some parables. He's not so much giving techniques of prayer as he's

showing that a right understanding of God's nature shapes our praying. The point of the examples of the friend at midnight and of parents' good gifts is that God is greater than earthly friends and parents. The friend will give what is needed so as not to be disgraced and not to bring disgrace on the village for failing to help show hospitality. How much more will God, who wants to give us the kingdom, answer us. Even imperfect parents know to give good, not harmful, gifts to their children. How much more will God give the best gift, the Holy Spirit, to us. The Holy Spirit is God present in and with God's people.

Prayer is essential in the life of discipleship. It's another way of loving the Lord and knowing that God loves us.

When Jesus talks about God being greater than a friend and greater than parents, he's showing how much God wants to give the kingdom and give the Holy Spirit. If we ask God to manifest his rule, he will do it. If we ask God for the Holy Spirit, we will receive the Holy Spirit.

All of this reveals the giving nature of God. If we have listened and discerned what God wants to give, we can pray confidently. When Jesus is our one thing, God will give us whatever we need to know him better, to follow him, and to hear and do his word.

The printed prayer I'm giving you today addresses the Trinity. Trinity is the Christian way of talking about the God who saves us. This prayer helps us open up to each Person of the Trinity and to receive what God wants to give us.

Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth:
Set up your kingdom in our midst.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God:
Have mercy on me, a sinner.

Holy Spirit, breath of the living God:
Renew me and all the world.

(N. T. Wright, http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Prayer_Trinity.htm)

Let's use this prayer each day, even throughout the day. Carry it with you or post it somewhere you will see it. Pray it during your devotional time to get your own prayers going. Really expect God to do the things we ask God to do in this prayer—and in all the prayers he guides us to pray.

Let's be followers of Jesus who join him in a life of prayer.