

This morning let's continue our spring training and preparation for Easter. Last Sunday, we discussed setting aside a daily quiet time with the Lord following the example set by Jesus in the first chapter of Mark where He regularly went off to a solitary place to spend time alone with His Father. During this quiet time, I noted that there are two essential activities that we need to practice if we want to grow closer to the Lord: spending time in prayer and reading the Bible. This morning, let's look at prayer – what is it, what does it mean to our lives, and how can we improve our daily prayer life. Prayer was an essential part of Jesus' life and ministry. In both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as a model for prayer. This morning, let's look at what Luke has to say in the eleventh chapter, the first four verses.

Read Luke 11:1-4

Now you may be thinking, why all this talk about prayer? We all know what it is and we all do it at some time and in our own individual way. So, what's the big deal? Well, for one thing, prayer is at the heart of religion. For in prayer, we stop talking about religion and enter into a personal, one-on-one relationship with God. Prayer, in its highest form, is communion and encounter with God. When we pray, we sense the very presence of God in our lives. Through prayer God meets us where we are and summons us to a new life, offering us the opportunity to become the person that He created us to be.

So how strong is your prayer life? Do you talk with God each day or only in crises? Can your prayer life use some improvement and enhancement, or have you already achieved perfect communion with God? If you are like me, your prayer life can always use some improvement; so, let's see what we can learn about prayer from the teachings and practices of Jesus. First, what is prayer? We all have different opinions based on our personal experiences and religious upbringing. I like to think of prayer as communicating with God one-on-one. It's a dialogue, not a monologue. Sometimes we are guilty, I know that I am, of doing all the talking and not simply being quiet and listening to God.

In our Responsive Reading this morning from Psalm 46:10, God tells us: "Be still, and know that I am God." If we are to really communicate with God, encounter Him and ask Him into our lives, then we must be still, clear our minds of all the distracting thoughts, be quiet, listen, and let Him fill our minds with His message for us. That's why seeking and having a daily quiet time alone with God is so essential to our spiritual growth, because let's face it; our lives today are so full of noise and activity that we normally can't hear or sense God's presence. The *Message* paraphrases Psalm 46:10 this way: "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your God."

Now what should our prayers consist of? The disciples asked that very same question over 2000 years ago in this morning's text. They had prayed all their lives, and yet something about Jesus' prayer life caused them to recognize how little they really knew about communicating with God. Jesus' life was saturated with prayer; He was constantly seeking His Father's guidance on every decision and action that He took. The disciples saw the difference that prayer made in Jesus' life, and wanted to know more about it. Notice that the disciples didn't ask Jesus to show them how to pray; they knew how. They said: "Teach us to pray," not "Teach us **how** to pray." There was something more about Jesus' prayer life that they wanted to learn about. His prayer life was so filled by the very spirit of God that it stood apart from anything they had experienced before. So, Jesus gave them and us the Lord's Prayer as a guide to a more spiritual life, a life centered on God.

The Lord's Prayer is not only a prayer for the church to recite together each Sunday morning, but it is also a pattern for our personal prayers. The Lord's Prayer is not something we memorize and then recite on cue each Sunday morning. As Christians, it should become part of us and when it does our prayer time becomes more like a conversation with a friend. The Lord's Prayer begins with God and not ourselves. Our prayers should be centered on God. How often do we begin our prayers with our thoughts centered on ourselves and our needs? I think Jesus is saying: "If you start with your thoughts and mind centered on God, everything else will be in the proper perspective."

Next, we are to pray like a child. By praying to God as our Father, we place ourselves in our born-again relationship with Him. We begin by acknowledging and praising God from whom all blessings come. When we go to the Lord in prayer, we are recognizing that we are dependent upon Him and Him alone. "Hallowed be Thy name." Now "hallowed" is a strange word. It reminds me of the little boy who began his bedtime prayers by saying: "Dear Howard, bless mommy and daddy." His mother asked who Howard was. The little boy responded: "Why, that's God's name." What do you mean? Well, every Sunday in church we pray, "Our Father, which art in heaven, Howard be Thy name." But what hallow actually means is "to make holy." Too often we think this means not to curse or take the Lord's name in vain; however, what it really means is don't claim to follow God and then fail to do what He tells you to do. We proclaim God's holiness by how we live our daily lives— now there's a serious thought.

By focusing on God first, then our requests will and should be in accordance with God's will. Couched in the Lord's Prayer is a simple petition – "Lord, give us our daily bread." Sometimes we think of our prayers as a wish list to a divine Santa Claus. Like the little boy who was saying his bedtime prayers: "Now I lay me down to sleep. I want a train. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. I want a train. And if I should die before I wake. I want a train."

Jesus tells us to pray to God and trust that He will supply our daily needs. Do you find it hard to live one day at a time and not worry about tomorrow? Remember what Jesus tells us in the sixth chapter of Matthew: "Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Jesus said that daily living begins with prayer; our trust in Him must be renewed each day. Prayer is the means of dealing with life one day at a time. There's a little folksy saying that goes: "Life by the yard is hard; life by the inch is a cinch." Jesus is basically telling us: "Here's my offer to you – if you make the Kingdom of God your primary focus of your life and live in obedience and trust, I'll see to it that you have all you really need." Also don't forget to thank God for taking care of your needs and the many blessings He sends your way.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus teaches us to pray for bread, not cake? We are to ask God for the necessities of life, not the luxuries. Also notice the personal pronouns in this petition: "Give us our daily bread – "us" and "our," not "me" and "my." This request seeks the welfare of all, not the benefits of a few. In this request, we enter into a family relationship with every person who has a need. The quality of our prayer life can be measured by the quality of our prayers for others.

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, what do you find right in the middle? Forgiveness. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is God's pleasure to offer us forgiveness. However, there are two problems with this. First, a lot of us have a hard time forgiving ourselves. Some of us do not have much trouble accepting God's forgiveness, but we cannot forgive ourselves. Jesus is telling us I have already done the work on the cross.

We also have a problem forgiving others. On one occasion, Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive others and Jesus said "seventy times seven." In other words, we must keep on forgiving. Someone has said that we need Teflon coated memories where nothing sticks, where all hurts and grudges are forgotten. That may be what we need, but that is not what we have. We carry grudges, harbor resentments, and keep records of every hurt. But Jesus tells us that if we are to be forgiven, we must forgive as God has forgiven us. We will only know the perfect forgiveness and peace of Christ as we forgive. C. S. Lewis said: "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive."

And finally, we ask the Lord "to lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I like the translation in the *Message*: "Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil." Now some of us can get into enough trouble by ourselves, and we definitely need help. Jesus is telling us that by coming to Him in prayer and staying focused on Him, we not only can be forgiven for the wrong that we have done, but we can be delivered from the wrong that we may do. This line in the Lord's Prayer reminds us that if we pray "help me" in the morning, we may not have to pray "forgive me" at night.

Now we can spend hours and weeks talking about prayer and its power, but in the time we have remaining let me try to address some common questions that people have about prayer. First, when should I pray? As we discussed last Sunday, we should at least spend sometime alone with God in prayer each day. Don't be like the little boy who replied when his pastor asked him if he prayed every day: "Not every day, some days I don't want anything." While we should take our concerns and needs to God, it is also a time of fellowship and conversation with God, as friend with friend. I have found over the years that as you grow closer to the Lord, you want to spend more time with Him and you find yourself praying throughout the day, no matter where you are. The Apostle Paul understood this when he told us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 – "Pray without ceasing."

Next, what do I say? I don't know the right words. The elders of a certain church once came to a young man and criticized the theology and the words that he used in his prayer that morning in the worship service. After they dumped all their criticism on him, he turned to them and said: "If you gentlemen are finished, I have just one thing to say; I wasn't speaking to you." Don't worry about the words – just say what is on your heart. Speak as to a friend; God is always listening.

Jesus shows us that prayer does not depend on many words or a special religious vocabulary. Prayer depends on a few words and much faith. Once a three-year-old prayed: "Dear God, I love you. Thank you. Love Amy." Surely God appreciated this holy text as much or more than a ten-minute dissertation. God is more pleased with the time you spend with Him than the quality or quantity of the words used. John Bunyan who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* said that in prayer, it is better to have a heart without words than words without heart.

You may wonder, if God knows everything, why do we need to pray? We pray to God not to impress or inform Him, but to invite Him into our lives and to connect with Him. God knows what we need and what is best for us, but He delights in the time with us. Prayer is a way of growing in our love and worship of God and depending on Him as our true source of life. But often we don't really know what we need. We may think we don't need anything from God, thinking we can handle everything on our own. One reason we need to pray, therefore, is so we'll stop and realize how much we depend upon God. We also may think that we know what God ought to do for us – but we may be wrong. Our hearts need to be attuned to God's will, and this often comes only as we pray.

And then, we wonder how can God possibly hear my prayers when so many other people are making requests at the same time? We tend to limit God; just because we can't do something, we think that God can't. God hears all our prayers. The Bible promises us in 1 John 5:14 – "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He

hears us.” God always hears our prayers and will answer them if we address Him in faith. God does not always give us the answer we want, but He still hears us.

Okay, God hears all our prayers, but how does He answer them? As I have said before I believe that God answers our prayers in one of four ways – yes, no, wait, and the one that I don’t like – I have a better idea. This last one means that things may not work out the way that you wanted. It also may mean that we have to make a major change in our life. Of course, some prayers are not answered right away, but in God’s time, not ours. We forget that the unanswered prayer is still heard by God, and so His silence is for a purpose. Prayer may not get us what we want, but it will teach us to want what we need. Perhaps God wishes to do more than simply supply our requests. Perhaps He wishes to draw us closer to Him, test the maturity of our faith, or force us to re-evaluate our request. But remember that God always does what is best for us.

When He was asked to teach the disciples to pray, Jesus left us the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern for our individual prayer life. Jesus recognized the need to spend time alone with His Father in prayer; and the need for us also to follow His example. Our Lord desires to communicate with us each day. Remember that nothing is too small or too large to take to Him. If we don’t ask, God won’t answer. It’s as simple as that. The greatest tragedy in life is prayers that go unanswered because they go unasked.

Jesus’ model reveals the life-changing nature of prayer. Often, we hear the phrase “Prayer changes things.” Certainly, there is truth in that, but what is more important in Jesus’ pattern is that prayer changes us. One doesn’t pray as Jesus prayed and remain the same.

Prayer above all else is conversation with God. Our Father desires to chat with us each day. Our part is only to accept the hand already stretched out to us. During this season of Lent, re-evaluate your prayer life and see how you can improve your relationship with God. For God is never more than a prayer away. Call Him! Amen