

Last Sunday, we started studying some passages from the Sermon on the Mount. This morning let's continue our study in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. This chapter is at the heart of the Sermon on the Mount which provides an outstanding summary of Jesus' teachings. Because of the vast amount of guidance contained in the Sermon on the Mount in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew, it is generally assumed that this is a collection of Jesus' sermons and teachings and that it was not given at one time. I think we would all agree that there is far too much information for one sitting. Can you imagine having to sit through a sermon that covered this much material?

A priest whose sermons were very long and boring announced one Sunday following the message that he had been transferred to another church and it was Jesus' wish that he leave. The closing hymn that morning was "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

A lady named Gladys Dunne was visiting a church for the first time. Following the service she was greeting the people around her. She extended her hand to one member and said: "Hi, I'm Gladys Dunne." To which the other person replied: "I'm sure glad he's done too."

This morning let's see what Jesus has to teach us about one of the greatest gifts that God has ever given us, the ability to commune with Him and His Son through prayer. Prayer was an essential part of Jesus' life and ministry, and there are numerous references throughout the Gospels to His prayer life. Of course, there is no way that we can cover all of these references this morning, but let's see what we can learn from verses 5 through 15 in the sixth chapter of Matthew. You may follow along on Page 5 of the New Testament in the Pew Bibles.

Read Matthew 6: 5-15

Now some of you may be thinking, why all this talk about prayer? We all know what it is and all of us pray at some time, especially when we are in trouble. So what's the big deal; why is it so important? Well, for one thing, prayer is at the very 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 an 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; to become the person that He created us to be. It is through prayer that all areas of our lives can be influenced and enhanced.

So how strong is your prayer life? Can it use some improvement? Now if you are one of those rare saints who have achieved perfect communication with God, you can take a nap for the rest of the service. But for the rest of us, let's see what we can learn from our text this morning about prayer. First, how would you define prayer? Of course, each of our replies will vary

depending on our individual experiences and religious backgrounds, and how we pray. For me, I like to think of prayer as communicating with God one-on-one; it's a dialogue, not a monologue. However, at times I must admit that I do all the talking and forget to simply be quiet and listen.

In Psalm 46:10, God tells us: "Be still, and know that I am God." If we are to truly communicate with God, encounter Him, and ask Him into our lives, we need to be still, clear our minds of all those 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 in our lives. I like the way the *Message* paraphrases Psalm 46:10 - "Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, God."

So the next question is – what should our prayers consist of, how should we pray? The disciples asked this very same question over 2,000 years ago, as told in the eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus' disciples were living in a time when prayer was a very important public activity, especially among the Pharisees and other religious leaders. But they saw something different in Jesus' prayer life. His' prayers were mostly private, secret and alone. They could tell that something happened when Jesus prayed, and they wanted to learn more.

Jesus recognized that a model for prayer was needed, so He gave the disciples and us the Lord's Prayer. This model provides us a pattern for our prayers. Simply to memorize this brief prayer and to spout it out mechanically is to misuse it. Trite, unthinking repetition is not unlike the "empty phrases" Jesus warned about in verse 7 of this morning's text. We need to soak ourselves in this model and then pray freely.

Jesus' pattern shows the simplicity of prayer. Jesus gives us a model that even a small child can follow. He shows us that prayer does not depend on the number of words or a special religious vocabulary. Prayer is less about words and more about sincere faith that comes from the heart. One three-year-old prayed like this: "Dear God, I love you. Thank you. Love Amy." Surely God appreciated this holy telegram as much as any ten minute dissertation.

Jesus' model reveals the life-changing nature of prayer. Often we hear the slogan: "Prayer changes things." Certainly there is truth in this statement, but there's more truth in the fact that prayer changes us. You can't pray as Jesus prayed and remain the same.

The Lord's Prayer begins with: "Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." We should begin our prayers by acknowledging and praising God from whom all blessings flow. When we go to the Lord in prayer, we are recognizing that we are dependent on Him and Him alone. Now "hallowed" is a strange word. It reminds me of a little boy who was saying his bedtime prayers one night: "Dear Howard, bless mommy and daddy." His mother asked him:

“Who is Howard?” To which the little boy replied: “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 do we really mean when we pray “Hallowed be Thy name?” In essence, we are saying: “Lord, we treat Your name differently from all other names, because Your Son Jesus Christ has revealed Your personality, Your character, and Your power to us.” With these words, we are reminded that there is something special and reverent about the name of God.

We cannot just recite from memory the phrase: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven;” we must mean it and live it. A chaplain in World War II tells of preparing to play a volleyball game with men on a South Pacific island. Directly across the net from him was a sergeant whose lifestyle ran contrary to the will of God. The men stripped down to the waist in preparation for the game. “Imagine my surprise,” said the chaplain, “at seeing that the sergeant had the Lord’s Prayer tattooed on his chest, every word of it.” What a shame that it was only skin deep! Unfortunately, some people put on a Christian face from time to time like make-up, and quickly pass over these words. However, when we pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” we should be praying “Lord, I want to do Your thing; I want to do it Your way, not my way.”

Our prayers also include petitions. 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. We are like the little boy who knelt by his bed one night and prayed: “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 to trust that He will supply our basic needs. Do you find it hard to live one day at a time and not worry about tomorrow? At the end of the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus states: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Daily living begins with prayer in which our trust in the Lord is renewed each day. Prayer is the means of dealing with life one day at a time. There is a little folksy saying that goes like this: “Life by the yard is hard; life by the inch is a cinch.” I think that Jesus is telling us: “Here’s my offer to you; if you will make God the primary focus of your life and live in obedience and righteousness, I’ll see to it that you have all you really need.”

There are two other points about this petition of the Lord’s Prayer that we sometimes overlook. First, Jesus teaches us to pray for bread, not cake. We are to ask God for only the necessities of life, not the luxuries. In a way this request is also for a simplified lifestyle. Next notice the personal pronouns in this petition; give “us” and “our” daily bread; there is no “I”, “me” or “mine” in the Lord’s Prayer. This petition seeks the welfare of all, not the profit of a few. We enter into a family relationship with every person who has a need. There is no place in this prayer for one to seek to build their fortune on the backs of others. It takes a

responsible Christian to pray this petition and to act on it through giving to the needs of others. It's a fact that the quality of our prayer life can be measured in part by the quality of our petitions.

Have you ever noticed what is right in the middle of the Lord's Prayer? Forgiveness: "Forgive us our trespasses as we have forgiven those who trespass against us." It is the Father's pleasure to offer us forgiveness, but many of us have two problems with this. The first is forgiving ourselves. There is the story of a man walking along a road carrying a heavy sack. Another man comes along driving a horse and wagon and offers him a ride. The man with the sack accepts the kind offer and climbs in the back of the wagon. A few minutes later the driver turns around to see if the man is comfortable, and is startled to find that the man is still standing up with the heavy sack on his shoulder. The puzzled driver asked the man: "The wagon is carrying the sack anyway, why not put down your load and let the horse and wagon do the work?" Some of us do not have much trouble accepting God's forgiveness, but we cannot forgive ourselves. We are like the man who is still carrying the sack. Jesus Christ has already done the work on the cross, why not put your load down and let Him carry it?

The Bible tells us that God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west; to be remembered no more. They are buried in the sea of God's forgetfulness. Fortunately, this is not like a college in Wisconsin that asked a government agency in Washington, D.C. for permission to destroy some old files. After months of delay the answer came back: "permission granted to destroy the files, but keep one copy of everything." Some of us have the mistaken idea that God is like that government agency, He destroys the files listing our sins, but keeps one copy of everything, just in case. Isn't it good to know that God doesn't do that? He has a shredder!

Another aspect of forgiveness that gives us problems is forgiving others. On one occasion, Peter asked Jesus how many times we should forgive our debtors; was seven times seven enough? To which Jesus replied: "No, until seventy times seven." In other words, we must keep on forgiving. Someone has said that we need Teflon coated memories where no hurts stick; where wounds are soon forgotten. That may be what we need, but that is not what most of us have. We carry grudges, harbor resentments, and keep records of every hurt. I had a woman who worked for me in Santa Fe that instead of a rosary had grudge beads; every now and then she would pull them out and go over every time somebody in the office had hurt her over the last 25 years. But Jesus tells us that if we are to be forgiven, we must also forgive as God forgives us. Until we forgive as God does, we will never know and experience the perfect forgiveness of God and peace of mind that He offers to each of us. Who is the burr under your saddle; who do you need to forgive?

Finally, we ask the Lord to lead us not into temptation, but to deliver us from evil. The *Message* has an interesting paraphrase of this verse: "Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil." Some of us don't need the devil's help; we can get into enough trouble all by ourselves! Jesus is telling us that by coming to Him in prayer and staying focused on Him, we can not only be forgiven for the wrong we have done; we can also be delivered from the wrong that we may do. Just as a person needs a roadmap to avoid making the wrong turn, so spending time in prayer with God each day can help us avoid making a wrong decision. Not only does the Lord offer us forgiveness, but He also deals in preventive behavior. 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.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus gave them and us this beautiful prayer as a pattern for our individual prayer life. Jesus, Himself, recognized the need to spend time alone with His Father in prayer; and if Jesus needed to do this, then we definitely need to follow His example. Our Lord desires to communicate with us. Remember that nothing is too small to take to Him. As we sang earlier: "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear! What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer! O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

Prayer above all else is talking with God. Our heavenly Father desires to chat with each one of us; can't you hear Him saying: "Call me." Don't past up this opportunity. Take some time this week to re-evaluate your prayer life based on this model that Jesus gave us in the Lord's Prayer, and see how you can improve your relationship with God. Remember God is never more than a prayer away! Amen