

The Prayer of Jesus

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 24, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage

Matthew 6:5-13 (NRSV)

⁵And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹“Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹Give us this day our daily bread.

¹²And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

This is the fourth in a five-week series on the Sermon on the Mount. Today, we consider Jesus' teachings on prayer.

Jabez and Jesus

A few years ago, Bruce Wilkinson published *The Prayer of Jabez*. This small volume spawned a virtual “Jabez industry”! Wilkinson has a lot of good things to say about the power of prayer and seeking out opportunities to minister to others. But I could never really see how so much could be found in Jabez’ brief (less than thirty words!) prayer for more land and freedom from evil and pain (1 Chronicles 4:10). Might we Christians be better served by devoting similar attention to the Prayer of Jesus?

As we’ve been learning in this series, Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are focused on creating a community of disciples trained for the kingdom of God – trained for what they would have thought to be impossible. Prayer takes center stage in their training. The prayer that Jesus teaches them lies at the center of the sermon, but before giving them what has come to be called the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus cautions them about problems common to the prayer life of all people.

Competitive Praying

There have been times when I’ve felt that I was in some sort of prayer competition. We’d all sit in a circle and then go around the room, each of us taking turns offering up a prayer. Some people seemed so articulate and experienced that I’d be a wreck by the time my turn came. I admit that often I would hardly hear the prayers of others – I’d be too busy thinking about what I would possibly say when my turn arrived. Clearly, this is not how it is supposed to be! Jesus knows us well. He understands that it can be all too easy for us to begin trying to win some sort of prayer

“Hallowed be your Name”

I remember reading once a child’s rendition of the Lord’s prayer. As I recall, God’s name was Harold! Now, I doubt many of us make that mistake, but I do suspect that we tend to blow right past “hallowed be your name” with little awareness of what it means.

This phrase could just as easily be translated “set apart your holy name.” Perhaps Eugene Peterson gets even closer when he renders the phrase as “reveal who you are” in his paraphrase, *The Message*. For the ancient Hebrews, the name and the person are much closer in thought than for us today. In the Bible, the name of God is virtually indistinguishable from the person of God. When we pray that God’s name be hallowed or holy or sanctified or set apart or revealed, we are praying that God would let all the world see that he is the one true God. We are praying that God will usher in his kingdom in all its fullness – so that even God’s enemies would come to honor God’s name.

competition, even going so far as to pray publicly so others can see how well we pray! When Jesus tells his followers that they are to go into a room and pray privately, he doesn't mean that we should never pray with others, only that we need to be careful about our prayers. We aren't on stage.¹ We aren't to heap up a lot of flowery language and empty phrases. We are praying to God the Creator and Redeemer! Our prayers – whether of praise or appeal or confession or thanks – are to be sincere and heartfelt. We don't have to be articulate. We don't have to be experienced. If you aren't comfortable praying in front of others, then don't – but do pray! And if you don't know where to begin, pray the prayer Jesus gave us.

The History of the Lord's Prayer

In the decades immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers began to use some variation of the Lord's Prayer that we have in Matthew and Luke.

About 150 years ago a manuscript was discovered that turned out to be a "teaching manual" for Christians from the second half of the first century! Called the *Didache* (teaching), this manual instructs believers in various Christian disciplines, including fasting and prayer. The Lord's Prayer is to be said three times a day, probably reflecting Jewish practices regarding daily prayer.

The *Didache* includes the text of the Lord's Prayer – and it is virtually identical to the prayer we say every Sunday! Following Christian tradition of nearly 2000 years as reflected in the *Didache*, we add a doxology to the end of the prayer from Matthew. In the *Didache*, the doxology is "For thine is the power and the glory forever and ever." You will sometimes find a translation of Matthew that incorporates the doxology, but it is not found in the earliest and best manuscripts. But of course, it is very appropriate that we conclude this prayer by offering praise and glory to the Lord Almighty!

The Lord's Prayer²

Jesus spoke more often about the Kingdom of God than about anything else. Not surprisingly then, the Lord's Prayer is a kingdom prayer. In his sermon, Jesus trains his disciples for the kingdom; in this prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for its arrival.

Prayer is theology and theology is prayer. What we pray for reveals our deepest beliefs about God and ourselves. One way to approach the Lord's Prayer is to think of it as being in two parts. In the first part, we express our desire for the arrival of God's kingdom so that the will of God will be done, so that God's desires for his creation will be realized. This is not some other-worldly thing – God's will is to be done on earth, as it is in the kingdom of heaven. Think of it as the merger of the two – our world is to be transformed into the full expression of God's love and creative power, a world free from sin and death, misery and tragedy.

In the second part of the Lord's Prayer we turn to our own lives, admitting that it is God, not we, who provides today and every day even the basics of life – like bread. We pray that God will shelter us from the trials and tests that come at us so often in a world still rocked by pain and suffering. We even pray for our rescue, not from some abstract idea of evil, but from the foes of God that threaten all goodness and mercy. All this is to be God's doing! Nonetheless, we recognize our own part in this as well. We confess to God our understanding that God's forgiveness of us is somehow bound up with our own forgiveness of others.³ We are not to be bystanders sitting out God's war against evil. We are not to be escapists watching the world sink ever deeper into Godlessness. We are to be the light to the world, the ones through whom God accomplishes the very things for which we pray!

¹In the Greek, Matthew captures Jesus' intention well. The word we translate "hypocrites" in v. 5 is a word that refers to stage actors. Are we praying to God or to the grandstands?

²The Lord's Prayer will greatly repay slow praying and thoughtful reflection. Two excellent and brief books on the Lord's Prayer are *The Lord and his Prayer*, by N.T. Wright and *Lord, Teach Us: The Lord's Prayer and the Christian Life*, by William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas.

³The various versions of the Lord's Prayer used by Christians speak of forgiveness of debts or trespasses or sins. The underlying Greek word in the prayer is *opheilema*, which referred to obligations and was often used by Jews to refer to sins. As God's covenant partners we have obligations to him, such as loving God and neighbor. When we fail to deliver on those obligations, we have sinned. We incur obligations to others and them to us. We are called to be generous and forgiving when others fail to meet their obligations to us, just as God is generous and forgiving with us when we fail to meet our obligations to him!

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 11:1-8 Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer; Jesus teaches about the value of persistence!</p>	<p>Day 2 John 17 Jesus' final prayer. Read this in light of the Lord's Prayer. Can you see any similarities?</p>
<p>Day 3 Matthew 4:23 - 7:28 The entire Sermon on the Mount. Please read it in one sitting. We'll do this once a week during this series!</p>	<p>Day 4 Philippians 1:1-11 Paul prays for the Philippians.</p>
<p>Day 5 Matthew 18:21-33 Jesus trains his disciples in forgiveness.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Bible Academy registration is now available on-line!

Bible Academy classes begin the week of September 15. You can pick up information about the classes and a registration form at the information counter in the Narthex. This will also be mailed out in the newsletter you'll receive in early September.

To register and for info go to www.standrewccl.org or www.standrewumc.org

Scott Engle's 9:30 class is meeting in Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

We've begun a new adult Sunday School class at the 9:30 hour. The class is led by Scott Engle, the author of these background studies, and is open to all adults. The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is plenty of time for questions and answers.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Christian life is to be a prayerful life. It is that simple. We can muster lots of excuses for our inattention to prayer but none are sufficient. Make a list of all the reasons why prayer is not a bigger part of your life. Here are a few possibilities: "I'm too busy." "I feel too spiritually dry to pray." "I feel no need to pray." "I am too bitter . . . or too ashamed . . . or too content." Perhaps some of our reluctance to pray is because we fail to understand that at its heart, prayer is conversation with God. Sometimes this conversation will be spoken aloud (at least our side of the conversation!). Praying aloud is a good idea because it helps to keep our minds from wandering. Other times, our conversation with God is more a matter of keeping God at the center of our thoughts, shaping our mind around God. This doesn't come naturally to us. Our minds must be transformed and renewed so that we can discern God's wishes (Romans 12:2). These are some of the practical implications of being re-born, of being new creations. I recently received an e-mail from a couple at St. Andrew who wrote ". . . our comprehension of the scripture has been enriched and God has become more present in our daily conversations." They may not realize what is going on, but their minds are being renewed; their mental furniture is being rearranged so God can be where he should be - at the center. Make a list of the concrete steps you will take in the next six months to improve your prayer life.