

Prayer

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in an eight-week series

February 6, 2022

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Psalms 34:4–8 (NIV)

- ⁴ I sought the LORD, and he answered me;
he delivered me from all my fears.
- ⁵ Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame.
- ⁶ This poor man called, and the LORD heard him;
he saved him out of all his troubles.
- ⁷ The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him,
and he delivers them.
- ⁸ Taste and see that the LORD is good;
blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Matthew 6:5–15 (NIV)

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray:

- “ ‘Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us today our daily bread.
¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.’ ”

¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.

Luke 18:1–8 (NIV)

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’ ”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

The true story

This is the second week in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, found in chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel. Jesus begins with the Beatitudes, ends with a parable about actually doing as he taught, and right in the center of it all we find some teachings about prayer, including the most well-known prayer of all, the Lord's Prayer.

Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home, and its true home is the heart of God.¹ God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking him (Genesis 3:9). In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God's call, but we've turned so far away from God that the call is muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

We have restless, yearning hearts that seek peace and joy and fulfillment. We spend much of our life looking one place after another for something that will make us happy or joyful or content, often in all the wrong places. But, in truth, our restless hearts will only find their rest in God.

Coming home

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts seeking after God, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you" (Psalm 63). The heart of the psalmist's prayer, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek their heart's true home.

Richard Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home. "We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer."²

Prayers built upon trust

In the Bible, trust is a good synonym for faith. When we say that we have faith in Jesus Christ, we mean that we trust Jesus – completely and utterly. Now, all of us are experienced at building trusting relationships with others, or at least trying to. We know that building trust is not easy. It takes time. We risk trusting a person in small matters so that we might come to trust them in large matters. We know that trust is fragile. Trust takes a long time to build but it can disintegrate in a moment of betrayal. We know that trust must be cherished and protected. And . . . we know that hypocrisy and empty talk are not the way to build trust.

Prayer is conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. Indeed, prayer builds such trust. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don't hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don't hesitate; they trust God. Let the psalms teach us today.

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. He points them toward God's kingdom and teaches them to rely

¹This beautiful phrase, "the heart's true home," is from Richard Foster's book, *Prayer*.

²from the introduction to Foster's book, *Prayer*, p. 1-2.

completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God's forgiveness, even as they forgive others.

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us. The basic ingredients of prayer are the ingredients that build trust between two persons: honesty, sincerity, caring, thanking, appreciating, loving, serving . . . add to this list as you'd like. And in the end, pray with a trusting heart.

It is with such a heart that we are to pray the Lord's Prayer, even as we pray it together and often aloud. It is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples. Here is an overview.

*The Lord's Prayer*³

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.

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.

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, or marriage, 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. 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

³The 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.

are to be the light of the world, the ones through whom God accomplishes the very things for which we pray!

Give us today our daily bread

I've taken several classes through an in-depth study of Exodus. It is quite a story. God rescues the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and defeats Pharaoh. But when Moses and the people begin their trek across the Sinai wilderness, griping and complaining become rampant. We have no water!! We have no food!! So God, who loves them and provides for them, ensures that they have all they need to survive in the harsh desert. The food God provides is a white flaky substance found on the ground every morning. The Israelites call it *manna*, which means "what is it?" in Hebrew (yes, really). This manna won't keep overnight but must be collected every day.

It is this story that Jesus draws on in the Lord's Prayer. To pray for our daily bread is to acknowledge that all we have comes from God, even our lives – and to be thankful. We humans can be fiercely independent, resisting the very notion that we are dependent on God. But every time we pray the Lord's Prayer we acknowledge that God provides for us every single day. He always has and he always will.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive our trespasses⁴

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out. The Lord's Prayer puts this truth right in front of us – forgive us, as we forgive others.

Living, truly God-shaped living, requires that forgiveness be breathed out, not just breathed in. A truly grateful heart is also a forgiving heart.

Lead us not into temptation

I've been asked whether this phrase is a prayer for God not to tempt us to do wrong. Of course not . . . do we really think that Jesus seeks to make our lives harder, to lead us into the trap of sin and brokenness? No, we do an excellent job of that on our own. This

"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.

⁴ There is no need to get hung up on debts/trespasses/sins. The Greek word Matthew uses here is straightforward: the wrongs we commit against others, including God.

is a prayer for strength to persevere, to avoid temptations when we can and to resist them when we can't.

Both the NIV and NRSV translators tell us that the prayer for deliverance could be rendered as deliverance from "the evil one" or from "evil."⁵ If Matthew had in mind the former, the prayer is for deliverance from the machinations of Satan. If Matthew had in mind the latter, then it is a prayer for deliverance from evil circumstances. Though we always say "evil" when we pray the Lord's Prayer – both translations are worth keeping in view. This is an ever-present reminder that we need God's protection and deliverance every day.

Every single day – the importance of persistence

Even if we've been taught to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. We might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it's not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? We remind ourselves that, of course, God answers prayers; a loving father would do no less. Still, it is not always easy to persist. Our passage from Luke is one of Jesus' parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish sin as it deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In the end, the judge was to render a just verdict that vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.⁶

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God, our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayer of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our confidence that God loves us.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Isaiah*

We are beginning our study of Isaiah on February 7. I hope you can join us!!

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

⁵ It is important to remember that Jesus would have taught this prayer to his disciples in Aramaic, the day-to-day language used by the Jews in the Judea and Galilee. Thus, Matthew had to render the Aramaic into Greek, the language used for all of the New Testament. The same would be true if Jesus taught them the prayer in Hebrew.

⁶In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Note -- This class will not meet on February 20

We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.