

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 24, 2022

Teach Us to Pray

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How do you pray? If you're anything like me, there's likely no one set way that you pray; so perhaps this is an unfair question. I often find that I pray differently given the circumstances I find myself in. We pray differently before a meal than we might when gathered at a loved ones' death bed. We pray differently in the midst of violence and turmoil than we might in times of peace and plenty. A better question, one we should answer before we even begin to pray, would be: "why are we praying?" Awareness and intentionality are crucial to relationships after all. And what is prayer if not, in part, attending to our relationship with the divine?

The most common way that I pray is asking for a blessing at mealtimes with my family. Why do we regularly pray at this time? Primarily it's a reminder to us that God provides our "daily bread." This prayer is often one of the ones our family has memorized, with the most common of our table graces being: "Come Lord Jesus, be our guest and let these gifts to us be blest. Give us Lord our daily bread, may all the world be clothed and fed. Amen." That is our default prayer before meals, but sometimes we mix things up by singing the doxology (Praise God from whom all blessing flow...) or another sung prayer; or we'll use a camp table grace (we've got dozens of those memorized, feel free to ask my kids about their favorite camp prayers! In the end, these prayers generally amount to "thank you for our daily bread," or "bless us through this food to better serve the Gospel." Or to sum up even more, either "thank you" or "help us." Ultimately, most human prayer falls into one of those two summations.

These two basic prayers are so common that they tend to be how I start the process of teaching others how to pray. I try to stress that prayer need not be fancy or long. It can be as simple as saying "Thank you, God!" Or "Help me, God!" There's even a fair amount of scriptural witness to these two, most

basic of prayers. A quick look through the Psalms, which many theologians call the prayer book of the bible, will provide numerous examples.

On the “help me” front we can echo Psalm 86:1, “Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy,” or Psalm 79:9, “Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name’s sake.” Or...Psalm 16:1, Psalm 102:17, Psalm 4:1, Psalm 7:1, Psalm 18:6, Psalm 20:6, Psalm 22:19...well, you get the idea! There are a lot of psalms dedicated to praying for help!

There are almost as many Psalm verses dedicated to thanking and praising God as well! For instance, there’s Psalm 9:1, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds,” or Psalm 57:9, “I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples; I will sing praises to you among the nations.” But there are plenty more! Psalm 69:30, Psalm 86:12, Psalm 92:1, Psalm 44:8, and Psalm 30:4 just to name a few more in this category!

And that’s just focusing on the Psalms! There are numerous more examples of prayers in Scripture! Famous prayers like the one Jesus taught in our reading today, and lesser-known prayers like the song of Hannah¹, which Mary echoes in her Magnificat.

Beyond these two basic, very human, prayers I tend to move on to teach a lesser used type of prayer which is “Wow, God!” What I love about this type of prayer is that it is often an involuntary sort of prayer. It’s the gasp we let out when we are confronted with a beautiful sunset over the mountains. It’s realizing we’ve been holding our breath as we watch a whale breach the water. It’s the awestruck moment in the aftermath of childbirth.

So, prayer can be as simple as “Help me God,” “thank you God,” and “wow, God!” Which of these categories does the Lord’s prayer fall into? Trick question! I don’t think the Lord’s prayer really falls into any of these basic categories. And that should come as no surprise. After all, the disciples would have been very familiar with these three forms of prayer.

Instead, Jesus is teaching his disciples a new-ish way to pray. I say new-ish because we can find a couple of examples of this sort of prayer in the Old

¹ 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (NRSV)

Testament, but they are very few!² This is the “Your will” prayer. The Lord’s prayer certainly has elements of thank you and help me in them, what is praying for daily bread if not asking for help, after all? But at its heart, the Lord’s prayer is focused on God’s will. And Jesus is not just teaching (or re-teaching) this type of prayer, he adds on the importance of intention too.

But first, what is God’s will? Well, we have some hints in the rest of the Lord’s prayer itself. God’s will is that God’s name be kept holy. God’s will is for God’s kingdom to reign on earth as in heaven. God’s will is for people to have daily bread. God’s will is for mercy and forgiveness, between us and God and between us and our neighbors. God’s will is that we do not face trials or be confronted with evil. God’s will is the Gospel that Christ proclaimed, which is “good news to the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”³

Now, on to intentions. After teach this “your will” prayer Jesus goes on to provide several examples that often get misused in some very broken, human ways. This whole business with the rude neighbor (I mean come on, waking someone up at midnight because you ran out of bread seems rather rude, doesn’t it?) and the explanation that follows aren’t about persisting until we get what we want from God. Rather they are about persisting because our intentions are in line with God’s will. They are also about actions in response to prayer.

The heretical “prosperity gospel” loves verses 9-10 of this chapter. According to false teachers like Joel Osteen and Kenneth Copeland you just have to persistently ask God for wealth, and it will somehow come to you (especially if you donate big bucks so they can live in mansions and travel in private jets). This completely ignores the context of these two verses. It also completely ignores the “your will” prayer that Jesus teaches at the start of this chapter.

The rude neighbor that Jesus uses in his example is trying to provide food and hospitality to their guest, which is certainly in line with God’s will. Verses 11-13 also illustrate the importance of intention. God will absolutely answer prayer and will answer it with blessings; but we do not necessarily know the how of those answer. And we can trust that any answer to our prayer will also be in line with God’s will, not ours.

² C.f. Psalm 40:8, Psalm 143:10 (NRSV)

³ Luke 4:18 (NRSV)

This is why I consider the Lord's prayer a dangerous one. It draws us away from our typical styles of prayer, it draws us away from asking for help or thanking God for what God has done for us. Instead it is focused on God's will and not only that, but Jesus makes it clear that our prayer will be answered in line with that will. We can pray for wealth, but the witness of scripture⁴ suggests that wealth is not God's will for us. We can pray for power, but once again, that doesn't seem to be God's will for us. So we should not be surprised when those prayers are answered in ways aligned with God's will – opportunities to help and serve those who do not have as much as we do, having our eyes opened to the blessing we have and how we might use them for God's purposes.

“Your will” prayers are perhaps the most important, and difficult, prayers we can offer. It is no wonder that Jesus gave his disciples words to use to pray in this way, we would struggle greatly without this teaching! And if we do pray “your will” prayers (including the Lord's prayer) with deep and authentic intention we should not be surprised at God's answers. Answers that will likely invite us to participate in God's will. Blessings that we can use to provide others with daily bread. Blessings that will allow us to truly forgive those who have wronged us. And blessings that will keep us firm in the face of trials and evil.

Whatever your prayer practices I want to invite you into regularly praying “your will” prayers. The Lord's prayer, certainly, but any prayer that invites God to do what God will, with us and with creation. And examine your intentions in prayer too. If you earnestly wish for God's will to be done, how might God be calling **you** to do God's will? How might God be answering your prayer with blessing to equip you for service? Are you truly ready to pray that God's will be done over your own?

Amen.

⁴ Matthew 6:24 (NRSV)