

Praying Like Jesus

Luke 11:1-13

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The Gospel of Luke includes a long list of stories and parables and passages that are readily familiar to us. Things like the story of the birth of Jesus, complete with the angel chorus and shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger. Things like the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. And in this passage we find the most famous prayer ever – so familiar that we may find ourselves skimming over it to get to the next part, figuring we know that already. Like skimming over all those other familiar passages of Scripture, if we don't slow down and savor these words, we may miss what they have especially to say to us right now.

There are some really important things for us to learn about prayer here, and it has little to do with memorizing a specific set of words and phrases. Jesus is not just teaching the disciples a prayer – He is teaching them and us lessons about the nature of prayer. Those lessons are not just in the prayer itself, but in the entire passage.

We start with the request of the disciples. They had seen Jesus withdraw to quiet places, sometimes alone, sometimes with others, for the specific purpose of prayer. They had seen Jesus renewed by that prayer time, had seen how important it was to Him, and they wanted to know more. So it should be with us and every aspect of our lives as people of God. The people around us see who we are and what we do and how we live. All of that bears witness to our relationship with God. All of it, both the good and the not so good. If we are modeling who we are and what we do and how we live after the example of Jesus Christ, people will see something there that they will want to know about. That's where we get to tell our story! And here is where Jesus got to tell the part of His story about being in tune with God.

That's fundamentally what prayer is. It is the opportunity that we have, all the time and everywhere, to get in tune with God – to make the choice to seek God's will, to discern God's ways, and to align ourselves with God's will and God's ways. If we don't communicate with God, if we don't open ourselves up to God's Word, we are just

guessing what God's will might be. Not a good plan, and most importantly, not necessary, because God offers us that open communication all the time. It remains up to us to choose to take advantage of all that God has put before us, including constant communication.

Look at the parts of the prayer.

It begins with an expression of our understanding of who God is, worthy of all our praise and reverence and love. Understanding who God is should lead to us understanding who we are, which should lead us to understanding the gap between who God is and who we are. God reaches across that gap – that gap that we created by our sin and self-centeredness – to invite us to come to Him. Jesus tells us with the one word that starts the prayer, “Father”, that God has opened Himself to us for a relationship of perfect intimacy and love. With just that one word, we should be overwhelmed with joy for the grace that God has shown in simply and beautifully inviting us to that relationship.

Jesus tells us to pray that the kingdom of God would be real right here and right now. “Thy kingdom come” is not some future wish just for the Second Coming; it is a plea for the reign of God to be real and personal and meaningful in the here and now, and that the reign of God would be real and personal and meaningful in me. That is an expression of individual and collective relationship with God that brings purpose and joy to this life – no more wandering, no more despair. God rules!

Our relationship with God depends on forgiveness, because without it, we cannot even imagine approaching God with anything other than total terror. Without forgiveness, we stand before God as nothing but sinners, completely undeserving on our own to even think about groveling before the throne of God. But the forgiveness that God puts before us is an offer from God to clean us up and stand us up before Him as His children. Because it is the nature of God to love us, it is the nature of God to offer us forgiveness so we can come to him as His beloved children and not as outsiders, condemned to forever be outsiders because of our sin. We show our understanding and gratitude for the forgiveness that God offers us by being people of forgiveness ourselves. We are reconciled to God by forgiveness and we are reconciled to each other by

forgiveness, and through that reconciliation, we find ourselves aligned with the commandments of God to love Him first and to love each other. There is joy there!

The story that Jesus tells about the persistent friend is not about nagging God with prayer until God can't stand it anymore and gives us what we want. That would suggest that we can manipulate God, and we know that's wrong. What this story tells me is that we are to be focused and determined in throwing off the distractions of this life, stubbornly and persistently shedding ourselves of anything that takes our eyes off the prize – the prize of eternal relationship with God. Again, because it is the nature of God to love us, He offers us all good gifts, most especially here the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We could spend a whole lot of time on the phenomenal gift that the Holy Spirit is to us, and all the different ways that the presence of the Holy Spirit works to draw us deeper into relationship with God, but there is a special gift of the Holy Spirit for our prayer life. Paul tells us at Romans 8:26 that when we do not know how to pray or what to pray for, “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will.” What an incredible gift that is! When all we know is that we need to be one with God, we just throw ourselves open and let the Holy Spirit do the work! When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He gave them the same answer: open yourself to Almighty God and let God work in you. Let God work in you to clean you up, to reconcile you to Him and to each other, and make His kingdom real in you. Never stop. Never stop coming back from wherever you are to the welcoming arms of God who loves you so.

There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. The answer may not be what we want or expect. The answer may be “No.” The answer may not come on our time schedule. But it is in the bedrock of our faith that God hears and answers all our prayers. We may misunderstand the nature of prayer as presentation of our wish lists. We may misunderstand the nature of God’s answers as finding us deserving or not of whatever we ask. These misunderstandings can lead us to some faith-challenging places. We can find ourselves angry at God for not granting our wishes. We can find ourselves taking the

blame for not having been sufficiently sincere or persistent in our prayers so that God did not give us what we wanted. We can find ourselves congratulating ourselves for having offered such a great prayer or having been successfully persistent so that God found us worthy of a “Yes.” All of those are faith problems. God tells us to ask, to seek, to knock – not so God will listen, but so that in the intentional opening of our hearts to God we will be joined to Him in Spirit and truth. There is incredible joy there, in tune and in line with the will of God for us – in tune and in line with the answers that God had prepared for our prayers even before we formed them in our minds.

The fundamental lesson here is about the attitude in which we are to pray. Jesus gave the disciples and us this prayer not for us to just repeat it, but for us to open our hearts to it. These are not just words to say – they are truths for us to claim. The truth of the perfect love of the Father for His children. The truth of God’s mercy and forgiveness and grace. The truth of God’s attention and attentiveness to the prayers of His people. The truth of the present and future rewards of relationship with God. The truth of the gift of the Holy Spirit to lead and guide and intercede. We come to God with prayer grounded in faith – faith that God loves us just as He says He does, and that His grace is there for us all.

There is beauty and joy here. Life in relationship with God is all about joy. Not putting on a happy face through trials or hardships or difficult days, but counting it all joy because we have abundant and eternal life in right relationship with God, free from the burdens of sin and death. All because God loves us.

Music helps us express that beauty and grace and joy, including singing this prayer. The grand and powerful “Mormon Tabernacle Choir” version has great meaning for a lot of people, but there is another musical setting for the Lord’s Prayer that for me conveys the joy of openness to the presence of God like nothing else I’ve heard. The contemporary Christian artist Carman produced this version in 1998. It will be my prayer for you this morning that you will not be able to get this tune out of your head, and the joy of life in open communion with God who loves you will fill your hearts.

CARMAN: The Prayer Anthem video