

## **A New Approach to Prayer**

### **Luke 11:1-13**

The message for today ties in with the idea from last week of how important it is to abide in Christ. If you're not abiding in Christ, you're dying. Apart from Christ, you can do nothing, but if you abide in him, you will bear much fruit. And a big part of abiding in Christ is prayer. That's what our passage is about this morning – Jesus is teaching some of his disciples how to pray.

For us who have grown up in Christian homes and going to church and Sunday School, prayer is nothing new. We've had lots of experiences and heard lots of teaching about it. We've been part of a prayer culture in which we've been conditioned to think about and practice prayer in a certain way. And to be honest with you, it might not be all that positive despite our best efforts.

I would assume many of us share some common experiences. Maybe our parents prayed with us at bedtime or before meals or we heard the pastor pray at church. We heard our Sunday School teachers pray and might have attended weekly prayer services. Prayer was familiar and may have also become mundane. We may have wished our parents didn't pray so long before meals because we were hungry. We may have struggled with prayer at bedtime because we always prayed about the same things and it was just part of the routine, like brushing our teeth. We may have suffered through prayer meetings at church just hoping Clarence or Myrtle didn't start praying again so we could go home. When it came to personal prayer time we may have felt like we were stuck in a rut and were just speaking into the air.

The important became normal and the normal became mundane, little more than a religious routine. I've experienced some of those things and I understand that to hear another sermon about prayer might not be all that exciting. But this morning I want us to try something new. If your experience with prayer has been similar to what I just described, I want to encourage you to just stop praying that way. Whatever you think prayer is, just throw it out the window. Those are the kinds of prayer experiences that need to go away so that you can start to experience something different. Because the essence of prayer is something very different than what you've been experiencing.

As I look at Jesus' teaching about prayer today I believe the people he was teaching were coming from a similar place as us when it came to prayer. Prayer was very familiar to them. They were part of a religious prayer culture. But when they watched how Jesus prayed, they saw something very different than what they were used to. Something mysterious, powerful, and so intriguing that they were moved to ask him about it. So to understand this passage, we have to look at it through their eyes, which I think we can do because many of us are probably coming from a similar place.

They learned about prayer primarily from their religious leaders – the Pharisees. (Picture) Prayer was extremely important to the Pharisees. According to Making Life Count Ministries, they had a list of 18 prayers that they repeated three times a day. Wherever they were at that time, they would stop and pray. Some would purposely go to the Temple or synagogue to pray, thinking God was confined to those holy places. Others would purposely go to busy streets to pray so people would see their devotion to God. They would make very lengthy prayers and made a habit of hypnotizing themselves by endless repetition of a phrase or word so that they could pray longer.

Almost everything in life had a formula for prayer. When I was growing up, we had a prayer we repeated before meals: *"Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Let these gifts to us be blessed. In Jesus' name, Amen."* Well, the Pharisees had prayers for meals, when they saw light, fire, lightning, a new moon, comets, rain, the sea, lakes, rivers, receiving new furniture, entering or leaving a city, and so on. So you can imagine parents trying to teach their children all these different kinds of prayers. Prayer was extremely important and practiced regularly, but it was also impersonal, empty, and religious. And that's where Jesus' disciples were coming from.

I don't want to be too hard on our prayer culture because many people realize that prayer is much more than that and have tried to teach and demonstrate that to others. But I do want to acknowledge that sometimes, despite our best efforts, the way we often perceive prayer ends up being much the same as 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews.

And that's not what prayer is. That's not what the disciples were seeing in Jesus, or they would have never asked him to teach them to pray. Jesus prayed

differently. That's what the disciples saw and that's what we need to see as we come to this teaching today. Let's look at what Jesus taught his disciples and how it was different than what they knew so we can see it differently ourselves. First he gives them some instructions about how to pray and then he gives them a couple stories. The instructions come first.

Read Luke 11:1-4.

*Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." <sup>2</sup> And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. <sup>3</sup> Give us each day our daily bread, <sup>4</sup> and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."*

This may sound familiar because it's very similar to what Jesus taught his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. This is likely a different group of disciples, but the teaching is essentially the same thing which tells me this was how Jesus regularly began to teach people about prayer. This wasn't just another rote prayer to add to their list of prayers to recite three times a day, this was a pattern for prayer that introduced them to something different than what they had known before.

The first thing I want to note is that Jesus taught them to address God as "Father," and I think this is significant. This is different than addressing God as "God" or "Lord" or "Yahweh," which are true, but impersonal. One of the things I think the disciples noticed that was different about Jesus is that his prayers were personal. He wasn't addressing a God who was separate and inaccessible, he was speaking with his Father. The Jews grew up with the understanding that God was set apart and holy. His glory was in the Most Holy Place in the center of the Temple compound, but he was cut off and inaccessible to anyone other than the high priest. Prayers were lifted up, but very one-sided and who knew if their prayers mattered or if God heard them?

Jesus was different. His prayers were personal because he had a close relationship with his Father. They weren't empty religious repetition, they were real. And that's something we need to check in ourselves. When we go to prayer, do we recognize we are actually talking with our heavenly Father who knows us and

loves us and is listening to us? Or are we just going through the motions again? Do we address him as “Father,” or only “God” or “Lord”?

“Hallowed be your name.” Jesus taught that prayer needs to come from an attitude and posture of humility and reverence toward our heavenly Father. Later on, in Luke 18:11-12, he gave an example of how a Pharisee would pray: *“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”* This prayer was full of pride and self-righteousness which is the exact opposite of the attitude we should have. We come to our heavenly Father recognizing that he is holy; he is worthy; he is precious to us. The focus isn’t on us and how we think we can impress him, it’s on him and how worthy he is.

“Your kingdom come.” In this statement a disciple would acknowledge God as their King and express their desire to see his kingdom established on earth. The Pharisees were trying to gain leverage through an earthly government, but not Jesus’ disciples. They weren’t to put their hope in a human governor or king, but in God alone. This prayer also expresses submission to his will and the desire to serve him in his kingdom. We too often look to our government or world for hope and a future rather than God. As Christ’s disciples we need to shift our hope and allegiance to God alone, and devote ourselves to his will.

“Give us each day our daily bread.” This acknowledges both God’s sufficiency and our need for him. We don’t ultimately provide for our needs each day, God does. In our affluent culture this is easy to forget and replace with an attitude of self-reliance. But everything we need for each day ultimately comes from God. Our jobs, health, opportunities, abilities, food, even the air we breathe – it all comes from our Great Giver who provides for our needs.

“Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” This acknowledges the disciple’s need for forgiveness – the opposite of the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees. It also acknowledges our personal responsibility to walk in obedience to God and forgive those who have sinned against us. The Pharisees took God’s forgiveness for granted because they were the chosen people and that often released them from the responsibility to walk in true obedience. Jesus made it clear that was not the case. Obedience went hand in hand with forgiveness – not as the cause, but as the proof. We can take

forgiveness for granted as well. We believe that by Christ's sacrifice our sins are forgiven – past, present, and future – but we can use that as a license for complacency or disobedience. We saw a few weeks ago, faith without works is dead. Christ's sacrifice forgives the sins I commit today, but there is also the need for ongoing obedience because that proves that Christ is alive in me. This prayer reminds us of that.

And finally, "Lead us not into temptation." This acknowledges God's active role in the affairs of our lives and our ongoing need for his protection and direction so we don't stray into evil.

I think as the disciples heard these things they saw prayer in a whole new light – personal communication and a personal relationship with God that made an actual difference in their lives today. Prayer was how they could connect with God and grow closer to him, honoring him, depending on him, submitting to his will. It made sense to them why Jesus' prayers were so different than what they grew up with. They weren't empty religious practices and routines; they were real communication. And that's what we need to experience today or prayer will be worthless. Prayer will become something God never intended it to be. So if prayer has been dull and dead to you, stop praying that way and treat it as something real.

Going along with this new perspective, Jesus told them a couple stories I want to read and just make a few observations about that I think fit the context in which they were given. We like to pick apart these stories and form a complex theology of prayer, but I don't think that's what Jesus wanted.

Read Luke 11:5-10.

*And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, <sup>6</sup> for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; <sup>7</sup> and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup> And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. <sup>10</sup> For everyone*

*who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

I think the general idea Jesus was trying to convey to his disciples was that if you need something, go to God and ask him for it – as you would a friend. It's good to ask! And don't be afraid to keep asking. He's not like the friend who gets bothered in the story. He wants you to ask, seek, and knock. He wants to be in a close relationship with you. He wants you to see that he hears you and responds. The second story has a similar theme.

Read Luke 11:11-13.

*<sup>11</sup> What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; <sup>12</sup> or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? <sup>13</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

Here I think he wants them to see that God loves them even more than they love their own children and as much as they want to give good gifts to their children, he wants to give even more. Most of all, he wants to give them more of himself, through the presence of the Holy Spirit. So again – ask!

My hope is that Jesus' teaching and words will stir in your heart a new vision and new desire for prayer. Prayer is not a religious obligation, it's an invitation to connect with and delight in God. He loves you and wants you to pray so you can come to know him and grow closer in your relationship with him.