

*Luke 11:1-4, 9-13; Psalm 27:1-6

Teach Us to Pray

[READING Luke 11:1-4, 9-13]

¹ Now it came to pass, as Jesus was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, *that* one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.”

² So He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Our Father in heaven,

Hallowed be Your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven.

³ Give us day by day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

For we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And do not lead us into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one...”

⁹ “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

I know some friends who are tempted to lust. Like most men, it can grab my attention. Jesus tells us that lust is adultery working inside the mind; a secret, but deadly, affair. So I pray about that temptation. I name it before the Lord, and I tell Him, “I can’t handle this temptation by myself..”

In fact, that’s the prayer Jesus taught the Church: *Lead us not into temptation...*

I used to subscribe to Sports Illustrated. Once a year I had temptation delivered to my home. The bathing suit issue. One year, after seeing the cover, my daughter put it straight in the trash can. But throughout February and March you can’t go shopping to the grocery store or convenience market without seeing – the mostly nude Swimsuit model.

You don’t think this prayer Jesus taught us is relevant?

But you know, lust or greed or pride or anger or indifference or criticism can wreak havoc in my relationship with our heavenly Father!

Have you ever prayed for deliverance from some temptation, only to find yourself falling back into the pit again?

Have you ever prayed for a loved one who was agonizing with disease or illness – only to be frustrated time and time again?

[Introducing Sermon Series on Prayer: the Lord’s Prayer. The disciples asked Jesus, “Teach us to pray.” There was something unique in the way Jesus prayed. It was different. It was powerful!]

We are people of prayer! If we are God's people, then we have to be people of prayer. Habitual prayer. Constant prayer. Enduring prayer. Persevering prayer. For it's through prayer that we commune with our loving God throughout our day.

But for some, prayer is a tragic problem. Many of *you* have attempted prayer; you believed that prayer was the avenue to "hear" God speak to you. You've wanted to find His wisdom, His will, His power, and His direction – but you came up ...with *nothing!* *And you stopped praying!*

And here's the paradox: you yearn for prayer, yet you avoid it. You're attracted to God, yet you ignore Him. Does that sound like you?

It seems that prayer can kill us or it can cure us. Prayer either extinguishes the fire of our spiritual life or it enhances us with power and blessing! And the key – here it is – *today's key*: the key to prayer may be in what you *believe* about prayer. Your belief about prayer could actually cause your faith in God to deteriorate, instead of empower you!

Too often we focus our prayer on the target of our *needs* rather than the target of God, and who God is! Before we pray we need to understand the character of God! The Lord's prayer sets the stage to understand God: "Our Father, who art in heaven, Holy is Thy name..." Because if we don't have a true understanding of God we're apt to give up praying altogether, believing that it's an aimless exercise of our imaginations.

Or you might wonder if you're praying wrongly, because you see others benefitting so much ...and you're practicing new postures of prayer or checking to see if you're holding your hands just right. 1) "Is it my lack of faith?" 2) "Maybe I'm not worthy of God's love." Does God want me to be more contrite? More obedient? More sorry?

You know, maybe you're wrong on both counts. Let's not conclude 2) that God is withholding grace or 1) that you lack faith. A mustard seed isn't that big!

You may need a new perspective on God *and* prayer. That's what we'll explore in the weeks to come. We usually begin worship focusing on the presence of the Almighty; turning our attention with our hearts and voice upon the God who we glorify!

And in the same way with your series on prayer ...let's go deeper with four qualities or characteristics we can believe about God:

1. God is All-Powerful and Able to Do All that You Ask. Do you believe that?

A child who knows that his father has nothing to give will be very reluctant to ask for anything at all, but one who knows his father is wealthy and generous will be encouraged to ask for whatever he needs. God is abundantly able to provide for all your needs. He wants you to come to Him with boldness in order to receive what you need.

Hebrews 4:16 – **Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.**

Sir Walter Raleigh one day asked a favor of Queen Elizabeth, who said to him, "Raleigh, when will you leave off begging?" To which he replied, "When your Majesty leaves off giving." Let's ask great things of God, expect great things of God, and let His goodness make us constant in prayer.

2. God is Compassionate. We heard it in our reading today: **If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing – you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask Him? (MSG)**

Do you know that the Qur'an, the bible of the Moslems, never applies the word "love" to God? Aristotle, in the third century said, "It would be eccentric for anyone to claim that he loved Zeus" – or that Zeus loved a human being, for that matter. Yet our Christian bible affirms, "God is love."

Jesus tried to describe the Father's love through His stories. He tells of a woman who searched all night until she found a valuable coin, and of a shepherd who hunted in the dark until he found the one sheep who had strayed. Each scene concludes with joy and a party of celebration over the news of another sinner welcomed home! Finally, Jesus tells the story of the lost son, a reckless, wasteful child who mocks the love of his father and squanders his inheritance in a far country.

The priest Henri Nouwen sat for hours meditating on Rembrandt's great painting *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Staring at the painting, Nouwen gained a new insight into the parable: the mystery that Jesus Himself was the prodigal son for our sake! "He left the house of His heavenly Father, came to a foreign country, gave away all that He had, and returned through a cross to His Father's home. All this He did, not as a rebellious Son, but as the obedient Son, sent out to bring home all the lost children of God... Jesus is the prodigal Son of the prodigal Father who gave away everything the Father had entrusted to Him ...so I could become like Him and return with Him to His Father's home." [2. God Is Compassionate]

3. God Wants a Relationship With You.

We are driven to prayer by our *needs*. You see, there are needs we have that *no one* can touch; *no one else* can fulfill. It might be a need for salvation from sin or relief from guilt. Where else will we go; what will we do to find forgiveness for sin? You may need courage. Or you may need company in your loneliness. It may be the need for healing. Or the need for affirmation and acceptance – that can only come from the quiet strength of God who whispers, "I am with you." "I love you..."

Surely God has planted this sense of *need* within us, this restlessness, to persuade us to seek communion with Him!

Philip Yancey spent a long night sitting in the uncomfortable chairs of O'Hare Airport, waiting impatiently for a flight that was delayed five hours. He happened to be next to a wise woman traveling to the same conference to which he was headed. The long delay and the late hour created a time to share stories and Yancey got into some of the dysfunctions of his childhood, disappointments with the Church, and their questions of faith. At the time, Yancey was writing the book *Disappointments with God* and he was overwhelmed by the burden of other people's doubts and unanswered prayers.

His new friend listened in silence for a very long time, and out of nowhere she asked a question that stuck. "Philip, do you ever just let God love you? It's pretty important, I think."

He realized that she had brought to light the gaping hole in his spiritual life. For all our preoccupation in the Christian faith, we often miss the most important reality of all. The story of Jesus is a story of relationships, a story of love. It is God's greatest effort to reach out to you, to love you, to save you, to rescue you. Jesus represents the promise of a God who will go to any length to meet you and bring you back!

[3. God Wants a Relationship with You.]

Remarkably, Jesus made us loveable to the Infinite and Holy God.

4. Finally, God is Always Present. God is always near.

Are you separated from God? Have you been ignoring His invitation to you?

You don't have to live outside His presence. It's not God's plan for you to wander as a nomad. God wants you to move into His heart and live with Him. He's your Father, for crying out loud! And your Father not only wants you to live *with* Him but to live *in* Him!

Did you hear that? The Bible says you can live *in* Him! **"For in Him we live and move and have our being."** (Acts 17:28)

If we really believe in a crucifixion and resurrection, if we really believe Jesus was killed on a cross but came back to life three days later, what real option do we have but to let God guide us through prayer and studying His purpose and plan?

There really is a God. And we each need to decide if we're going to let God work through us and do the miracles that accomplish amazing, unexpected things among us. Because God will nudge us into the most curious places – into conversations that are impossible to anticipate, in directions that we couldn't have thought out for ourselves.

God wants to be your dwelling place. He has no interest in being a weekend getaway or summer cottage. Don't even consider using God as a vacation cabin or a retirement home. He wants you under His roof now and always. He wants to be your mailing address. Listen to the promise of His Son: **If My people love Me they will obey My teaching. My Father will love them and We will come to them and make Our home with them.** (John 14:23)

For some of you this is a whole new concept. We think of God as a deity to discuss, not a place to dwell. We think of God as a mysterious miracle worker, not a house in which to live. We think of Him as a Creator to call on, not a home to reside in. But our Father wants to be much more. He wants to be the One in whom you **live and move and have your being.**

Listen to what David, the man after God's own heart, wrote:

READING Psalm 27:1-6

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation –
so why should I be afraid?

The LORD protects me from danger –
so why should I tremble?

² When evil people come to destroy me,
when my enemies and foes attack me,
they will stumble and fall.

³ Though a mighty army surrounds me,
my heart will know no fear.

Even if they attack me,
I remain confident.

⁴ The one thing I ask of the LORD –
the thing I seek most –
is to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life,
delighting in the LORD's perfections
and meditating in His Temple.

⁵ For He will conceal me there when troubles come;
He will hide me in His sanctuary.

He will place me out of reach on a high rock.

⁶ Then I will hold my head high,
above my enemies who surround me.

At His Tabernacle I will offer sacrifices with shouts of joy,

singing and praising the LORD with music.

What is this house of God which David seeks? Is David describing a physical structure? Doesn't he point us beyond a building with four walls and a door through which we enter?

Acts 17:24 – **Our Lord does not live in temples built by human hands.**

When David says, **Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever**, he's not saying he wants to get away from people. He's saying that he yearns to be in God's presence, wherever he is! David longs to be *with* God and *in* God ...in every moment he's alive!

You're one step, one breath, away from the Father. Wherever you are: whatever time it is. Be it Sunday or Thursday afternoon. You need never leave the house of God. You don't need to change your zip code or your neighborhood – all you need to change is your *perception!*

Do you know:

- Your Father in heaven is all-powerful and able to do abundantly more than all that you ask or imagine?
- Your Father in heaven is compassionate and loves you more than you can fathom?
- Your Father in heaven wants nothing more than a relationship with you? He sent His Son to rescue you and to bring you to Himself.
- Your Father in heaven is present, constantly available to you?

Have you misunderstood His love, His expectations? Will you walk with Him and talk with Him today, and tomorrow, and each day this week ahead? And learn about Him?

He's waiting for you! And prayer is free!

ACTION PLANS

- Ask God in prayer about the Action Steps you can take beginning today to practice a prayer life.

²⁰ **God can do anything, you know – far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, His Spirit deeply and gently within us.**

²¹ **Glory to God in the church!**

Glory to God in the Messiah, in Jesus!

Glory down all the generations!

Glory through all millennia! Oh, yes!

(Ephesians 3:20-21)