

WHAT'S THE POINT OF PRAYER?

*He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'*² *He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.'*³ *Give us each day our daily bread.*⁴ *And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'*⁵ *And he said to them, 'Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;'*⁶ *for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'*⁷ *And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'*⁸ *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.'*⁹ *So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.*¹⁰ *For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*¹¹ *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?*¹² *Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?*¹³ *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!'*

(Luke 11:1-13, NRSV)

Does God care who wins the World Series? Maybe if the L.A. Angels are playing. I remember when the Rams won the Super Bowl a few years ago their quarterback, Kurt Warner, an Evangelical Christian, praised Jesus for the spectacular win. His teammate, receiver Isaac Bruce, described catching the winning pass like this: “That wasn’t me. That was all God. I had to make an adjustment on the ball, and God did the rest” (*Slate*, February 2, 2000). I’ve read that baseball legend Ty Cobb could commit 4 of the 7 deadly sins before lunch and then dazzle the Detroit Tiger fans in an afternoon double header. But today’s sports heroes are increasingly religious and increasingly public about their faith. And while many of the athletes merely pray to do their best in the game, others pray to win and win big to the glory of God. And so I ask, does God care who wins the World Series or the Super Bowl?

After all, in today’s scripture lesson Jesus taught his disciples about prayer saying, “For everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and to everyone who knocks the door will be opened” (Luke 11:10).

This verse seems to say that if we ask God for something, we’re going to get it. Perhaps like me, you’ve prayed for something or someone to no avail, or so it seems. Why? The Jim Bakkers and Jimmy Swaggerts of the world have simple explanations. They say that prayers may go unanswered because of unconfessed sin. That God is not in the business of answering the prayers of sinners. I’ve never bought this argument. Saying that it is my fault that God doesn’t answer my prayers seems like blaming the victim. And besides, when it comes to sin we’re all in the same boat, Bakker and Swaggert included.

So what does it take to get God to answer our prayers? Jesus’ disciples were wondering the same thing in today’s scripture lesson from the Gospel of Luke. As the

story goes, Jesus had just finished a time of private prayer when the disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

The 12 verses that follow are some of Jesus’ most important teachings on prayer. First, Jesus gave them the model prayer or the Lord’s Prayer. We have two versions—one in Matthew and a shorter one in Luke. When we look at these prayers, we see that the Church added a few lines around 100 AD. And Jesus didn’t even say “Amen.”

Dr. Keith Wagner, a UCC pastor says, “The prayer that Jesus gave was not a theological dissertation on the meaning of prayer. It was not a prayer that listed all the ills and problems of the community. It wasn’t a ‘wish list’ of things and desires. It had just a few basic points. (1) God is to be acknowledged. (2) We are free to make an appeal for our daily sustenance. (3) We are to forgive as we are forgiven. And (4) we are to seek God’s leadership in our life’s journey” (“The Simplicity of Prayer,” July 26, 1998).

In Luke’s version the prayer begins, “Father.” Instead of some flowery theological language meant to impress his disciples, he begins with the most personal and loving of words, Father, Abba, Daddy. Of course the point in calling God “Father” is not to imply that God is masculine. The point is that as God’s children, we are to approach God in the same way we approached our parents when we were children.

I came to understand this better after becoming a parent. Just being acknowledged by the child we love means the world to us. I’ll never forget when Matthew was around one and he started saying, “Dada.” It also meant the world to me when Alina started calling me “Dada” when she was still in the orphanage. These days many requests from my children begin with “Daddy.” “Daddy will you play with me? Daddy will you read me a book? Daddy will you pour

me some milk?” And of course the all-time classic kid question: “Why Daddy?”

What would it be like if I walked in the house and my children completely ignored me, if they acted as if I didn’t exist? God loves us like an ideal Father or Mother. When we fail to talk to God, to deepen and nurture our relationship, our spiritual lives can become stale and stagnant. So let us approach God with open hearts and open arms, addressing God as intimately and honestly as children.

Whatever name we choose for God, it should be in keeping with the next line of the Lord’s Prayer, “hallowed be thy name.” Since names in the Hebrew tradition referred to the essential nature of the person, praising God’s name was simply acknowledging God as the One who was worthy of praise and adoration.

The next phrase, “Thy kingdom come,” flows directly from this praise. If God is our loving Parent, we can pray and accept with full confidence the coming of God’s Kingdom or Reign. When we pray, “Thy Kingdom come” we are in essence saying, “God, we wish that your purpose for us and our world would happen right now.” This involves both acceptance and action—acceptance in that we trust God’s purpose and action in that we open ourselves up to making our world a more loving place. Prayer and work go hand in hand. Someone once said, “Pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended upon [you].”

The next phrase in Luke’s version is, “Give us *each day* our daily bread.” The literal translation is, “continually give us” our daily bread. Since most of us in this room have no problem keeping food on the table, why should we pray for daily bread? When we ask God for daily bread we are asking God for more than carbohydrates. We are asking God

to help us day to day with whatever comes our way. We are requesting strength for life's journey. We are asking for God's help in whatever form it may come.

The next petition in Luke's version sounds different than Matthew's, which is the one we pray every week. Luke records, "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us." The meaning of this phrase has been debated for centuries. Some believe that if we do not forgive others, God will not forgive us. I've heard many a sermon on forgiveness make this very point. I disagree with this interpretation because it limits the grace of God.

By definition, grace is God's unmerited favor toward us. Grace is independent of any action on our part. Grace does not mean that it doesn't matter what we do. That we can forgive our debtors if we feel like it, but either way is fine. Grace means that while we are imperfect, God's Spirit helps us cultivate an attitude of forgiveness toward others. And that when we truly understand and experience God's gracious forgiveness in our own lives, we can become forgiving people ourselves.

The final petition is, "Lead us not into temptation," which Matthew expands to being delivered from evil. It makes sense that after asking God's forgiveness we should pray for help in temptation. You may be able to relate to me when I say that I can resist anything but temptation! The temptations we face may not be the kind that makes headlines, but they may nevertheless keep us from being all that God intends. Are we tempted to spend too much time at the office at the expense of our families? Do we find it easier to spread malicious gossip instead of respecting another's privacy? Do we neglect time for prayer or meditation in lieu of the latest sitcom or suspense novel? Do we spend more money at expensive restaurants than we give

to world hunger? Temptations abound. We all need God's help.

After praying the model prayer, Jesus continued teaching his disciples about prayer with a short parable that goes something like this—suppose a friend comes to you at midnight. He wakes you up and says an unexpected guest has arrived at his house and he needs three loaves of bread to feed him. The friend asks repeatedly and it starts to sound like a demand. At that hour what would you do? Jesus says you will probably not get out of bed to help your friend merely because he is your friend, but because of your friend's repeated requests.

How does this apply to our prayer lives? Is Jesus saying that if we wear God down with repeated requests we will eventually get what we want? I believe that Jesus is saying if an inconsiderate friend can get what he wants by persistent pestering, surely our merciful God will be all the more attentive and compassionate with our requests.

Jesus' next teaching on prayer is simple, yet profound. These words are among my favorite in scripture when I am trying to make a decision or seek direction. Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened unto you." These verses comfort me in anxious times because they promise us that our asking, seeking, and knocking are not in vain. They also remind me that God most surely answers every prayer, although it may not be the answer we want. Jesus himself experienced this in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed that the impending crucifixion, his bitter cup, might pass from him. But then he prayed to God, "Not my will but thine be done."

Since we aren't assured of the answer we want, why should we pray? For starters it makes a difference in our

connection to God. If we have a joy or concern, shouldn't we share it with the One who is as close as our next heartbeat? Prayer opens us up to God's Spirit strengthening us to face life's hardships. Prayer helps us come to terms with life's bitter disappointments and difficult struggles. Prayer also connects us to other people in a remarkable way. When we use the Prayer Chain to pray for our friend's mother or neighbor, when we participate in our 24-hour Lenten prayer vigil, we allow ourselves to slow down, to focus on God, on others, on the direction of our own lives. And in doing so it strengthens the bonds that unite us as a church family.

God is not Santa Claus. God doesn't promise to bring us whatever we ask. But God promises to give us something better. Jesus ended his teaching by promising his disciples that God will give us what we need most, the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God. When in spite of our prayers, life gives us grief and heartache, God gives us the Spirit of comfort and hope, and the assurance of everlasting love. And thanks to the teachings of Jesus, we will always have a prayer. AMEN.

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August 21, 2005
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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, you have blessed us with the gift of life and a wonderful world in which to live. We offer thanks. You, the Source of our lives, love us as your children. May we embrace our lives and the lives of others with courage and compassion, unafraid of joy and pain, sickness and health. May your care be made known in our care of others.

Assist those who suffer poverty, injustice or oppression. Open the ears of our hearts to hear and quicken in us the desire to respond in love.

We earnestly pray for peace on earth. For the difficult steps toward peace made this week in Gaza we give you thanks. And we continue to worry and weep at the continued loss of life in Iraq and Niger.

Awaken in us boundless compassion, and use us as agents of loving-kindness. In your love and compassion, hear the prayers of your people. Enliven us, by your Spirit, to live into the fullness of your Reign. We pray through Jesus Christ who gives us hope. AMEN.