

Learning to Pray

by John Vissers

Learning to pray is a vital part of the Christian life, and it begins by asking Jesus to teach us, following His example, and believing in prayer.

Duration: 29:42

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Luke 11:1-13

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the importance of learning how to pray and trust in God. Jesus tells a parable about a friend at midnight who persistently asks for help and eventually receives it. This story serves as an incentive for prayer, encouraging believers to ask, seek, and knock, knowing that God is good and will answer. The preacher emphasizes the need for persistence in prayer and highlights the importance of faith in approaching God.

Transcript

Let us hear the Word of God this morning from Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, and reading there verses 1 to 13. Luke chapter 11, reading at verse 1. Turn with me in your Bibles or in the Pew Bible if you would like to follow along. One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.

When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, give us each day our daily bread, forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us, and lead us not into temptation. Then he said to them, suppose one of you has a friend and he goes to him at midnight and says, friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me and I have nothing to set before him.

Then the one inside answers, don't bother me. The door is already locked and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.

I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you, ask and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find.

Knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds.

And to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? Amen. And may God bless to us this reading from his word this morning.

Let us bow in prayer. Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, to receive your word this morning. Silence within us any voice but your own voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. The story is told about the elders of a certain church who once came to speak to a young man in their congregation about the way that he prayed. They didn't particularly like or appreciate the way that he prayed.

They criticized the language that he used in the prayers he prayed in the midweek Bible study. They complained about the theology of his public prayers in the church service whenever he was asked to participate in prayer. And they wanted to teach him how to pray properly, how to use the proper language, how to express the proper theology.

And after they had laid their load on him, he simply turned to them and he said, are you folks finished now? And they kind of nodded and he said, well I have just one thing to say to you. I wasn't talking to you. Learning how to pray.

How do we learn to pray? Some of us, of course, learned how to pray as children from our parents. We grew up in homes where the words of the great poet Alfred Lord Tennyson echoed in our ears, more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of. Some of us learned how to pray by following the example of a godly Sunday school teacher or a godly pastor.

Others of us learned how to pray in a small group Bible study or fellowship group where others took an interest in us and helped us along in the life of prayer. Some of us have just had to learn how to pray on our own, perhaps when we've faced a crisis. We've gone to our knees to God in prayer and fumbled our ways forward as we've tried to pray.

There are many ways to pray and there are many different ways to learn how to pray. What is basic, however, is that being a Christian means being a person who prays and becoming a Christian involves learning how to pray. And so this morning we come to our third and final message in our short follow-up series to Mission Ontario.

We've talked about what it means to become a Christian by faith to accept Christ and to become a child of God. We've talked about what it is to read the Bible, how to read the Bible as God's word and make it a part of our life. And this morning we then come to what it means to learn how to pray.

What is prayer? Why does it seem so difficult to pray in our day? Is it really important to being a Christian? Is prayer really necessary? How do we learn to pray? How do we begin? How can we make a start at this thing which is so vital to the Christian life? And I want us to look together this morning at this passage in Luke chapter 11, because I think we find here on the lips of our Savior some helpful and some very practical instruction on how to pray, on what it means to learn how to pray. And the first step in learning how to pray is simply this, to ask the Lord to teach you. The first step in learning how to pray is to ask the Lord to teach you.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. Verse 1, when he finished one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.

The disciples wanted to learn how to pray. They were confronted by a praying Jesus, and they were willing to confront the prayerlessness of their own lives. As they saw Jesus praying, they began to realize how little they knew about prayer.

They saw Jesus arise early in the morning and go to a quiet place before the day began to spend time with God his Father in prayer. They saw Jesus withdraw from the busyness of ministry, from the pressure of the crowds, to those places where he would be alone with God his Father in prayer. He frequently found a quiet place where he could pray.

Here was a man in constant fellowship with God his Father. Here was a man whose prayers made a difference. And when Jesus prayed, the disciples knew that the glory of heaven itself touched down to the depths of the earth.

They saw a man for whom prayer made a difference. Prayer sustained Jesus. Prayer gave Jesus life.

It made a difference to the way that he lived day in and day out as he sought to fulfill the will of God for his life and fulfill the ministry that the Father had sent him to do. And the disciples, seeing that, wanted to pray like that. They were willing to confront the problem of prayer in their own lives.

They wanted Jesus to teach them to pray. They knew that John the Baptist had taught his disciples how to pray, and they wanted to learn how to pray like that. If Jesus, the very Son of the Father, needed to pray, so then did they.

One of the church fathers, Cyprian, said this, if he prayed who was without sin, how much more it becomes a sinner to pray. And so we need to begin by realizing that the first thing we do is we come to Jesus and we ask him to teach us how to pray. We acknowledge that prayer is something to be learned, that prayer is something we need, that prayer does not always come naturally, that it's not easy, that we don't always feel like praying, that prayer indeed is a learned art.

And a Christian life of prayer begins with the prayer of the disciples. It's the first prayer we ought to utter as we come into the presence of our Lord. Lord, teach us to pray.

Lord, teach me to pray. This is the starting point. Our first request ought to be a request to enter with Christ into the school of prayer.

We go to Jesus in prayer and we ask him to teach us how to pray. And we learn how to pray by praying to learn how to pray. It's the first step.

We begin by acknowledging we need help and we ask Jesus to give us the will to pray. We don't always feel like praying. We don't want to do it.

But one of the secrets of the Christian life is to learn that when you don't want to do something, when you don't feel like doing something, when you don't think rightly, you ask God to change your heart and you ask God to change your mind and you ask God to change your will. We start by recognizing that Jesus alone is the one who can teach us how to pray. We are living at a time in the church when there seems to be a renewed interest in prayer in the church around the world.

And one of the things that has been exciting to me as I have traveled in various parts of the world and attended mission conferences and had an opportunity to teach in various theological schools and Bible colleges in other parts of the world is to see how many Christians, especially in other parts of the world, are deeply committed to prayer. I attended a conference in Manila in 1989 and I was roomed with a brother Christian from Africa, a pastor, and I was awakened one morning at about three o'clock in the morning by some rustling and I looked up and I realized that here he was up praying still in the middle of the night and I thought perhaps he was still suffering from jet lag and just couldn't sleep so got up to pray, but I found out the next day that this was his regular routine. I don't know about you, but I don't get up at three to pray.

Maybe I should, but there's this tremendous interest and stirring of renewal and interest in prayer around the church and around the world today and the Holy Spirit seems to be stirring up God's people to prayer and I sense a stirring of interest in this congregation. If we are serious about learning how to pray persistently and passionately and effectively, then it begins by falling on our knees before our Lord and saying, Lord, teach us to pray. Lord, teach us to pray.

The second step in learning how to pray is simply this, to follow the example of Jesus. Notice in this text that the disciples were given a pattern for prayer. Verse 2, Jesus said to them, when you pray say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread, forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation. This is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. Matthew's version is the more traditional one that we know.

It's the longer version. But in Matthew and here in Luke, the Lord's Prayer is in a sense really misnamed because it's not the Lord's Prayer so much as a prayer that our Lord gives to his disciples. Jesus gives them a pattern for all their praying.

It is not a ritual prayer to be recited by rote. It is not a formula prayer which guarantees the results we want. It is not a magical incantation which manipulates the hands of the living God.

But it is a way of praying which leads us into the very presence of God. And so we should pray this prayer. But we should also use the Lord's Prayer as a pattern and as a guide for all prayer.

Now we don't have time this morning to go through this prayer in detail. At some point in the future I'm going to come back to the Lord's Prayer and we will work through it in a series of messages piece by piece. But notice the essential features of this prayer.

We learn how to address God personally in this prayer. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our Father. The God of redemption and creation is our God.

He knows us and we are invited to come into his presence to personally address him. Many neighborhoods in this city now have signs which read, this is a block parent community. Those of you who have children or those of you who participate in that program will know what I'm talking about.

This means that there are homes in that community with certain signs in the front window that indicate help will be provided to children who are confused or who are in trouble or who are in danger. A child can go up to the door where such a sign is in the window and knock on that door and be assured that someone will be there to answer, that someone will be at home to help them. And in a very real sense this

is what Jesus is saying as we are to address God as Father.

There is always someone at home in the universe and so we are invited to address God personally and come into his presence. We learn how to praise God in this prayer. Hallowed be your name.

God's reputation is to be held in high esteem. God's person is to be honored. God's name is to be glorified in all the earth.

Thy kingdom come. God's purposes are to prevail. God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

You see, prayer is speaking to God about God, about God's person, about God's purposes. And we also learn in this prayer how boldly to come before God with our own needs. Give us each day our daily bread.

This prayer teaches us to depend upon the Living God for all of life. We learn how to look inward and see our need for forgiveness. Forgive us our sins for we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation.

These are powerful petitions, daily bread for physical strength and survival. We take that for granted, but many people in our world do not. Daily forgiveness for spiritual strength and spiritual survival.

Too often we take that for granted, but many do not. And daily protection from evil in order to do the will of God. Personal address to God, praise of God, and petition.

That's the pattern. That's the guideline that Jesus provides for us in this prayer which he gives to his disciples. When children first start to color, they have two problems.

First, they often choose colors that are inappropriate. We've discovered this in our house. I've tried to persuade my children a number of times that bears are not green and that horses are not purple, but they choose colors that may be inappropriate, the colors that they want.

And secondly, once the colors are chosen, they have a difficult time keeping the colors within the boundary lines. And as children grow, of course, one of the accomplishments is that they grow and they mature and as they keep on coloring, they they learn how to color within the guidelines and to choose the appropriate colors resulting in a satisfying picture. And learning to pray is something like that.

At first, we don't know what to pray. We don't know what to pray for, nor do our prayers always stay within the guidelines of God's will. But as we mature, as we grow, as we fumble forward, as we continue to pray, we learn how to pray the right things in the right way.

And the Lord's prayer provides us with these wonderful guidelines. It's a pattern for all prayer and it reminds us that in prayer we look up at God and we look in at ourselves and we look out at others and we look back to the past with thanksgiving and we look on to the future as God leads us forward. We learn how to pray by asking Jesus to teach us.

We learn how to pray by following the example of Jesus. And then thirdly and finally, very simply, we learn how to pray by believing in prayer, by trusting in the God of prayer. Prayer, you see, is an act of faith and part of learning how to pray is learning how to believe in God, learning how to trust in God.

In verses 5 to 13, Jesus tells a parable about a friend at midnight. The friend needs help to feed an unexpected guest in his home and the one to whom this request is made refuses to help at first. But the

man will not give up.

And because of his persistence, Jesus says, the other friend finally gets up to help. And Jesus tells this story as an incentive to prayer, as an incentive to prayer. He says, when you ask, and it shall be given to you.

Seek and you will find knock and the door will be opened to you. God is good, Jesus says, and knows how to give good gifts to his children. God will answer.

God will open the door. God will answer and provide trust in the God of prayer. There is someone at home in the universe.

And that kind of prayer, as we learn to trust in God, requires persistence. Prayer is an act of faith. Hudson Taylor, the great missionary statesman, lived his life on the principle that it was possible to move people through God by prayer alone.

That prayer mattered. Prayer puts us in touch with God. Augustine said that God does not ask us to tell him our needs, that he may learn about them, but in order that we may be capable of receiving what he is preparing to give.

And Mother Teresa says that prayer enlarges the heart until it is capable of containing God's gift of himself. And you see, that's what Jesus is saying here. God wants to give many good gifts, including the gift of his Holy Spirit.

And so for the Christian, praying should be like breathing. Just as breathing is the response of physical life to the presence of air, so prayer should be the response of spiritual life to the very presence, the very presence of God. You see, there are a lot of misconceptions about prayer.

Prayer does not plug us into the slot machine of the universe in order to get a chance at the big win. That's how some people imagine prayer. Prayer is not presumption that somehow if we just name it, we can claim it.

Prayer, rather, is an instrument which humbles us before God. As we boldly go before the throne of grace in the name of Jesus, prayer humbles us before God. The God who created us to be his children, the God who weeps over our sin, the God whose holiness and wrath and judgment ought to strike fear into our hearts, the God whose love in Jesus Christ ought to overwhelm us with repentance and with gratitude, the God who knows, according to Jesus, how to give good gifts to his children, and the God who longs to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

This God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the God who invites us to pray in faith. You see, prayer, when all is said and when all is done, prayer is nothing more and nothing less than that which brings us face to face with God. Face to face with God.

And when you come face to face with God in your life, then you've begun to learn how to pray. I ask for strength that I might achieve. God made me weak that I might obey.

I ask for health that I might do great things. God gave me grace that I might do better things. I asked for riches that I might be happy.

God gave me poverty that I might be wise. I asked for power that I might have the praise of people. God gave me weakness that I might feel a need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life, but God gave me life that I might enjoy all things. I received nothing that I asked for, but everything that I had hoped for. I am among all people the most blessed.

Are you willing to learn how to pray this morning? If you're not a Christian this morning, I would invite you to pray the first prayer to invite Jesus Christ into your life. If you're a new Christian, I would invite you to pray this prayer. Lord, teach me how to pray and may all of us, especially those of us who have been believers for many years, continually go to Jesus and ask Him to teach us how to pray and then to trust in the God who faces us, who meets us in prayer, that we might do His will.

Amen. Let us pray. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Bless this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

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