

## **“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”**

Luke 11:1-4

As we begin a sermon series on prayer this morning, I'd like for us to think about the difference between the way children often pray and the way that adults often pray. Generally speaking, children don't need a lot of coaching in prayer. And generally speaking, they don't pray in King James English and say things like “Most Holy God, Thou hast given us abundant provision this day. . .” It's more like, “Thanks for the butter and the ketchup and the French fries and my dog and my friend George and my crazy Uncle John. . .” And it can go on a long time. But it's natural and from the heart.

Sometimes a child will pray for more significant things too: “God, help my mommy not to be sad anymore.” “God, we pray for the poor people all over the world.” You've got to know that God loves to hear that type of prayer. Children, generally speaking, talk to God the way they talk to their parents. Just like young children think that their parents can do anything, they have this wild idea that God can do anything. And it shows up in the way they pray. Our children's pastor, Chris Barker, has mentioned that when he has asked children to pray for him, God has answered their prayers. The simple, unassuming, humble prayers of children. . . .

But something often changes in our praying on the way to adulthood. Things get more complicated. Maybe you go to church and you hear feature-length prayers that give you the impression that you have to use certain words in certain combinations if you're really praying. When we face disappointments in our lives, we wonder if God can be trusted. Or we pray for certain outcomes – a relationship to be healed, a body to be healed, the safety of a loved one – and God doesn't do what we've asked. As a result we become much more guarded in our prayers or we quit praying altogether.

And then there are all the theological difficulties with prayer. If God is all-knowing and if God is all-compassionate and all-powerful, why do we have to pray? If I have the ability to do meet some need, I'm going to do it without being asked. So why does God have to be asked? And how can we be sure what to ask for anyway? And how do we know if prayer makes a difference anyway?

There are also the realities of our lives and our lifestyles: we're busy people, busy in mind and in body. When we pause to pray our minds are flooded with so many thoughts and anxieties that two minutes later we're off *doing* something. Prayer, quite honestly, doesn't seem like a very good use of our time. Then there's the issue that praying is a lot “harder” than watching TV or doing Facebook or reading the newspaper or talking with people.

Consequently many of us find ourselves in a position of needing to learn how to pray all over again. We need to re-learn how to be honest and humble and real and natural in prayer. Interestingly, the disciples of Jesus eventually came to the place where they realized that they needed to learn all over again how to pray. They had grown up Jewish, so they had a rich heritage of praying. And yet they eventually came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

As we begin a sermon series on prayer this morning, I'd like to suggest that we make this our foundational request to Jesus, "Lord teach us to pray." We are going to notice what led to this request originally. We are going to examine what the gospel of Luke records about Jesus' prayer habits and how the disciples' request flowed from what they'd seen in Him. My hope is that Jesus' prayer habits will make the same request rise up within us.

***Our Response to Jesus' Devotion to Prayer: "Lord, teach us to pray." (Luke 3:21-22, 5:15-16, 6:12, 9:18, 11:1)***

In Luke we first read of Jesus praying at His baptism. Luke 3:21-22 records:

21 Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

It's interesting that in this public setting at the Jordan River with a crowd gathered, Jesus was praying. We aren't told whether He was praying "out loud" or silently, but it was obvious that Jesus was praying. And while He was praying, God and the Holy Spirit affirmed their pleasure in Jesus.

In Luke 5 we have an interesting comment about Jesus' prayer habits.

15 But the news about Him was spreading even farther, and large crowds were gathering to hear Him and to be healed of their sicknesses. 16 But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray.

It's significant that in the midst of His teaching and healing ministry Jesus "would often slip away to the wilderness to pray." Jesus would intentionally withdraw from the crowds and go to a deserted place to talk with His heavenly Father. We aren't told what Jesus prayed. We are simply told that in the midst of demands (demands I might add that are more pressing than anything anybody in this room faces), Jesus made conversation with His heavenly Father a priority. The sinless Son of God withdrew from people who had overwhelming needs, and He prayed.

In the next chapter we are told that on one occasion Jesus prayed all night. Jesus had just healed the man with a "withered right hand" on a Sabbath. Luke records that the scribes and Pharisees were enraged with Jesus and began plotting what they might do to Jesus.

12 It was at this time that He went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God.

Again, we aren't told what Jesus prayed about. The next day He chose twelve of His disciples to be "apostles" (those He would send to proclaim the Kingdom); perhaps He was praying about this choice. Jesus spent an entire night in prayer to God.

In chapter 9 we have an intriguing statement about Jesus' prayer habits:

18 And it happened that while He was praying alone, the disciples were with Him, and He questioned them, saying, "Who do the people say that I am?"

Isn't it interesting that Jesus was "praying alone" (NIV "in private") yet "the disciples were with Him." I mention this detail simply to point out that the disciples observed Jesus praying; they had seen Him withdraw from the crowds so that He could have intimate fellowship with His heavenly Father. They had seen Jesus' prayer life up close.

Now turn with me to Luke 11. In verse 1 we read how on another occasion when Jesus was praying, one of His disciples approached Him with a specific request about prayer:

11 It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."

It's interesting that the scribes and Pharisees had earlier insinuated that Jesus' disciples weren't nearly as devout as John's disciples because John's disciples "often fast and offer prayers" while "Yours eat and drink." This was immediately after the Pharisees confronted Jesus for sharing table fellowship with tax gatherers and sinners; instead of befriending sinners they should be off somewhere praying and fasting. As usual the Pharisees were judging on externals instead of the heart.

Perhaps this exchange between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees was in the back of their minds when Jesus' disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples to pray." In any case it's a good request. And I suspect that Jesus had been waiting for them to make this request. You can't really teach somebody to pray unless they want to learn to pray. By this time the disciples had seen Jesus regularly withdrawing to a lonely place to pray; apparently they had become sufficiently hungry for the same life of prayer that they made the request, "Lord teach us to pray."

The disciples didn't ask Jesus to teach them *about* prayer; He asked Jesus to teach them *to* pray. There's a huge difference between the two requests. It's the difference between asking a tennis pro, "Teach me about tennis" and "Teach me how to play tennis." Those are two very different things; one involves information and the other involves information, ability, and lots of practice. The request of Jesus wasn't to teach them *about* prayer; the disciple wanted Jesus to actually teach them *to* pray.

As the leadership of Faith has sought God concerning the direction of this church for the next 3 to 5 years, this very request is one of the things that God has impressed upon us. We call this aspect of our Vision "**A Deepening of Prayer**":

*We desire for every member to have a rich, growing life of prayer, and for every ministry of the church to begin in petition and end in praise.* We join the original disciples in asking Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). We believe that each of our members can have a deep experience of prayer, whereby they commune with their Heavenly Father, growing in their knowledge of God through conversation with

Him. We believe that prayer can be more than just a petitionary listing of our needs before God. When our petitions grow out of prayers of worship and thanksgiving first, our faith grows accordingly. We desire a fuller expression of corporate prayer among us. We desire to provide leadership and appropriate structures in order to facilitate prayer. Finally, we desire that prayer permeates all the ministries of Faith—no matter how large or small—so that in all we do, we begin and end in thankful dependence on God.

We believe that if we are going to see more people come to faith in Christ and experience Him in every area of life, we need a deepening of prayer. And it begins by joining the original disciples in asking Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Very simply, we come individually and collectively and make this simple, honest request of Jesus.

Some of you may be saying, “It’s about time!” You may have been ready for this type of prayer initiative for a long time. It’s possible that others of you aren’t quite so “all in.” Perhaps you have serious doubts about prayer, or perhaps you just aren’t convinced that this is the type of request we can bring to Jesus. In light of these reservations, I’d like to draw out a couple of implications of what we’ve already seen in the gospel of Luke. Jesus’ devotion to prayer has some profound implications that can lead us to the place where we say to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

### ***Implications of Jesus’ Devotion to Prayer***

For starters, Jesus’ devotion to prayer suggests that ***we don’t have to have all our questions about prayer answered.*** If Jesus – the Lord and Head of the church – prayed and taught His disciples to pray, then we can be assured that it’s legit. We can trust that Jesus’ commitment to prayer is right – even if we don’t understand it all.

Some people don’t really have many questions about prayer; they have the type of childlike faith that allows them to pray easily for the things in their world. Other people have serious questions that almost paralyze them in terms of prayer. I remember a conversation about prayer many years ago with a woman who had been deeply disappointed in God. She had prayed for something that she was convinced was God’s will (one involved a war and the other a pregnancy). But God didn’t grant what she had requested. And so she basically stopped praying. Her attitude was, “God will do what God will do, no matter what I pray.” Can you relate to that? I can.

Philip Yancey wrote in his book *Prayer*: “The simplest answer to the question ‘Why pray?’ is ‘because Jesus did’” (*Prayer*, p. 78). That is a good enough answer for me as well. If Jesus “flooded the heavens with prayers,” then surely we should learn to do the same.

To me Jesus’ practice and teachings suggest that we should pray even if we don’t understand why we don’t always get what we ask for. Like every area of practice and obedience, when it comes to prayer we have to decide whether Jesus can be trusted when He calls us to be His disciples and learn how to live as He lived.

The second implication of Jesus' commitment to prayer is that ***He is very willing and able to teach us to pray.*** If Jesus was devoted to prayer and if Jesus calls us to be His disciples (learners), then surely He is willing and able to teach us to pray. If discipleship means anything, it means learning how to pray like He did. He wouldn't call us to be His disciples and then not teach us something as foundational as prayer.

Jesus' answer to the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray," was disarmingly simple. He gave them what we call the "Lord's Prayer" – a very simple prayer much like a child would pray (Luke 11:2-4):

2 And 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 also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"

He also used parables to teach them to pray. We'll look at a couple of those next week. Jesus taught them the power of prayer by mentioning things He'd prayed for so that when they came to pass they would know it wasn't merely coincidence. In Luke 22 Jesus told Peter that "...Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." After denying Jesus three times and then becoming the rock upon which the church was built, Peter would have remembered that Jesus had prayed for him. Later in Luke 22 when Jesus awaited His arrest, He told the disciples that prayer was the most important thing they could do. He instructed the disciples, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation. And He withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and He knelt down and began to pray. . ."

This pattern of intentionally teaching His disciples to pray suggests that Jesus will surely also teach ***us*** to pray as well. Over the next two months we are going to put ourselves in a position to learn from Jesus how to pray. We are going to examine His teachings and His example, and invite Him to teach us to pray. We are going to provide some actual opportunities to pray; ultimately we learn to pray by praying. But it all begins by wanting it. And so I invite you to join me in making this simple request of Jesus:

Heavenly Father, we come to You as the original disciples came to Jesus and we ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." We will need to know ***about*** prayer along the way, but we really need to learn ***to*** pray. We're at many different places in our prayer lives. But as a community we want a deepening of prayer that flows from the heart. Allow us to set aside our doubts; allow us to set aside our skepticism; allow us to set aside our busyness and make space in our lives to pray. We believe that You are fully willing and able to teach us to pray. Teach us to pray – for our good and for Your glory. In Jesus name. Amen.