

Teach Us To Pray

Luke 11:1-13

¹ 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!"

How do you pray? Is it kneeling? Is it sitting with eye closed? Is it with head lifted up and hands out-stretched? Is it at meal time? Is it when you wake in the morning? Or when you go to sleep at night? Is it journaling? Meditating? Deep-breathing? Who taught you to pray? Was it a parent? A preacher? A teacher? A spouse? A friend? For me, it was my father who taught me to pray. Each night before I went to bed my father would say short phrased of the Lord's Prayer and I would repeat each phrase. Each Sunday morning we had family prayer at the breakfast table...and each of us was encouraged to pray to God. Later I remember we would study the Sunday School lesson together as a family and I would hear my father pray for understanding and for our family. He was a deacon in the church, and it was his responsibility to help begin the worship service on Sunday morning with prayer for the congregation.

What do you pray for? Your family? Your community? Your nation? Your world? Money? Health? Peace, personal or world? Little things or big things? Theologian **James A. Wallace** says when he reflects on his childhood, he remembered that his family prayed. His mother would say her prayers daily from a small book, crammed with special prayer cards collected over the years. She would refer to "the good Lord who knows best." His stepfather worked from a truck checking gas meters for the Baltimore Gas and Electric Company and would often eat his lunch sitting in a back pew in church, talking to "the Man upstairs"—for him it signaled a respectful yet familiar relationship. Both his parents and grandparents taught him to pray, more through example than specific words. From them he learned God was good, someone to be turned to on a daily basis.

In Catholic school James learned four reasons to pray: to praise God, to thank God, to ask God's pardon, and to ask God for what he needed, or even wanted—provided prayer ended with "however, not my will but yours be done," like Jesus at Gethsemane. Later, while becoming a member of the Redemptorists, a Roman Catholic religious order, he was taught mental prayer, to meditate and contemplate. The founder of his religious order, Alphonsus Liguori, wrote a spiritual classic called *Prayer, the Great Means of Salvation*, in which he emphasized the necessity of prayer, writing that those who pray are certainly saved. More recent voices that influenced his attitude toward prayer are Thomas Merton, who spoke of prayer as the communion of our freedom with God's ultimate freedom, and Anne Lamott, who wrote that she has two basic prayers: "Thank you, thank you," and "Help me, help me, help me."

We all have our own prayer history, but today's scripture takes us back to the beginning of praying *with* and *in* Jesus Christ. This is more than a recounting of a pious moment in the life of Jesus, more than a story of how we got the Our Father, more than a lesson from Jesus the teacher. Jesus taught his disciples *how* to pray and *for what* to pray. Prayer was an integral part of his life. Luke's Gospel points out that Jesus "would withdraw to deserted places to pray" (5:16) and at other times "he went out to the

mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (6:12; also 9:18). Jesus prayed before he chose his apostles (6:13-16) and when he fed the five thousand (9:16); he prayed the night before he died (22:39-44) and from the cross itself (23:34, 46). Prayer was part of his life, even unto death.

So, when Jesus responded to the request of his followers that he teach them how to pray, what he taught them became important—and has remained important—for the life of the church. He gave them—and us—words to address God, words to praise God, and, only then, words to petition God. Jesus began, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be thy name; your kingdom come.'" We are to approach God as "Father," as "Abba," in my family we would say Daddy, one we relate to intimately. Much has been written about this one word, inviting us to think of God as one who looks upon us as family, to whom we are as dear that God considers us his very own children. In a world where existence was so fragile—a condition that has not changed but only increased today—Jesus' prayer reminds us that there is one who has power over all and who is near to us. The two phrases that follow call on God to be God: "Hallowed be your name" and "Your kingdom come." They implore God to truly take charge of life, our lives, to bring justice and peace to our world, something only God can bring about. **James A.**

Wallace, C.Ss.R.

"Give us.... Forgive us.... Lead us.... Deliver us" are the next words uttered. There is no "Please," none of the softening, pious interjections that often mark what is called "spontaneous" prayer—"Oh dear Father," "blessed Lord," "sweet Jesus," and so on—just "Give us, forgive us, lead us, deliver us"!

The whole assumption of this prayer is that it is uttered out of a condition of real *necessity*. The one who prays is driven by great need—there is neither the inclination nor the time for pretence. We are dependent—so "Give us"; guilty—so "Forgive us"; lost and vulnerable—so "Lead us," "Deliver us." We are able sometimes through our most honest acts of prayer to find that our very weakness is the occasion for encounter with the Source of new strength. **Douglas John Hall**

Another way of viewing these petitions concern our three basic needs: food ("Give us each day our daily bread"), forgiveness ("And forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us") and fidelity ("And do not bring us to the time of trial"). These petitions name what is essential for the life of our individual bodies, the life of our communal body—be it society, the church, or the world—and the life of our ongoing relationship with God. These are the gifts of the kingdom, which will not be refused, because they flow from our being united with the very being of God, who sustains, forgives, and is faithful to us.

Jesus ended his prayer session with a parable and some advice urging persistence. John Pilch suggests that a better translation of persistence, given the culture of Jesus' world, would be "shamelessness." In a world where hospitality was highly prized, the continuous and shameless knocking would broadcast to the world the shameless behavior of a friend who stayed in bed rather than answering hospitality's urgent need. So, keep on asking, searching, knocking—be equally shameless in your prayer so that "God will not risk having his clients expose divine shamelessness for refusing to take care of them as a good father or patron would." Here God is presented as sleepy friend who needs to be shaken awake by a shameless friend. Luke went on to say that God's way of giving exceeds that of human friends, gifting all who ask with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' lesson on prayer serves only to reinforce the point the Lord's Prayer itself has made: prayer is not a meek, contrived, and merely "religious" act; it is the act of human beings who know how hard it is to be human. Real prayer cannot be faked. Its only prerequisites are sufficient self-knowledge to recognize the depths of our need, and enough humility to ask for help. "Ask (Really ask! Keep on asking!) and it will be given you"—*and is being given you already in the asking!* **Douglas John Hall**

Our scripture invites us to reflect on the story of our prayer life and where it has taken us. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who put us on the path to prayer as an essential part of our life. So we continue to ask, Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us truly to pray the words given by your Son, calling on God as our parent and protector. We can

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take comfort from the fact that, even when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness with sighs too deep for words (Rom. 8:26-27). For our part, we continue to teach those entrusted to us to pray as Jesus taught us, confident that our prayer will find favor with our God. **James A. Wallace, C.Ss.R.**

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