

TEACH US TO PRAY

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 26, 2019
Based on Luke 11:1–4; Mark 1:35–39, Luke 5:15–16***

Luke chapter 11 reports, “Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” (Luke 11:1) Jesus then taught his disciples a prayer that we now call The Lord’s Prayer, which is not so much a particular set of words but a model or pattern for prayer. There are actually two versions of the Lord’s Prayer in the New Testament, the one in the gospel of Luke that we heard this morning, and the other in the gospel of Matthew, which includes everything in the Luke version but with some additional phrases added. The gospels report a number of prayers that Jesus prayed at one time or another, but the Lord’s Prayer is the one prayer that Jesus specifically taught his disciples to pray.

Today we are beginning a summer sermon series entitled, “Teach Us to Pray—the Spiritual Journey of the Lord’s Prayer.” Through the course of this series, we will be looking at the Lord’s Prayer in depth, and we will find that each phrase in the Lord’s Prayer tells us a great deal about what our relationship with God can be. But before we launch into the content of the Lord’s Prayer, it is important to note what occasioned the Lord’s Prayer in the first place—it was Jesus’ own practice of prayer. The disciples saw Jesus praying, and they then asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. This morning we will focus on Jesus’ personal practice of prayer and how it can provide us with valuable guidance for living.

In the gospels it quickly becomes clear that Jesus was besieged with demands on his time and energy, soon after he began his public ministry. The passage we heard earlier from Luke 5 reports, “But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases.” (Luke 5:15) You get a sense of masses of people pressing upon Jesus; there was so much to be done! And everything that Jesus was doing was extraordinarily important. Jesus was healing people, he was proclaiming eternal truth, he was ushering in the Kingdom of God—which is why the next verse is rather stunning as it says, “But Jesus would withdraw to deserted places and pray.” (Luke 5:16)

We are likely to think, “Wait a minute! There is so much that needs to be done! What is Jesus doing—going off to some empty field someplace to pray?” We are a culture that values action and accomplishment. We want to see people solving problems. When the demands and needs are great, leaders, we think, will *do* something; it may seem an abandonment of responsibility to “withdraw to a deserted place to pray.” But it is precisely here that Jesus would directly challenge our culture and our lifestyles.

We may readily identify with the life situation in which Jesus had found himself—besieged with demands on our time and energy. Many people juggle huge demands

coming from all directions in life—from major job responsibilities to the considerable needs of family and friends to the commitments of volunteer positions to the yard that needs mowed and the weeds that need pulled and the washing machine that needs fixed. In our society, the heroic individual—the supermom, or the super-anyone—is the person who in a blaze of energy accomplishes it all with success. Following that model, many people drive themselves into unending frenzied activity.

Jesus models for us a radically different way. If anyone ever had good reason to be engaged in unending frenzied activity, it was Jesus! He was here to save the world! But by withdrawing from activity and retreating to deserted places to pray, Jesus shows us a crucial truth: we need a spiritual rhythm in life. In going off to a quiet place, Jesus embodies the Old Testament concept of Sabbath—the principle that human beings need time for rest and worship, time to connect with God . . . time to pray.

Many people today struggle with the very idea of prayer, and the very idea of worship, precisely because these activities do not seem to accomplish anything. What exactly do we accomplish by being in worship? We do not seem to produce anything in worship; the world is just the same when we leave church as when we came. And if a person is to engage in prayer, the only good reason to do so, one might think, would be if the prayer could achieve something. So people pray for some desired result. But if they do not get the result they desired, they may conclude that prayer simply has no point.

Yet when we look at Jesus, we see that he regularly goes off to pray, and in doing so he seems completely unconcerned about results. The world is just the same when he returns from praying as when he left. All the problems and pressures are still there. Yet he gives priority to spending time in prayer. Why?

What is clear in Jesus is that his prayer is not result-oriented; it is God-oriented. Jesus did not regularly pray to get some wish granted, or to get himself out of a jam. He prayed in order to be in communion with his heavenly Father.

Today people often live as though the point of life is to get stuff done. But according to the Bible, and according to Jesus, the point of life is to grow in the likeness of God—which means to live in fellowship with God and thereby reflect the goodness of God. But if this is the case, then prayer and worship are foundational for living, for it is these spiritual practices that bring us into connection with God.

In the end, of course, Jesus did accomplish enormous good. At times his life was a veritable whirlwind of activity. But what Jesus shows us is that if we want to successfully meet the problems and pressures of life, and if we want our activity to be fruitful, we need to ground it all in a connection with God. In the gospel of John, Jesus famously illustrated this point with his image of the vine and the branches, where he noted that a branch will bear fruit only so long as it is connected with the vine.

So prayer is the practice of connection with God. Worship likewise is the practice of people coming together to make a connection with God; or more correctly, it is people

opening themselves to the connection that God is seeking to make with us. In this light, it would be wrong to think that prayer and worship are a matter of not really doing anything. A few weeks ago, I talked in a sermon about the General Rules of the Methodist church, which are three simple rules for Christian living, originally laid out by our Methodist founder, John Wesley. Two of those rules are: “Do no harm,” and “do good.” These two rules encompass all that we typically think of when we think of doing something—all those actions by which we mitigate evil and accomplish good. But there is a third rule which Wesley considered crucial if the other two are really going to happen—“do things that draw you closer to God.” This rule encompasses spiritual practices such as Bible study, Christian fellowship, prayer, and worship. The rule implies that when you engage in such practices you are in fact doing something. You are doing something so essential that Jesus considered it necessary to break away from “doing good” in order to *pray*. Doing things that draw you closer to God provides the spiritual foundation upon which everything else is rightly built.

But if prayer and worship are things that we should do, there is always the danger that in a lifestyle where we are juggling a myriad of activities, prayer and worship can just become additional activities in the mix. If prayer is rote and worship is routine, then they just add to the busyness without deepening life. This is why Jesus, along with the Biblical prophets, consistently taught people to get well beyond superficiality in prayer and worship, so that our prayer involves a genuine attentiveness to God and a lifting of the heart to God.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, tells a wonderful story about how he was once speaking at a Conference where, due to flight delays, he had had only two hours of sleep the night before. As soon as his speech was over and he had returned to his seat, he promptly fell asleep. The Conference rolled on, and Dr. Mohler dozed, until as the session came to a close, someone at the podium said, “We would now like to ask Dr. Mohler to come up and pray.” Someone sitting next to Dr. Moller jabbed him and said, “They want you to come up to the podium.” As he groggily stumbled forward, he was very thankful when the person at the podium said, “Now while Dr. Mohler is coming forward to pray . . .” so that he at least knew what it was that he was being asked to do.

But while he knew that he was supposed to pray, he had no idea what he was to pray for. Was he supposed to pray in response to some specific need? Was somebody sick? Was there a catastrophe someplace? Or was something being celebrated? Was there something for which he ought to be giving thanks? Or was the session just wrapping up, and this prayer was the closing?

As Dr. Mohler entered the podium, his mind naturally grabbed all the stock phrases and language that he had used in prayers over many years. He managed to cobble together a prayer that sounded pious and reasonable enough, so that at least in the end no

one jeered. He had avoided embarrassment. But as he left the podium, he felt deeply unsatisfied, because he knew that his prayer was not genuine.

He later commented that very likely many of us Christians can identify with this kind of experience, because, as he said, “We know what it is to pray without really praying. Many of us know what it is to simply fall into a pattern of familiar words and slogans without really engaging our hearts or minds with the One to whom we speak.”ⁱ

This brings us directly to the Lord’s Prayer. We say the Lord’s Prayer in our worship most Sundays. We say it at weddings and at funerals. But when we say it, do we end up simply mouthing familiar words without really engaging our hearts and minds with the One to whom we speak?

During this sermon series, we will be getting behind the familiar words to see what this prayer is intended to do. The Lord’s Prayer is a vehicle designed to bring us into an authentic connection with God which will shape and guide and empower life. The prayer would do for us what Jesus did in that story in Luke—it would draw us, at least for a moment, away from the hustle and bustle of life so that we can hear what God is saying to us.

At the special General Conference of the United Methodist Church which happened last February, our Bishops attempted to follow the example of Jesus in prioritizing prayer. Although the Conference only had a few days to accomplish a huge agenda—reshaping the church’s stance on human sexuality—the bishops planned a full day of prayer on the first day of the Conference, in the hope that the delegates would become authentically receptive to what our Bishop called “the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit.” But as the Conference continued, it became painfully apparent that many delegates had spent their day of prayer plotting out what they were already intending to do. We likely can identify with that. We have all been in worship where instead of really listening to God we were planning out our week. But at the General Conference, the result was disastrous, as the Conference adopted a set of policies that were distinctly unwelcoming toward LGBT persons and that have sharply divided our church. This past week, Mount Union university, founded by Methodists, and affiliated with the Methodist church for more than 150 years, disaffiliated from the United Methodist church, because, as Mount Union president Richard Merriman stated, “We want to have a diverse campus where all kinds of people can succeed, so it was difficult to see how our values as a university could be reconciled with the values the church is espousing.” Mount Union’s disaffiliation followed that of Baldwin-Wallace, another formerly United Methodist related university, which disaffiliated last month. Something is amiss when the denomination’s values fall short of the standards of the universities we founded. Our church is in need of authentic prayer.

The model for us is Jesus. In the passage we heard from the gospel of Mark, we are told, “In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted

place, and there he prayed.” (Mark 1:35) Jesus begins with prayer, and not prayer that is simply a going through the motions, but prayer that is an authentic openness to the wisdom and the guidance and the empowerment of God. The passage then goes on to report that Jesus went forth to engage in all sorts of preaching and healing. So we see a pattern for life, for our personal lives and for the whole church: begin truly with God, and then all that we do can abundantly bear fruit.

¹ Albert Mohler, *The Prayer that Turns the World Upside Down*, pp. 4–5.