

Sermon: Pray to the Father

Luke 11:1-13

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Prayer in the heart of our Christian life; it is the centre of our personal life with God; it is also the heart of our church life. We come together to pray. It is as natural as eating and drinking. But eating and drinking we learn, step by step. First the milk from mother, later some mashed stuff, then the meat. And we learn how to actually chew long enough, to eat regularly, to not eat too much.

Prayer is natural as eating and drinking, and it is something we need to learn. The disciples of Jesus came to him and said, Lord, teach us how you want us to pray. Let us listen to the teachings of Jesus. In those days, rabbis in Israel would have students around them and they would teach their students how to behave and how to relate to God. Jesus did the same.

Teach us to pray: Lords Prayer

So Jesus taught his disciples what we now call The Lord's Prayer. We know from the very early church that the believers were supposed to pray this prayer three times per day. You can read this in the Didache, a small booklet full of liturgical and pastoral advice, dated between 50-100 AD.

And as the earliest Christians, like the Jews, prayed with their hands raised to God, a good and ancient habit is to especially pray the Lord's Prayer with hands raised up.

The Lord's Prayer is the standard prayer; it is good to pray this prayer itself, but it also teaches us the topics we should pray for.

Jesus tells us to first and foremost, pray for God to be glorified. Jesus taught his disciples, when you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

Our Lord is teaching us, that we must desire God's glory more than our interest and advantage. Pray to God must not start with 'give me, give me', but with 'Lord we give you glory. We desire your name to be great in all the earth.'

'Lord, may our lifestyle bring honour to your name. And may we see your kingdom, in our lives, in our church, in this world.'

And when the honour and glory of God is our highest motive, immediately our wish list changes. We do not have so many needs.

'Lord, just enough to eat and drink, and I am satisfied.... Give us our daily bread. Give us just what we need.'

Our focus in life should not be on getting more and more, but on glorifying God more and more. If that is our focus, we do not have too much time for material thing anyway.

By the way, this prayer is not a prayer that asks God to give ME what I need. It is a prayer in the plural. 'Lord, give us.' It is the prayer of the community of believers who prayer for their common needs. We pray for our job, but also for the job of the others in church. We pray for the health of those who are sick, we pray for God to meet the needs of one another.

This prayer of Jesus is in direct conflict with Christians with a health and wealth theology. Jesus does not promise riches; he does not tell us we should pray for wealth; he does not suggest we should aim for big houses, fancy cars, a lifestyle of luxury. That sort of thinking is individualistic, and not focused on God or the other.

Jesus continues by teaching that we should next pray for forgiveness of our sins. When God meets the primary needs of our community, we are extra aware that He is gracious. We do not deserve his goodness because we often do not honour God with our life and our words.

We do not love God and our neighbour with all of our heart. We do things that hurt other people and we sin against God. We often live as if we find our comfort in material blessings and not in God and in our friends.

So we have to ask forgiveness, each time when we approach God.

And to pray, 'lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil' is logical. We ask forgiveness for what we did wrong, and we pray that we will not be in situations that are too hard for us, and where we are prone to sin.

It is not a sin to feel temptation; it is sin to give in to it. And it is a sin to purposely enter into situations that are bad for us. Stay away from that. And pray that God will help you to live for his honour.

That is the heart of prayer. Seeking the honour of God, and asking him for the bare needs of ourselves and those around us. And prayer – communicating with God – makes us sensitive to our sins and to situations we should avoid.

There are Christians who focus so much on the fact that for a Christian, all sins are forgiven once and for all, that they do not like to ask for forgiveness for each and every sin they commit. I find this strange.

The more we pray, the closer we come to God, the more sensitive we become to our own shortcomings. Better Christians are more aware of their sins, and pray more to God for forgiveness. We do so in the knowledge that He has forgiven all of them through Jesus Christ – but we approach God again and again with humility. 'Lord I messed up again. Please forgive me. And help me to do better again.'

So Jesus teaches us to honour God, depend on him for our needs, and to live a holy life for him. That is what prayer is about. That is what our relationship with God is about. Very simple actually.

But I skipped an important aspect of the teaching of Jesus. He begins to address God as Father. And that really makes all the difference in prayer. We do not approach Him as a distant, scary God, but as our loving Father.

God is better than our best friend

God is a loving Father – and to underline this, Jesus then tells a story.

Imagine you have a friend who comes to you hungry, in the middle of the night, after a long journey. It was not strange for people to travel in the cool of the night – nowadays people even demonstrate at midnight.

Your friend arrives, and you as a good Middle Eastern person are hospitable. You do not have bread for him, so what to do! You must of course feed your hungry friend. Nowadays we would maybe order some pizza. 😊 In those days, these handy options were not available. So what will you do? You will knock on the door of another friend to ask him for some food, even in the middle of the night.

So you wake up your friend who was sound asleep. By banging on his door his whole family wakes up. Jesus says: will that friend, even to just make you stop making noise, give you the bread you need for your friend?

And God, your Father, is much better for you than that friend who gets up to give you bread. If a grumpy sleepy friend can be forced to give you what you need, just to get rid of you, how much more will your loving Father, who is ever awake, give you what you need!

What an encouragement to pray! Jesus says, knock, ask, seek. And God will give because He is your Father.

Mind you. It is worthwhile to note that the one knocking on the door of his friend was asking for the daily bread – not for himself but for someone else. Fully in line with the Lord prayer, where we together pray for our common needs.

Jesus teaches us to pray together, and to pray for the needs of others. I do not need riches, but Lord, give my poor friend what he urgently needs. Seen from this perspective, prayers for me to be wealthy, and for more than my real needs, are so wrong. Jesus teaches us to focus on God and others in our prayers.

And if we do so, in that context of focusing on God's need to be honoured and our neighbour's need for food, God also meets our own needs.

Father gives according to our need, not to our desire

Is that so? Does God always answer our prayers? Jesus seems to have guessed our question. A question the disciples must also have had.

We often pray, and we do not get.

Well, Jesus says, that is logical because God is a Father. He loves you; he cares for you. If you ask him something wrong, he will not give it. He only gives what is good.

If your son asks for a fish, or an egg, Jesus says, you do not give your child a snake or a scorpion. You only give your children what is best for them.

So if your child asks you for a snake, or a scorpion, will you give it? No of course. We only give what is best to our children. Likewise, God our Father does not answer every prayer because some of them are outright bad for us. We may not always realize that, but God knows what he does.

God gives us in accordance with our needs, not in accordance with our desire.

Or I should actually say, if we seek the honour of God above all, and if we seek in prayer that God meets the urgent needs of our friends and fellow Christians, then we are aligning our desires with the will of God. Then what we need and what we desire becomes one and the same.

What we need is God, and friends, and a roof above our head with enough to eat and drink. If that is what we have, we should thank God and be satisfied.

We would only give what is good to our children – how much more will God give us what is best for us. All we need, forgiveness of sins, and protection against temptations. Well actually Jesus says, “How much more

will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

That is unexpected, as the end of Jesus’ speech about prayer. Suddenly he brings in the Holy Spirit. What is this!

It is no coincidence, I think. Jesus knew what he was talking about. When we pray, the whole Trinity is involved. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Bible records, of course, many prayers to the Father. It also records many prayers to Jesus Christ. But never to the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God – He is directing our prayers to God the Father and to God the Son,, from inside our being. And He is leading our prayers. The Good Father gives us his Spirit so that we know how to pray.

Conclusion

‘God, may your will be done, on earth, in our church. In my life.’

‘And Holy Father, give my brother what he needs; give my sister what she needs. Take care of them, and take care of me, my Father.’

‘And you are so good for us but in spite of that, we your children stumble again and again. ‘Forgive us Lord, and help us to not be tempted.’

‘Let us not be tempted by focussing on material goods. Let us not be tempted to be unkind to each other.’

‘Above all, what we need, is that as a community, as a church, we have communion with you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That we live for your glory and for blessing each other. We need nothing else because you fill our lives with yourself; with your Holy Spirit.’

Amen.