

Luke 11:1-10

“Learning to Pray”

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Ordinary Time

As I return from my sabbatical this summer, I’m preaching a series of sermons that describe some of my hopes for our Life Together at Colleyville Presbyterian Church.

Several weeks ago, we discussed what it might look like for us to embrace gentleness with one another as a church, two weeks ago we walked through Psalm 133 and considered its vision of the centrality and blessing of community in the local church, and last Sunday we looked at Luke 5 and considered what it be like to be a church that is willing, in our personal, family and corporate lives, to follow Jesus out into the deep waters where he can make us new.

And this Sunday, we’re going to look at Luke 11 and consider what it has to teach us regarding prayer.

Beloved, I cannot tell you how much I long for prayer to be one of the central markers of our church.

In many ways, I’ve spent much of my time with you over the last seven years trying to work out this conviction.

We have preached through over 60 psalms together over these seven years and considered, again and again, how the psalter is the model for Christian prayer.

We have introduced new forms of prayer into our Sunday morning worship. We have started new prayer meetings.

We have incorporated prayer as a substantial feature of every one of our bible studies and other group gatherings.

Prayer, for me, is a central feature of who I want us to be together as a church. And I'm thankful for the opportunity this morning to explore this topic further with you, as we consider the way in which our Lord Jesus teaches us to pray.

With that in mind, let's listen this morning once more to God's holy and inerrant word from Luke 11:1-10, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

*Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." 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 forgive everyone who is indebted to us.*

*And lead us not into temptation."*

*5 And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, 6 for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; 7 and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? 8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 9 And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

As a pastor, one of the things you end up talking to people about with a substantial amount of frequency is their prayer lives.

One of the things that is interesting about all of these conversations that I've had over the past 13 years is that I've learned that many Christians feel at least a little unsettled and unsure about their own personal experience of prayer.

There are many who are deeply anxious about praying out loud in front of others. There are many who worry about whether they're praying for the right things. There are more than a few who wonder what is wrong with them when God doesn't seem to answer.

And almost everyone I talk to walks around with at least some guilt about not praying enough, often in the same ways people often feel vaguely guilty about their diet or exercise habits.

I can't tell you how many times I've asked the question, "How is your prayer life?" and gotten the response. "It's ok. It could be better. I wish it was better."

And when I hear that response, often I hear behind those words a deep longing for something more - that the person speaking to me suspects, at least in some way, that there are levels of intimacy with God in prayer that they haven't found yet.

Now, there are exceptions, of course. But what I want you to hear me saying this morning is that if you feel at least some tension in your life of prayer, you are not alone.

In fact, it's very likely that everyone in this room can relate, in a real way, to whatever you think your prayer deficiency might be.

And I also want to point out that acknowledging that prayer is something we must learn to do, and something we can actually grow in as Christians, is actually a huge step toward that growth.

I think for many of us who have spent many years in the church, there's this assumption that we should all be prayer experts by now, that prayer is something that should just come naturally for a Christian, but if you read this passage, you'll find just the opposite.

Because whatever else this passage teaches us, it's that prayer is something that we must learn how to do, and in fact, it is in humbly accepting our position as learners in the school of prayer that we actually create space for growth and change and maturity in how we pray.

Look at how this passage begins.

It begins with Jesus praying and the disciples watching, and with them actually opening their mouths to ask to be taught. "Lord, teach us to pray," the disciples say.

I know sometimes preachers like to poke a little fun at the disciples in the gospels and how they get things wrong.

But here, as they are on many occasions, the disciples are actually a profound example to us of what it means to follow Jesus.

Because here the disciples teach us that in order to learn how to pray we must acknowledge that we need help.

And, as it turns out, we learn to pray not just somehow naturally by ourselves, but the same way we learn anything in this life - whether that's learning to read or learning to drive a car or learning to tie a necktie - we learn all these things, and prayer as well, by apprenticing ourselves to someone else who is more experienced than we are.

The disciples see Jesus praying, and they ask him to teach them.

And in this we discover that the first step toward learning how to pray is just simply asking for someone to teach us.

That's worth considering if you have concerns about weaknesses in your life of prayer. Asking for help requires humility and self-awareness.

And often asking for help is the first step toward real change - in prayer, and in many many other things in life. Which is challenging, because if there's anything most people in our culture don't like to do it's ask for help - especially with anything important.

In any case, the second thing to notice in this passage is *how* Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. The first thing he does in response to their request isn't to give them a lecture on prayer. No, the first thing Jesus does in order to teach his disciples to pray is he gives them words to pray to God.

Essentially, the disciples ask to be taught to pray, and Jesus says. Ok. Here's how. Repeat after me:

*"Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come,"* etc. etc.

What's significant to notice here is that we don't primarily learn to pray by reading books on the theology of prayer.

I mean, books on prayer are fine, I've read more than a few myself, but the way we learn to pray, Jesus is telling us, is actually by opening our mouths and praying - and usually praying with someone else.

It's worth noting as well that Jesus has no problem at all giving his disciples a formal prayer for them to pray literally word for word. "When you pray," he says, "Say this." And then he tells them what to say.

And let's look at this prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples.

It begins with a pretty radical address. "When you pray," Jesus says, "Say this": Say...*"Father."*

This is something new about prayer that Jesus himself introduces.

It was not typical in the Old Testament for Israelites to address God as Father. But Jesus, as God's true Son, invites us now, in the New Covenant, to use his own name for God. To call God *Father*.

And this is crucial, because in the whole rest of this passage Jesus is expanding for us what it actually means for God to be our father when we pray to him.

And then, after instructing his disciples to call God "Father," Jesus gives them a whole list of petitions to bring to their father. What do children do with their fathers? They boldly and shamelessly come to their father with their needs. And that's how Jesus instructs us to pray to God.

Father - make your name holy in the world.

Father - make your kingdom come.

Father - give us every day what we need to eat and live and thrive.

Father - forgive us our sins and misdeeds.

Father - lead us not into temptation.

The Lord's Prayer is very very simple, as far as prayers go. The language is straightforward and unadorned.

And when you break it down, the Lord's Prayer is nothing but a series of petitions, requests we are instructed to make of our heavenly Father.

Beloved, do not ever be afraid in prayer to come to your Father and ask plainly for what you need. That is exactly how Jesus has instructed you to pray.

And then, after teaching his disciples the Lord's Prayer, Jesus then goes on to instruct them further in *how* to pray.

And he does so, as he so often does, by means of a parable - and the purpose of this parable is to reveal to his disciples the manner in which they should pour out their hearts to their Father.

That parable is simply this.

Jesus imagines a scenario where a person is in need. Friends have come to visit him and have arrived unexpectedly at midnight, but there is no food in the house. And so this person goes to his neighbor's door and bangs on it, waking his neighbor from sleep and asking him for bread. At first the neighbor answers him and says: *"Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything."*

But then, Jesus delivers the punch line and tells us how we should pray. He says:

*8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 9 And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

That word, “impudence” is an important one in this parable. It means something like “shamelessness.” “Presumptuousness.” “Brazenness.” “Full of audacity.”

In this parable, Jesus is doing a remarkable thing.

He is encouraging us to be *demanding* of God in our prayers. He is saying that we should be radically shameless in what we ask for when we speak to our Father.

Don’t hold back, Jesus is saying. Don’t be embarrassed. Pray for what you want, Jesus says. Be bold about it. Be like a child who believes he has a loving Father. Be audacious. Be brazen.

And then, Jesus says, expect that if we ask, we will receive. That if we seek, we will find. That if we knock, the door will open.

I think this point about prayer is a particularly important one for us to hear, because sometimes I think we can overly spiritualize prayer.

Often, it’s easy to pray for *someone else’s* needs. We can pray for someone else’s grief. Or for someone to be healed. Or for someone’s salvation.

But it’s a much much harder task to go to God and ask him for exactly what it is *we* want. I think that often this is because our desires seem so superficial to us. They’re not spiritual enough.



What do we want? A new job, maybe. A spouse, perhaps, if we're single. If we're married, perhaps a better marriage with the spouse we have. Enough money to pay the bills each month. To not be afraid anymore. For our children to be happy and love Jesus.

For our bodies to be healed of their pain and trouble. To stop being anxious, or depressed, or overwhelmed by grief. To be reconciled to someone we love. To be happy. Or any number of even more complex things, which are hidden somewhere in the deep recesses of our hearts.

What is it you actually want God to do for you? It's worth thinking about. Because knowing the answer to that question is a fundamental part of learning to pray as Jesus instructs.

Somehow, these things can often feel hard to name before God, especially when it comes to asking things like this for ourselves.

Maybe part of that is that we're embarrassed by our desires.

Maybe it's because to ask for something you really really want is about the most vulnerable thing you can do in this life.

Friends, think about this for a moment.

There is probably no more intimate thing in the world that you can do with another person than to genuinely ask them to do something for you that you deeply deeply want and need and to put yourself at their mercy to respond however they see fit. I mean, that's about as intimate and scary and vulnerable as it gets.

And I would argue doing this intimate and scary and vulnerable thing with God is exactly what genuine prayer is.

Learning to pray is learning to name our deepest and truest desires before our Father - believing that he is *actually our Father*. And then trusting him to give us good things in return.

Friends, Jesus wants us to be intimate enough with God to ask for exactly what is we actually want.

And perhaps - just perhaps - it is because we do not ask for what we actually want that prayer is so hard?

Herbert McCabe, an English theologian, writes this, and friends, this is some of the best advice on prayer I've ever read. He says:

*You must indeed pray for the right things; but the right things are not the noble high-minded things that you think that you ought to want, they are the vulgar and rather infantile things you really do want.*

*Genuine prayer means honest prayer, laying before the Father in heaven the actual desires of your heart — never mind how childish they may sound. Your Father knows how to cope with that.*

*People often complain of 'distraction' during prayer. Their mind goes wandering off on to other things. This is nearly always due to praying for something you do not really much want; you just think it would be proper and respectable and 'religious' to want it. So you pray high-mindedly for big but distant things like peace in Northern Ireland or you pray that your aunt will get better from the flu — when in fact you do not much care about these things; perhaps you ought to, but you don't.*

*And so your prayer is rapidly invaded by distractions arising from what you really want — promotion at work, let us say. Distractions are nearly always your real wants breaking in on your prayer for edifying but bogus wants. If you are distracted in prayer, trace your distraction back to the real desires it comes from and pray about these.*

*When you are praying for what you really want you will not be distracted. People on sinking ships do not complain of distractions during their prayer.*

Think for a moment how well this quote matches up with that remarkable story of Hannah's prayer life that we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning.

Hannah was barren and desperate. And so she goes to the doorpost of the tabernacle and she prays for exactly what she wants - a child.

She doesn't say - well, God hasn't given me a child. I'm barren. What important spiritual lesson should I learn from this difficult situation?

*No!* Hannah goes to her father, and she pours her heart out to him so fervently that Eli the priest thinks she is drunk.

Indeed, Hannah says about her prayer that she was speaking to the Lord "out of my great anxiety and vexation."

In other words, she was going to God in her place of deepest need - naming her desires before her God, committing herself into his hands.

And that is exactly the kind of prayer that Jesus commends.

Friends, as I close this morning, I want to encourage you with this.

I don't want prayer to feel like a burden to you that you feel vaguely guilty about, like eating your vegetables or getting enough exercise.

Beloved, I want so much more for you than that. So much more.

Because I think that when you read the Psalms and consider how they speak of prayer, and when you read the lives of the saints throughout Church history and consider how they speak of prayer, and when you read the teaching and life of Jesus and how he speaks of prayer, you will find that your life of prayer actually contains the possibility of being the grand adventure of your soul going into deeper and deeper waters with your heavenly Father.

And *that's* what I want for you.

Indeed, in many ways, the extent to which you grow in intimacy with God over all the course the years of your life will depend, in great part, on the extent to which you learn to honestly and openly pray to him for those things you actually most deeply want.

And there is perhaps no better way to learn what it means that God is your loving and good father than to come to him with impudence, with boldness, with courage, and name your desires before his face.

If you want help with prayer, please, don't hesitate to ask. Come and meet with me. Come and meet with Patrick. Join us for morning prayer. Come and talk about it. Let's do this together.

My hope for us as a church in the years to come is that we would learn more and more to pray like Hannah. To pray with the boldness Jesus tells us to embrace.

And to trust that Jesus is in fact, not kidding around in the least when he says to you and me these words: *And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.