

During lent we talked about prayer. Can anyone remember what the unclenched hand represented for prayer?

Today in our Sermon on the Mount series, Jesus puts his own spin on the importance of prayer. He starts by calling out improper motives for prayer. He ends with giving us a “boiler plate” for how to pray.

Let’s start by seeing what we can learn about prayer from kids.

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As we see here, proper and improper motives for prayer can start at a young age. Make it be Christmas soon. Bring back the tyrannosaurus rexes so they can eat all of the bad guys? How will they know a “bad” tasty human from a “good” tasty human?

Jesus gives the same instruction for prayer as he did for almsgiving. Don’t pray just to be seen praying. Don’t pray for personal promotion.

He gives his disciples and us a “look at me, look at me” detector for those who pray insincerely. Vs. 5 & 7.

Do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Do not heap up empty phrases as the gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

The overt publicity of our prayers, prayers that go on and on not just for minutes but for hours. These just aren’t necessary to get God’s attention. We don’t need to try to get God’s attention, because we already have it.

So why pray then, if God already knows what’s on our hearts? There are a few reasons.

Prayer is a way for us to express, honestly, our feelings: of worry, of anger, of thanksgiving, of celebration. If you need guidance here, read a few Psalms. They cover the whole gamut of prayer types.

Did you know that studying scriptures can be a form of worship? A form of prayer. It can be an avenue to help us find words we might not have considered. It prompts us to give thanks for insights we might not have found otherwise.

Prayer is communication with God. Any form of communication will improve your relationship with anyone. That includes God. When you communicate with someone, especially someone you love, you come to understand them better. They come to understand you better. Yes, you can better your understanding in your relationship with God.

Prayer is one form of several ways we have to unite ourselves to our community and our past. When we pray together as a church family, we recognize that we are part of a larger group. That gives us comfort. That gives us strength. There are times when I am praying that I call to mind times when I prayed with my Grandpa Rudy and Grandma Esther at their kitchen table. I remember my dad teaching me to say the Lord's Prayer in German. (Say first line) Prayer is connection. Prayer is continuity

Communal prayer reminds us that we are not all in the same place. Some of us here today are joyful. Some of us are struggling. Some of us are fit and healthy. Some of us are ailing. When we join together in prayer, some of the spoken words may not resonate with us individually. They don't apply to us in this moment. But by reciting them or reflecting on them, we lend our support to those who need those exact words in that exact moment. Many studies show that people feel better knowing that others are praying for them and with them. Has that been true for any of you?

Finally, prayer is extremely helpful for matters of discernment. Avoiding temptations. Making major decisions. How could we not want to look for God's grounding here. What God would want for us, even if it doesn't line up with what we are asking of God.

Jesus doesn't just leave us hanging with coaching us on the right motives, tactics, and reasons for praying. Jesus leaves us with a model of prayer. We have a form of that model here in Matthew 6:9-13. In the King James Version:

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Luke has a slightly different version of it in Luke 11:2-4. Again, in the King James Version:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

One of the earliest Christian texts, the Didache, contains a version of this prayer. It instructs its readers to pray the prayer 3 times a day.

We could spend an entire sermon series on this prayer and still come up lacking in what it has to teach us. But here are a few things we might find ourselves learning today.

If we want to understand what this world should be like, we need to look beyond it. We believe in a place, heaven. This is where God dwells. Where the Father's will is done. If the places of our lives are ever to look like that place, I'm pretty sure the occurrence of that miracle would have to come through prayer.

Second, we are privileged. I certainly know that I am privileged. I've never been hungry to the point of bodily distress. I've never seen a day without bread unless it was intentional. If you accept the challenge to pray this prayer 3 times a day, how about one other challenge. When you

ask God to give us our daily bread, might you realize that you have all the bread you really need and also realize that Christ calls us to help those who do not have that.

Third, the more we plead for forgiveness, might it become easier to forgive? When we ask for forgiveness 3 times a day. When we ask to forgive those who trespass against us 3 times a day. What do you think will happen?

Might unforgiveness find fewer and few places to anchor to your soul? Might the spirit of forgiveness well up more naturally in the heart of one who is truly forgiven?

Finally, there's that whole temptation thing. Lead us not into temptation. That has disturbed many a person who has prayed this line. Why would God lead us into temptation? The good news is that God wouldn't. What is being asked here is for the power to resist temptation. I don't know about you, but really, there's only one way I know how to do it. Avoid temptation.

We know don't we? We know there are places where we can go with complete comfort and other places we can go with complete discomfort. As Jiminy Cricket told Pinocchio, it's called our conscience. As we pray lead us not into temptation, we are praying for strength to listen better to our conscience. To avoid places and activities that would cause our conscience to put a hand up. We pray that God will lead us away from places of temptation. Because if we avoid those places, we will not need to pray for the strength to withstand temptation.

As we close our sermon on How to Pray, let's ask a few last questions of ourselves.

Can we say "our" if we live only for ourselves individually?

Can we say, "Father" if we do not try to act like a child of God?

Can we say, "hallowed be your name" if we are playing around with sin?

Can we say "your kingdom come" if we don't allow God to guide our lives?

Can we say "give us this day our daily bread" if we trust more in ourselves than what God provides?

Can we say, "Forgive us our sins" if we are nursing grudges or withholding forgiveness from others?

Can we say, “lead us not into temptation” if we deliberately place ourselves in its path?

In this part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us the right purpose for prayer. Jesus gives us a model prayer. The Didache gave us the frequency with which to pray this prayer. And I can think of only one good way to conclude this sermon. AMEN!