

## “Our Father in Heaven”

Lent: Teach us to Pray

Matthew 6:7-15

2/26/23

### “Teach us to Pray”

#### Pray.

Imagine with me for a second, that you had the opportunity to follow Jesus around for his 3 years of ministry here on the earth.

- You traveled with him from town to town
- Watched and listen as he preached sermons to huge crowds
- Seen the miracles he performed of feeding the 5,000 people, healing the sick, raising the dead, giving sight to the blind, calming a storm in the middle of a sea, walking on water

And you have a chance to ask Him to teach you something. **What do you ask?** My personal request as someone who is hungry often is how to do the multiply food miracle. I’m in on that.

What do you ask Jesus, your rabbi, your Messiah, your Savior and Lord to teach you?

Well in Luke 11, we have this request from the disciples. The only thing in all 4 gospel accounts the disciples ask Jesus to teach them...

**Luke 11:1 – “Lord, teach us to pray...”**

*Not – teach us to heal, teach us to do miraculous things, teach us to preach awesome sermons...but rather **teach us to pray.***

#### Which communicates two things:

##### #1 is the necessity of prayer.

The disciples would not have been strangers to prayer. They would have come from a rich Jewish tradition of rhythmic fixed-hour prayer where they would have prayers they would pray individually and together at various set points of the day. They would have been trained in prayer and learned the language of prayer from the Psalms and the Torah.

But their question reveals they’ve seen something different in their Rabbi Jesus. They’ve seen a way of prayer that is unusual.

A prayer life that is:

- **Priority** – Jesus often leaves areas where he’s doing great and widespread ministry to go get alone with His Father.
- **Personal** – in how he talks with God and spends time with Him
- **Powerful** – leading to all sorts of ministry out in the world.

So they would’ve started to understand the importance of learning to pray like Jesus – If Jesus felt prayer was so necessary for his life in the world, how much more for us as His followers.

Prayer is much less like a perfume or cologne – a good addition to the air but overall non-essential – and much more like oxygen. Prayer is essential, necessary, required for our very life with God.

The great 18th century British preacher Charles Spurgeon once said – **“A prayerless soul is a Christ-less soul.”**

Or consider this line from modern day theologian JI Packer – **“It is not too much to say that God made us to pray, that prayer is (not the easiest, but) the most natural activity in which we ever engage, and that prayer is the measure of us all in God’s sight.”**

**Prayer is the most essential of the spiritual practices. We must pray.**

**But the 2nd thing their request to Jesus reveals is the difficulty of prayer.**

Asking Jesus to teach them to pray reveals they experienced a gap between what they saw in Him and His prayer life, and what they experienced themselves in prayer.

Which is true for many of us, is it not?

Prayer can often feel less like a beautiful invitation and more like a shame-filled burden. We are well aware that our prayer life doesn’t feel robust and full of life, but rather much more one of fits and starts. Something that feels awkward and clunky. With maybe even the best intentions we try to enter into, only to find on the other side of our “dear God” we’ve become distracted, bored, or maybe even fallen asleep.

Prayer is difficult. As Christians, but also as Modern Western Americans. Our culture is not one which is friendly to prayer.

- Our culture is self-preoccupied, but prayer is about God.
- Our culture is self-reliant – prayer assumes neediness.
- Our culture is busy – prayer requires dedicated, extended periods of time.
- Our culture is pragmatic – prayer seems incredibly inefficient.
- Our culture is distracted – prayer needs focus and attention.
- Our culture is noisy – prayer flourishes in silence and solitude.
- Our culture is cynical – prayer requires hope.

Everything in the world we inhabit draws us away from a quiet life of prayer with God.

And then you add onto that our own disappointments in prayer. Prayers that seem to be left unanswered or answered differently than how we hoped.

It’s no wonder that prayer, even for those who have been laboring in our discipleship to Jesus, doing the diligent work to be with Him – still often find this ancient practice difficult, mysterious, challenging, and defeating.

And so for many of us we resign ourselves to simply give up on a flourishing prayer life. We think prayer is reserved for the spiritually elite. Or for those with distinct contemplative personalities. Or for those who God has answered their prayers in the past and so of course they would be drawn further into a life of prayer.

It’s simply not for us in our busy frantic distracted world living our busy frantic distracted lives.

And yet – **we must pray.**

**So I don't know about you, but I find great comfort in the example of the disciples when they ask Jesus this simple and yet profound request – Lord, teach us to pray.**

**But I also find great comfort in the fact that Jesus does. When His disciples ask him to teach them, he teaches them.**

And he teaches them not with theory. Not with ideas or tips or practical how-to's, but He teaches them to pray by giving them a prayer. A prayer not simply to be prayed or read word for word (although that's perfectly fine as a part of our prayers) but as a guide, a prayer template if you will, for a life of prayer with God.

And so over the course of the next 6 weeks leading up to Easter we're going to make the same request as Jesus' first disciples – Lord teach us to pray. And we're going to walk together through Matthew's version of Jesus' response.

This prayer Jesus gives to His disciples in **Matthew 6**. Line by line learning from Jesus how to become a people who pray.

### Communion

**Now, I want to give you a fair warning – today might be a little bit frustrating for some of us.**

For those of us who lean practical or pragmatic, tell me how to pray, tell me what to do and what to say, this week might be a little bit hard to wrap our minds and our hearts around.

Now, over the next 5 weeks we're going to do a lot of that:

- Adoration
- Lament
- Petition + Intercession (making requests of God)
- Examination + Confession
- Spiritual Warfare

Over this series we'll journey into all of that, what to pray and how to pray those specific types of prayers.

But what I want to show us today is that those are trees, not the forest. Those are all aspects of a bigger overarching forest of a prayer life with God. They are all parts that make up a larger whole.

A forest that has been called a number of things throughout church history – practicing the presence of God. Others have called it 'beholding prayer'.

What I think is best described as **communion with God**.

**Comm – “With” and Union – “Oneness”. Oneness with God.**

Being with Him and being in his presence. That's the baseline of prayer. The forest that holds all of the trees of prayer is the fact that you and I get to **be with God**.

- Bringing requests is a part of prayer, but it's not the whole.
- Emotional experiences are a part of prayer, but they're not the whole.
- Receiving from God – love, compassion, mercy, care – is a part of prayer, but it's not the whole.
- Being changed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit is a part of prayer, but it's not the whole.

And if any of those become the entirety of your prayer life and prayer expectations you will never develop a robust lasting prayer life with God.

The forest that holds all of those trees, what prayer is about at its most foundational understanding, the underlying goal of all prayer is **being with God.**

**Prayer, at its most basic level, is communion with the wonderful and powerful person of God.**

It's ultimately about communion with the wonderful and powerful person of God.

As spiritual director Strahan Coleman writes – “[Communion is] a way of being with God that doesn't demand emotional experiences, answers, or gifts as some kind of spiritual commodity, but just values God, however He longs to give Himself. Those things will come, because God is the most cheerful Giver, but they're not what satisfies us most.”

**Prayer, at its most basic level, is communion with the wonderful and powerful person of God.**

### Opening Line

**And we see that in the very first line of the Lord's Prayer.**

Look with me at **Matthew 6:9 – 9 Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven...”**

Now, this is more than just a preliminary greeting. Jesus is not simply telling us how to get God's attention. He starts by making sure God is listening – like “Hey God, yes you. I'm praying to you.”

He's showing us something so much bigger.

**In the very first line of the prayer Jesus turns our attention off of the “what” of prayer and onto the “who” of prayer.**

In this template of prayer he gives his disciples, *Jesus begins with a simple line that grounds the entirety of prayer in a relationship between us and God.*

Through this opening line Jesus shows us that – **Prayer is much less about what we're saying and much more about who we're saying it to.**

And I love that Jesus starts us here in our prayer life with God because what I've realized over the years both as a pastor and as a disciple to Jesus is that often our inability to have a consistent prayer life is not a struggle with prayer, but rather a struggle with God.

We aren't uncertain about prayer as much as we're uncertain about the God we pray to. We're unsure if he truly exists, if he actually listens and if he does, does he care, is he good, is he going to do anything.

Just like with living on mission like we talked about a few weeks ago – our struggle with sharing the gospel is not foundationally that we aren't sure what to say or that we're afraid, it's that we're uncertain about God and His desire and power to save.

The same is true in prayer. Our struggle with praying is not so much that we aren't sure what to say or how to do it or what it looks like, but that foundationally we aren't sure about the God we're supposed to meet in prayer.

Jl Packer - **"People feel a problem about prayer because of the muddle they are in about God. If you are uncertain whether God exists, or whether he is personal, or good, or in control of things, or concerned about ordinary folks like you and me, you are bound to conclude that prayer is pretty pointless, not to say trivial, and then you won't do it."**

**So...If at its most basic level prayer is about communion with God, and the reason we struggle with prayer is because of our struggles with God, then it would make sense that Jesus would begin his template of prayer by reminding us who God is.**

***Because that is the first step into prayer. Not by learning how to pray, but by remembering the God we pray with and to and remembering He invites us to be with and commune with Him.***

### **Our Father...In Heaven...**

So let's spend our few more minutes together this morning looking at who Jesus says God is in the opening line of the prayer.

**A very simple and yet wondrously beautiful address – "Our Father in Heaven."**

Two incredible realities.

#### **1. Our Father**

This would be shocking to Jesus' disciples. I said earlier the disciples would not be unfamiliar with the practice of prayer, but a prayer this intimate would have shocked them.

You see in the Jewish religious system, God's name was held in such reverence that you were not allowed to speak or even to write it. To write or say "Yahweh" was forbidden, because of the gravity of the "otherness", holiness/magnificence of God.

Think about how God shows up to various people throughout the Old Testament.

- He shows up as a pillar of fire and a cloud of smoke to the Israelites wandering in the desert.
- He shows up in a burning bush to Moses.

The big question for the Jewish people was not – "Does God exist?" That would be silly. Of course he does – look at that pillar of fire. The question was not – "Is God real?" but rather – "Is God knowable?"

Could they actually know Him and be known by Him and Jesus says – "Yes. You can call Him Father'." Not only can you know Him, you can know Him in a more deeply intimate way than you can even imagine. Because we don't just pray to A Father, we pray "Our Father".

**Do you see how shocking this is? Jesus is inviting His disciples to pray as if His Father is now their Father.**

As if they can know God and be known by God in the same way as Jesus.

WHICH is true through the gospel. The good news of the gospel is that through faith in Jesus, we get what is Christ's. Jesus, who is the Son of God, unites us to Himself and brings us into union with God. That's one of the deepest realities of our faith – **IF you are a Christian, you are united to God (You have permanent communion with Him) as His child through Jesus.**

So can you know Him, and you can be known by Him in a way that you will spend the rest of your life and into eternity understanding the weight and glory of. If you are in Christ, a follower of Jesus, you have His full delight. As we sang about on Ash Wednesday – those He saves are His delight. He is present with us. Longs to know us and care for us and be with us.

**Harper.** I was just messed up in my prayer life this week with this. When your bend is towards perfectionism one of the things you have to constantly fight for in your discipleship to Jesus is a living and growing awareness of God's love for you. So it's just one of my constant prayers over the past, I don't know, decade – "Lord, would you remind me that in Christ you're delighted with me as a Father delights in His children?"

And I was thinking about this idea of "our Father in Heaven" and praying for you and for this week and just trying to just push this reality into my heart, the Holy Spirit brought this picture into my mind of my oldest kid.

One of the things Harper has been doing the past 6 months when she disobeys and is getting disciplined is she asks over and over again – "Daddy, are you happy? Daddy, are you happy?" She wants to know in that moment when she messed up royally and disobeyed – does she still make me happy?

And as a dad I feel this thing inside of me that's like – how do I get her to believe this? That yes, of course, even when she has disobeyed me I delight in her as my daughter, and it is a joy to be her father and nothing she can do can make me love her less.

And in prayer this week that scene of me and Harper in this moment came to my mind, and I heard this whisper from God – "Do you know how badly in that moment you want her to know your delight in her, your affection for her, your love that will not cease for her. That is my love for you. Only abundantly greater because I'm God."

That is the God we get to pray with and to. We enter into prayer, through Christ, as those who have communion forever with God, to then practice that communion. That's what prayer is. It's the practice of what is already ours – communion with God through Jesus. And he welcomes us as a loving Father with full delight.

**But if that were not enough, he's not only Our father. He's Our Father...**

## **2. In Heaven**

This actually means the opposite of what you might think – this doesn't mean he's far away in some far off distant place called Heaven. "Heaven" is Matthew's preferred language for what other NT authors call the kingdom of God.

So to Matthew heaven is not a far off place, so much as it is **the realm of God's rule and reign**. So the fact that He is our father in Heaven doesn't mean He's far from us, but rather that he's transcendent over us, he operates in a whole different kingdom or sphere than us.

Meaning – As our father he's intimate, near, close, personal. But as our Father in Heaven it also means he's powerful, above, able to do abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine. Who spoke the world into existence. Who holds the entire universe together. Who can bend the hearts of kings at His whim. Who the Scriptures say owns the cattle on a thousand hills – meaning everything in the world belongs to Him. Who exists outside of time and rules over all things.

**Crab Nebula.** Sometimes when we try to describe how big God is, we talk about it like He's huge and we're like little ants compared to Him. But I'm going to be honest with you, that's an understatement. Just think about how massive the universe we live in is.

Have you ever heard of the Crab Nebula? Me either until last week. It's a star that scientists think exploded about a thousand years ago. If you were to try and look at it today through a telescope or binoculars, it looks like a tiny little dot, and yet it's been exploding and expanding at the rate of **930 miles a second**.

We live in a universe where something that expands by 80 million miles a day goes unnoticed to our eyes and maybe even most of us have never heard of it. **And that's a speck to our God.**

I can't fix my car if it breaks down. But the God I get to be in a relationship with, who knows me deeply and intimately, also holds an entire universe full of crab nebulas together and commands them with His voice.

He is **OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.**

### Conclusion

**That is the God you and I get to be with in prayer.**

**Prayer, at its most basic level, is communion with the wonderful and powerful person of God.**

We get to be with Him. **To sit and rest and breathe in the presence of the one we love and that loves us in return.**

So before we rush in to what am I gonna say, and here's my problems and here's what I need God – which we get the privilege of doing, those are all trees in the forest of prayer we'll explore and step into in the weeks to come – we first get to just sit and be with God.

**And here's why I said this week might be frustrating and even a little bit weird...because the first thing sort of to do in prayer is to stop doing some stuff in prayer.**

To say with king David in **Psalm 27:4 - One thing have I asked of the Lord...to dwell in His house and gaze upon His beauty.**

That's the forest of prayer – He's our Father in heaven. And we get to pause, and stop. And be silent. And with no agenda, no hurry – we just get to be with Him.

And that's just weird for us as modern Americans. Our practice each morning this week in our Lent guide is going to be to sit still, breathe, and rest into God's presence. And it's one of those things that's like – until you do it, I don't know how to tell you how to do it.

And so I thought we'd practice together and let the psalms guide us. **Psalm 16 is in your bulletin – you can also grab a bible from one of the seat backs, I would encourage you not to use your phone for the sake of minimizing distractions.**

I want to give us space to do what 17th century monk Brother Lawrence called “practice the presence of God.”

So I'm going to read a little bit of the Psalm and then we're just going to be quiet, and we're going to meditate on the words that are read – just sort of turn over each idea the Psalm lays before us in our minds, if words come feel free to say them or think them to God.

But I just want to create some space for us to practice communion with God.

Hopefully this will just get you into what you're going to be practicing this week through our Lent guide.

- Enjoy God - v2
- Bless God - v7
- Look at God - v8
- Thank God - v9
- Resting in God - v11