

“Prayer”
2 Chronicles 7:12-16; Psalm 5;
Romans 8:24-28; Matthew 6:5-15

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

Jesus goes on pretty much in the same vein as he was in the last set of verses we looked at. At first, as he begins to shift from talking about giving to prayer, he still is suggesting that we don't use this spiritual activity, this activity we do in relationship to God, in a way that is for our getting instead of our giving. It should be a communication we have with God rather than our communication with those around us in a way that tries to show how good we are.

Jesus suggests that we don't have to pray in a special way, although sometimes we might want to:

*Lord, infinite transcendence of the superior **summon meo**,
the more creation grows into the measure of its difference,
the more profoundly it drinks from the transcendent
moments that compose it, you allow its modes of disclosure
to speak of your infinite goodness. Your **analogia entis** is
supremely aesthetic: all beings, in their intrinsic
nothingness, become what they are, drawing on your infinite
wellspring of determinacy, particularity and actuality...*

OK, I had to look up some of those words. But we don't have to do this. We don't have to pray this way. And we don't have to have a prayer that goes on forever.

Jesus is inviting us to pray simply, to pray to God in secret—that is, without anybody else watching. We can do it together, or we can do it separately, but we don't have to think about impressing anybody else. We don't even have to think about impressing God. God simply is open to hear from us, so we don't have to know all those big words. We don't have to know Latin. We can come as we are.

Jesus invites his disciples to pray a simple prayer. It's not a prayer that he says we have to continually pray, but I'm thankful for it. It's a wonderful prayer to be able to repeat. In it, we begin to see some of what Jesus is inviting us to think about as we pray. So I want to go through the prayer and give some indications of some of the things that I might see. I think we could spend quite a bit of time on this, but let me just run through it quickly.

He starts out: “Our Father.” He's starting out in a very intimate way, recognizing God's presence, God's relationship to us, the idea that we have a parent that loves us. There's a familiarity at the very beginning. “Our Father,” and then he says “who art in heaven.” That suggests to me that God is also very “other,” distant, incredible in some way. The one who is very close to us has this greater being as well.

We come, also, in respect. “Hallowed be your name.” It’s a way of saying, “We respect who you are and we remember how great God is as we come.”

“Thy kingdom come.” We start out in that intimate relationship, also recognizing the wonder of who God is, with respect, and then begin to pray about things that God might want and we might want God to do. It’s God’s side of the equation: Thy kingdom come. It’s kind of like thinking about whose sphere of influence we want to live in. We want God’s sphere of influence to be that which we live in. *Thy kingdom come.*

“Thy will be done.” This recognizes that we want to align ourselves to God’s will as opposed to rebelling against it. We want to allow God’s will to become that which works from within and works its way out in our lives. And then it says, “On earth,” here with us, in our lives, “as it is in heaven.”

“Give us today our daily bread.” Here we switch from the things God might want—God’s sphere of influence, God’s will in our lives, God right here with us—to remembering what we need. We need daily bread. We need to be sustained. We need the things that sustain us; our daily bread.

The next thing Jesus focuses on is, “Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.” So we need forgiveness. It’s one of the basic things we need in life. We need sustenance and we need forgiveness. One of the true things about being human is that we make mistakes. We need forgiveness.

Then, “Lead us not into temptation.” We need guidance, especially away from the things that take us down the wrong paths. We want to go on the right path.

“Deliver us from evil,” or from the evil one. We want deliverance. These are the things we need: sustenance, forgiveness, guidance, deliverance.

Of course, over time we have added a benediction: “For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.” It’s not in some of the earliest manuscripts, so the New Revised Standard Version doesn’t have it in this passage, but it’s a wonderful thing we say each week because it does remind us of who God is.

We could spend a lot more time on each component, but as we look at this prayer, we begin to recognize it’s a matter of coming, thinking about who God is, thinking about where our lives are at and what we need to bring to God and trusting that God will address those things.

The interesting thing Jesus does is, once he’s laid the prayer out is he immediately goes back and highlights a portion of it—the “forgiveness” piece. The struggle with that is it may feel like God is saying, “Unless you forgive, I won’t forgive you.” There’s a sense there that it’s not what really comes first. In fact, he tells a parable later about the unforgiving servant. I think that order is the order he has in mind. The servant is

forgiven just as we are forgiven, then he is challenged to forgive his fellow servants. God offers us that forgiveness, and it is an entry point into knowing we are children of God, the family of faith. If we want to be part of that family, if we want to enter in to that family of faith, God asks us simply to share that forgiveness. It's what his family does. So if we can't share that forgiveness, it's hard to be in that family. In a way, we are defining ourselves out when we refuse to try to forgive. That's what it feels to me like Jesus is saying. It is our willingness to forgive that helps us understand the full forgiveness of God, to be truly part of the family of faith.

We have gone quickly through this passage. There's just one more thing I want to note. This passage comes at about the middle, the center, of the Sermon on the Mount. There's some suggestion that perhaps that's because it's central to our spiritual health, to our relationship with God. Prayer is the central spiritual discipline of our lives. It is that which truly enables us to be in right relationship with God. Not forgiving puts us in conflict with that right relationship. Prayer is a way we restore the relationship and ask again for God's guidance, ask for God to show us the way, not to lead us into temptation, to deliver us from evil. So, prayer is that central spiritual discipline, that central way for us to be in healthy, right relationship with God.

It's what Jesus offers us to practice. He doesn't say we have to have a thesis or a lot of huge words. He just invites us to come. In fact, we hear in Romans how the Spirit will speak for us in ways that are beyond our understanding to help our need be known to God. Jesus says at the beginning that God knows our needs, so we can come.

As we think about prayer as the central discipline or spiritual practice, something that we can do in allowing our relationship to be right with God, I just note the things this particular prayer Jesus shows us does. It recognizes our intimacy with God, our Father. It recalls what God brings: the kingdom, God's will. It restates our essential needs: sustenance, forgiveness, guidance, deliverance. Throughout it reminds us what it means to be in right relationship with God. It's incredible that something as simple as offering a prayer can do all that.

I believe this passage is an invitation to prayer, and to make prayer central in our relationship with God. So let's pray:

Gracious God, it feels clear that you ask us to place prayer central our relationship with you. And yet, we realize it's not always easy to come. We are worried about what we bring, worried about who you are; worried about what people think. Lord, let us come and simply offer our thoughts, our hopes, our fears, our joys to you. Thank you for the prayer you have given us and how it reminds us how important coming to you in prayer is. Lead us. Guide us. Deliver us. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.