

Learning the Language  
*Sermon Series: Teach Us to Pray*  
Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:1–4  
Sunday, August 25, 2024

Let us pray: You have already spoken, Lord. Let us simply *hear* the word that you have spoken and to follow, obediently and lovingly, in Jesus' name. Amen.

For the next few weeks, we are talking about prayer – what it is, how to do it if you *don't* know how, and how to grow in it if you *do* know how. And we started last week by saying that prayer is not just talking to God, asking for what we want. Prayer is communion with God. It is spending time with God. It is a relationship with God, a conversation with God. And like all conversations, it involves talking *and* listening. So we talked last week about the importance of spending time in silence, listening to God. And I shared a quote with you from Mother Teresa, who said, “We listen to God speaking in the silence of the heart. And *then* we begin to speak to God from the fullness of the heart. And God listens.” It is only after *listening* that we can *speak*. So we are going to talk today and next Sunday about *what we say* when we pray.

I shared another quote last week from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who talked about how we were not *born* with the ability to speak. We had to *learn* how to speak, and the way we *did* that was by listening to our parents. We listened to the words that *they* said, and then we began to repeat those words and learn what they mean. And it's the same way with prayer. Every single one of us has learned how to pray by listening to someone else, whether it was a parent, grandparent, sibling, friend, pastor, or by reading it in a book. Not a single one of us came up with the idea of prayer entirely on our own or just intuitively *knew* how to pray. We learned how to pray by praying the words of others.

I remember when my parents taught me how to pray. It was a bedtime prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. God, bless...” and then we went through a list of names: my parents, my brother, my grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins and our dog. It had a rhythm to it that was very easy to learn, and 40 years later, I can still remember that exact prayer, word for word.

Eventually, as I got older, it didn't feel like enough anymore. I wanted to take another step. So after I prayed that prayer, I started praying the Lord's Prayer. At one point, I began praying the Apostles' Creed after that. Around the time I was 16 or 17, I began speaking to God more extemporaneously, giving thanks, asking for help, using my own words. But those initial prayers taught me how to begin speaking to God. They gave me a vocabulary for faith.

The hymn that we're going to sing at the end today, “Prayer Is the Soul's Sincere Desire,” there is a line in it that says, “Prayer is the Christian's vital breath, the Christian's native tongue.” But sometimes prayer can feel like a foreign language that we do not know how to speak. Any of us who have tried to learn a foreign language know that learning another language begins with memorization. You just start memorizing the alphabet, memorizing words, memorizing the patterns of conjugating verbs, and eventually you learn how to put those words together and speak on your own.

I am a big believer that one of the best ways to *learn* how to pray, to *grow* in prayer, or to pray when you can't find the words on your own is to pray the prayers of others. Prayers that we have memorized or read. Eighteen years ago, after Jen and I lost our first child, I struggled to pray. I just couldn't find the words to speak to God. But I *wanted* to. And so the way I got back into that was by praying the Lord's Prayer. Multiple times a day, just, “Our Father, who art in

heaven...” That prayer gave me the words to speak when I could not find the words on my own. When Jesus’ disciples come to him and say, “Lord, teach us to pray,” *that* is the prayer he teaches them.

We’re going to come back to the Lord’s Prayer in just a bit, but there is a wealth of resources that we can use to pray if we don’t know how, if we can’t find the words, or if we want to grow in prayer. The Psalms are the prayer book of Israel, and there are 150 of them in the Bible that cover the whole range of human experience and emotion.

Psalm 6: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am suffering; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord—how long? Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.”

Psalm 9: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.”

“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?” (Psalm 13)

Jesus prayed a Psalm when he was on the cross, Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Psalm 23 is a great one to memorize and just pray any time, “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

One that I pray all the time is from Psalm 25, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long.”

If you are feeling guilty or need forgiveness, Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

If you are just happy and want to give thanks, there are a bunch of those, and the last five Psalms are all Psalms of praise. Psalm 150: “Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

If you already know how to pray, then start *memorizing* Psalms.

You can use hymns to pray. The hymn we just sang, “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak.” “O use me, Lord, use even me, just as you will and when and where, until your blessed face I see, your rest, your joy, your glory share.”

The hymn “Take My Life and Let it Be” is a great one to pray:

Take my life and let it be  
consecrated, Lord, to thee.  
Take my moments and my days;  
let them flow in endless praise.

Take my will and make it thine;  
it shall be no longer mine.  
Take my heart it is thine own;  
it shall be thy royal throne.

or

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart;  
Not be all else but naught to me, save that Thou art;  
Thou my best thought by day and by night,  
waking and sleeping, Thy presence my light.

There are countless books of prayer that you can find with prayers for all different situations in them. “O loving Christ, who died upon the tree, each day and each night I remember your love. In my lying down and in my rising up, in life and in death, you are my health and my peace. Each day and each night, I remember your forgiveness bestowed on me so gently and generously. Each day and each night, may I be fuller in love to you.” That’s from a book of Celtic prayers that I have. The Book of Common Prayer has *tons* of prayers, like the Prayer of Confession we prayed earlier.

You can find things in books or online like the prayer of St. Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.  
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

I've shared with you before the prayer by Thomas Merton that has become so meaningful to me:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.  
I do not see the road ahead of me.  
I cannot know for certain where it will end.  
nor do I really know myself,  
and the fact that I think I am following your will  
does not mean that I am actually doing so.  
But I believe that the desire to please you  
does in fact please you.  
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.  
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.  
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,  
though I may know nothing about it.  
Therefore will I trust you always though  
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.  
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,  
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Just go on Amazon and type in, "prayer books," and you are bound to find *something* there that speaks to you. Just because someone else wrote it doesn't mean it can't come from your heart.

This is how we learn the language of prayer, by praying the prayers of others.

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Now, I want to come back to the Lord's Prayer for a moment. Because in these two scripture readings, we hear two different versions of the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in

heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.” And then in Luke’s gospel, “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” So which one is it? Which is the prayer that we’re supposed to pray, and why is the one that *we* pray all the time so different from those?

Jesus is not teaching us a magical formula. He is giving us a model for prayer. Prayer is not about getting the words exactly right. Like, “If I say the right thing in the right way, then God will hear me.” If you are directing your heart, your mind, your words, your attention to God, God is *with* you, and God *hears* you.

But again, Jesus is giving us a *model* for prayer here. And I want to give you *another* model of prayer that can help us see that. When I was younger, someone taught me the ACTS model of prayer. Anyone know this? The A stands for *adoration*. Praising God. Words that express love to God and give God glory. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by your name! Your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!” Those are words of adoration that praise and glorify God. “Dearest God, you are so wonderful!” “Gracious God, I love you with all my heart!” “Almighty God, you are so amazing!”

The C stands for *confession*. “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” This is just asking God for forgiveness. If we have done something wrong, it is talking to God about that. “God, I am so sorry for this thing that I have done. Please forgive me.” Or even just acknowledging, “I know I’m not perfect, Lord. I make a lot of mistakes. But you love me anyway.”

The T is for *thanksgiving*. This is saying, “I am *so grateful*, Lord, for all the ways that you have blessed me! Thank you for *this* gift in my life, for *this* person in my life. Thank you for the good test results and the healing that you brought this person I love.” This is just saying *thank you* to God and telling God what it is you are grateful for.

And finally the S is *supplication*. Supplication simply means, “asking for something earnestly or humbly.” “Give us this day our daily bread. Lead us not into temptation. Deliver us from evil.” This is asking God for what you need. Praying for *people* who need healing or help. And again, there are no magic words there. It’s just, “God, please help Bill. Please heal Jane.” It can be *simple*, but the point is that it is directed toward God.

So what can an ACTS prayer sound like? “God, you are so amazing. I love you with all my heart! I know I don’t always do what you want me to do. Please forgive me for.... You have blessed me in so many ways. I want to thank you for my family and for the healing that you brought to my friend. I still need your help with this situation at work that’s weighing on me. Give me wisdom and guidance, in Jesus’ name. Amen.” Very simple. No magic words. But it is from the heart, and it is directed toward God.

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These are some ways that we can pray when we don’t know how to pray, when we can’t find the words, or when we just want to grow in prayer. I know, though, that there are still times when words fail us. So I want to leave you with this. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, “The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know how to pray as we ought. But that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit.”



In those times when we simply cannot find the words, and all we can do is \*sigh\*, God hears that, because God speaks the language of the sigh. *That* is a prayer to God. And even when *we can't* pray, the Holy Spirit is at work in us, praying *in* us and *for* us. Remember what I said last week, you are never alone when you pray. You *always* have a partner, and that partner is God.

The best advice that I can give you about prayer is to talk to God like you would talk to a friend. Except *this* friend has the power to change *everything*, in Christ. Amen.