

February 9, 2020 How Jesus Invites Us Matthew 6:9-15

It always surprises me that when we speak about the sermon on the Mount, the thing we remember most, the thing that gets the balance of commentary under that title, is the portion we call the Beatitudes... “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” etc. In fact the most remembered and memorized portion of that teaching is in Matthew chapter 6: What we call the Lord’s prayer. And there are commentators who appeal to us to call it the Disciples’ Prayer, because it was for them that Jesus taught this lesson. HE was still speaking before the crowd on that very special hillside above the Sea of Galilee, but HIS eyes were on Peter and Andrew, James and John, the beginnings of the creation of that group of 12, which would include Judas.

The reason it is right to call it the Lord’s Prayer is that it is the beating heart of Jesus teaching about Prayer. In Luke chapter 11 we find the same prayer text as that before us in Matthew 6. What is different in Luke 11 is that we are told the disciples specifically asked Jesus to teach them to pray, as John the Baptist taught his disciples a discipline of prayer. We know that Jesus both taught and modeled the concept of getting away, a private place, quiet time to pray. We know that he said what amounted to do not babble like the pagans who go on and on often repeating themselves.

And we know specifically from Matthew 6 and Luke 11 that Jesus said in response to the request of HIS

followers, “Ok, when you pray, pray like this.” And we call God our Father, because Jesus instructed us to do so.

That is where we begin in this examination of a portrait of Jesus when HE is praying. He invites us to participate. HE knows and HE teaches that God the Father knows before we ask HIM precisely what we need. In fact Jesus teaches, or at least insinuates that the Father knows better than we do, exactly what we need even before we ask it. One might well ask the question, why bother praying at all? If God knows our needs and knows them better than we do why waste time in the exercise of prayer? It is a good question. And it is a good question because it goes to the heart of the matter of what is prayer about? What was prayer about for Jesus? And what should prayer therefore be about for us? You might be surprised at the answer.

Prayer is not primarily about giving God information about us and our loved ones. I say it again, HE knows us, and HE knows our loved ones, regardless of our attitude toward HIM or our church attendance, or lack thereof, better than we do. HE knows our secrets. HE knows the secrets of our loved ones, secrets we do not know. Prayer is not about the information. Prayer is about the relationship. It was for Jesus during HIS time of ministry on earth and among the disciples, HIS followers, even HIS enemies. In spite of everything that is happening to us and around us, prayer is first and foremost about our relationship with God who Jesus reminds us, is our Father, and HIS Father. I was taught to pray as a child

on my knees, with my hands folded and my eyes closed. I got out of that habit, ironically when I came to faith and thought of myself as an adult. The wisdom of that childhood image returns to me when I am really in need!

The body language of kneeling before God is precious. It acknowledges a submission of the mind and spirit, that any other posture tends to deny. We Presbyterians do not talk nearly enough about the importance of submission to the will of the Lord our God, Our Father. It is not that our Father beats us into submission, although we sometimes conclude, I sometimes conclude that HE needs to do tough stuff with me to get my attention. As an elder statesman of the Kingdom of God I have come to think of myself on my knees in prayer, as reaching out to take the hand my Father has already bent down to offer, that we might walk hand in hand. That is the best commentary I can ever offer of the phrase “Our Father.” We reach for the hand of grace already offered us. And we walk as Adam did, with our Lord in the midst of the Garden in the heat of the day.

The Lord’s prayer contains 6 petitions. The first is that God’s name might be hallowed. Jesus first instruction to us of things to ask our Father for, is that HIS name might be recognized as holy, because HE is holy. And I dare say that is a more needful lesson to hear in our time than it was in ancient Israel, or the Israel of Jesus time. That we as creatures could even begin to think about the death of God, that is, mankind’s lack of need for God, is a denial of the greatness of our need. I

will provide very little here in terms of specifics. But we live in evil times. The sinfulness of man is virtually denied as such a million times a day. Believers struggle to remember what sin really looks like, because as never in a long, long time, sin has become the new normal. It is accepted. Well....God does not accept it. It is not HIS way. In the appeal for the recognition of God's holiness, this recipe for prayer turns our attention to the fact that our need to be like our Father, is great.

The second petition is that HIS kingdom might be on earth as it is, in heaven. It involves recognition of a need to change, and a need to change what the world has become in its fallenness. And yet, even here there is a sign of hope. The Kingdom of Heaven came to earth in the ministry of Jesus. It is alive in the work of those who believe in every act of love, and, every kindness performed. But the flower must bloom in order to bear fruit. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for...the fruitfulness of the vine. The flourishing of the budding Kingdom vine. This petition is about God's doing HIS will in spite of much that goes on among human kind.

Which leads directly to the third petition. Thy will be done. It is the expression of a desiring heart that wants to see God's will performed on earth. We caught a glimpse of that in the ministry of that little giant of a lady, Mother Theresa. We catch a glimpse of it when we send knitted goods to people in need of them, wrapped in our prayers of dedication. I catch a glimpse of it when I remember myself as a child on my knees. There are moments when we desire to be so full of faith we

submit to the Father's will. Those are blessed moments even though they are often tinged with pain. Notice this: the first three petitions are not about us. They are about our Father in heaven. His name be hallowed. His kingdom come. His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Having spent time focused on God our Father, the 4th petition turns to our needs. There is a sense in which the term bread is symbolic. It includes the steak and potatoes, and the pumpkin pie, warm socks, and a coat for cold days. Physical needs of all kinds. An end to a cold. A medicine for a killer virus.

The 5th petition is about our greatest need. Did you know that this Lord's Prayer is one of the portions in the New Testament which was originally in Aramaic and not Greek? And the Aramaic word for debts, can also rightly be translated sins. I wonder if it is a sign of our rebelliousness that we continue to talk in terms of debt, rather than naming it for what it is, sins? It will continue to be our greatest need. And we are more helpless in dealing with our sin than we are with a new virus.

Finally we pray about temptation and evil, when Jesus leads us. We know that God does not tempt. However we also know we need the Lord's help to avoid the real tempter. And we know in moments of sobriety and faith we cannot save ourselves. Although, we are still tempted to try.

The closing portion of the Lord's prayer is not in Matthew or Luke. The reason is it was added as worship liturgy was created in the churches. "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory." It is certainly true. And it circles us back to the opening petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Here in this lesson on prayer we have a genuine portrait of not just how we should pray, but also a portrait of what was happening when Jesus was praying. I know we already did it. But I think we should do it one more time this morning.

Let us say together the Lord's prayer.

Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come 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, the power and the glory,

Forever and ever.

Amen