

Sermon, February 12, 2023

Matthew 6:5-18
“Concerning Prayer “

Here, within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks to his disciples about prayer, and begins by warning them about putting their piety on public display. To do so is just a form of spiritual vanity, as in, ‘see how holy I am’. Instead, he tells them to go to a private place, to commune with God in secret. He then points out that God is not impressed by long, wordy prayers, because God is already aware of what our needs are. We offer our prayers without long instructions on how God should go about answering the prayers.

“Pray then in this way”, he says, and teaches them what has become known as the Lord’s Prayer. In the Gospels there are different versions of the prayer. This one in Matthew, and then another in the 11th chapter of Luke. Two things about this Prayer to begin with. Again, he says, “Pray then in this way”. What that suggests is that it is a model for how to pray, meaning that it does not require we use those words exactly. Secondly, because he begins the teaching talking about praying in secret, he meant this as a form of private prayer, not corporate prayer. Today, of course, we use it both privately and corporately. The fact that we do it together is just fine. Doing so not only binds us together as a congregation, but it reminds us that it is being prayed by Christians all over the world, at least pointing to the unity of the Church.

It begins with the words, “Our Father”, which speaks of an intimate relationship between ourselves and the Lord and suggests a parental relationship. And the fact that it says, in heaven symbolizes the divine nature of the relationship. It continues, “hallowed be your name”. What does that mean? Well, if you look to a literal translation from the Greek, it says, “Let Be revered the name of you”. In other words, it refers to the sacredness of the name. But notice that Matthew does not use the actual name. This, again, is because of the Jewish prohibition of speaking, or writing, the name of the Lord, which we know as Yahweh.

(If I may interject a cute little story here, an old friend of mine, a clergyman in Connecticut, said that one day he was walking past a Sunday school class and overheard a young boy reciting the Lord’s Prayer, but something didn’t sound right. So, he stopped and asked the boy to repeat the prayer - and the child said, “Our Father, Who Art in New Haven, how did you know my name?”) Again, it is a cute story, but there is truth in it; because God is everywhere, including New Haven, and He does know our name!

Continuing on it says, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. Why would Jesus ask that the kingdom come when in Matthew 3:2, John the Baptist says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near”, or, “ is at hand” according to the King James translation. Because Jesus represents the dawning of the kingdom, not its ultimate fulfillment. It is not fulfilled in the course of human history because of the presence of sin. It can only be fulfilled by God at a time when his will is finally done “on earth as it is in heaven”. However, if we are true followers of Jesus, we can bear witness to the values of the kingdom through our actions and our words, until the time of fulfillment.

Next, the following words of the prayer tells us what to pray for, “in the meantime”, beginning with a request for our daily bread. As New Testament scholar, Douglas Hare, points out, the people that Jesus was preaching to, were the poverty stricken, therefore, very much in need of daily sustenance. For us who live in more prosperous circumstances it need not mean that we pray for our daily bread. Instead, we give thanks for what we have, and pray for the needs of others with much less.

Next, we have, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”. Other versions use trespasses. Luke’s version says, “forgive us our sins”. The use of the word’s ‘debt’ and ‘debtors’, actually comes from a Latin version of the Bible. Yet, all of them mean the same thing - that we ask God to forgive us our shortcomings in this life. But notice the use of the past tense when it says, “ as we also have forgiven our debtors”. What does that mean? That **before** we ask God for forgiveness, we have the responsibility to forgive those who have hurt us. As Jesus continues to say in verse 14 - “For if you forgive others of their trespasses; your Heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”. Not only is forgiveness good for your soul, but it is also essential for peace and harmony in the world, and within the Body of Christ.

The next verse is a little troublesome, when it says, “And do not bring us to the time of trial but rescue us from the evil one”. In our version of the prayer, we say, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”. Does a God, who is love, really lead us into temptation? In the Book of James, first chapter, verses 13 and 14, it reads, “No one, when tempted, should say, “I am being tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself tempts no one. But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it...”. What we are really saying in the prayer is, “Grant me strength to resist temptation”. (Hare)

Now we end the Prayer with the words, "For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory. Amen." Notice that these words appear in neither Matthew's nor Luke's version. Those words are, in fact, a doxology - a doxology being a liturgical form that we offer praise to God. They were added to the prayer in the 17th century, and are used almost exclusively in Protestant churches, such as ours. It's just a nice way to end the prayer.

Once more, Jesus offers a model for prayer, which takes many forms. There is petitionary prayer, in which we ask God for guidance, as well as praying for others beyond ourselves. There is contemplative prayer and meditation, which are really more about listening for the voice of God, rather than speaking. And then we have our hymns and songs of praise, which are also a form of prayer. These are just to name a few.

Kierkegaard once said "...prayer does not change God, but it changes the one who prays". In other words, when we pray, we are asking God to give us strength, faith, and personal transformation. He also said, "To pray is also to breathe, and possibility is for the self what Oxygen is for breathing". Praying brings us into close and intimate relationship with God, which, in turn, brings New Life.

What lies at the heart of prayer is the belief in the presence of God in your life. If you don't believe in God's presence, then prayer is just talking to yourself! Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, we thank you for this day you have given us, and for the many blessings it brings. As we offer our prayers, like Jesus' disciples, we ask that you teach us to pray - that you help us to open our hearts that we may know your will, and that we may be transformed each day into a new way of life. May our prayers bring us closer to you, that they guide us, and inspire us to be more creative, more loving and caring, more like your Son Jesus. May your Holy Spirit speak to our hearts, guiding us into lives that reflect your love and your will. Amen.