

“How Do We Pray?”

Today our scripture passage from Luke 11:1-13 is Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. This prayer appears to be in the same context as the prayer in Matthew 6:9-13, although there is some difference between the two. The Matthew version contains seven petitions while the Luke version contains only five. Today we will look at the Luke passage, which gives more emphasis to Jesus’ practice of prayer.

The address “Father” established the relationship that makes the rest of the prayer possible. Although God is neither male nor female, throughout Christian history God has been personified as “Father.” We have a relationship with God that throughout scripture projects God as our “Father.” In our prayer life we want to acknowledge God as “Father.” We need to remember God stands in relation to us as a parent. This relationship is why I open my prayers with God the Father and close with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The prayer announces the coming of the kingdom of God. The preaching of the kingdom of God was the driving purpose of Jesus’ ministry. When we pray for something, we want to make sure it is in accord with God’s kingdom. To know God’s kingdom we must continually be in study of the scriptures and be

knowledgeable about God's will. Are we praying to God to ask him to do His will or our will?

When I read about praying in accord with God's kingdom, I cannot help but think about the story of the Louisiana TV preacher who prayed that God give him a new Gulfstream Jet so that he could fly across the world to do mission work. This story came up about a year ago. He already had a jet but needed a new one so he did not have to refuel. The cost was around \$35 million. He raised the money, but I'm not convinced it was due to God's will. The problem with his example is that it encourages others to pray for things they really do not need.

When we are praying for God's kingdom to be on earth, we want to pray for harmony among all. We want people to receive justice. We look forward to the day when there is no death and all needs are met.

Theologically, the most debated section of the Lord's Prayer is the petition for bread. Is this a prayer for ordinary bread or for the eschatological bread of the messianic banquet? By the use of the verb used by Luke in the Greek, the favored interpretation of the petition for daily bread is that the petition is that of a peasant who prays that God will supply each day's needs. We think of how the Israelites in the wilderness had to rely on God's provision daily of manna. The manna could not be saved or stored. They had to rely on God each day.

In Luke there is concern for the needs of the poor. The giving of bread and sharing common meals are distinguishing marks of Jesus' ministry. Genuine prayer thus begins with expressing to God as "Father" our complete dependence on God's mercy for even our most elemental needs. The focus has to be on our needs, not our wants. In our society today, there are many things we can want but we really don't need. I want to drive a sports car but I do not need it. When we pray let us make sure that we are praying for our actual needs and the needs of others.

Today's prosperity gospel has abused prayer. People are taught they are entitled to anything they want and they can ask God for it. God is treated like a huge expense account. If you want a \$200,000 sports car, you can have it. Ask God. If you want a house on the French Riviera, ask God for it. It's yours for the asking.

Our attitude when we pray has to be a complete dependence on God. And we also need to come to God with a spirit of forgiveness. In the Jewish tradition, forgiveness was the expected blessing on the day of salvation. As surely as we need bread, we need forgiveness. We stand in need not only of daily sustenance, but in need of continual forgiveness. One who cannot forgive cannot receive forgiveness. To be able to come to God with the right attitude, one needs to forgive

everyone indebted to him. To forgive may be difficult, but it necessary to make prayer requests to God.

The final petition is an interesting one, “And do not bring us to the time of trial.” Would God want to lead us to temptation or trial? One interpretation is of course not. Only the devil tempts us to sin, not God (Rev. 3:10). Yet there is a strong biblical tradition of God testing believers. There is testing of Abraham as to whether he will sacrifice his son Issac (Gen. 22:1); the testing of Job; the testing of the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exod 15:25); and Gethsemane, the testing of Jesus. Pope Francis has recently changed the wording of the Lord’s Prayer for Roman Catholics. His position is that the English translation of the prayer was not good because it speaks of a God who induces temptation. Instead of saying, “Lead us not into temptation,” Roman Catholics will now say, “Do not let us fall into temptation.” In light of this tradition and the threat of persecution, the model prayer appeals to God as the one who controls all our life, and it underscores our relationship to God as Father to whom we can appeal to for protection from any circumstances that might threaten our lives or our relationship with God.

The second part of the passage deals with another concern many of us with prayer. How do we have confidence that God answers our prayers? I admit that I have confidence that God answers my prayers but it is not a 100% confidence.

About 15 to 20 percent of the time I struggle with whether God answers my prayers. This is especially true when mass shootings continue or when someone I have been praying for still dies from a sickness.

Jesus uses two parables to deal with this concern. The first parable is about going to a neighbor in the middle of the night to ask for some food. At first the neighbor does not respond; it is the middle of the night, the doors are locked, and the kids are in bed. But if you persist, the neighbor will eventually get up in the middle of the night and give bread to a neighbor in need. In the same way God answers those who call out to God in need. What we need to remember is to be persistent. In verse 9, Luke encourages persistence. Ask and it will be given to you. Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door will be opened for you. We may pray confidently because we know that in a time of need God is even more trustworthy than a neighbor we wake up in the middle of the night.

Jesus then offers a rather absurd, surprising and almost horror filled metaphor of how much we can depend on God. This metaphor builds on the personification of God as a father. Jesus asks, "If your child asks for a fish, will you give him a snake instead of a fish? If your child asks for an egg, will you give him a scorpion?" Give a child wiggling, dangerous creatures instead of bread? I don't think so. The point here is that if a human father will give his children good

things, then how much more will the heavenly Father give? The heavenly Father will give even a greater gift, the Holy Spirit, to those who ask him.

The sayings in these parables encourage confident and persistent prayer in the knowledge that God's goodness is greater than that of any human father. Jesus' teachings on prayer, therefore, require that the one who prays will pray as one aware of desperate self-need before God. The danger comes when we think we can pray for a blank check or anything our hearts' desire. Our prayers don't have to be fancy words but they need to be for need, consistent with God's kingdom, seeking the kingdom of God, and knocking at the door as a neighbor in the night. As we close, let us remember that the model prayer and the parables elsewhere in the Gospel underscore the related point that prayer is ultimately the worship of God as Father, acknowledging God's holiness and devoting ourselves to the coming of God's kingdom. Where we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer.