

# “You’re Already Praying”

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**Luke 11:1-13 Good News Translation** <sup>1</sup> One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

<sup>2</sup> Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say this: ‘Father: May your holy name be honored; may your Kingdom come.

<sup>3</sup> Give us day by day the food we need. <sup>4</sup> Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who does us wrong. And do not bring us to hard testing.’”

<sup>5</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, “Suppose one of you should go to a friend's house at midnight and say, ‘Friend, let me borrow three loaves of bread. <sup>6</sup> A friend of mine who is on a trip has just come to my house, and I don't have any food for him!’ <sup>7</sup> And suppose your friend should answer from inside, ‘Don't bother me! The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.’ <sup>8</sup> Well, what then? I tell you that even if he will not get up and give you the bread because you are his friend, yet he will get up and give you everything you need because you are not ashamed to keep on asking. <sup>9</sup> And so I say to you: Ask, and you will receive; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. <sup>10</sup> For those who ask will receive, and those who seek will find, and the door will be opened to anyone who knocks. <sup>11</sup> Would any of you who are fathers give your son a snake when he asks for fish? <sup>12</sup> Or would you give him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? <sup>13</sup> As bad as you are, you know how to give good things to your children. How much more, then, will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

It’s not that the disciples had never prayed before. Of course they had. But after a few months following Jesus, listening to him, this collection of disciples was starting to develop some “team spirit,” let’s say. They were beginning to bond with each other and with their leader. They were looking for ways to solidify their sense of “team.” In our day, they would have gotten matching shirts with custom-embroidered logos. But what they decided they needed was a team prayer.

Jesus’ disciples would have been most familiar with unchanging, set prayers from their synagogue worship services.<sup>2</sup> Apparently John the Baptist had taught his disciples a set prayer that was distinctively theirs. Now Jesus’ disciples were asking for a set prayer of their own, one that would say, “We belong to Jesus, and this is the prayer Jesus taught us.” Jesus offered the words we’ve come to call the Lord’s Prayer. It wasn’t a set prayer when he spoke it. Jesus created it as he went, but it became a set prayer in due course.

The Lord’s Prayer appears not only in Luke but also in Matthew’s gospel because they got it from a common literary source. The two versions are a little different:

The wording of the prayer in Matthew is more polished, and the Matthean version contains seven petitions, whereas the Lukan form contains only five. Neither form of the prayer contains the traditional benediction [For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.].... It is generally agreed that whereas the Matthean wording is more original in places, the Lukan structure is probably closer to the original form of the prayer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on my sermon from November 8, 2009 entitled “Prayer Anxiety”

<sup>2</sup> New Interpreter’s Bible, IX, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> New Interpreter’s Bible, IX, p. 234.

In Luke the first petition asks that God's name be known as sanctified or holy. Since the ancients believed that a name was a dimension of a person's being, what's being prayed for is that people will know that God (and not just God's name) is holy.

The second petition proposes that if God is known as holy, then our greatest desire is that God's will or intention for creation should come to pass: *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done...."*

Then come three petitions for our daily needs: bread or food, forgiveness, and deliverance. The request for *"daily bread"* seems to be a reference to Exodus Chapter 16 when God fed the Israelites in the wilderness. Each day God provided them with enough *"manna"* for that day, so people would share but not hoard; the lesson, of course, was to learn to depend on God.

For a moment let's skip to *"lead us not into temptation"* or *"save us from the time of trial."* God certainly does not tempt us, but the Bible is full of examples of God putting people through tests: Abraham was told to sacrifice his son Isaac; a series of calamities tested Job's faith; the Israelites were tested during their forty years in the wilderness; Jesus was tested in his anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. One who tests also has the ability to deliver from testing, so the third petition acknowledges that God is sovereign over all of life. *"Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us...."*

But back to that middle petition, where Luke has Jesus saying, *"Forgive us our sins...."* We're more familiar with two other versions: *"Forgive us our debts..."* and *"Forgive us our trespasses...."*

Where do those come from? Matthew employed a metaphor for the word *"sin,"* using a Greek term rightly translated as *"debts."* Matthew's metaphor conveys the image that one who has wronged someone else needs to make amends to *"balance the ledger"* and be out the other person's debt, so to speak. But right after his presentation of the Lord's Prayer Matthew expands on forgiveness using a different Greek word instead of the one translated as *"debts;"* he uses a word that is translated as *"trespasses."* In English translations of the Bible both *"debts"* and *"trespasses"* came into common usage, and eventually different Christian traditions preferred one or the other.

What both *"debts"* and *"trespasses"* are referring to, of course, is sinful behavior – when we do things we shouldn't or we fail to do things we should. Modern translations have favored this term: *"Forgive us our sins as we forgive everyone who does us wrong."*<sup>4</sup> Note that this is not a conditional, *"if-this-then-that"* formula, because *"the ability to forgive and to be forgiven is a part of the same gift. We stand in need not only of daily sustenance ["daily bread"] but also of continual forgiveness."*<sup>5</sup>

I remember a rabbi pointing out to me that although the Lord's Prayer is perhaps the most widely known prayer in Christendom, it is not a distinctively Christian prayer. Yes, it appears in the Christian scriptures, but who uttered it? Jesus... a Jew. Who requested the prayer? A disciple who was Jewish. When you look at the text, does it contain anything that couldn't be prayed by someone of another faith tradition? No. People of every faith tradition seek to know God's holiness and desire God's reign on

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<sup>4</sup> Lk. 11:4a (TEV)

<sup>5</sup> New Interpreter's Bible, IX, p. 235.

earth. Everyone wants assurance that daily needs will be met, that justice will prevail in interpersonal relationships and that every aspect of our life would unfold under God's watchful care. No wonder this simple prayer has been spoken across the centuries by Christians the world over in languages too numerous to count.

There is a benefit of having a set prayer like the Lord's Prayer or that unknown prayer that John the Baptist apparently taught his disciples. The benefit of a set prayer is that you don't have to create new material each time you pray – you simply repeat familiar words. Some religious traditions emphasize this kind of prayer, and many people find comfort in the familiarity of set prayers. On the other hand, using *only* set prayers can have its drawbacks. Set, unchanging prayers don't specifically address what's happening in your life or your world now.

But we've conditioned ourselves to become anxious when asked to pray anything other than a set prayer like the Lord's Prayer. You all have seen this happen, maybe at your Thanksgiving table, or a funeral luncheon, or at a church meeting: a leader says, "Would someone be willing to offer a prayer for us?" Suddenly every head is bowed, eyes cast downward, eyelids in locked-down squint to prevent eye-contact that might possibly suggest a willingness to say a prayer in front of other people: a clear case of "P.A." – "Prayer Anxiety."

What are we anxious about, people? Do we really think God's going to say, "*Uh-uh, that's not the way to do it. Go back, start your prayer over, and this time throw in a few more "Thees" and "Thous" – those make me particularly happy.*" Of course not.

So let's consider a few non-anxious thoughts about praying.

- **Thought No. 1:** If you want to pray, you're already praying. Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner has written,

Everybody prays whether he thinks of it as praying or not. The odd silence you fall into when something very beautiful is happening or something very good or very bad.... The stammer of pain at somebody else's pain. The stammer of joy at somebody else's joy.... These are all prayers in their own way.<sup>6</sup>

So the first step to treating prayer anxiety is to acknowledge that you are already a pray-er! When you express your authentic feelings, whether consciously addressed to yourself or another – even God – those authentic feelings are connecting your inner life with your Creator.

- **Thought No. 2** is to stop beating yourself up about how inadequate you think your prayer life is. Don't compare yourself to others. After all, just because you're not as good a cook as your neighbor doesn't mean that you don't bother to eat, does it? Your prayer life is yours. It is your connection with God. Use it as *you* would use it. If you want to pray spontaneously, don't worry about trying to phrase and craft your prayers as though you were offering an opening statement in a courtroom. No, just speak – or think – as though you were having a casual conversation – you don't even have to use complete sentences. After all, that's what our everyday conversation is like – overlapping thoughts, fragmented sentences and phrases – yet we are able to understand each other. God certainly can sort it out to know what's on our heart, as this little folktale illustrates:

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A theological ABC. New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p. 70

It was Sunday morning in the mountain country of central Europe, and the church bells were ringing. A man walking a mountain path came upon a shepherd lad with his father's flock of sheep. The boy was kneeling and, looking up, was reciting the alphabet.

The man asked, "What are you doing?" and the boy answered, "I am praying." Somewhat sternly, the man said, "Praying? What kind of praying is this? Just saying letters, no words at all?" The lad replied: "I've never learned any prayers, sir. But it's Sunday morning and the bells are ringing in the valley, and I thought I wanted to pray, and I thought maybe—well, maybe—if I just said all of the letters, God might hear them and put them together for me, and spell out what I ought to say."<sup>7</sup>

The shepherd boy dispelled any prayer anxiety by simply offering the simplest, most honest thoughts to God and let God work through him. You really don't have to worry about the particular words you say.

- **Thought No. 3:** If you want to use set prayers like the Lord's Prayer or the Serenity Prayer or "Now I lay me down to sleep" or "God is great and God is good," go right ahead. But don't be surprised if God somehow takes words like "I pray the Lord my soul to keep" and moves your thoughts to consider something in your life like, "How can I keep my sister's illness from completely disrupting her family life?" God has a way of detouring even set prayers to lead your thoughts in a new direction.
- **Thought No. 4** is "Be persistent." Remember Luke's description of the friend who wouldn't stop asking his neighbor for bread? The point was not that we wear down God with our persistence, but that persistence in prayer is to be desired. "The value of persistent prayer is not that [God] will hear us but that we will finally hear [God]."<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, here's a word of grace about communing with God through prayer: the effectiveness of our prayers is not up to us. God is not dependent on our ability to pray. Prayer is not about getting what we want when we want it. Prayer is about learning to trust God; it's about growing in relationship with God by voicing the cares of our hearts and sharing with God the joys and sorrows of our lives. Prayer is not the clenched fist demanding that our will be done; it is the open hand receiving God's provisions for this day. Prayer is the means by which we acknowledge that God is God and we are not.<sup>9</sup>

As we engage in the experience of prayer, God's Holy Spirit graces us with a gift: the gift of spiritual union with the Holy One who is to us like a Heavenly Mother and Father. Rather than anxiety, our prayer gives us assurance of God's presence in our lives now and hope for the days ahead.

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<sup>7</sup> Illustrations on "Prayer" at sermons.com, accessed 11/3/09

<sup>8</sup> Psychologist and former Columbia University president William McGill cited at [http://thinkexist.com/quotes/william\\_mcgill/](http://thinkexist.com/quotes/william_mcgill/), accessed 11/5/09

<sup>9</sup> A "Looking into the Lectionary" reflection from Rev. John Wurster. *Presbyterian Outlook*, July 18, 2022 at [https://pres-outlook.org/2022/07/seventh-sunday-after-pentecost-july-24-2022/?utm\\_source=Presbyterian%20Outlook%20Email%20Updates&utm\\_campaign=f31e2f3747-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2021\\_10\\_18\\_01\\_23\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_b2a9be72d0-f31e2f3747-420029554&mc\\_cid=f31e2f3747&mc\\_eid=824aeec31](https://pres-outlook.org/2022/07/seventh-sunday-after-pentecost-july-24-2022/?utm_source=Presbyterian%20Outlook%20Email%20Updates&utm_campaign=f31e2f3747-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2021_10_18_01_23_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b2a9be72d0-f31e2f3747-420029554&mc_cid=f31e2f3747&mc_eid=824aeec31), accessed 7/18/2022