

**The Healing Power of Prayer**  
**Luke 11:1-13**  
**8/12/07**  
**Brentwood Presbyterian Church**  
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**Movement 1 – Lord, teach us to pray**

We Americans pray. According to a Gallop Poll, 87% of all Americans pray, 50% use prayer for petitions, and 70% claim their prayers are answered. Although we are not allowed to pray in the classroom in public schools, it is clear that Americans do manage to pray.

But, do we know how to pray? When we pray are we just speaking to ourselves, or are we speaking to God? Do we merely ask for something, or do we ask for inner change? If you feel somewhat inadequate in knowing how prayer works and exactly how to pray, then take heart: you are in good company. For even the disciples felt the same way. That prayer warrior Apostle Paul himself wrote in Romans 8:26: “We do not know how to pray as we ought.”

In both last June and again in July, I asked the descendents of the Mayans in Guatemala, new Christians, if they knew the Lord’s Prayer. I am not sure why I asked that. But I was stunned at the answer. They said, through a translator, “No, what is that?” Before we get too smug about being better Christians because we know the Lord’s Prayer and they do not, I will remind you that all of us are confused about prayer. We tend to reduce prayer to asking God for favors. We forget that to keep our own egos in perspective, we need to both praise God and to confess our shortcomings. If we have no needs, we forget we can begin and end all prayer by giving thanks for all God has done. We forget that in prayer we need to save time for silence, to allow God to talk to us in a

still small voice. Our prayer sometimes resembles a spiritual shopping list, launched heavenward on the wings of pious words.

Most of us know prayer is a conversation with God. But sometimes we are tempted to think our prayer is a one-way phone conversation in which all we hear is the sound of our own voice. We may wonder if we have been heard, whether any one is on the other end of the line, or whether we are even connected.

A military cadet was praying in his room when he heard a heavy knock on the door. Before he could get up the Colonel came in and said that years ago he had given up on praying. The Colonel said he simply had nothing for which to ask God. Nothing for which to petition God. "Well, sir," the cadet replied, "Then you must have a lot for which to thank God!"

Thirty years ago, I was an intern. I was excited to be a new medical doctor, though a green one, and I prayed for my patients every day. A kind physician, a medical oncologist, took me under his wing. I believe it is he who convinced me that I wanted to be an oncologist. One day after playing tennis, he came into the hospital with a myocardial infarction, and had hypertension. I was his intern. His attending internist asked me to double his diuretic, his hydrochlorothiazide, which I did. It turns out his kidneys were intolerant of that. And he developed full blown kidney failure. His creatinine doubled every day, going from a baseline of 0.8 all the way up to 10 over a period of 7 days. My patient might have to be on dialysis permanently. I cried myself to sleep every night. Though I prayed every day, I did not really know how to pray. So on the day his creatinine reached 10, I decided it was time to bargain with God. I told God that if he would fix my mistake; if God would make my patient's kidneys better so he did

not have to go on dialysis; I would NEVER ask God for another favor. I would never petition God again. The next day his serum creatinine started coming down, and was normal within a week. It was years later before I learned God would not hold me to my promise never to ask for another favor. I did not understand prayer.

Jesus had a habit of withdrawing to pray, and his disciples wanted to know what he did when he prayed. The disciples want to know how Jesus petitions his heavenly Father. They want to know how humble human beings like themselves can presume to petition God.

One day the disciples, after listening to Jesus pray, ask him if he would teach them how to do it. He told them a parable.

### **Movement 2 – Parable of the Friend at Midnight**

In Palestine 2000 years ago, hospitality was much more important than it seems to be today. People loved to gossip then as they do today, and one of the favorite topics to gossip about was who failed to be hospitable, that is, who failed to welcome others into their home. So it would not be unusual to knock on the door of a neighbor to get bread, when a friend shows up and your cupboard is bare. And it is dishonorable to fail to loan your neighbor a loaf of bread when called upon, if it keeps your neighbor from being hospitable.

Jesus' parable goes like this. Late one evening an unexpected visitor came to a certain man's home. The householder is certainly glad to see him but he is also concerned because he has no bread in the house. It is a reminder of the nursery rhyme about Old Mother Hubbard who finds her cupboard bare. It is the custom of the frugal Jewish mother to make only as much bread as is absolutely necessary for the day so that none is

wasted. But in the Eastern part of the world hospitality is a sacred duty. It is unacceptable to give a guest no food, regardless of how unexpected he is. So what to do? The market place is obviously closed, for it is now midnight. There is simply no bread in the house.

But the householder has a trump card. He may not have bread but he does have a neighbor. He decides to take his problem next door to his neighbor. Now, this parable has traditionally been called: “The Friend At Midnight” but that may be somewhat of a misnomer. At midnight, not too many people are your friends. As an aside, I called an intern about a patient who I thought had an interesting disease a few years ago, asking him to help me take care of him. The intern told me rather kindly, “There are no interesting cases after midnight!” He is right of course. We do what we have to do, but it is not fun for us after midnight. Back to the parable. The man saw that his neighbor had barred the door. That was an ancient way of saying: Do not disturb. But the householder begins knocking. At first the neighbor ignores him, probably hoping that it is all a bad dream that will go away. But does this discourage the householder? Not in the least. He continues to knock. “Go away,” yells the neighbor. “We are all asleep. You have come too late.” Finally, with the persistent pounding of the householder, the entire family is awoken and probably most of the neighborhood as well. Finally, in desperation the neighbor comes to the door. I can hear the neighbor’s wife now: “Just give him what he wants to get rid of him.” So, it was through this near shameful persistence that the householder got what he wanted.

Now, what is the meaning behind this parable? Jesus tells it in response to the disciples’ request: Teach us how to pray.

To begin with, we must first understand what the parable is not saying. It is not saying the grouchy old neighbor is God. It is true that in many of Jesus' parables there is a God figure. But in this parable the neighbor is not God. It is wrong to assume that the point of this parable is that God grudgingly gives us what we want if we just nag God long enough, and hard enough—just like my children used to do with me when they want something. It has been said that the value of persistent prayer is not that God will hear us, but that we will finally hear God.

Instead, God gives to us out of love and gives to us knowing what is in our best interest. Jesus points out that if even a rude neighbor will eventually, because of persistence, give up his bread, how much more so will our loving and merciful heavenly parent, when we ask for our daily bread.

It has been said that after satisfying our basic physical needs for food, water, and shelter, human beings have three deep psychological needs. What do you imagine those are? The first need we have, it is said, is to find someone who will listen to us. We all have a story to tell, a need to verbalize our feelings. We want someone who will listen to that. Secondly, it is said, we want the person listening to believe what we are saying. We want someone who will trust our story. Finally, it is said that when we have found such a person who listens to us and trusts us, we want to be assured that such a person always has our best interests at heart. We don't want to be involved with someone who will misuse or abuse our story (through gossip, for instance), but who will remain on our side, perhaps despite our story. Prayer touches on an important aspect of our deepest need as human beings. The promise of prayer -- of Christian prayer -- is that for the sake of Jesus,

a loving heavenly parent is ready to listen to you and me. As God listens, we may be sure that God always had our best interest at heart. This is the promise of prayer.

Yes, our prayer sometimes resembles a spiritual shopping list, launched heavenward on the wings of pious words. But God is not our cosmic bellhop. So we need a model prayer of petition. Jesus gives his disciples, and us, a prayer for petitioning God. We call it the Lord's Prayer, and it has been our model prayer for petitioning God for almost 2000 years.

### **Movement 3 – The model prayer of petition**

When visiting pastors come to preach, one of the first questions they ask is, does this congregation trespass, debt, or sin in the Lord's Prayer. There has always been a lot of talk about which is the correct version of the Lord's Prayer, because the Luke version is different than the Matthew version, and because different translations use different English words to translate from the Greek in which it was written. I know someone who quit going to a local church a few years ago because the interim pastor decided the words "debt" from the NRSV translation of the Matthew version, and "trespass" from the King James translation of the Matthew version, were too ambiguous, and instead used the word found in the Luke version, "sin." This is both humorous and sad, because we remember that Jesus spoke to his disciples not in modern English, not in Shakespearian English, not in Mel Gibson's Latin, and not even in Greek. Jesus spoke to his disciples in Aramaic, and we do not have his precise words. All we have is a written Greek translation from the oral Aramaic, and that written 30 years after he died. So in our church, we use an ecumenical version, one that clarifies the ambiguity of the archaic Shakespearian English of the King James Version. This ecumenical version is a synthesis of the Matthew

version and the Luke version. It is printed in your bulletin. But this is not my favorite version. My favorite version is found in neither a Bible translation nor in a hymn book. It is what a child heard and repeated as her bed time prayer. It goes like this:

“Our **Fader**, who art in heber, **haloed** be thy name. My kingdom you’re makin, den soon you will come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in **mom’s house** and in heber. Give us dis day our bread and butter, and forgib us out trespasses as we forgib **foes** who trespass on our yard. And lead us not into temptation, but deliber us from **ego**. For **time** is the kingdom, the power and the glory for eber, and eber, and eber. Amen.”

We laugh at the changes the child made, but I think this child is theologically astute: “**foes** who trespass” instead of “**those** who trespass,” “deliver us from **ego**” instead of “deliver us from **evil**,” “**time** is the kingdom” instead of “**thine** is the kingdom.”

Jesus’ prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, is indeed a prayer of petition. The “your” petitions establish what it means to revere God as our creator, and allows us to consider our principle need: “Your kingdom come; your will be done.” The “our” petitions assure us that God will provide. The first “our” petition allows us to consider our physical need: “Give us this day our daily bread.” The second “our” petition allows us to consider our personal need: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” And finally, the last “our” petition allows us to consider our pious need: “Save us from the time of trial, and deliver us from evil.” We petition God to give, forgive, save, and to come and be in charge. The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, but Jesus does not give them

magic words to say. He teaches them about the nature of the one to whom they pray. The Lord's prayer, in the beginning and in the ending, describes God as a kindly heavenly parent. Prayer is ultimately the worship of our heavenly creator and provider.

There is no unanswered prayer. Jesus assures his disciples that God always answers prayer, but does not guarantee they will receive whatever they request.

A few months ago, I saw a person with stage IV lung cancer. I told him what the textbooks say, that he cannot be cured, and that his prognosis is only 8-12 months. But he has even more serious issues in his life. His relationships with his wife, children, and God are broken. So we hold hands and pray both for a cure and a healing. For a healing of his broken relationships. Our prayer pushes down a taproot into the healing waters of God's hope, peace, and joy. He later tells me that in an unexpected way, his incurable illness has been a blessing. In prayer, we don't always get what we ask for, but I am convinced we always get what we hope for.

A few years ago, I diagnosed a man in my office with myeloma, a painful cancer. He told me he knew why he had cancer. He had been bad, and God was punishing him. First we prayed for God's hope, and then for God's healing peace and joy. Then I told him I did not know the mind of God, but even so, I was absolutely certain God neither inflicts nor allows suffering as instruction or punishment. Several years later, when his cancer was in remission, he told me the most important thing I ever did for him was not the obvious, putting his cancer into remission with chemotherapy, but was persuasively telling him that God loves him. No one had ever told him that before.

### **Conclusion**

New Mayan Christians who do not know the Lord's Prayer. Twenty four year old medical interns bargaining with God. Singing and saying prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and the Lord's Prayer. Delivering us from ego, time is the kingdom, and foes who trespass against us.

Here is what Jesus has to say about prayer. Corporate and private prayer push a taproot into God's healing waters of hope, peace, and joy. And private prayer is talking with a God who loves, cares, and provides. Prayer is one of those thin places where we truly experience the presence of God's Spirit.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's people say ...