

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Teach Us to Pray: Introduction

Matthew 6:5-13

Last weekend Debby and I attended a wedding. The traditional elements of the service were all there. The procession, the exchange of vows, the exchange of rings, the pronouncement of marriage. About halfway into the ceremony, the minister started reciting a prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven...." Immediately most heads bowed and lips opened. Many of those gathered knew the words by heart: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.... " And on it went to the final "Amen." Then heads lifted, eyes opened, and we went on to the next part of the service.

For centuries, wherever and whenever people have gathered in the name of Jesus Christ, they've used the words of what we call the Lord's Prayer. It's a standard element of worship in most parts of the Christian faith. We've sometimes inserted it into our services here at Grace Baptist, or you've recited it with other worshipers when visiting another congregation. Many of you already know this prayer.

But over the course of the next several Sundays, I want us to know this prayer in even deeper ways. Today we'll begin a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. From now until mid-November, we'll reclaim these familiar words and encounter our Lord who has given them to us, so that we can pray with him, and live out the kingdom vision that his prayer embodies.

Last Sunday, we looked at Jesus' own prayerfulness. We saw how prayer was essential to his life and ministry. At so many significant turning points in the story of our Lord, we encounter him praying. Jesus knew that every moment, and especially certain critical moments, had to be elevated into the larger purpose of God for the restoration of his people and the redemption of the world. So Jesus regularly turned away from the outward and visible work of doing kingdom good and turned toward the One who was the source of his power to do kingdom good. And we who follow him must do the same, which means we need our Lord's instruction and example. We're like those first disciples who came to him with the request, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1).

Jesus' response to their request includes the Lord's Prayer. This is a reminder to us that the Lord's Prayer is more than just an element in Christian worship. It has its roots in Scripture. Before this prayer shows up in the order of worship, it shows up in the Bible.

The Lord's Prayer occurs in two texts, one in Matthew and one in Luke. I read the Matthew passage a few moments ago. The setting is the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is teaching his followers what life looks like when the kingdom of God takes hold and gets lived out in Christian community. As Jesus lays out his vision of the reign of God, he gives instruction on a range of topics, including prayer. He warns his disciples against ostentatious displays of prayer, such as they may have seen and heard from some of the religious leaders. According to Jesus, prayer isn't about impressing others. Instead, he

tells his disciples to go find a quiet place and approach God with childlike confidence, trusting that God will hear. Jesus says, "This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven...." (6:9).

You can see Matthew's version of the prayer here on the left side of our screen. This is taken from the New International Version (NIV), the Bible translation that's normally in our pew racks. You may notice that the prayer is a little shorter than what we're often accustomed to, leaving you wondering, "Where's the ending? What happened to "for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen"? Actually, the oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament don't contain this final doxology or benediction. It only shows up in later manuscripts as time passes. In fact, the manuscript tradition contains ten different endings to the Lord's Prayer, which indicates that it was frequently adopted and adapted in the life of the church. If you use the NIV or some other modern translations, you'll see that they include a note with the doxology at the bottom of the page, while indicating that it's not there in the earliest manuscripts.

If you've worshiped in a Catholic setting, you may have noticed that recitation of the Lord's Prayer, usually called the "Our Father," is different. Debby and I recently attended a funeral service at a Catholic church, and when the priest who was leading the prayer said "deliver us from evil," he was done. But a few of us from Protestant backgrounds kept going, "For thine is the kingdom," and then, realizing our mistake, we tailed off into silence. That's just one example of how the use of the Lord's Prayer, particularly its conclusion, has varied across time in different forms and expressions of the Christian faith. During this sermon series, we'll include the final doxology, but won't get into more detail about its significance until we reach the last sermon.

Now look over on the right side of our screen, and you'll see Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. You may be struck by the fact that it's shorter than Matthew's. All the essentials are still there, but in more compact form. Matthew's version has seven petitions, whereas Luke's has five. Like Matthew's version, Luke's appears in the context of instructions on prayer. In this case, one of Jesus' followers, having observed his practice of prayer, asks, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples" (11:1). This kind of request wouldn't have been unusual. Teachers like Jesus would have been expected to pass on their insights about how to beseech God. Other religious leaders were doing this with their disciples, in some cases even providing their followers with a set prayer. Perhaps Jesus could do the same. In this case, Jesus responds, "When you pray, say: "Father,..." (11:2).

Lord, teach us to pray. That's still our request, here in our own day and time. This request rightly assumes that prayer is an essential part of the Christian life, for individual believers and for the church as a whole. As Gordon Smith has put it, "... to be a Christian is to be a pray-er. It can truly be said that we cannot live the Christian life unless we learn how to pray. We cannot be the church until we pray."¹ Something so essential to Christian living requires learning and instruction.

In the movie *Gravity*, George Clooney and Sandra Bullock play astronauts who end up on an aborted mission with a storm of debris headed toward them. They lose communication with Mission Control in Houston, and must make their way to the International Space Station. There's a scene where Bullock, who plays Dr. Stone, is coming to grips with her mortality and has a conversation/prayer with God. She says:

I'm gonna die, aren't I God? I know we're all gonna die ... we're all gonna die. But I'm gonna die today! Funny that you ought to know. But the thing is I'm still scared ... I'm really scared.

Nobody will mourn for me; no one will pray for my soul. Will you mourn for me? Will you pray for me? Or is it too late? I mean, I'd pray for myself but I've never prayed in my life. Nobody ever taught me how. Nobody ever taught me how.²

We need to learn how to pray. Lord, teach us to pray.

My desire is that the Lord will use this series of sermons to teach you to pray. I realize that we're each at different stages of our Christian journey. Some of you have been following Jesus for many years. Some of you may be newer in your relationship with Christ. Many of you are somewhere in between new believer and lifelong disciple. But no matter where you're at in your spiritual development, prayer is a critical part of your communion with our Lord and your transformation into his likeness. Growing into God's will and purpose for your life is inseparable from praying.

And this isn't just an individual matter. Remember that the request is, "Lord, teach *us* to pray." Not simply, teach me to pray, or give me personal instruction on prayer. That's certainly true, important, and absolutely necessary. But the gift of the Lord's Prayer isn't just offered to us as individuals. It's given to us as a community of believers. Note how the plural "our" is used throughout this prayer. So we pray not only personally but as a people, especially when we come together for congregational worship. And as we continue to learn how to pray, we do so in community as part of the church.

Now you may have noticed that I haven't spent much time in today's sermon looking into the specifics of the Lord's Prayer as we have it in Matthew and Luke. My purpose today is simply to introduce you—or for many of you, to reintroduce you—to this prayer. So we've started by looking more at the forest than the trees. In the weeks ahead, as we go through this series of messages, we'll have an opportunity to dig deeper into the details of each petition in the Lord's Prayer, exploring its significance for your own life and our life as the church.

By the time we finish, on the Sunday before Thanksgiving, I trust that the Lord will have worked in your life to instruct you and strengthen you as a pray-er, and to cultivate us as a community of prayer. Remember that in Matthew, the context of the prayer is Jesus' teaching about the reality of God's kingdom, and the visibility of that reality in the way that his disciples live, individually and together. This means that our goal in this series of sermons isn't primarily to master a body of knowledge or to improve our technique when it comes to prayer. Rather, our goal is to be formed into people who embody the reign of God and long for its full arrival. That will involve you and me in a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ. The whole Lord's Prayer points to him. It shows us who he is and what he's all about, and as a result, who we are and what we're all about.

In closing, let me emphasize one other opportunity that comes with this series of sermons. This is a good time to work on memorizing the Lord's Prayer. Some of you may already know it. Others may recall bits and pieces of it. Others may not know it at all. Even if you're pretty familiar with the Lord's Prayer, it's easy to take it for granted. So memorizing it can be a good way to reclaim it for your own journey of discipleship. Susan Pendleton Jones has written:

I have served as the pastor of four rather diverse congregations, yet in each church there has been a common occurrence. In making pastoral calls to elderly parishioners, I discovered that even those who could no longer remember their own names were always able to join me in praying the Lord's Prayer during the liturgy for Holy Communion. The phrases spilled out from the deep recesses of their memory because the prayer had been committed, not only to the mind, but also to the heart.

They had prayed it every Sunday in church. Many of them prayed it each night at home with their families before going to bed. Some of them had memorized it long before they had learned to read. It is the prayer of Christians at all times and in all places; it is the prayer our Lord taught his disciples to pray as the model for all of our prayers.³

As we go forward in our exploration and experience of the Lord's Prayer, I encourage you to take this gift from Christ, commit it to your mind, and let it work its way deeper and deeper into your heart. Let's close today's message by saying it together.

¹ Gordon T. Smith, *Teach Us to Pray* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2018) 1.

² *Gravity*. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón, Warner Brothers, 2014.

³ Susan Pendleton Jones, "Lord, Teach Us to Pray." Christianity Today website. October 6, 1997. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/october6/7tb060.html> (October 7, 2021).