

Prayer: Its Pattern and Its Practice

Scripture: Mat 6: 5-15

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Evening Service**

People of God: On this day of prayer, we need to do more than just talk about prayer, we need to pray. We've been doing that this afternoon, we have done it this evening, and we will continue to do it in our personal lives and in the life of the church. We need just to pray.

But we must also talk about prayer. We must teach the basic principles of prayer. Because prayer is not natural to the soul stricken by sin. It does not come automatically to those who are inclined to the horizontal aspects of life, rather than the vertical. In addition, there are wrong views concerning the nature and practice of prayer. As a result, it must be taught. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, just as John the Baptist did for his disciples. In our scripture reading, we hear Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching the crowds about to how to pray.

This morning we examined the first two "p's" of prayer; its purpose and its power. The purpose of prayer is for a believer to talk to God. It's really as simple as that. Prayer is our communication link with our God.

Prayer is also powerful. There is power in prayer because we pray to the creator of the heavens and earth; we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; we pray through the strength of the Holy Spirit. That makes a prayer a powerful force in the life of the Christian and in the life of the church.

Tonight, we will look at the last two "p's" of prayer: its pattern and its practice. These last two items are necessary for the purpose of prayer to be realized. If we want to tap into the power of prayer, we must practice it; following the pattern of prayer Christ laid out for us.

Let us, then, look at the pattern of prayer. Now there are two extremes when it comes to the pattern for our prayers. The one extreme is to say there is only one way to pray; there is only one formula to follow. In some traditions, how one prays is carefully and precisely prescribed. At the other

extreme, is a view that anything goes in prayer. It doesn't matter what you say or how you say it; as long as you are praying.

When Christ taught his disciples about prayer he did not lay down a whole list of rules about how one should pray. You do not need candles and incense. You do not need to be in a church building. You do not need to pray at specific times of the day. Yet this does not mean anything goes in prayer. We cannot say anything we please. Because Christ does lay out before us a pattern of prayer.

This pattern we call the Lord's Prayer. It is no magical incantation. It is no strict formula that must be repeated word for word. Instead, it is a model. It is a guide to direct our prayer life. We are not limited to these words, but these words do help shape the pattern of our prayers.

There are really four parts of this model prayer. There is first of all the opening address. At the beginning of a prayer, you name the person to whom you are talking. "Our Father in heaven." This opening address forms the basis of our prayer. It gives us the confidence we need in order to proceed in prayer. When we begin to speak to God, we focus on him and who he is. When our focus is on God, everything else is placed in the proper perspective.

The next two parts of the Lord's prayer are a series of six petitions. There are the three petitions that focus on the rule of God over the whole world. These petitions build upon each other. The Father's name will be adored when the kingdom has come; and the kingdom has come when God's will is done on earth as it is already done in heaven. When these requests truly lie in our hearts, then we will be faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

Then we can go to ask for those things we need in order to be faithful followers of Christ in God's kingdom. We can ask for our daily supplies, forgiveness and help in temptation. These requests look to God to supply our physical and spiritual needs so that we can stand firm in the midst of the spiritual battle of our time.

Notice the order of these two sections. The "your" requests come before the "our" requests. The Lord's prayer follows the central command of kingdom living: Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and all these things (such as food and clothes) will be given to you as well. Our prayers should reflect this pattern. They should reflect a deep concern to do the will of God. They should place the agenda of God ahead of our own personal agenda. They should place our needs and concerns within the overall plan of God, rather than try to get the plan of God to fit into our own expectations and plan.

The final part of the Lord's prayer is its conclusion, for yours is the

kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen. As with the opening words, these words provide the confidence and the strength of our prayer. They point to its power. When we usually finish our prayers, we most often say, "in Jesus' name, amen." This too states the confidence we have in our prayers. We pray in the name of the One, who now rules over heaven and earth. As a result, our "amen" can be boldly said. This is sure to be.

Now we need to be reminded that this model prayer is exactly that: a model. It is a guide, a pattern. It sets out the basic ingredients of our prayers. But this form is not to be held on to slavishly. There are a variety of ways in which these aspects can be included in our prayers. There may be times, when one element dominates the others. Yet overall, this pattern provides for a healthy prayer life.

There have been other ways of trying to ensure that our prayers have a good balance. At youth group we quickly went through the ACTS acronym as a guide to our prayers: ACTS: Adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. We've used that model before for this service.

The point is that there is a pattern to our prayers and we need to ensure that it is a healthy pattern. Prayers that only focus on me and my needs: Lord, I want this, Lord I want that, is not a healthy pattern to follow.

This leads me to consider the final "p" of prayer: its practice. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is where it all comes down to. We may know the purpose of prayer; we may know its power and its pattern; but unless we actually practice prayer, all the rest is said in vain.

When should we pray? How often should we pray? Unlike Islam, with its prescribed five prayers to be said each day, the Christian church has not laid down strict rules about when we ought to pray. Perhaps this is a shortcoming. We know that prayer can be done in any place at any time. But on the other hand, experience teaches us that things that can be done at any time tend to be neglected and put off to the end.

It's like a project for school. If there is no deadline, it probably won't get done. The same is true for our prayer life. If it is an open-ended affair, we can easily go through a day without talking to our God in prayer. We need regular times in which we pray. The prayers said on the run, the prayers said in a tight situation need to be rooted in a well-established practice of prayer.

The church has its practice of prayer. We have our set times in the worship service in which we pray. From the silent prayer in which we focus our thoughts on God and preparing our hearts on worship to the offertory prayer in which ask the Lord's blessings on the causes of his church and kingdom to the prayer for guidance as we seek to open God's Word to the

congregational prayer, prayer shapes our liturgy.

As the church has its practice of prayer, so does the family. Indeed, the family is the primary source for teaching children how to pray. Parents, you have the task of teaching prayer to your children. It often begins around the dinner table, when a young child in the highchair is taught to fold her hands and close her eyes, while the blessing for the food is offered. Then she is asked to say "amen" after the conclusion of the prayer. Then a few more words: Bless this food, for Jesus' sake, Amen. The older she gets, the more is expected of her. Perhaps at some point, she will lead the prayer.

We need to encourage our children to pray openly and with their own words. We also need to encourage them to have a time of private prayer. A good time for that is just before bedtime. Parents, are you teaching your children how to pray?

One important way prayer is taught is by modeling. Children need to see their parents praying. They need to know that parents also have a time of personal prayer. They need to know that they are being prayed for.

Both this teaching and modeling of prayer requires a time in which the family is together for a time of family devotions. The best time is around the table at mealtime. Yet this time-honored practice seems to be an endangered species. Our lives are so busy, we don't have time to spend a few minutes reading God's word; asking a few questions about it; and then going to God in prayer. Our schedules are so different that family members are often in different places at dinnertime.

There is so much that is lost when a family cannot regularly spend one meal together. One important loss is this time of family devotions. How is it in your family? Do you make an effort to have family devotions and make it meaningful? If it is impossible to have this time around the table at meal time, is there another time in which you get together as family for devotions? The family unit is an important place for the practice of prayer to be carried out.

But prayer must also be practiced personally. Every Christian needs a time for personal devotions. Some insist it should be early in the morning. Others insist just before bed in the best time. But Scripture does not lay down any precise requirements on this matter. Each person must discover for himself or herself what works for them. But it is important is to establish a time and keep at it. Devotions are not just for when you feel like it; because it is precisely when you don't feel like it that you need to read God's Word and come to him in prayer.

So how are your personal devotions? Do you have time set aside to meet with God? It is at this point many of us look aside, don't want to look

me in the eyes. It's an area that many Christians struggle in, from our youth to those in leadership positions—we know the excuses—too busy, too tired, too distracted. But just as we need to eat to be nourished, just as we need to sleep to be refreshed, so the believer needs to spent time in God's Word and in prayer in order to be connected with God.

I hope that today, we have reminded of the importance of prayer in the life of the believer. We heard its purpose, its power and its pattern. Now let's put it into practice. Amen.