

# I

## LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

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Luke 11:1–4

### A PERSONAL CONFESSION

I think all Christian believers who are honest with themselves and with each other will acknowledge that we are not very spiritual people, that we do not find prayer easy, and that our prayer life is not strong. And yet many of us have read books or heard sermons and talks that claim to teach us how to have a great prayer life, or how we might become prayer warriors. Some teachers even claim that their methods and approaches to prayer will guarantee spiritual experience and rich blessing from God. Some of their books become extraordinarily popular—examples are unnecessary, since everyone is familiar with them. If we pay attention to the particular teacher’s approach, we are promised that such obedience will ensure our steady growth in a deep devotional life, or that God will certainly do amazing things for us—that he will “enlarge our territory” and give us answers of health, prosperity, or some other

great blessing. Sometimes when I hear such messages on prayer and the spiritual life, or when I read these kinds of books about prayer, I find that I go away feeling worthless and hopeless because my personal history of devotion and my practice of prayer looks very inadequate compared with what I hear and read.

Because of this sense of poverty in my prayer life, I have shied away from teaching on the subject of prayer for most of my years in ministry, first as a pastor and then as a seminary professor. What could I share when I myself was such a poor example? Some time ago, however, the dean of students at Covenant Theological Seminary, where I teach, asked me to give a talk on prayer at one of our regular days of prayer and fasting. So I thought, “Well, I had better try to come up with something.” Over the past few years I had been doing a series of studies on Jesus the Greatest Evangelist, and I had found his teaching and example on this subject to be so helpful and freeing that I thought to myself: “Why not just look at what Jesus teaches about prayer? Maybe I will find the same help and freedom in Jesus’ teaching on prayer that I have discovered in his teaching on evangelism.”

That was exactly what I did find. As I began to look at Jesus’ teaching on prayer, I found what he has to say to be the clearest, the most upbuilding, and the most healing thoughts on this subject that I had ever read. I did not have the response of feeling inadequate and worthless when I studied the message of the Lord himself. What is remarkable about this to me is that the Lord knows full well how inadequate and weak my prayer life is, and he sees my cold heart and lack of zeal; yet I find that his words on prayer are a solace and support to me, rather than a condemnation and rebuke.

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So my desire in this book is to seek to encourage others with the encouragement and comfort that I myself have received from the Lord's teaching on prayer, and also from his own practice of prayer. We will begin at the beginning—with the prayer that Christians term "the Lord's Prayer."

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone who is  
indebted to us.  
And lead us not into temptation." (Luke  
11:1-4)

According to the Gospel records, Jesus taught the Lord's Prayer on two occasions—one in the Sermon on the Mount, the other in Luke chapter 11. In Matthew's gospel, the context in which Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer is his urging those who believe in him to pray privately and not just publicly. We will look at his words on that occasion later in this book. In Luke's gospel, the setting in which we find the Lord's Prayer is quite different. The disciples see Jesus praying, and when he has finished they ask him for help: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples" (Luke 11:1). Why did they ask? Presumably because they did not know how to pray, or they felt that their prayers were somewhat inadequate. Perhaps their prayer life, like mine, did not amount to much! Whatever the precise reason (and

we can ask them one day), they knew they needed help with their prayers.

Why did they need help? Why did they need to be taught how to pray? These are Jesus' disciples, the apostles he had chosen to be with him and to hear his teaching every day, the ones he was training to be the leaders and founders of the church all through this age. But they, of course, were just like you and me. And they needed help with their prayers, just like you and I. First, we are sinners who do nothing as we should, and so we fall short in prayer just as we do in every other area of Christian faith and life. We know that the greatest commandments are that we are to love the Lord with heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. But none of us keep these commandments well. So we don't "do prayer" well, for we do not love God well, nor do we love our neighbors well.

But it seems that there is an additional problem with prayer: we do not see God face to face, for ever since the fall God has been hidden from us, and so we sense a barrier. Because we don't see the Lord, all sorts of questions come into our minds about prayer. We struggle to find time to pray; we doubt whether our prayers are "getting through" to our heavenly Father; we are uncertain about how to evaluate the reality of our prayers; we wonder whether we are praying long enough or with the right amount of fervor; we ask ourselves whether our poor motivation and the sins that beset us prevent our prayers from being heard. We could all add other anxieties and worries about our prayers to this brief list.

Be comforted, for this understanding of the problems we face with prayer is a good place to begin. It seems that the disciples were in a similar place. It is encouraging to know that the apostles clearly found prayer difficult, just as

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we do. Thankfully, they had the common sense, and more importantly the humility, to come to Jesus and to ask him to teach them how to pray.

For all of us, this is the beginning of learning—that is, being honest and humble enough to acknowledge that we do not do well at living the Christian life. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). Later on in his ministry, he says to the Pharisees, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (John 9:41). Will we agree with Jesus that we are poor in spirit? Will we say to him: “Lord, I am blind; help me to see”? Can we move beyond having to pretend to God, to ourselves, and to others that we are deeply spiritual; that we are good at praying; that we know how to live a good Christian life; and that we love God well and love our neighbor well? Will we rather be open and humble, and will we freely acknowledge to the Lord, to ourselves, and to others that we are blind and poor and naked? It is liberating to do this, and it prepares us to be ready to learn from the Lord. So are we ready?

## THE LORD’S ANSWER

And he said to them, “When you pray, say:

“Father, hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Give us each day our daily bread,  
and forgive us our sins,  
for we ourselves forgive everyone who is  
indebted to us.  
And lead us not into temptation.” (Luke  
11:2–4)

## THE HEART OF PRAYER

In reply to their request, Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. All through the centuries, this prayer has been regarded by the church both as a prayer for believers to pray and as a pattern for Christian prayer, a model for all our praying, whether public or private. What do we discover when we look at this model prayer?

### A SHORT PRAYER

We notice first that the Lord's Prayer is a short prayer. If we time ourselves when we repeat the words that Jesus teaches us in Luke chapter 11, we will discover that it takes about fifteen seconds to say the Lord's Prayer. On the other occasion when Jesus teaches this prayer, he reminds us that God does not hear us better when we pray long prayers (Matt. 6:7). Pagans, says Jesus, pray long prayers because they think that doing so will "make God listen better." Jesus assures us that this is not the case. A prayer does not have to be long to be "spiritual." It does not have to be long for God to hear it favorably. A prayer is just as powerful, just as effective, just as pleasing to the Lord if it is a short prayer.

Jesus gives another clear example of this principle in a story he tells about the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus represents the tax collector's prayer as very brief: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (v. 13). This prayer takes just a couple of seconds, yet Jesus tells us that this man went home justified. His brief cry is a prayer that God delights to answer. Or we might think of Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39); or consider his prayers from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34); "Father, forgive them, for they know

not what they do” (Luke 23:34); and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46).

God the Father was clearly pleased with these brief prayers of his Son—the Son who had dwelt close to his heart through all eternity. In just the same way, our prayers do not have to be long for God to be pleased to hear them. In fact, if our prayers are long, we might need to ask ourselves, “Why am I praying a long prayer?”

If our answer to this question is that we feel that the length of time we pray will make God more likely to listen to us, then we are wrong in a truly deep way. God hears us because of his love for us in Christ, not because we pray prayers that someone else may regard as “spiritual” because of their length. Jesus assures us that his Father is satisfied with a prayer that lasts only half a minute, or even a fleeting instant. If we answer that it is a good spiritual discipline for us to spend a good long time at our prayers, we need to ask ourselves the question: “What is prayer? Is prayer about disciplining myself to pray long prayers, or is it about talking to the Lord?” We will come back to this question later.

We may want to respond: “Aren’t prayers occasionally very long? Isn’t it true that some of the prayers recorded in the Bible would take a much greater time to pray than the Lord’s Prayer?” We can think about some biblical examples—for instance, if we read aloud the prayer of confession that Daniel prays (Dan. 9:4–19), we will discover that it would take us perhaps five minutes to say this prayer. Or we might think of the longest of the psalms, Psalm 119, which might take twenty or thirty minutes to say aloud.

We can acknowledge that sometimes our prayers might be longer than the Lord’s Prayer; we will address the issue of length, of extended prayer times and periods of fasting, at a later place in our study. But the point we need to grasp now

is this: brief prayers are pleasing to the Lord; brief prayers are heard and answered by him readily and gladly. Length is not what makes a prayer acceptable to God.

### A SIMPLE PRAYER

Second, we observe that the prayer Jesus teaches is very simple. It does not have long, impressive sentences, nor does it have deep theological complexity as its character. It is a brief series of straightforward statements and requests. This surprises some of us, who might honestly believe that we must make more complex what Jesus declares to be so simple! “Surely it cannot be that easy!” we say to ourselves. “Prayer must be more profound, more eloquent, more taxing than this little model that Jesus gives us!”

Again, we need to ask ourselves why we might make such a statement. If the answer centers on our feeling better about ourselves when we pray prayers that we assess as theologically deep and verbally impressive, then we are again profoundly wrong. Prayer is not a performance in which we are trying to prove something to God about our depth of theological understanding or our skills of eloquence. Nor is prayer a performance in which we seek to impress our fellow believers about these things. And prayer is certainly not a performance in which we are to appraise and applaud ourselves for theological acumen or verbal gymnastics. Prayer is talking to God; prayer is not about trying to feel better about ourselves. Most of the time, of course, we are not quite so foolish as to judge our prayers in such ways.

Yet a problem remains: many of us struggle with thinking that others may view us as unspiritual if we pray in public, or if we admit to praying in private, prayers that are brief and simple. Indeed, many Christians are deeply



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reluctant to ever pray in front of others for fear of what others may think. But it is very sad that many believers feel this way, and some of us have been very sinful in making other Christians feel ashamed of their own prayers. Jesus encourages us all to know that prayer is communicating to God in the way that he teaches us. Prayer is not about demonstrating to others our spirituality, our theological understanding, or our verbal ability. Our prayers can be brief and they can be simple.

### A PLAIN PRAYER

Third, prayer can be plain, as is the Lord's Prayer. This prayer that Jesus teaches us is so ordinary! I do not mean this as a criticism, nor to deny the beauty of the Lord's Prayer. I want to try to communicate that this is another major area in which we become confused about prayer. We think that our prayers must be more involved, and somehow more intense, than these plain phrases of praise and request that Jesus teaches us. "It surely can't be quite that ordinary!" we think to ourselves. "It must be necessary for our prayers to have an extraordinary character! Doesn't there have to be more fervency, passion, and emotional intensity than is present in Jesus' plain petitions?"

How are these questions to be answered? Sometimes there will be fervency, passion, and emotional intensity in our prayers. It is fine to express this emotion in our prayers if it truly reflects the way we feel.

Think of the prayer of the tax collector. He beat his breast and would not lift up his eyes to heaven when he prayed: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Or think about Jesus' brief prayers from the cross; they are certainly full of passion! Many psalms and other prayers

(for example, some of the prayers of Jeremiah, both in the book of Jeremiah and in Lamentations, or the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2) are fervent and passionate, but they arise from situations in which the one praying is indeed in distress. In some of his prayers, Jeremiah is deeply troubled about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. In others, he is distressed because the Lord does not seem to be listening to him. Hannah is barren, longs to have a child, and must deal with the ridicule of her rival, Peninnah. In such cases, emotional intensity is a natural response to the pressure of the circumstances facing these believers.

It is the same for us: when someone we love—a spouse, child, or dear friend—is desperately ill, we cry out to the Lord in anguish. When my wife, Vicki, was diagnosed with colon cancer a decade ago and the chemotherapy was ravaging her body, I prayed many intense, passionate prayers—mostly very short! “Lord, do something!” “Lord, listen!” God, of course, encourages us to bring our intense pain or pleasure to him, and he assures us that he will hear with compassion or gladness, as the case may be. Yet there are several significant issues to notice.

First, it is not the emotional intensity of our prayers that makes God attentive to them. He listens intently and attentively because he loves us, not because of the passion with which we pray to him. We need to be reminded of this, for we very readily judge ourselves, and others, about the quality or value of our prayer life, and the criterion we use for this judgment is often the emotional fervor or the experiential strength of our feelings when we pray.

I do not wish to deny that sometimes Christians have wonderful moments of feeling the Lord’s presence when we

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are praying. In addition, on rare occasions we may have extended periods of acutely sensing his love for us, or his grief over our sins, or his comfort in our sorrows, or his power at work when we teach his Word or otherwise serve him.

The important point, however, is that we do not begin to measure the validity of our prayers, or the maturity of our spirituality, by the depth, height, or power of our experience. If we do such measuring, all sorts of dangers can arise. For example, we might start feeling proud of our experience, as if we had a closer relationship with the Lord than that enjoyed by our fellow believers. Jesus warned his disciples against such pride when he reminded them to rejoice that their names were written in heaven, rather than in the excitement of having experienced the Father powerfully at work in answer to their prayers (Luke 10:20).

An additional problem is that if we are not careful when we openly share such “experiences” we have had with the Lord, we can make other believers who have not had them start doubting the reality of their own relationship with God. Paul addresses this problem in Colossians chapter 2 when he encourages the believers not to be robbed of their confidence in Christ by fellow Christians who stand on visions and other spiritual experiences they have had (Col. 2:18-19).

What tends to happen very easily is that when the Lord grants us some special experience, we start boasting about it, as if this were a mark of our own spiritual maturity rather than a particular gift of God. Because we are all such sinners who are so easily seduced by pride, we also struggle with wanting to feel superior to other Christians. In addition, we may want to keep having the same experience ourselves so that we can walk by sight rather than by faith. So we try to manufacture the experience to make it keep happening, or

we tell stories about it to prove to others how close to the Lord we are and what prayer warriors we have become.

I recall a pastor's sharing, during a sermon, about a one-day prayer retreat he had taken the previous week. He told us all what a day of sweet fellowship he had enjoyed with the Lord, how rapidly the day had gone by, how easily he had spent hours in prayer. The effect of this story, I am afraid, was one of two things: some present were amazed by the pastor's spirituality, and put him on a pedestal as a spiritual giant whose experience was utterly unlike their own; others simply thought he was telling a complete fabrication and stopped believing anything he said about personal spirituality.

The heart of the problem, I believe, was that the pastor was claiming to have spent a day walking by sight—experiencing the Lord so personally and directly that it was as if he and the Lord were walking arm in arm together through the woods all day without any interruption. The truth is that the New Testament teaches us that we are called to walk by faith now rather than by sight, and so we must be content with not always, or with only rarely, or maybe even not at all, having intense experiences of the Lord's presence.

The day will come, thank God, when faith will be turned to sight. Then we will see Christ face to face, and we as his redeemed people will indeed walk through the woods and gardens with him—as did Adam and Eve before the fall. In the meantime, however, we do not walk by sight, and the passion of our hearts is no trustworthy measure of the reality of our prayers, nor is our passion a measure of the willingness of our Father to hear us.

This brings up a second and related point. Less emotionally intense prayers are heard just as readily by God as

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the most passionate prayers we pray. We are encouraged to pray about many things that are not, or are not immediately, matters of life and death: our daily food, our need to grow in love and in virtue, our desire for our children's well-being and for their future, and many other regular needs. It is not only the urgent, desperate problems that God is willing to hear and to answer. We can bring anything to our heavenly Father! And we can come to him just as we are, whether we are in a time of great sorrow or joy, or whether it is just an ordinary, uneventful day.

A third issue is that we can begin to think that the intensity and fervor of our prayers, or our perseverance in prayer, are placing the Lord God under obligation to answer our prayers. It is as if we were saying to him: "Lord, I have prayed about this issue with such passion. I have prayed about it every day for seventy days. Now you must answer me, because I deserve it."

You may wish to deny that you are ever so crass and manipulative in your approach to the Lord, but it is my experience that I often behave this way—and so, I suspect, do all other believers. We all too easily begin to think that the Lord is in our debt. We start believing that our faithfulness, our intensity, or our persistence in prayer requires the Lord to answer in the way we desire.

But this notion of the Lord's indebtedness to us is not what he teaches us about prayer. Prayer is our response to God, the God who graciously invites us to come to him with our thanksgiving and requests. He is never indebted to us; we are always indebted to him. We cannot manipulate him into a position where we can make him answer us—no matter how much time, how much emotional energy, how much spiritual fervor, or how much frequency of prayer we

offer to him. We are always beggars who are completely dependent on his generous kindness to us. We are not those who can bargain with him on the basis of our perceived spiritual power or faithfulness.

#### A CONFIDENT PRAYER

This brings us to a fourth central matter that Jesus teaches us when he gives us the Lord's Prayer. Little children who know they are loved by their parents or grandparents and who are fully secure in their love do not have to try to impress their fathers, their mothers, or their grandparents. So it is with God. He is "Our Father." We are indeed loved by him. We can be secure in the knowledge of his love. We do not have to try to impress him with our prayers. So Jesus teaches us to pray with confidence, to approach God directly with a sense of security and call him "Father!" or "Our Father!" God is always "open" for such prayers. He never rests, but rather is always at work, listening to our prayers and eager to meet our needs.

Our confidence and directness pleases God, for it shows that we are coming to him as little children to a father, a mother, or a grandparent. We are coming to the Lord knowing that we are loved and that he will gladly hear us. To put this point another way, we are coming to the Father as those who believe the gospel of Christ. For the gospel teaches us that the God who made the heavens and the earth has made himself our Father through his Son, Jesus, by taking away all our failure, idolatry, unbelief, and shame through his death for us on the cross.

In order to make very clear this matter of the confidence we can have in prayer, I will tell a brief story about one of my grandsons. One of my daughters-in-law is French, and

her children call me “Papy”—the French term for “Grandfather.” I remember that when one of them was three, I would sometimes answer the phone to this beloved little voice: “Papy, I love you! I want you to come and have dinner with us.” I would say, “Yes! Thank you! Mamy and I will come. I love you, too.” (Of course, I would then telephone our son or daughter-in-law to double-check, because sometimes they did not know that he was inviting us—this was his idea completely.)

My grandson would say these few words and then put the phone down. I was delighted, of course! He did not need to say anything else. His brief words, his simple and straightforward expression of love, his request—these were enough for me. If that is how I, a sinner, respond, then how much more does our perfect God delight in his children’s simple, brief, plain expressions of love and our requests for his presence and help in our lives! We can tell him happily, and we can tell him often, how much we love him, need him, and long to be with him. Our model, the Lord’s Prayer, teaches us that we can say these things briefly, simply, plainly, and confidently.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you think of yourself as someone who has a great prayer life, as being poor at prayer, or as falling somewhere in between?
2. Were you troubled, encouraged, or a bit of both by my confession of my own spiritual poverty at the beginning of this first chapter?

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3. Do you find it encouraging that the disciples came to Jesus to ask him to teach them to pray?
4. Have you ever asked either the Lord or a fellow believer, “Can you teach me how to pray?”
5. Do you sometimes struggle with feeling that short, simple, plain prayers are not very spiritual? What might you say to yourself when you feel like this?
6. For you, what are the barriers in coming to God in prayer? Why do you find prayer difficult?
7. Have you felt the need to get yourself straightened out spiritually or into the right frame of mind before you could pray “real” prayers?
8. Do you sometimes want to judge the value of your prayers? If you do, what criteria have you used for judging their value? What do you say to yourself to refrain from doing this?