

1 Sermon, February 17, 2013

Texts: Luke 18:1-8, Matthew 5:43-48, Matthew 6:1-15

Title: "Prayer Is a Balancing Act"

Every so often, it's important for me to preach about prayer. It's such a vital part of our faith, and so simple, yet so difficult.

Jesus assumed that his disciples prayed. He assumed that the people who came to hear him prayed.

He said, "*When you pray...*" he didn't say "If you pray..."

He taught about prayer in many ways. Be humble when you pray. Keep it simple. Pray for your neighbors. Pray for your enemies. Be constant in prayer.

Jesus never told us whether we should pray standing up or lying down or sitting or even jogging or dancing. I don't think it matters much. If how you pray lets you stop thinking about your own desires, and think about God's desires, it's working.

So here are a few things from the gospels about how Jesus taught us to pray.

First, he said to beat on the door for your own needs. Tell God of your needs with great force and desire. Especially if it's because you want to make something right.

Jesus says we should be like a widow (widows had very little power back then) who uses what power she has to keep pestering a selfish judge, who finally gives in to her demands.

Pray with that persistence, because unlike that selfish judge, God wants to grant us justice and love and peace.

It's a matter of being honest to God about our needs, even to the point of selfishness. Plead with God for those who are closest to you, the ones you care about most.

I once talked to a woman who said she felt God heard her best when she went out in the back yard and shouted at God. Really yelled until she was hoarse. I don't know if God heard her any better, but she felt more confident that she had given it her all.

Jesus also tells us to pray for our enemies.

That would seem to be the complete opposite: to be completely unselfish. The people who hurt us, the people who use their power in

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destructive ways, the ones who don't seem to care – we're supposed to pray for them.

We are not only to pray for something to be made right – we're supposed to pray for the ones who do wrong.

Pray for the people you're most angry at – like those people on the opposite side of the political spectrum. We're to pray for the ones we're most afraid of, the people who are the reason we lock our doors at night.

Ken Sande writes of a couple that he came to know:

When John's wife, Karen, divorced him and moved in with her high school sweetheart, John was devastated. Still, he trusted in God and refused to give in to self-pity. He refused to criticize Karen, especially to their children. He accommodated the ever-changing visitation schedule. Most of all, he continued to pray for Karen, and asked God to help him continue to speak to Karen with love and gentleness.

After about a year, Karen and her boyfriend were fighting continuously. As she compared his behavior to John's kindness in the face of her betrayal, she began to realize what a terrible mistake she had made. With great trepidation, she asked John if there was any chance they could get together again. To her amazement, John said yes, and suggested they start counseling with the pastor at his church. Eight months later, their children had the joy of seeing their parents renewing their vows and reuniting their family.

That's what prayer can do.

So Jesus tells us to pray for things to be made right, and to pray for those who do wrong. He also tells us to pray simply.

That's what the Lord's Prayer is. It is a simple prayer that covers most of what we might pray for.

The King James Version language of the Lord's Prayer makes it sound much more complicated than it is. In the Contemporary English Version, it reads:

Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name.

Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven.

Give us our food for today.

Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.

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It's a straightforward prayer, praising God, asking God to do what *God* wants, and asking God to supply our needs. It also asks God to forgive us, protect us and save us from our own worst selves.

So when you pray, pray for things to be made right, pray for those who do wrong — and pray simply.

Jesus tells us not to pile up empty words and make it sound good. Don't worry about having poetic wording. Just pray from the heart.

And then wait.
Shut up and listen.
Be open to what God will say or show you.

Don't expect that all your wishes will be granted.
Don't expect results in your own terms. Isaiah tells us:

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 59:8-9, NIV)

So you don't need to understand it all. But know that God has heard you. A change has already happened. You have already come closer to God and God's abundance.

If you keep your heart and mind open, God will speak to you in some way, in God's good time.

Jesus often said, "those who have ears to hear, listen." If we keep our ears open, God will speak.

Amen.

Jesus told his disciples a story about how they should keep on praying and never give up:

2 In a town there was once a judge who didn't fear God or care about people. **3** In that same town there was a widow who kept going to the judge and saying, "Make sure that I get fair treatment in court."

4 For a while the judge refused to do anything. Finally, he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care about people, **5** I

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will help this widow because she keeps on bothering me. If I don't help her, she will wear me out."

6 The Lord said:

Think about what that crooked judge said. **7** Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to him day and night? Won't he be concerned for them? **8** He will surely hurry and help them. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find on this earth anyone with faith? (Luke 18:1-8, CEV)

43 You have heard people say, "Love your neighbors and hate your enemies." **44** But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for anyone who mistreats you. **45** Then you will be acting like your Father in heaven. He makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. **46** If you love only those people who love you, will God reward you for that? Even tax collectors^[a] love their friends. **47** If you greet only your friends, what's so great about that? Don't even unbelievers do that? **48** But you must always act like your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:43-48, CEV)

When you do good deeds, don't try to show off. If you do, you won't get a reward from your Father in heaven. When you give to the poor, don't blow a loud horn. That's what show-offs do in the meeting places and on the street corners, because they are always looking for praise. I can assure you that they already have their reward. When you give to the poor, don't let anyone know about it. Then your gift will be given in secret. Your Father knows what is done in secret, and he will reward you.

When you pray, don't be like those show-offs who love to stand up and pray in the meeting places and on the street corners. They do this just to look good. I can assure you that they already have their reward. When you pray, go into a room alone and close the door. Pray to your Father in private. He knows what is done in private, and he will reward you. When you pray, don't talk on and on as people do who don't know God. They think God likes to hear long prayers. Don't be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask.

You should pray like this:

Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name. Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven. Give us our food for today.

Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.

If you forgive others for the wrongs they do to you, your Father in heaven will forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins.

(Matthew 6:1-15, CEV)