

“Lord, Teach us to Pray” based on Luke 11:1-13 and Gen. 18:17, 20-32

Prayer— Our God who calls us to pray...and to join you in Spirit as well as in deed...we come before you today seeking to hear your Word about the gift of prayer. We know that this is one of your greatest and most mysterious of gifts. Speak to our minds and help us understand your truth; speak to our hearts and help us feel your truth; speak to our spirits and help us live out your truth. Through Jesus Christ, your Word to the world and our prayer to you. Amen

Last week, Abraham and Sarah had welcomed three visitors who promised them a Son. After this, Abraham looked with them upon Sodom— a city infamous for inhospitality, promiscuity and violence. I can almost see the clouds rolling in as the Lord considers the fate of this city and Abraham pleads for mercy.

It was the time of trial for Sodom and Gomorrah for whom Abraham prayed. But they would be found guilty. I will come back to this briefly at the end of the sermon.

When Jesus faced the time of his trial, he was shaken to his core. And so he told his disciples in the Garden, pray that you will not come into a time of trial.” And yet, like Jesus, we all eventually do come to times of trial and potential destruction. And it is then that prayer rises up from that primal place which longs for salvation.

The other day, I was out grilling Korean barbecue under the front entryway because it looked like rain. All of a sudden, lightning seemed to strike in the cul-de-dac right in front of me and immediately, BOOM! thunder cracked like a powerful gun had gone off right in front of me.

I came in and little Dietrich was shaken to his core. He does not even like thunder that is miles away. After about another five minutes of occasional rumbling thunder, he looked at me with those scared puppy dog eyes and said, “Daddy, can we pray?” This was a first...and a joyful one at that. And we did...and the thunder stopped. Very nice timing Lord!

The fact that prayer rises up in the midst of fear and destruction points to the purpose and power of prayer— that of salvation. Now if only we would recognize that destruction looms in minor times of trial and temptation as well— and learn to practice the prayer that will stop destruction in its tracks! How often would we be saved from foolish action, and hurtful judgment, anger and blame.

Jesus said, “everyone who asks receives... and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” So prayer saves, not only eternally but daily.

Prayer lifts us up from the trials of daily life...and places in the presence of the holy. Remember Moses and the burning bush and how God asked Moses to take off his sandals? Prayer moves us toward our Father in heaven. And we take off our shoes in recognition of God’s holiness just as Moses did.

The other day a movie character said that taking your work boots off is one of life’s great simple pleasures. The confines and heat and soreness of a boot tightly fastened are all released as the shoes come off and we stretch out our toes.

This is what taking our shoes off through prayer can do for us. The oppressive spaces, the heated moments, the sore feelings come off--- the weight and responsibility are released as we acknowledge the one who has even greater responsibility over our affairs than us. Prayer recognizes that a merciful and all-powerful God is sovereign—and this frees us from the burden of self-sovereignty.

Prayer lessens not only the burden but also the stumbling of our selves. Thy Kingdom Come into my life and into those I share life with...even to the whole world.

And something which should not even need to be acknowledged is that our prayers make a difference. Christians believe in Spirit and invisible powers. So just as God can use our bodies every day to help others, so can God use the invisible work of our spirits— that of prayer. (At the same time, our spirits and their prayers, just like our bodies and their acts have limits. So the more prayers coming from spirits with different gifts— the greater the impact.) The point here is that our God wants communion with us and wants our participation- physically *and mystically*-- in his Kingdom come.

And prayer actually enables communion between our spirits and our bodies. Prayer transforms and emboldens us to help save others. Prayers of contrition lead to greater righteousness. Prayers of intercession and listening prayers brings to our minds the suffering of others— and lead us to help. Praying “Thy Kingdom Come, Thy Will Be Done on earth” calls us to do God’s will.

The other day I was doing my centering prayer here in the sanctuary. This is a silent contemplative prayer which seeks to set one apart completely from the busy-ness of the earth and the trappings of the mind. It literally seeks to place us in God’s Kingdom which is already present. Well I have gotten used to the normal distraction of traffic. But this was suddenly replaced by the incessant shouts of children outside. So much for Kingdom peace.

Well I lifted these children up in prayer— knowing that it is better to bless than to curse, especially in the midst of prayer— and yet I really hoped they were passing through. But they did not. And then I remembered our church camp and that it was right around 3:00 p.m. when they finish. And I thought “O.K. God I get it...” And I got up and went to pray with the children and say good-bye to them at the end of their camp. No big deal, obviously...My simple point is that prayerful communion with God necessarily leads to the care of others.

I watched a documentary the other night about an English neuro-surgeon about Henry Marsh. He has been saving lives for free in the Ukraine for the last 15 years. Dr. Marsh spoke of the trepidation with which he always engaged the very risky work of neuro-surgery. And yet he concluded, “You have to do what you can. What are we if we do not try to help others, really? We’re nothing; nothing at all.”

Much of the Christian life of helping others and pursuing justice and sharing good news involves risk. And we do botch things up. But learning to pray “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors”— this foundation of grace empowers communities to continue moving forward in the critical Kingdom work God calls us to.

One of Dr. Marsh’s patients, Marian, had a huge and very dangerous tumor on his brain. Marian prayed that most basic of prayers— salvation from a time of trial...He prayed, “I hope that God with Henry's hands will give me health and life.” And that is exactly what happened.

And yet another of Dr. Marsh's patients, Tanya, whose mother had probably prayed with even greater vigor, was further disabled by brain surgery and died a couple years later.

Take this cup from me prayed Jesus. Save us from the time of trial, prayed the disciples. And we pray the same for ourselves or loved one as death or destruction lingers. And yet Jesus had to drink the cup. And things often do not turn out according to our prayer and our plan. But one of the greatest gifts of prayer is the acceptance of the sovereign will of God; an acceptance which overcomes both denial and despair.

I have spoken of the effect of prayers on self and loved ones and I will conclude with the world. The balls of fire and sulfur which were eventually dropped on Sodom and Gomorrah got my attention. And shortly thereafter, I heard again of the many times we have been this close to nuclear war. One time in '95, the Russians thought a rocket test out of Norway was a sneak attack and Yeltsin was immediately called. An academic quipped, "Thank goodness Yeltsin was not drunk that day!" Thank goodness and the author of all goodness indeed.

I came upon Joel Osteen the other day and was drawn in by that sweet smile of his. And he said something interesting... "The moment you pray, the tide of the battle begins to turn. That very moment God sets (or keeps) the miracle in motion. It may not happen today or in a week or in ten years, but if you stay in faith, one day you will see what God has been doing behind the scenes." (From the sermon "Having Now Faith")

I believe all the prayers for peace in the world over the centuries have set and kept in motion God's angels of peace. And over the last 50 years or so, they have kept the world from the time of great trial and tribulation. And while God's Kingdom of peace has not yet fully come, we will, through the gifts of faith and prayer, look back and see all the Kingdom Work God has been doing behind the scenes.

Until then, may our prayers for peace and mercy never end. And may we trust and hope that, even though there are not 50, 40, 20 or even 10 righteous, God will hear our prayer. That for the sake of one righteous one, his only Son Jesus Christ in whose image we are made and through whom we pray; for his sake and for the sake of his brothers and sisters everywhere, God will preserve and one day re-make the earth and her peoples. To the

God of all grace and peace who calls us to eternal union with Christ, be all the glory and the power, now and forevermore. And God's people say...

And how the world today is actually more dangerous in this regard than during the Cold War.

Our God is one who wants communion with us and wants our participation in his Kingdom come. So if we believe in Spirit, why is it so hard to believe that God wants to use the movement of our spirits in prayer as well as the movement of our bodies in order to help ourselves and others!

And in realizing God's hallowed name and praying for God's Kingdom
Come, we are shaped by prayer.

So prayer frees us

rather than our broken and stumbling self.

Prayer is the practice of living faith in a sovereign God— and like
everything else, it is only practice that can perfect or at least grow our faith.

Prayer humbles us, opens us, and frees us.

Lord teach us to pray, said the disciples. And if they who lived in a very
religious culture and were in daily contact with the Son of God; if they need
to learn how to pray, how much more do we. I have talked a lot about the

importance of prayer but I am not sure how much I have gone into how to do it.

So how do we pray? What is immediately striking is how simple Jesus' teaching on prayer is. Five short sentences: "Our Father in heaven"—acknowledge that God is a loving parent who governs from heaven... "hallowed be thy name"—acknowledge that God is holy...set above.

Both of these confessions provide perspective on the unholy fray that we muddle through here on earth. "Thy Kingdom come..." this pretty much sums up all of prayer. "Bring to the profanities of this earth your heavenly Kingdom— its peace, health, life, and love!"

The rest is even simpler: sustain us, forgive us, help us to forgive, save us.

So how do we pray? Simply, clearly, directly, acknowledging God's 1. sovereignty, 2. holiness, 3. sustenance, 4. forgiveness and 5. salvation.

Father

So

So this is but

The other day as I was doing my centering prayer here in the sanctuary— which is a silent contemplative prayer-- the normal distraction of traffic which I have gotten used to was replaced by the shouts of children. I lifted these children up, hoping they were passing through...but they did not. And then I remembered our church camp...And got to go over and finish the camp with the kids...

God's plans and ours are often quite far apart. And prayer shapes us in accepting

Now Abraham could not save Sodom. And Jesus had to drink the cup of crucifixion, saying, "Not my will but yours be done." I believe the peace and

This is the most basic of prayers.

I guess there were not 10 righteous ones in Sodom for the Lord destroyed it with balls of sulfur and fire in the next chapter.

Herein is an example of the great mystery of God's sovereignty and our prayer which pleads with God for mercy and salvation,

a prayer which is finally answered in the person of Christ alone.

I watched a documentary the other night called The English Surgeon about Henry Marsh, a brain surgeon who has been saving lives for free in the Ukraine for the last 15 years.

One of his patients, Marian, had a huge and very dangerous tumor on his brain. Marian prayed that most basic of prayers— salvation from trial... “I hope that God with Henry's hands will give me health and life.”

This is exactly what happened.

Abraham then pleads with the Lord, asking him

1. prayer as cry out for and opening self up to salvation
2. prayer as daily bread
3. prayer as means of forgiveness
4. prayer as preparation for times of trial