

Teaching Outline

Intro hook:

- Just a few nights ago we had our friends over for dinner, who have two little kids, a baby and a preschooler. The baby is just learning to talk. All night long, he was making noises that I could not decipher, but I was watching his parents teach him to speak. “Say, hi. Say, please. Say, thank you.” Teaching the child to talk *to* me.
- The preschooler, on the other hand, had a basic grasp of the English language and was learning to talk *with* me.
- At the very end of the night, she came up to me and — shy and bashful — asked me a question. And then sat there in a squirrely four-year-old kind of way, listening for my reply...
- Both children are going through a God-created process of learning how to communicate and commune with others.
- In a similar way, we are working through a four-stage progression in the life of prayer:
 1. Talking to God
 2. Talking with God
 3. Listening to God
 4. And being with God
- And while the spiritual journey is *not* linear, most of us learn to pray just like children. First, we learn the vocabulary and grammar of life with God. Say, Daddy. Say, mommy. Say, Our Father who is in heaven... To talk to God.
- But there comes a time when we desire a more personalized relationship to God. More grounded in the highs and lows of *our particular* life... so we begin, most of us intuitively, to talk *with* God. Just meaning, to tell him what’s on our mind.

Seam/interlude: Turn again in your Bibles to **Luke 11**... We see this progression — from talking to God to talking with God — in Jesus’ central teaching on prayer. We left off last Session in verse four; let’s pick it up in verse five...

Luke 11v5-13

5 Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

- This is a rabbinic form of teaching that NT scholars call “how much more.”
- It’s Jesus’ way of drawing attention to a point.
- His point is not that God is the grumpy neighbor with a “do-not-disturb” sign on his front door, but if you bang loud enough he’ll give you what you want; it’s, if the grumpy, begrudging neighbor will answer your request, how much more will our Father?
- Jesus goes on...

9 “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

- And then, notice, Jesus goes straight to the metaphor of a father and his child...

11 “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Progression:

- Do you see the progression?
- Jesus *starts* by teaching his disciples to talk *to* God — meaning, to pray a pre-made prayer. “When you pray, recite this: *Our Father who is in heaven...*”
- But he assumes his disciples will move on to talk *with* God... to come to our Father, with all we need and desire.
- This progression is kind of like learning to play music. I played in bands for years. And the first thing you do is learn basic music theory and scales and chords on your guitar. You have to learn to *play other people’s* music, before you can learn to *write your own* music.
- When you watch a savant like John Coltrane — he’s so mastered all the ins and outs of music, that now he’s just feeling his way into each song.

- In the same way, we begin to pray by learning the basics of life with God, but then we move onto just riffing in our conversation with our Father.
- Or what we are calling, *talking with God*.

Seam: Now, under this second category of talking with God, there are three sub-categories. They are:

Overview:

1. Gratitude — talking with God about what is *good* in your life and world
2. Lament — talking with God about what is *evil* in your life and world
3. Petition and Intercession — asking God to fulfill his promises to overcome evil with good.

Seam: A short word on each. First off, gratitude...

Gratitude — talking with God about what is good in your life and world:

- **Ignatius of Loyola**, the founder of the Jesuit Order, said the beginning point for this type of more interactive prayer is “to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits received.”
- He called ingratitude— “the failure to recognize the good things, the graces, and the gifts received. As such, [ingratitude] is the cause, beginning, and origin of all evil and sin.”
 - Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden; their sin was ultimately a failure to receive life as a gift, but rather, to take it as a right.
 - And while human rights are a thoroughly Christian concept; we must hold it in harmony with the fact that, ultimately, life is a *gift*.
- Therefore, gratitude isn’t just the beginning of prayer, it’s the heart and soul of our entire relationship to God.
- At the center of the Divine Dance we call the Trinity, is a generous, joyful, self-giving, others focused *love*.
- It is written, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.” (**John 3v16**) And of Jesus, “He gave himself for our sins.” (**Galatians 1v4**) The Father gave the Son and the Son gave his life and the Father and the Son together gave the Holy Spirit.
- Generosity is at the center of the Gospel and the inner nature of God himself.

- Therefore, gratitude is the primary way we relate to God.
- Paul writes that we are to be, “overflowing with thankfulness”. (**Colossians 2v7**)
- The Jesuit Priest Timothy Gallagher says this:
 - “Recognizing God’s loving gifts and recognizing God’s loving presence through them — summarized by the word “gratitude” — lies at the very heart of our entire relationship with God.”
- One way to measure your spiritual maturity is by your level of genuine, unforced thankfulness.
- It’s been said that to be a saint is to live from grateful joy; to see all of your life as a gift.
- Secondly...

Lament — talking with God about what is evil in your life and world:

- The honest truth is our life and world are both full of things that are *not* good, or beautiful, but are ugly and evil.
- What are we to do with all the pain and suffering we carry in our heart?
- Pray it!
- As **Pete Greig**, the founder of 24-7 Prayer would say, “Pray what you got!”
- If you have gratitude, pray that! Grief, pray that! Anger, pray that!
- It’s an open secret that many Christians find prayer boring; one reason for that is because they aren’t actually praying; they’re performing.
- We are so used to performing our life with other people; we edit our thoughts; to present a more polished image of ourselves to the world; in order to be loved, and not rejected, and succeed and not fail. It’s like we can’t help but carry that way of being over into our relationship to God.
- But C.S. Lewis said we are to lay before God what is in us, not what *ought* to be in us.
- Learning to pray is about learning to bring all we are to God, because he already knows *all* that’s inside you!
 - I think of **Psalms 139**: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me... you perceive my thoughts from afar... Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.” (**Psalms 139v1-4**)
- Talking honestly with God about our pain is a type of prayer called lament.
- It’s very rare in modern worship, but very common in ancient worship.

- Read the Psalms, the so-called “prayer book of the Bible.” Scholars tell us *two thirds* of the Psalms are lament! Read them — they are full of rage, anger, vengeance, jealousy, envy, doubt, suicidal ideation, etc. — and worse! Why would God put *that* in Scripture? Because we are full of rage, anger, vengeance, and more.
- One way of thinking about lament is as an emotionally healthy way of processing the pain of your life and world with God. Learning to complain to God. Because if we don’t complain to God, we’ll end up complaining to our spouse, or our friend group, or our boss, or the internet, etc. We’ll vent and rage and criticize and just leak emotional waste into the atmosphere.
- And another way of thinking about lament is a theological protest.
- Our generation is all about protest and speaking truth to power and the social media rant.
- What if we were to channel all that pent-up anger into prayer?
- The social activist **JT Thomas** calls this “pray-test” — and argues this kind of praying against evil and injustice does something both through us and *in* us...
- It’s a way of fighting with God, and against evil...
- As Ann Voskamp has said:
“Lament is a cry of belief in a good God, a God who has his ear to our hearts. A God who transfigures the ugly into beauty.”

Seam: Now we’re getting into the third category. Lament will naturally lead you into...

Petition and Intercession — asking God to fulfill his promises to overcome evil with good:

- Which are two sides of the same coin:
- Petition is when we *ask* God to do something on our behalf: God, help me get a job or make rent or know what to do in a tricky situation.
- Intercession is when we ask God to do something on someone *else’s* behalf.
- It’s a priestly work, standing before God on behalf of people and people on behalf of God.
- Intercession is a form of love. A way to carry one another’s pain into God’s healing light.
- And both petition and intercession are summarized by Jesus’ command to *ask*.
- **Paul Miller**, in his book ***A Praying Life***, writes:
 - “All of Jesus’ teaching on prayer in the Gospels can be summarized with one word: *ask*.”
 - Over and over again, Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given to you.”
 - He regularly says to people, “What do you want me to do for you?”

- Many of us have *thought* about a problem in our life many times; but we have never stopped to ask Jesus to do something about it.
- But the 19th century Baptist preacher **Charles Spurgeon** said, “Whether we like it or not, asking is the rule of the kingdom.”

Seam: *But the single most important thing Jesus teaches his disciples about asking is to not just to ask, but ask “in Jesus’ name...”*

“In Jesus’ name”

- For example, in a few chapters later in John, Jesus says, “I will do whatever you ask in my name...” (**John 14v13**)
- Most people put the tagline “in Jesus’ name” at the end of their prayer: “In Jesus’ name, amen.”
- But not *once* is it used that way in the NT.
- If it goes anywhere in a prayer, it should go at the *beginning*, not the end.
- Because it’s not a magic incantation you add to the end of your prayer to get what you want. Like the open sesame of the Kingdom of God.
- It’s a way of praying.
- There are two dimensions to asking “in Jesus’ name.”

1. The first is to invoke our status as those who are “in Christ.”

- The NT scholar **Larry Hurtado** put it this way:
 “To pray in Jesus’ name ... means that we enter into Jesus’ status in God’s favor, and invoke Jesus’ standing with God.”
- It means that when we come before our Father, we come not as beggars off the street, but as royal sons and daughters, adopted into the family through Christ — what the NT writer Paul calls “co-heirs with Christ.”
- We come in the name and authority of King Jesus with access to the full resources of the Kingdom.

2. The second is to pray in alignment with Christ.

- In the ancient world, a person’s name was a synonym for their nature or character.
- We ask “in Jesus’ name” when we ask for the kinds of things Jesus would ask for in a given situation. *That’s* the sacred alignment through which the miraculous power of God flows.

- This is why, if you pay close attention to the prayers of Scripture, be it from Moses in the OT or Paul in the New, they don't pray problems, they pray promises!
- They call on God to do what they know God *desires* to do!

Seam: *But to pray in Jesus' name, we must come to believe that our prayers actually make a difference in what does or does not happen.*

Prayers make a difference:

- The theologian **Walter Wink** said this beautifully:
 - "Intercessory prayer is spiritual defiance of what is in the way of what God has promised. Intercession visualizes an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the momentum of current forces. Prayer infuses the air of a time yet to be into the suffocating atmosphere of the present. History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. Even a small number of people, firmly committed to the new inevitability on which they have fixed their imaginations, can decisively affect the shape the future takes. These shapers of the future are the intercessors."
- Tragically, very few modern Christians actually believe this. That through prayer we can "decisively affect the shape the future takes."
- Much less think of prayer as "spiritual defiance."
- Few of us live with Jesus' worldview, what some theologians call a "warfare worldview," that sees humanity as besieged by evil forces, and Jesus as it's Savior come to liberate occupied territory with the Kingdom of God, and prayer as how we join Jesus in the fight.
- There is a deadly undercurrent of determinism in the modern church.
- Like the ancient Greeks, many believe we are trapped by the fates!
- Listen to the philosopher **Dallas Willard**:
 - "God's 'response' to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. ...of course this is not the biblical idea of prayer, nor is it the idea of people for whom prayer is a vital part of life."
- Think of the Lord's Prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

- Jesus assumes:
 1. That the Kingdom of God's will is *not* yet come and his will is not yet done, at least in full.
 2. That prayer actually makes a difference in what does — or does *not* — happen!
- Of course this raises all sorts of questions about the tension between God's power and good intentions — or what some call Sovereignty or Providence — and human free will.
- Is prayer something God is doing in me? Or something I am doing with God?
- Both.
- God is king of the world; but he's not a dictator. He hasn't totally taken his hands off the wheel, but he really has entrusted a level of management of the world to his sons and daughters, and prayer is one of the ways we steward our task as co-rulers with Jesus in his world.
- The Reformed theologian R.C. Sproul said it this way:
 - "The prayer of his people is one of the means he uses to bring things to pass in this world. So if you ask me whether prayer changes things, I answer with an unhesitating "Yes!"
- To pray is both a moral responsibility and a spiritual opportunity to partner with God to bend the arc of human history in the direction of his Kingdom.

Ending:

- But as we pray, we must never forget that...
- Whether we come to God with...
 - Gratitude
 - Or lament
 - Or petition and intercession...
- Through it all, God is forming us into the answers to our own prayers.
- Prayer is a way we ask God to act and do things only he can do in the world; and it is a way of giving God the space to do what only he can do in us.
- So, this coming week, may our anthem be: Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, and in our own heart, as it is in heaven.