



Prayer

Teaching Notes



PRACTICING THE WAY

Prayer | Part One: Talking to God

Teaching Outline

Intro hook:

- Growing up, my mother was a first generation follower of Jesus.
- When I was born, she was still learning how to pray.
- And when I was just a few years old, she was diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disorder, and began to go deaf.
- The pain of her loss was her portal from a superficial Christian spirituality to a deeper life with God.
- As her hearing was fading day by day, she began to rise early in the morning, to pray...
- And I just remember as a kid, no matter what time I got up, there she was, sitting in the arm-chair by the window, alone, in the quiet... in prayer.
- At the time, daily prayer, *for me*, was a duty and honestly, a bit of a drag. But it was clear to my young mind, she was experiencing something in prayer that I was *not*.
- For her, prayer was not a duty, but a delight.
- It was not until many years later, when I went through my own season of pain and loss, that I discovered the joy of prayer.

Seam: *But let's face it: for many of us prayer is still a duty.*

Experience:

We're all so busy, it's hard to find the time to pray, and when we do...

- It can be boring. And it's hard to focus. We get distracted by all the things on our to-do list for the day, or as the spiritual writer **Robert Mulholland** once said, spend our time just worrying in God's general direction.
- It can feel like talking to yourself, or reading a Christmas list to the Santa in the sky.
- So, we make excuses — I have young kids, or I have to go work, or whatever, etc. And we feel a tinge of guilt. Then we just pick up our phone.

- Prayer — for a lot of us — is like eating our vegetables; we know it's good for our health, but very few of us enjoy it.
- Let me *normalize* this for you: we live in one of the most difficult times in all of human history to pray.
 - The smartphone alone is a deathblow to prayer for our entire generation, not to mention: social media, the internet, digital streaming, entertainment, noise pollution, urbanization, secularization, and more.
- My point is, if you struggle to pray, you are not alone.
- As **St. Teresa of Ávila** used to say, when it come to prayer, we're all beginners.
- And yet, *prayer is the portal to life with God* — the life we all crave in the deepest part of our being, whether we identify it as a desire for God, or misidentify it as a desire for something else.

Seam/interlude: Thankfully, Jesus was full of wisdom on prayer. Turn in your Bibles to **Luke 11...** (Many people are beginning to read Scripture on their phones; and that's fine, but we recommend you carry a hardcopy Bible with you to each Session, and follow along. Luke 11...)

Luke 11:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.

- Pause for a minute.
- We are dropping into the middle of a much larger story. And in the literary design of Luke's biography of Jesus, this is a running theme...
- In chapter **5[v15-16]**, **Luke** writes...

“Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.”
- In **Luke 6[v12]**:

“One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God.”
- Or in **Luke 9[v28-29]**:

“[Jesus] took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray.”
- Here he is again, praying... Keep reading...

When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John

taught his disciples.”

Teach us to pray:

- This is a fascinating request: Jesus did all sorts of amazing things — but the disciples do not ask Jesus to teach them how to heal the sick, or to cast out demons, or perform miracles. They ask him to teach them how to pray.
- My theory is it's because living with Jesus 24/7, watching his daily prayer rhythm, they realized that Jesus' extraordinary *outer* life with people was the byproduct of his even-more-extraordinary inner life with God.
- They were smart enough to intuit that Jesus was experiencing something they were not in prayer; prayer wasn't a duty, but a delight. He really enjoyed his Father's company. In prayer Jesus was drinking from a deep well, and they wanted a taste of the water.
- So, right now, right where you are — I invite you to take a moment, and make the disciples' prayer your own. “Lord, teach us to pray.”

Seam: *And if you're ready to apprentice under Rabbi Jesus in his school of prayer, pay close attention to what Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, and how Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. A short word on each. First off, what...*

1. What Jesus teaches his disciples to pray

- Verse two:
 - *He said to them, “When you pray, say:*
 - *“Our Father in heaven,*
 - *hallowed be your name,*
 - *Your kingdom come.*
 - *May your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*
 - *Give us each day our daily bread.*
 - *Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.*
 - *And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.”*
- Protestants call this “the Lord's Prayer”; Catholics, “the Our Father.”

- And it's not just a liturgy — or a pre-made prayer; it's also a theology - or a theological orientation for prayer; it's a way of coming before God.
- A lot of people equate prayer with asking God for things. But while asking is a key part of prayer, there's still much more to prayer.
- Notice, Jesus does not ask our Father for anything until midway through the prayer.
- The entire first half is orientation.
- Let me point out four theological truths from the Lord's Prayer that are Jesus' framework for all prayer. For Jesus...

God is our Father

- Line *one*: "Our Father..." Or in Aramaic, *Abba*. What a child would call their dad.
- In Jesus' day, that was a revolutionary way to address God.
- The NT scholar **Joachim Jeremias** argues, "There is not a single example of the use of *abba*... as an address to God in the whole of Jewish literature."
- Yet it was Jesus' go-to name for God. He thought of God as his Father, *and*... he taught his apprentices to do the same.
- I know this is really hard for some of you due to difficult relationships with your human fathers.
- But for Jesus, what comes to mind when you think about God will make or *break* your prayer life.
- My friend **Jon Tyson from Pray NYC** put it this way:
- "Unless you break the stronghold of false images of God in your mind, you'll never be drawn to prayer—"
- For many of us, our journey into a deeper life of prayer must begin with the healing of our false images of who God is.
- If you think of God as an angry tyrant in the sky, mad at the world, waiting to lay into you... or the cosmic life coach there to make you happy, but who doesn't seem to deliver — you will not be drawn to prayer.
- *But*... if you think of God as your *father*... that's a whole other story.
- When I get home from work, my kids don't grovel at my feet and say, "Pastor Comer, welcome." They run up and give me a hug and immediately start telling me about their day or asking me for things — can we go see a movie? Can we eat ice cream tonight? Because they

know, for all my shortcomings as a dad, I have a welcoming heart and good intentions toward them.

- The first thing Jesus has to teach us about prayer is that the God we come before has a welcoming heart and good intentions toward us.
- The primary emotional word used for God in both the Old and New Testaments is [*rakum* in Hebrew] “compassionate,” and in Hebrew it’s referring to the feeling that a father or most specifically a *mother* has toward their infant child. That is God’s baseline emotional disposition toward you — compassion, delight, tender care. He’s our Father. Secondly, for Jesus...

2. God is as close as the air

- Line two: “Our Father, *in heaven*.” Read the footnote in your Bible, and you’ll read that while most copies we have of Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer are shorter, some ancient manuscripts add on the full version found in the other Gospels.
- Now, “heaven” is a tricky word, because in English, when most people read heaven, they think of a place that you go to when you die.
- But while there’s truth in that, in Greek, the word is *ouranos*. It’s actually plural, the heavens. More literally, it just means the air.
- Hear it this way: Our Father in the air.
- Think about it: the air is all around you, up against your skin, *inside* your body, in your *blood*.
- That’s how close the availability of God is.
- Jesus is teaching his apprentices that when we come to our Father in prayer, he’s not far away, but closer to us than we are to ourselves.
- Third, for Jesus...

3. The first goal of prayer is the worshipful enjoyment of our Father’s company.

- The next line is: “hallowed be your name.”
- That’s another tricky word to translate into English.
- Basically, to “hallow” means to rever and respect the holiness of God.
- And to be holy means to be unique and special and beautiful.
- To say God is holy is to say there is no other being in all the cosmos more radiant than God.
- The Presbyterian **Timothy Keller**, in his book *Prayer*, writes:

- “To hallow God’s name is to have a heart of grateful joy toward God — and even more, a wondrous sense of his beauty...
- When you start to pray — to commune with God — and you begin to enter into the inner life of the Father and the Son and the Spirit and share in their love and joy and peace... you realize, they radiate beauty...
- And as you are caught up in the beauty of God, you can’t help but desire for others around you to see God for who he really is.
- The Anglican theologian **N.T. Wright** translates “hallowed be your name,” this way:
 - “May you be worshiped by your whole creation; may the whole cosmos resound with your praise; may the whole world be freed from injustice, disfigurement, sin, and death.”
- Here is Jesus, in loving worship of his Father.
- Think about how different Jesus’ approach to prayer is from our own. Often, we come to God to get things from God that we feel we need to be happy... this is one of the reasons we tend to pray mostly when our career or relationships or life circumstances are under threat. And that’s fine, but it’s also a gentle sign from our own heart that, for most of us, we are still searching for happiness outside of God; for most of us, God himself has yet to become our happiness.
- But for Jesus, the first goal of prayer is just to enter into the beauty of God. And when you do that, you can’t help but desire the world around you to experience that same beauty.
- Finally, for Jesus...

4. Our prayers really do make a difference

- Jesus’ next line is: “Your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”
- Notice, Jesus assumes that his kingdom has *not* yet come and that his will is *not* yet done.
- In part, yes, but not in full.
- And he assumes that through prayer, we partner with Jesus to bend reality in the direction of our Father’s good intentions.
- That through prayer we drag the future age of the Kingdom of God *into the here and now*.

Hinge: Now, much more could be said about the Lord’s Prayer, but for now, think of how different this is from how many of us approach God...

1. We think of God as a grumpy dictator or cosmic vending machine, not our Father.
2. We think he’s far away in outer space, not as close as the air.

3. We think the main point of prayer is to get things from God (what Mullholand calls “symptom management,” not to delight in God himself.
 4. And we assume that what’s going to happen is going to happen, with or without our prayers, not, that prayer really makes a difference.
- No wonder we avoid prayer!

Seam: *So... that’s what Jesus teaches us to pray. But that can all sound overwhelming. Where do we start? Well, next, look at...*

2. How Jesus teaches us to pray.

- He does not *start* by teaching us to say whatever is on our mind...
- Nothing wrong with that, *at all*.
- But he *starts* by saying, “When you pray, say.”
- The NT scholar Scot McKnight argues that v2 can be translated “Whenever you pray, recite this...”
- That Jesus is tapping into the first century Jewish custom of praying memorized or pre-made prayers.
- This is what we mean by talking to God; praying pre-made prayers, that someone else, in this case Jesus, created for followers of Jesus across the world and down through history to pray.
- Let me give you a few examples of pre-made prayers:

1. The Lord’s Prayer is the most famous in the NT.

- It was prayed three times a day by the first Christians.

2. The Psalms. Which are called the “prayerbook” of the Bible.

- Because most of them were designed not to be read, but to be *prayed*.

3. Scripture itself.

- Many people find great life in praying Scripture back to God, calling on God to fulfill his promises.

4. Singing.

- There’s a power in prayer set to music. St. Augustine famously said, “To sing is to pray twice.”
- We don’t think of modern worship music as liturgical, but it is; it’s a pre-written prayer

we're all praying together, to God.

- But there is also formal...

5. Liturgy.

- In more historic streams of the church, or in *The Book of Common Prayer* or *The Liturgy of the Hours*.

6. And in today's world, Apps on your phone...

- ...that guide you through prayer as you drive to work or walk your dog in the park.

- These are all examples of talking to God with pre-made prayers.

- This type of prayer is very helpful in a number of situations:

1. When you're first learning to pray.

- Think of how children learn to write, by tracing letters and then words on a page, before they write on their own; this is how God wired the brain to grow — by copying. And this is a great way to learn how to pray.

2. When you're traveling and away from your daily prayer rhythm — you're on an airplane or in a hotel room. And you don't have the habit cues of your home life.

3. When you're exhausted and can't focus your mind very well, because you have a newborn, or you didn't sleep well the night before, or you're in a demanding season of school, or work, or caregiving.

4. When you're emotionally or physically unwell.

5. When you long for greater articulation in your prayer and you're searching for the right words to express your heart to God.

6. When you're in what St. John of the Cross called "the dark night of the soul" — a season where you don't feel God's presence like you used to.

- In these situations and more, this can be a really helpful way to pray.
- Now, there are limitations to this type of prayer. It can feel impersonal or inauthentic or intellectual.
- It's very important with pre-made prayer that we slow down and bring our heart's intention to it, less it become rote.
- But if we open our heart to God, we tap into a quiet power that is running underneath the surface of the Kingdom of God.
- We are praying with the communion of the saints, adding our voice to millions around the world and down through history.
- We are praying with articulation and theological weight and beauty.

- We are guarding our mind from distraction and guiding it into God's presence and purposes.
- These pre-made prayers are a kind of scaffolding for building a temple of the Holy Spirit in our body.

Seam: *So, this coming week, our Practice is to begin to develop a daily prayer rhythm. And to explore when and where and how to pray.*

Ending:

- We have all sorts of recommendations for you, but really there's no "right way" to pray.
- Ronald Rolheiser writes:
 - "There's no bad way to pray and no single starting point for prayer. The spiritual masters offer one nonnegotiable rule: You have to show up for prayer and show up regularly. Everything else is negotiable and respects your unique circumstances."
- So as you practice, remember, the ultimate aim of prayer is not to master a discipline. It's not to master anything; it's to *be* mastered, and as a result, be set free.
- The point of prayer is to open our heart to God, to offer deeper and deeper parts of our life and world to him to heal and save, and to move farther down the path toward what ancient Christians called "union" with God.
- Union is the answer to Jesus' own prayer for his apprentices in John 17:
 - "Father, just as you are *in* me and I am *in* you. May they also be *in* us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." (**John 17v21**)
- As the 14th century Englishwoman **Julian of Norwich** once said:
 - "The whole reason why we pray is to be *united* into the vision and contemplation of God to whom we pray."
- Whether you pray the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 or Gregorian chant.
- The whole point is just to live more and more of our days receiving and giving the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- And while we never "arrive," that is our ultimate aim; and prayer is the way.
- So, this coming week, as you begin, I can't think of a better place to start than the disciples' simple request: "Lord, teach us to pray."