

## Luke 11:1-13 How to Pray

Last week, when I preached about Mary and Martha I observed that the story was about paying attention to Jesus: Mary paid attention, while Martha attempted to co-opt Jesus into telling Mary *her* plans. I then talked about how that attention to Jesus was the pattern for our prayer: prayer is giving God attention, inviting him into your life and your home, rather than presenting God with the shopping list of your wants and needs.

The passage that follows directly on is much meatier in its teaching on prayer — not least because it is longer, and the disciples ask Jesus directly for help.

The disciples have seen Jesus praying and they recognise that his prayer is qualitatively different to theirs. How then should we pray? It is perhaps rather obvious but still worth stating that Jesus's disciples served two purposes: they were his eyewitnesses, so that after his ascension they could faithfully report everything they had seen and heard through three years or so of being with him night and day. But they were also people inspired by him, eager to learn, eager to be faithful in *the way*, even if they didn't fully understand.

Luke's version of the Lord's prayer is more compact than Matthew's. Furthermore, neither of them contains the doxology that we traditionally add — for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.

The pithiness of Luke's prayer gets right to the point. And the first point is that our attention is on God, rather than our coopting his attention to us. JB Phillips characterises this prayer as focused on seven 'p's of God: God's person, his place, his purity, his purposes, his provision, his pardon and his protection.

You will remember, because we said it ten minutes ago, that the two commandment summary of the law is love God, and then love your neighbour. The ten commandments begin with 4 commandments about our relationship with God before 6 about our relationships with our neighbours. So the Lord's prayer is resolutely God focused first, before turning to God's provision for us, pardon of us, and protection of us.

We know that one of the qualities of good friendship is being ready to listen. We also know that it's quite hard to do well — most of us are itching to share our own 'solutions' long before others have finished speaking. I see this especially in children, but I don't think adults are much better, just more conscious of looking rude.

So, the hard thing about prayer is giving God undivided attention. But the prayer starts:

Father — begins by affirming his relationship to us, and ours to him. It is a reminder that we are children of God.

Hallowed be your name. We are honouring God's name (and by extension the whole of God), and wishing that everyone honoured God. That's good. But for what reason would God *not* be honoured? Mostly because of the behaviour of the people who claim to worship him. This is certainly true of the Bible's stories: God's reputation falls into disrepute because his people prove themselves disreputable. This is also true now: safeguarding scandals have rocked all sorts of organisations, but none has been hurt so badly as the church — the wider world will not look past our collective sins to see that the God we worship is better than that. All sorts of people can be judgmental, or haughty or unfriendly. But if Christians are judgy, unfriendly or ungracious God's reputation is smeared. 'Hallowed be your name' is a group reminder that we want to enhance God's reputation by who we are ourselves.

'your kingdom come', is equally a prayer that God's rule will increase. God does not rule by compulsion but by influence and invitation. We are praying that more people would come more fully into God's guidance, wisdom and way. We long for a world ruled by God's gentleness more than human greed, violence or coldness. Again, this is hard to pray, because while we are very keen for everyone else to submit to God's will, it is an admission that you and I must submit to God's will too. And that can feel hard at times, even though we know that this *increases* our freedom.

Give us each day our daily bread is not about helplessness, and it's not particularly about bread either. We are seeking God's provision for our needs, physical, mental, spiritual, just like the Israelites who ate manna in the desert and had to trust for it daily. We are praying for current needs not wealth or large reserves of cash, however appealing that may be — that is a pretty good way of losing focus on God.

Forgive as we forgive — we are not forgiving others under the threat that we won't be forgiven ourselves. God's grace, which is God's free forgiveness always comes first and more perfectly than ours. But, because we know we are forgiven by God so we ourselves strive to forgive. We are imperfect and therefore our ability to forgive is imperfect. If we were perfect there would be nothing for God to forgive... so we will always fall short of the forgiving nature that we see in Jesus. The point is that we don't stop trying. That, in seeking God's pardon, and pardoning others we are praying constantly to be at peace with God and with our neighbour. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

And finally, lead us not into temptation. Perhaps it should simply say 'protect us from temptation.' God doesn't lead us into temptation, but God can protect us from temptation, through the power of the Spirit, and through hearts focused on him.

What immediately follows this brief prayer is a sort of parable about prayer. Even a begrudging friend will give you bread if you badger him, how much more readily will God give to those whom he loves? God doesn't just love a cheerful giver, God *is* a cheerful giver. If you ask God for good things, he won't give you bad things — because God is better than any earthly father, and because God is love.

That said, God is not a genie, ready to grant you your three most outrageous wishes. God is not a vending machine where you pay your prayer and get your reward. God is not your backup for poor planning or laziness. I don't know any stories of people doing no revision and yet passing their exams after a quick prayer. But I've heard of endless prayers for healing answered. All sorts of people who have prayed for peace and found it, any number of people who, in prayer, trusted themselves to God's guidance and were rewarded. And more than that — those who pray regularly and deeply know God in a way that can't be guessed, and experience peace and joy and purpose beyond the regular measure. But it starts with that difficult thing of making it less about you and me, and more about God.

When the disciples asked how to pray Jesus gave us all a distinctive prayer that focused on God's person, place, purity, purposes, provision, pardon and protection. He taught them about petition and God's joy in pleasing us. But he also wakes us up to the grown-up nature of prayer. Prayer remoulds us, transforms our desires, and widens our hearts. Other religions pray because they have been told to pray. We pray because we love God, and God loves us, and that is enough.

Amen.