

## “We Do Not Know How to Pray as We Ought”

Luke 11:1-13

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I do not know how to pray as I ought. There, I've said it. I feel better already.

There is a client in the Goodwill program named Elmer who is very sick these days. He's crippled by a birth defect that he's lived with for all this life. Every time I see him he asks me, “Did you read the Bible today?” I reminds me of my vow at my ordination to read the Bible daily. I don't. And I don't know how to pray as I ought. This is all the more painful for me, as I believe that I ought to be an example to this congregation. But alas, I am not. I am weak and a poor and undisciplined sinner.

I do not pray as I ought.

And so I take a cold comfort in the disciples' question, “Lord, teach us to pray.” I give thanks for the picture of the disciples that is presented in the Gospels. They are as incompetent in their piety as I am. Peter, in whose hands are place the very keys to the kingdom, denies that he knew the Lord. You know how that story goes.

I do not know how to pray as I ought. But neither did the disciples. And in their innocent question, they speak for the church as a whole. “Lord, teach us to pray.” And Jesus does not say, “What?! All those years in the synagogue and you don't know how to pray?” “What?! You are my followers and you don't know how to pray?” He would have been fully within his right as a rabbi to say such things. But he doesn't. The record shows that Jesus embraced the question and quietly taught them how to pray. He told them to pray like this:

*Father, hallowed be your name.*

*Your kingdom come.*

*Give us each day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*

*And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris writes:

*“Prayer was impossible for me for years. For a time I was so alienated from my religious heritage that I had the vainglorious notion that somehow, if I prayed, I would cause more harm than good. But when a priest I know asked me to pray for him—he'd been diagnosed with a serious illness—my ‘yes’ was immediate, sincere, and complete. I*

*wasn't sure that I could pray well and was shocked that the priest would trust me to do so. But I recognized that this was my pride speaking, the old perfectionism that has dogged me since I was a child. Well, or badly, that was beside the point. Of course, I could pray, and I did."*

When I was in high school I volunteered to counsel at summer camp near Bloomington, Illinois. East Bay Camp it was called, and it was on the East Bay of Lake Bloomington where we, in the old Evangelical and Reformed church, shared a camp site with the Presbyterians. At each meal, each of the camps—the Junior Highs, the Senior Highs, and the Juniors (fifth and sixth graders, the camp I was working with)—were assigned the responsibility to pray before the meal.

Somehow the responsibility to pray fell to me for one of the meals. It was later in the week, so I knew it was coming. I heard this wonderful woman, a leader in one of the other camps, pray for one of the earlier meals. Her prayers were so utterly simple. I asked her for a prayer. Were they written down? Did she have a book?

She said that she didn't have one. She just prayed. I said, "How do you do that?" And she said that she just went up to the microphone (one of those old silver microphones that looked like it came from the Arthur Godfrey Show; it stood in the middle of one of the rooms with no podium to hide behind) and began to speak to God.

I asked, "What do you say?" She answered, "I just go to the microphone and God gives me the words to say." And so I did that. I don't know what I said. I just spoke. Like a diver going to the edge of a diving board and jumping off, I spoke from my heart and it was one of the most moving moments of my life.

I just prayed. I wish I did that more often. Just pray. But things get in the way. My heart and hands get all busy with my private and public wars, skirmishes and battles, and I forget to turn to God in prayer. To take it to the Lord in prayer. And everything gets so bottled up. I think I have to solve all my own problems. That by my own hard work I need to make a difference.

Let me make yet another confession. I didn't want to engage in this last fund drive for our church. We worked to make it all look good. Fund for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, we called it. We made our list and presented it to the church, but I was not sure that it was going to work.

I tried not to say so publicly, but I was quite prepared to face the reality that we couldn't do it. I mean, we are a largely elderly congregation on, as we like to say, limited incomes. There were voices that called us gently to reconsider our goals; \$300,000 was unrealistic.

I believed with all my heart that these voices were absolutely right. But I also believed that we needed to be challenged to meet a difficult goal. We worked to engage a committee that would take on an impossible task. To raise money that just might not be there. And all this would do would be to make people feel guilty for not being able to contribute to a cause that they would otherwise see as good and right.

And all through this process, I did not pray as I ought. I just lost sleep. That's what one does when one does not pray. One loses sleep.

The mantra for this fund raising effort was "pray and consider." All we were asking people to do was pray and consider. Pray and consider. And you did. And we have raised, through the power of prayer and the Holy Spirit, over \$311,000.

I do not know how to pray as I ought. Lord, teach me to pray.

Teach me to believe that there is more to this effort we call church and life in Christ than my own feeble attempts to be a hard working Christian pastor. Teach me to believe that there are others in this journey with me and teach me to believe that You, Lord Jesus, have greater things for us to do than we can imagine.

Lord, teach us to pray, and there will be no obstacle too large for your great work.

Lord, teach us to pray.

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