



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"And When You Pray"
Lord, Teach Us How to Pray:
A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer

Matthew 6:5-9

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Introduction.

Perhaps the most famous scene in all of the 6 "Rocky" films is the one in the first movie where Rocky Balboa, the Italian Stallion, is trying to get in shape for his fight with Apollo Creed. He runs through the streets of Philadelphia, faster and faster, with the music pulsating to his feet on the pavement until at last he comes to the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. With a final burst of energy he runs up the steps, turns and raises his arms with a sign of victory.

It is a very famous scene. But if Rocky had kept going straight into the Philadelphia Art Museum and if he had turned right and proceeded to the third gallery, he would have seen hanging on the wall right next to the door leading to the fourth gallery a very small painting. It measures no more than 6 by 8 inches, and it depicts a mountain valley scene.

A friend of mine was looking at the painting once, and as he studied it one of the guards came over to him and said, "You know, I usually keep a magnifying glass with me to let people use when they look at that painting. After all, the man who painted it used one!" Without a magnifying glass, you simply could not see all there was to see in that painting.ⁱ

The Lord's Prayer is like that. It consists of just 52 words which can be recited in less than a minute. But despite its brevity, this prayer has proven to be of tremendous value to millions of people throughout the last 20 centuries. We would do well to take some time to study each phrase with a magnifying glass. There is more of God's truth in this prayer than appears at first glance.

I. Our Struggle With Prayer.

Most of us, if we are honest, will admit that we are pretty discouraged with our prayer lives. We feel defeated; we feel like a failure before we even begin. However, our struggle is a universal one, and all of us are in the same boat together.

Many of us don't know what to pray or how to pray. Others of us are scared to death to pray out loud. I remember being in high school, and in my youth group we had a practice of doing what was called a "circle prayer" in which we would go around the circle and each person would pray for something or someone. As the circle began, I frantically tried to think of something I could pray that I thought would sound okay, and just as I settled in on something, another kid would pray my prayer, and I would have to think of another one! It was always so uncomfortable.

And then there are others of us who have been disappointed in our prayers and the answers we have received. I remember an incident when I was 11 that brought me face to face with what I felt was unanswered prayer. My brother Bill was a Little League All Star baseball player, and his team was in the state playoffs. It was the bottom of the last inning, and his team was down by one run. The bases were loaded, there were 2 outs, and my brother was up to bat.

I climbed off the bleachers and went beneath them, and I prayed with all the faith I could muster that God would help him get a hit and win the game. I finished my prayer and looked through the fence

anxiously as my brother batted. "Strike 1. Strike 2. Strike 3. You're out!" I felt so defeated, and I wondered why God would let me down like that. It never occurred to me that the mother of the other team's pitcher was probably praying just as fervently that her son would strike my brother out!

Many of us have the wrong idea about prayer. We think of it as making a wish list, that God is a grandfatherly figure who is up in heaven to give us what we want. Others of us see prayer as a way to twist God's arm. Still other misconceptions lie in the fact that when some people think about prayer, they conjure up images of people in lotus positions engaging in trance-like activities. There is a great deal of ignorance about prayer today. We don't know what to do with the time, we don't have a clear idea of how to be effective in it, and there are not many people around today who have a lot of experience to serve as wise and godly guides for us.

You and I are living in a time when very few people pray more than perfunctory prayers, and the lifeline to God is a tenuous one for many believers. I believe we need to recover a hunger for prayer in our lives and in our church. I feel this need as much as you do, and that's why I felt called by God to offer a series of sermons this fall on the Lord's Prayer.

II. Jesus' Teaching On Prayer.

How can we begin to do this? Where do we start? If you want to learn how to do something right, go to an expert and learn from him. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples about prayer, and then He gave them the Lord's Prayer. In verse 5 we read that Jesus said, "*And when you pray...*" Our Lord assumed that His disciples would be praying people. I read somewhere, "The moment a spiritual babe is born into the new creation, it sends up a cry of helpless dependence toward the source of its birth." I like that. Prayer for the follower of Jesus Christ should be as natural and as regular and the cry of a baby for his/her mother, and our Lord assumed that we would pray.

A. The prayer Jesus condemned. As Christ began His teaching on prayer, He had some strong words to say about how *not* to pray. He said, "*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. They love to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full*" (Mt. 6:5). At first what Jesus says of the hypocrites sounds fine - "*they love to pray*", but unfortunately, it was not prayer they loved but the approval of other people and the recognition they received. They prayed for all the wrong reasons, and they prayed in all the wrong ways.

Several problems had crept into Jewish habits of prayer in Jesus' day, and prayer tended to be very formalized. The Jews had set times for prayer, and every devout Jew prayed at 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. Wherever you were, whatever you were doing, you were to stop and pray at these set times, much as Muslims continue to do today.

There was also a problem with certain forms of repetition which they used in saying the same prayers over and over. Hindu and Buddhist prayers are like this. They depend on the principle of repetition thinking that "much equals much." There are people today involved in Eastern religions who believe that the repetition of certain words, mantras, sounds or syllables can transform a person into the deity invoked or the reality recited. Jesus criticized this kind of prayer and said, "*They think they will be heard for their many words. Don't be like them*" (6:7,8).

The people of God in Jesus' day were not prayerless. Rather, they were overburdened with prayer, and they had the wrong idea about it. Christ brought release from having to make a special effort to guarantee access to God, and in the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, He turned prayer not into an arduous ordeal but into a child's conversation with his/her heavenly Father.

These problems with prayer which Jesus mentioned are problems you and I wrestle with still today. Many of us come to God for the wrong reasons, and when we pray out loud, we are more concerned with what other people think about our prayers than what God thinks of them. When we pray, are we talking to God from the heart, or are we trying to sound eloquent and spiritual?

B. The prayer Jesus commended. In verses 6-8 of our passage we read, *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen....And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."* Jesus said that when we pray, we should enter into our closet.

The word that is translated "closet" is the Greek word *tameion*. It was the word used for the supply-room in Palestinian farms that could be locked. In one sense it was the least likely place in the house for prayer, because it was used to store feed, small animals, tools, and other supplies. But that wasn't important. What was important was that the room could be locked. It could be private, and that was the key.

What Jesus was saying was that the special meeting place between God and His people didn't have to be the synagogue or the Holy of Holies in the temple. Rather, you and I can meet with God anywhere, even if it's just a room with a lock on it. In other words, Jesus was saying, "Shut the door against distraction and shut yourself in with God alone, and He will hear you." We're invited to talk to the Lord of the universe and freely open our hearts and minds to Him, our needs and cares, with the full assurance that He hears our prayers, and He wants to meet our needs.

III. Jesus' Model of Prayer.

Jesus actually didn't say a whole lot about prayer. In fact, He said more about money in the gospels than He did about prayer. However, what we see in the life of Christ was a life of prayer. Jesus didn't talk a lot about prayer. Instead, He prayed!

He prayed at His baptism.

He prayed in the wilderness.

He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus prayed on the cross, and at least 3 of the 7 words spoke from the cross were prayers.

Jesus prayed in the temple,

He prayed in the synagogue,

He prayed alone, and

He prayed with His disciples.

There were times when he would go off by Himself late at night or early in the morning to be alone in prayer. Before and after dealing with the crowds of people, He sought the solitude of personal prayer.

Jesus not only modeled out a life of prayer in His personal habits; He also gave them a model of prayer in His teaching, and we have that model in the Lord's Prayer. Great spiritual truths are compressed into the few, concise phrases of this prayer, and when you hold them up they shine like facets of a diamond in the glistening sun. This is the model Jesus gave His disciples when they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Conclusion.

Ten years ago today our world changed forever. When American Airlines flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, it sent a reverberation of catastrophe around the world and our lives have never been the same since. If Pearl Harbor marked my parent's generation before me, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. marked my generation,

then surely the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. will mark my children's generation for a lifetime.

In the three weeks after 9/11 church attendance soared in this country. People were searching for God, and there was renewed interest in prayer. People began to realize they didn't have the spiritual resources to cope with this great tragedy. So they prayed. As someone has said, "There are no atheists in foxholes. Everybody prays when the bullets are flying." But after about three weeks, attendance died down, and people went back to their lives as they were before.

But not everyone. Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham and a noted author and Bible teacher in her own right, recently said in an interview that September 11 was an alarm that penetrated her life in a profound way.ⁱⁱ She believed God was trying to get her attention through those awful events, much like the Lord did Isaiah in the year King Uzziah died, and she looked up with eyes of faith. What she saw was not just a fresh vision of Jesus Christ in the midst of our nation's great loss but also a vision of her own sin, and she spent several days on her face before God in prayer. The result was an authentic experience of personal revival, and in the decade since her life has been marked by an increased fervency in prayer.

On this 10th anniversary of September 11, perhaps God is calling each of us to a greater awareness of and commitment to prayer. With all that's gone on in the last 10 years – from Hurricane Katrina to the record-breaking floods; from wildfires, tornadoes, and droughts, to major snow storms; from the collapse of our financial institutions and the Great Recession to our inability to win the war in Afghanistan, don't you think we could use a little more prayer these days?

Maybe this can be a season when you and I will join together in seeking God as never before, and that we begin to do it through prayer. My hope, my prayer, is that our study of the Lord's Prayer will be the beginning of a transformation in this church and that it will take us all deeper into the heart of God and deeper into the heart and the practice of prayer. Make it so, Lord Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ Taken from a sermon by Trevor H.G. Smith, "Putting God First," preached in Stillman Valley, IL.

ⁱⁱ Anne Graham Lotz in *Christianity Today*, September 2011, p. 29.