

LORD, TEACH ME HOW TO PRAY

There are as many ways to pray as there are people praying, I think. We all have our own way of praying, our own favorite times and places to pray, our own understanding of what prayer is, our own preferred things we pray for, and our own beliefs about why God does or doesn't seem to respond to our prayers.

Children have their own unique understanding of prayer. I came across some examples of that.

A four-year-old boy, who hadn't said his prayers for several days, finally announced to his parents, "I want to say my prayers tonight. Won't God be surprised!"

Another young girl, when asked if she had said her prayers, assured her father that she did; but she added, "When I started praying I began thinking that God hears the same old stuff every night. So I told him the story of the Three Bears instead."

A boy who had been hoping and praying for a new pair of basketball sneakers went on strike at prayer time. When asked by his mother why he didn't want to say his prayers, he said. "It's no use. Art won't listen."

"Art who?" she asked.

He responded sadly, "You know. Art in heaven."

Finally, another youngster said, "It must get boring for God to hear the same old prayer every time. When God listens to me pray He must think, "Okay, Laura is talking to me. I know just what she's going to say."

It's cute to hear how children understand prayer; but many adults have an understanding that's a bit off-center, and they need Jesus to teach them how to pray, too. So for all of us adults who stumble along and whose prayer life can use some sprucing up, I want to ask Jesus, in the form of a prayer:

"Lord, teach us to pray, just as John [the Baptist] taught his disciples." Maybe, Lord, you can teach me how to surprise and delight God, perhaps by praying in a place I normally don't pray, such as when I'm sitting in traffic waiting for the light to change. Or when I'm in the shower, scrubbing behind my ears. Or at the gym, during my exercise workout.

Lord, teach me how to pray without using the same old words, without

asking for the same old things, or without hoping for the same old responses from you. And maybe teach me how to pray prayers of thanks and praise for the blessings you've already given me, rather than simply praying for more blessings.

Lord, teach me how to pray continually, faithfully, without ceasing, and to keep on praying even when it seems like you're not listening to what I'm saying and not giving me the things I pray for.

Lord, teach me how to pray in ways other than talking. Teach me how to pray instead by doing a lot more listening to you, by opening wide my heart and mind to the Spirit speaking to me, and by striving to discern what the Spirit is trying to communicate.

Lord, teach me the wisdom, gratitude and understanding of your not answering every prayer I pray. If I'm honest about it, I know that some, if not most of my prayers aren't very realistic or well thought out, because sometimes what I ask for when I pray is for two and two to not make four. And I know deep down inside me, Lord, that not every prayer I pray is inspired by Christian love and concern for others, but instead focuses on myself.

For example, I confess that I have prayed to win the Power Ball jackpot, and tried to bargain with you by saying if I won it I would surely share it with churches and charities and people in need. In other words, Lord, I know that not every prayer I offer is worthy of a response from you, even though you're gracious and loving enough to listen to it. So teach me to how to pray for your will to be done, rather than mine.

Lord, teach me the difference between praying and begging. Because to beg implies that the person I'm talking to isn't really interested in listening to me, so I have to come on strong to get their attention. But when I pray to my loving Heavenly Father, I can trust and I have no doubt that I am cared for and loved, and God is very much interested in listening to me.

So Lord, teach me the difference between begging for what I think is in my own best interest and well-being, and praying to discern what you know is in my own best interest and well-being. Because often those are two very different things and are diametrically opposed to each other. Yes, sometimes the things I pray for and believe are beneficial are the absolute worst things I could ask of you. But you know the difference, Lord. You know what I need, what is best for me, what I actually should be asking you for. So, please teach me so I will know, too.

Lord, teach me how to pray and then let it go. If something is on my mind that causes me to be anxious and afraid, teach me how to bring it to you in prayer and then let you do the worrying. Because it's not your will that I stay awake at

night, tossing and turning and not able to fall asleep. Help me remember, Lord, that you are going to be up and awake all night anyway, so I can leave my concerns and apprehensions in your capable and loving hands, if not for the rest of my life, then at least for the evening.

Lord, teach me how the act of prayer isn't intended to change you, but rather to change the one who prays. When I pray, the ultimate goal isn't to get you to agree with me and my point of view. It's not to get you to see things my way. Rather, prayer is intended to help me see things your way, to help me discern your point of view, and to help me align my will with your will.

And Lord, although Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you," I need to learn again how that will only happen when what I ask for in prayer is what your will is for me. If what I seek in prayer is what you want me to find, and if the door I knock upon in prayer is the door you're standing behind and hoping and waiting for me to enter, then my prayers will be answered. So Lord, teach me how to pray, and to continue praying, with persistence and trust. Enable me to continue to pray, not until you hear what I'm praying for, but until I'm the one who hears what your will for me is.

Lord, teach me the difference between praying for something I need, and praying for something I want, because sometimes I confuse the two. Help me to realize that every want of mine isn't a need; and it's more probable that you will respond favorably to a prayer for a need I have than to a prayer for a want I have.

Lord, teach me how to pray so that I can draw closer to you, not just during a tragedy in my life, but simply because of the gratitude and love I feel for you. I know that you do hear me when I'm vulnerable and feel helpless; but you also hear me when I'm thankful. When I'm joyful. When everything in my life is going well and there's nothing really to ask you for, but there is a whole lot to give thanks to you for.

Lord, teach me how to pray when sickness has affected my life. It's a natural instinct, when I'm suffering from a serious illness, to pray for healing. Because certainly I want to feel better and get better. But sometimes, for whatever reason, it takes a while for that to happen. Or it may never happen. And when I pray and pray and pray to you be healed of my ailment and it doesn't happen, I can get frustrated, angry and lose hope. And I can even begin to lose faith, and doubt that you love me and have heard my prayers. But you always answer my prayers, Lord. It's just that the healing you offer me might not be the kind of healing I had asked for and hoped for.

So Lord, when I'm sick and feeling miserable, teach me how to pray for

more than being cured of my sickness. Teach me how to pray with patience, trust and perseverance, no matter how long it takes before I'm made physically well, or even if I'm not made well at all. And teach me how to pray, not just to be healed, because you already know I want that; but to pray that I will feel closer to you than ever and sense your presence and love, even in the midst of my sickness, and even if I ultimately never experience physical healing.

My final prayer, dear Lord, is that my message this morning has helped teach those who have listened to it at least a little more about prayer and how to pray, so their prayer life might be strengthened, and their faith and love for you might be deepened. Amen.