

Lord Teach Us To Pray

Luke 11:1-13

Lord teach us to pray.

This could be seen as an odd request as there seem to be few things more natural to humanity than prayer. It is to be found in all cultures throughout history as people call on a power high than themselves. All of us have probably had times when we have prayed spontaneously, whether it be thanks for the beauty of creation or the birth of a child, or just the stress of renovations "How long o Lord!".

Whilst it may be natural this does not mean that that we do not need to be taught, and if we are honest few of us will be happy with the way that we pray and the amount that we pray, and the usual response to preaching on prayer is guilt!

It is interesting that the one thing that is recorded that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them was to pray. I might have asked how to do the trick with bread and fish, or walking on water, but the disciples knew Jesus well enough to know that the secret of all his life was prayer, it was a central part of who he was and all that he did. As a good Jew Jesus would have prayed at least 3 times a day and we know from the gospels accounts that when something important was coming up he prayed all the more. Jesus was a man of prayer, and his disciples knew they were in the presence of a master and that if they were to follow Jesus they needed to know some of his secrets, and we should be glad they did ask for now they have been recorded for us.

There is much that we could learn from what Jesus teaches here but as we consider the whole passage we see the importance of perspective and petitions, or attitude and asking. But this will only be of use if like the disciples want to learn to pray.

GETTING THE PERSPECTIVE RIGHT

Father in Heaven

The Lord's Prayer reminds us up front that we are talking to God, God in heaven, the creator of all that is, who deserves to be worshipped and served.

But the amazingly we are encouraged to dare to call this awesome, wonderful mighty God, our Father. This is particularly emphasised in Luke's account where we start abruptly with "Father."

Here we are very much in touch with the way in which Jesus prayed and the way in which Jesus thought of his relationship with God, a relationship of dependence and trust which we are invited by Jesus to join (cf Rom 8:15; Galatians 4:16).

If we can hold these two ideas in our minds at the same time, God in heaven, God our saving Father, we will make great strides in learning to pray. We will praise this wonderful God but also we will not be afraid to bring all our worries and concerns to him because as our Father he cares for us. (1Peter 5:7)

Hallowed by thy name, your kingdom come.

When we remember we are speaking to God we will also remember that the things of God should take priority in our prayer.

We pray that God's name would be hallowed. We perhaps are so used to this idea that we don't think what we are praying. This is not a warning against blasphemy, the misuse of God's name, it is praying that throughout the world people would recognise who God is, recognise his authority, his power, his holiness.

When I was at school we would often have the deputy principal telling off the school in assembly because the way in which certain students has misbehaved had damaged the good name of the school.

In the Old Testament God's good name was damaged, his name was not hallowed among the nations because of the failure of the People of God to live as they should. This has all too often been true in the Christian Church.

When we pray this line of the Lord's Prayer then it is not just a pious religious wish, we are praying that our lives would not bring dishonour to God but that we would play our part in God's name being honoured in our world and doing all that we can to bring about that end.

It is only natural then to pray for God's kingdom to come. This means for God's rule to be established, as the Matthew version expands it, that God's will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. Again this is not a nebulous idea, but it is praying that we would do God's will, that we would live truly as God's people.

In these two simple lines we are praying for the transformation of ourselves as well as the world. The more we look at the world from God's perspective the more fervently we would pray these well known words as we long for an end to the injustices, violence, exploitation, corruption and evil of this world and in our lives.

Putting Our Lives in his hands: Present Past & Future

The Lord's Prayer starts by getting our perspective right in relation to God, but it continues by correcting our perspective on ourselves as we put our whole lives before him, our present, our past and our future.

Daily Bread – Our Present

Firstly we pray for daily bread, the provision of our needs. In a peasant agrarian society the issues of where the next meal was coming from was always present, and this would have been a natural part of prayer. For us it may lead us to ponder all those for whom daily bread is still a struggle, the plural "us" forces us to look outside of ourselves, but also means bringing all the aspects of present to God.

Forgiveness of sins – Our Past

But we also pray about our past, we pray for forgiveness. When we say this prayer we are reminded that we are that we count God as our Father not because of any merit on our part, but simply because of his grace and forgiveness. We put our past before God and ask for his mercy..

But there is more here. In what has been described as "... one of the most frightening requests that can ever be put to God" (Dunn DJG), we pray that God would forgive us our sins as we forgive others. We invite God to use the same measure on us as we use on others.

We are reminding ourselves of the social, communal dimension of the Christian faith. We cannot pray this prayer and not be committed to good relationships with each other. The more we reflect on this the more we may need to ask for forgiveness from God and each other.

Deliver us from evil – Our Future

Finally we pray about our future. We pray for God to be with us, to lead us and strengthen us. Whilst we pray for God's kingdom to come we still live in this fallen and often evil world. Many struggle with what the future hold and this is something we should take to God. We commit our future to God in faith and trust.

The Lord's Prayer then is way that we recognise that all our life is in God's hands, our present, our past and our future.

A couple of years ago daughter came home from a Christian camp in the last school holidays she wore a bracelet with the letters F R O G on it. She explained to me that this stood for Fully Rely On God. This is really what the Lord's prayer teaches us. We should be FROGS as croaking this prayer will remind us each time we say it.

There is a well known preacher's story of a boy who as he finished his prayers suddenly said loudly "Dear God, I pray that I will get a new bicycle and an electric train for my birthday". Why are you praying so loudly?" asked his brother. 'God isn't deaf'. 'I know' replied the first boy 'but Grandma is'.

This story of a bold request to a family member leads us to the next part of Jesus' teaching. The Lord's Prayer may help us to get our perspective right, but prayer is also about bringing our needs to God and asking him to do something. Prayer is not simply transform our thinking, it is about bring real concrete problems before God.

Jesus tells a story of someone coming to the door at midnight asking for food. We can perhaps all understand the response of the owner of the house, "go away". This seems even more understandable when we realise that in those days everyone slept in the main room of the house.

But the original hearers would not have sided with the man in the bed, his behaviour would have been scandalous. People often arrived late to avoid travelling in the heat of the day, and to not be able to provide refreshments was not just a inconvenience it was an extreme embarrassment and a friend would be expected to help. To put into Australian thinking, you wouldn't do that to a mate.

Jesus goes on to point out that eventually this grumpy mate would do what he was asked if not more because of the boldness of the man at his door, if only to get some sleep and so that others would not get to hear of his ungracious behaviour.

But God is not a grumpy friend, or even a deaf Grandma, he wants to give and so we need ask. We need to recognise our need and boldly even shamelessly come to God and ask, seek, knock.

ASK THE FATHER

Having just used a negative image, God is not like a grumpy friend, returns to the positive image of a Father. We long to give good gifts to our children, we want to give them the best that we have, and so does God.

There is one thing I have learnt as a parent and it is never give a child something if they only ask for it once. You can save yourself if you wait for a week or so and see if they are still asking, then you know that they really want it.

Jesus is encouraging us to be persistent in asking for the things we want from God. Our requests will already have been shaped by the perspective of God's kingdom as we have seen in the Lord's prayer. It should also be shaped by the final sentence of our reading, God desires not only to fulfil our material needs but to give the best thing that he has, his presence with us. Once again Jesus is helping us to get things in perspective. Of all the things we could pray for and do pray, is the Holy Spirit something we boldly ask for a greater portion of? If we really want to learn to pray are we willing to ask for the very thing that Jesus asks us to?

Relationship

By using the intimate image of a father giving to a son Jesus is, of course returning to the first line of the Lord's Prayer, but deepening it, making it more personal, moving it beyond theological idea to a living reality. God wants us to think of him as our Father, yours, mine, who wants good things for us as our human fathers should.

It is perhaps important to develop this idea as it is so important to get this firmly fixed in our mind when we come to think about our attitude to God in prayer.

If you were to go to my parents old house in Parliament St you would have no doubt that my parents loved me and thought of me regularly. How would you know that? As you were led into the lounge room to a comfortable seat you would see above the fireplace, on the mantle piece many a picture of my sisters and me. All the school photos, the ones the bad hair cut, even the photo where I had my eyes closed. A graduation photo, a wedding photo and so on. For me it is an embarrassing room to be in especially the eyes closed photo but it is also a wonderful room as it reminds me of my parents' love.

As we say "Our Father" we should imagine entering into God's house, being invited in, through the front door into the living room, sitting in front of the fire and seeing that on the mantle piece above the fire there is our picture. That is how God wants us to approach him, our heavenly father who wants to give us good things.

All too often in prayer we come to God as if he was the grumpy friend who needed to be pushed into action, or the divine call centre just trying to get through. We should approach him boldly in prayer as our heavenly father of whom we are to ask, seek, knock. That is how Jesus taught us to pray to our Father.