

“Prayer”

Luke 11:1-13

When Pastor Charissa Prunty, the chaplain and spiritual care services coordinator at Southwest Hospital, preached here in May, she gifted me with a quite heavy copy of the “Africa Study Bible”.

Like any study Bible, it has illustrations for texts throughout the Bible. I’m going to share with you the illustration for today’s gospel text that is entitled “Prayer”.

One day a brother in the Lord said, "Prayer is magic". He was praying to encourage Christians to pray for Namibian youth who experienced unemployment and, a lack of good education. His concern was genuine, but his understanding of prayer was incorrect. Perhaps his thinking had been influenced by the Herero-Mbanderu tribe of Namibia, which sees prayer as the means of appeasing their ancestors by asking them to intercede to God for blessings such as good health, marriage, employment, or protection for their new cars.

What is Prayer? One of the simplest definitions is, "Prayer is talking to God." We speak to God as if we are children addressing our heavenly Father.

Some African traditional religions teach that prayer forces a god to obey. If he fails to answer the prayer of those who worship him, the god is shamed. Some Christians seem to have the same idea about our God. They believe that prayer is a talisman or a charm that forces God to do what they ask. But praying “in Jesus name” is not a set of magic words that forces God to do what we ask.

We must pray according to God's will. God promises to answer, "anything that pleases him". Even Paul received a "no" in response to his persistent prayer . . . 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 .. . "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Prayer is talking to God, not demanding our own way.

When we pray as God's obedient children, we ask expecting a "yes" (faith) while willingly accepting God's "no" (submission). Prayer is based on a relationship with our heavenly Father. When God says "no" or "wait," our prayer has not failed. We pray to communicate with God, not simply to receive what we ask for.

Why should we pray? The main reason to pray is because God told us to. He tells us to bring all our worries and cares to him. . . 1 Peter 5:7 . . . ⁷Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. He also tells us to "keep on asking" (Matthew 7:7-8). God created us to have fellowship and communication with him. Prayer brings us closer to him. We may not understand how prayer works, but we know it changes us.

Who should pray? Every believer should pray. Some Christians act as if prayer is like a charm that gives instant protection or provision when it is used. So, they pray only in times of trouble or when they need special help. Instead, we should "never stop praying" (1 Thessalonians 5:7).

Some newer believers think that only mature Christians know how to pray, and that prayer requires a special vocabulary. Instead, every believer enjoys the privilege of prayer. We do not have to use beautiful words in prayer – we simply talk to God. When we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit “helps us in our weakness” (Romans 8:26).

How should we pray? Because prayer is for every believer, we should learn how to pray. When the disciples asked Jesus about this, he taught them a model prayer (Luke 11:1-4). The “Lord’s Prayer” shows us the spirit of true prayer.

We pray in humble submission to the Father, “Father, may your name be kept holy. May your kingdom come soon” (Luke 11:2).

We pray with faith that God will provide for our needs. “Give us each day the food we need” (Luke 11:3).

We pray from a repentant heart and from a heart that forgives others. “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And don’t let us yield to temptation” (Luke 11:4).

As Christians, we pray in the Spirit, who intercedes for us (Romans 8:26). We also pray through Christ who “lives forever to intercede with God on our behalf” (Hebrews 7:25). Our prayers are powerful not because of how much faith we exert or how loudly we pray (common misunderstandings), but because Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede on our behalf. This is a great encouragement to pray, we do not have to rely on our own power when we pray.

One of the most profound ways to pray is with Scripture. Praying the Scriptures can help us store the Word of God in our hearts . . . Psalm 119:11 . . . “¹¹I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.”

The psalms give us language for praise and thanksgiving (Psalms 8; 145) for lament (Psalms 44; 74), for repentance (Psalms 6; 51), and even for handling anger against those who wrong us (Psalms 10, 109). The Bible speaks from God to us, and it also provides the words for us to speak to God. Sometimes prayer is sitting in quiet, seeking God's presence and listening for his voice. It is also telling God about our deepest hurts and emotions, like David did in the psalms he wrote.

One of the great strengths of African Christians is a reliance on prayer as the true solution to all needs. Christians who have had little political power, few economic resources, and no social status have learned to rely fully on God. In prayer, we voiced our complete submission and dependence on God. He ordained prayer as the gracious means of communication in which his people respond to him in humility, in earnestness, and with confidence. We are totally dependent upon God – our Creator, Sustainer, and our only hope of glory.

I'm grateful that Pastor Charissa gifted me with an African Study Bible from which that illustration came. My sermons and most of my illustrations are obviously from a white male middle class perspective. It's good for us to hear a different perspective occasionally.

The African illustrations teaches us that in traditional African religions, "prayer is magic" and was seen as "a way to appease their ancestors by asking them to intercede to God for blessings such as good health, marriage, employment, or protection of their new cars".

While we do not pray to our ancestors, we must confess that our prayers are often for our own needs like health, marriage, employment, or protection of our new cars. I must confess that when one of our parishioners picked me up to go to lunch in his brand new \$100,000 Corvette and handed me the little power box to drive, I started praying immediately.

I calmed down and we safely made it to the restaurant with heads turning the entire way. Heads don't turn when I'm driving my '08 Dakota.

A week later, as I was pulling into an empty Divinity parking lot during a steady rain in my Dakota, I noticed two bicycles at the base of the wing from our tower that comes down over our main entrance. I quickly parked, got out, and walked the two bikes into our fellowship hall entrance. I had them.

I walked back around to the wing and shouted, I won't use my exact language, but told them that I had their bikes and they needed to come down now. No response. It's raining and I'm getting wet. I yelled that I was calling the cops. They came walking across the roof and made their way down the wing. When they saw my size and my angry face, I could tell they were both praying for themselves.

I was wet and I was pissed. Thank God none of you have encountered me in that condition. In a not so pastoral voice, I got in their faces, quickly explaining to them all the reasons why they can never be on our roof again.

The two freshmen from Valley Forge, now sophomores, who live a few blocks away, were very apologetic and humble. One said, "I swear on my grandpa's grave that we'll never go up there again".

You don't have to be African to pray to your ancestors for help!

The other said, they were half brothers with the same mom, "please don't call the cops. I'm already in trouble with the cops".

I told them that they were coming with me to my office and that I would be calling their mom. I had them write down their names, address, and their mom's phone number.

They explained to me that they were part of a group of friends who in the summer meet here on the lawn, visit, and walk over to the basketball court to hang out. I told them I have no problem with that as long as they stay off the roof.

Their mom was not surprised by my phone call, she was at work, a single mom struggling to raise two teenage boys. I told her that if we need some work done on the church grounds, I may call her to send the boys over. She thanked me for calling her and not the cops.

As they rode their bikes past my window on their way home in the rain, they very well may have been thinking that prayer is magic and that it works to pray to your ancestors to intercede on your behalf.

What is prayer? Why should we pray? Who should pray? How should we pray?

No matter what color our skin – we are totally dependent on God – our Creator, Sustainer, and our only hope of glory.

May the peace of God . . .

#742 – What a Friend We Have in Jesus