

How Jesus Prayed, & How He Taught Us to Pray, Too Luke 11:1-13

Four features of the introduction to this account (11:1-2) are suggestive. First, Jesus does not just teach about prayer, he models an active prayer life: it was in seeing him pray that the disciples' interest was piqued. Secondly, it is striking that Jesus has not already taught them how to pray in some early lesson as part of a discipleship program, but has waited until they expressly asked him about it. Thirdly, it was apparently routine practice for counter-cultural or innovative religious teachers to offer their own particular slant on prayer: at least John the Baptizer did so, and Jesus' disciples expect him to do likewise. The logic is straightforward: given the conciseness of the prayer, and its role as intimate communication with God, it is here that core values come to sharpest expression. Fourthly, read aloud, the prayer takes less than a minute to repeat, yet presumably Jesus expects us to pray for more than a minute a day. What he offers, then, is not an actual prayer to repeat, but a distillation of the key features, headings, or core values in prayer.

Day 1: Luke 11:2a "Father"

We know that daily devotions – reading the Bible and praying – is a healthy spiritual practice, and vital to nurturing our walk with Christ. But for one reason or another, it is not reflexive or intuitive, at least not for most of us. For whatever reason, consistency in devotions is something we more naturally resist than embrace. And so, because it is good, and yet we are disinclined to it, we tend to motivate ourselves – and others try to motivate us – through a sense of obligation: How often have you told yourself, or admitted to others, "I *should* pray more"? And we join 'accountability groups' (whose very name highlights obligation), and hold each other 'accountable' for – among other things – having daily devotions. But often enough, the sense of obligation and the reporting entailed in accountability, further decrease motivation and increase a sense of failure.

Since Jesus' core message was about the kingdom or reign of God, he could have taught us to pray to God the King, and warned of the dangers of insurrection through prayerlessness. Or, since God gave the Law through Moses, he could have taught us to pray to God the Lawgiver, to underscore our legal and moral obligation to pray and read the Bible. Instead, he teaches us to come to God as caring Father, just as he did.

So this sets our attitude and shapes our motivation as we come to prayer. We come not to a task-master who lays troublesome burdens on us, or to a judge who waits to punish us for our failures and lapses. We come instead to a father who cares for us, who wants to talk to us, and enjoys it when we share our lives with him.

Day 2: Luke 11:2b "Hallowed be your name; your kingdom come"

The first item on this list is clearly the top priority: that God's name be honored by all, that his reign be fully realized in all of life. Both these clauses mean essentially the same thing (parallelism was a common feature of Old Testament and Jewish prayers, such as the Psalms, partly for emphasis, partly for poetic value). In teaching us to begin our prayers here, Jesus invites us to put God – his honor and his cause – first so that our prayer in turn shapes our daily priorities.

Since this is merely a rubric, we flesh it out in practice. Identify an aspect of society (such as corruption in politics, or poverty in the inner city or rural areas), a region of the world (such as North Africa), a dimension of world affairs (such as a current war or dictatorial regime), or an part of nature (such as the earthquake in Haiti), where God's power is not yet in full control, where his name is not honored, where his will is not currently carried out, where his reign is not yet fully realized, and begin your prayers there.

This requires a long-term focus: God's reign will not be fully realized until Jesus returns and time ends. Still, in various ways we can work for progress toward those ends, and we can have a part in it through prayer. In addition to whatever we accomplish through prayer, we honor God by putting him first.

Day 3: Luke 11:3 “Give us each day our daily bread”

While Jesus calls us to begin our prayers with God, he permits us quickly to turn to our own needs. At the same time, he invites us to set modest limits on these needs and expectations. Two limits, in fact: 'bread' and 'daily'. 'Bread': Paul sets the standard, “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (1 Tim 6:8). 'Daily': Jesus sets the standard, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt 6:34). So our daily prayer not only provides opportunity to remind God of what we need, it also supplies a reminder to us of the appropriate limits to our need: food, for today.

Of course, while that may seem a reasonable prayer goal for those suffering poverty or the sort of devastation in Port-au-Prince in the current crisis, it does not begin to make a dent in our perceived needs: a stable job in the current economic crisis, mortgage payments on a house, a late model car, health insurance, a 529 savings plan for our children's private-college education, contributions to a 401(k), and so forth. While nothing in this text condemns such financial goals or modest levels of consumption, this prayer provides two daily reminders: (a) that God cares about our daily necessities; and, (b) that we should be modest in any additional financial goals.

Day 4: Luke 11:4a “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us”

Just as the prayer for financial needs, this prayer also moves in two directions. On the one hand, it invites us to bring our sin, our guilt, and our shame to God for cleansing, day by day. It offers us hope: that no sin is final, no transgression is fatal, no offense is beyond forgiveness, no mistake is irredeemable. So we take comfort that God knows our frailties and our peccadilloes, and yet still offers us forgiveness and cleansing.

On the other hand, as we confess our sins, we simultaneously forgive all who are in our debt. Strikingly, Jesus does not *command* that we forgive, as though forgiveness can be commanded. He does not tell us that we *must* forgive, as though forgiveness can be mandated. Instead, his wording puts the forgiveness in our own mouths: in the very act of asking for forgiveness, we profess our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. And, of course, this implicitly expresses a simultaneous plea to God for grace not to make ourselves liars.

Who do you need to forgive as you seek forgiveness from God today?

Day 5: Luke 11:4b “And lead us not into temptation”

A few chapters earlier in this gospel, Luke reported that the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for forty days (4:1-2). Did the Holy Spirit lead Jesus into temptation? Not exactly. Luke guards against attributing the temptation to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit simply leads Jesus into the wilderness, whereas the temptation comes at the hands of Satan. The two roles differ: the Holy Spirit leads; Satan tempts.

So does Jesus intend to imply that if we do not offer this plea, God might actively lead us into temptation? Not likely. After guarding against such an interpretation in the account of Jesus’ temptation, it’s hardly likely that Luke intend to imply that here.

Instead, this is a common enough figure of speech (technically, *litotes*), emphatic expression of an affirmative by negating its opposite. To appeal, “lead us not into temptation,” is to plea for protection in the midst of temptation: “Keep us from falling into sin!” It is a conscious recognition – and the prayer, a continual self-reminder – that we are spiritually frail, susceptible to temptation, prone to succumbing. And so we plea for God to protect us; and in so doing, we remind ourselves to be vigilant.

Day 6: Luke 11:3,4a,4b,4c “us ... us ... us ... us”

Thus far, the preceding comments have all presupposed our use of this prayer guideline in personal devotions. Jesus appears to intend something else. Or, at least, something more. Because he does not invite us to pray: “Give *me* each day

my daily bread ... forgive me my sins, for I also forgive everyone who sins against me ... and lead me not into temptation.” Rather than the singular ‘I’ or ‘me’, his pronouns are consistently the plural ‘we’ and ‘us’. And so Jesus reminds us that prayer is not something that I do privately, between me and God. It is just as much something we do corporately, together before God. Our corporate life provides emotional support, so that when some are struggling, they can lean on others. We find social support from – and provide support to – others traveling the same path along counter-cultural values toward God. And through prayer together, we develop a common life in the presence of God.