

Lord, Teach Us To Pray

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 1992. Scripture Lesson: 2 Kings 5:1-15ab ("... in Israel"); Luke 11:1-13.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

There's hardly anything in the Christian faith which is more in danger of becoming "vain repetition" than the Lord's Prayer. I learned this prayer as a child along with "Now I lay me down to sleep...". When I was a boy, we repeated it every day in school. We repeat it every Sunday in our Worship Service. It's in great danger of becoming a vain repetition and that's one good reason for studying it (William Barclay).

Luke tells us that Jesus "was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray...'" Now there are many things I'd like Jesus to teach me how to do. I'd love to know how to walk on water. I'd love to know how to multiply loaves and fish so as to feed a lot of people without going over our grocery budget. And I'd love for Jesus to teach me how to heal. But nowhere in the Gospels do we ever hear the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to do any of those things. There's only one thing the disciples ever asked Jesus to teach them, according to the Gospels, and that was to pray (Marshall F. Mauney, *The Lutheran Series of the Protestant Hour*, 1963).

Their desire to pray must have grown out of seeing Jesus pray. It was observing Jesus pray that led them to want to learn how to pray. With that in mind, I want you to observe me as I pray the Lord's Prayer. I want each one of you to bow your heads and close your eyes as I pray.

Ted: "Our Father who art in heaven..."

God: Yes.

Ted: Don't interrupt me. I'm praying.

God: But you called me.

Ted: Called you? I didn't call you. I'm praying, "Our Father who art in heaven..."

God: There, you did it again.

Ted: Did what?

God: Called me. You said: "Our Father who art in Heaven." Here I am. What's on your mind?

Ted: But I didn't mean anything by it. I was, ~~you know~~, just saying my prayers. I always say the Lord's Prayer. It makes me feel good; kind of like getting a duty done.

God: All right, go on.

Ted: "Hallowed be Thy name..."

God: Hold it. What did you mean by that?

Ted: By what?

God: By "hallowed be Thy name?"

Ted: It means... it means... Good grief, I don't know what it means. How should I know? It's just part of the prayer. By the way, what ~~does~~ it mean?

God: It means honored, holy, wonderful.

Ted: Hey, that makes sense. I never thought what "hallowed" meant before. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

God: Do you really mean that?

Ted: Sure, why not?

God: What are you doing about it?

Ted: Doing? Nothing, I guess. I just think it would be kind of neat if you got control of everything down here like you have up there.

God: Yes, but have I got control of you?

Ted: Well, I'm a minister?

God: That's not what I asked you. What about that sacrilegious streak you have? And nobody knows when you're serious and when you're kidding. You know, sometimes that goes well beyond the bonds of propriety. And your temper. Remember that time you got so angry at your wife that you took your wallet out, threw it on the floor, and started jumping up and down on it... and your kids were looking on afraid that you'd gone crazy?

Ted: Stop picking on me! I'm no worse than a lot of church members.

God: Excuse me! I thought you were praying for my will to be done. If that's to happen it will have to start with the ones who are praying for it. Like you, for example.

Ted: Oh, all right. I guess I do have some hang-ups and now that You mention it, I could probably name some others.

God: So could I!

Ted: I haven't thought about it very much until now. But I really would like to cut out some of those things. I would like to, you know, be really free.

God: Good! Now we're getting somewhere. We'll work together, you and I. Some victories can truly be won. I'm proud of you.

Ted: Look, Lord. I need to finish up here. This is taking a lot longer than it usually does. "Give us this day our daily bread."

God: You need to cut out the bread. You're overweight as it is.

Ted: Hey, wait a minute! What is this, "Criticize Ted, day?" Here I was doing my religious duty, repeating the Lord's Prayer like I do every day, and all of a sudden You break in and remind me of all my hang-ups (pause). But you're right. And, besides, how can I pray for *our* daily bread without praying, as well, for those millions of Somalians who have no bread. And how can I pray for them unless I do something for them... like support with my tithes and offerings missionaries and Christian agriculturalists?

God: Now I think you're ^{beginning} to understand. This prayer doesn't have to be a vain repetition does it? Praying this prayer can be a dangerous thing. You could wind up changed, ~~you know~~. That's what I'm trying to get across to you. You called Me, and here I am. It's too late to stop now. Keep praying, I'm interested in the next part of your prayer... (pause) well, go on.

Ted: I'm scared to.

God: Scared? Of what?

Ted: I know what you'll say.

God: Try me and see.

Ted: "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

God: What about Saddam Hussein?

Ted: Ah, come on Lord, you're getting political.

God: Well, I thought you wanted *my* kingdom to come and *my* will to be done. I want to save Hussein. I want him to trust in Christ.

Ted: But Hussein is different. I mean, look at what he's done. He's used poison gas on the Kurds. He's persecuted fellow Christians in Iraq. He's trying to wipe out the Shi'ite Muslims in Southern Iraq. He's stolen billions of dollars from Kuwait. He's a tyrant in his own country. I'll feel better as soon as we get even with him. Boy, I hope we really let him have it. He'll wish he never did anybody any harm.

God: But what about your prayer?

Ted: That prayer has nothing to do with really bad people like Hussein.

God: Oh, I see! But remember, Vengeance is mine. I will repay.

Ted: Yea! But you're so slow to anger and so plenteous in mercy. That's no way to deal with someone like Hussein.

God: Forgive Hussein as I have forgiven you. Then the hate and sin will be his problems and not yours.

Ted: But Lord, we can't forgive him.

God: Then I can't forgive you.

Ted: (Long pause). You're right. You always are. And, more than I want revenge on our enemies, I want to be right with You (pause) (sigh) All right! All right! Forgive me and all us Christians and us Americans for our debts as we forgive our debtors. All of them. Help us to do what will further your will and your kingdom on earth. And help him to do what's right. He's bound to be awfully miserable. Anybody who goes around doing the things he's done has to feel miserable. Some way, somehow, point him to Christ.

God: There now! It's not as easy as you thought to pray this prayer is it? But go on. You're not through with your prayer yet.

Ted: Oh, all right. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

God: Good! Good! I'll do that. Just don't put yourself in a place where you can be tempted. You can't go places and do things and look at things which you know will lead you down the slippery slope into sin. That's what you usually do, ~~you know~~. You get yourself into trouble and then you use me for an escape hatch.

Ted: I don't understand.

God: Don't act stupid, Atkinson. You know very well what I'm talking about. You've done it lots of times. You get into bad situations, you get into trouble and then you come running to me. "Lord, help me out of this mess, and I promise You I'll never do it again."

Ted: Yes, and I'm ashamed, Lord. I really am. Keep me from doing this. "Lead us... my wife, my ^{sons} kids and my parishioners, not into temptation, but deliver us all from evil."

God: I will, but you must stay close to me. Now... go ahead and finish your prayer.

Ted: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

God: Do you know what would bring Me glory? What would really make Me happy?

Ted: I'm not sure, but I'd like to know. I really do want to please you. I can see what a mess we can make of our lives and the lives of others. And I can see how great it would be to really listen to what you have to say to me in your Word and then to follow Christ every day.

God: You just ^{answered} ~~answered~~ the question.

Ted: I did?

God: Yes. The thing that would bring Me glory is to have people like you, your family and your parishioners truly love me. And I can see that beginning to happen. There's no telling what you, your family and your church could do for my kingdom and glory if you do it in *my* power and not your own.

Well! You can open your eyes now. Hopefully you won't think this has been sacrilegious. I hope it will help us to see how life changing it can be to pray the Lord's Prayer. It could really change us as individuals and as a church. It could really change the whole world.

Do your children know this prayer? We can no longer assume that everybody knows this prayer. Parents, and not the government, have the responsibility to teach it to our children, just as Jesus taught his disciples. This week I'm going to get out my old Childrens' Catechism and go over the Lord's Prayer each night with my sons. I want them to pray this prayer until, by God's grace, it becomes a prayer of the heart.

I'm also going to let this prayer be the model for my prayers this week and I'd encourage you to do the same. I believe we could all enrich our prayer-life by committing this prayer to memory and by pondering the meaning of the words. And when we meditate on these words they can help us to shape the content of all the rest of our prayers.

What better way to begin again the habit of prayer that may have fallen by the wayside than to use this prayer. Christ assumes that all his disciples will pray. "We cannot be Christians without prayer" (Luther). God is waiting to hear from us. Do we really believe that he's waiting to respond?

Let us pray: Lord, teach us to pray.