

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

sermon on prayer

He was a pastor I looked up to. I knew him for over fifty years, a spiritual and professional mentor. That's why I was shocked when he confided in me. He said, "Prayer is important as a pastor. But prayer is the biggest struggle I have." He said, "I confess that it is difficult for me to maintain a consistent prayer life. I wonder if my prayer does any good at all."

Prayer does not come naturally for most of us. And sometimes we wonder if our praying does any good.

We know prayer is supposed to be a dialogue, but often it feels like a monologue. There is nothing worse than trying to talk with someone who won't talk back.

We do not like to admit it, but usually what we are really wondering about prayer is, is it working? Am I doing it correctly? Do my prayers matter?

Sometimes, to be honest, what we are wondering about prayer is: “How can I pray so God will give me what I want?” Like the little boy who was asked if he said his prayers every night. He replied, “No, not every night because some nights I don’t need anything.”

Prayer is not about getting what we want. Neither is prayer about the particular words we use or the way we pray or the length of time we spend praying. Prayer is about getting acquainted. Prayer is about building a relationship.

Prayer is about showing God you are taking your relationship with God seriously. Prayer is about not just speaking to God but listening to God. (For me, it sure is hard to hear God’s voice when I have already decided what I want God to say.)

Martin Luther had a legendary prayer life. Luther once said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.”

Luther taught that prayer was the same as a child and parent having an intimate conversation. He taught that prayer was our essential duty. God commands it and God promises to hear it. Therefore, Luther said, prayer is not some burdensome ritual to win God's favor, but prayer is initiated by God, an invitation from God.

I have discovered that there are three kinds of praying. Grudge praying, duty praying and thanksgiving praying. Grudge praying says, "I have to pray...." Duty praying says, "I ought to pray...." And thanksgiving praying says, "I want to pray."

Have to pray, ought to pray, want to pray. Which is it for you? Thanksgiving praying is the way we open the gates to the heart of God.

There is a story about a PhD student from Princeton walking into Albert Einstein's office and asking him, "What is there left in the world for original dissertation research?" To which Einstein

responded, “Find out about prayer.”

Einstein wasn't the only person who was curious about prayer. Jesus taught about prayer to his disciples. The disciples wanted to know how to pray. It is the only time in the Bible where one person clearly teaches another person how to pray. And all because of the request from the disciples.

The Bible says, Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Apparently, the way Jesus prayed was so distinct from the way they prayed that they said, “Teach us how to pray the way you pray.”

Before Jesus ever fed the multitudes, he prayed. Before he selected his disciples, he prayed. Before he calmed the storm on the sea of Galilee, he took time to pray. The results of his prayers were so amazing, that the disciples asked, “Lord, teach us to pray like that.”

If you are struggling with prayer, ask Jesus to show you how. He will respond. Make that request part of your very prayer to him.

Many of us approach prayer as the way to tell God what we need. But prayer is not about getting something *from* God, but about getting closer *to* God. As if God is saying to us, “Don’t bring me your shopping list. I already know what is on it. We’ll deal with that later. Bring me your heart,” God says. “Bring me your love, bring me your undivided attention.”

Prayer is not mainly about getting things *from* the Lord, it is about spending time *with* the Lord.

We have a young woman in our church who has a boyfriend named Michael. Michael has, as they say, issues. He has issues. He is angry. That’s a nice way of saying it. The truth is Michael is consumed by anger and rage.

The parents of Michael’s girlfriend told me about this situation. They felt helpless and were, naturally, concerned for their daughter and

this relationship. They also admitted that since she lived far away, they felt powerless.

I did not agree with them. I told them they were not powerless. They can pray. There is no greater power than prayer. Pray and pray not just for your daughter, but especially pray for Michael, that his rage subsides, that he comes to grips with his anger.

Well, the parents of Michael's girlfriend are fantastic praying members of our church. They dedicated themselves to praying for Michael, morning and night, every day. This was over two years ago.

Their continuous prayers eventually broke through the clutter of Michael's mind and spirit, bringing a dramatic transformation that left Michael with a heart full of light, love and peace.

All four of them attended Easter worship services this Spring. It was my first time to meet Michael and he was delightful, an

impressive, caring young man.
Those were prayers of
transformation.

Did you know that there is a
prayer called the “I Don’t Know
Prayer?” It is very spiritual. You
just go off somewhere quiet and
hidden and you walk right up to
God and you say, “I don’t know.”

I don’t know where to go from
here.

I don’t know what is happening or
why this is happening.

I don’t know how to process this.

I don’t know what to do with these
emotions.

I don’t know how to handle this
situation.

It covers a lot of “I don’t knows.”

And then, with whatever dusty
little sand grain of faith you have
left, you say, “I don’t know...but
you know.”

And you leave it there. God most certainly hears that prayer.

May you be a praying person.

May we be a praying church.

Amen.