

Lenten Prayer
Matthew 6:5-15
March 8, 2020

You might think that I would be an expert at praying. I'm a pastor, after all. I've been ordained for 20 years, a baptized member of a Presbyterian church for 33 years, if my math is right, and growing up in a church for another six or seven years before I was baptized. You might think my prayers are extra holy, because after all, I'm a professional. You might think that I'm comfortable praying in public, which is precisely what the Matthew passage warns against.

You would be wrong on the first two guesses and right on the last one. I don't think I'm particularly good at praying. It occurs to me too late in a crisis, I usually pray only when I'm doing something else, like walking the dog or washing dishes or ironing shirts, and I often am confronted with situations where I don't even know what to pray for. I put those in our weekly prayers often, you may have noticed. So, no. I'm not particularly good at praying, at least in my estimation. I know a ton of people who are more disciplined and more faithful and more discerning in their prayers. Nor are my prayers more holy than yours, nor more effective. You praying for your loved one works the same as me praying for them. Except that when I pray for them, it has the additional bonus of showing care and love for you *and* your person. But anyone can do that, too, pray for someone else. On the third point, despite Jesus's warnings in Matthew, I am indeed pretty comfortable with praying in public. That comes from doing it a lot.

Now that I've exposed myself as quite likely a prayer fraud, let's think about what it is I'm measuring myself against, the classic picture we have of someone praying. I typically picture someone sitting alone, in the quiet, with no clutter around them, eyes closed, hands folded, some sort of pious look on their face. That may work for you, and if it does, I wish you'd let me know how you do it. I simply can't manage a prayer time like that. My mind drifts off to my grocery list, at best. At worst, I fall asleep right there with my hands folded.

So thinking of prayer as a spiritual discipline makes me feel like a failure. It's just not something I do in a disciplined way. So I thought maybe some of you were in the same spot. And that it might be worth looking at prayer again, and talking about different ways and approaches to prayer. Some of this are things we talked about a couple of years ago, when we did that sermon series on prayer, and hung the clothesline outside with our prayers on it. But I figure it can't hurt to have a short review session.

Along with fasting, prayer is the most common spiritual discipline mentioned in Scripture. We have examples from both Old and New Testaments of people praying, both privately and publicly. Fasting and prayer are often partnered together, as they each re-inforce the other and strengthen each other.

First, let's look at the types of prayers that we pray. There are several kinds, and we all practice all of them, in varying combinations.

Here's the list, then we'll look at each one: praise, thanksgiving, confession, petition and intercession. Lots of fancy words that express pretty simple human emotions toward God. Prayers of praise are praising God for who God is—not for what God does or has done for us, but praising God because of who God is. It might also be called a prayer of adoration. Here's an example from Psalm 47 (vs 2): "For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth." Or, a more familiar one from our Matthew passage: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed (or holy) be your name." Praise and adoration are fundamentally about God. We aren't telling God anything when we pray this way, as much as we are telling ourselves what kind of God it is that we are praying to. We need the reminders and the descriptions of our God.

Prayers of thanksgiving are common enough, I hope. We are thankful when we feel that our prayers have been answered, when we recognize what God has done for us, when we see God at work in the world. Again, from the Psalms, "I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving" (Psalm 69:30). Thanking God for our everyday blessings, and for those things that are extraordinary, becomes more ingrained in us as we pray more and more. We begin to see God's hand at work everywhere, and we are grateful.

A confession prayer can come anywhere, anytime. It isn't one of our favorite things to pray, but it is necessary. We pray together each week a prayer that represents our sins as individuals and as a community of faith. Again in the Psalms, this time from Psalm 51, a psalm traditionally attributed to David, after his violation of Bathsheba: For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. And, again from the Lord's Prayer, "forgive us our debts." Confession, as I should say more often, should really be a celebration of our freedom to be honest before God. Yes, it is about us and our sins, but it is fundamentally about God and God's forgiveness.

Prayers of petition are the ones we ask for ourselves. We ask God to provide for our needs, our wants, our desires, our dreams. An Old Testament

example is Hannah, praying year after year for God to give her a son. Eventually that prayer was answered with the birth of Samuel. A prayer of petition demonstrates our trust in God's faithfulness, even in the face of repeated disappointments.

And finally, prayers of intercession. These are just like prayers of petition, only for other people instead of for ourselves. Each week, we speak the names of those who need God's extra healing and care. We pray as often, and for as long, as these people need our prayers. And being on the receiving end of prayers of intercession, as our family has been just this week, is a blessing that is beyond my understanding and explanation. These prayers of intercession are important for both the one praying and the one being prayed for.

These five kinds of prayer are fairly straightforward. To some extent, I think each of us practices each of these kinds of prayer. It's the "how" of prayer that trips me up, though, and we haven't really talked about that. Prayer, of course, is the communication of a relationship. It is the conversation between us and God. As a conversation, it must include listening and speaking on the part of both parties—the human and the divine.

We speak with our voices, we speak in writings, we speak in conversations with friends and families. We think prayers with words, and we feel prayers without words. One of the Scriptures that I cling to when things are difficult is Romans 8.26: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words." We too, have sighs that are too deep for words, and God hears those sighs, as well as our cries and our screams. Speaking a prayer does not require fancy words or complete sentences or correct grammar. It may be quiet or noisy, out loud or internal, written down or expressed in art, conscious or unconscious. There are as many ways to speak our prayers as there are to express ourselves as human beings.

Now, listening—how do we do that, when God doesn't speak to us in the conventional way? We can't listen with our ears to a voice that doesn't make any sound. We listen in various ways—in the words of Scripture, in our intuition, in our feelings, in our everyday activities. God provides times and places for us to communicate in prayer; we just have to look for them and be open to them.

Prayer is the foundation of our relationship with God, and it requires practice: practice speaking and practice listening. Other than that, it requires no special training or skills. But to think of prayer specifically as a spiritual discipline, like we talked about with fasting last week, how might we take on prayer as a

discipline, for Lent or for any other time? Discipline seems to imply that we make time to pray every day. We've already said that prayer can take different forms and different contents, so I'm not saying that you have to clear an hour on your calendar first thing each morning, though if you can do that, more power to you. But to make time to pray intentionally rather than casually, to make a habit of including all the kinds of prayer we talked about: adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, and intercession. It would be a good idea just to make a little list every day, one prayer in each of those categories. Try that for a week, and I think it will surprise you...surprise me...how much we really are praying, and how easy it is to think of things in each of those categories. And if it isn't easy, to work on the habit of praying for different things than what we're used to.

There's no such thing as an expert in prayer. There's no gradebook or checklist, despite me telling you that making a checklist is a good idea. The fundamental idea of prayer is to strengthen the relationship you have with God, through speaking and through listening, no matter what those look like. We pray to God because we trust in the one to whom we pray.