**The Sermon on the Mount**

**Sunday May 27, 2018**

**“The Lord’s Prayer” (Matthew 6:1-18)**

**1. Introduction: *Reciting the Lord’s Prayer***.

Two friends were talking about religion one day. The first challenged the other, “If you are so religious, let's hear you recite the Lord's Prayer. I bet you $10 you can't.”

The second responded, “Now I lay my down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.”

The first pulled out his wallet and gave his friend a ten-dollar bill, muttering, “I didn't think you could do it!” ([www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-illustrations/4888/the-lords-prayer](http://www.sermonsearch.com/sermon-illustrations/4888/the-lords-prayer)).

This humorous little story illustrates that the Lord’s Prayer may not be as well known as we think it is. Both fellows in the story were painfully unaware that what was recited was not the Lord’s Prayer, but a popular bedtime prayer that many of us learned as children. I remember learning and praying this little prayer as a child but as I read this prayer now, I’m struck by its rather morbid tone. “And if I die before I wake” seems to be hardly the kind of comforting prayer for a child’s bedtime routine. And yet many of us recited this by rote night after night without giving it much thought.

Even the real Lord’s Prayer can be recited without giving it much thought. This seems to be the problem with a great many things we do, spiritual or otherwise. All to easily we can slip into autopilot and simply go through the motions. Jesus challenges us once more to get to the heart of the matter and to reflect on what we are doing and why we are doing it. Even the good things that we do, like prayer and charitable work, can be twisted into bad things if our motives for doing them are wrong.

**2. Jesus’ Warning about the Spiritual Disciplines**

Last Sunday we reflected on Jesus’ fulfilment of the Old Testament Law and his challenge to his disciples to seek a *better righteousness* than that of the scribes and the Pharisees (5:20). In that context the *better righteousness* embraced the *heart* rather than the *letter* of the Law*.* For example, the letter of the Law prohibits *murder*, but Jesus gets to the heart of the matter by addressing the problem of the *anger* inside of us that manifests itself in negative ways toward others. In this way, Jesus was addressing the problem of a religious observance that focuses on the minutiae and rigorously follows the rules but misses the bigger picture. Jesus illustrated this notion when he was asked what was the greatest commandment. Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’This is the first and greatest commandment.And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:36-40).

In this morning’s Gospel lesson Jesus applies his discussion of the *better righteousness* to the spiritual disciplines of charitable giving, praying and fasting. While he concentrated on these three, his words can be applied to a host of spiritual practices that we may engage in. His challenge to each one of us is to be mindful of the reasons behind our actions because our aims for doing them may be wrong.

The passage begins with a clear warning that captures the central theme of this section of the Sermon on the Mount. Eugene Peterson’s translation is quite striking, “Be especially careful when you are trying to be good so that you don’t make a performance out of it. It might be good theater, but the God who made you won’t be applauding” (6:1, *The Message*). In our pursuit of the better righteousness to which Jesus has called us, self-centred motives can get in the way of the ultimate aim of pleasing God. When we do good things with the motivation to be admired or applauded by others, we are doing them for the wrong reasons. Jesus is saying that deeds done to impress others or to gain a reputation for being devout are not of any value in the eyes of God.

Jesus illustrates this general principle with the three spiritual disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. In all three cases, a good action can become a form of self-seeking when done to win the praise of others. Jesus says: when you give your offerings to God or to those in need, don’t blow your own horn and draw attention to your act of charity in order to gain the praise of people (6:2); when you pray, don’t put on a performance of piety for the sake of your audience (6:5); when you fast, don’t advertise your devotion by going around looking hungry and haggard (6:16). In all three cases, the wrong motivation is the conspicuous display of spirituality so that those around will say, “My, aren’t they godly.” In each case those who do good things with this very superficial goal in mind will get a standing ovation from the crowd, but the not the applause of God (6:1; 5; 6; 16; 18)

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) discusses this kind of false spirituality in his famous work, *The Dark Night of the Soul.* Like Jesus, John of the Cross speaks of good practices becoming bad, even sinful, when done for the wrong reasons. He warns that for some, doing the spiritual disciplines may lead to a *spiritual* *pride* in their accomplishments. John writes the following about the spiritually prideful,

“The devil will often inflame their fervor so that their pride will grow even greater. The devil knows that all their works and virtues will be come valueless and, if unchecked, will become vices. For they begin to do these spiritual exercises to be esteemed by others. They want others to realize how spiritual they are. They will begin to fear confession to another for it would ruin their image. So they soften their sins when they make confession in order to make them appear less imperfect.

They will beg God to take away their imperfections, but they do this only because they want to find inner peace and not for God’s sake. They do not realize that if God were to take away their imperfections from them, they would probably become prouder and more presumptuous still.

But those who are at this time moving in God’s way will counter this pride with humility. They will learn to think very little of themselves and their religious works. Instead, they will focus on how great and how deserving God is and how little it is that they can do for him. The Spirit of God dwells in such persons, urging them to keep their treasures secretly within themselves” (Foster & Smith, *Devotional Classics,* p. 34).

As Jesus talks about these spiritual practices he urges his audience to do them, not with the goal of self-glorification, but with a clear focus on God. Jesus says: when you give, be so discreet that only God notices; when you pray, have an honest conversation with God and don’t be concerned what others are thinking; when you fast, shower and shave so that only God knows about your act of self-denial. In all these cases, the goal is to honour God and to be drawn into a closer relationship with him.

F.W. Beare summarizes Jesus’ message with these words: “There must be nothing ostentatious, no public exhibition of piety; and there must be no motive of winning admiration, but *only of pleasing God and seeking no reward except that which he may give*” (Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew,* p. 164).

**3. Jesus’ Model Prayer**

Within this larger discussion about the appropriate motivation and method for doing good, Jesus talks about prayer and offers his model prayer, known as *the* *Lord’s Prayer.* In keeping with his words about charitable giving and fasting, Jesus contrasts a self-centred approach to prayer with a God-centred one (6:5-6). A self-centred approach to prayer seeks the admiration of others, instead of having a personal talk with God. So Jesus contrasts a flashy and conspicuous prayer in the public square with a private prayer to God behind closed doors. But Jesus’ words should not be understood as a blanket condemnation of all public prayers. If that were the case, then much of what I do as a pastor would not be done. Jesus’ contrast of prayer in the public square with that in the private study is a vivid way of insisting that any temptation to make prayer a display of personal piety needs to be avoided. Prayer is a conversation between you and your heavenly Father and even if it is done in the presence of other people it still must be treated as such.

But Jesus wasn’t just talking about the religious show-offs that he observed in the public square. He also warned against adopting the babbling, many-worded prayers of the Gentiles (6:7). The prayer lives of these non-Jews consisted of complex magical incantations and special formulas intended to grab the attention of the gods and getting them to act. The goal was not communication but manipulation. Eugene Peterson’s translation nicely captures the essence of Jesus’ words, “The world is full of so-called prayer warriors who are prayer-ignorant. *They’re full of formulas and programs and advice, peddling techniques for getting what you want from God.* Don’t fall for that nonsense” (6:7, *The Message*). Thankfully, prayer is not magic and our prayers don’t need to be sophisticated or lengthy in order to get God’s attention. After all, this is our heavenly Father that we are praying to and he “knows exactly what you need even before you ask him!” (6:8). The Father’s love, knowledge and concern for us is the bedrock of Christian prayer and this assurance ushers us into a liberating dialogue with the Father. The efficacy of our prayers is not dependent upon the quality or the quantity of our words, but upon our Father who deeply loves us. Again, Peterson’s translation is outstanding, “This is your Father you are dealing with, and he knows better than you what you need. *With a God like this loving you, you can pray very simply*. Like this:” (6:9, *The Message*).

Jesus’ simple and straightforward prayer is *the Lord’s Prayer*. His model prayer begins with a reminder of the *relational* foundation of this conversation. When we pray, we’re communicating with “our Father” – someone who knows what we need before we ask him. The first *three* petitions of the prayer are closely related since they all deal with God’s activity in the universe. These first three requests express the Christian’s deep longing for God’s reign to come in all its fullness (6:9-10).

In biblical thought, God’s name is equated with God himself so when we pray, “*Hallowed be your name”* we asking for universal honour to be given to God. We are inviting God to sanctify his name and reveal his forgiveness and redemption to all humankind. We are praying that the whole world would acknowledge the loving sovereignty of God. And when the entire cosmos, when every knee bows and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11), God’s *kingdom* will come in all its fullness. And when God’s benevolent rule is universally accepted his “*will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* All creation will respond to God’s kingly rule in perfect obedience. This prayer request will be fully realized until the future, the end of all things, and the transformation of all creation. Yet even now, the kingdom of God is present within our world as redeemed humanity, including you and me, bows in humble submission before God and pray, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Yet our prayers for the kingdom must also include a humble acknowledgement that God himself is the one who will establish his kingdom; we are not the builders of the kingdom. New Testament scholar, Douglas Hare writes, “We cannot build the kingdom of God on earth, because even our best efforts towards peace, justice, and community are compromised by sin. Only God can bring the ultimate transformation that includes the radical annulment of sin” (Hare, *Matthew,* p. 67). Hare goes on to suggest our role is to co-operate with God’s kingdom activity in our world and to pray, “Let thy will be done in, through, and by me that I may become and effective sign of the dawning kingdom” (Hare, *Matthew,* p. 71).

Jesus’ model prayer turns from its focus on the future consummation of God’s kingdom to God’s activity in our lives, here and now, from day to day. The four petitions of the second half of the prayer give voice to our physical, relational and spiritual needs (6:11-13). So, we can pray to our heavenly Father, who knows our needs before we ask him, and ask for daily bread to feed our hungry bodies. We can also ask for our hungry souls to be fed with the forgiveness that only God can give. Our relationship with God doesn’t need to remain broken by sin. We can say sorry to God for our sins and receive God’s grace. At the same time our experience of God’s forgiveness can heal our broken relationships with others. Because God has forgiven us we are empowered to forgive others who have hurt us and so experience healing in these broken relationships. Finally, we can also ask God for his help amidst our intense spiritual struggles. Yet the words, “lead us not into temptation,” should not be misunderstood to mean that it is God who *tempts* us. Our pew Bibles offer the helpful translation, “And don’t let us yield to temptation,” which presents it as a prayer for the strength to resist temptation. At the same time, the Greek word translated as *temptation* (πειρασμός) can also be translated *testing,* whichmakes this a request for God to protect and preserve us from times of *spiritual testing* that push us beyond our ability to endure. In these times of severe testing and we can ask God to keep us from the cluches of the evil one.

The beauty of the Lord’s Prayer is that it considers the larger cosmic dimensions of God’s rule, yet at the same time it gives voice to our individual needs. God has a grand plan for the universe and we are filled with a deep longing for the fulfilment of God’s kingdom rule in our world. We’ve had enough of the profound brokenness that surrounds us and we desire for God to heal and transform all creation. While Jesus’ model prayer considers the big picture, it doesn’t ignore our day-to-day needs. The hunger within our bodies and souls can be brought before God. Undergirding this prayer is the assurance that we are communicating with Someone who loves and knows us deeply – our heavenly Father who knows what we need even before we ask.

In closing, I’d like to read these helpful words on prayer from theologian, J.I. Packer: “Praying is not like carpentry or cookery; it is the active exercise of a personal relationship: a kind of friendship with the living God and his Son Jesus Christ, and the way it goes is more under divine control than under ours. Books on praying, like marriage manuals, are not to be treated with slavish superstition, as if the perfection of technique is the answer to all difficulties; their purpose, rather, is to suggest things to try. But as in other close relationships, in prayer you have to find out by trial and error what is right for you, and you learn to pray by praying” (Packer, *Your Father Loves You).*