



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# The Power of Prayer

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 6:7-13,  
Luke 11:1-4

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September 25, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**S**eventy-seven percent. That's the number. According to the Pew Forum on religion and the public life, 77% of Americans pray regularly. Sixty-three percent of those of who pray regularly say that prayer is an essential part of their faith. Even among those who claim no religious affiliation (they don't belong to any religion), even among them, 28% say they pray regularly. When asked why they pray, most Americans said we pray as a source of comfort and to acknowledge the truth that there is a God who is greater than we are who is worthy of our trust.

Friends, Tom Are, our senior pastor, has started us off beautifully on this preaching series titled, "Sometimes We Need to Ask for Directions." We are focusing on particular practices—things we do—to help us grow our faith in God. Tom started two weeks ago preaching about the importance of the Bible in our lives. Then last week, he preached about the crucial practice of truth seeking and truth speaking. Today, we focus on the power of prayer. There is power in prayer.

So we look this morning at the Lord's prayer, so named because Jesus gave this prayer to his disciples. We find the Lord's prayer in two of the gospel stories: Matthew and Luke.

In Matthew, Jesus is teaching his sermon on the mount. He starts off by telling the disciples that when they pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do. He's saying to them, "Don't use too many words." It's not as if God doesn't already know what you are going to pray. It is interesting that before Jesus tells the disciples how to pray, he starts off telling the disciples how not to pray.

Growing up as a pastor's kid, we prayed all the time. We always prayed before a meal. That was a rule. I remember one day when I learned what prayer

was not supposed to be thanks to my Dad and Mom. It must have been a bad day. My brothers and I, we must have been making bad choices and behaving badly. We sat down for dinner together as a family and Dad began to pray. I remember it started off the usual way with Dad thanking God for the food and for Mom preparing it for us but then it took a turn and Dad began to pray something like, "And O Lord, help us to listen to our parents and to be more obedient. Help us to be good sons and not to cause trouble because we know being bad is not pleasing to you. Help us to be more careful and to stop breaking things in the house..." and this seemed to go on and get worse until our Mom spoke up during the prayer and said, "Oh, Dick, please. That's not what prayer is for." I remember Dad ended the prayer abruptly. I was thinking to myself, "Go, Mom." Matthew starts off telling the disciples how not to pray.

In Luke, Jesus is praying and the disciples are curious. One of them asks him to teach them to pray as John the baptizer taught his disciples. It was common that a teacher—a rabbi—would teach his followers to pray certain prayers.

The first lines in both Matthew and Luke are similar yet different. Matthew starts out with, "Our Father in heaven." First, notice this: 'Our' is plural. This is not a prayer for one. This is a prayer for us all. Then notice the word 'Father.' In the earliest manuscripts, the word is Aramaic: 'Abba.' It means 'father' but it's an endearment. It's more like: Papa, Dad or Daddy. Using this kind of familiar language when speaking to God would have surprised the disciples. Then to remind us that even though we can address God so informally and intimately that we are still praying to the God of the universe, Matthew adds, "in heaven." This is not any Dad. This is not any Papa. This is God in heaven.

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'Hallowed' is another word for 'holy.' Holy be, or holy is, your name. Sacred. God is both holy and wholly other.

Then we start with the petitions. "May your kingdom come and may your will be done." Matthew says to pray that what is happening in heaven, let it also happen here on earth. Luke is more succinct. He writes: "Your kingdom come." The hope is that a day will come when all that is happening in heaven will happen here on earth. Tom calls this, "living toward God's promised day."

Then both gospel writers say: "Give us this day our daily bread." Remember that for many of Jesus' followers—including Jesus himself and his disciples—they woke up not at all sure where their food was going to come from that day. And truthfully, this is a prayer for many persons around us today and around the world. While it may not be true for many of us, food insecurity is all too real for too many people. When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," let us be reminded of that tragedy.

Then we ask God to "forgive us our debts" in Matthew and "sins" in Luke. Other translations say, "trespasses." There is lots of discussion here among Bible scholars. The early manuscripts for Matthew use the word 'debts.' Something that is owed. We human beings are sinful. We cannot save ourselves. We need God's forgiveness. Luke's gospel uses the word 'sins.' 'Trespasses' shows up later but was used early in English translations. Which word we use is not all that important but what is important is that we understand the relationship here between God's forgiveness and our forgiving others. Our lives emanate from the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ. We forgive because we are forgiven.

Then this odd phrase: "Do not bring us to the time of trial." We say, "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." It sounds like we are asking God not to tempt us—not to test us. This makes sense because God is God and can do whatever God pleases, but I think a better way to understand this is to pray, "Do not let us be led into temptation..." because the truth is God does not lead me into temptation so much as I lead myself into temptation.

Matthew ends with, "but rescue us from the evil one" acknowledging that there is evil in this world. There are powers and principalities that are at work against good and against peace and against joy.

There is power in prayer. Jesus' disciples knew that. I do, too.

Popular theologian and writer Anne Lamott says her most frequent prayer is three words: "Help. Thanks. Wow." She wrote a book by that same title. One of you told me that throughout your day, you pray these words: "Come, Holy Spirit."

Susan Story Lord died in August. She was 89 years old. A beautiful, faithful saint. We held her service last month at Village on Antioch. Last year when I was visiting her in rehab, she was having a hard time. She was struggling with pain. I asked her about increasing her medication but she didn't want to do that. Susan did not like how it made her sleepy and her mind fuzzy. I asked her how she dealt with the pain and she told me she prayed. "What do you pray, Susan?" I asked her. She said, "It's really simple." I told her I think those are the best prayers. She smiled. She said, "When it gets really bad, I pray one word over and over: Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

"Do you think that's enough?" Susan asked me. "Absolutely, dear one," I told her. "That's the perfect prayer."

I know this to be true. That in the moment when Susan took her last breath here on this earth, she was gathered into the arms of the one whose name she had been praying on those lonely, pain-filled nights. And I imagine Susan looked at Jesus and asked, "Did you hear me praying to you?" And I am certain Jesus looked at her said, "Of course, my beloved. I heard every one of your prayers. Welcome home."

Jesus said you don't have to use too many words. Just make it real. Just be honest.

"Come, Holy Spirit, come."

"Help. Thanks. Wow."

"Jesus. Jesus. Jesus."

Sometimes we all need to ask for directions. Turn to scripture. Seek and speak the truth. Pray.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.