

*Philippians 4:4-7*

*Luke 11:1-13*

*February 28, 2021*

*The Second Sunday in Lent*

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**A LUKAN LENT  
THE A.C.T.S. OF PRAYER**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Two men were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Frustrated by their situation, one man began to pray, “Dear Lord, I know that I haven’t been a very good person. In the past I have lied, cheated, and hurt people with my behavior. I drink, smoke, swear, and gamble. But God, if you get us out of this mess, I’ll be a changed man. I promise I’ll give up . . .” Before he could finish his thought, his friend shouted, “Stop! Don’t say another word! I see a boat and it’s headed in our direction.”<sup>1</sup>

Then there’s the story about Joe, whose business had gone belly up. He was in serious financial trouble, so he decided to pray to God for help. “God, please help me. I’ve lost my business and if I don’t get some money, I’ll also lose my house. Please let me win the lotto.” That night somebody else won the lottery.

The next night Joe prayed, “God, please let me win the lotto! I’ve lost my business and my house, and I’m about to lose my car.” That night, when the numbers were drawn, someone else won the lotto.

So Joe tried again, this time more urgently, “My God, why have you forsaken me? I’ve lost my business, my house, and my car. My wife and children are hungry. I don’t often ask you for help, but please let me win the lotto this one time so I can get my life back on track.”

Suddenly there is a brilliant flash of light and voice from heaven says, “Joe, meet me halfway on this. At least buy a ticket!”

Two funny stories, but I’m not sure they are good answers to that disciple’s request, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Instead, Jesus taught his disciples what we call The Lord’s Prayer. The question is, when Jesus taught his disciples, “When you pray, say . . .” did he mean “Pray like this . . .” or “Pray these exact words”? Suppose we take Jesus literally — “Pray these exact words” — and combine that teaching with 1 Thessalonians 5:17 which says “pray without ceasing.” Then we would do nothing all day, every day except repeat these words, “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .”

But suppose we hear Jesus’ teaching about how to pray as a template or a model of prayer. Then, as someone has noted, we can begin to imagine who God is and how God works in our lives and in the world. Our focus in prayer then becomes God: God hears. God provides. God forgives. God protects. God expects us to be generous to one another.<sup>2</sup>

So, how do we “pray this way without ceasing”? Years ago, someone taught me about the A.C.T.S. of prayer. It’s a good acronym for prayer that fits very well with Jesus’ teaching about prayer.

- \* A stands for Adoration: Father, hallowed be thy name.

- \* C stands for Confession: Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

- \* T stands for Thanksgiving: just addressing God as “Father” calls to mind God’s many blessings

- \* S stands for Supplication: Give us each day our daily bread and do not bring us to the time of trial.

In 1542, John Calvin, the French lawyer and theologian and our forefather as Presbyterians, wrote his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva*. He added an appendix titled “Several Godly Prayers” which provide a way to “pray this way without ceasing.” Calvin said to pray this way:

- \* when you wake up in the morning, thank God for the new day.

- \* when you begin your workday or school day, ask God for strength for the work you have to do that day.

- \* when you take a break during the day and when you come home in the afternoon, ask God to bless the good you have done and forgive your mistakes and sins of the day.

- \* when you go to bed at night, thank God for the opportunities you had that day and remember those people who have needs.<sup>3</sup>

In his sermon on the mount, Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds how **not** to pray: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others . . . When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.” (Matthew 6:5, 7-8)

Which brings us back to the idea that who God is and how God works can shape the kinds of prayers we pray. It’s not like we have to wake up a sleeping God by beating on heaven’s gates until God finally caves in and grants our wishes. No, it has more to do with being persistent in prayer — “pray without ceasing.” And if even we know how to give good gifts to our children and how to help people who need our help, imagine how much more God is willing and able to help us, his children, who need his help.

So, when we think about who God is and how God operates, our prayers can become less like shopping lists or vending machines and more like confessions of faith and honest requests to our loving heavenly Father. When prayer changes how we think about God, then prayer will change how we think about ourselves. Let’s be honest, even a plan for daily prayer without ceasing as good as John Calvin’s can become rote and mindless if we’re not careful, just something to check off the to-do list, if we even remember to do it. But, as another writer has put it, Jesus’ model prayer and Calvin’s directions for daily prayer are grounded in these four attitudes:

- \* a heartfelt sense of reverence

- \* a heartfelt sense of need and repentance
- \* a heartfelt sense of humility and trust in God
- \* a heartfelt sense of confident hope<sup>4</sup>

What about some questions that crop up from this gospel story and from our own prayers?

\* Does God hear and answer all prayers? According to Jesus' teaching, if even the neighbor you wake up in the middle of the night with your banging on his door finally helps you, just imagine how much God is ready, willing, and able to hear and answer prayers! It has been said, "Of course, God answers prayers. . . and the answers are either Yes, No, Wait, or Are You Kidding?"

\* How are we supposed to pray? Well, that's exactly what one of Jesus' disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray." So we can start with the model of the Lord's Prayer. And writer Ann Lamott took Jesus' advice about "not heaping up empty phrases" to heart and wrote a *New York Times* bestseller called *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. The Amazon blurb describes these three words as "the three simple prayers essential to coming through tough times, difficult days and the hardships of daily life."

\* What if you don't know *what* to pray? There have been several times when situations and circumstances have driven me to my knees — literally — in my study and my prayer has been, "God, I don't know what to pray. You know what's going on. Help me." In times like those, I rely on the apostle Paul's assurance in Romans 8:26-27: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

\* That last phrase — "according to the will of God" — may be the most important and the most difficult thing we pray. "Ask, and it will be given; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened." That makes prayer sound like a blank check or a genie's three wishes. But when you add on "according to the will of God" and combine that with who God is and how God works, our prayers come into a sharper focus. When we pray, we can remember one of the other prayers of our Lord: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:42) Several years ago, a dear friend introduced me to Martina McBride's song "Anyway." The song's chorus is a good reflection on "thy will be done," "Does God answer prayers?" and persevering in prayer: "God is great, but sometimes life ain't good. When I pray, it doesn't always turn out like I think it should, but I do it anyway; I do it anyway."

You've heard the old saying, "Be careful what you pray for. You just might get it." There's a lot of wisdom in that advice, and maybe that's exactly what Jesus was getting at when he taught his disciples how to pray. The more we learn about God and how God works, the more we learn the A.C.T.S. of prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

But what if we tweaked that familiar saying a bit? Perhaps you've heard this selection before. It seems to put "not my will but thine be done" in different words and puts our prayers in perspective:

I asked for strength and God gave me difficulties to make me strong.

I asked for wisdom and God gave me problems to solve.

I asked for prosperity and God gave me brawn and brains to work.

I asked for courage and God gave me dangers to overcome.

I asked for patience and God placed me in situations where I was forced to wait.

I asked for love and God gave me troubled people to help.

I asked for favors and God gave me opportunities.

I received nothing I wanted. I received everything I needed. My prayers have all been answered.

When you pray, say this . . . Father . . .

***Let us pray: Heavenly Father, may we seek you and find you, may we knock and the door be opened, for we are sojourners looking for your kingdom. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Taken from a sermon by Rev. Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson, "Praying with Persistence," July 25, 2010 at [www.dimplamp.wordpress.com](http://www.dimplamp.wordpress.com).

<sup>2</sup>Matt Skinner, "Who Taught You How to Pray?" July 21, 2019 at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>3</sup>From a combination of sources:

Justin Taylor, "Four Daily Prayers from John Calvin," March 16, 2019 at [www.thegospelcoalition.org](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org).

Curt Denning, "Exercises in Daily Prayer," February 9, 2016 at [www.melbourncommunitychurch.org](http://www.melbourncommunitychurch.org).

James A. Simson, Angus T. Stewart, and Alan A.S. Reid, *Keywords of Faith: Running the Risk of Heresy!* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1992), p. 57.

<sup>4</sup>Joel Beeke, "John Calvin's 4 Rules of Prayer," February 5, 2016 at [www.ligonier.org](http://www.ligonier.org).