

**SI:** Last Sunday we began a study of the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is mentioned twice in the New Testament—

here in Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount and also in Luke 11.

In Luke, the setting is different. The disciples have been watching Jesus.

They’ve heard him pray, seen him go away and pray—sometimes all night.

They must have noticed the peace and confidence he had in prayer.

So they said: Lord, teach us to pray. Jesus said, When you pray, pray like this:

And he gave them the Lord’s Prayer.

The Lord’s Prayer is a model prayer.

It’s for children in the faith and for the most mature.

**INTRO:** Over the years lots of people have stopped by the church wanting a handout—money, gas, a motel room—that sort of thing.

There was a woman who came in and asked for money and she was a fast talker, if you know I mean.

I just need \$50, I've been working at a new job two weeks and I get paid tomorrow and they're about to turn off my electric . . .!!!

And when I tried to ask her a follow up question, she just cranked it up.

So you're getting paid tomorrow?

My granddaddy lives out in Berlin and if I can't get gas money to get out and see him he's on oxygen and I need to get some help around here!!!

Do you need gas money or help on your electric bill?

I told you I'll pay you back tomorrow when I get paid. I thought the church was supposed to help people!!!

I'm not doing it justice.

The speed and the volume and the flood of details was overwhelming.

It was a technique to overcome my resistance to giving her money.

As soon as she realized I was insisting she come back Sunday and talk to the deacons she shut it off and was gone.

There was another woman who asked for help.

She needed a motel room for the night.

I asked a few questions about her situation and she wouldn't say much.

But then she took a breath, and in a quiet, earnest voice she spoke to me.

Pastor, you don't know me. But I'll tell you this about myself: I've made lots of bad and foolish decisions that have gotten me where I am. You don't owe me anything, I know that. But will you please help me? I'm desperate.

What is prayer?

Our catechism says:

Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies.

That's a good definition. Five important elements.

Maybe you've heard the definition of prayer based on the acrostic ACTS.

Adoration. Confession. Thanksgiving. Supplication.

I remember learning that in church camp years ago.

That's another good, comprehensive definition of prayer.

But let me give you another definition of prayer.

This is from John Knox, the Scottish Reformer, the man who has been called the father of Presbyterianism.

Knox said prayer is “earnest and familiar talking with God.”

That means talking to God as person.

A person who has his own thoughts and judgments and considerations.

A person who wants to hear things honestly and truthfully expressed.

A person who appreciates, as people do, being talked to as a person, not as an impersonal source of things.

Both of those women told me what they wanted.

They both told me things about their lives and situations.

But only one talked with me in a personal way.

Before the Lord Jesus gave his disciples his model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, he gave them two negatives, two “do not’s.”

I’m going to tell you how to pray, but first do not pray like hypocrites, and second, do not pray like pagans.

When the Bible speaks of hypocrites, it means people inside the church.

When the Bible speaks of pagans, our your Bible might translate it Gentiles, it means people outside the church. People who don’t know the true God.

So Christ is saying: Before you pray, know that there are two bad influences, two false ways of praying. One comes from inside the church and one comes from outside the church—don’t pray like that.

This is not about mechanics, it’s about the heart.

The Lord is saying: Before you pray, give yourself a heart check.

You’re going to be pulled in two bad directions in prayer.

Know it and resist it.

Last week we looked at hypocritical prayer.

This morning, we’re going to look at pagan prayer.

Isn’t that a strange warning by Christ? He says to his disciples, to believers, to us—don’t pray like pagans. That means we can and sometimes do.

Look at these words of Christ under two points:

1. The emptiness of pagan prayer
2. The satisfaction of true prayer

## **MP#1 The emptiness of pagan prayer**

Jesus says: “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

“Pagan” or “Gentile” was the Jewish way of saying, people outside the covenant, people who don’t know the true God.

Old Testament prophets used it to describe the nations in spiritual darkness.

Jesus describes pagan prayer as babbling. KJV translates it “vain repetitions.”

And, Jesus says, they think they will be heard because of “their many words.”

This is the primary characteristic of pagan prayer the world over.

It is the belief that by merely saying the words themselves

or by repeating the same words over and over,

or by performing certain rituals

or maybe by praying very loudly,

that their gods will hear them and be compelled to answer.

Paganism believes it is possible to manipulate or control or force or compel god through your words.

In the showdown between Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel, how did the Baal worshippers pray? You can’t say they weren’t sincere.

They were so sincere they cut themselves with knives to get their god’s attention.

They shouted their prayers all morning.

You can’t help but notice how calm and personal Elijah’s prayer was in contrast.

A Muslim prays at specific times of the day, facing in a specific direction, saying specific words. He has to do it just right or it doesn’t count.

But if he prays right, then Allah might be inclined to show him mercy.

A Hindu prays by picking the god he needs for good luck or wealth or romance and then performing the prayers and rituals specific to that god to get its blessing.

Pagan prayer is not “earnest and familiar talking with God.”

Because when you really talk with a person, you don’t try to manipulate him by shouting or flattering or kicking the wall.

Jesus doesn’t make this judgment of pagan prayer for us to look down on them and feel superior. This is for us to examine ourselves.

He’s wanting us to do a heart check and see if we are praying this way.

We might be saying the right words, but are we trying to force and manipulate God to get him to give us what we want?

This doesn’t have anything to do with form.

The Bible does not forbid repetitive prayers.

It doesn't tell us we can't ask God for the same things over and over. When Jesus himself was in the Garden of Gethsemane Matthew says he prayed the same words three times.

It's ok to use written prayers, it's ok to use a prayer list, it's ok to keep a prayer journal, it's ok to have a regular, set prayer time, it's ok to email the prayer chain. All of those can be compatible with earnest and familiar talking with God.

So what might Christians sound like when we pray like pagans?

One blatant example is the word-faith movement, the prosperity gospel.

It's the name it claim it approach to prayer often on big tv preachers. Specifically ask God for a blessing, visualize that blessing, and your faith compels God to answer.

He'll give you the Cadillac or healing or whatever it is you want.

On a more humorous note: A friend who played high school football, said that in the locker room before every game, right before running on the field they would chant the Lord's Prayer as that final good luck ritual.

He grew up in Georgia and he said the only reason we used the Lord's Prayer and not something else is that we were Bible Belt pagans.

Going through the motions of prayer without thinking is another example.

One night years ago I was putting the kids to bed and I was trying to pray but they kept giggling, so finally I said to them in my preacher voice:

Kids, prayer is very important. We are talking to God.

So you need to stop giggling and pay attention.

They immediately sobered up. And I started to pray.

And when I did, they burst out laughing.

I stopped and said: Did you not hear me?

They said: We're sorry dad, but you were praying the food prayer!

And I realized that after my lecture about paying attention, and really talking to

God, I had said: "God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food . . ."

Doesn't that bug you when a person does that to you?

Talks to you without paying attention? But we sometimes talk to God that way.

Those are very obvious examples.

But mostly, I think it's more subtle.

It's when a Christian prays to put God in his debt, to earn credit from God,

Do you ever pray like that?

Do you ever pray, not to talk with God, but just to get something from him?

And beyond prayer, what about the other acts of religion?

Do you ever go to church or give your tithes and offerings or even live a moral life, not so much to commune with God and love him and express gratitude, but to gain spiritual credits?

Pagans don't know there is a loving heavenly Father who has sacrificed his own Son for their salvation.

Pagans don't know that through Christ you can be adopted into the family and have access to all the rights and privileges of the sons of God.

But we do. We know those things.

We know that God is our Father who loves us.

We know that Christ is our elder brother and he loves us too.

We know that the heart of our salvation is a personal relationship.

So Jesus says: Guard your heart against the emptiness of pagan prayer.

Guard your heart against taking this glorious privilege of earnest and familiar talking with God and turning it manipulation and technique to get something.

But the Lord doesn't stop here. He doesn't stop with the emptiness of pagan prayer.

The Christian ethic is never just negative. "Just say no" is not in the Bible.

It's always say no to sin and yes to God.

It's the negative and then the positive.

So after showing us the emptiness of pagan prayer, Christ holds before us something wonderful, something worth doing with all our hearts.

That brings us to our second point:

## **MP#2 The satisfaction of true prayer**

After describing the babbling and empty words of the pagan to his gods, he says:  
“Do not be like them, for your Father know what you need before you ask him.”

Those are wonderful words. And as you read them you see immediately the difference between paganism and a personal faith in the living God. He’s your Father and you are his child.

He knows exactly what you need even before you ask him

Allison and I were eating at a restaurant in a corner booth, and there was a young family in the other corner booth and they had a highchair with a car seat on it and a tiny baby—it couldn’t have been more than a month or two old.

Well it seems like no matter where we are seated in a restaurant it’s always right under an air conditioner vent.

All that cold air was blowing down on the baby.

But the thought didn’t even cross my mind until I noticed the young dad reach over and raise the hood of the car seat to block the air and I heard him ask his wife:

Do I need to go out to the car and get another blanket?

Before that baby had made a peep.

Before it even knew it was cold, its father knew what it needed.

And your Father in heaven knows what you need before you ask him!

When that sinks in, it cuts the root of pagan prayer.

You know you never have to bargain with God, you never have to try to manipulate him or get into his good graces by your religious acts.

He knows everything you need and he’s your Father.

Psalms 139 says he know when you sit and when you rise.

He is familiar with all your ways. He knit you together in your mother’s womb.

Think of all of the things he gives every day that you never specifically asked for.

We hardly ever really ask for our daily bread and for protection from the thousands of temptations that endanger us every day.

But he gives us those things anyway.

Look at your life and you will have to admit that most of the blessings

God gives, he gives you even when you don’t pray.

Think of the times God has given you something really good you never prayed for, and when you get it your conscience says—I should have prayed for that!

And think of the really big things:

You didn't ask God to send Christ to die on the cross for you.  
You didn't ask to be born again.  
But he knew your need and gave it to you anyway.

Why do we need to ask God for anything if he already knows what we need?  
That's a great question. And in the answer is wonderful.  
Obviously we don't need to pray to give God any new information.  
Jesus tells us that he already knows our needs. He knows all things.  
And we don't need to pray to convince him to be merciful and kind to us.  
He's been showing us his mercy and kindness long before we ever prayed.

It's true that if you don't pray, you will miss a lot.  
Because God has appointed prayer as the means through which  
we receive many of his blessings.  
Over and over the Bible speaks of the influence and power of prayer.  
Makes clear that we receive many good things through prayer.  
And if we don't pray, we will miss things.

Bible says:

“Whatever you ask in my name, it shall be done for you.”

“The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

“You have not because you ask not.”

The Bible makes clear that prayer is an actual instrument of change.  
It has an effect on the events of the world. It changes the course of things.  
And there are many examples in the Bible of prayer doing that.  
Elijah praying for it not to rain, and then praying for it to rain again,  
is the great example in the book of James.

But the rock bottom reason for prayer is that God wants us to live in personal  
communion with him. He wants a real relationship of love and dependence.  
He wants us to talk to him about the things that matter the most.  
That's why we pray. And that's the heart of the Christian life.

Think about that father and baby in the restaurant.  
It would be possible for that father to provide for his child in an impersonal  
and distant way. He could pay for food and clothes, hire people to raise it.  
He could work things out so that his child would never know him personally  
or ever have to ask him for anything.  
But no good parent would ever dream of doing something like that.  
We want our children to come to us and ask us for things

We want to provide for our children directly.  
Because it's through our children's requests and our answering of those requests,  
that a true parent-child relationship is formed and expressed.  
It doesn't happen any other way.

That dad who I watched cover up his infant in the restaurant is looking  
forward to the day when his child is old enough to say: Daddy, I'm cold.  
And he will say, Come here, let me hug you.  
Get close to me and get warm. Put my coat on.  
That's the way love is both expressed to children and instilled in them.

No father would be happy to have his son take everything and ask for nothing.  
It would be thankless. It would make his son self-centered and ungrateful.  
He would not learn to give to others as he had been given to.  
He would not know the great mercies he had been shown.  
And that's exactly what God has done for us in prayer.  
By asking and receiving from him, we learn all the great lessons  
of the Christian life.

Prayer makes personal our relationship with God.  
It makes it real at the level of our daily life.  
It's the link that binds us to God in the most personal way,  
as one person to another, as a child to his father.

So guard your heart from pagan prayers. Don't take this magnificent gift—  
conversation with your Father, and turn it into an empty bargaining tool  
to get what you need and want.  
He already knows. And if you ever doubt that. Look at the cross.  
Before you ever even thought to ask, before you were ever born,  
God the Father in love saw your greatest need, and took care of you.  
So talk with him. That, the Lord Jesus is telling us, is the heart of prayer.

In the 1600s there was a French Catholic priest named Francois Fenelon.  
He came into conflict with the King of France and even with the Pope  
for his views of prayer and the Christian life.  
Because he insisted that the heart of prayer is not ritual and performance.  
It's not counting your prayer beads.  
This is how he described prayer:

“Tell God all that is in your heart, as one unloads one's heart,

its pleasures and pains to a dear friend.  
Tell him all your troubles that he may comfort you;  
tell him your joys, that he may sober them;  
Tell him your longings that he may purify them;  
Tell him your dislikes, that he may help you conquer them.  
Talk to him of your temptations, that he may shield you from them.  
Show him the wounds of your heart, that he may heal them.  
Tell him how your self-love makes you unjust to others,  
how vanity tempts you to be insincere.  
People who have no secrets from each other never lack subjects of conversation.  
They do not weigh their words, for there is nothing to be held back,  
neither do they seek for something to say.  
They talk out of the abundance of their heart,  
without consideration, they say just what they think.  
Blessed are they who attain to such familiar, unreserved conversation with God.”

What a wonderful picture of prayer. Through Christ, may that be true of us!