

In Luke's Gospel, we hear the disciples' simple request, "Lord, teach us to pray." The disciples had seen Jesus get away alone—time and time again—to pray. And at their request, Jesus gave them the Lord's Prayer. We hear this in our Gospel reading too—at least Jesus' teaching regarding prayer—if not the request itself. Of course, in Matthew 6 we are still in the *Sermon on the Mount*.

But this request shows us that prayer is a skill to be taught. It is something we must learn how to do. Jesus doesn't ignore their petition. He responds with instruction. This is a teachable moment for the disciples. And the Lord's Prayer is not *His* prayer per se. Really, His prayer is the High Priestly Prayer of John 17. Instead, the Lord's Prayer is what He intends for His disciples. And we could even say that all the other prayers of the Scriptures are summed up in the Lord's Prayer.

Most people think that they get prayer already. And the definitions are many and varied. Prayer is posting that folded hands emoji on Facebook. It is a sincere wish that a friend might recover. It is manifesting your future with words of positive energy. And to critique a couple of more churchly definitions, "prayer is pouring out your heart" or "prayer is talking to God."

I want to offer a different definition of prayer with this sermon series—a deeper definition. Today is Ash Wednesday. And this day marks our 40-day journey with Jesus in fasting and prayer and personal discipline. I want to visit the question of fasting a little more seriously on Sunday. But on Wednesdays, we are going to be talking about prayer throughout the season of Lent.

And we are going to use the Psalms to give us this fuller picture. The Psalms are the prayer book of God's people—or better, the prayer book of Jesus. And they only make sense when we read them in light of Jesus. If we want to read and pray the prayers of the Bible, and especially the Psalms, our first concern cannot be ourselves. Instead we will ask what the Psalms have to do with Jesus. He is at the heart and center of the Psalms. And often, the prayers are His own.

And I want to broaden our practice. Maybe the Lord's Prayer is the only prayer that we actually pray aloud. Or maybe we only use it in its memorized form—it doesn't shape the rest of our prayer life. Maybe we never actually pray apart from Sunday morning. Maybe our prayer is limited to the 4<sup>th</sup> Petition, "Give us this day our daily bread." Our prayers are full of demands that we make of God. And then we wonder why He doesn't answer. And then we judge God for refusing our requests.

The Psalms will add rich depth to the content and place of our prayers. They will keep us praying with Jesus. And they will give us some perspective when we don't get the answers we might want.

But, let's start with some meaning. In youth catechesis, as we introduce prayer, we start with this definition. Prayer is "a response to God's word and grace, speaking God's Word back to Him." The idea here is that we learn to pray by listening to God first in the Scriptures. We speak to God as a response, because God has first spoken to us.

The analogy here is obvious. This is how we all learned to speak in the first couple of years of life. Our parents spoke to us. They read to us. They even prayed for us. And we began with the words and phrases that were used in our homes.

In the same way, God's speech in Jesus Christ meets us in the Holy Scriptures. He is the Word of God, after all. And if we want to pray with assurance—and with joy—then the word of the Scriptures must be the firm foundation of our prayers. The words that come from God are our only way back to God. Prayer is speaking God's Word back to Him.

Minds set on the Scriptures lead us to pray aright. We pray with our Bibles open, letting His Word shape the things we say to Him. In this way, we will not fall prey to our own emptiness and selfishness. We won't merely demand our own way. Prayer means nothing else but the readiness to appropriate the Word. Prayer allows the Word to speak to me in my personal situation—to my decisions, tasks, sins, and temptations. Thus, even our spontaneous prayers will be ordered by the Word of God.

And with that definition, we see that prayer has a different purpose—one that doesn't exactly match what many attempt to accomplish with prayer. Of course, we can ask Him for our daily bread. But the point for us is not to get more of what we want. And we may not know what is good for us in the first place. We can't see the full scope of what God is doing—what God is thinking.

Again, prayer doesn't necessarily guarantee that we are going to get everything we ask for. We aren't attempting to twist His arm. We are not trying to muster up all the faith we can in order to change reality. Instead, this prayer for daily bread serves us by recognizing that all good gifts come from Him—including food and drink, house and home, and so on. He is the Giver of all good gifts.

I like the way Soren Kierkegaard puts it, "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." Prayer, according to the Scriptures, puts us in line with the will of God. There really is something to that line in the Lord's Prayer, the third petition, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This, of course, means that our own will is not done sometimes.

But in this sense, prayer is transformative. Instead of prayer changing the mind of God, prayer changes us. Remember that in Numbers 23, we hear that "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?"

Thus, even though we cannot change God's mind, He can change ours. He brings us in line with His will. And this is great news! And prayer is the vehicle for this. With prayer, God transforms our hearts and minds.

I like the way that the Small Catechism puts it here, "The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may be done among us also."

God wants us to speak to Him. But not in selfishness—not in the false and confused language of our hearts. James deals with this idea, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions."

Instead, we must speak to Him in the clear and pure language that God has spoken to us in Jesus Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it this way, "If we are to pray aright, perhaps it is

quite necessary that we pray contrary to our own heart. Not what we want to pray is important, but what God wants us to pray. The richness of the Word of God ought to determine our prayer, not the poverty of our heart.”

And so, we begin Lent with what prayer means. It means speaking to God on the basis of God’s Word. His Word shapes our words. And it is looking to God for what He has promised. It is understanding God’s purposes are mysterious to us at times, but as the Psalmist says, “But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”

Christian prayer takes its stand on the solid ground of the revealed Word and the character of God. It has nothing to do with vague, self-seeking desires. It gladly bends the knee to the will of God—trusting in His good purposes in our lives over our own.

It has nothing to do with demanding our own way. And specifically, we look at prayer through the lens of the Lord’s Prayer—letting that prayer guide all of our other prayers—even those we find throughout the Scriptures and in the Psalms.

Let me conclude with a bit of a commercial for the weeks ahead. Next week, we are really going to get into the Psalms as a prayer book. How we read the Psalms really matters. Next, we are going to deal with unanswered prayer—what we should know—and how we should react.

Then, we are going to talk about forming our own prayers with Luther’s little book, *A Simple Way to Pray*. And then, we are going to address prayer in the context of the Christian community. We are going to take this series right on through Holy Week and Easter. I hope you will join us for all of these services.

In addition, at each of these services, I want to conclude each sermon with a written prayer from church history. We can learn so much from the prayers of others. We can know something about prayer by listening to the prayers of the faithful who have come before us.

And really, we do this every week with the Collect of the Day. These are all historic prayers that the church has been using for centuries. With them, we pray with the saints of all generations. In addition, they get to shape what we pray for, which is a true blessing. They shape our hearts with godly petitions and praise we might otherwise have missed.

With that said, our concluding prayer is from one of my favorite prayer books. It is called *The Valley of Vision*, a reference to Isaiah 22. I think it grasps the tone of Ash Wednesday pretty well. Let us pray.

*O God Eternal, help us to know that all things are shadows, but Thou art substance, all things are quicksand, but Thou art mountain, all things are shifting, but Thou art anchor, all things are ignorance, but Thou art wisdom. Deliver us from attachment to things unclean, from wrong associations, from the predominance of evil passions, that with deep contrition and earnest heart searching, we may come to Thee, cast ourselves upon Thee, trust in Thee, cry to Thee, and be delivered by Thee. Grant us never to lose sight of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the exceeding righteousness of salvation, the exceeding glory of Christ, the exceeding beauty of holiness, and the exceeding wonder of grace. Amen.*

+*Soli Deo Gloria*+