

INTRODUCTION

Series introduction: a) Types of prayer: ACTS (petition and intercession)

b) The concentric circles; Galileo and Copernicus vs. Ptolemy. Is the Sun at the center?

When I was a young teen-ager I took dance lessons. Along with many of my peers I went to “Cotillion.” Cotillion is a French word meaning, “an elaborate dance marked by many changes of partners.” The same program of formal dance lessons continues today. Many of you or your children also have kicked up your heels and learned the way of the waltz, the foxtrot, the jitterbug, etc...

Cotillion instructs young people in the proper steps of various forms of ballroom dancing AND it includes some lessons in courtesy and manners (e.g. don’t step on your partners’ toes, thank your partner for the dance, use your napkin to wipe your mouth, etc.). A certain assumption lies behind all the lessons: you cannot dance until you’ve been taught. In fact, you probably should not even try until you have introduced and initiated into the world of the ballroom.

I think many people hold the same assumption about the practice of prayer. Unless you’ve been taught or trained you may feel intimidated about trying to pray. You don’t know where to start or what words to say in praying because you have little experience in praying. As a result a lot of people get discouraged when they try to pray--or they give up before even starting.

When Jesus’ disciples asked him for prayer lessons he gave them a model prayer (the Our Father...). It’s pretty short and fairly simple. And Jesus told his followers a parable with several conclusions. I want to share with you Jesus’ lessons on prayer in this sermon series, and in our Seekers/Discovery Sunday School class, and in our new prayer meeting. Today, I want us to think about the first two lessons in prayer. Are you ready? These lessons are not complicated but they are profound. Ready?

1. Pray as you can, not as you can’t.

It’s more important to pray poorly or simply than to wait until you can pray well. If we think we have to master all the dance steps first we will never get around to praying. If we think all our motives need to be pure and straight first, we will never be free enough to pray. If we think we have to be knowledgeable and competent first we will never be humble enough to pray. God invites us “to come as we are.” Come and pray with faith and doubt, with motives good and bad.

But do come seeing that God is big enough to receive you no matter what state you are in. We don't have to be righteous or faithful or knowledgeable. We say and we believe we are "saved by grace." We ought to live by grace too. And pray by it.

Jesus reminds us that prayer is like children coming to their parents. Our children come to us with unusual and even crazy requests at times. Often we are grieved by the meanness or self-centeredness of some of those requests. But we would be even more grieved if they never came to us with their requests, good, bad or otherwise.

In the same way that a young child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer. Pray as you can, not as you can't. Begin with *simple* prayer. Simple prayer is bringing yourself before God simply as you are, warts and all. Like children before a loving parent, we open our hearts and make our requests. We do not try to sort things out, the good from the bad. And pray about what you care about. Start by praying for those around you, your family and friends, the near ones!

Now--look at Jesus' parable ([Luke 11:5-8](#))

Ordinarily, parables have one main point. Interpreting a parable requires you to find that one primary point of comparison. This story is a little strange. Why does the one man really need to borrow bread at midnight? Why won't the man share his bread out of friendship? Does the one who begs and pleads succeed because he begs and pleads? Is God like the reluctant friend who needs to be coaxed into sharing?

The point of the story is to highlight the needy friend's action when he boldly and persistently asks for help. God is not a character in this story. Jesus is underscoring the propriety and the necessity of asking when we pray. And he is recommending perseverance. See the advice Jesus gives on the heels of this story?

Ask and it will be given; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

It sounds like advice you might give to children. "Kids, don't be shy. If you don't understand, raise your hand and ask questions."

I'm guessing that schoolteachers say these words to their classes all the time--or at least at the beginning of the year! And I'm also guessing that some kids (some people) are shy and have difficulty asking for help. Maybe others are proud and have trouble seeking advice or assistance.

Are you the shy type? Are you tenderhearted and afraid to trouble God with your little requests and your tiny concerns? You think God is too busy with important stuff to be bothered with you? Read this text! Or are you the proud, self-sufficient type? "*I'm not going to ask directions. I'll find it by myself. I'll work harder. I don't need help.*" Read this text!

Story: losing passport in Manila, lost in Campinas (I had to ask!)

Earlier I said that the first lesson in prayer is "pray as you can, not as you can't." Come to God as you are--engage in simple prayer.

2. The second lesson is, “**go ahead and ask.**” This kind of prayer is called petitionary prayer. Asking for things is petitionary prayer and asking for others is a kind of a petition called intercessory prayer.

But quickly we see two problems with petitionary prayer. Do you know what they are?

The first problem is why should we ask God for things when He surely knows what we need and what we will ask for? The most straightforward answer is simply that He likes to be asked. We like our children to ask us for things that we already know they need because the asking enhances and deepens our relationship with them. P. T. Forsyth noted, “Love loves to be told what it knows already...it wants to be asked for what it longs to give.”

Asking God helps us to become consciously dependent on His grace and mercy. Asking in prayer develops in us a trusting spirit. And God apparently wants us to ask and trust Him for what we need.

The second problem in petitionary prayer is harder. It’s the problem of *unanswered prayer*. We must not rush too quickly to solve this problem with glib sayings like “God knows best” and “God is teaching me patience.” Of course He knows best and certainly I need to learn patience. But why doesn’t He give, and let me find, or open the door in this situation?

I don’t know. I have been perplexed on many occasions by the absence of God when I sought His presence. And if you are honest--you have been similarly frustrated and perplexed. And if you read the Psalms you know our ancestors cried out as well for God to speak and to act...

Examples: prayerful laments (losing Miller Eason & Maggie Moyler)

Perhaps the only answer is to affirm that we live under the sunshine and the shadow of God’s mysterious ways. Paul put it this way, “Now we look through a glass darkly; only in the age to come will we understand fully even as we are fully understood.” (I Corinthians 13:12)

Here are three aspects of affirming God works in mysterious ways:

1. In eternity we will have a greater perspective...
2. It is good that God does not grant all my silly and shortsighted requests.
James 1:6, 4:3
3. Perhaps I miss some answers because I cannot now see them.

In his parable on prayer Jesus gives an example (see vs 11-13) that has to do with fathers giving gifts to their children; the gift giving of earthly fathers is compared to the gift giving of our heavenly Father.

Ordinarily, we who are human fathers will give good things to our children. At least we try. Unless something has gone terribly wrong we do not give evil or dangerous gifts to our kids. Notice the contrast between a fish (food) and a dangerous serpent. Or the contrast between

an egg and a scorpion (Matthew, in his gospel, remembered Jesus contrasting bread and a stone).

The argument is one called from the lesser to the greater. If the lesser father gives good gifts—how much better will be the gifts from the greater father? So Jesus teaches us to pray by asking: persist in your petitions and believe that God gives good things. In fact God not only gives things, He gives of himself. He gives the Holy Spirit.

Example: a parent/friend's love more valuable than gifts (knowing the gift-giver greater than gaining her/his gifts).

But here is an irony. Of course parents ordinarily know how to give their children good gifts. So surely we give them the gift of our prayers. Do we? Are we faithful and persevering in praying for our children and grandchildren day after day? Do we sometimes we find ourselves too busy? Do we sometimes find our faith lagging and our prayers sagging. Or...

May I suggest you start or keep or enlarge your prayer list? It can be written or it can be in your head. It can be tucked in your wallet or placed on your refrigerator. Start your list with *the near ones*. And pray regularly as a discipline, as a habit for those who are dear to you. It is good to pray for and with our kids every day... as long as you can!

When our children were in the house (before the teen years) we prayed with them every night. We tucked them in with prayers and a song and a story. And as soon as they could talk we taught them to pray as well. It became as natural for them as talking or singing. You know the old adage: *give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, feed him for a lifetime?* Helping someone to learn to pray is a pretty good gift.

And your prayers for others may be among the best gifts you have ever given. Because prayers are carried by the Spirit to God's throne. And there Jesus presents them to the Father. The whole Godhead gets involved with hearing our prayers. That's good news, yes?

Story: answered prayer (**Egypt** and Arab Spring—it started with a spark in Tunisia and spread by the power of Facebook—social networking, right? Much prayer happened behind the scenes. Particularly in Egypt, the most Christian country in the Arab world. This is the rest of the story!