

One Sermon That Changed The World

When You Haven't Got A Prayer

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Pray then like this:

*“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name
Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.*

(Matthew 6:7-13 ESV)

A preacher, known for his lengthy sermons, noticed a man get up and leave during the middle of his message. The man returned just before the conclusion of the service. Afterward the preacher asked the man where he had gone. "I went to get a haircut," was the reply. "But," said the preacher, "why didn't you do that before the service started?" "Because," the gentleman said, "I didn't need one then."

I have good news for you this morning. This will not be a long sermon. I felt convicted when I read the text for this morning. Jesus begins by saying something negative about people with “many words,” followed by this phrase: “don’t be like them.” Only Jesus isn’t talking about preachers here; he’s talking about pray-ers. When I was a kid sitting in the pew on Sunday morning, I would have told you the only thing worse than a *sermon* that goes on too long is a *prayer* that goes on too long. Oh! Fighting to stay awake. I mean, you asked me to close my eyes and then began this snoozer of a prayer? It’s a

perfect storm! And some of those long prayers telegraphed they were nowhere near the end. Like the one that was something of a commentary on the Lord's prayer. He didn't just say the words—he had to make comments on each line and apply them to every single thing in his life and every single person he knew. The problem was that I had memorized the Lord's prayer in Bible class. So I knew I was in trouble when the guy—who had already been up there for what seemed like an eternity—said, “And Lord, give us this day our daily bread...” I knew it was only halftime. At least he could have had the courtesy to give us all a bathroom break or something.

Long prayers. You know I'm joking of course. There is no sin in a long prayer. You've prayed long prayers, haven't you?

- When you get the call you've been dreading for weeks. The test results are in. You have cancer.
- The bills have been piling up, and now the bank sends the foreclosure notice; they are coming to take possession of your house.
- You are awakened with the startling message: she's been in an accident, and it doesn't look good.

Oh, we pray long prayers, don't we?

The book of Psalms was the song book of the early church. The song book and the prayer book. And there are some long prayers in there! Try taking a look at Psalm 119. But I warn you, you'll have to turn pages to finish it. Long prayers are called for in a number of circumstances. When we have so much to be thankful for, or when we feel so much pain we just want to pour out our heart to God.

Jesus isn't condemning long prayers. He's talking about showiness. People who want to be seen, so they show off. But I do think it's helpful sometimes to remember that God knows everything. My friend Noel Whitlock over at College Church has a favorite line he learned from his college professor: “has it ever occurred to you that nothing ever occurs to God?” He knows what you need even before you ask. So, when you don't know what to say, or when you don't have the words to say it, you don't have to. Some of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible are short ones. Psalm 119 has 176 verses. But Psalm 117 only has 2! Just 28 words in my Bible. A 10-second prayer.

I can think of some extremely powerful ones that were even shorter. One of my favorites is only three words long. Jesus had a group of followers known as “disciples;” they were in a boat out in the middle of the sea, in the middle of a storm. And Jesus appeared out there in the distance, walking on the water! Some of them thought it was a ghost; but Jesus told them not to worry, it's me. One of the disciples, named Peter, was skeptical. “If it's really you Jesus,” Peter said, “then give me the power to walk on this water and come over to you.” Jesus said, “Come.” So, Peter got out of the boat and

began to walk on the water! Pretty amazing right? What a spiritual high! I imagine many of you in this audience have been there. Times when you felt so close, so connected to God you saw his power at work in every inch of your life; you felt so good you could walk on water. But then...Peter felt the wind. He saw the rain. He heard the thunder. He noticed the waves. Have you been there? When the weight of the world came crashing down on your shoulders? The burden so strong you just sink under the weight of it all? Peter began to sink. It's in those scary moments—perhaps the scariest moments of our lives—that we want to cry out to God but we don't know what to say, or we don't have the words to say it. If that describes you, take comfort in knowing that Peter's prayer at this moment worked. Jesus came to his rescue and lifted him out of the trouble. Just three words: "Lord, save me" (Matt 14:25-30).

In our text this morning, Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray. I'm glad Jesus taught his disciples to pray. I've looked through my Bible and I don't see where Jesus was asked how to preach. He wanted them to preach. He said the Spirit would guide them and give them words. And he taught them truths they would later preach (Matt 5:2; 13:54; Mk 1:22; 10:1; Jn 8:2). And he instructed them to teach and preach (Mt 28:19). But the text never says "the disciples saw Jesus preaching and said, Lord, teach us to preach." The text never says he taught his disciples to sing. They did sing. They sang a hymn at the last supper. But there is no text where the disciples saw Jesus singing and said, "Lord, teach us to sing." But in Luke 11—Luke's parallel account to our own text this morning—we find Jesus praying. His disciples waited for him to finish. But when he *had* finished, his disciples reflected on what they had just witnessed and said, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). It must be important. But it seems so hard sometimes, doesn't it? Especially when we don't know what to say, or we don't have the words to say it?

The worries of this life can beat us down. That's when we want to pray. But the anxiety can be overwhelming, robbing us of our words.

We worry about our present.

- Do I have enough money to pay rent this month?
- Why is my child acting up and acting out so much at school—is something wrong with her?
- Why isn't my medicine working, because I'm taking it regularly, but I still hurt.

We want God to fix it, and fix it now. But we worry so much, we can't get the words out.

We worry about our past.

- It's been 18 years since that affair. Your spouse forgave you. You went to counseling and they haven't brought it up since. You moved to a new town, you

even got a new job and life seems to be going fine. But you can't stop replaying that shame and guilt in your mind.

- Maybe you are empty nesters now. The kids seem to be alright, and they have families of their own. But your negative self-talk still keeps you up at night. Should I have spanked them? Did I spank them too much? Did I start that too early? Do they even remember that accident that scared me half to death? Did it traumatize them? I know they never say it, but do they still hold a grudge against me for how I handled that prom fiasco?

And the mistakes. Oh....so many mistakes. We worry about our past.

We worry about our future.

- I'm stuck in a dead-end job; I can handle it right now, but will this be my life 10 years from now? Is this as good as it gets?
- We've dealt with some rocky times in our relationship. We're holding it together now—with duct tape and finger crossed—but where are we going to be in 5 years?
- I'm looking at my retirement account (if you want to call it that). I mean, with a balance that low can you even call that a retirement account? Will we ever have enough to enjoy retirement? Or just to live in retirement?

Oh, we worry about our future.

It seems almost cliché for a preacher to give this advice: “say a little prayer.” But that is precisely what I want to say to you this morning. When we worry about our present, our past, or our future, and we don't know what to say or how to say it, *Jesus teaches us how to pray*. He offers us words, and encourages us to “say a little prayer.”

Are you ready for it? Here it is:

Give us.

Forgive us.

Deliver us.

To meet our needs in the present, “give us this day our daily bread.”

To cover our mistakes in the past, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

To empower our future, “lead us far from temptation, and deliver us from evil.”

Prayer is not the opposite of action—it is action. Prayer is not escaping the battle. It is the front lines. But there is still hand-to-hand combat to do. Still work to be done, as the Spirit gives us power.

Asking God to give us today our 'daily' bread, means we don't go borrowing trouble by storing up for ourselves bread for tomorrow. Asking God to 'forgive us' of our wrongs means we also must go about forgiving others of how they wronged us. Asking God to 'lead' us and to 'deliver' us means we follow His lead, we don't act like the boy hanging backwards off his father's shoulder as the dad walks away, the boy still reaching out for the thing the father is pulling him away from.

I can see lots of reasons why Jesus's speech goes in this order: pray like this, don't care about money, you don't have to worry. I see reason and logic in that order, don't you? Pray first. Pray for God to give us, forgive us, and deliver us. Know that God, your God, is on your side and on His way. And if so, don't turn to another God for your security and comfort—like money, or the clothes and possessions you buy with money. Without meaning to, without knowing it, you will be contradicting your prayer.

And...you will be adding more things to worry about.

It doesn't seem like it. We worry about money. We never seem to have enough. We worry about food: will we have enough to feed the children? We worry about clothes: do I know the latest styles, and will I ever fit in? But it's an illusion. The more money we have, the more we worry—because with ability comes opportunity and awareness. Once we buy the house next to the Jones' we discover all the furniture, the cars, the boats, and the clothes that belong to the Jones'. And once we acquire those, then we learn about the second home, the 401K, and the vacations to Cabo. "More" breeds more. And it's not always good.

So, remember our prayer. We are asking God to relieve us of our worries. Give us. Forgive us. Deliver us.

We don't worry about food. For God gives us today our daily bread.

We don't worry about money. For God forgives us our debts.

We don't worry about whether we can keep up with fashion and fortune and fame. For the Lord will deliver us from such addictions.

You prayed, says God. You aren't turning to other gods. So don't worry. You're taken care of.

I love that Jesus tells us all of that...but he doesn't begin with that. Look at this trick up his sleeve. Before telling us to pray "give us, forgive us, deliver us," he teaches this prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
Just as it is in heaven.

The first lines aren't about you and me at all. They aren't about our stressors or our worries. They aren't about the children, or the retirement account, the job, or the journey. They are about God. A good God. A God who has plans to make everything right, and a confidence that He is who he says he is.

And some of you may have learned an ending to the prayer: "For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." That isn't from the gospels; it's from King David in 1 Chronicles chapter 29. Do you know why this concluding prayer of David was attached (in church tradition) to the prayer of Jesus? I think I know why. If Thine is the kingdom, and we long for the kingdom to come in its fullness, then we are really asking for you, oh Father, for you to come. It's fitting, isn't it? That the prayer should begin and end not with you and me, but with God?

So maybe the whole prayer can be reduced to two words. "Father...come." Come to think of it, that's very close to the final prayer Paul offers in one of his letters. His two-word prayer is "*Maran atha*," which means "Lord, come" (1 Cor 16:22). Or John's 3 word prayer that comes at the end of our Bible: "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20).

And he will. He sees you in the storm. He knows your every need before you ask. If you are drowning in a sea of misery, rest assured, He's on his way. And he will save.

What about you? Just as He is on his way to you, he bids you to come to Him. Step out in faith and reach for His hand. When you do, you will find he calms the waters. In his hands, you are not lost and tossed in the billowy waves; you are safe, and able to drink deeply of the Spirit of peace. All of this is given to you in the waters of baptism. We enter in with full assurance of faith, and we rise anew, aboard his fellow-ship. The Spirit and the Bride say "Come." Let the one who is thirsty, Come. Let the one who desires take the water of life at no cost (Rev 22:17).

For all those who love his appearing, I close this sermon with a prayer. A prayer of anguish for all the pains you are going through. A prayer of hope that God will accomplish his good pleasure and that you will see it and rejoice. And a prayer of thanksgiving to a God who already is working on it.

“Lord, come.”

And if you are ready to come to Him, I encourage you to respond to the invitation while we stand and sing.