



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Whenever you pray...”

Introduction to the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”

Matthew 6:1-18

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Introduction:

Our scripture reading comes from Matthew 6. It is a portion of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, which is recounted in Matthew 5-7. Tradition places the sermon on the side of a mountain in Galilee, known today as the Mount of Beatitudes (see your bulletin cover). The sermon took place early on in Jesus’ ministry, following Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the desert. Jesus had been preaching all around Galilee, and crowds would gather to hear him. A crowd is gathered along with his disciples to hear the sermon Jesus shares. We pick up mid-way through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:1-18

¹Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

²‘So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your



right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁵ ‘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. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷ ‘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. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

⁹ ‘Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.

¹⁰ Your kingdom come.

Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹³ And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

¹⁶ ‘And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Sermon:

It was Isaac and his father’s tradition to read two books before bed each night. After the books, his dad would tuck Isaac under the covers, and Isaac would say his prayers. “God bless Mommy and Daddy, my brothers and sisters, my cousins, my aunts, and uncles.” ... And then the questions would begin. “Daddy, does Grandma Anne hear my prayers in heaven?” “Daddy, can God bless the ants and ladybugs and all the insects? The snakes and turtles and fish in the sea? And my dog Sheila?” “Daddy, should I pray for people in jail?” “Daddy, can we pray that everyone has their own bed to pray in?”



Teaching children that they can talk to God is one of the greatest gifts of faith we can share. As a child, I can remember the thousands of thoughts that ran through my mind once the lights were out.

Our days are filled with distractions—good and bad—and it can be hard to turn our thoughts toward something like prayer. Jesus knew this. In Mark, we read that Jesus got up very early in the morning, while it was still dark, and left the house for a solitary place where he prayed. Luke adds that Jesus withdrew to lonely places to pray, and that one time he went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night talking to God. Jesus talked to God often, and he taught his disciples to do the same.

Jesus' disciples, of course, were Jewish men. “Whenever you pray,” Jesus instructs. He is assuming that prayer is already a part of their religious life. They would have grown up hearing and reading the prayers at their synagogue. They would have read Hebrew and were familiar with their faith's rituals and traditions. It was not uncommon in those days for rabbis to teach their pupils a new prayer. The disciples would have listened and recognized the cadence and topics reminiscent of other prayers in their tradition.

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.”

This Lent, we are exploring the depth and meaning of this ancient prayer. George likes to describe our sermon series as a practice in “giving up” something for Lent—that we are “giving up” the Lord's Prayer for Lent. Well, since George isn't here, I can say it freely—I don't like describing this sermon series as “giving up” the Lord's prayer. Because we aren't giving it up. We are doing the opposite of that. While we won't be reciting the Lord's Prayer in unison over the next six Sundays, we will be savoring it and exploring it in far deeper ways than we ever have before. So, we aren't giving it up; we are breaking it down, piece by piece, so that we might come to understand it more.

Because, if we're not careful, something familiar like the Lord's Prayer can become rote. Presbyterian minister Steve Eason asks the question, how would you pray if Jesus were seated right in front of you? Odds are, our prayers would be a heck of a lot shorter and a heck of a lot more humble. Our prayer would probably be a prayer more like the Lord's Prayer, and there wouldn't be a hint of rote recitation to it.

In the weeks to come, we mean to take our time with this prayer. We want to consider what each petition really means, and we want to recognize the true boldness of what this prayer really calls on—what it is asking of God, for ourselves and for our world.

In George's defense, it is pretty popular to talk about “giving something up” for Lent. Who among us here has ever chosen to give up something for Lent? I once gave up Dr. Pepper, but I just drank lemonade instead—I don't believe I can count that as a true spiritual discipline—swapping one sweet drink for another.



Lent is meant to be a season in which we work to renew our deep commitment to God. It can be a helpful season for both personal reflection and for the letting go of things that have become obstacles to fuller devotion to God and discipleship.

If our issue is overscheduling and overcommitting to the point of neglecting time in worship, Scripture, prayer, or service, then Lent is an invitation to give up those commitments that have become an obstacle to our faith. If life seems to revolve too much around a hobby, activity, or personal indulgence, Lent is an invitation to set it aside for the forty-day period and refocus on God. In this way, it IS a season of letting go.

The roots of this season are ancient. As early as 325 CE, when the Council of Nicea met, Lent was observed as a period of forty days (not including Sundays) immediately preceding Easter. The forty-day period recalled Jesus' forty days in the wilderness following his baptism. It was a time of repentance, spiritual discipline, and preparation for baptism at Easter. Several centuries later, when the practice of Easter baptism was no longer the norm in the church, Lent became less focused on preparation for baptism and widely observed for its focus on repentance, spiritual discipline, and preparation for Holy Week and the Easter journey.

Frederick Buechner points out in his book *Whistling in the Dark* that many cultures share an ancient tradition of giving a tenth of each year's income to some holy use. For Christians, he writes, to observe the forty days of Lent is to do the same thing with roughly a tenth of each year's days.

What would it look like if one tenth of your year were spent clearing a little space in the overscheduled calendar, intentionally quieting the alerts and notifications that distract you, and finding more ways to sit at Jesus' feet in worship, study, service, and prayer? One tenth of your year.

Lent is not only about giving up things for a season. It is also about taking on new behaviors and practices. Even the origins of the word Lent in Middle and Old English speak to growth. The word for spring (*lente*) and the word to describe the lengthening of daylight (*lengten*) extend from the same root word as Lent.

So, instead of giving up the Lord's Prayer, we are going to give ourselves up to the power of the Lord's Prayer. Because it is powerful.

In 2008, I interned at a church in Easley, SC. It is that church's tradition to deliver home communion each summer Sunday after worship. The pastor, an elder, and I would travel to homes, nursing homes, and dementia care facilities. We would visit, talk about families and the church, share a bit about that Sunday's worship, and then break bread and share the cup together.

The conversation with members who struggled with dementia was often difficult. Sometimes, those members couldn't speak at all. One married couple from the church were both in a dementia care unit—even sharing a room together, with two twin beds in that small space. The three of us from the church sat in chairs at the feet of their two beds. There wasn't much



conversation to be had; truthfully, there wasn't any. The couple didn't speak, so the pastor moved swiftly to the service of communion.

As he prayed, he transitioned from his pastoral prayer to the Lord's prayer. "We pray together the prayer our Lord Jesus taught us," he said. The elder and I joined our voices with his, "Our Father, who art in heaven..." And then we heard a fourth voice chime in, "Hallowed be Thy Name..." And then a fifth, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The couple prayed every word of that prayer. When we had said amen and opened our eyes, we saw the same two faces looking back at us, but this time with a spark of recognition. The dementia had not gone, their minds were not well, but somewhere through the fog of that awful disease, those ancient words of faith rang out clear as a bell.

What is it about this prayer that can speak to and for all of us? What is it about this prayer that can hold meaning throughout our whole lives long? Maybe you learned the Lord's Prayer as a child. Maybe you're learning it now. Maybe you've heard it prayed at funerals, or on battlefields. Maybe you've prayed it before bed each night of your life, or had it sung at your wedding. For many of us, we have prayed this prayer so often that we have forgotten what it says.

Matthew 6 has told us to be real in our prayer, and Jesus has shown us how. In this prayer...

We pray that we might act as God would have us act;

We pray that we might have what God would have us have—no more, no less;

We pray that we might honor our relationships—asking and extending forgiveness—as God would have us treat those relationships;

And, we pray that we might have the strength to do all these things.

To put it even simpler still, in this prayer Jesus directs our concern to God, ourselves, and our neighbor, and for the strength to care for all three. It is that simple. It is that profound. It is that important. And it is so worth slowing down and considering it all.

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday. I invite you to join us in making space in your life these forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday to savor this ancient prayer. Read it. Recite it. Pray it. And be so bold as to mean it, each and every word. Amen.

