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“Teach Me How to Pray”

Luke 11:1-4

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“Did you see the gorilla?”

The first time I watched the video, I didn’t. Neither did Millie, Virginia or Emory when I showed it to them. Six people are moving around and passing a basketball between them—three dressed in white and three dressed in black. A person in a black gorilla suit walks straight through the middle of them. The gorilla stops, beats its chest, and walks off screen. It’s on screen for nine full seconds. And yet... we never saw it.

Why? Because we were doing exactly what we were told: count how many times players wearing white touched the basketball.

Fifteen, by the way. I got the count right, but I completely missed the gorilla.

The video comes from a 1999 study by psychologists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons. For the study, nearly 200 people were shown the same clip, given the same instructions, and over half of them—just like us—missed the gorilla entirely.

It’s a striking example of *inattention blindness*—the phenomenon of missing something obvious because you’re so focused on something else—

and maybe also because we tend to see what we expect to see.

I wonder if inattention blindness applies to spiritual sight. That is, I wonder if it makes a difference whether we expect—or don’t expect—God to be in the room.



Am I stretching the gorilla illustration too far? Maybe. After all, Scripture and experience remind us that we cannot see God face to face. Yet some seem to notice God's hand at work where others see nothing at all.

Isn't that at least part of why we pray? To see more clearly—to feel, sense, and discern God's presence?

Maybe that's one of the reasons the disciples ask the question they ask in the passage I am about to read. They're not asking for lessons in theology or technique—they're asking how to *see* like Jesus sees—how to know that God is in the room.

Later, I'll tell a story about Eugene Peterson. Let's listen first to how he translates this familiar passage from Luke 11:

One day [Jesus] was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, "Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples."

²⁻⁴ So he said, "When you pray, say,

Father,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil."

The Word, *and Prayer*, of the Lord!
(Thanks be to God!)

Years ago, I visited someone in the hospital who was facing significant health challenges. She was a relative of a member of the church I served—not someone I knew well. She seemed to enjoy the visit, though mostly, I think, as a welcome distraction. Before I left the room, I asked if she would like to have a prayer.

She shrugged. "If you want to pray, go ahead."

I said, "Only if it would mean something to you. I don't want to impose?"

She doubled down, "I don't need a prayer. But if it will make you feel better, go ahead."

It was a *déjà vu* moment. Back in seminary during chaplaincy training, when I look about 15 years old, I had almost the same exchange while visiting a patient in the VCU hospital. That time, I awkwardly offered a prayer while the patient watched me with a bemused expression. He wasn't praying. And honestly, I wasn't either. I was just filling the silence with religious sounding words so I could exit politely.

I didn't like the way that made me feel and I didn't want to do that again, so this time when I heard, "If you want to pray, go ahead" I responded differently. "Well, yes, I do want to pray for you, but I'll do that later on my own."

I turned to leave, but she stopped me.



“No, wait,” she said. “I would like you to pray.”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s hold hands and pray together.”

Our relationship changed just a bit in that moment. The next time I visited, I wasn’t just a diversion. Even though she didn’t even know if she believed in God, I represented at least the possibility that God might be in the room as she faced what she had to face. So, we talked about that possibility, and we prayed again.

That hospital visit stayed with me. It reminded me that sometimes, what people need most from a pastor isn’t answers or advice, or even good company. but someone who joins them looking for God in the room.

Eugene Peterson—who wrote the translation of our passage—had a hospital visit and then a home visit that changed the course of his ministry. He wrote about it in his memoir, *The Pastor*, and I read about it in Andy Root’s, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*.¹

Like me, Peterson took counseling courses and went through chaplaincy training while in seminary. Unlike me, when he was newly ordained, he went even further—attending weekly classes on Tuesday that trained him to treat issues like depression, neuroses, and alcoholism. The training was helpful, but over time, he noticed something; he was starting to see his parishioners more as clients with problems to be solved and less as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. He began to wonder, “Am I helping people discover their identity as children of God—or just trying to be useful in ways others are better qualified for?”

Then came a hospital visit with a young woman named Marilyn. She was

- newly married,
- newly employed as a lawyer,
- and new to Peterson’s congregation.

Doctors were running tests, but it was becoming clear her problem wasn’t physical—it was psychological. Peterson’s Tuesday training tried to kick in and he knew what to do—guide her toward the right help.

But instead, he froze. He said nothing and for weeks beat himself up for not being “useful.”

A month later, visiting Marilyn in her home, she told him that she decided her doctors were right and she had made an appointment with a psychiatrist. Peterson felt relieved, but still wanted to contribute. So, he asked, “Is there anything you want me to do?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “can you teach me how to pray?”

That one question changed everything for him. In that moment, he realized his most important role as a pastor wasn’t to solve problems, but to help people notice and respond to the presence of God. From that point on, he centered his ministry—and his writing—on *teaching others how to pray*.

¹ Andy Root offered his summary in the 15th chapter of his book, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*. BakerAcademic, 2019. Peterson’s book, *The Pastor*, was published by HarperCollins, 2011. Root also led me to the gorilla illustration.



In saying that, I don't mean Peterson became a teacher of technique. He didn't spend a lot of time explaining the difference between a Pastoral Prayer and a Prayer of Confession, an invocation and a table blessing—though there's a place for that. And he certainly didn't teach prayer as a way to bargain with God or get what you want. He taught prayer as presence—ongoing, honest awareness of God in the room. Like Paul's invitation to “pray without ceasing,” his teaching wasn't about saying the right words, but about living continually in relationship with God as revealed in Jesus.

Isn't a relationship with God what the disciples really are asking for? They don't just want to know *how* to pray. They want a deeper relationship with Jesus, and they want the relationship Jesus seems to have with God. They want the connection Jesus has—his steady awareness of God's nearness. Whether he was alone in a quiet place, calming a storm, being challenged by authorities, having dinner with the rejected, healing a woman, or freeing a man possessed, Jesus acted as if God was already there.

“Teach us to pray,” they ask. In other words: “*Help us learn to live like that.*”

Jesus responds not with instructions, but with an invitation into the relationship he has with God—as Father.

He says, “Pray like this”—and what follows isn't a formula, but a conversation... a conversation as a way of life.

Let's hear the prayer again, this time in more familiar words:

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Start here—not with a request, but start in relationship with God as Father. God is near, even when God seems absent. To pray is to remember: we're not alone.

Hallowed be thy name...

Honor God's presence by being accountable to God's presence. Let it shape how we show up in the world.

Thy kingdom come...

Come not just to “my” world, but *the* world. Jesus teaches us to pray not only for personal blessing, but for God's will to be done in the world—for justice, healing, kindness, and God's reign of peace.

Give us this day our daily bread...

So simple. So honest. Not a lifetime guarantee—just enough for today. Help me today. Help me live today—and help me live *as I am supposed to live* today.

Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors...

Grace flows both ways—or it stops flowing. Jesus ties our need for mercy to our call to extend mercy.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...

Prayer won't shield us from every struggle. But prayer helps us stay awake, grounded, honest, *accountable*—especially when we're tempted to forget “who we are based on whose we are.”

“Pray like this,” Jesus said.



OK. So, we memorized this prayer and we say it every Sunday—not because those are the words we are to use, but because this prayer reminds us *how* to continually pray, by continually reminding us God is in the room—in all the spaces of our lives.

What difference does it make?

I think it makes a lot of difference, but I'll offer just one extreme example to make the point. You're frustrated—angry, even. Maybe you're arguing with someone. Or maybe you're surrounded by people who agree with you, and together you're on a rant about *them*... their views, their values, their leaders.

What difference would it make to remember God is in the room?

It doesn't necessarily mean you stop being frustrated or stop being angry. That awareness doesn't mean silencing conviction. Stay honest. Keep caring about what you believe is right and true. But remembering God's presence might also slow your speech. Open your ears. Inspire humility. Help you see your own blind spots. Soften your heart just enough to wonder what grace might ask of *you*.

Remember the gorilla video? Nothing changed in the footage when I watched it the second time. What changed was what we noticed.

Prayer is like that. It shifts our perspective. It opens our eyes. We pray not just to speak—but to stay awake. To live more honestly. To love more graciously. To notice what we might otherwise miss.

Jesus doesn't give us magic words—he gives us holy awareness. In argument, in grief, in confusion, in confession, in lust, in silence, in contentment, in joy—it is different when we remember God is in the room?

We might not immediately have answers or solutions, and we still might be at a loss of what to do, or even what to say. But like Marilyn, we can still whisper, "[Teach me how to pray.](#)"

In the asking, you are already learning. Because that whisper— however unsure, however shy— is already having a conversation. It is already a prayer.

Benediction:

As you go from this place,
may you go with open eyes—

to notice what you might have missed.

With open hearts—

to receive what grace still wants to give.

And with open hands—

to offer prayer, not as performance,
but as a way of walking in the presence of God.

Even when you don't have the words,

may you still have the courage to whisper,



“Teach me how to pray.”
And trust that Jesus will,
 because that whisper is already a conversation,
 already a prayer.
You are not alone,
 So go in peace, to notice..., to listen..., to love,
Knowing that the grace, mercy and peace of
 God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit,
 goes with you into all the spaces of your lives.

