

Prayer

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Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

And this is the confidence that we have toward him that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Amen. So, this morning I am continuing our sermon series, Walking with God, which is about the disciplines and the responsibilities of the Christian life.

And I have to say, when we think about the Christian life, it is hard to think of anything that is more important than prayer.

In fact, I would go so far as to say that prayer stands at the very center of the Christian life. But prayer is also something that is profoundly misunderstood.

[1:14] So, we might find ourselves asking, what is prayer? Why do we pray? How do we pray? Now, as a brief aside, I'd like to mention quickly that I realize, of course, that this is the subject of our Lenten teaching series this year.

So, if you will, consider this sermon preparation for what Bishop Dave and Mary Ellen are going to teach us. I don't want to encroach on their territory this morning, especially because I am sure that they will do it better than I would.

So, my goal is pretty modest. I want to give us a practical overview of some important things to keep in mind as we seek to live a life of prayer.

And to do that following roughly the outline of the Lord's Prayer. I trust you're all familiar with the Lord's Prayer, yes? Yes. Alright, good. When I say that prayer is profoundly misunderstood, what do I mean by that?

Well, think of this. Imagine for a second that you are having a crisis in your life. You have some kind of, say, medical or family problem.

[2:23] You call me up to talk to me about it. I listen to your concerns and then I respond with this. Okay, I just want to let you know that I am sending positive vibes your way.

Our deacon is visibly disgusted with that notion. Prayer is not sending positive vibes.

Just want to throw that out there. I am actually not sure what sending positive vibes means, but I am sure that it doesn't have anything to do with prayer. Or perhaps when you called me up, you told me that you had a considerable health problem.

And what I told you was that, well, if you pray to God to heal you and you do it with enough faith, you can be certain that a miraculous healing will be coming your way. Well, prayer is not treating God as a genie who grants wishes or a cosmic vending machine.

Prayer isn't positive vibes. Prayer isn't about getting all the stuff we want. It's not about manipulating God. It's not trying to trick God into granting what we would like to get from Him.

[3:36] So that being said, I want to hit a few points this morning about what prayer is and what it includes. First of all, prayer is a means of grace, along with the Word and the sacraments.

And that means that prayer is absolutely necessary for us if we are going to grow in the Christian life. If we are not praying, we are not growing as Christians.

Prayer is for people who want to be holy disciples of Jesus. Prayer is not for the purpose of increasing our odds of winning the lottery.

Prayer is for people who want to be holy disciples of Jesus. Prayer is communing with God and spending time in God's presence. It is an expression of our relationship with God.

It's no accident that the Lord's Prayer begins with relationship. We call God our Father. In prayer, we come before not just some distant figure up there.

[4:39] We come before the throne of the God who knows us and loves us. Now, when we think of God as our Father, we have to remember, and we are reminded, that prayer is only possible because the Gospel is true.

What do I mean by that? Well, outside of Christ, human beings are dead in their sins and separated from God, right? That makes communion with God, that makes having a living relationship with God an impossibility.

The reason we are able to pray and to draw near to God is because Christ died for us and stands as our High Priest and Mediator. He died the death that we deserve to justify us by His blood so that our sins are washed away and we have forgiveness through faith in Him.

The barrier between God and us was broken down by the death of Christ when He said from the cross, it is finished and died and the veil of the temple was torn in two.

We are reconciled to God in Christ. If that were not the case, prayer as we know it would be impossible.

[5:58] But because it is the case that we are reconciled to God in Christ, we as Christians can draw near to God in prayer with boldness. Think about what we read in Hebrews.

Since then we have a great High Priest who passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God. Let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. So we have Jesus praying for us, interceding for us.

We have Jesus who washed away our sins. We have Jesus as our High Priest. And that means that we have access to the throne of God. Because in Jesus, we are now beloved adopted children of the Father.

Prayer is possible only because the Gospel is true. But because the Gospel is true, we have the promise that we always have access to God's presence, and that He gives mercy and grace to those who draw near to His throne.

[7:24] We can call God Father, not because we are all God's children in some generic sense, but because we are in Christ. Next point.

Prayer is an act of worship. Think about the Lord's Prayer. Before we ask for anything for ourselves, or any of our fellow human beings, anything like that, we get to this.

Hallowed be Thy name. We are saying, God, Your name is holy. And the first thing that we are going to ask is that Your name be acknowledged and revered as holy by everyone in every place.

Should that surprise us? That the pattern that we have is to begin prayer with acknowledging God's holiness? If prayer is coming before the throne of God, we need to begin with adoration, praise, and worship, because that is what happens before the throne of God.

In prayer, we're entering into that place where the Scriptures tell us the appropriate thing to do is to cry, Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty who was and is and is to come, and to cry, Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.

[8:52] Our prayers need to sound more like that. So prayer must include adoration, praise, and worship, seeking above all else the glory of God's holy name.

Next. Prayer does include asking that God's will be done. When we ask that God's kingdom come, we're basically asking that God would be obeyed everywhere, right?

That everywhere would be subjected to His rule. That every place, including this earth we're living on, would be characterized by God's will being done there.

And again, isn't it interesting that in the Lord's prayer, this model we're given for prayer, before we ask for any of our own requests, we're seeking that God's will be done.

I would suggest that that is no accident. We see that very same desire that God's will be done in our epistle reading for this morning from 1 John 5, where we read, this is the confidence that we have toward Him.

[10:09] That if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him. So, before any requests that we may have in mind when we pray, our prayer needs to be that God's will would be done.

We do not go to prayer in order to manipulate God or to conform God to our will. We go to prayer, actually, for us to be conformed to God's will.

We don't go to prayer with the goal that our will would be done, but with the goal that God's will would be done. We need to understand that anything we ask of God, we are asking Him to grant it only if it is consistent with His will.

That said, prayer does rightly include asking God for what we need. As the Lord's Prayer says, give us this day our daily bread.

It's fine and good to ask God for what we need. Because, after all, the Scriptures tell us that He is a loving Father who loves to give good things to His children when they ask.

[11 : 35] And we pray in the knowledge that God will meet our needs. That does not mean that God will grant everything that we want, but we can trust that God will grant everything that we need.

I have to say, here is an aspect of prayer that may puzzle us. You might be thinking, wait, I can remember a time when I needed something and I prayed for it and I didn't get it or it didn't happen. I would say that we should remember that what we think we need and what God knows we need do not always match up.

God knows that what we need most of all is to trust Him more, to grow in grace, and to make it safely home to Him where we will glorify Him and enjoy Him forever.

When God considers our needs, those are His top priorities. I hope that they are our top priorities as well. So prayer includes asking God for what we need.

[12 : 43] Now it also includes confession of sin and seeking God's forgiveness. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Right? And then asking that God would preserve us from falling into temptation and would protect us from evil. Now this is an aspect of prayer that we absolutely cannot neglect.

Confessing our sins is something we might be tempted to put on the back burner when we pray because, man, that's a bummer who wants to think about that. But it is something that we should prioritize.

If we have fallen into sin, then to repent, to bring it before God, to be cleansed of unrighteousness, and to be assured that our sins are forgiven in Christ is a glorious gift beyond all that we can imagine.

We should never neglect that. And we should never neglect seeking God's protection against temptation and against the evil one.

[13 : 50] The Christian life is one of spiritual warfare. And we have an enemy who would love to see us destroyed. We need God's protection as we seek to lead lives that are honoring to Jesus Christ.

Now before I move on, I want to mention something else. What we pray for ourselves, that we would be, that we would have what we need, that God would forgive us and save us from evil, we are supposed to pray that for others as well.

No treatment of prayer, however brief, would be complete without mentioning intercessory prayer, praying for others. As we read in 1 Timothy 2, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

This is good and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. So we are supposed to pray for all people.

That is part of the deal. As a congregation, that is one of the most important things that we do. We'll be doing that in a few minutes during the prayers of the people. After the service, there will be a prayer team up front to pray with anyone who has prayer needs.

[15 : 22] On Thursdays, here at this church, we have an intercessory prayer meeting where we pray for the needs of the people in our congregation, for the mission and ministry of our church, and for our community, nation, and world.

Now, God may not be calling you to one of these particular ministries, although I hope that he is because we need more people involved in them, just saying, but he is certainly calling you to pray for the needs of others.

Do not neglect that calling. A couple of more points about prayer before I close for this morning. The first is this.

prayer can be really difficult. A fourth-century monk, a dude who went out to live as a hermit in the desert, was asked what he believed to be the most difficult part of living the Christian life. And keep in mind, this guy probably baked in the desert sun, went hungry at times, and routinely dealt with venomous snakes. But here's what he said. I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God.

[16 : 31] For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him. For they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey.

Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath. Do you find it hard to be disciplined about prayer?

Do you sometimes find prayer tiring or challenging? That is no surprise because the devil does not want you to pray. Don't be surprised that warfare can be exhausting.

But do remember that it is worth it and keep going. Even when we feel like we're too tired to pray, let's pray anyway.

Even when we feel like we're not getting any benefit from prayer, let's remember that that is not true and let's pray anyway. When we feel that we don't have the words or we don't know what to say, let's pray anyway.

[17 : 37] And let's remember in the life of prayer, we are never alone. We have the Holy Spirit, don't we?

What does Paul say in Romans? Romans, the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.

And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. Okay, so if we don't know how to pray as we ought, or we don't feel a desire to pray, that should not stop us from praying when we remember that the Holy Spirit intercedes perfectly for us.

He can more than make up for my discouraged or disorganized mumblings and can do it for you too. The final thing I want us to note this morning about prayer is that prayer is absolutely amazing and incredible.

That we can commune with the God of the universe. That we can come boldly to him. The way my little girls come up to me blows my mind.

[18 : 58] We were created to enjoy God's presence. We will enjoy God's presence in eternity, of course, but even now, in this fallen world, while we are still imperfect people who struggle with sin, we can begin to taste God's presence and to enjoy it now.

Prayer is nothing short of a foretaste of heaven. If it doesn't always feel that way, and it doesn't always feel that way, if I'm being honest, maybe you're holier than I am and you don't have to deal with that.

But if it doesn't feel that way, it's because we still struggle with sin, we still get distracted by the lesser joys of this world, and we still have a spiritual enemy who wants to keep us out of the fight. And that can cause us to forget the privilege that we have. Because Christ shed his blood for us, we, who are separated from God by sin, can now go into God's presence.

We can now call him father. We'll go into his presence more fully one day, but we can start now. I mean, the greatest thing about heaven will be that God is there and that we will be with him, right?

[20 : 25] That's the appeal. The cool thing is that we can start being with him now. Prayer is an amazing gift from an amazing God.

Let's pray this morning. When we go to pray together, as a church during the prayers of the people, as we pray in our pews or seats individually, pray this morning that the Holy Spirit would lead each one of us and our congregation as a whole to a deeper experience of prayer than we have ever known before, so that we can know Jesus in a deeper way than we have ever known him before. To the glory of this amazing God, we are so privileged to be able to call on as our Father. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.