

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Teach Us to Pray: Approaching the Holy”

Dr. Jay Howell

Psalm 99; Luke 11:1-4

June 5, 2022

I'm grateful to Jeff McCrory for leading us in worship last week and for kicking off our summer preaching series in the Psalms. If you were with us last week, Jeff taught about the very first psalm and the notion of joy and delight in the law, in the word of the Lord, and how one who delights in the word of the Lord is like a tree planted by a stream of water. But more broadly, he shared about how the psalms for thousands of years have been a primary way, both in Jewish tradition and in the Christian faith, by which people of faith join together in speaking *to* God and speaking *about* God.

We will be in the psalms throughout this summer but from two different angles. In June we'll be asking how the Psalms teach us to pray. Then in July we'll be asking how the Psalms teach us to praise, to worship.

And we begin our series on prayer being loosely guided by the prayer our Lord himself taught his disciples, connecting aspects of the Lord's Prayer to different psalms. So today, we focus where Christ did when he started his prayer, when he taught his disciples to pray: holiness. Let's go to God's Word together.

*The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!
He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!
The Lord is great in Zion;
he is exalted over all the peoples.
Let them praise your great and awesome name.
Holy is he!
Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;
you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.
Extol the Lord our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is he!*

*Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.
He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they kept his decrees
and the statutes that he gave them.*

*O Lord our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain,
for the Lord our God is holy.*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

I loved one point Jeff made last week. It was a word he shared from the pastor, writer, and Bible scholar Eugene Peterson: that the most important thing for a pastor to do was to teach your church to pray. And among the reasons I love that is because it is a place of conviction and correction for me. Whatever focuses we've had as a church these past few years, the conviction to teach the church to pray has not been on my list of priorities, and it should have been.

Because when you think of just core, fundamental practices in the Christian life, prayer is right there in that central mix. I wouldn't venture to try to rank them or anything, but prayer has got to be in there with reading the Bible, with worship together, with compassion, generosity, and service. Not in the sense that these are things you *have* to do or else Jesus won't love you—that's not how it works. But because of God's grace and because of new life in Christ, because of the gospel, these are core aspects that you would expect to find reflected in the life of one following him. And prayer is right there in the mix, I'd think. It's what Jesus himself did; he prayed. As Jeff mentioned last week, Jesus learned to pray using the psalms, and he himself prayed the words of the psalms publicly.

One day Jesus himself was out praying, after he had finished, one of his disciples came up to him and asked him somewhat bluntly, "Lord, teach us to pray." And then Jesus offers what later became compiled with a few other phrasings as the Lord's Prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Now you might be thinking, wait a minute, that's not the same as the Lord's Prayer. You're right. It's not the same phrasing, and if you want to know more about what it means for phrasing to be different from one Gospel to another, let's talk more.

But this is what we read in Luke 11, and Luke doesn't tell us which disciple it was. Whoever it was, I'm just imagining him bucking up enough courage to ask what he likely felt was a dumb question, something that he had likely been around all his life but never actually learned.

And my guess is that's where a lot of us are when it comes to prayer. Prayer, if it's not something you're used to or grew up doing, can be really intimidating. That's especially true if you're ever asked to do so out loud. Take one part public speaking, which is frightening, then another part expressions of faith, which even for some lifelong Christians can be challenging to articulate, and you mash them together, and for some that is downright terrifying.

Makes you feel like you have to take lessons or go to school for it. You can feel out of your depth when you're praying. You can feel foolish when you're praying. You can feel like everyone else knows what they're doing except for you, when you're praying.

But if that in any way describes how you might consider prayer, I have good news for you. You're in good company, because we are all out of our depth when it comes to prayer, and that's the point. That's what makes it so incredible.

When we pray, we are approaching something—or rather someone—that we have no business approaching.

Scripture has a word for that, for something that we in our human state have no business approaching: “holy.” And that word “holy” undergirds everything that prayer is about. It’s what separates prayer from meditation or silent reflection. Nothing necessarily wrong with meditation or silent reflection, but by definition they are internal. You meditate on your own thoughts. You reflect within your own state. When we pray, what we are doing (or seeking to do) is approaching something that is not of ourselves, something that we could not of our will become: holy.

There’s a reason when Jesus begins his prayer, the prayer he meant to teach his own disciples how to pray, he starts by saying “Father, hallowed be your name.” You know what that word “hallowed” means? It’s kind of an old-timey word, but it means holy, consecrated, set apart. The very first words out of Christ’s mouth when he teaches his disciples to pray are to proclaim and declare that the one we pray to is not like we are.

We see the same thread in the psalm we read today, Psalm 99. “The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!” Just in those opening words, the Lord is beyond everything in heaven (the cherubim) and on earth, and what is the response we see: “Let the peoples tremble!” “Let the earth quake.” The psalm continues in that thread, with a refrain popping up, once in v. 3 and again in v. 5: “Holy is he!” Then the psalm concludes with the words “Extol the Lord our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the Lord our God is holy.”

So this proclamation that the Lord is holy, and at the onset this calling upon the peoples and upon the earth itself to tremble before God.

Is that what prayer is supposed to be? Is that what the psalms call us to do? When we pray the Lord’s Prayer together each week, and we start it with those words, “Our Father, who art in heaven, *hallowed* (or holy) be thy name,” be honest, does addressing the holy, hallowed name of the eternal, cosmic God, Lord of all that was, is, or will be, give you cause to tremble? Or is it just something you say each week?

It is so important that prayer begins in acknowledging and proclaiming the holiness, the beyond-ness, the other-ness of the one to whom we pray, because we are way out of our depth when we address one like that. It’s not a casual conversation among equals or old friends; that assumes we’re on the same plane, and we are not.

And it is so important to adopt that posture right from the get-go, not because it’s something that God demands of us, as in, “You better show the proper respect to get me to listen to your prayer,” no that’s not how it goes. Adopting that posture of “The Lord is holy, and I am not,” doesn’t do something for God. He doesn’t need our declarations like some litmus test of faith. It’s important because it does something to us. The very act of praying in the sense of proclaiming the holiness of God, that we are approaching the holiness of God, and that we are way out of our depth in even seeking to do so, *does something* to us.

It changes prayer from just being a wishlist like we would bring to Santa Claus, or from just being a quiet contemplation of one’s own navel. And from that posture, God starts to shape us. The very act of prayer shapes us. It means that no matter what else we might include in the prayer, whether it be words of thanksgiving, words of supplication, words of confession, words even of frustration, it starts from a place of saying “You are God; and I am not.”

Think about how that could change someone, to over and over again declare, admit even, that “You are God; and I am not.” Humbles you to be sure, but it also starts to open things up. Because God doesn’t *call upon* us or *require* us to pray to him just to gather flattery unto himself. God *invites* us into prayer because of the

relationship, the right relationship it could bring about. A relationship of intimacy, of vulnerability. One that is not between two equals, that's important, but no less close nonetheless.

In what has become a seminal book on prayer, titled *Prayer*, Richard Foster offers a powerful interpretation of what prayer can and should be. These are a few things he shares at the opening of his book.

“Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness....

“And he is inviting you—and me—to come home....

“For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation....

“The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer.”

Did you hear what he said? Prayer isn't a requirement on the to-do list. Prayer is an invitation, an invitation to come home, “home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.” And you want to know the good news about prayer? That invitation is there even though and precisely because we are way out of our depth.

It is yet another way that the grace of God is shown in how he reaches out to us. We have no business expecting or hoping for or seeking this kind of intimacy with the one who is holy, the one who is so completely beyond us that we don't even have the capacity to begin to fathom just how far beyond us he is. But that invitation stands nonetheless, for it is what will make us whole.

Growing up, there was a guy in our youth group, about 4-5 years older than I was, so he was a senior when I was in 7th or 8th grade. And I remember him leading the entire youth group in prayer on occasion, and he had a particular way he did it. It was almost like a phone call. He'd start, “Hey God, how's it going? Things were okay today. I was really happy and grateful that [this] happened. But I'm struggling with a few things that I was hoping to share with you too. [Then he'd go on to share about all those things, until finally closing the prayer with,] Talk to you later. Amen.”

And I remember the first time I heard him pray I was kind of taken aback, because that didn't sound like any of the preachers or grown ups or anybody I had heard before. There was a closeness there. And since then I've kind of gone back and forth between whether that was a powerful prayer of intimacy with God, or whether it perhaps got a bit too chummy, whether that who “Let the peoples tremble” element was perhaps missing, but regardless it has stuck with me.

And the good news embedded in the act of prayer is that even as we say “Holy is he!” or “Hallowed by your name,” the Lord is answering back, answering even before we started talking, come closer, come closer.

So I invite you, friends, as we begin this journey in prayer, pray, come closer to the Holy God with fear and trembling, and also with the boldness that you are invited to do so by the Lord who wants you with him.

For that is our true home.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.