

“Jesus . . . on Prayer, Part 1”

Luke 6:27-36; 18:9-14 ¹

Once when Jesus had been praying, one of His disciples came to Him as He finished and said, ‘*Lord, teach us to pray*’ (Luke 11:1). It was in response to that request that Jesus gave His disciples the prayer that we usually call “The Lord’s Prayer.”

While we call it “The Lord’s Prayer” because Jesus is its author, it would really be more accurate to call it “The Model Prayer,” because Jesus gave this prayer to His disciples as an example of how we should pray. It’s interesting that the disciples’ request about learning how to pray came as Jesus was returning from a time of prayer. The disciples knew what Jesus had been doing, and there was something about the “before and after” effect of Jesus’ prayer that caused the disciples to want that effect to be present in their lives as well.

As we’ve noted before, “prayer” is conversation. Conversation is communication between two persons, and prayer has many things in common with ordinary conversation. Conversation involves listening and speaking, hearing, understanding, and responding. “Prayer” is the name we attach to conversation when one of the persons in the conversation is God.

This morning we’re not going to look at “the Lord’s Prayer” so much as at the *Lord’s prayer*. Not at the Model Prayer so much as at the Model Pray-er. What can we learn about prayer from studying how Jesus prayed and from listening to the things Jesus taught about prayer?

Today and next week, we’re going to look at seven prayer principles that emerge pretty clearly as we watch Jesus pray and listen to Jesus talk about prayer. We’ll look at the first two today. We’ll look at the others next week.

Principle One: Pray in the awareness of your constant need for forgiveness. A key reference for this principle is Luke 18:9-14. You know this story, but let’s look at it once more:

⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Now I actually hope that most of us here have a lot in common with the Pharisee in this story. I hope that you’re completely honest in all your dealings, that if you’re married, you’re faithful in every way to your marital commitments, that you give God a tenth of your income, and that you even fast occasionally. Those things are all important. Jesus wasn’t speaking against these things, but His point clearly was that we should have much in common with the tax collector as well.

In this parable, Jesus reminded us that when we enter into conversation with God, we need to bear in mind that all of our righteous deeds taken together amount to nothing more than

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 1, 2015.

“filthy rags” before God’s holiness (Isaiah 64:6). Like the tax collector in this story, you and I need to come to God with the attitude, “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*”

Centuries ago, St. Ignatius Brianchaninov of the Balamond Monastery near Beirut, Lebanon, composed a prayer that has become known the world over as “The Jesus Prayer.” The prayer goes like this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Would you say that with me, slowly? “***Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.***” This prayer is intended to be prayed repeatedly aloud, giving careful emphasis to each word. There are also motions with the prayer that I may show you later.

While you and I are more fortunate than the tax collector in Jesus’ story because we can pray to God *in the name of Jesus*, we, too, must always come in repentance. And even when we’ve prayed through everything we’re aware of, the Bible us that we can never know all the sin that lurks in our hearts,² so we’re taught to pray, “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*” (Psalm 139:23-24).

Matthew’s account of the Model Prayer includes a corollary to Principle One that’s absolutely critical. There Jesus said, “*If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins*” (Matthew 6:14-15). This corollary expands on the phrase in the Model Prayer that goes, “*and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*” “*As we also have forgiven*” means “in the same way and to the same extent.”

Jesus’ point is that if we harbor resentment, unforgiveness, bitterness, or anger in our hearts toward another person—even one—such harboring proves that we have failed to understand the gravity of our own sin, and it’s therefore impossible for us to have truly repented of it. And harboring such feelings, of course, is sin all by itself (Matthew 5:22).

Let me tell you a story that illustrates the power of Principle One. On Thursday night, November 14, 1940, the city of Coventry, in central England, was devastated by bombs dropped by the Luftwaffe. The majestic Coventry Cathedral, built in the fourteenth century, burned with the city, and only the shell of a few walls was left standing.

On the morning after the fire, the spiritual leaders of the Cathedral decided to rebuild it, not as an act of defiance, but as a sign of faith and hope. Over the next several days, three things happened that eventually changed Coventry, and that continue to change the world today. The first thing was that, shortly after the destruction of the Cathedral, Jock Forbes, the cathedral stonemason, noticed that two of the ancient roof timbers had fallen in the shape of a cross. Jock set the charred cross upright amid the ruins. An unknown person came along at some point after that and built an altar out of the rubble, placing the charred cross upright on the altar, and inscribing the words, “Father, Forgive” on the remnant of the wall behind the altar. The third thing was that a local priest, Arthur Wales, found three medieval nails in the ruins and fashioned a cross from them, putting this cross on the altar also.

Some years later, Rev. Stephen Verney became what we would think of as the “Associational Missionary” for the area that included Coventry. Stephen wrote that “When Hitler bombed our cathedral, God blew a hole in our old patterns of thinking and set fire to our old ecclesiastical structures, and out of our brokenness he made us a sign of ‘life through death.’”³

² “Who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Psalm 19:12).

³ Stephen Verney, *Fire in Coventry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964; rev. ed. Atlanta: Austin Publishing Co., 1996), p. 62. www.coventrycathedral.org

What happened was that a group of priests met on February 17, 1959 to begin planning the events that would lead up to the consecration of the rebuilt Cathedral on May 25, 1962. As Verney told the story, “The discussion started, and we very soon came to see that what God wanted was not just a consecrated Cathedral, but a *consecrated people* living round it. And there followed quickly the second uncomfortable discovery, that *if there was to be a consecrated people, it would have to begin with ourselves.*”⁴

Over a period of three years, small groups of clergy and laity gathered to pray through what it means to be a people consecrated to God, rather like our Incendiary Fellowship group is doing right now. Because the Christians of Coventry responded to each other and to God with repentance, confession, and forgiveness, God began a work of spiritual revival among them that moved to many other congregations across England and around the world. One of the things they did was to get together with believers from Dresden, Germany, a city destroyed by the Allies, for services of forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. And today there is an international ministry of reconciliation known as “The Community of the Cross of Nails.”⁵

So what does this all have to do with us? Well, on the night that He was betrayed, an event that we will commemorate together in just a few minutes, Jesus told His disciples, “A *new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. **By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another***” (John 13:34-35).

Stephen Verney, in describing how God worked among the believers in Coventry, wrote, “Try to obey the New Commandment, and you will find that you cannot. There is nothing so powerful to bring you to prayer.” He continued, “As we began to obey the New Commandment, so we began to experience the New Prayer. When we began to ask God, ‘What do you want us to do?’ we discovered that God did not want us to do anything. God asked us to surrender our pride; to stop trying to control everything; to stop trying to be God—which was of course the original sin of Adam.”⁶

Why do we pray for forgiveness for our own sin? Why do we do the sweaty soul work of forgiving those who “trespass against us”? We do these things because it is only in doing them that the Kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven. It is only in doing these things that we ourselves are able to experience lives that matter and relationships that last. And all of this brings us to Principle Two.

Principle Two: Pray for persons who create stress in your life. Turn with me to Luke 6 for a moment, and let’s look at verses 27-31:

27 “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Now the truth of the matter is that we’d probably prefer that Jesus had never said these words. “Love your enemies?!” “Do good to those who hate you?!” “Pray for the happiness of those who curse you?!” Get real, we say! Well, Jesus knew what we’d think about His prayer principles, and that’s why He began with the words, “if you are willing to listen.”

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

⁵ www.ccn-usa.org

⁶ Ibid., pp. 51-52.

The writer of Hebrews reminded us that our orders are to “*run with endurance the race that is set before us,*” and told us that “*we do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from start to finish*” (12:1-2). As we keep our eyes on Jesus, we see that Jesus did exactly what He told us to do. When we look at that cross and at those nails from which the fire in Coventry took its shape and its flame, we see Jesus as He cries out, again—even today, even in this moment—“*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34).

Sisters and brothers, it’s God’s purpose that the fire of the Spirit burns in Columbia even as that spiritual fire burned in Coventry. It’s God’s purpose to pour out the fire of the Spirit on us in such a way that our friends and neighbors will come to “watch us burn,” and that many will be saved. It’s God’s purpose that the waters of our baptistry be stirred right often.

As Stephen Verney reminds us, it is out of brokenness that revival comes. What God desires in you and in me is a “*broken and repentant spirit*” (Psalm 51:17). Pride always stands between us and God. God frequently cannot pour blessings into our hearts because our hearts are already full . . . of ourselves. We come into this sanctuary, quietly congratulating ourselves on how beautiful it is. We think of this as “our” church. We think in our hearts, “I’m quite a substantial citizen of Columbia, and God is pretty lucky to have me on his team.” Can you hear the Pharisee’s prayer? Where is “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me, a sinner?*”

It is repentance that opens the door to the Kingdom and it is pride that makes us blind to our need to repent. Jesus calls us to become a consecrated people whose love for one another will prove to the world that His Life is in us. Do you want your life to matter? Do you want your relationships to last? Do you really want the Kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven? Do you want the Fire to fall? Then keep your eyes on the Cross, my friend. Keep your eyes on the Cross.

#144 “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Prayer Principles from Jesus

1. **Pray in the awareness of your constant need for forgiveness** (Luke 18:9-14).

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

2. **Pray for persons who create stress in your life** (Luke 6:27-36).
3. **Make time to be alone with God in places that uplift your spirit** (Matthew 6:5-6, 14:22-23; Luke 6:12).
4. **Pray constantly and persistently** (Luke 11:5-13, 18:1-8).
 - Prayer changes us into persons who are able to receive God’s Power (Romans 12:2, Ephesians 6:18, Philippians 4:6-7, Colossians 4:2).
5. **Pray for God’s will to become your will** (Matthew 26:39, 42; Philippians 2:5).
 - Fasting can clarify your thinking in moments of decision (Matthew 4:2-4, 6:16-18; Acts 13:2-3, 14:23; Isaiah 58:1-11).
6. **Make prayer your first response to temptation and to crisis** (Matthew 26:41; Mark 14:32; 1 Corinthians 10:13).
7. **Learn what it means to pray in faith** (Mark 11:20-25).

