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Lord, Teach Us to Pray – You Can Call Him Father

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TEXT: Luke 11:1-4 (NRSV)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say:

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.”

If you want to learn and develop a particular skill, it's wise to turn to an expert to teach you. For instance, in the field of finance, it's very sensible to turn to a successful investor and ask him or her to teach you to become a savvy investor yourself. And if you are a golfer, it pays off to turn to a golf pro to teach you to drive the ball further and straighter. And in the area of academics, it's smart to turn to a well-respected research scholar and ask, “Teach me to do research, will you?” Let's turn to a spiritual matter like prayer. Who would you say is the best person to turn to, to help you in your per life? If you said Jesus, you're absolutely right. He's the greatest prayer of all time. After all, he's the son of God, knowing the mind of God. And he's also true man, and as true man, prayer was his go-to as he carried out his ministry. It was a power in his life. It was his lifeline as he faced the decisions and many challenges before him; it kept him going. Prayer was a major blessing in his life.

Now, I have a personal question for you. How would you describe your prayer life at the present time? Do you pray much? And are you experiencing the power and joy of prayer working in your daily life like it did in our Lord's? Now we know in our heart of

hearts that God wants us to have prayer working in our lives that he gave it to us to be a source of blessing. Yet many of us find ourselves struggling with it along the way. Dr. Haddon Robinson, who was one of America's most notable preachers in past decades, confesses in his book *What Jesus Said About Successful Living* these words:

Over the years, my success in prayer has been more intermittent than persistent. There have been times when I've gotten a hold of the hem of the garment, but I have not been able to sustain the grasp. One thing I know for certain: you don't turn over in bed and just say your prayers. To confess to you that I have had a lifelong struggle to sit at the feet of Jesus, I do with a certain amount of embarrassment.

And I can identify with Dr. Robinson. I pray regularly to God about all kinds of things, but I also have my time to struggle with it. I have my dry periods when I feel disconnected and discouraged and disappointed and ready to give up. But I have committed myself to not stop approaching God's throne of grace. It's a matter of obedience for me. God wants me to pray. And if it was important to Jesus, therefore it must be important for me as his disciple. So, I want to get better at it. And as Robinson describes it, I want to get a hold of the hem of the garment. But I also know that he's right when he points out that it just doesn't happen automatically. You don't just turn over in bed and say your prayers. Henri Nouwen, a well-known and respected, contemplative Christian author, wrote this insight about prayer: "The paradox of prayer is that it asks for a serious effort while it can only be received as a gift. We cannot plan, organize, or manipulate God. But without a careful discipline, we cannot receive him either." Prayer is a spiritual discipline. As a follower of Jesus, I want to experience God's strength and power and direction working in me like Jesus did. I want to grow closer to God and my relationship with him, and I'll bet you do too.

The disciples sure did. They observed that Jesus prayed a lot, and they also noticed what it seemed to do for him as he faced life's challenges. And so, one day they asked him to teach them to pray. Isn't it interesting? They didn't say, "Teach us to preach, teach us to teach, or teach us to counsel or lead, or heal," no, they said, "Teach us to pray." It must have delighted Jesus to hear this request from them. The disciples were obviously beginning to catch on to the value of prayer. I can imagine Jesus smiling and nodding his head at them as he sat down to teach them to pray. He gave them a prayer which we call the Lord's Prayer to you. It's probably one of the most familiar and treasured prayers in the world. I remember years ago, after a worship service that I led, a friend of mine came up to me and said, "Steve, why did you leave out the Lord's

Prayer today? Man, I wish you wouldn't do that. It's important to me. It does something inside of me when we say it together at our worship." Well, it is a great prayer, a valuable gift from Jesus to us, and it's to be used a lot, not ignored or taken for granted. And it's not to be thoughtlessly recited like a poem or a magical incantation of some sort. I know from personal experience how easy it is to fall into the habit of just reciting it in haste without much thought. That's not what Jesus had in mind when he gave it to the disciples to use. This is more of a model prayer, giving us a framework to work with in our own conversations with God. It's as if Jesus is saying "When you talk to God, talk to him about these things." And because it's given to us by Jesus, the son of God, we know it's perfect, it's flawless in form and content. It's the ideal permanent base for every conversation with God. That's why I thought we should take a few Sundays of Lent to delve into this Lord's Prayer and examine each part of it more deeply so that we might have a clearer picture of what we are being taught to say to God and thus grow in our own prayer life.

So, we're beginning prayer class with Jesus today, and we're focusing on the opening, the way Jesus teaches us to address God. Jesus says, "When you pray, say 'father.'" That's a rather personal, intimate way to address the great God of the universe, isn't it? Jesus seems to be teaching us here that God is approachable and personal, someone we can actually know. He's interested in us and we could actually have a close, personal relationship with him, as our father. I know some people struggle with this idea of calling God "father." First, for cultural reasons, some people will ask me "Why don't we call a mother or keep a gender neutral? Let's be fair here." Well, my response has always been because Jesus taught us to say it, and he must have had a good reason. Or for others, there are more theological reasons – they think it seems to shrink one's perspective on our almighty God. They're uncomfortable with the notion of a personal relationship with the great God of the cosmos. But yet again, Jesus is teaching us to address God that way. And he actually described him in a parable as the gracious father who welcomed his lost son home after all the terrible things his son had done to him.

And, of course, some struggle with calling God father for personal reasons, because of painful experiences they've suffered at the hands of their fathers. Tragically, that does happen more often than we think. I was just reading the autobiography of a Hall of Fame ballplayer who had grown up with a very abusive father. It was an awful thing and made him an untrusting and distant person towards others for a lot of years. And I've talked with people who have been sexually abused by their dads, and that

experience has left them with painful wounds, and some have had fathers who were cold and harsh and unforgiving. And if any of those have been your life experience, I'm sorry that you went through that. No one should have to. And I hope you've gotten some professional help to assist you in sorting it all out and find healing, using the resources, the counselors, God has provided. It's not a weakness in your faith to do something like that. It's the wise thing. And I also appeal to you, encourage you, to not confuse your heavenly father with the fathers you've seen on Earth. He's the perfect father. His love for you is perfect. It's consistent and it never ends – never. I was fortunate to have a loving earthly father myself, who's now in Heaven, and both he and mom are gone. And but I'm not an orphan. Never will be, because I will always have my heavenly father with me forever. I know he loves me, and that's comforting.

I've always liked the way Martin Luther wrote about this in his small catechism section on the Lord's Prayer. He writes, "'Our father who art in Heaven,' what does this mean here? God encourages us to believe that he is truly our father and we are his children. We therefore are to pray to him with complete confidence, just as children speak to their loving father." I love that – it's so important to keep in mind who we are talking with when we, as Christians come to God in prayer. In Christ, God is our heavenly, loving father, and we are his children, forgiven and adopted into his family with an eternal inheritance. That reality, by the way, is not because of anything I have done. It's because of what he's done for me. This kind of relationship with God was made possible only through the cross. We were far from God in our sinfulness, but God sent Jesus to suffer and die on a cross and rise again so that we could become God's rescued and adopted children. He was in Christ, reconciling us to himself so that the broken relationship with him might be restored and we could confidently then turn to God as our loving father when we pray. That privilege came at a great cost to God, our father. That cross reassures me again and again that this God I'm approaching in prayer really does love me and wants to hear from me and carry on a relationship with me. So I need to keep my eyes on the cross.

Sometimes circumstances can cause me to doubt him and ask, Does he really care about me? Does he know me? I know I've been there. Or there are lots of times when we as adopted children through Christ, let him down. We think, how can I possibly approach him again? He has every right to write me off, strike me down, turn away from me and even disown me. And that's when I most need to focus on the cross and remember the great lengths God went to make me his forgiven child. He truly does love me. He's my

father and his commitment to us has always been greater than our commitment to him. His love is unwavering, and this is a very important truth to carry with you as you turn to the Lord in prayer. Through Faith in Christ, you have become his child and you are no stranger to him. And yes, you will continue to still be a disobedient, sinful child as well as a saint, but God will keep loving you as his own anyway. He is full of amazing grace upon grace. Amen to that. That's why Jesus teaches us that when Christians pray, they can confidently come to God and call him father and that God likes that. It's an endearing expression of our faith in him. According to the Savior, that name is God's favorite. We know that because that's what Jesus, true God and true man, called him over 200 times in the New Testament Gospels, and God endorsed Jesus, didn't he? And everything he said by raising him from the tomb on Easter morning? It's an inviting word image, then, that inspires confidence and attracts us to turn to him in prayer. In all matters of life, he's our support. He's not some impersonal, distant deity. He's your father who loves you. It reminds us that this great, almighty God of the universe is personal, and he cares and he knows us, and he's approachable and available to you any time, night or day, about anything.

As the old hymn says, it's a privilege that we have here to carry everything to God in prayer, and he'll never turn his sons and daughters away, but instead will welcome us with open arms as we come to visit with him and spend time with him in prayer. So that we can experience his love and warmth in our lives. You know, when I pray, I like the image of me crawling up into God's lap or sitting on a park bench, leaning with my head on his shoulder. That lap and strong shoulder of God is always available to his children, no matter how old you are. You can do that. You see, I discovered in my own life, I really need him. I can't get by without him. The same goes for you. We're just not that smart or capable or strong on our own. We need that time with the father. Life can get difficult and discouraging and feel like an overwhelming battle that we're losing. And that's when we need to know that prayer has been given to us to help us through those times.

But we're not only to reserve prayer for those hard times or emergencies. We also need it for when life is good. It can build us up then in order to be prepared for the rough days. I heard someone say one time "he who does not pray when the sun is shining, will not know how to pray when the clouds roll in," and cloudy times will come. And we will need him to carry us and help us when they do occur.

So, friend, keep praying in all circumstances to your father. Jesus did, he needed to. Are we so arrogant as to believe that we're more competent than Jesus? I hope not. I encourage you today to grab that lifeline your father offers you, and call upon him daily like a child confidently approaches his or her loving father. And as you draw near to him, he will draw near to you because he loves you deeply, so deeply that he gave his only son to die for you so that you could become his adopted child with the privilege of calling out to him any time, night or day, "Father." Our first class on prayer is now dismissed, but before we go our way, let's pray. Father, thank you for your deep, deep love. We would be lost without it. Thank you for the privilege of turning to you in prayer as confident children approaching a loving, committed father who can do all things. Amen.