

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name

February 24, 2008

Why Do We Pray?

John 4:1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" ²-- although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized-- ³he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Matthew 6:4-14 ⁴ so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁵"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷"When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹Give us this day our daily bread. ¹²And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. ¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you;

Luke 11:1-4 **Luke 11:1** 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." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

I want to begin a series of sermons today on the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that we, as Christians, have become familiar with at a very early age. It is **the prayer** of the church – prayed in worship on Sunday, in weddings, in funerals, in church meetings and at almost any time and circumstance in which we gather as some segment of the body of Christ. It makes no difference how large or how small the gathering. It is a regular part of the rhythm of Christian life.

One of the common questions that new Christians will ask is "**How do I pray?**" But, the first question really should be, "**Why do I pray?**" Do we pray to get something or to get rid of something. I remember a young Christian who said his watch stopped and he put it on top of the refrigerator and prayed that God would fix and get it going again. Do we pray to change God's mind when we are afraid of judgment? Or do we pray to alter a hurricane from coming into Virginia Beach as Pat Robertson once did? Are we rewarded for our prayers if done

regularly, properly and frequently? Is the reward in heaven or on earth? I have often heard folks say, "I don't know how to pray like you do." I can also remember hearing long and well crafted prayers that were really a preacher's second sermon and it took all of my energy to keep awake! Why do we pray, then?

Certainly, if there was a candidate for "**change**" in the ancient days of Galilee, as we hear in modern political parlance today, it would be this **Nazarene rabbi**. Later, the followers of this crucified and resurrected Jesus were accused of turning the world upside down! They continued to change the world and turn it upside down. And it all began that way as soon as Jesus spoke the first words to call people to faith. In one of the shortest sermons on record he proclaimed that the Kingdom of Heaven was very near and that each person needed to turn toward God and believe in the Good News. That was **change**. Then Jesus set about to do just that – touching the untouchable, being with the rejected and outcast, healing and doing good on the Sabbath, and going places that he ought not to go if he were

a proper Jew – such as in the story today in the Gospel of John, when Jesus comes to the woman at the well in Samaria.

At the heart of change is the **sacrifice** of self. Give up this life he would urge, in order to find real life. Take up the cross and follow this radically different thinking rabbi Jesus. Later St. Paul would say, "*present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*" (Romans 12:1) Only in so doing could a Christian discern and know the will of God, what is good and acceptable. In the coming weeks we must ask ourselves what "Sacrifice" means today to do God's work right here in this place. To a people who are anxious about life, grasping for every dollar and material good, seeking our own rewards now, this is a threatening demand. Sacrifice means giving up self to find real life in the life of our God.

In this season of Lent, we journey together toward and through Holy Week until we pass through Good Friday and arrive at that great day of celebration, Easter – the Resurrection of Jesus. This

is a time of prayer and of turning our lives toward the higher calling of God. It requires each disciple to **sacrifice the easy way** for the **hard and demanding way** of the Lord. To do some means **sacrifice**.

Right in the middle of his greatest set of teachings – the Sermon on the Mount – chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew, written to a Jewish audience who have cut their teeth on the Laws of Moses – and right in the middle of this sermon, Jesus **places the prayer** that is **central** to our way of life. We begin studying this prayer this morning. It is the *Lord's Prayer*.

Why do we pray at all? People were confused at Jesus' teaching as they looked about them and saw the most pious examples in their villages, synagogues and in the great Temple in Jerusalem. Prayer was important as an act of piety. Many, however, prayed to be seen in their praying. This was their reward. Many gave alms to the poor to be seen for their giving. A person would throw a coin into the receptacle in the Temple and you could

easily tell how much by its sound. Places of seating were places of importance based on your visible holy life and your wealth on earth.

This man of **divine change** challenged this way of life on earth. To give to the poor, to pray to God or to fast with sackcloth and ashes are **not to be seen as rewards on earth**. These rewards find only limited and full reward right now. Rather, these are acts that could be better done in silence or in secret so that only God would know and are the **riches of eternity**. The contrast was between what people believed was riches and wealth on earth and to that which is riches in heaven. It means that disciples have to make choices about this kind of wealth.

Thieves can break in and steal wealth what is material and earthly. But, who can steal the wealth and riches of heaven?

Why do we pray? We pray to know the difference and to know that we are truly God's children and that God is in charge and we are not. We pray because God is **both holy and distant** but

also **loving and personal** to **each** believer. And only a disciple can go to the heart of prayer before God. No pretensions will work. No show or ostentatious display will **impress** the Lord of heaven and earth. No amount of money or lack of it will sway the heavenly Father.

So **why** do we pray? We pray **to put ourselves before God** as a flower is placed in the sunlight. When the sun shines its living rays upon the plant, it literally tilts toward the sun. When we place ourselves before God, we lean into God's truth and ways.

Here we receive the living waters that sustain us as ***the woman at the well*** heard from Jesus as he stopped at that well in Samaria. To a **woman** and a **despised Samaritan** who was also a known sinner with many lovers and husbands, yet he offered her the gift of water that would quench her thirst forever.

Why do we pray? We pray because it places us before God and **honors God**. So, Jesus begins by instructing the disciples who really want to know the **true riches** and wealth of heaven. The

first instruction is to **acknowledge God** – *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...*

In Jesus' day, "**Father**" was the word "**abba**." It was that word that spoke of a **parent** who would love as a parent loves his own child. It is as if you pray to your own "**daddy**." It was said that a **Roman Emperor** returned victorious with the spoils and captives of his battles. On one such occasion, the Emperor's wife and son were on a platform near the crowd as the Emperor passed by. As soldiers held back the people from approaching the mighty Emperor, his very own son ran under the legs and around the crowd and tried to reach his father. When a soldier grabbed him and scooped him up to stop him, the soldier says, "Don't you know who that is? That's the Emperor." The boy replied, "He may be the Emperor, **but he is my father.**"

A son or a daughter should know that they have access to the **love of the Father** of heaven and earth at any time. So, we pray, "**Our Father** in heaven." It is **not my** father alone, though. I

cannot claim or possess this parent all to myself. It is "**Our** Father." Yours and yours and everyone here and all over, around the world and in every age, must know this relationship to be true, that God belongs to everyone.

And, we are offered **full access** to this divine God. That's powerful stuff. Just consider how much money a lobbyist would pay today to gain access to an important legislator, or an aspiring presidential candidate, anyone from any party. Consider how much it is worth to gain access to the oval **office of the west wing of the White House at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue?**

Access is everything in politics. It is influence, money, and power to get what you want. How do you **approach** or get an **introduction** to an important person? Some would say that to get that kind of lucrative **access** depends **not** on what you know. It depends on **whom** you know.

But, access to God is not the same. Access to God is offered freely in this simple prayer. This is an open access to any believer. What a contrast in access through this simple prayer!

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote to the **Roman** house churches. "...we have *peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have ACCESS to this grace in which we stand..." (Romans 5:1b-2a)

Why do we pray? We pray because we honor God in prayer – to listen, to be shaped, and to become what we were meant to be. *Hallowed be thy name* or *Holy is your name*, as some translations put it, means that to approach God is to come into the presence of what is sacred and holy. It is not a mere sentiment to say, "*daddy*." To say God is holy is to remember that the **Ten Commandments** demand that we acknowledge **one and only one** God. You will have no other gods before this one and holy God. The name itself is sacred and not to be desecrated by slang or presumptuous use that becomes so casual

as to mean nothing sacred when used in a profane and common way.

How many times do we glibly say, "*Oh God*" ? Or we say in frustration, "*Jesus Christ.*" Or worse yet we make the word become a curse – God --. Should God's **name** be so easily spoken with so little care and meaning? That will not make our heavenly deity holy in the least.

To pray the **sacred name** of God is to hold this whole person of God in honor and in respect. *Hallowed* reminds us that God is set apart from sin and deserves worship and glory.

A **psychiatrist** once remarked that he could determine something critical about the mental state of a person by what that person held as **holy and sacred**. He would wonder if there is any sense of "*awe*" for God or the divine in this person. Is there that sense of "*awe*" when we pray "*Our Father who art in heaven*"?

Why do we pray? We pray because we place ourselves before the Almighty God, maker of heaven and earth, whose son, Jesus Christ, lived and died and was resurrected to **give us hope eternal**. If we pray for no other reason, it is to know that **we are not gods**. We are the creation of a God. We are creatures of the creator.

Why do we pray? We pray **because** people are confused about the difference between earthly and heavenly riches; **because**; God is in charge and we are not; **because** we put ourselves before God to honor God as our heavenly parent; **because** we honor God to be shaped to become what we were meant to be; and **because** God gives us access to grace and hope that is real.

Next week, we will look at that part of the Lord's Prayer which says, "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven*." Praying in this spirit, we move from the secure foundation of our relationship to the God of heaven whom we worship and hold in awe and holiness to the **changes** we need

altered in our life to be in good relationship with each other and with God. That's when we ask, "**What** do we pray?" *Not my will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...* Now that is a challenge, isn't it?

Listen to this prayer as it is sung to us. Then later we will pray it together that this prayer, the Lord's Prayer, that it may shape us in spirit to be faithful disciples who will **sacrifice** our lives as our God would call us. This Jesus is the real person of **change** – yesterday, today and tomorrow. Will you vote for him?