

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY: (#2) ME, PRAY?”

(Hebrews 10:19-23; Hebrews 4:16)

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[PROP NEEDED: “Wizard of Oz” Video Clip]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 2-28-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Texts: Hebrews 10:19-23; Hebrews 4:16 and Pray.

2. [WATCH “The Wizard of Oz” VIDEO CLIP (1:08:34-1:10:07, Total Time: 1:33)]

A–So, how do you approach God in prayer?

B–Unfortunately, what we see here is something like what many people think about when they think about praying: a powerful and mighty God who is to be feared.

C–And because we feel insignificant and perhaps even unworthy in His presence, we wonder if He’s approachable at all, and if prayer is really something that *we* can do without feeling anxious and awkward.

3. Well, this is a mind-set that I want to address as we continue our series “Lord, Teach Us to Pray” by looking today at the “WHO” of prayer (*Refer to Bulletin Sermon Notes*).

A–*Who* is prayer for? Is it really just for “professionals” like clergy and others trained in religious work? Or for laity who’re “called” to be in some sort of church prayer ministry?

B–Who is it (really!) that God wants to communicate and interact with during prayer?

–II–

4. To answer this, let’s begin by acknowledging that there *is* a sense in which biblical prayer *does* need to acknowledge the greatness and power of God.

A–But as I mentioned last week, the Bible teaches a paradox here, in that this great and majestic Lord of the whole universe is also at the same time... intimate & *approachable*.

1–And that while His power far exceeds that of the “Wizard of Oz,” He’s *not* a terrible and dreadful being who requires fear and trepidation to be approached,...

2–...But is instead a loving, compassionate being who longs for us to draw near to Him in a deep, abiding relationship, using prayer as the primary means to do this.¹

B–Today’s scriptures in fact make this quite clear – let me read them (again):

1–Hebrews 10:19-23,

(MSG) “*So friends, we can now - without hesitation - walk right up to God, into ‘the Holy Place.’ Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The ‘curtain’ into God’s presence is his body. So let’s do it - full of belief, confident that we’re presentable inside and out. Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word.*”

(NRSV) “*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us... through his [death], and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach [the throne] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience....*”

2–Hebrews 4:16,

(MSG), “*So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take [His] mercy, accept [His] help.*”

(NRSV) “*Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

C–Do you hear in these verses the reality of a God who uses prayer to invite us to a relationship with Him?...A God who longs for us to commune intimately with Him? ...To receive from Him grace and help for the challenges and obstacles of our lives, so that we don’t feel like we have to face them all alone?

D–These are verses that tell us that we’re *all* invited to pray as a way to build and deepen our relationship with God, and through it to receive the *benefits* of that relationship: hope; joy; peace; forgiveness; and freedom from anxiety and fear.

5. Now, I *will* acknowledge that while it’s easy to say that prayer is “for everyone,” most of us need help understanding exactly what that means in practical terms.
6. So let’s briefly talk about what I call the “**Two Contexts for Prayer**” – two biblical “settings” (if you will) in which each of us is asked to pray.

–III–

7. The first of these is what’s often called **INDIVIDUAL / PERSONAL PRAYER** (or even at times called “private prayer”).

A–It’s the idea that every one of us can and should have our own *private, personal, individual* prayer time with God that includes no one else but God and us.

1–Jesus himself prayed in this kind of context. We find many instances, for example, where he went apart from his disciples and from the crowds to pray alone with God – sometimes silently, sometimes out loud – but by himself nevertheless.²

2–And if Jesus (who was God himself) practiced this kind of praying, then why would we (who are *not* God) think we need anything *less!*

B–In my own life, some of the most meaningful encounters I’ve had with God have been in my own personal prayer time – whether it was time I set aside weekly to pray here in the Sanctuary, or on my back porch at home, or walking around my neighborhood, or walking along the beach on vacation – I value the times when my heart and soul has its own private intimacy with God.

1–The famous scientist Sir Isaac Newton once said,

*“I can take my telescope and look millions and millions of miles into space. But when I lay it aside, go into my room, shut the door, and get down on my knees in earnest prayer, I see more of Heaven and feel closer to God than if I were assisted by all the telescopes and material [things] on earth.”*³

2–A pastor once saw a little boy going in and out of their church sanctuary several times one day, and (suspicious of what He was doing), the pastor asked him, to which the boy simply replied, *“Oh, I was just in there loving God a little.”*

C–Well, that’s what personal prayer is: *“loving God a little”* in our own personal, intimate way. So, are *you* taking time to do that?

8. Our prayer life, though, also needs to include **CORPORATE / GROUP PRAYER** – what we sometimes call *“public prayer,”* or (depending on the context)... *“family prayer.”*

A–These are essentially opportunities for us to pray *with others*,... often *out loud*, in groups like Sunday School, in a Bible Study group, Choir/Praise Team, Youth Group, or even in our families (like with our spouse, children, and/or parents).⁴

1–Corporate Prayer can take the form of one person praying “on behalf of” everyone else (like a Pastor/Worship Leader does in worship, or like a parent does in a blessing at a dinner table),...

2–...Or it can take the form of everyone praying aloud *each in turn* (going around a circle, each praying a sentence or two), and still other times it can be an entire group praying *in unison* (like we sometimes do in worship, as well).

B–Again, we find examples of this kind of praying throughout the Bible – where people pray out loud in groups or assemblies, and we find a *power* in this kind of context that’s *different from* the power found in our individual prayer time.⁵

1–For example, until recently, one of my own weekly practices has been to pray in my office each Sunday morning:...for our services (that God would bless them); for each of you (that God would touch you and help you hear something from Him); and that God would use me and our all our worship leaders (imperfect as we are) to do these things.

2–But about a month ago, one of our Men’s groups asked if they could come join me each week to pray for these same things; and even though I’d enjoyed my private prayer time, in the last month since I’ve done this, I’ve sensed an even stronger power of God at work through the prayers of these men as we pray *together*.

3–Another example is the prayers my family and I share each year in December as we light the candles on our family Advent Wreath – we read & pray the scriptures and prayers from the Upper Room devotional booklet for that month, and we find our family being drawn closer as we share that time together.

C–You see, there is special power present when God’s people pray *together* – not only are we drawn closer to *God*, but we’re mystically also drawn closer to the people we’re praying *with*, as well. ⁶

–III–

9. So the Bible shows us, then, that prayer is really an invitation for *everyone* to come openly and unabashedly into the presence of God, so that through both its *personal* and *corporate* contexts, we can connect and interact not only with *God*, but also with *His people*. ⁷

A–Think of it like being at a party/reception, where the host comes over and welcomes you in person, and starts talking with you.

1–And in the middle of that very personal, intimate, one-on-one conversation, the host says, “*Oh, and have you met (so and so)?*” and he/she takes you over and introduces you.

2–And from that point on, there’s a new dimension to your conversation, because the host has helped you to open your circle and include fellow guests in your sharing.

B–Well, that’s what prayer does: it invites us into a personal, intimate dialogue with *God*, but one in which (sooner or later) God introduces us to *others*, as well – ...

C–...Only in this case, the “others” aren’t “guests”; like us, they’re merely imperfect people who’ve first been invited, and then adopted into God’s family, and with whom God invites us to share the conversation – and THAT is prayer!

10. [PRAY]

ENDNOTES:

1. A primary example that I read last week is Jesus’ words in Luke 11 where he was teaching his disciples to pray, and you may remember that in Verse 3 he said... “*When you pray, say: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...*” The word “*hallowed*” simply means “*holy*” or “*set apart*” (e.g., a reference to the majesty and the power and the “otherness” of God. But I mentioned that the word “*Father*” in the original Aramaic language (that Jesus spoke) was the word “*Abba*,” and it was a term that implied great intimacy and familiarity – in fact, a more contemporary translation might be “*Daddy*” or “*Dad*.” In other words, when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, He was saying, in effect, “*When you pray, remember that even though God is ‘holy,’ you can and should pray to Him as if you were talking to your own earthly Daddy (or at least to someone that you love and cherish and care for very deeply).*”

2. Examples of Jesus praying alone include Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:46; and Luke 6:12. Notice, too, that in this context, we most often pray SILENTLY (i.e., to ourselves). However, many Christians have found that there a great power and openness to God’s Spirit and direction when we choose to pray ALOUD, even in our personal/individual prayer times.

3. Samiplus.net Digest website, “Quotes of the Greats”, found at www.samiplus.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4:be-inspired&catid=20:reflection&Itemid=53

4. The scriptures give numerous examples of families who followed God's ways and were obedient to various disciplines of faith, which certainly included the discipline and practice of prayer (For example, read Exodus 12:3-13; Joshua 24:15; 1 Samuel 1:21; Acts 10:2; 16:15; 18:8; 1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 2:5). You've heard it said before: "*The family that prays together stays together*" – and even though it's a cliché, there's a good bit of truth to it.

It may seem a bit awkward at first, but we should all develop ways and times for us to pray with members of our family: with our spouses; our children; and even our parents. And we need to also find ways to include our family member's prayers in our family prayer times. For example, instead of always letting adults pray the family prayer, we should allow our children to do so from time to time – we'll often get a blessing out of their simple, child-like faith. (Read Matthew 18:2-3 and Matthew 19:13-15).

5. For example, last week's key scripture of Luke 11:1-3 tells us that one day one of Jesus' own disciples asked him, "*Lord, teach US to pray, as John taught his disciples.*" [Jesus] said to them, "*When YOU [plural] pray, say: 'OUR Father in heaven, hallowed be your name...'*" Notice this disciple didn't say, "Lord, teach ME to pray," but "Lord teach US..." And not only did Jesus use the plural tense of "you" when he was answering, but began what has come to be called "The Lord's Prayer" with "OUR Father" (not "MY Father"). It's almost as if Jesus wanted to say by his own answer that biblical prayer should never become *merely* a private act of personal devotion and piety.

6. Perhaps that's why 19th-century prayer evangelist Andrew Murray once said that "*The [one] who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history.*" Along the same lines, evangelist Dwight L. Moody once said "*I'd rather be able to pray than be a great preacher; Jesus Christ never taught his disciples how to preach, but only how to pray*" [--D. L. Moody, cited in James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988), p. 417]. In a similar vein, noted preacher Charles Spurgeon once remarked that "*I would rather teach one man to pray than ten men to preach.*"

7. This is precisely why when we become a member of a United Methodist church, one promise we make is to become a person of prayer – to support the mission and ministry of Christ's church through our "Prayers." It's one promise we can *all* keep as we seek to grow in our relationship with God, for even if we can't teach Sunday School or sing in the choir/praise team or do some other "public" kind of ministry, we can pray (I even remind our homebound members that this is one ministry that they can still perform, even if they can't do other ministries – they can pray for their church and for its ministries).

We can all pray for ourselves, for each other, for our community, state, nation, and world, and for our church (its vision, mission, ministry, and witness in our world). John 17 gives an example of Jesus praying for his people (the church). It is a prayer for their protection from evil, for them to have the complete joy that comes only from God his Father, for power to go out into the world and witness to His glory, for those who will come to salvation because of their ministry. And in fact, from the very beginning of its ministry, we find the church (the people of God) praying for God's will, for people, situations, and power to witness (See for example, Acts 1:14; 6:4; 12:5; 13:1-3; 14:23; Romans 12:12-13; and James 5:14).]