

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY: (#3) ‘PRAY, THEN, IN THIS WAY...’”

(Matthew 6:9-13)

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[PROP NEEDED: Aramaic Text of “The Lord’s Prayer” for Media Screen]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-7-10]

–I–

1. Today as we continue our sermon series “Lord, Teach Us to Pray,” our focus turns to the “HOW” of prayer: Is there a particular biblical form or pattern that we should follow when we pray? If so, what is it? And what does it look like in practice?

A–Well, Jesus’ disciples also wanted to know the answers to these questions, and in today’s scripture, he answers them with words that have come to be some of the most famous and familiar words in the entire Bible.

B–If you will, let’s read it together from the media screen... [Show Aramaic text of **The Lord’s Prayer in BOTH services...**] You can’t read that? Well, that’s how Jesus would have read it (in Aramaic)! But how about this?... [In Unison, Read English NRSV translation of **Matthew 6:9-13 and Pray**].

2. Of course, we know this today simply as “The Lord’s Prayer,” and for the last nearly 2000 years, Christians have used this prayer in worship services, at funerals, weddings, in personal prayer time, and even in group settings.

A–So, one answer to “*HOW should we pray?*” might be to simply *say* this prayer over and over again (like we sometimes do).

B–And yet, when Jesus shared this prayer with his disciples, I want us to notice that (in Vs.9) he *didn’t* say “*Pray these specific words...*” but simply “*Pray in this way...*”

1–In other words, I *don’t* believe this prayer is intended to be (as we’ve often made it) a rote, legalistic ritual that we *say* over and over, to the point where it’s hollow and meaningless.

2–Instead, Jesus’ own words indicate that it’s intended to be a flexible *pattern* that’s merely meant to *guide* the creativity and focus of our prayer life.

(a) It’s really just a *skeleton* over which we can lay the “meat / muscle” (if you will) of our own *unique* prayers – ...

(b) ...A structure meant not to *limit* us merely to *these words*, but to *guide* the spirit behind our *own* words.

3. So, rather than dissecting The Lord’s Prayer line by line,¹ what I’d like to do today instead is to share an acronym that I think captures the essence of what Jesus is trying to teach through his prayer about *how* we are to pray.

A–It’s called the ACTS pattern (because the 1st letter of each word makes up the word ACTS).

B—Many of you have heard it before, but I share it again simply because within these four words I think we find the primary concepts of prayer that Jesus shares in his “Lord’s Prayer” for us to know and practice. (*Refer to Bulletin Sermon Notes*)

–II–

4. The letter “A” first of all stands for **ADORATION** – the idea that biblical prayer should either start with (or at least *include*) expressions of praise to God.

A—Jesus’ prayer itself begins (in Vs. 9) with the words “*Our Father in heaven, hallowed [“holy”] is your name...*” – essentially words which “*tell the truth about who GOD is.*”

1—Think about the fact that as parents, we don’t want our children to love us just because of the *things* we give them, or the things we *do* for them. No, we want them to love us *simply because* we’re their parents.

2—Well, it’s the same with God: biblical prayer includes expressions of our love for God simply because of who God is ...because the most *meaningful* kind of love is love given for its own sake.

B—So, for example, when I set aside time to pray, I often begin my prayers by singing (or at least *listening*) to music about God’s character / nature, OR I’ll read scripture or part of a book or prayer that talks about *who* God is as our faithful Father – but however we do it, prayer should include adoration.

5. The second letter of the ACTS pattern reminds us of the importance of... **CONFESSION**.

A—Remember that in the version of The Lord’s Prayer we often say in worship, Jesus taught us (Vs.12) to pray “*Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

1—The word “*trespasses*” is also often translated as “*debts/sins,*” but whatever word is used, it’s simply a reminder that not only should prayer “*tell the truth about who God is,*” but it should also “*acknowledge the truth about who WE are.*”

2—Confession means acknowledging (to ourselves *and* to God) our own imperfections and faults, exposing the “darkness” of our own hearts to the “light” of God’s grace and forgiveness,...

B—...Which means that confession becomes a pattern that we pass on to others, as well.

1—[PRESSING TRASH STORY] A little girl was once overheard praying the Lord’s Prayer one night during her bedtime prayers by her parents, only when she got to the phrase “forgive us our trespasses,” what her parents hear her say instead was “*Forgive us our trash presses as we forgive those who press trash against us.*”

2–And isn't that what "confession" really is?... asking God to help *us* forgive those who take the "garbage/filth" of their own life (e.g., their fears, frustrations and insecurities) and dump them on us? ...even as *God* forgives *us* of the disgusting "trash" of *our lives* that we "dump/press" against Him and others?

C–James 5:16 says "*Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed*" – there is power, you see, in confession.

6. I believe that the "T" in the ACTS pattern can stand for **THANKSGIVING** – that prayer should always "*Acknowledge God's loving actions towards us, others, & our world.*"

A–The tagline of The Lord's Prayer (which is actually a footnote to Vs. 13 in many translations) says "...*For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever.*"

B–And even if these aren't *explicit* words of gratitude, they nevertheless *do* express a sense of satisfaction and appreciation for God's loving actions already at work to bring His "*kingdom*" and "*power*" and "*glory*" into our world.

1–Most of us have received a "thank-you" note, or email, or "e-card" at some point in our lives – and it's a good feeling, isn't it?... knowing that someone took the time to write and send it to you?

2–Well, it's the same with God – our relationship with Him is made stronger when we take time to "count our blessings", acknowledge His work, & say "thank you," not only for who He is, but also for the specific *things* He's done for us and others.

7. Finally, I believe that the "S" represents the practice of **SUPPLICATION**² – the most obvious example being what we find in Verse 11, where Jesus says "*Give us this day our daily bread.*"

A–This is an open invitation to "*share our life's needs*" with God, confidently trusting Him to address them in His own, unique way (rather than only in the way *we* might want).³

1–I can think of a number of times in own life when I prayed for specific thing, and God *answered*... but not always in the way I *prayed*.

2–And in most cases, He later revealed that the *specific* thing I'd prayed for either was only something I *wanted* (but not something I *needed*), or that what I really *needed* was something else entirely!...

B–...And that brings me to the point that too often our supplications/requests focus *solely* on *us*, instead of on the priorities Jesus sets forth in The Lord's Prayer.⁴

1–For example, when we pray “*Your kingdom come, your will be done...*” (Vs.10), we’re acknowledging that we can’t always have *our* way, and so we’re saying that we trust that *God’s way* really is best.

2–Croft Pentz once wrote that “*Prayer is not a device for getting our wills done through heaven, but a desire that God’s will may be done on earth through us.*”⁵

3–Also, when we pray (Vs.13) “*Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,*” this is simply a request that God would help *US* trust Him to such a depth and degree that when we *do* face challenges & temptations of life, we would not *succumb* to them – the MSG translation says, “*Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.*”

D–So the bottom line here is that even the requests of our prayer life should be not only consistent with God’s kingdom and will, but should be of such a nature that – if God answered them with a “Yes” – they would help us bring glory to His kingdom.

–III–

8. And so,... A.C.T.S.: *Adoration; Confession; Thanksgiving; and Supplication.*⁶

A–These are the four concepts of biblical prayer that we find in The Lord’s Prayer.⁷

1–Like the words of the prayer itself, they’re *not* intended to be a pat formula that we simply memorize and regurgitate over and over again.

2–Instead, they’re intended to be a *pattern* for our daily *practice* of prayer.

B–And it’s my hope that as we learn the “HOW” of prayer from Jesus himself, that *his* prayer – The Lord’s Prayer, through these ACTS – would become the prayer *pattern* of our very hearts.

9. [PRAY (**Led by Mary M or Jim P**)]

10. [SING SOLO: “*Hallowed*” (by Jennifer Knapp)]

ENDNOTES:

1. Each line/phrase of The Lord’s Prayer can, in fact, teach us something about *how* to pray, and each can also give us insight into the nature and meaning of our relationship with God. And there are preachers (including myself) that expounded The Lord’s Prayer in just such a way, preaching a series of sermons on each line/phrase of this prayer. Numerous books also explore the prayer from this “line-by-line” exposition/approach. Several which I recommend highly include: Hank Hanegraaff, *The Prayer of Jesus: Secrets to Real Intimacy With God* (See www.prayerofjesus.org); and James Mulholland, *Praying Like Jesus: The Lord’s Prayer In A Culture of Prosperity* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001). Consider, too, the words of Henry Ward Beecher, who once wrote, “*I used to think the Lord’s Prayer was a short prayer; but, as I live longer, and see more of life, I believe there is no such thing as getting through it. If a man, in praying that prayer, were to be stopped by every word until he had thoroughly prayed it, it would take him a lifetime*” (Henry Ward Beecher, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 34).

2. This, of course, this is the most well-known and widely-used component of prayer. We're all aware of "fox-hole" prayers prayed by soldiers on the battlefield, of emotional pleas by parents for God to save their child after a tragic accident, and even of our own desperate prayers for peace for both ourselves & our world today. We call this part of prayer "*Supplication*" (if it's prayer for ourselves), or "*Intercession*" (if it's prayer on behalf of others).

3. Notice that our prayers are not necessarily for what we *want/desire*, but what we *need* – God always promises to provide our *needs*, but not always our *wants*.

4. Consider the fact that though The Lord's Prayer contains seven requests, only *one* is for our own *physical* needs – the other requests are for our *spiritual* needs, and for the extension of *God's* rule on earth. One author once explained it this way:

*"You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say 'I.'
You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say 'My.'
Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for one another.
And when you ask for daily bread, you must include each other.
For others are included ... in each and every plea,
From the beginning to the end of it, it doesn't once say 'Me.'"*
(Author Unknown, Christian Reader, Vol. 32, no. 3)

5. Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

6. There is actually a fifth component/element that the Bible teaches should be interspersed throughout and in-between these other four components: LISTENING. Notice that the A.C.T.S. components all usually imply actions of us SPEAKING. Recall from the first sermon in this series, however, that biblically faithful prayer should ALSO include us listening to and for God. Biblical prayer is as much (or more) about us listening to God as us speaking to Him.

7. Several further issues revolving around the HOW of prayer that time did not allow me to discuss this morning include:

(1) A balanced of practice between PREPARED / WRITTEN prayer and EXTEMPORANEOUS / IMPROMPTU prayer. The former can help to guide, direct, and give focus to our prayers and avoid what John Wesley (founder of Methodism) called "wandering thoughts." The latter ("praying off the top of your head") keeps our prayer life fresh and alive, and keeps us from getting dry and formal in our spirituality. Both of these forms had a place in Jesus' life: as a boy he read and memorized certain prayers that we see reflected in the Gospel accounts; at the same time, we know that Jesus' spontaneous prayers sometimes shocked those who heard them and often offended religious leaders.

(2) Understanding that there is no one "proper" PLACE for prayer. In fact, ANY place can be the "right" place for prayer. Jesus prayed in the Temple and in the hills. He prayed in houses, on the highways, and in the garden of Gethsemane.

(3) Understanding that there is no one "correct" POSTURE for prayer. Throughout the scriptures, we have examples of persons (including Jesus) praying standing, seated, kneeling, prostrate on the ground, with arms folded, and even outstretched to the heavens.

(4) Understanding the great value (though not the absolute necessity) of praying "in the name of Jesus". In biblical times, people took very seriously the importance of a name, as a name symbolized the essence of a person. To know the name allowed someone to exercise a degree of influence and power. As evangelist Andrew Murray once explained, "*The free use of the name of another is always the token of great confidence, of close union*" (Murray, cited in Tom Albin, Growing Christians Series: Teach Me to Pray, Graded Press, 1985, p. 92). While not understood as a necessity for God to "hear" our prayers, to use the name of Jesus in our prayers is an expression of all he has done, of all he is now, and of all he will do in the future.

