

The passage that we read from the Gospel of Luke begins by setting the scene:

*“One day he [Jesus] was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, ‘Master, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.’”* (Luke 11:1 *Message*)

Jesus was praying. It doesn’t say that the disciples were praying; or if Jesus was praying with the disciples; or if the disciples were simply observing Jesus as he prayed. It just says that Jesus was praying. And when Jesus finished praying, one of his disciples said, “Master, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples.” I imagine Jesus might have looked a bit quizzical after he heard that. If the disciples WANTED to pray the way John taught his disciples, why weren’t they following John as his disciples? After all, some of Jesus’ disciples HAD BEEN disciples of John, surely they already KNEW how to pray as John taught them?! Or was this disciple really asking Jesus to teach them how **Jesus** goes about praying? Is he asking what Jesus does when he goes off by himself to pray? What is this disciple really asking for, or expecting to receive from Jesus? What exactly did this disciple mean when he said, “Master, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples”?

Teach US. Don’t just teach that one disciple who spoke up! Teach ALL OF US. . . . Do you think that this was something that ALL of the disciples had been discussing amongst themselves? Did they think Jesus should have made a point of teaching them to pray before this? Were the disciples criticizing Jesus for not teaching them? Or was Jesus’ way of praying such a departure from their past experiences of prayer that they were confused, or perhaps wondered if there was some kind of ‘prayer scale’ that went from ‘lousy’ to ‘bad’ to ‘middling’ to ‘good’ to ‘great’? Could Jesus teach them a new and improved way to pray? . . . Because that would imply that they felt a little insecure about how to pray, or were concerned that Jesus might say they weren’t doing it right.

The good news is that the disciples already were people who prayed. Because when Jesus responded he *didn’t* say, “**IF** you pray”; Jesus said, “**WHEN** you pray.” And then he gave them an example of **how** to pray. The example is typed out on a strip of paper that looks like this (hold up) if you are in the sanctuary. Actually you have two versions of Jesus’ example. The strip of paper has a side-by-side, line-by-line, comparison of Luke 11:3-4 from *The Message*; and the wording of The Lord’s Prayer that we use most of the time. I’ll just point out that both versions are intended to be prayed by more than one person. After all, Jesus was teaching US! We find a total of 32 words in the example from *The Message*; and a total of 55 words in the example from the hymnal. Jesus’ example of ‘how to pray’ is far shorter than everything else he went on to tell the disciples *ABOUT* prayer! Although he also boiled that down to: “Ask and you’ll get; Seek and you’ll find; Knock and the door will open. Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need.” Nice and concise. But Jesus taught the disciples something else about prayer. He invited them to imagine what it might be like for God to receive their prayers. Is it like trying to wake God up in the middle of the night, and asking God to get up and help you

– the way you would wake up a friend, and beg your friend to bail you out of a difficult situation – and how you’d keep begging until they actually got up and helped you? Was Jesus suggesting that prayer requires that degree of need, that type of persistence, that kind of relationship? . . . Or what about a different type of relationship? Instead of picturing prayer as a conversation between two friends, could it be a conversation between a parent and a child? Jesus suggested that children ask for food when they need it and then simply trust that their parents will feed them. Children don’t expect their parents to respond by trying to scare them or trick them into eating something that could harm them. That’s not what any decent parent would do! And God will act like a decent parent who lovingly responds to our prayers and provides the Holy Spirit to us.

That all seems rather straight forward, doesn’t it? And if we take Jesus’ prayer example as a straight forward linear progression that begins with God, we can understand why David Lose wrote, “When God’s name is hallowed and God’s kingdom comes, there is daily bread for all, forgiveness is practiced, and God delivers the faithful from the time of trial.” Which is GREAT – but if WE are praying, then prayer isn’t *entirely* about God. Each prayer is part of an ongoing conversation, part of how we live in relationship with God. Robb McCoy writes, “When you live the Lord’s Prayer, it becomes more than words that you say. It is the choices you make, the grace you show, the forgiveness you give, and the bread you share.” (*The Fat Pastor*) What we ask of God is often what God asks us to join in doing. God’s response to our prayers is echoed back in our response to God – if we let the Holy Spirit into our lives. And that might be harder than it sounds. Jacqueline K. Thompson writes:

*Many folks find it hard to accept the Holy Spirit as God’s perfect gift. Many want stuff from God much more than they want God. I admit sometimes I’d rather have God sweep in and fix everything much more than I want God’s Spirit to fill and accompany me so that I can do my part to heal the world. St. Teresa of Calcutta (aka Mother Teresa) wrote, ‘Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, [placing oneself at God’s] disposition, and listening to God’s voice.’ In other words, prayer is about placing ourselves in the hands of God, it’s about listening for our marching orders from God, and then becoming Christ’s hands and feet in the world through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.*

*So when we pray, we pray with words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope, in despair. When we pray in all circumstances, we rejoice and we give thanks as we welcome the presence of God’s Spirit. When we pray, we are not alone . . .*

*(“When Disciples Pray: Memorandum for Those Who Preach” for July 24, 2022)*

Indeed Jesus taught US that WE are not alone when we pray. He said, “And don’t you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?” And at heart all of our prayers basically ask, and ask again and again, for God’s Spirit to be revealed to us, to be with us, to help us set the world right. Amen.