

Bill Bagents

PRAYER

Luke 11:1

One Main Thing

Like the unnamed disciple of Luke 11:1, we need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray because we cannot be like Jesus unless we pray like Jesus.

Introduction

Of all the ways to be clothed in Christ, none could be more dear or natural than sincere imitation of the Lord's prayer life. Frequent, heart-felt prayer characterized the life of Jesus. Though not explicitly stated, we believe that the forty days of fasting and temptation were also forty days of prayer (Luke 4). One reason for that belief is that prayer and fasting so often accompany one another in the New Testament (cf. Luke 2:37; Matt 16:1–18). Another is that following the defeat of Satan, "Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee..." (Luke 4:14). We rightly associate prayer and spiritual power.

The gospel writers emphasize the fact that Jesus prayed before and during major ministry events. Luke 3:21–22 reports that Jesus prayed immediately after His baptism and that God was “well pleased” with both actions. Before choosing the twelve, “He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Luke 22:39–46 describes Jesus’ prayer in the garden on the night of His betrayal. John 17 documents His intercessory prayer for the disciples leading up to that night.

Scripture reminds us that prayer accompanied other special events in the life of Jesus. Jesus was not in the boat with the disciples as they faced a fearsome storm because “when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray” (Mark 6:46). The occasion of Peter’s confession of Jesus as “The Christ of God” in Luke 9:18–20 begins with the disciples finding Jesus “as He was alone praying.” Luke’s account of the transfiguration is introduced with the words, “...He took Peter, John, and James and went up on the mountain to pray” (9:28).

Of the many labels Jesus could rightly wear, none would seem more fitting than Jesus Christ, Man of Prayer.



What an outstanding request! “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1) pulls back the curtain to reveal reasons for the appeal. Jesus was praying (again) in the presence

of His disciples. We say “again” in light of Luke 5:16: “So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.” The disciples knew from observation that prayer was important to Jesus. Mark 1:35 supports this truth: “Now in the morning, having arisen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place, and there He prayed.”

Not only had the disciples observed the frequency of Jesus’ prayers, they had also seen the fruit of His prayers. We think of Luke 9:10–17 where Jesus blessed the five loaves and two fish before breaking them into enough pieces to feed about 5,000—and with fragments left over. The miracle of healing in Luke 9:37–42 stands as another example. After the disciples could not cast out a demon afflicting a child, Jesus “healed the child, and gave him back to his father.” The parallel account in Mark 9:28–29 shares the disciples’ logical question, “Why could we not cast it out?” as well as Jesus’ answer, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” We also think of Luke 18:1: “Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.” Certainly, we think of Jesus praying from the cross (Luke 23:34, 46).

Luke 11:1 asserts that prayer is a practice and a discipline that can be taught and learned. The disciples of Jesus knew that John had taught his disciples to pray. They wanted similar instruction. Contrary to what some might expect today, Jesus obliged them. There was no chiding for needing instruction. There was no

philosophical discourse on how prayer “just flows from the heart” and is “either spontaneous or not real.” Rather, Jesus welcomed the opportunity to teach.

Entire books have been written about “The Lord’s Prayer” or “The Model Prayer,” usually from the fuller version found in Matt 6:7–15. It would be foolish to assert that the model prayer is intended as a rigid script, the only prayer to be offered by any disciple of Christ. Scripture records other prayers of Christ and of disciples. Rather, the model prayer is exemplary.

- ~ It is exemplary in its brevity. There is no need for “vain repetitions” or “many words” (Matt 6:7). Of course this fact needs to be balanced by the truth that Jesus Himself “continued all night in prayer” on occasion (Luke 6:12).
- ~ It is exemplary in its simplicity. There is no specialized vocabulary; there are no complex philosophical issues.
- ~ It is exemplary in its humility. God is the Father who rules from heaven. His name (not ours) is holy and to be uplifted. We exist to His glory and to do His will. We depend on Him for our daily bread. We are morally, ethically, and spiritually responsible to Him. We dare not face temptation without His help.
- ~ It is exemplary in its realism. Physical needs exist. We all sin and need God’s forgiveness. Humans also sin against one another and must practice

forgiveness. There is an “evil one” who opposes and will destroy us unless God effects deliverance.

Jesus’ teaching on prayer from Luke 11 does not stop with verse 5; rather, it continues through verse 13. Jesus offers bonus teaching that encourages the constant practice of prayer. Even a friend, if disturbed at midnight, could be reluctant to help. That friend might need prodding. Not so with God: “For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:10).

Even the evil people of this world tend to give good gifts to family members and those they love. “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13). God gives better than we ask because God knows better than we know and God loves better than we love.

Application

We are blessed when one of our first and most frequent prayers is the simple words of Luke 11:1: “Lord, teach us to pray.” We can be helped tremendously by studying the prayer life of Jesus from the gospels.

In that Jesus was utterly respectful of what we call the Old Testament, we can also learn from the outstanding examples we find there. Think of Moses’ prayers. Think

of Hannah's prayer from 1 Sam 1. Think of Daniel's prayer life. Think of David's penitent prayer in Ps 51.

In that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim 3:16), we can learn from the broader New Testament teaching on prayer. We remember aged Anna "who served God with fastings and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37). There is Paul's constancy of prayer for the brethren (Col 1:3; 1 Thess 1:2; 2:13). We love the beautiful description of Epaphras, "always laboring fervently for you in prayers..." (Col 4:12). And we take great comfort in the divine intercession and mediation that assist our prayers (Rom 8:26–28; 1 Tim 2:1–7; 1 John 2:1–2). God will not leave us alone in prayer.

Though no book compares to God's word, there is extensive literature on prayer that has proven helpful to many. From scholarly to devotional in nature, this literature can encourage our practice of biblical prayer. Some also benefit from keeping a prayer list, a prayer journal, or both.

In light of 1 Cor 1:11 and Phil 3:17, we can also deepen and improve our prayer lives by noting the examples and soliciting the encouragement of brethren who have learned the heart and practice of prayer better than we. Sometimes we identify such men from their public prayers and teaching. Sometimes we identify such ladies from their rich comments during Bible class or their happy reports, "I want you to know that I pray for you and for the Lord's church every day."

Conclusion

We need to ask Jesus to teach us to pray because we can't be like Jesus unless we pray like Jesus. It's a simple statement with profound implications. It's a spiritual imperative that holds unimaginable blessings (Eph 4:11–16).

Discussion

1. Why and in what senses is it still wise for us to ask Jesus to teach us to pray?
2. In your best judgment, what are the most common errors Christians make in their prayer lives?
3. What are the key connections between praying like Jesus prayed and being "clothed in Christ"?
4. What keeps Christians from praying like Jesus prayed?