

## Pray Without Ceasing

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who teaches us how to pray, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

A few months ago we did a video Bible Study on the Lord's Prayer. It was a most excellent study by Adam Hamilton the pastor of the largest Methodist Church in the United States. (SLIDE) On the first video Adam related that it was his grandmother who taught him the Lord's Prayer. As we talked about who taught us the Lord's Prayer most of us couldn't remember. We just decided it was the Church we attended who taught it to us. I would agree with that with one slight correction. It was the Church who handed it on to us, but it was Jesus who taught us to pray it. At least that's my opinion... There's a group of Bible Scholars called the Jesus Seminar (SLIDE) who meet twice a year in Atlanta to discuss and vote on the historical accuracy of the things Jesus said and taught in the Bible. Most would say the words of Jesus in the Bible we have today were not direct quotes. If you think about it the first books of the New Testament weren't written down until at least 30 years after his crucifixion, so it makes sense that what did get written down was a paraphrase of someone's memory of what Jesus had said and done decades earlier. The Jesus Seminar scholars tend to agree that the Lord's Prayer was not taught by Jesus in the manner it is laid out in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Rather it was most likely edited together from various sayings Jesus did say during his earthly ministry. The Lord's Prayer, they claim was put together by an

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early Church congregation so they would have a template to teach their people. These scholars believe The Lord's Prayer was a part of ancient sayings of Jesus that were in a long since lost document called "Q." In seminary, I learned that this "Q" document was simply a collection of the sayings of Jesus that were gathered together and held in common by both Matthew's and Luke's congregations. Since there are no copies of this "Q" document that have survived, this is simply one theory about where the material that Matthew and Luke both share in common may have come from.

I don't know if you believe every word in the Bible was dictated by God or if it was loosely guided and inspired by the Holy Spirit. It seems logical to me that if the first books of the New Testament weren't written down until some 30 to 70 years or so after the first Easter, we're getting a lot of paraphrases and sayings that had been handed down in oral stories for decades before they were finalized in written form. These stories about Jesus didn't get written down at first because most of His followers thought he was coming back soon and very soon. As the days became months and the months became years, some of the witnesses of the resurrection began to die. Others began to think they better write down the important things Jesus said and did just in case his second coming wasn't right around the corner. I don't know about you, but it would be easy for me to imagine and fall into the trap of thinking these stories might not be all that fresh in the

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memories of those who were still standing after all those years. Also, think about stories of our modern day heroes like sports legends such as Babe Ruth. One such story says that when the Babe would come up to bat he would point to the left, center, or right field as the location of his next home run. (SLIDE) Over time, stories about our heroes tend to become more and more exaggerated. Now, make no mistake about it, I'm not saying the Bible isn't true or that it isn't the inspired Word of God. Like most Lutherans, I do believe the Bible to be the inspired Word of God. (SLIDE) If there are stories that aren't historically accurate or if some of the miracles are exaggerated, I still believe the Bible we have is exactly the Bible God wants our generation of Jesus Followers to have.

So, what does the Bible have to say about the importance of prayer? The first thing that comes to my mind is that Jesus was the one uniquely qualified person to provide for us a method for prayer, but also specifics as to what we should be praying for. As both God and Man Jesus is in the singularly unique position to know both how much God wants to bless us and also our greatest human needs. I guess you could say Jesus was kind of an expert on what and how to pray.

I looked up prayer and all the different forms of the word pray, prayer, prays, prayed and any other form of the word in both the New and the Old Testaments. Prayer is mentioned over 350 times in the Bible. (SLIDE) Saint Paul constantly

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reminds us to pray without ceasing. In seminary most professors liked to begin each class with prayer. They would typically ask which of us would like to offer prayer. We all knew this was coming, so we would be acting very busy when the question was posed. I would usually be taking my laptop computer out and plugging it in, while trying to find my class notebook. I discovered that if you didn't make eye contact you usually wouldn't get picked... Most of us just hung our heads when asked who wants to pray... I'm not proud of that behavior, but I don't think I'm all that different than most other people either. Sometimes the words to pray just escape me. I know, even now when I pray I don't know what to ask for without sounding too needy or making my prayers too complicated. Most of you know I like to talk. In my private prayers I'm not much different. I want to explain myself to God. I want to make sure God understands not just what I need, but why I need it and what's the best way to answer each and every petition. I wonder if God isn't up there rolling His eyes at me when I tell Him how to go about making me happy.

When I take the time to actually look at the versions of the Lord's Prayer in both Matthew and Luke I discover that prayer is really an exercise in trust. We bring our basic needs and desires before God. In these models of prayer Jesus gives us examples of how to form a proper petition. Pray like this... Father in heaven, make your name Holy. Bring your kingdom to earth as it is in heaven.

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Give us what we need for today. Forgive us. Lead us. Those are some big issues. I notice Jesus never tells God exactly how to accomplish any of these intercessions. We simply say them out loud or in the silence of our hearts and then trust in God's love for us to figure out how to accomplish that for which we pray. The same practice works for almost everything we need, want, or desire. When Jesus attended the wedding at Cana the host of the party failed to plan for enough wine for all the guests. When Mary, the mother of Jesus sees they are out of wine, she raises the issue to her son. "Jesus, they are out of wine." She trusts her son, period... She trusts him so much that she tells the servants to do whatever Jesus says to do. If I had been the one to ask Jesus for more wine I would have said something like, "Jesus, they are out of wine. Send Peter and James and John across town to that Kosher Wine cellar (SLIDE) and have them bring back a couple of cases of that really good, full bodied Chianti. You know the one I like with the pink label. Make sure they only get the wine from 07. That was the best year for grapes in the Galilee region. Instead, Mary simply says they are out of wine and trusts in Jesus to do the rest. You all know the outcome of Mary's prayer for more wine... Hundreds of gallons of the best wine ever and neither the host of the party nor any of the guests were ever the wiser. (SLIDE) When I tell God how to answer my prayers, I'm eating of the forbidden fruit and trying to become like God... Better to just say, Jesus I need your peace in my life. Help me...

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One final thought on prayer before we move into our own time of prayers for the Church. Like most of you, I want to be better at praying. For the Christian praying should be what we do. Dogs bark. Birds chirp. Christians pray. Here's where I fall down. God wants us to pray because that's how we can have a living, life giving relationship. So, God gives us this fantastic gift we call prayer. Unfortunately, like so many of God's gifts we tend to turn them into shoulds' and oughts'. If you've passed confirmation/catechism, then you know a should and ought is one step away from a must or a have to. We turn God's good gifts into a law. When we don't think we pray enough or correctly we feel guilty. When we feel guilty we think we can hide from God. When we try to hide from God we stop talking to God. When we stop talking to God we stop praying... Rather than trying to pray a certain amount of minutes each day or trying to make sure I say the correct words, I just have a conversation in my mind with God. Sometimes I even fall asleep while in the middle of a sentence. The amazing thing for me is that when I fall asleep praying, God has answered my prayers sometimes in my dreams.

(SLIDE) May our prayers rise before God like incense. May the words of our prayers come as easily as having a deep and satisfying conversation with our best friend. May we learn from Jesus and from other examples in the Bible to simply raise our need before God and then trust God to provide. For all God's grace and mercy, thanks be to God... Amen.