

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

July 24, 2022 – PENTECOST 7/PROPER 12, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*The Lord’s Prayer Says it All*”

Genesis 18:20-32 (Abraham bargains with God about not destroying a righteous remnant)
Psalm 138 (Praise for the Lord’s care and protection)
Colossians 2:6-15 (We are not to follow false teachings; only Christ’s example)
St. Luke 11:1-13 (Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray)

It’s a tendency we all have. You see someone doing something you want to accomplish, or a project you’d like to do better on your own. So you ask another person what’s the secret to their success. But getting the answer is no guarantee. For example, as much as your buddy has asked you to help him with his golf swing, something’s still definitely missing. Instead of consistently hitting a ball that lands in the middle of the fairway and travels over 250 yards, his double-bogey shots end up out of bounds, on the rough, and in the sand traps. Or, when I was eager to cook amazing crispy-on-the-outside, moist-on-the inside fried chicken just like my Mom’s, even though I had her recipe, mine turned out barely edible. Somehow, most of us just can’t seem to measure up to the people we admire and wish to emulate.

The same is true for our fellow Christians’ prayer lives. Some believers seem to have the “secret ingredients” to a good prayer life and can offer the most beautiful prayers right off the cuff. They do it with such confidence, and also demonstrate great trust in the power of prayer. They make prayer look easy and natural. But the rest of us know that coming up with just the right prayer, at just the right time, with just the right words, isn’t that easy!

Before we look into the secret of a good prayer life, let’s talk about what is prayer, anyway? We’ve seen pictures of small children doing it with folded hands while kneeling at bedtime. We’ve heard a chorus of unison voices following the pastor’s lead during a religious service. Perhaps, it’s part of your morning and evening mealtime rhythm—as normal and essential as breathing. Or maybe it’s something you did once in your life during a particularly scary or painful experience: “Dear God, if you’re there, *help!*” A lot of Episcopalians think it’s a certain page in the Prayer Book.

Prayer is an essential part of every world religion, including Christianity. Most people realize it has something to do with talking to God. Many hope it will bring much needed assistance or comfort when facing difficult circumstances.¹ But what did Jesus show us about prayer?

Prayer is a conversation with God. And, as with any conversation, it works both ways. Each party takes turns talking and listening. And sometimes, for us to be able to listen to God, we simply need to be silent, open, and waiting. There are many kinds of prayers: public prayers; private prayers; memorized prayers; spontaneous prayers; spoken prayers; silent prayers; written prayers; sung prayers; walking or dancing prayers, and many more.

We have conversations with people with whom we are *in a relationship*. That is why the life of every Christian should be filled with prayer. Imagine not talking to, or listening to, someone you live with. *God* is with you 24/7. Unfortunately, most of us don’t come naturally to prayer. So, if you’d like to improve your prayer life, look at the disciples in our Gospel reading for today. Notice the request they made. St. Luke tells us, “one of his disciples said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, teach us to pray.’” And, Jesus did. He responded with what we know as “The Lord’s Prayer,” and it contains 4 secrets to a good prayer life. To make these easier to remember, we’ll call them the 4 “P’s of Prayer”.²

Secret #1 is *Pedagogy*—or, teaching: We need to be *taught* how to pray, whether we are little children memorizing our first simple prayers, or we are senior citizens who feel the need to call upon God for just about everything. Jesus provides the best example from which to learn, both for His disciples and for us.

Jesus prayed often and everywhere, sometimes before an important ministry, sometimes after. Luke (3:21-22) records that Jesus prayed at His baptism in the Jordan River, and again in the morning before heading to Galilee (Mk. 1:35-36). He prayed all night before choosing His twelve disciples (Lk. 6:12-13); during and after healing people (Mk. 7:31-37; Lk. 5:16); before raising Lazarus from the dead (Jn. 11:41-42); while speaking to the Jewish leaders (Mt. 11:25-26); before feeding the 5,000 (Jn. 6:11); before walking on the water (Mt. 14:23); at the Transfiguration (Lk. 9:28-29); and when the 70 disciples returned from mission work (Lk. 10:21). He prayed before Peter called Him “the Christ” (Lk 9:18) and prayed that Peter’s faith might not fail, after Satan had asked to have him. He prayed for little children (Mt. 19:13-15); before teaching His disciples the Lord’s Prayer (Lk. 11:1); and at the Lord’s Supper (Mt. 26:26). Before heading to Gethsemane, Jesus interceded for Himself, His disciples, and all believers (Jn. 17:1-26), and again, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed three times before His betrayal (Mt. 26:36-46).

Immediately after being nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk. 23:34). He then prayed while dying on the cross, “My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27:46), and with His final breath, Jesus prayed, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” (Lk. 23:46). After His resurrection, Jesus prayed a blessing on the bread before He ate with His friends (Lk. 24:30). And before His Ascension, Jesus blessed the disciples (Lk. 24:50-53).³ In His own life, Jesus models many different kinds of prayers in diverse circumstances.

As often as Jesus’ disciples had experienced their Master praying, they didn’t seem to know how to do it themselves—and maybe they were embarrassed, too, because John the Baptist’s disciples knew how to pray better than they did. For many of us today, like those followers of Jesus long ago, prayer is something *we* struggle with. We aren’t sure what to ask for, which words to use, or perhaps what posture to adopt (kneeling? standing? sitting?).

We may feel we are unworthy of conversing with God. For example, whenever a friend of mine expressed to me a concern, I would say, “Why don’t you pray about it?” And she would respond, “Oh, I don’t want to *bother* God.” If your adult children or grandkids wanted to share with you what’s in their heart, would they be *bothering* you?

We can’t understand fully how to pray until we recognize the Holy Spirit’s involvement in our prayers. St. Paul tells us in Romans 8:26, “In our weakness, when we do not know what we ought to pray for, the Holy Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” We need the very Spirit of God to help us with our prayers—and He will, if we simply invite Him to.

Secret # 2 is *Pattern*: Although there are times when we simply cry out to God in prayer, not worrying about format or words, especially in times of stress or distress, prayer is not haphazardly stringing together a bunch of words or phrases—not withstanding Whoopi Goldberg’s famous (and funny) blessing at the nuns’ dinner table in the movie “Sister Act.” (See it, if you haven’t.)

We need a pattern when sewing a dress; cutting out flooring material; landscaping a garden, and many other things we do in life. When the disciples made their request, Jesus taught them a “prayer pattern” to follow. The Lord’s Prayer provides us a model for how to pray our own prayers, in addition to the one Jesus taught us.

In His pattern, Jesus begins by acknowledging the One to whom ALL prayer is addressed: God, our Heavenly Father. Please notice, Jesus did not say “Our Parent” or “Our Mother,” as some in the Church are apt to do, these days. Prayer is hard enough without our being confused as to who God is.

It’s important to acknowledge God as our Father, because then we are free to ask Him for the things we need, and tell Him how we feel. The perfect analogy is that a father provides for the needs of his family. Jesus teaches us that our three most basic needs are: 1) that our daily requirements be met, 2) that our sins be forgiven—and that we forgive others, and 3) that we be delivered from the power of the evil one who wants us to sin. The implication here is that if you never prayed another prayer, but prayed *this* prayer meaningfully *every day*, that would be enough. Or, you could pray 365 days a year using your own heartfelt words, and that would be okay, too. Above all, Jesus wants us to understand that God *always* knows the desires of our hearts even before we even mention them, and that He will grant them in *His* wisdom, goodness, and timing.

When we lived in upstate NY, my old Volvo needed \$3,500 in repairs we couldn't afford. Nor did we have money for another car. So I prayed a rather goofy prayer, "Abba—Daddy—I need a car." That's all. And I didn't tell *anyone else* about it. At the same time, quite frankly, I had long coveted the deep blue-green Volvo sedan that a parishioner drove. Soon after my "goofy prayer," the phone rang. It was Joan. "Mother Nina, I want to make you an offer you can't refuse. I want to give you my Volvo." "*Whaat?*" I had to sit down. Long story short, she'd decided to buy a jeep, knew I liked her car, and agreed to sell it to me for \$1 (I insisted!).

The pattern of the Lord's Prayer acknowledges our dependence on God, at the same time as it acknowledges our inadequacies. This kind of humility is a good habit to follow any time we're praying.

Secret #3 is *Persistence*: One of the greatest secrets to prayer is persistence. And now the child/father analogy really is applicable. Little children do not hesitate to trouble, bug, or annoy, their Dad when they want something. And kids can be *very* persistent! Jesus told a couple of parables about people asking persistently until they got what they needed. Now, the point of those stories is not that we are "bothering" God so that He finally gives in. The Lord does not consider it a bother when we come to Him, day or night, eloquently or confused, with our requests. Here, the word "persistent" means "to ask with unashamed boldness." In other words, we don't get embarrassed or tired of asking. Persistent prayer gets results—when it is in accord with the will of God.

Secret #4 is *Purpose*: We tend to think of the purpose of prayer as informing God of what we, or someone we care for, *need*. We also know that prayer is praise and thanksgiving, as well as sorrow and repentance, worship and wonder. But what is the ultimate *purpose* of prayer?

A mother sent her fifth-grade boy up to bed. A few minutes later, she went to make sure he was going to sleep. When she peeked into his room, he was kneeling beside his bed in prayer. She could hear her son praying over and over again. "Let it be Tokyo! Please dear God, let it be Tokyo!" When he'd finished, she asked: "What did you mean, 'Let it be Tokyo?'" "Oh," the boy answered with embarrassment, "we had our geography exam today and I was praying that God would make Tokyo the capital of France."⁴

Prayer is not a magical means by which we get God to do what we want. Prayer is an inner openness to God's presence and power, which allows His divine purpose to be released in and through us. Ultimately, the purpose of prayer is not that we change God, but that He changes us.

In closing, don't forget some other "P" words that go with prayer: *Promises*—we can trust God to answer either "yes," "no," or "wait." And *Practice*—we'll all become better pray-ers the more we do it. If you still can't think of what to say in prayer, offer the Lord's Prayer or open *Book of Common Prayer* to the Psalms—the prayers of Ancient Israel—or to pages 810 through 839 where there are lots of prayers for many occasions.

Lord, teach us to pray, and may our prayers be answered according to Thy will. *Amen*.

¹ Adapt. "What the Bible Says About Prayer," n. d. [Grace Chapel](https://real-life.grace.org/felt-needs/prayer/), Lexington MA < <https://real-life.grace.org/felt-needs/prayer/> > 19 July 2022. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Christopher Martin, "Secrets to Prayer," 23 July 2007, [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/secrets-to-prayer-christopher-martin-sermon-on-prayer-how-to-109699?page=1&wc=800) < <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/secrets-to-prayer-christopher-martin-sermon-on-prayer-how-to-109699?page=1&wc=800> > 19 July 2022. Used with permission.

³ Adapt. Steve Shirley, "How Many Times Did Jesus Pray in the Bible?" n. d. [JesusAlive.com](https://jesusalive.com) < <https://jesusalive.com/times-jesus-prayed/> > 19 July 2022. Used with permission.

⁴ Adapt. Robert L. Allen, *Greatest Passages of The Bible*, (CSS Publishing Company, 1990).