<u>"Lord, Teach Us to Pray</u>
Sermon Series on *The Lord's Prayer* #1
(Mt. 6:5-15)
September 11, 2016
Dr. Peter B. Barnes

There was an interesting story that came out of the Olympics in Rio last month I want to tell you about. When New Zealand runner Nikki Hamblin fell in one of the heats of the women's 5,000-meter race, American runner Abbey D'Agostino tripped over her and fell to the track as well.

Hamblin lay on the ground until she felt D'Agostino's hand on her shoulder. "Get up, get up! We have to finish!" D'Agostino said to her. "This is the Olympic Games. We have to finish this." Both runners completed the race with D'Agostino running the last 1,500 meters on a torn ACL and finishing dead last before being taken off the track in a wheel chair.

Here's what Abbey said about why she did what she did: "Although my actions were instinctual at that moment, the only way I can rationalize it is that God prepared my heart to respond that way."[1]

The Bible says, *"What you say flows from what's in your heart" (Luke 6:45).* Abbey D'Agostino prepared to compete in the Olympics not only by training herself physically. It's obvious that she also trained her heart to think of and to help others even in the heat of competition and even in times of personal crisis through a life of discipleship as a follower of Christ.

This fall and throughout the coming year, we're going to study and emphasize the importance of discipleship in the Christian life and in our church. The reason we're doing this is because one of the top priorities of the 20/20 five-year Strategic Plan the Session has set for our church is "to establish a clear path of discipleship and engagement." Three different teams in our congregation are working on this initiative, and I'm excited to see what they come up with as we attempt to accomplish this very important goal.

To that end, most of the sermons this year will focus on the theme of discipleship in one way or another. In particular, this fall we'll begin a new series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer entitled: "Lord, Teach Us to Pray." Throughout church history, the Lord's Prayer has been a cornerstone of any tool of instruction for discipleship which has been developed to teach people about the Christian faith. And this prayer is probably recited more often than any other in the Christian church. So it seems appropriate that we begin our emphasis on discipleship this year by studying in greater detail the prayer Jesus taught His disciples which has been central to Christian worship and living the Christian life down through the centuries.

Introduction.

Perhaps the most famous scene in all of the six "Rocky" films is the one in the first movie where Rocky Balboa, the Italian Stallion, is trying to get in shape for his fight with Apollo Creed. He runs through the streets of Philadelphia, faster and faster, with the music pulsating to his feet as they pound on the pavement, until at last he comes to the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. With a final burst of energy he runs up the steps, turns around and raises his arms with a sign of victory.

It's a very famous scene. But if Rocky had turned around and kept going straight into the Philadelphia Art Museum, and if he had turned right and proceeded to the third gallery, he would have seen hanging on the wall right next to the door leading to the fourth gallery a very small painting. It measures no more than 6 inches by 8 inches, and it depicts a mountain valley scene.

A friend of mine was looking at that painting once, and as he studied it one of the guards came over to him and said, "You know, I usually keep a magnifying glass with me to let people use when they look at that painting. After all, the man who painted it used one!" Without a magnifying glass, you simply couldn't see all there was to see in that painting.[2]

The Lord's Prayer is like that. It consists of just 52 words in the book of Matthew, and it can be recited in less than a minute. But despite its brevity, this prayer has proven to be of tremendous value to millions of people throughout the last 20 centuries. And we would do well to take some time to study each phrase with a magnifying glass. There is more of God's truth in this prayer than appears at first glance.

I. Our Struggle with Prayer.

Most of us, if we're honest, will admit that we're pretty discouraged with our prayer lives. We feel defeated, and for most of us prayer is a struggle. I've been a follower of Christ for almost five decades, and I still feel like I'm a kindergartener in the school of prayer. Even after all these years, I don't feel like I've mastered the art of prayer, and I think I still have such a long way to go. Maybe you do too.

Many of us don't know what to pray or how to pray. Others of us are scared to death to pray out loud. I remember when I was in high school, and in my youth group we had a practice of doing what was called a "circle prayer" in which we would go around the circle and each person would pray for something or someone out loud. This scared me to death back then. As the circle began, I frantically tried to think of something I could pray for that I thought would sound okay. But just as I would settle on something, another kid would pray my prayer, and I'd have to think of another one! It was always so uncomfortable for me.

And then there are those of us who have been disappointed in the answers we've received to our prayers. I remember the first time when I experienced what I felt like was unanswered prayer. I was 11-years-old. My older brother Bill was a Little League All Star baseball player, and his team was in the state playoffs. It was the bottom of the last inning, and his team was down by one run. The bases were loaded, there were 2 outs, and my brother was up to bat.

I climbed down off the bleachers and went beneath the stands, and I prayed with all the faith I could muster that God would help my brother get a hit and win the game. I finished my prayer and looked anxiously through the chain linked fence as my brother batted. The umpire bellowed, "Strike 1. Strike 2. Strike 3. You're out!" I felt so defeated, and I wondered why God would let me down like that. It never occurred to me that the mother of the other team's pitcher was probably praying just as fervently that her son would strike my brother out!

A more recent experience of this kind of disappointment in prayer has to do with my wife Lorie's cancer. All of you have joined us in praying earnestly for her healing, but she remains ill, and we aren't making much progress in beating the cancer into remission. We wonder, "Lord, what are you up to, and why hasn't Lorie been healed of this disease?" Have you ever been disappointed with God in the answers which you've received to the prayers you've prayed?

Another problem we face in prayer is that many of us have the wrong idea about it all. We think of it as making a wish list, that God is a grandfatherly figure who is up in heaven to give us what we want. Others of us see prayer as a way to twist God's arm. Still other misconceptions lie in the fact that when some people think about prayer, they conjure up images of people sitting in lotus positions engaging in trance-like activities. There's a great deal of ignorance about prayer today. We don't know what to do with the time, we don't have a clear idea of how to be effective in it, and there aren't many people we know today who have a lot of experience and can serve as wise and godly guides for us.

You and I are living in a time when few people pray very often, and the lifeline to God feels like a tenuous one for most believers. I believe we need to recover a hunger for prayer in our lives and in our church today. It's one of the reasons why I felt called by God to offer a series of sermons this fall on the Lord's Prayer. It's perhaps the first next step a person can take on the path of discipleship and develop a deeper walk with Christ.

II. Jesus' Teaching on Prayer.

How can we begin to do this? Where do we start? If you want to learn how to do something correctly, go to an expert and learn from them. It's true in life, and it's true in prayer. In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His disciples about prayer, and there He also gave them the words of Lord's Prayer. In

verse 5 we read that Jesus said, *"And when you pray..."* Our Lord assumed that His disciples would be praying people.

A. The prayer Jesus condemned. As Christ began His teaching on prayer, He had some strong words to say about how *not* to pray. He said, *"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites. They love to pray in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. It tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full" (Mt. 6:5).* At first what Jesus says of the hypocrites sounds fine - *"they love to pray."* But unfortunately, it wasn't prayer they loved as much the approval of other people and the recognition they received. They prayed for all the wrong reasons, and they prayed in all the wrong ways.

Several problems had crept into the Jewish habits of prayer in Jesus' day, and prayer tended to be very formalized and legalistic. The Jews had set three times for prayer, and every devout Jew prayed at 9 a.m., 12 noon, and 3 p.m. Wherever you were, whatever you were doing, you were to stop and pray at these set times, much as Muslims continue to do today in many parts of the world today.

There was also a problem with certain forms of repetition which they used in saying the same prayers over and over again. Hindu and Buddhist prayers are like this today. They depend on the principle of repetition thinking that "much equals much." There are people today involved in some Eastern religions who believe that the repetition of certain words, mantras, sounds or syllables can actually transform a person into the deity invoked or the reality recited. Jesus criticized this kind of prayer and He said, *"They think they will be heard for their many words. Don't be like them" (6:7,8).*

The Jews in Jesus' day were not prayer less people. Rather, they were overburdened with prayer, and they had the wrong idea about it all. Jesus helped His disciples realize that you don't have to make a special effort in order to guarantee access to God, and in the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, He turned prayer not into a difficult ordeal but into a child's conversation with his/her heavenly Father.

B. The prayer Jesus commended. In verses 6-8 of our passage we read, *"But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen....And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him."*

Jesus said that when we pray, we should enter into our closet. The word that is translated "closet" in the Greek New Testament is the word *tameion.* It was the word used for the supply-room on Palestinian farms that could be locked. In one sense it was the least likely place in the house for prayer, because it was used to store feed, small animals, tools, and other supplies. But that wasn't important.

What was important was that the room could be locked. It could be private, and that was the key for Jesus.

What Christ was saying here is, "Shut the door against distraction and shut yourself in with God alone, and He will hear you." We're invited to talk to the Lord of the universe and freely open our hearts and our minds to Him. We can bring God our needs and cares, with the full assurance that He hears our prayers, and He wants to meet us where we are.

III. Jesus' Model of Prayer.

If you read the New Testament, you'll discover that Jesus actually didn't say a whole lot about prayer. In fact, He said more about money in the gospels than He did about prayer. However, what we see in the *life* of Christ was a very active demonstration of prayer. Jesus didn't talk a lot about prayer. Instead, He prayed!

He prayed at His baptism.
He prayed in the wilderness.
He prayed on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus prayed on the cross, and at least three of the seven words He spoke as He was crucified were prayers.

Jesus prayed in the temple,
He prayed in the synagogue,
He prayed alone, and
He prayed with His disciples.

There were times when he would go off by Himself late at night or early in the morning to be alone in prayer. Before and after dealing with the crowds of people, He sought the solitude of personal prayer.

Jesus not only modeled out a life of prayer in His personal habits, He also gave them a model of prayer in His teaching, and we have that model in the Lord's Prayer. Great spiritual truths are compressed into the few, concise phrases of this prayer, and when you hold them up they shine like facets of a diamond in the glistening sun. This is the model Jesus gave His disciples when they asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray." And it's our privilege to study this prayer in the months to come. I'm so excited to see what God has in store for us this fall.

Conclusion.

Fifteen years ago today our world changed forever. When American Airlines flight 11 slammed into the north tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, it sent a reverberation of catastrophe around the world and our lives have never been the same since. If Pearl Harbor marked my parent's generation before me, and the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. marked

my generation, then surely the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. will mark my children's generation for a lifetime.

In the three weeks after 9/11 church attendance soared in this country. People were searching for God, and there was renewed interest in prayer. People began to realize they didn't have the spiritual resources to cope with this kind of tragedy. So they prayed. But after about three weeks, attendance died down, and people went back to their lives as they were before.

But not everyone. Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham and a noted author and Bible teacher in her own right down in Charlotte, said in an interview that September 11 was an alarm that penetrated her life in a profound way.[3] She said that she believed God was trying to get her attention through those awful events, much like the Lord did the prophet Isaiah in the year King Uzziah died in the Old Testament. And she looked up with eyes of faith. What she saw was not just a fresh vision of Jesus Christ in the midst of our nation's great loss but also a vision of her own sin, and she spent several days on her knees before the Lord in prayer. The result was a deep experience of personal revival, and in the time since those awful events her life has been marked by an increased fervency in prayer.

On this 15th anniversary of September 11, perhaps God is calling each of us to a greater understanding of and commitment to prayer. Think about all that's gone on in the last 15 years –

- Hurricane Katrina and the record-breaking floods in many parts of the country in recent months;
- wildfires, tornadoes, droughts, and major snow storms;
- the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- the collapse of some of our financial institutions and the Great Recession of 2008;
- the racial conflict in Ferguson, Charleston, Baltimore, and so many other places in our country; and also
- what has been the most disappointing year in politics I can ever remember.

With all that we've been through since 9/11, and all that's going on right now, don't you think we could use a little more prayer?

Maybe this will be a season when you and I join together in seeking God as never before, and maybe we'll begin to do it through prayer. My hope is that our study of the Lord's Prayer will be the beginning of a transformation in your life and in this church that will take us all us all deeper into the heart of God, and further down the path of discipleship, and into a greater experience of the practice of prayer. Make is so, Lord Jesus. Amen.

---

[1] Taken from something Bill Zukowski wrote in his newsletter for *Practice Ministries* after the Olympics.

---

[2]Taken from a sermon by Trevor H.G. Smith, "Putting God First," preached in Stillman Valley, IL.
[3] Anne Graham Lotz in *Christianity Today,* September 2011, p. 29.