

**When You Pray**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**7-24-2016**  
**Luke 11:1-13**

As a divinity school student at Wake Forest, I interned at Grace Baptist Church in Statesville. Part of my training required thirteen mentoring sessions per semester. Each week, I would meet with our pastor Gary West at the local coffee shop – our conversations lasted the length of at least one twelve-ounce cup, maybe two if they were serving an especially-good variety of Larry’s Beans. And occasionally, if the conversation was really important, we’d have a third cup.

I don’t remember all the details of these conversations. But I do remember a question that sparked a three-cup conversation. We were talking about prayer. And it just kind of slipped out, but I asked, “Well, Gary, tell me something...how do you offer prayer in a way that’s not...what’s the word I’m looking for...creepy...yeah, creepy?”

I expressed to Gary that throughout my life, but particularly in the divinity school setting, I had seen prayer done really well, and prayer done in ways that were really unsettling. And I had noticed that prayer done well could be so healing, and so profound, and so honest, and so moving. And prayer done poorly could be so off-putting.

Gary smiled, and laughed a little. He said: “This may not help you, but you just have to feel your way through it. Don’t go guns-blazin’ into a hospital room or a home ready to pop open your Bible, or lay hands on someone. Listen. Really listen. They’ll ask for what they need.”

He told me to watch others pray. He told me to think of prayer as a conversation. And he told me that the more I prayed, and particularly prayed in public, I would develop my own style and my own comfort level.

After that conversation, I took his advice. I paid close attention to how certain people around me prayed. And I still do. Here are a few people who stand out for their non-creepiness. That’s not a good word. Scratch that. Here are a few people who stand out for the kind of prayer I seek to emulate:

My friend Don Hinton was a high school teacher in Wake County for many years. He remembered that many of his students would come in on test day, and pray that God would help them do well. He would remind them: “Don’t pray that God will help you on test day. Pray that God will give you the discipline and drive and desire and determination to study and prepare in the days and weeks leading up to your test.”

My friend and pastor Andrea Dellinger Jones, when offering prayer for others, never assumes she knows their petitions. She always asks that person, “What is it that YOU would like for me to pray for today?”

My friend Marie Mason prays for the neatest things. Two years ago on her 98<sup>th</sup> birthday, her prayer/birthday wish was that no child in Wake County would go hungry that evening.

I met my friend Woody Catoe for lunch one day in Raleigh. As our meal was served, we waited awkwardly, each wondering, “Does this guy offer a blessing in restaurants?” Woody broke the silence.

"I don't close my eyes," he said. "But I am asking God to bless this food, and I am grateful for our opportunity to break bread together. Amen."

My mom, Kathy Stillerman, is a stickler for the use of the word "we" when leading corporate prayer. She laments when folks say, "God I just pray..." when they should really be saying, "God, we just pray."

I like Tillie Duncan's solution: "Would you join your prayer with mine?"

And it's hard to argue with Anne Lamott's succinctness. She offers the only three words you have to say: "Help. Thanks. Wow!"

Regardless of who we are, or where we are in our faith journey, prayer is a mysterious thing. And confident or not, we're always left to wonder how we should approach prayer.

Friends, there is good news. We are not alone in such an endeavor. The disciples struggled with the very same thing. In today's lection they ask Jesus for advice. And thank goodness for Jesus' patience and counsel. He offers them, and us as well, advice:

"When you pray, say 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.'"

In other words, address this parental source of ours with reverence. When we speak to God, we speak to our creator, to our very source. And this source is holy! But this holy source is not some stranger. This holy source, for Jesus, was a father: a mix of power and wisdom and compassion and connectedness. Christ tells us to address this connected, familiar, holy being. If the image of Father works for you, great! If not, choose another metaphor, and use it to help you create a similar sense of connectedness and familiarity and holiness with your maker.

And Jesus reminds us that God's justice and God's presence are not things reserved for another life and another dimension. We are called to demand God's kingdom in this world, in this lifetime. And when we proclaim God's kingdom come, we also proclaim that God has given us gifts to help make such a place come about. And I dare say, God longs for each of us to use our gifts to the fullest.

"Give us each day, our daily bread."

That sounds a little direct. And truth be told it is. But shouldn't we have confidence in this good God of ours? When we seek our daily bread, we share in the story of those who found manna in the wilderness. Jesus seems to be saying, "God we don't always know HOW you will provide, but we know you WILL. And so we ask!"

"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."

Would that it were! But what a thing to pray! Jesus once said "my yolk is easy and my burden is light." And I bet ours would be too, if we didn't let ourselves become so weighed down by resentment, or anger, or jealousy. When Jesus instructs us to pray these lines, it's a reminder for us to mimic the love and forgiveness of the one we follow – a love and forgiveness born of God.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Keep us focused, God. Remind us that when we are nestled in your community of love, the demands of this world are never too big to manage. When we are in your presence, you “keep us” and “lead us” and “shade us,” just as the Psalmist proclaims.

Friends, here’s what I think: In today’s lection, Jesus offers us a prayer that isn’t creepy. Instead, we receive a prayer that is honest. And authentic. And instructive. The words call us into the power and presence of the one we serve. When we say the words aloud, we are reminded of how God acts in the world. And when repeat them, again and again and again, we are reminded of how Christ calls us to live.

Recognize the divine. Name it. Once you’ve named it, bid that the divine dimension come about. And recognize that when we work to bring about God’s kingdom, our needs are provided for, our relationships are enhanced by mutual love and respect, and our lives are funneled down sunlit paths and still waters.

May God give us the courage to pray this prayer with conviction, today, and every day. Amen.

### **Lord’s Prayer:**

*And this morning, having reflected on the Lord’s Prayer, we’ll use it to lead our thoughts for our pastoral prayer. I’ll take us through line by line, and as we go, we’ll offer our joys and concerns.*

### **Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name**

*Friends, we sit in the presence of our good God. Let’s take a moment to voice the joy and thanksgiving we feel for such a presence.*

### **Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven**

*Let’s ask God to make us instruments of such a purpose. What kinds of things must happen for us to see glimpses of God’s kingdom?*

### **Give us this day, our daily bread.**

*We all need manna of some kind. Our God has the power to provide. What concerns do we bring today?*

### **And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who have trespassed against us.**

*What peace do we seek?*

### **And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**

*What burdens, what busy-ness are preventing us from experiencing God’s presence?*

**For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory. Forever. Amen.**