

The Lord's Prayer

by Connie Stinson, Pastor

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Yesterday, some 15 thousand Baptists returned to their homes after attending a national meeting in Atlanta, Georgia called the New Baptist Covenant Celebration. Perhaps you heard about it. It was largely the result of a vision President Jimmy Carter had to get all “conservative-Baptists-turned-moderate” together under one roof to worship and focus on topics such as evangelism, poverty, immigration, peacemaking, responding to natural disasters and protecting religious liberty. With Mr. Carter's pull, the speaker's lineup grew formidable, including former Vice President Al Gore (who at a luncheon attended by 2,000 gave one of his now-famous slide presentations on global warming), Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman, author John Grisham, and former U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher.

Another Baptist former president, Bill Clinton, spoke Friday night. I think it would be fair to say that the crowd was braced for what they feared would be made a political platform for Mr. Clinton. But he avoided partisan politics. Instead he, like others before him, acknowledged with sadness and regrets the dissension and schisms that have long-existed in Baptist life, in our country, and in this world. He, like others before him, spoke eloquently, sincerely, and somberly of how he had personally struggled with his own faith throughout and in spite of the varying venues and menus of religious life in America. He said he thought the most important verse in the whole Bible was I Corinthians 13:12: “Now, I see through a glass darkly, only then will I know fully and be fully known.” To him (and I agree with him) that the verse means that none of us really know the whole truth about any of God's business. President Clinton added that the real reason we have to love each other is because in the end we might discover that we all are wrong.

Now in the next few weeks and even months I will have more to say about the last three days I spent in Atlanta, for there God had a thing or two, an important thing or two, for

all of us to hear and know, but today I want to try to put words to what I think is the most important thing that God pressed upon me. It is that we are making Christianity too easy. We are falsely thinking that being a Christian, being a Baptist Christian, is an easy thing to be.

Tony Campolo, another Baptist who was present in Atlanta, is a Baptist who is radical in his writings and his teachings, an internationally recognized Sociology professor at Eastern University in Philadelphia who loves his students, and whose students love him. He says, “We are losing today’s young people, making Christianity too easy for them.”

I think this miserable mistake of watering down our faith, this attitude of apathy that keeps us lying dormant in our church’s dusty doorways, this tendency to trivialize a faith that should be stirring up souls, raising roofs’ rafters, building big bridges, and extending helping hands, can be better seen and well understood when we realize how incredibly important our prayer life should be.... And is not.

So as we consider PRAYER this morning, the Lord’s Prayer taught by Christ to His disciples, in particular, let us first remember that prayer isn’t just a decoration. Prayer isn’t just an exercise that is meant for us to feel better or feel good about ourselves. It isn’t a salve and it isn’t a solution. It isn’t just for sinners and it isn’t just for saints.

The disciples’ request of Jesus, “Lord, teach us how to pray,” as is recorded in Luke 11, the only other place besides Matthew where you’ll find the Lord’s Prayer in the Bible, should sound strange to us, just as strange as it might sound to you if I were to go to a fellow church member and say, “Joe, teach me how to pray.” You would be shocked, right? You’d think, “Oh, she’s lost her marbles this time. She prays in worship; she prays in my living room; she prays in the hospital; she prays on Wednesday nights; she prays for me over the phone; and now she wants to learn how to pray.” You’d think I was a fake, off my rocker, or maybe both.

Well, the disciples were a praying people. Jesus’ disciples were Jews who had learned how to pray at home, in their synagogues, and at the temple. They were taught all of their lives how to pray. They were even told to pray at certain hours of the day—nine o’clock,

twelve o'clock, and three o'clock. The disciples had plenty of opportunities to learn how to pray. Nonetheless, they asked. They didn't say, "Lord, teach us to heal." They didn't say, "Lord, teach us to teach and preach." They didn't say, "Lord, teach us to do miracles." Instead, they asked Christ to teach them to pray. THEY were not off their rockers, at least this time. And Christ understood where they were coming from. And that's why He gave them an answer.

Bill Tuck, in his book about The Lord's Prayer, points out that one of the reasons the disciples asked this question in the first place was that they saw the prayer life of Jesus as an example so compelling that they wanted it for themselves. The gospels record at least 17 different occasions in which Jesus is seen praying. They also saw that for Jesus it was a habitual practice. Prayer for Jesus wasn't spasmodic or occasional, or determined by mood or time of day. The gospels reveal numerous occasions where Jesus got up "a great time before day" to pray. Jesus prayed before the major crises of his life. Sometimes he prayed all night long. His followers knew that Jesus prayed before his period of temptations in the wilderness, before his miracles, before the raising of Lazarus, before he selected his 12 disciples, before his last journey to Jerusalem, and in Gethsemane before his arrest and crucifixion. He even died praying. The disciples recognized that prayer made the life of Jesus different.

Harry Emerson Fosdick expressed it this way, "The master prayed as naturally as a child breathes." Prayer was a vital part of Christ's inner being.

So the question is, "Do you know how important prayer is, and most particularly, the Lord's Prayer?"

I purchased a few books in Atlanta. One was written by Marian Wright Edelman: *GUIDE MY FEET: Prayers and Meditations for Our Children*. Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund, and she spoke in Atlanta. To me, the content of her speech moved me like no other. So I bought her book, and it, too, is so good. So good, in fact, I regret that it is categorized for the section called PARENTING, MEDITATION, for I believe every Baptist, every government official, and every American should be required

to read it. I had read most of it in one sitting, and then I read the introduction, which has as its first two sentences these words: *I set out to write a very different book—a policy book—but out tumbled prayers instead. A long time ago when I read that Martin Luther prayed four hours a day, I wondered how he found the time.*

Sometimes, brothers and sisters, we set out to write a different book—a fix-our-lives book or a fix your life book, and we find it doesn't help. Sometimes we set out to figure out why our church doesn't grow faster than it does, or we set out to figure out why our kids don't do what they're supposed to, or we set out to fix our grandchildren's problems, or our financial situation, or we set out to fix our nosey neighbor once and for all, or we set out to tell the guy who's holding up the line that we've been standing in for way too long that if he'd just quit complaining, and quit taking up so much of our time, and smartin' up, and quit doing that which doesn't amount to a hill of beans anyway, then we'd all be a lot better off. Sometimes, we set out to write a different book, and then, and then, and then out tumble prayers instead.

And we realize prayer is the only thing that is important... it's the only thing that's going to matter, after all.

Now let's get specific.

The Lord's Prayer is important. Our own Nick Nickerson has said to me more than once that if you aren't praying the Lord's Prayer then you just aren't praying. Just recently, I came across a quote of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said the same thing about the Lord's Prayer in these words: "Every prayer is contained in it. Whatever is included in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is contained aright; whatever is not included is no prayer." Somebody tell Nick he is right.

It's just 58 words and six petitions, but it is important. This week I have been thinking about the Lord's Prayer as a cart filled with beautiful, fresh, nutritious, delicious vegetables, all being taken to market. The cart is filled with clean, perfect vegetables, the likes of which cannot be enjoyed as much or cannot be to as much benefit if processed, packaged, canned, flash-frozen, freeze-dried or concentrated into juice form or even

down to its vitamin equivalent. Nothing will taste or lend itself nutritionally like the beautiful, fresh, nutritious, delicious produce in its most ripe and unblemished condition. Once we realize how important it is, we realize we cannot live without it, this nutritious, spirit-filling Lord's Prayer.

But not everybody eats their vegetables.

Now lest we get our cart before the horse, let us consider our understanding of the Lord's Prayer. Beyond realizing that our spiritual bodies can greatly benefit from this cart's contents, perhaps it would be good to try to understand why the Lord's Prayer is necessary and good for us, and HOW its contents gets delivered to us. In other words, we have the cart, so to speak, so where's the (proverbial) horse?

We need a horse. Like the horse carries the vegetables, our understanding will bring its importance into our hearts. So brothers and sisters, let's get busy and understand this thing.

I marvel at how many Christians memorize the Lord's Prayer without giving much thought to what the words mean. It was this curiosity, this need to understand that prompted the disciples' request, "Lord, teach us to pray." I like to think that there is a natural yearning to be close to, to enter into deep relationship with God, and that this was what prompted the disciples' request.

James Purdy is the author of the book *LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY*, and it is his book from which I take the titles of my next three sermons about different parts of the Lord's Prayer. In his introduction, he tells of a time when he was a dinner guest in the home of church members. As a young minister he had been teaching a children's Sunday School class in which he had been encouraging the children to learn the Lord's Prayer. His hosts, parents of one of his young students, sent him upstairs to hear the bedtime prayers of their little girl. After sweetly reciting the prayer at the side of her bed, she looked up at Purdy and asked, "Jack, what am I supposed to think about when I am saying those words?" Purdy wrote that the question remained with him for many years, and that he

doubted that he would have written his book if that child's probing inquiry had not stuck with him. What are we supposed to think about when we pray the Lord's Prayer?

Tuck says that the Lord's Prayer is a guide or model for how to pray. It was given to us as an example. "This is the manner after which you can pray," Jesus told his disciples, as we read in Luke.

Let us carry that metaphor of cart and horse, the Lord's Prayer's importance and our understanding of why its important, one step further.

This horse has got to be strong. And this cart holding the veggies can't be a rickety old thing. It has to be well crafted. The Lord's Prayer provides for us the one true model of biblical spirituality. Praying it, using it, and living by it is the actual consumption of spiritual food, it is the integration of human and divine—it is learning to live in the company of God—it provides the necessary nutrition that leads to spiritual growth. Excellent physical condition of the horse and fine craftsmanship of the cart are critical, so our utmost attention is required!!!

If we do not pay attention, we will mistake processed white sugar for that which is good for us! WE will mistake pretty candy for that which we need! WE will say and think with conviction, that prayer and Christianity are easy (!), and we will be wrong!

And if we continue to be wrong, our churches will tumble down once and for all.

The kingdom of God parables include one about yeast and one about land purchased at great cost because of buried treasure on that land.

Matthew 13, v. 33, says, "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with 3 measures of flour..." Jesus is saying that the kingdom is like yeast that a woman put in several measures of flour. How can that parable inform our thinking about the Lord's Prayer and its application to our lives? By remembering that like a tiny bit of yeast, the Lord's Prayer permeates all of life!

Matthew 13, v. 44 says, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field...” Jesus is saying that a man sold all that he had to purchase the empty field. What does that parable tell us about how the LP can impact us? It tells us that though its value is unseen, we can be assured that it is worth much more than all our worldly possessions.

Often we procrastinate and make excuses for our inaction, depression, and despair. It’s not the right time. I can’t make a difference. Whatever I do won’t matter. It’s somebody else’s turn. Nobody will pay attention. It’s overwhelming—my little bit doesn’t matter. IN the words of Marian Wright Edelman, we must struggle with ourselves and ask God’s forgiveness and help to keep being useful in small ways. And we must remember that it is always the right time to do right.

I close with one of her prayers. Bow with me:

Our Father and Mother who art in Heaven, let Your will and not mine be done. Hallowed be Your name and not mine on earth and in Heaven. Give me this day my daily bread and help me not to worry about tomorrow. Forgive me my sins and give me a spirit of forgiveness for the sins of others. And keep my eyes not on the world’s fleeting power and glory today but on Your kingdom, Your power, and Your glory forever.
Amen.