

Sermon Series: Transitions
Prayer – by Jeff McClain
Matt 6:5-13

Boone UMC
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These last several weeks as we've transitioned into new pastoral leadership here at Boone UMC, and welcomed David Hockett and his family we've been in the midst of a preaching series entitled: Transitions. Our final sermon in this series is on prayer...one of the spiritual practices that sustains and anchors us during times of transition.

Before I start, I want to thank you for your prayers for my family these past couple days. Thursday afternoon my wife and I went to our 10 week ultrasound appointment expecting to hear for the first time the heartbeat of our newest little one. But instead we found out that the baby never developed beyond the 5th week. Miscarriage isn't something we tend to talk about much in public. But it happens so frequently that most of us have or will experience it, either personally or alongside someone close to us. And if there's anywhere we should be able to talk openly about our grief and struggles it's the church. It's been a difficult few days. But the burden has been far easier to bear because of the overflow of love and support we've received from you. So many of you have reached out and shared your own stories of loss and grief, to let us know we're not alone. I can't thank you enough for that. I also thank you especially for your prayers. They've sustained, strengthened, and encouraged us more than you can know. Thank you church for being the church.

Our scripture today is from Matthew chapter 6. It's smack in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus teaches his disciples how to live as God's children in God's kingdom – a place where the poor are blessed, those who mourn are comforted, the meek inherit the earth, and we are to love even our enemies. That's what God's kingdom looks like, and Jesus lived, died, and rose again to inaugurate that kingdom, to have that kingdom break in to our existing reality and begin to make all things new.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus gives instructions for those who would be his followers, those who would participate in the coming kingdom of God. In Matthew 6 Jesus provides instructions for giving, praying, and fasting. These are spiritual practices that are simply expected of people who are in covenant with God, people who are God's beloved children. We'll focus today on prayer but know that giving and fasting are on the list, too, and they are great ways to draw closer to God as well. Here Jesus teaches us how to pray. Jesus gives us words to pray, words that reflect the heart and mission of God. Words that when we pray them and live them out make us more like Jesus. Hear this word from Matthew 6, starting at verse 5.

5 "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward.

6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. 7 "When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. 11 Give us this day our daily bread. 12 And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 13 And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

If you're wondering what happened to the "For thine is the kingdom" part, that's not found in the earliest gospel manuscripts. It appears to have been added later, so most translations leave it out (as does the Catholic Church). However, tradition teaches that the early church did recite it, and that's why we do too.¹ Here ends today's ancient manuscript history lesson.

A couple weeks ago our kids got in an argument over something. I don't remember what it was about, but our four year old Emma had somehow wronged her little sister Anne and we asked her to apologize. In a quick, huffy, and very unapologetic breath Emma said, "Sorry." Annie's only two and a half but she quickly called her sister to task. "No Emma, don't say 'Sorry.' You need to say (in a drawn out and very sympathetic tone) 'Soorrrrr-rrrry.'" Anne made her repeat the exercise three times, until she felt like she received a legitimate apology. Sometimes we can have the right words to say but if our heart isn't in them, it doesn't matter what words we use.

Jesus teaches us it's the same with our spiritual practices. We can give, pray, and fast all day long, but God isn't interested in any of it if our heart isn't in it. God doesn't want our money, our time, our rituals, or our words. God wants our hearts. And when our heart's desire is to connect with God, to grow closer to God, then it hardly matters what words we use.

Some of our best prayers are our simplest. Anne Lamott wrote a book² about this called "Help. Thanks. Wow: The Three Essential Prayers." Help. Thanks. Wow. Those are pretty good prayers. I recently heard another good short prayer at the birthday party for the Blackburn House, our intentional Christian community in Todd, NC. Pastor Brandon Wrencher threw a party to celebrate their life and ministry together over the past three years. Around 40 people showed up, many of whom had connections with Blackburn's outside of Sunday morning worship. Before we

¹ <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/DOXOLOG.HTM>

ate together Brandon quieted everyone down to pray before the meal, and this was his prayer: “Grace... Let’s eat, y’all!” Grace. Is there really anything else we need to say? Blackburn House has experienced an abundance of God’s grace in the past three years. What an appropriate prayer. Sometimes our simplest prayers can be our best.

The most powerful short prayer I heard recently came from one of our Sunday School gatherings on the lawn. I hope you had a chance to participate in those. They’re done for the summer but we’ll bring them back again. We heard some incredible stories about how God has been working in our lives here at BUMC. Melissa Strickland gave a testimony about her experience with a woman whose son was about to die. This woman got on the ground and prayed over and over, “Lord I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” She kept repeating this simple phrase, “I’m so sorry.” And then she said, “Now I know what it feels like to lose a son. I’m so sorry that you had to watch your son die for me.”

Amazingly, her son recovered, and with much gratitude for the multitude of prayers offered on his behalf. But what a powerful prayer from his mother! And simple. Not many words.

And isn’t that exactly what scripture tells us anyway?³ Listen again: **Matthew 6:7**:

“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Suddenly the short prayers of help, thanks, wow, grace, and I’m sorry sound pretty sufficient, don’t they? Provided our hearts are in the right place. But sometimes we need a bit more. Maybe just a few more words. And that’s where scripture can help us. One of my seminary professors used to repeatedly assure us pastors in training that we didn’t ever have to worry about what to say. He’d hold up either a bible or a book of worship and say, “You have the words –they’re all right here!”

And it’s true. The bible, the word of God, is full of prayers. And there’s nothing wrong with borrowing those words to pray. I know the Ten Commandments teach us not to steal, but that doesn’t apply to scripture – steal that all you want. It’s not cheating to copy off of God’s paper. That’s actually how people used to pray back in the day. Like back in Jesus’ day, and way before him, too. The entire book of Psalms is nothing but a prayer book. God’s people have prayed the psalms together for thousands of years – well before they were even written down. So if you ever can’t find words to pray, just find a bible, open up to the middle, find a psalm and start reading. You’ll be praying with the saints.

We borrow words to pray all the time. If you've been a part of this church for more than a month you've noticed that our prayers of the people start to sound familiar. There's a reason for that. We use prayer templates from the Book of Common Prayer, a prayer book that's been used throughout the world in various forms in a variety of denominations for nearly 500 years. We add things and make changes here and there but we often pray some of the same fixed prayers. And there's beauty in that – first of all, they're good prayers. That's why they've lasted five centuries. Secondly, as I said before, the church has always prayed fixed prayers in corporate worship. The saints are good company to keep.

Here's the other thing. Whether praying spontaneous prayers or borrowing from tradition, sometimes it's easy to get caught up in trying to find the right words to pray, when really God simply wants us to spend time in prayer. Eugene Peterson⁴, author of *The Message* and my favorite pastor and theologian said, "We try to figure out prayer too much. When people would come to me and say, 'Teach me how to pray,' what I usually would say is, 'Meet me at 11 o'clock Sunday morning.' You want to learn how to pray, you join the people of prayer. Join the community of prayer. Don't try to make anything happen. Just be there. And be there the next Sunday and the next Sunday. This is the laboratory of prayer."⁵

Welcome to the laboratory! I love that quote. You want to learn how to pray? Spend time with praying people. Don't try to make anything happen. Just be there. Isn't that all we can do anyway? Just show up? God's already here. God has already initiated conversation with us. Everything always starts with God. Creation, salvation, resurrection, new life – it's all initiated by God. And all we can do is respond to it. We meet God in the midst of what God is already doing and spend time there. Don't try to make anything happen. Just be there.

When Carrie and I were in Montana a couple weeks ago we had the opportunity to have lunch with Eugene and his wife Jan. I asked him how to lead God's people in prayer and his answer somewhat surprised me. He talked about his practice of keeping the Sabbath. He tried to teach his congregation about prayer by making prayer and reflection a regularly scheduled part of his life.⁶ He always took Mondays as his day off, and every Monday he and his wife Jan would take long walks in nature together. They'd start early in the morning and pack a lunch and their rule was they weren't allowed to talk to each other until lunch time. Jan told us she hated the silence at first but eventually got to a point where she didn't really want to talk even when they were allowed to. When they finally did speak, they talked about what they'd heard or seen from God

⁵ <http://theburnerblog.com/conferences-2/q-practices/eugene-peterson-on-prayer-qpractices/>

⁶ Peterson describes this in his memoir *The Pastor*, p. 218-222

that morning. This practice of Sabbath formed, sustained, and strengthened not only their prayer lives but the entirety of their lives together.

We pray because prayer draws us closer to God. And it's also just what disciples do. Disciples pray. Not for show, not to impress people, but to be in God's presence and to make our hearts more like God's heart. But in our scripture for today Jesus also says this curious bit about rewards. There are rewards associated with praying. Now there's something we don't tend to think about much. But it's right there in black and white (or red or maybe blue, depending on your bible).⁷ Verse 6 But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

What do prayer rewards look like? Many of you already know because you've spent countless hours in prayer. I read recently from an author who contends that God designed our bodies to physically respond to spiritual practices. Praying changes our bodies on a cellular level to better equip us to communicate with God.

Listen to this:⁸

We are all taught to pray; we pray before meals, before bed or during devotional time. But how we pray can have very physical effects. Shorter prayers in which we make requests to God – the kind many of us are most familiar with – go undetected by a brain scan. This doesn't mean they don't work or they are not valuable. But it may encourage you toward deeper, longer prayer when you learn that twelve minutes of attentive and focused prayer every day for eight weeks changes the brain significantly enough to be measured by a brain scan. Not only that, but it strengthens areas of the brain involved in social interaction, increasing our sense of compassion and making us more sensitive to other people.. Prayer that seeks communion with God actually makes us more thoughtful and rational, enhances our sense of peace and well-being, and makes us more compassionate and responsive to the needs of other people.

Those sound like some pretty good rewards to me! Twelve minutes a day with God for two months and I can become more thoughtful, rational, peaceful, compassionate, and responsive to the needs of others? That almost sounds like an infomercial. That list also sounds a lot like Jesus. Either way, sign me up! Now, of course we don't pray in order to get rewarded. Prayer isn't like a gumball machine where if we put in a quarter we get the candy. No. Don't try to make anything happen, Peterson said. Just be there. We pray in order to spend time with God. That, in and of itself, is reward enough. And it's what disciples do. But you have to admit those are some pretty impressive side effects of spending time in prayer!

⁷ On screen please Matt 6:6

To be honest, when I was first imagining this sermon I thought very seriously about reading that quote, inviting us into prayer, standing up here for 12 full minutes in silence, and then saying “Amen” and sitting down. David’s got Quaker roots – they sit in silence all the time, so I’m sure he’d have been cool with it. And I’m sure you’d have never forgotten that sermon either!

For some of us the thought of spending twelve minutes in prayer seems impossible. What in the world would I say? Well, again, the point is not how we pray or what we say. And if we’re at a loss for words, we can borrow from scripture. But God doesn’t want our words. God wants our hearts. And what this research shows is that as we pray, our hearts begin to change. Our hearts become more like God’s heart.

Think again with me about the prayer Jesus taught us. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus provides a framework for us to pray. Jesus gives us words. That doesn’t mean we have to use those exact words every time. Although there is something incredibly powerful about praying a prayer millions of Christians around the world pray daily. But rather Jesus says pray in this way. Make your life a life of prayer. Model it like this. Follow me.

The prayer Jesus taught us was the life Jesus lived for us.⁹ Jesus has, from the beginning of time, been one with our Father in heaven, and his name is hallowed above all names. Jesus came to earth in order to usher in God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. He is our daily bread, the bread of life. Jesus, though without sin himself, prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them” even as they sinned against him. He was led by the Spirit into temptation but he resisted the evil one and delivered us and all creation from the clutches of evil. He is seated at the right hand of God, and his is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Church, our Lord’s Prayer is our Lord’s life. May our prayers and our lives reflect his. May our prayers prey on us and transform our hearts to look like his. Lord, teach us to pray. Lord, teach us to live. Forever and ever. Amen.

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.*