“Jesus, teach us to pray”

by Brian Coday

Our little neighborhood Bible study group finished our meeting last night with prayer. The group is a great mix of people from many different walks of life. There are “professional” Christians, new Christians, normal Christians and non-Christians that attend each week.

One beautiful thing that we all have in common is that we can all do better with our prayer life. All of us can improve, increase and intensify our personal prayer life, no matter how long we have been praying to the God of all creation.

The final comment during our closing prayer was something like “Lord, help us improve our prayer life.” The disciples of Jesus said something similar at least a couple of times in the New Testament.

Recently, I had the privilege of listening to a series of sermons by pastor Andy Stanley of Northpoint Baptist Church in Georgia titled “Permission to Speak Freely.” The messages were all about Jesus’ teaching on prayer. What follows is a very rough explanation of how the truths revealed in that series have changed my prayer patterns in the last several months.

The disciples of Jesus were, for the most part, young Jewish men who had grown up hearing prayers, reading prayers from the Old Testament texts, memorizing prayers, and witnessing the countless prayers of the priests and religious leaders of the day. They had a working knowledge of how prayer was done. But after spending time with Jesus and noticing how He prayed, they felt compelled to ask Him to “teach us to pray.”

It’s interesting that Jesus didn’t tell them that they already knew how to pray. Instead, he instantly began teaching them what is important and what’s not important when it comes to prayer. One of these instances is recorded in Matthew 6:6-12:

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like 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.

I have missed the importance of the beginning of this passage for years. There is a great deal of teaching being done in these few verses that has the potential to vitally change your prayer life. Jesus was telling His disciples that if they really want to pray like He prays, then they need to take some time to pray in private.

We know that Jesus didn’t always go to the same room and close the door behind Him when He prayed, but He did consistently find private places to spend time in intimate prayer with His Father. How many times a week do we do that? How many times in a year? If we want to learn to pray like Jesus, finding a private place on a regular basis seems to be a very important example of His to follow.

Jesus then told His disciples something that messes up my prayer patterns completely. In essence, Jesus told them (and is telling us) that our words are not really that important to God. Neither are the lists of things that we consider “needs,” because God knows about these even before we ask. Under normal circumstances, asking God for things accounts for about 98% of my prayer time!

If, in order to pray more like Jesus, I am supposed to go someplace private but not worry too much about telling God about the things He already knows I need, what am I supposed to be praying about? I can just imagine the disciples coming to that same confusing conclusion. So Jesus proceeds to answer their question in the next few sentences.

continued on next page
Those next few verses compose what we commonly refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer.” Are you as mystified as I am when I hear someone repeat or recite the Lord’s Prayer in times of trouble? Occasionally, people admit that they recite the Lord’s Prayer as some sort of last resort to gain God’s protection and/or guidance. I am not sure that was the intent of Jesus when He spoke these words to the disciples.

Instead, it seems evident that He was offering those words as an example of how to pray and what to pray for. It’s pretty clear that these words were not the same words that Jesus used EVERY time He prayed. In fact, in Luke 11, we see a different instance where some of the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray and the words that Jesus used were slightly different. The pattern was the same, however.

In both instances, Jesus taught the disciples to start with God and acknowledge how great God is.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,”

This is in stark contrast to how my prayers usually begin. Most of the time, I jump right in with my list of requests and my list of things that I would like God to do something about. Jesus showed us that instead, we should start with God.

He then proceeded with the next principle of prayer…. aligning your will with God’s.

“your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

This is where praying can sometimes get tough. We all have our ideas about how God “should” answer our prayers and how things “should” work out in our lives. But that is not always what God has in mind. When these two “wills” are in contrast (and they seem to almost always be) it is important that we do what Jesus is teaching here: submit our will to God’s.

Jesus’ final statements in His model prayer have to do with acknowledging our dependence on God for provisions, forgiveness, and safety.

After hearing Andy Stanley’s messages and thinking about the truths revealed in this passage of Scripture, I realized my own prayer life needed an overhaul!

What about yours? Are your prayers similar to the model prayer that we find in Scripture?

If you are not already doing so, I want to encourage you to find a private place where you can escape to spend some intimate time with your Father. Let Him know that you realize how great He is. Spend whatever time it takes to align your will with His. Then talk to Him about the needs that you have and your dependence on Him to provide those things for you.

When we pray like Jesus taught us to pray, it will change our routine prayer life into one that provides intimacy, fulfillment and direction to our lives and ministries.