



Sermon, September 4, 2016  
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: The Prayer That Changes Us  
**Sermon # 1: The Prayer That Changes Us (Introduction)**

**Matthew 6:5-15**

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. 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.

'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. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial,  
but rescue us from the evil one.

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

**Opening**

When Robert Louis Stevenson was a boy he once remarked to his mother, "Momma, you can't be good without praying." "How do you know, Robert?" she asked. "Because I've tried!" he answered. This brings to mind a story about another little fellow – one who had been sent to his room because he had been bad. A short time later he came out and said to his mother, "I've been thinking about what I did and I said a prayer." "That's fine," she said, "if you ask God to make you good, He will help you." "Oh, I didn't ask Him to help me be good," replied the boy. "I asked Him to help you put up with me." (*Our Daily Bread*)

**What is Prayer?**

1. Prayer is universal.

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One of the most common of human spiritual practices is prayer. Prayer is found across the world in a variety of forms, and employs a wide variety of techniques and methods of articulation.

### 2. Christian prayer focuses our intentions upon God.

In traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, the prayers are directed to God, who serves as the one who listens to and receives such stated intentions or prayers. But prayer is also found in Buddhism, Hinduism, Paganism and Wicca, and indigenous and traditional societies across the globe. It is a well-nigh universal human practice. What is unique in Christian prayer is how this practice is grounded in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, and how it is often directed to him in a conversational manner, as if face-to-face.

### 3. Prayer expresses what is in our hearts.

At its heart, prayer is the formal or deliberate stating of an intention for oneself or for another person or groups of persons, or even for a situation. We desire that a certain thing will happen, or a particular state of being or set of circumstances be achieved, and we formulate that intention into words. This is the essence of prayer. But it arises out of what is in our hearts. John Bunyan said this: "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart." That is what Jesus meant when he cautioned against stacking up a bunch of useless words. Prayer starts with the content of the heart.

### **Why pray?**

The urge to pray, the impulse to connect with That which is greater than us and which encompasses us and all of the universe, is somehow implanted within us. I find this to be a characteristic of all religions around the world. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes 3:11 expresses it this way: "He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart."

### **How does the Prayer of Jesus change us?**

Prayer affects us by operating at the level of conscious thought. Repeated prayers start to affect what it is we think about, and consequently, what we

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set our hearts on. Example: advertisements operate by frequently displaying a product or message, that when repeated enough times, becomes fixed in our thinking. Add to that certain emotional qualities that make us desire that product and you produce a certain desired human behavior: buying stuff.

Prayer operates at this common level of human consciousness. What we focus our attention and desires upon forms the basis of prayers.

The Prayer of Jesus focuses our consciousness and desires upon God, and bringing about God's will in the world. Which is basically the point of prayer in the first place. My definition of prayer: "Prayer is that part of the will of God that needs the vehicle of human expression in order to be manifested in the material world."

This definition of prayer roots it in the will of God, so that our very desire or need to pray is itself already a function of God's will – God desires us to communicate and train our consciousness upon Godly/heavenly/divine/spiritual matters in order to be formed by that which is eternal and divine. That is what I mean by saying that the urge to pray is somehow implanted within us.

The Prayer of Jesus changes us through a three-step process:

1. Focus on the Will of God;
2. Focus on our own lives;
3. Focus on the world.

### **Focus on the Will of God**

Jesus' prayer begins by focusing our minds on the task of helping to bring about the will of God. But how do we rightly discern the will of God? Well, how does anybody know the mind of another – only by frequent, constant contact and communication, of course. In order to become familiar with what the will of God is, we need to engage in study, and spiritual discernment. It basically involves training our minds in the same way we learn mathematics, how to build a house, how to fly an airplane or bake a cake. The more we practice a thing, the more adept we are at doing that

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thing, and the more attuned or intuitive we become with understanding the nuances of that thing.

E. Stanley Jones explained it this way: "Prayer is surrender—surrender to the will of God and cooperation with that will. If I throw out a boathook from the boat and catch hold of the shore and pull, do I pull the shore to me, or do I pull myself to the shore? Prayer is not pulling God to my will, but the aligning of my will to the will of God." (E. Stanley Jones, *Liberating Ministry From The Success Syndrome*, K Hughes, Tyndale, 1988, p. 73.)

### **Focus on Our Lives**

Then the prayer moves our focus to what we are doing with our lives. It focuses upon simplifying our attention only to what is needful each day for living, how we live our lives in community.

### **Focus on the World**

Then finally it acknowledges the reality of evil in the world, the fact that our human societies are not expressions of God's love, mercy and justice, and we then pray that our minds will not be shaped by that evil, but instead be shaped by God's reality and way of living. Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

There is a great arc in the prayer: God >ourselves>the world at large. This reflects the divine action that moves from God to human individuals out into the world created by humans.

### **More to come...**

It is my hope and intention throughout this sermon series that this powerful Prayer of Jesus will come alive for each of us. We are going to pray it in different translations and forms. We will sing it sometimes. We will read it in different English versions of the Bible. We will encounter new wordings that will expand our understanding. At times it will be like traveling to a foreign country. We will meet new people, hear new things and the words we speak will taste differently to our mouths. Each week we will focus upon one line of this prayer, and sink into it more deeply. By the end, I am sure we won't be the same. That's because this is the Prayer that Changes Us.