



What Are We Doing Here?

Week 1: The Lord's Prayer

Brian Mattson - 02/22/2026

We are officially in the season of Lent now, which began with Ash Wednesday. In the calendar of the church, this time of repentance, fasting, and preparation for Easter lasts 40 days. During these Sundays leading up to Holy Week, we are going to do our best to prepare ourselves for the encounter of the resurrection. To see it with new eyes and renewed hearts as we draw close to God through the ancient practice of prayer.

You know last year, for my first Lenten season, I knew I wanted to do a series on the Atonement. Several people were a little leery of the idea, it being my first Easter season as the lead pastor, but also because the theories of the Atonement are complex and nuanced. They are often used as a litmus test by some denominations to determine who is in or out, right or wrong. And frankly, the theories aren't necessarily easy to wrap our heads around, because there isn't one definitive answer. It's easier to just say something supernatural happened at the crucifixion of Jesus, but resurrection is the thing we want to focus on. *Yeah, resurrection. That's happier. That's more Easter-y.*

This year, I decided to take a more traditional route to Easter morning. Rather than getting into the weeds of Atonement theories, we are going to stick with a known commodity—prayer. You all know what I mean when I say prayer, right? We all do... or at least we assume we do. If I just picked one of

you in the pews right now to tell me *What is prayer?* or *How are we supposed to pray?* I would imagine that most of you would pray that I don't call on you.

When I visit my daughter's preschool class, they know exactly what to do. No doubts at all. Right before lunch, the teacher says, "Faith," and all the kids smash their hands together. Then Ms. Jenn says, "Hope," and they all bow their heads. Finally, she says, "Love," and most of the kids close their eyes before they sing a little prayer to the theme from *Superman* or *Frère Jacques*. Obviously, that's the correct model for a bunch of five year olds. But what does prayer look like for grown ups? What does prayer sound and feel like? What are our expectations or assumptions around prayer, prayer teams, and prayer lists? Pastoral prayers and memorized prayers? Perhaps prayer is as nuanced and complex as Atonement theories when we really get into it.

Not too long ago, I was snuggling with Jack after we finished reading a bedtime story. And, as I occasionally do with both kids, I asked him if he wanted me to say a quick prayer for us. Usually, those prayers consist of thanking God for our day, for all of our family, and for a home to live in together. Dorothy usually wants a little bit of prayer for her friends at school. Jack requests that God get rid of ticks and mosquitos, while simultaneously thanking God for bats and opossums that eat ticks and mosquitoes. Then I normally conclude the prayers with both kids by saying, "and most of all God, thank you for Jesus who showed us how to love everyone," which in my mind is the one thing I absolutely want to impart each evening before falling asleep.

Well, when I asked Jack if he wanted me to say a quick prayer that night, he said, "No, we can just go to sleep." I asked him why he didn't want me to pray or if anything was wrong. He very plainly, in the most innocent seven year old way said, "I don't know. What are we doing here?" to which I didn't have an answer at the ready. I told him we are kind of just talking to God, asking for things, but also listening. We are thanking God, we are remembering others, and we are seeking peace and rest.

But it got me thinking. What *are* we doing here? Do you have a good answer for that question? Is there one answer? Is there any answer? Some of you might just add that to your list to ask God when you get to heaven. *Hey God, what's the deal with prayer? You already know everything before I say it, right?*

So we are going to explore the practice of prayer over the next 40 days. We'll look at the words we say and the ways we pray to help us better understand just exactly what it is we're doing here. Are we changing God's mind or are we changing our hearts? Are we praying for other people or ourselves or is that too selfish? If we use memorized prayers or other people's prayers, is that cheating? Is prayer supposed to be spontaneous or improvisational? Do I just pray whenever, or at meals, or bedtime, or just during specific times at church?

There's a tradition that dates back to the early church, the first three or so centuries after Christ died, of praying at seven specific times each day. Once when you wake up, again at 9am, 12pm, and 3pm, then at dusk, bedtime, and midnight. These prayer times were done both privately and communally. Generally, people would gather at churches for morning prayer, which became known as Lauds, and then again for evening prayers, which became known as Vespers. The other fixed prayer times were generally for personal or private prayer, but included reciting the Lord's Prayer. And since we are doing an entire series on prayer, the Lord's Prayer seems like a mighty fine place to start our journey.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the familiar prayer is presented as a model for praying. A model we continue using to this day. It's found inside of a larger passage of scripture known as the Sermon on the Mount, perhaps Jesus's most famous and oft-quoted teaching. In Matthew 5-7, we hear some of his greatest hits: The Beatitudes, the Salt & Light metaphors, the Lord's Prayer, lessons for living in community, and building a house on the rock.

The entire three chapters are worthy of a lifetime of study, and some people have done just that. We aren't going to scrutinize each word or verse, but there are some very fascinating details that will help us understand the impact and importance of the Lord's Prayer in this larger passage of scripture.

The first thing to note is that this teaching takes place up on a mountain, hence the name the Sermon on the Mount. Do you remember what I was telling you about mountaintops last week? They are physical locations, yes, but oftentimes in scripture, they were places where people encountered God. Places where the divine meets the earthly. That's exactly what we have here. The longer passage starts like this:

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to speak and taught them.

- Matthew 5:1-2

Just like the story of Jesus's Transfiguration we discussed last week, this is another instance where he goes up a mountain. In fact, there are seven times in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is on a mountaintop, with seven being the number of completeness or perfection in the Bible. The author is reminding us that the locations are not by accident, but are keying the reader into the fact that each of these stories are holy encounters, marked by miraculous signs or words.

Here at the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches in a way that leaves the crowd astonished and amazed at his authority. He starts by explaining that the Kingdom of God is for all people, even the sick, oppressed, and lonely. It's not just for the rich and powerful. And there on a mountaintop, a place where Moses received the law, Jesus helps the crowds make sense of Torah by reinterpreting it—not dismantling it, but showing how to truly fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

-Matthew 5:17

And true fulfillment is radical and unexpected. He moves the crowds' understanding of the Law forward. *"You're right," he says, "Don't murder. But go further. Don't even get angry or throw insults. You'd be just as guilty as a murderer."* That's the Brian translation, but it's really the underlying message. *"Yes, the scriptures say an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But rather than retaliating, offer your other cheek. Better yet, when people ask for your shirt, give them a coat, Jesus continues,"* yet another Brian translation. This is radical stuff. Authoritative stuff. Lifestyle-changing stuff. And that's just the first of three chapters.

The last chapter deals mostly with relationships with others in community. Don't judge. Treat others the way you want to be treated. Don't be selfish or self-righteous. Do good works and bear fruit in the world. By your actions, you are choosing to either walk through the narrow gate that leads to life, or the easier wide gate, which leads to destruction. As The Message translation puts it:

"Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires total attention."

- Matthew 7:13-14

And nestled in between these two chapters is Jesus's model for praying, what we know as the Lord's Prayer.

"Pray, then, in this way: Our Father in heaven, may your name be revered as holy. May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today 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.

- Matthew 6:9-13

Later manuscripts would add the common refrain, “For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours, forever. Amen.” So if you didn’t know where we get the specific words of the Lord’s Prayer, they come from the Sermon on the Mount. And they weren’t just randomly tossed in. There’s something meaningful about the exact spot they are placed in this longer section. They are in the exact middle. The core focus of Jesus’s teaching.

When we break it down further, the prayer itself is centered on six essential requests. There are three heavenly petitions: May your name be revered, may your kingdom come, may your will be done. Then there are three earthly petitions: Give us daily bread, forgive us our debts, rescue us from evil. And at the exact middle of those petitions, in the middle of the middle, the very heart of the Sermon on the Mount, is the phrase *on earth as it is in heaven*.

Here, in perhaps Jesus’s most important sermon, the most important, central element, is communing with God in prayer, linking the fulfillment of the law with our work in the world—*on earth as it is in heaven*. It’s almost as if Jesus and the gospel writer are saying that our connection with God in prayer is a catalyst for our vital work here on earth. Right here, right now. Not in some far off distant future on a different cosmic plane. On earth. Your life—your words, your actions, *your prayers*—matter at this exact moment in the history of Creation.

This prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, is one we say every week, because it’s important. It’s part of the Church’s 2,000-year history. Has it lost its vitality because of how often you’ve said it? Yes, memorized prayer can be boring and monotonous. Sometimes that’s okay, I’ve been reading the news too. It can also be life-giving, course-setting.

But maybe it's hard for you to see the Lord's Prayer with fresh eyes or hear it with new ears. I get it. You've heard this prayer a million times. Most Sundays it probably just rolls off your tongue without a second thought. So maybe you just need to hear another prayer. Somebody else's prayer. Look one up or ask one of the staff to introduce you to a few to choose from. As I mentioned earlier, historically the Lord's Prayer has been recited during daylight hours. So I offer two new prayers to you: One you can use to start your day, and one you can pray as you fall asleep.

The first prayer is one I hear quite regularly as I start my day. When I wake up with my alarm at 5:30am and don't hit snooze a couple of times, I usually have enough margin to listen to the daily devotional on the Lectio365 app. It's a wonderful way to start your day with a little meditation, scripture, devotion, and prayer. All in about 10 minutes! At the end of every morning devotional, there is a prayer that I've grown to love. A prayer that sets a positive tone and direction for the rest of my day. It sounds like this.

Father, help me to live this day to the full, being true to you in every way. Jesus, help me to give myself away to others, being kind to everyone I meet. Spirit, help me to love the lost, proclaiming Christ in all I do and say. Amen

Or maybe you'd rather try a nighttime prayer. For that, we can turn to these beautiful words in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer. In the standardized hours of prayer for the church, *Compline*, or *Prayers at the End of the Day*, is the final service before sleep, and these words are one option to pray for the overnight hours.

Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen.

I don't think God has a preference which one you choose. I don't think God minds if we use words at all. We say the Lord's Prayer because that's the model Jesus gave us. But Jesus lifted all sorts of prayers to God in scripture, so we model that too. Prayers of confession or sadness. Words of anger and doubt. Sighs and moans of exasperation and frustration. Even more, we offer our whole lives to God as an act of prayer.

A Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast, says prayer is not the same thing as prayers. Prayers are important, but prayer is waking up to the presence of God no matter where I am or what I am doing. It's coffee with an old friend. It's serving sandwiches to the homeless. It's snuggling with your kids.

Saying prayers with our mouths and living out prayer with our lives are two sides of the same coin—communion with God. Humans in touch with the divine. The very core of Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and the very core of Jesus as a person.

This week will you pray with me? Would you seek the presence of God just as you go about your day? You can go ahead and talk to God. Or not. But either way, if you're looking and listening, you will discover opportunity after opportunity to express God's love in ways you don't expect. And the more of those opportunities we act on, people all across the *world* act on, the closer earth gets to heaven.