

The Lent Challenge: Prayer

(The following message is the first in our series titled The Journey to the Cross: Four Practices to Prepare Us for Easter.)

Luke 18:1-8a

And so we come to our second Sunday in Lent.

Julie and I had a conversation last night over dinner with some friends about how different traditions use different practices to remember this season. Some give something up, others go to special services, you get the idea. For us, however you practice this season, Lent is the 40 non-Sundays before Easter. Sundays are always festive days—we're not supposed to deprive ourselves of anything on the Lord's Day. That's why Lent is such a bad time to diet—on each Sunday we're supposed to feast on whatever we're giving up.

Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for our remembrance and celebration of Christ's love for us as we find it in the Easter miracle. It's an old tradition—it dates back at least to the 4th century—it's a part of the church calendar that moves us from the joy and expectation of Advent and Christmas, through the more somber season of thinking about the Cross and Christ's suffering for us.

Over these next four Sundays we're going to explore some practices that will prepare our hearts and minds for Holy Week and Easter. The habits and practices we'll look at are prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality. Each one of these serves to help us understand and experience what Christ has offered to us—each one of these gets us out of our regular routines and practices and makes Lent and Easter more meaningful.

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.

As we look at this parable it's important to remember some things about Parables as a specific type of writing. They're not allegories, but instead they're stories that are designed to create a feeling or reaction, like a short story as opposed to a novel. They're more confrontational than informational. They're meant to confront us with a glimpse of what the Kingdom of God might look like.

Luke's gospel was written a generation after the events of Jesus' ministry, and it was designed to encourage Christians who were under attack or persecution. There's a cultural context to the story we read, too. Luke's readers would have had a clear understanding of the relationship between the powerful and the weak—about what it meant to be powerless. The persistent woman in the story would have gotten a lot of nods from the people listening to the story—as a widow her plight would have resonated with Jesus' audience.

Since this parable isn't an allegory, the characters aren't meant to specifically represent God or us or anyone else. In the parable we read today the judge doesn't represent God. He's a device that is meant to highlight God's love and grace and mercy. The point Jesus is making goes something like this: If a crappy, unjust judge would take this woman's case—even if just to get her off his back—if even this corrupt politician would do the right thing in the end, how much more would our Father in heaven act on our behalf.

So what do we learn about preparing for Easter in this passage?

First, there is a persistence to prayer here that goes against our shopping mentality. On the back of your bulletin there's a description of prayer that goes like this:

"Prayer is a dynamic and vital part of our journey of faith in Jesus Christ. We pray, not as we shop for goods—with a list in hand and limited funds to spend—but rather as faithful people bringing our hopes and fears before God, whose love and power and resources have no end. In prayer we learn to align our vision and desires with those of God himself, and in the process become mature disciples, ready for service."

Mostly, though, prayer is about bringing our lives before God—all the time—not just when we have something we want from him. Remember that even Jesus prayed all night—if prayer was a simple matter of placing an order and waiting for goods, *he never would have done that.*

So how can we experience prayer as a way to prepare for Easter?

The answer to that is deceptively simple, but that doesn't mean it's easy. If you want to see how prayer can help you move through the Lent season and get you ready for Easter, the answer is to pray.

Pray for your friends and families.

Pray for this church and our ministry together.

Pray for your kids and the ways they're being shaped in their schools and friendships.

Pray for the person sitting next to you today.

Pray for your neighbors.

Pray for strangers.

Pray for people who drive you crazy—the ones who really get under your skin.

Pray for your priorities.

Pray for peace, everywhere.

Pray for a heart that is as soft toward others as God's is toward you.

In the interest of full disclosure here I have to say that I know this part is difficult. I'm the last guy who should be up here giving instruction on prayer. I've been a Christian for most of my life and I still don't feel like I get this part of the life of discipleship.

I know this is hard. But Jesus understood that, too. That's why when his disciples came to him and asked that he teach them to pray, he gave them the prayer that we say here almost every Sunday.

Developing a life of prayer is a challenge that will take our whole lifetime to wrestle with. But the one part of that that isn't a mystery is in knowing where to start.

We begin precisely where Jesus himself told us to begin. We start with the Lord's Prayer.

Last year we spent a couple of months walking through this prayer—seeing it for the radical statement of faith that it is. That’s something we want to rediscover over and over again.

I want to give you a challenge during this Lent season, as we reflect and prepare on the Cross of Christ and his resurrection on Easter Sunday. As we develop the practices of the Christian life I want to challenge all of us to do something over these next weeks before Easter.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer five times a day.

That’s it. That’s all. It’s not magic, but it is a way to get our minds and hearts focused on the one who made us and redeems us and calls us to this new way of life.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer five times each day.

Let the words soak in. Let the prayer teach you something about the mind of God—about God’s plan—about God’s heart for you and for this church and for the world.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer five times each day.

Right now I know that some people will be thinking that they don’t have time to do this—that they can’t fit this into their busy, stress-filled lives.

You know the word I want to say about that (the one that would cost me my job).

Here’s a reality check: The Lord’s Prayer takes about 30 seconds to say. It might be a little longer for the ‘trespasser’ crowd, but not by much. We’re talking about less than 3 minutes total out of your day. Three minutes to get your mind and heart focused with God as we prepare for Easter. Three minutes each day to take a stab at praying just as Jesus himself taught us to pray.

Pray the Lord’s Prayer five times each day between now and Easter.

For those of you who like to have a plan for things (and you know who you are), try this: Pray it once when you wake up. Pray it before breakfast, lunch and dinner. Pray it again as you go to bed.

If you miss one, then you miss one. If you miss a day, don't give up. This isn't magic—this is about learning to align our lives and minds and hearts and priorities with the mind and heart and priorities of God. Talk about it in your home or with friends or people here at the church. If praying the Lord's Prayer raises questions for you, then write them down and talk about them with someone.

As you pray the prayer, let the prayer enter into your life and start to work on you—to change the way you think and feel and even believe. Just try it—we can make it our shared Lent project this year.

John Ortberg is a pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California. He's a really effective teacher and writer—one of his books is called '*The Life You've Always Wanted*,' which is on that reading list in your bulletin, by the way. The book is about how to develop spiritual disciplines in our daily lives. He wrote this about prayer:

"Prayer, perhaps more than any activity, is the concrete expression of the fact that we are invited into a relationship with God. Prayer is talking with God about what we are doing together. In addition to all the other work that gets done through prayer, perhaps the greatest work of all is the knitting of the human heart together with the heart of God."

I don't know too many people who aren't in some way looking for a concrete expression of their relationship with God.

I don't know too many people who would reject the idea of their heart being somehow knitted together with the heart of God.

That's what God offers us in the life of prayer.

That's what I'm inviting you to do during these next few weeks of Lent.

As we reflect on Christ's ministry and sacrifice for us—as we prepare together to celebrate the miracle of the resurrection as if it were happening for the very first time—as we continue to grow together in our faith and discipleship...

Pray the Lord's Prayer five times a day—pray it with the annoying persistence of the widow in the parable.

Let it become a part of the rhythm of your day—let it become part of the rhythm of your life.

We look ahead with humility and joy and anticipation to the events of Holy Week and Easter. As we continue that journey to the Cross, let's stand and pray the Lord's Prayer together.