



Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Luke 11:1-13

July 27, 2025

The Lord's Prayer and You

The great preacher George Buttrick once said, "Pastors think people come to church to hear sermons. They don't. They come to pray and to learn to pray." I'm going to trust that Buttrick is right and we're going to talk about prayer today – specifically the Lord's Prayer. But there's a problem. I don't think I can teach you how to pray. I can describe different ways to pray or different types of prayer to say, but I can't really teach you how to pray. It's like when you explain a joke, it ruins it and destroys its humor; or when you analyze a poem and break down its rhyming scheme, it loses some of its beauty. I could tell you how to sit and what words to use when you pray. But even if you took careful notes and followed my every instruction, I'm not sure in the end you'll be any better at praying itself. Now, in today's gospel lesson, the disciples came to Jesus and asked him to teach them how to pray, and he did just that. But I'm not Jesus. So we'll need to approach this subject from a different direction.

Let's start with this idea. Each of us is a unique individual, right? We have led lives filled with experiences unique to us. Like snowflakes, no two of us are exactly the same. Yet the problem of these modern times is that we exist as individuals in a hyper-connected world.¹ We look in the mirror and think we are one of a kind, yet every item we buy, every product we use from our shoes to our shampoo has been tested, packaged, marketed, and priced so that lots of people like us will buy it. We turn on the computer and as we prepare to order something from Amazon, the computer already knows all about us and auto-fills everything about us, including our credit card number. We glance at our phones, and choices appear on our search engines, videos pop up on our social media, or ads appear all based on what these mini-computers already know about us - our habits, our preferences, and our innermost thoughts.

Given all this, if I try to teach you how to pray – a congregation of 200 souls – and I give you all the exact same advice, how is my sermon any different from something you could find by Googling "teach me to pray"? Actually, you might get better advice Googling "how to pray". Its answers would likely have nice graphics and clever mnemonic devices that will help you remember the Google advice far longer than you'll remember my sermon. If my entire sermon has the same weight as the random article you found on Google; and if both those lessons about prayer are seen as equally valid, equally relevant and effective, then why come to church at all? Teaching you about prayer has to be more than just giving you tips and pointers you can use when you pray.

Second, it seems like everyone today is talking about A.I. – artificial intelligence. Ironically, in order to even explain a bit about this to you, my phone gave me an AI overview about AI itself – how artificial intelligence is trained on massive amounts of text data to answer questions, translate texts, summarize volumes of material, and write essays or poems or even sermons in whatever style you tell it to use. A year ago, programs like ChatGPT were novelties. They were able to answer some questions accurately, but they were also prone to hallucinate – to make up answers that were totally impossible.

But in the past year AI has made vast strides and now is able to do effectively almost anything that is asked of it. Need a job description for an employee, a summary of an annual report, a quick email response to a colleague? Hit a button and almost instantly it is there before you. The more precise your instructions, the more specific the AI reply. My brother is a great guy, who is downsizing and moving from one house to another. The work was overwhelming him, so he described himself and his situation to ChatGPT and immediately got a helpful essay of how to go about decluttering and simplifying his life for this move. Some people even use AI programs as personal therapists, or create best friends or even romantic partners out of artificial intelligence programs.

Now I'm not trying to be a Luddite. The question is whether AI is good news and a tool to make us all more efficient, or is there a downside to this whole AI business? A recent M.I.T. study looked at 54 participants writing essays, some who used AI and some who didn't. Those who used ChatGPT to write demonstrated weaker brain connectivity, poorer memory recall of what they'd just written, and less ownership over their writing than those who hadn't used AI. Less brain connectivity, less memory recall, less ownership. The study called this a "cognitive debt" associated with using AI.² The study suggests something is gained when we sit and write an essay by ourselves, when we chew on our pen and make revisions, when we work through different combinations of words to get our ideas out – while something is lost when we let technology do most of that creative work for us.

Now we can circle back to the Lord's Prayer. There are many different types of prayer. There are prayers in which we confess our sins, prayers we offer for others in need, and prayers as short as "Thank you, God. Help me, God. Lord, I'm sorry." Jesus was off praying by himself when the disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray as well." It is true that Jesus gave them some specific words to say, and churches now for centuries have had its members repeat those words on a daily or weekly basis. But it is what happens between the words of the Lord's Prayer that is most important and transformative.

Imagine you going to say a prayer to God. You get comfortable; you take a breath; you close your eyes. Initially your focus is on what you want to pray about. Maybe you're worried about a medical test result or an upcoming operation. You miss a loved one who has died. You want peace on earth and an end to the unjust war in Gaza. All of

those are worthy topics of prayer. But by starting with the subject of your prayer, perhaps you struggle with how to put this into words; and subconsciously you might tell yourself that if you don't pray your prayer well, God won't listen to you or honor your request. So the start of your prayer is spent worrying about what to say and whether you're even worthy to be praying to God in the first place.

But notice how Jesus has his disciples begin their time of prayer. The Lord's Prayer starts with three "Thou" statements – three statements directed solely at God. "Lord, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done." Really think about those words for a moment. You've quieted yourself down and then you begin by considering God as the holy one you're addressing. God who is not us - who is so much more than us yet who loves us and knows us completely. Next you place God in time and space and imagine what is around God. "Your kingdom come": God's house, God's world, imagining what it would be like when it is fully present around me. "Your will be done": God's power and loving spirit active all around me. Jesus gave the disciples three "Thou" statements to help them become people of prayer. These petitions are designed to help us focus less on what we're praying about and more on whom we are praying to.

What comes next, though, isn't our specific prayer requests. Next are three "Us" statements – 1st person plural statements as if our prayer is being spoken from the midst of a crowd of people. "Give us this day our daily bread." We say those words and think of the relative ease with which we can go to Trader Joe's or MetroMart and buy our daily bread. But then we also think of others who lack enough income to shop like us or who have to line up at the Interchange food pantry for their daily bread. Or worse, the families in war zones who have no access to food at all, forced to starve due to the heartless policies of those in power. To pray "Give us our daily bread" means so much more than just "give me what I need."

Then comes the second "us" statement – Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lord, forgive all of us our sins, our bad choices, our acting for today at the expense of tomorrow, and move us to show grace to others; offer rehabilitation instead of punishment, a helping hand up instead of a fist pounding down. Help us all do better. Finally, there's the third "us" statement: Lead us not into temptation. Don't let us stampede over a cliff like lemmings. Don't let our hearts harden into stones. Don't numb us through tech distractions and AI shortcuts so that what is most beautiful in life is discarded or disregarded. Help us, dear Lord.

After teaching this outline of a prayer – three "Thou" statements and three "Us" statements, Jesus lovingly encourages us to then make our personal prayer requests known to God. To get it off our chest. So he said, "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened." This too was part of his lesson about prayer. A threefold encouragement from Christ to ask, seek, knock, trusting that God hears and longs to respond to our prayers.

The theologian Eugene Peterson has said, “Prayer means that we deal first with God and then with the world – that we experience the world not as a problem to be solved but as a reality in which God is [already] acting.”³ Jesus’ answer to the disciples’ request involved giving them some specific words to pray. But he didn’t teach them a rote prayer, an incantation to be repeated to get whatever we need. He taught about a space to step into when we pray – to deal first with God and then with the world and others around us. And while in that sacred spot, we also name our personal prayers to our heavenly Mother and Father, who would never give us a snake when we need a fish or a scorpion when we ask for an egg; the God who knows our uniqueness and our specific needs even before a word is on our lips. May remembering this encourage you whenever you pray. AMEN

¹ Cf. Alice Bolin, Culture Creep: Notes on the Pop Apocalypse; NYT Book Review, July 20, 2025.

² Meghan O’Rourke, “My Summer of Reckoning with ChatGPT”, *New York Times*, July 20, 2025.

³ Eugene Peterson, Working the Angles, p. 41.