

## **The Rev. Charlie Holt:**

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of Your Word and especially the invitation and teaching about how to pray. We ask that You would instruct our minds and our hearts and our practice so that we can live our lives in a prayerful orientation to You, Father, and through Your Son and in the power of Your Spirit. May the ministry and preaching of Your Word be Your Word for the sake and glory of Jesus, in His name we pray. Amen.

Please.

Over the years, I've had some incredibly good teachers in my life, which is sometimes people say, "Well, you just give good sermons or whatever." Well, nothing that I know or teach originates with me. Everything is really just distributing things that have been passed on and given to me. And I'm sure many of you feel that way about your professions and the things that you know in your life. And I've had, like, especially my parents, actually, my dad and grandparents. I learned how to tie knots and how to work a pocket knife and how to shoot guns and fish, and all of those kind of things.

One of the things that I've really needed to be instructed in is actually how to pray.

I remember when I was in North Carolina, a brand new priest, and I was really struggling with my own personal prayer life. And somebody encouraged me to find a teacher who could help me to learn how to pray better. And this was called a spiritual director. I had never heard of a spiritual director before. Has anybody ever heard of that before, a spiritual director? But basically, anybody ever gone to a spiritual director? Yeah, a few people.

A spiritual director is somebody who's actually trained to train people in their spiritual life and their prayer life and in their devotional life with the Lord.

And so, I looked up this priest who was about 30-minute drive from me. His name was Father Henry. And I said, "Father Henry, would you be my spiritual director?" And he said, "Sure." So I would go and meet with Father Henry about once a week, and I was not good. I was a mess. I needed a lot of help. And so, Father Henry tried telling me and teaching me some things, and I'd go back the next week, and he'd go, "How did it go?" And I was like, "It wasn't good.

It wasn't good." So then he really decided, "I'm just going to give this guy something real basic, and we'll just start at the ground level." So he taught me that if you wake up in the morning, the very first thing that you do is you just use the little line from morning prayer service, which actually comes from the Bible, Psalm 51, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise." Say that with me. It's very easy to remember. "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise."

And he said, "Just start with that."

You don't have to pray anything else after that. I'm like, "Really? That's great."

So he said, "If you'll just start with that before you greet the dog, before you greet your wife, before you turn on your phone, or open up Facebook, or the news, or whatever it is you do as your morning routine, even before you even get out of bed, you could do that. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim Your praise." He said, "If you just do that one little simple prayer, your whole day will change in its trajectory."

And that has really proven to be the case for me, that by starting the day with the Lord, and I will confess, I haven't done that every single day since that day, but I have seasons really of different things that I do to start the day with the Lord.

One of the best spiritual directors in all of the world is, of course, Jesus, right?

He is the Lord.

And so he was asked by one of his disciples, something that very similar to what I asked Father Henry, "Would you just teach me how to pray?"

Very simple question.

And what Jesus gave to him was a very simple prayer, one that is easily memorized, and I would hazard to guess that everybody in here already has it memorized.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation. And it stops right there, at least in the gospel that we read. There's more that we know, but...

That was the prayer that Jesus taught that disciple. And if you think about it, there's a whole section here on prayer, and I was trying to think of three P's because it's prayer, so I try to remember outlines in my head so I can just speak and communicate. So I had the pattern of prayer, which is the Lord's prayer, and then you have the persistence in prayer, which is that wonderful story about the guy that shows up at midnight asking for bread. And then the power of prayer, or the presence of prayer, with the gift of the Holy Spirit that he talks about.

So one thing that you can do is access that memorized prayer, that all of you just proved to me that you have memorized in your brains. And it's amazing how the Lord does that. Some people will say, "Well, it's a rote prayer." You know, that's all these Episcopalians, all they do is pray these rote prayers, which what they're trying to say is it doesn't mean anything to them. They're just going through the motions of saying these words, and they don't really think about these things. And I learned a very important lesson about memorized scriptures and prayers from a man that his name was Chuck, and he lived in Winter Park, Florida, in an assisted living facility. Chuck had had a stroke, and I would go and visit with Chuck on a regular basis.

And all Chuck could say was, "Yes and no." And even that was very hard to say. He would go, "Yeah, and hmm." And so I would go and I'd read Chuck books, or I'd read him the Bible. He loves Sports Illustrated. I'll read him Sports Illustrated.

His brain was all there, but his ability to articulate words was completely destroyed by the stroke.

And one day I said to Chuck, I said, "Do you want to pray the Lord's Prayer?" And he went, "Yeah, good."

He prayed every word out loud.

Every word.

And it taught me that things like that that have been ingrained in us, like the liturgical prayers that we pray every single Sunday when we do the Eucharist. I bet many of you have that memorized in your brain. The Lord be with you. What do you say?

Lift up your hearts.

See, it's all there. Got it right in there.

But Chuck had that Lord's Prayer in a very deep place inside his brain that was still accessible with his language, which was unbelievable to me. And what an incredible gift that the Lord has given us this prayer.

And so what I want to encourage you to do is when you get up in the morning, instead of just kind of saying it, take each part of it and meditate on it a little bit. Because Jesus was one of the first to teach us that when we relate to God, we ought to relate to God as Father.

That the relationship with us in prayer ought to be an intimate one, like a child and a parent, a father-son or a father-daughter relationship.

Up to that point, most people in the Jewish religion would have referred to God as Lord at Oneye, which is more of a king-subject relationship. You're the boss. You're the Lord. And I'm just a lowly servant. And that's not a bad way to relate to God. Certainly, it would be really helpful for us to be humble and submissive to God as our Lord. God wants us to relate to Him as Father and to be in a deep, personal relationship with Him. In fact, Paul would say in his letter to the Romans in Romans chapter 8 that that's actually a sign that you have a relationship with God, that you can have some assurance because your heart cries out to Him, "Abba, Father."

And it's your spirit interacting with God's spirit that is reassuring you that you are indeed a child of God because of that intimate prayer, our Father. So Jesus said, "Pray that way, our Father, who art in heaven."

And it's not disrespect, though. You need to say, "Hallowed be Your name."

And as you think about these kinds of things, just let the Lord take you to different places with that. It might be, "Well, just have a time of praise. Your name is glorious, Father. You are great. You are exalted. You are..." Whatever. But you can think about the majesty of God or the glory of God, or it might lead you in your meditation to think about yourself, like, "I've been putting my name first, and I need to make your name the highest name." Or whatever it is that the Lord does with you in that meditation, but allow each line of the Lord's prayer to impact your heart in the prayer time. And you could actually spend hours doing this with just the Lord's prayer. "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on

earth as it is in heaven." Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if every single one of us, every single day, started the day with a theocentric way of looking at things?

Not "My will be done today. My kingdom come today." Or "The Democratic Party of America's kingdom come today." Or "The Republican Party come."

Or "The business agenda of the day." Or whatever the agenda is, whatever the plan is, whatever my will is, know to let the Father's kingdom be primary in my heart as I begin each day. I don't want any other kingdom, any other agenda, any other plan but Yours, Lord, to be the one that will govern my day.

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's powerful, isn't it, to just think about these things. What it would do to your relationships? "Father, forgive them as I have been forgiven."

One of the...so you have this pattern. We could spend a lot of time going through each one of those. You have the pattern of prayer.

And then Jesus says, "But we need to be persistent in our prayer." And He gives this really funny story of the next-door neighbor friend that comes over, and he's got these friends that show up at midnight, which...who does that to your friends? I mean, I wouldn't call those friends, but that's what Jesus says. His friends showed up at midnight, and so He goes to His other friend, the neighbor, and He says, "Hey, I've had these friends show up at midnight and I don't have enough food for them, so can you give me some of your bread? I need three loaves of bread."

And the neighbor is like, "Get lost."

I can just picture, you know, my next-door neighbor is Hugh and Meeta McGabney. Meeta McGabney coming over. "Hey, we've had some people come over. Do you mind if we knock on your door at midnight and ask for some bread?" I'm like, "Get lost, Meeta."

But because she keeps knocking, I would open the door and give her some bread.

What comes to my mind is actually we had...I am such a sucker for cute dogs, but there was this dog that was like wandering Ortega Boulevard, and I opened my door, and the dog jumped into my truck. And so now I have a new dog.

It's a little husky. Her name's Roxy and she's really cute. And I've put the word out. If anybody knows who this dog belongs to, it's a beautiful little husky. If somebody's looking for a husky, I might have their dog. But we put word out everywhere, and we have not had anybody claim the dog, so we named it, and it's sleeping in our bedroom at night.

At four in the morning, the dog is teaching me the power of persistence because she scratches on the floor and then she bings on the wooden floor with her nails and walks around and then she goes, "It's four in the morning, but I get up." Why? Because she's persistent.

And this is what the Lord is trying to tell us in this kind of story, saying that's the way that we should be with God, that we need to bang on the doors of heaven with our prayers.

Ask, seek, knock.

If you ask, it will be answered. If you search them out, if you seek, you will find it. If you knock on the door, it will be open to you.

And part of what Jesus is saying to us about our prayers is that they're too passive.

They're too timid. They're not urgent enough. They're not engaging enough. They're not persistent enough.

And we give up too quick and too early and too soon, and we need to keep knocking, keep asking, keep searching. God wants us to do that, to be like Roxy at four in the morning.

To be like Meeta McGabney at midnight.

He wants us to bang on the doors of heaven and advocate for the things that we want and that we desire and that we are longing for. And that may be prayers for other people or prayers for somebody that we're concerned about their health, or that sort of thing. But there are so many things that we should be and could be praying for that we just sort of let go and let God.

And we're just very passive in the way that we treat this world. But Jesus said, "No, I want you to bang down the doors of heaven and bring in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven and drive out Satan by praying, deliver us from the evil one."

And we don't pray that way.

And maybe it's because we don't pray that way, because we're afraid that we'll do it wrong.

But what Jesus says is you can't do it wrong.

God is going back to the father thing. God is a good father.

And if you're his child and you're coming to him and you're saying, "Lord, I do not want this evil thing to be reigning over my life anymore or over my family or I want you to deal with this sickness or get rid of this problem," or whatever it is that you're praying against and asking him and banging on the door and seeking after, that he is not going to give you something bad because you're asking incorrectly or some childish prayer because you don't know how to do it right.

He is a good father. And if you are asking for something good, like a fish, he isn't going to give you a snake. Or if you're asking for an egg, he's not going to give you a scorpion. That's not the nature of God to give his children bad things. Now, if you're asking for something bad, you know, like, "Lord, I just bought a lottery ticket. Please help me to have a billion dollars.

I promise I'll give away 10 percent to the church."

He may not give you that.

Remember the Garth Brooks song, "Some of God's Greatest Gifts or Unanswered Prayers," about marrying the wrong woman?

But the Lord will give you good things. And the main thing that he wants to give you is his presence.

That's what Jesus says is the best gift that he's going to give you is the gift of his Holy Spirit. And he would love to give you that gift if you'll just ask him for it.

So why don't we end with just a prayer, and we'll ask him for that if you would like. "Lord, please fill me with your Holy Spirit." It's a very simple prayer. It's one you could pray at the altar rail to as you're receiving communion every time, just to come before the Lord and ask him for his gifts. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much for sending your son Jesus to teach us a pattern of prayer that challenging us to be persistent in it and to persevere as well as to ask for the gifts and to ask for your provision. And so we do that today. We ask you to give us as a church the empowerment of the Holy Spirit of the living God so that we can be a people that is filled with your presence and that we will be more powerful in our praying.

So Lord, fill us with your Spirit, or maybe we'll make it personal. "Lord, fill me with your Holy Spirit." And if you want to pray that right now, just repeat that with me. "Lord, fill me with your Spirit."

In Jesus' name, amen.