

Introduction

U.S. News and World Report Magazine recently came out with its list of the best schools in America. The top five are as follows: Harvard University, Princeton University, Yale University, California Institute of Technology, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

How many of you ever attended one of those five? Don't feel badly if you didn't because you can attend a far more important school than any of those if you want to. What I'm referring to is Christ's School of Prayer. Andrew Murray wrote one of the most beloved classics of all time with that very title, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Luke 11:1-8 is our text for this.

The School of Prayer

Verse 1 gives us the circumstance from which this text arose. The disciples had watched Jesus pray. That reminds me of something that William Penn wrote about George Fox: **"But above all, he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit and the fewness and fullness of his words, have often struck even strangers with admiration. The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer."** That's the kind of dynamic we have in verse 1. The disciples watched Jesus pray and were so impressed by what they saw that they requested, **"Lord, teach us to pray."**

That request reveals something about prayer that all of us need to know. It's learned behavior. We talk about people being born singers, born artists, born athletes, and so on. But no one is ever a born pray-er. Prayer is something we must learn and keep on learning.

I say, "keep on learning" because no one ever masters it. I've been following Jesus for over 50 years now and have prayed thousands of prayers, both public and private. But I still have more to learn about it.

Thomas Merton said it this way in his book *Contemplative Prayer*: **"We do not want to be beginners. But let us be convinced of the**

fact that we will never be anything else but beginners all of our life.” He’s right. All of us have something in common. It’s that we have more to learn about prayer.

So, let’s learn it. We do that by going to the one who knows everything about prayer that there is to know, Jesus. We need to enroll in His school of prayer by doing four things. First, using topical Bibles, Bible dictionaries, and concordances, find and study everything that Jesus teaches about prayer in the Bible. Second, read the best books that his best students have written about prayer, like Murray’s or like Richard Foster’s, *Prayer – Finding the Heart’s True Home*. Third, attend classes, conferences, or seminars about prayer if we can. And fourth, actually pray. Mother Teresa said it well, **“We learn how to pray by actually praying.”** That then is how we enroll in Christ’s School of Prayer.

He does offer many classes in it and Luke 11:1-8 is one of them. We might call this text “Prayer 101” because it teaches us the basics about it. So let’s begin our schooling by learning those basics.

When and Where to Pray

The first two, in verse 1, are about when and where to pray. That verse says, **“Jesus was praying in a certain place.”** He prayed at certain times and in certain places and so should we.

Don’t misunderstand what that means. Jesus teaches elsewhere that we should pray without ceasing. We should pray at *all* times and in *all* places. That’s true. But it’s also true that we should pray regularly, at least daily, at a *certain* time and in a *certain* place.

As for the time, we should pray when we’re at our best. Jesus often prayed early in the morning while it was still dark. Perhaps that’s why many Christians advise us to make our regular prayer time in the morning. It’s the best way to start our day, they claim. That’s all well and good but what if morning is our worst time of day. People are different in that regard. Some of us are morning people and some of us aren’t. It may be that you aren’t. It may be that even God wouldn’t

want to talk with you in the morning. So give Him our best time, the time of day when we're most able to pray clearly and enthusiastically.

I knew an attorney who always scheduled his prayer time at noon. He closed his office door, had his secretary hold all his calls, and prayed. He explained one day why he did. That's when he was sharpest, he said, and could pray the most effectively. The time should be our best time.

The same is true of the place. We should not only pray *when* we're at our best but *where* as well. Again, we can and should pray everywhere. But we also can and should pray regularly in a specific place. Alluding to Matthew 6:6, we call that place our "prayer closet." The term refers to a specially chosen place that supports not hinders our attempts to pray.

For Jesus, who was constantly traveling, it was often out of doors in a place of beauty and peace – on the side of a mountain, by the sea, in a garden, and so on. For us, it should be a place that is likewise conducive to prayer – in front of a window that has a view, by the garden in our backyard, in a comfortable corner of our office, and so on.

I read about a businessman who made the corner of his office his place of prayer. He placed relics there including a crown of thorns and a shepherd's staff and often holds one as he prays.

There is a distinct advantage to using the same place over and over again for prayer. Doing so lends sanctity to it. A couple I know has a favorite booth at a particular restaurant. That booth has become their special place over the years, one that enriches their experience together. In the same kind of way, meeting with God regularly in one place makes it our place, His and ours. It becomes sacred over time and enriches our experience there. It actually helps us enter more deeply into prayer.

So those are the first two basics we learn in Christ's School of Prayer. We should pray when and where we're at our best.

What to Pray

This text teaches us a third basic – what to pray about. Notice the

three requests in verses 3 and 4. First, give us our daily bread. Give us the things we need. Second, forgive our sins. Have pity on us when we do wrong things. And third, lead us not into temptation. Don't let bad things happen to us. Those three requests reveal what we should pray about – things that actually matter to us.

So many well-intentioned Christians don't understand that. They think they should pray only about lofty and noble things, not things that actually matter to them. There's a gap between what they think they should pray about and what they want to pray about. That gap makes prayer impossible. Anyone who begins his or her prayer life that way will never sustain it. As Dallas Willard observes: **"Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about 'good things' that honestly do not matter to us."** Nothing kills prayer faster than pretending to be nobler in it than we really are.

So, remove the gap. Pray about what *is* in us, not about *what ought to be* in us. As Richard Foster contends, we should pray about weather, health, tests, finances, or anything else that matters to us.

That is the best way I know of to deal with a wandering mind. I have that problem and so do many of you. I try to get focused in prayer but my mind wanders to other things: being overcharged by a mechanic, my desire to write a book, the good time I had with my grandsons at the park, an expensive home repair that needs done, and so on. Most Christians view those wandering thoughts as barriers. But maybe we should start viewing them as stepping-stones instead, stepping-stones to prayer. When our mind wanders, it may be wandering to what our heart needs to speak to God about the most. So, we do just that. We speak to God about the thing or things to which our mind is wandering.

I was praying, for example, and my mind wandered to something that annoys me I confess – the utter fiscal irresponsibility of Congress. So I spoke to God about that. I asked Him to give me a heart of compassion for the congressman as individuals (Harry Reid, Nancy Pelosi,

George Voinovich, Sherrod Brown and others) – also that He would make their minds clear and their hearts responsive to what is good and right.

Anyway, praying about things that truly matter to us is critical. The circle of our interest grows in the largeness of God's love as we do. The loftier and nobler things that don't matter to us eventually come to matter to us. I know that by experience. Having prayed verses 3 and 4 over the years, I eventually found myself praying verse 2 as well. Verse 2 in fact now matters to me more than verses 3 and 4 do. What I want and pray about the most are that God be hallowed (meaning, esteemed by the world) and that His kingdom come (meaning, that His will be done everywhere on earth, in places like Congress for example).

How to Pray

There's a fourth basic that this text teaches us – how to pray. The little parable Jesus tells in verses 5-8 instructs us to pray persistently. The Greek word translated "persistence" in verse 8 can also mean shamelessness. Both are true here. We should pray persistently. We keep at our request until it's resolved one way or the other. We should also pray shamelessly. We reason with God in detail about our request.

Some of the Bible's best prayers are just that, persistent and shameless. I think of the greatest intercessory prayer ever prayed, that of Moses in Exodus 32, also Abraham's in Genesis 18. Commit a week of your devotional time to those two prayers, studying and contemplating them. They're good illustrations of the parable Jesus tells here.

So many Christians equate the "how to" of prayer with the polite monologues they hear in church. But the stuff of prayers offered in real life is far different than that. Walter Wink's commentary on Abraham's prayer in Genesis 18 captures the essence of this. He argues that the moral of that prayer is that it pays to haggle with God. He says in that regard: **"Biblical prayer is impertinent, persistent, shameless, indecorous. It is more like haggling in an oriental bazaar than the polite monologues of the churches."**

Most Christians are uncomfortable with that but they shouldn't be. Don't get me wrong. God is our Maker and Judge and we should fear Him. But we should also welcome His invitation to come freely and openly to Him. We should never presume on His grace in prayer. But at the same time, we should recognize and act on it.

I had a devout Christian friend whose business was on the verge of bankruptcy. So, I prayed and asked God to bless His business and make it successful. I reminded Him as I did that this man worked hard and lived simply, that his faith was widely known to his unsaved employees and business associates, and that they would likely relate his struggles to his faith. **"You know what they're going to think, Lord,"** I said, **"If this is the way God treat His friends, I don't want to be one."** I then called His attention to verse 2 here and the request that He be hallowed. **"Lord,"** I said, **"my greatest desire is that his employees and business associates will esteem you. Please empower and prosper His business so they will."**

I have learned the "how to" of prayer. I take God seriously because He's dangerous. But I take His invitation in verses 5-8 just as seriously. I pray persistently and shamelessly.

Conclusion

So there you have it, our first class in Christ's School of Prayer - Prayer 101. It's over now and time for the final exam. It's a short one though, only four questions. #1 - When should we pray? When we're at our best. #2 - Where should we pray? Where we're at our best. #3 - What should we pray about? The things that matter to us. And #4 - How should we pray? Persistently and shamelessly.

You and I may never attend Harvard, Princeton, Yale, CIT, or MIT. But that's okay. Continue to learn and do all that Jesus teaches about prayer. We're attending and, at death, will graduate from the most prestigious of all schools if we do - Christ's School of Prayer.