THE PRAYER PROJECT, PART I

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We've been spending the last several weeks looking at various aspects of worship. We're going to shift our focus for the next few weeks to talk more specifically about prayer. Prayer is vital not only to the life of the individual Christian, but to the life of the church as well. It is the heartbeat of all we do.

So what is it? How do we do it? How does it work? Why is it important? Those are some of the questions we will try to address over the next three Sundays.

We're going to use a brief story from Luke as our starting point.

Luke 11:1-4
One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"'Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.'"

Did that sound a little different than you're used to? It's missing some phrases, isn't it? The Bible records what is called "The Lord's Prayer" in two different places. Matthew contains the longer version, the one that is most often recited in churches. While the one we just read is strikingly similar, Luke is most likely recording another time when Jesus talked about prayer with his disciples. Matthew's prayer is in the context of a sermon, while Luke's is not.

But I like the context of Luke's story, so that's why I chose it for this morning. Luke tells us that Jesus had just finished praying. Actually, Luke records more incidents of Jesus praying than anybody else. He's mentioned it several times by the time we get to chapter 11. So the disciples have had numerous opportunities to observe the way Jesus prays. Finally, they go to him and say "Teach us to pray."

Teach us to pray. I thought about those words and thought, "What a great starting point for a discussion on prayer."

Teach us to pray. Have you ever felt like you didn't know how to pray very well, that you didn't know the right words or way to do it? I hear that comment from people a lot. "I'm not very good at praying." The basic mechanics of it can trip us up.

O Hallesby Quote:
There is, for instance, the prayer meeting. One after another prays. First they pray who are accustomed to pray aloud in the presence of others. They pray well, and their prayers edify. When they say, Amen, everybody nods in agreement in the fact that it was a good prayer. But at the same prayer meeting there may also be another believing soul who would like very much to lift his or her voice in prayer at the meeting. This individual feels a greater need, perhaps, than any of the others. However, being not accustomed to it, the person does not succeed very well in the effort. Thoughts become disconnected, and the speaker stumbles. Finally the person becomes bewildered and even forgets to say, Amen. After the meeting the speaker is so downcast because of the prayer offered that he or she scarely dares to look anyone in the face.

But I know that a new song of praise has already been sung by the saints in glory, rejoicing because they have heard someone pray to God who in his or her helplessness did not know what else to do. Such prayers make an impression in heaven.

Prayer is all about feeling helpless. Sometimes the topic makes it hard to know how to pray. I've had people close to me experiencing tragedy and I have been at a total loss for words to pray.

So I think it's good to start off saying, "Teach us to pray." One of the authors I read this week said "That in itself is a good prayer." It's like admitting that I don't know what I'm doing. But it also says I'm teachable. We can't be content to just say, "I'm not very good at praying." We can't leave things there or that becomes an excuse and an easy out. If we're not good at it, let's learn how to get better at it.

In his response to the disciples, Jesus gives them an example prayer. But he doesn't intend these to become words that are just repeated over and over. The rest of the New Testament contains many examples of prayers by the disciples, and you know what? Not one of them is a verbatim repeat of what Jesus taught them. So we know he wasn't intending it to be the only words they were supposed to use.

This week I had to work on some new web site designs for one of my clients, and web design really isn't my strength. I enjoy it, but I don't do enough of it on a regular basis to feel like it comes naturally to me. It's different than designing printed pieces. So what did I do? I went out to this one web site that features home pages of all kinds of award winning sites. I was able to get a lot of great ideas for how to structure the page, what looks are current, what elements I needed to be sure to include.

Now I didn't copy any of the sites verbatim, because I have a different client with different needs. But you can definitely tell which sites influenced what I came up with, because I used them as a template for building my own.

We can think of the Lord's prayer as being like that web site I went to. It's a resource for us that can show us what we should include in prayer and how we should structure our prayers. **The Lord's prayer isn't magic – it's a template** for us to help us make sure all the elements are there.

There is a lot packed into this prayer, so let's break it down. Jesus uses six different statements to convey what he felt was essential. What Jesus tells me about how to pray:

Abba-cize my prayer.

Abba is a word that is used in the Bible that's a term of endearment for father. The very first word of the prayer here in Luke is "Father." If you grew up in a Catholic home, you might have even referred to this prayer as the "Our Father" prayer. With just that one word Jesus makes a dramatic point: We can call God our father. He's not just the father of Jesus – he's our father now, too.

The word there is the exact same word a child would have used. In other words, there is a concrete link between us and God.

How does that change our prayer? It gives God an incentive to respond to us. Jesus even clarifies that point a bit later on in the chapter.

Luke 11:11-13
If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing — you're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the Holy Spirit when you ask him?"

Generally speaking, when I see girl scouts selling cookies outside the grocery store, I don't have that much trouble resisting their pleas to buy cookies. I won't go home and lose sleep over being a disappointment to those kids.

But if my kids are asking for something that they really want and that I can afford, I have a much more difficult time saying no. Why? Because they're my kids. I love them in a different way than anyone else in the world. I love to see their faces when I get them a gift that they will enjoy.

It's no different with God as our Father. Sometimes I pray as if God will only grudgingly answer my prayers, and he'll do the minimum he can get away with. But that's not who he is. The Indigo Girls sang a song that said, "There was a time I asked my Father for a dollar, and he gave it a 10 dollar raise." God takes delight in answering the prayers of his children. We come to him as a good Father.

Let me pause for a moment to say that I realize not all of us grew up with good earthly fathers. Some of us did have dads who gave us snakes when we asked for fish. Whether he was abusive or a deadbeat or just uninterested in us he colors our understanding of God as Father. We project our fathers' qualities on to God.

If that was your experience, I'm hoping that you'll be able to reverse the images and let God define for you what the word father should look like. He can redeem that concept and show you that he cares for you and wants you to come to him as his child. He won't let you down.

Psalm 103:13-14
As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

As your Father, God loves you fiercely and unconditionally. As your Father, he's always ready to listen to you. As your Father, he delights in giving you good gifts. We can pray believing that with our whole hearts.

As I come to God in prayer as my Father, Jesus shows me that the first thing to do is

Applaud my God.
"Hallowed be your name." To hallow something is to give it the highest possible honor. It is the recognition of God's place in the universe.

Before I launch into my list of requests for God, before I tell him everything that I need and want him to fix, it is a good idea to stop and acknowledge who He is – apart from what he does for me.

Psalm 100:4
Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.

Praise is our point of entry in prayer. That's the way we come before him. How does that look if we put it in our own words? Instead of saying, "Hallowed be your name" **what are some of your own favorite sayings to praise God?**

It doesn't have to be long or flowery. Just take the time to pause as you pray and say a few words directly to God about who he is. That sets the right tone for the rest of the conversation, and it reminds you who you're dealing with.

A woman I worked with told me the story of one time when her family was on vacation in Hawaii. They went to a luau, where her father struck up a conversation with another man who was also there on vacation with his family. Her dad started asking the man

what he did for a living, and the man said he was a movie producer. "Oh really?" her dad said. "What kind of movies?"

The man was somewhat evasive, and my friend's dad assumed it was probably because the movies were small or not very good. He said, "That's okay if they're not that big. I watch a lot of movies. Maybe I've heard of one."

Finally the man told him he had produced Apocalypse Now and The Godfather series. It was Francis Ford Coppola, the academy award winning director. Perspectives shifted dramatically once my friend's dad realized who he was dealing with.

Sometimes when I jump right into my list of "to do's" for God, I lose sight of who I'm talking to. I need to applaud my God first, and then I will remember who he is and how I should approach him.

The next point Jesus makes in his prayer is that when I pray, I need to

Adjust my alignment.
"Your kingdom come" is the phrase for this point. To wish for God's kingdom to come is to say that we want to see his authority begin to take effect. We want life to line up with his agenda.

Alignment makes me think of car tires. Have you ever had yours out of alignment? Generally how you'll know is that your car will start to pull in one direction or another. If you're driving down a straight stretch of road and your car wants to take you into the ditch, chances are you're out of alignment.

When we're not lined up with the direction God wants to go, we'll be pulling to the side. We won't share his agenda. The requests that we ask should be in light of getting ourselves aligned with his kingdom plans. Are we on the same track?

Each time we say "Your kingdom come" it reorients us to focus on God's will. It is voluntarily placing ourselves under his rule. By putting that request ahead of our own, we will then only ask for those things that are compatible with that desire.

I saw a commercial for Fannie Mae, the government home loan program. A woman was walking past this store window, and she saw a pair of shoes sitting there that she really liked. But then she saw in her mind the picture of her dream home that she was saving for, and she knew that she wanted that more than the shoes, so she kept walking.

We have to keep the picture in our minds of God's kingdom. That's our dream home. It impacts all our other wants, and the ones that won't help us work for the advancement of God's kingdom will start to fade in importance. Jesus modeled this so perfectly in the garden of Gethsemane when he prayed for his father's will to be done, even though his human nature didn't want to go the cross. He aligned himself with the bigger purpose of God and wouldn't let anything detract him from accomplishing it.

I need to Abbacize my prayer. I need to applaud my God and adjust my alignment. Jesus also wants me to

Accept my dependence.
"Give us each day our daily bread."
The Greek is short and to the point: Keep giving us our daily allotment. We never outgrow our need for God's provision.

When Karin and I were in college, we were in Fiddler on the Roof together. We got married something like 13 times. If you know the story, you know it revolves around a man named Tevye who had 5 daughters.

Tevye was a poor milkman who dreamed of becoming rich. And in one of his solos, he sang, "If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack to sit in the synagogue and pray." He tries to convince God how much more spiritual he could be if he didn't have to worry about his daily existence.

We all entertain that fantasy from time to time. Wouldn't it be great to be financially independent so we didn't have to work? Think how much time we'd have to give to the church!

But that's not generally how it works.

Proverbs 30:8-9
Give me neither poverty nor riches,
but give me only my daily bread.
Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you
and say, 'Who is the LORD?'
Or I may become poor and steal,
and so dishonor the name of my God.

Finding a Christian attitude about wealth is extremely difficult in American culture, and that's an entirely different sermon. But in this context, we can see that God would like us to remember our dependence on him.

I think when Jesus is talking about daily bread, he may have had in mind the Israelites when God supplied the manna in the wilderness. They had no food, but every day, this bread-type stuff fell from heaven like snow. They had plenty to eat each day. But if they tried to horde it and keep it for the next day, it would go bad.

God will provide what we need, when we need it. We don't have to worry about where it will come from.

[Cristi share?]

Psalm 37:25
I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.

He is El Shaddai – Our provider. He will always supply our need.

It's worth pointing out here that Jesus gives us permission here to ask God for what we need. There's nothing wrong with laying out our basic requests before God. Tell him what would help you get through. He invites that.

Beyond the asking, Jesus encourages me in prayer to

Act my status.
"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us."

I like the first part of that. I want the forgiveness. It's harder to say that whole line in the same breath, though. We are to act in light of being forgiven people, which means we have to share the grace we've received.

It is a commitment statement that says, "God, I won't expect anything from you that I'm not willing to show to other people."

I once heard a speaker talking about the difficulty of doing that when you're talking about serious offenses. It's one thing to forgive somebody for looking at me cross-eyed while I'm on the freeway. It's fine for petty grievances that I know are small compared to my sin against God. It's an entirely different matter when I have been deeply wounded by someone who hasn't even asked for my forgiveness. When they've done something horrible to me and they're not the least bit sorry. Does God really expect me to be able to forgive those kinds of sins?

He showed a video interview of a woman in Africa whose entire family had been killed by a man from another tribe. She was able to forgive the man and actually took him in and cared for him as he got older. It was an amazing testimony to her faith. I thought that what this speaker said in response was very profound. He said to not forgive is to remain the victim, and that forgiveness is empowering. It sets us free from the other person controlling how we feel. When we let go of something, when we stop harboring the anger and resentment, we are the ones who benefit.

Giving forgiveness to others only increases our appreciation of the forgiveness God has given to us. We act our status as people who have been pardoned.

Jesus has one final instruction for us. He says that when we pray, we should

Ask for bumper guards.

There are two kinds of bowlers in this world. There are those people who consistently bowl over 100 and get at least one strike per game. Then there are the rest of us. It can be very frustrating when you're a kid and you're throwing everything in the gutter. That's why they invented the bumper guards that they put in the gutters. It greatly increases your chances for success, because the bowling ball has to go somewhere closer to the pins.

Jesus wraps up this prayer by saying, "And lead us not into temptation." It asks God for some bumper guards to keep us from ending up in the gutter. Build a hedge around me God. Don't let me get into situations I can't handle that will destroy me or lead me down a bad path.

This is one we can also pray for our children. I look back on my growing up years and know that I stood very close to the edge of a moral or spiritual cliff many times, and I attribute my not falling off to the prayers of my parents and grandparents that God would protect me. I had no idea at the time how close I came to really falling badly, but God didn't let me.

What a great, great comfort – to know that God is willing to come to our aid and protect us.

Psalm 91:9-12
Yes, because GOD's your refuge,
the High God your very own home,
Evil can't get close to you,
harm can't get through the door.
He ordered his angels
to guard you wherever you go.
If you stumble, they'll catch you;
their job is to keep you from falling.

As we wrap up a prayer and move forward into our day, it is only right that we should ask God's presence to go with us and to be our shield. In the process of requesting his help, it also reminds us to avoid situations that wouldn't be good for us. We don't want to go where he isn't leading.

So how do we apply six points to our lives in any meaningful way? Let me suggest two possible applications for you this week.

I love it that when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them, he gave them a tool to start using. Rather than talk for an hour about prayer, he handed them a prayer and said "S"art praying." Nothing beats on the job training. If prayer is new to you, or you don't feel confident in just talking to God impromptu, I would encourage you to start by taking this prayer as your prayer this week. Try praying this prayer every day. On the first day, read it as is. One the second day, start off with "Father," then put the "hallowed be your name" into your own praise words. Each day, paraphrase the next line, until you have

your very own version of the Lord's prayer by the end of the week. Use Jesus' prayer as a tool to increase your comfort level with prayer.

Or, if you're already a veteran of prayer, try this approach. Each day, take a different point from today's message. For example, take one day and spend the entire prayer applauding God. Maybe the next day you zero in on thinking about how you need to align your heart to his, or bringing needs before God.

Author Gail MacDonald often says, "Prayer is the main event." It is hard, hard work. But when we do pray, when we bring our joys and our hurts and our frustrations and needs and excitement and boredom and fears before God in prayer, we find a loving Father who is ready to answer and fully capable of providing all we need. Lord, teach us to pray.