

Praying with What Distracts Us

Luke 11:1-13

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ²He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

⁵And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

⁹"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

I

One day not long ago I sat down to pray for 20 minutes. On this particular day, I sat in my black leather chair in my study at home. First I took a minute or two to slow down and become more aware of God's presence which is always around us and through us, closer than flesh to fingernails. All was blessedly quiet. I found it easy to concentrate.

It didn't last long, however. Around minute 4, distractions started to set in. I remembered an email I needed to write to someone in the congregation, so I briefly got out of the chair, went to the desk, and wrote a note to myself. Easing back in the chair, I restarted my praying.

At about minute 6, my nose itched, and at minute 13, my back did the same. Both times I briefly broke my concentration to scratch.

At minute 9, I started daydreaming about retirement and what that might be like. My thoughts wandered off to some sunny but not too hot location where my seasonal affective disorder wouldn't ever bother me. Suddenly it occurred to me that I was daydreaming, not praying. So I released thoughts of retirement and gently refocused on God.

12th minute: someone in our house walked into the bathroom. The door closed, the toilet flushed, the water faucet went on and off, and the door opened. Another minute of distraction.

Again I refocused, only to hear the neighbor start up his riding lawn mower next door. At that point I more or less gave up. Praying with a riding lawn mower is not a skill I've mastered.

II

The disciples once asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. At first it sounds like they had never prayed before in their lives and were looking for someone to teach them the rudiments of how to pray. But I don't think that's what they were asking. After all, they were good Jews; and good Jews knew a lot about prayer from a lifetime of weekly Sabbath rituals, Passover Seder meals, and pilgrimages to the temple. Good grief, their own Jewish parents taught them how to pray at home. They knew the basics of kneeling or standing or sitting. They knew very well what names to use for God. They had been praying, and had been around others who were praying, since they were wee little tots.

Their real question was about overcoming distractions in order to concentrate in prayer. Several times they had watched Jesus pray with what looked like great concentration. Luke writes about these prayer times of Jesus in 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28-29, and here in 11:1. They watched Jesus with admiration. They wanted to pray like he prayed: with concentration, with intensity, with passion, with a conviction that their lives depended upon prayer.

III

In response to the disciples' question, Jesus offers a few suggestions on some words they might use, words which today we call "the Lord's Prayer." A longer version of that Lord's Prayer appears in Matthew 6:9-13. Next Jesus tells them a parable about prayer. The point of the parable is that human friends normally help each other out of a jam, even if it inconveniences them. If friends do that for each other, then surely we can count on God doing that for us when we get into a jam. Verses 9-13 make the meaning of the parable clear. We can persist in prayer confident that God isn't a mean ogre. God wants good for us. God wants to help us.

One answer Jesus gives to the problem of distractions is that prayer goes a little better when we trust that God wants to help us even more than our friends want to help us. In a round-about way Jesus is telling the disciples that he prays with such passion because the relationship between him and God is paramount. Jesus prays so often because there he and God go nose to nose. Prayer matters to Jesus because that's how he and God engage each other about hugely important things.

IV

It's at this point that I wonder whether you and I can learn from Jesus about prayer. Jesus, we can guess, prayed about stuff that mattered a great deal to him. I doubt he wasted his breath praying about things that didn't matter very much, such as the color of the oil lamps in his mother's house; or about things that were just the way they were, like the peculiar flight of an eagle or the fat waddle of sheep. Instead Jesus likely prayed about the cold heart of Judas Iscariot and the spiritual battle inside Mary Magdalene (cf. Lk. 8:2). He probably thanked God for the financial generosity of Joanna, Susanna, and all the other women who gave freely to support Jesus, which Luke writes about in 8:3. Jesus surely prayed about God's great kingdom, about peace in a world that loved to fight, and about justice in a world that rarely had it. The content of his prayers focused on people and issues that he cared about very much.

What if you and I did the same? What do you suppose would happen to our distractions if we prayed about the stuff we actually care about?

The British theologian Herbert McCabe once said he learned something important about prayer from a friend of his. People often pray about things they think they *should* care about, but actually don't care about very much. For example, people feel they really *should* pray for the grace to be nice to their nasty next door neighbor. Or they think they *should* pray for their great aunt with Alzheimer's, or the unrest in some far-off country. But as a matter of fact, what might be foremost on their minds is next month's vacation in the Canadian Rockies. But letting the Canadian Rockies become the focus of prayer seems too selfish. So instead they pray for the nasty neighbor and the great aunt with dementia and the civil war in Syria. But they're distracted—and during prayer those images of the Canadian Rockies keep popping up in their thoughts. As a result they have a hard time concentrating on great aunt Matilda, sad though her case is.

What would happen to our distractions in prayer if we focused instead on the distractions themselves?¹ Suppose you're sitting at prayer, dutifully going through your prayer list of eleven people and situations. But it's rough work because your mind keeps going back to that snippy conversation at work that left you seething in frustration. So why not set your list aside and pray instead about that snippy conversation, which is clearly what you care most about at this moment?

Or suppose you sit down with the intention of thanking God for a sunny day and your good marriage and your great colleagues at work—all fine things to be thankful for. But that's not exactly where your mind is, because you've just watched some news about fighting in the Middle East which contained graphic images that wounded your heart. In your mind's eye you keep seeing that child crying over the bloody body of her father. The distraught girl is pushing out the sunny day here in Indiana. Let yourself pray instead about the girl.

To take yet another example: you're out for your daily walk around the neighborhood during which you normally pray the Jesus Prayer ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.") It's a fine prayer, but today you're not exactly into it. Just before exiting the back door of your house, you read an email from the church office about one of our members who was in a car accident. Today, this minute, that's what's on

your mind. So maybe for today you don't pray the Jesus Prayer. Or maybe you do pray it but alter it slightly to become "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on so-and-so."

V

People on a sinking ship don't have any problem with distractions in prayer. A mother who's just found out her son has been arrested for murder will not be distracted when she prays for her son. A man who hears he has bone cancer will be able to concentrate in prayer just fine. If distractions are bugging us, we might be praying about the wrong things for us at this particular moment in time. Try shifting to the distractions themselves and explore what deeper desires motivate those desires. Pray honestly about the stuff that's affecting you now. Pray through the ups and downs of your life. Let daily things become the substance of your conversation with God. I suspect distractions won't be so much of a problem. And I suspect that's how Jesus prayed—by focusing on what was of critical importance to him and to God.

¹ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2002, 2005), 73-74.