

The request is an honest one; “Lord, teach us to pray...” John taught his disciples (so goes the argument) – proper modes of prayer are a necessary step on the road to discipleship. A teacher should teach – and students (these students) are eager to learn. Who knows – perhaps it will be prayer that unlocks the mysteries of this new approach to faithful living...and in answer to this request (in Luke’s gospel) Jesus says “when you pray, say:...”

By the time we get our hands on this passage, tradition has more than suggested that Jesus wants us to “use these words” and so the usual discussions around the Lord’s Prayer - community to community, across denominational lines, and through countless translations - have been about which words to use.

Our Father who /which/ is/art in heaven...? Sins, debts or trespasses?

And what about the ending?

SO while we debate form, the function of the thing goes missing. Instead of being concerned with the HOW of prayer, the question worth asking may well be; ‘Why pray *in this particular way?*’

This manner of praying suggests much about the way that Jesus followers were encouraged to think about God – what God is (or is not) capable of; how God engages humanity in general (and faithful folk in particular.) And, of course, Luke surrounds this instruction on prayer with some practical examples.

The thrust of these examples (strange as they may seem to us) is that we are good at heart; that hospitality and compassion MATTER. No matter what the general evidence (ie. The state of the world) might suggest, we are mostly inclined towards compassion.

We know how to give ‘appropriate gifts’. Where the most common of human relationships are concerned (friends, neighbours, families) we want what’s best for one another, no matter the circumstances.

Sit with that idea for a second. Test it and see if it isn’t true for you.

(We’ve gone out of our way for the neighbours (at least once). We’ve answered slightly unreasonable requests (it’s late! I’m stuck! Can you please...) carefully and often enough, cheerfully – (because one day, it might be us doing the asking...). We give spare change when we have it and don’t ask any questions. We support the causes that tug at our heartstrings. We may be inclined to play tricks on our kids – but never malicious (a rubber snake once in a while never hurt anyone... right?)

We’re more comfortable hearing that God is good, and a good God requires this kind of effort (praise first, ask for the RIGHT things in the right way, and all will be well). But this particular treatment of the prayer ignores something strange that happens in the way Luke’s gospel presents the bit about forgiveness.

Forgive us our (insert your favourite word here, but in Luke, it’s SINS – those times we’ve missed the mark/screwed up/made a mess of it) - “for we [ourselves] forgive everyone indebted to us...”

It’s a curious construction in any language, but the sense of it is that we know what forgiveness looks like because we are experienced practitioners of forgiveness. In brief, the prayer says – God, forgive us, because we know that forgiveness is best – because we do it all the time.

And yes, in Luke, it’s our sins and the indebtedness of others – two different words that we have (for convenience sake?) turned into something that sounds like a one for one exchange...

Except this is not quid pro quo. God, do this and we will do that. Rather the prayer is “God, cut us some slack because that’s the right thing to do – that’s what relationship is like.”

Suddenly we’re praying for God to be...like our best selves. (We’re not held to God’s level of forgiveness (which is understandably more thorough and more generous...) rather God will model divine mercy according to the human expressions of mercy that we offer/show one another.

Now sit with that for a while and see if it isn’t so.

We reap what we sow, (says a disciple of Jesus somewhere else¹) and that includes forgiveness. WE inhabit the kingdoms we pray for; we get (forgiven) according to how we offer forgiveness – (do we forgive everyone to whom we owe forgiveness? Think on that, and tremble...). And yet...and yet **God is able**, says the gospel.

If even you hesitant, broken humans can USUALLY give good gifts, and offer something that looks like mercy, then surely God is able to give you...

HA! – were you expecting “whatever you ask for” to be the closing thought in this long, drawn-out lesson? Sorry – no such luck. It turns out that God will certainly give the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who ask. (what we **need** is always on offer. What we want is delivered in ‘hit-or-miss’ fashion – quite by accident.)

¹ Paul of Tarsus in his letter to the Galatians 6:7

Some have turned this passage into a prosperity parable. Be faithful, use the right words and (ask, seek, knock) – et le viola! God, like some cosmic genie, will happily grant your requests. Nope. Nope, nope, nope!

God will give the Spirit to those who ask...that is the key to this particular mystery.

Not that you will prosper if you get the words right, but that if you shape your prayers according to an understanding of God who is the epitome of hospitality and compassion - God whose essence in us moves us to uncommon acts of goodness for the sake of relationship – if your prayers reflect THAT image of God, you will know that the Spirit (which brings wisdom and peace and life itself) is the only gift worth asking for. And the Holy Spirit is available anywhere, any time, in ridiculous abundance, Jesus says.

That – brothers and sisters – is the point.

We know how to be good to one another – though we ‘qualify’ our compassion by wishing there were enough (of everything) to go around – (which there is) - and we are intellectually able (if not always willing) to share in that abundance. Moreover, having been ‘made in God’s own image’, we are (by design) compassionate and able to show love, mercy and grace (when we think about it) thanks to our inherent ‘God-likeness’. The thing that is missing is the love, mercy and grace that is carried by (and revealed in the presence) of the Spirit of the Holy One. When your praying is shaped by an experience with (or knowledge of) the God of grace and glory, the Spirit– recognizing someone in pursuit of the Holy – will rush out to meet you, and that is a blessed thing.