

Lord, Teach Us to Pray

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Psalm 139 says that God has searched us, knows us, knows when we sit and when we rise. God perceives our thoughts from afar; is familiar with all our ways. There is nowhere we can go from God's Spirit. We cannot flee from God's presence. If we could go up to the heavens, God would be there. If we made our bed in the depths, God would be there. God created our inmost being and knit us together in our mother's womb. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. God's works are wonderful and wherever God's work is, God is there. We can conclude, then, that the presence of God is always with us as we journey on this earthly pilgrimage.

In this journey, we walk by faith, and not by sight. In fact, we could compare the journey to a race that we run. The race is hard. To endure it with patience, we must persevere in faith despite the difficulties that confront us at every turn. Finishing the race is what makes the difference, so that should be our goal. We must stay on course and never give up. We have an expert coach who constantly works at preparing us to be kingdom people. One way He taught was by example. e.g. He often went apart to pray, a practice his followers could imitate and emulate. Another way was through actual lessons. When the disciples asked Him to teach them how to pray, He taught them the Lord's prayer because He deemed it His duty to instruct His followers, but also to encourage them to expect answers.

Just what is prayer? It is communication with God. God commands us to pray continually. Through prayer, we receive spiritual nurture and strength, express devotion, and invite God to talk to us as we talk to God. Prayer changes things. It releases God's great power to change the course of nature, people and nations. Anyone can pray, but only those who walk in faith and obedience to Christ can expect to receive answers to their prayers. God commands us to pray continually. We can pray any time and any where. It is not necessary to be on our knees or in a quiet room. We could be in our car, walking down the street or doing household chores. All that's needed is a clean heart.

Prayer is a great law of natural religion. It is a way to keep our relationship with Jesus, community and God on even keel. Prayer can take the form of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, petitions and requests [supplication.] Jesus maintained that we should always pray, that we should come to God with boldness and confidence, asking for what is needed, for bread to sustain life, and with prayers for ourselves and others and with perseverance. God does provide but there are things we also need to provide, like forgiveness and welcome to all, stranger as well as sinner. We are charged to be people of God, to listen to God's word and share together in prayer utilizing the Scriptures, sharing the Book of Common Prayer, and partaking in the Eucharist.

Because faith is not a private matter, we can get help from others who have gone on before, people who can show us the way to victory. They inspire us to keep our eyes focused on Jesus and not let distractions slow us down. They are not spectators, but cheerleaders, witnesses, partners who share grief, joy, sorrow, victory, sadness and celebration. In the family of God, we are connected, called to live and love in community. We are a gift to each other despite the fact that we are all flawed human beings who can sometimes be Samaritans, Marthas, Marys, priests or Levites. We are people of prayer living in the kingdom of God. We are kingdom people.

Kingdom people are asked to do some hard things: sell your possessions give alms, have purses that don't grow old, gird your loins, keep your lamps trimmed and burning, dress for action, be ready, be awake and alert. Today's gospel tells kingdom people that the three major prerequisites for being kingdom people are:

(1) be; awake and alert, poised and ready for service at a moment's notice. If we are not alert, we may have to pay, as did Hosea. God is merciful but sin turns away that mercy. America would be wise to understand that now as it goes through this difficult period. We should be saying, Lord, teach us to pray" because the same hand that wounds is also stretched forth to heal. We can never pay the great ransom we owe to God. Israel was guilty of listening to false prophets. Let us not be guilty of the same offense. Let us not reject God's ways and seek after immorality and injustice so that we recreate our own Sodom and Gomorrah. Let us offer thanks to God for this prayer that has sustained

the faithful through ages past and will continue to do so for ages to come. Be full of resolve and have clear minds free of worry and fear, demonstrating faith in God. God loves us more than we are capable of loving. Here on earth, we are to seek heavenly things and put away anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language.

We are to guard against greed and act in community with others. We are connected to our ancestors and to our descendants, a chain which represents the communion of saints. The parable of the rich fool tells us that we are not to devote our lives to gathering wealth, a theme that is dominant in America. As Tom Ehrich says, "life is about love, not ownership. Life is about living . . . NOW. We are blessed to be a blessing to others and to build the kingdom of God. We are to treat each other with the same compassion, kindness, humility and patience that God gives us.

In summary, kingdom people's trust in God is unchanging. They are not like the atheist who visited Scotland and encountered the Loch Ness monster. Just as the monster was about to swallow him and his boat on that deserted lake, the atheist yelled, "Please help me, good God." As he was suspended in that position, God's deep voice bellowed: "I thought you didn't believe in me." The atheist responded, "Give me a break, God. I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either."

Today and every day, let us pray. Ask to see God more clearly, to love God, self and neighbor more dearly and follow God more nearly. Never fail to ask God to teach us to pray. And, remember that wherever we are, God is there. God's presence fills this church, your home, your community and the ground on which you run the race of life. So, ask, seek and knock. Your prayers will be answered. Your search will be fruitful and closed doors will be opened according to God's will. Amen.

[sing Surely The Presence of the Lord is in this Place]

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