

## **Lord, How Do I Pray**

1 Thessalonians 5:17; Genesis 21:8-19; John 14:13-14; Matthew 14:19-25 ; Luke 22:41-46; Romans 8:26  
**Saint Marks UMC, Charleston WV 6th Sunday after Pentecost (July 20) 2014**

### **1 Thessalonians 5:17. Pray without ceasing**

**Genesis 21:8-19.** 8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

**John 14:13-14** 13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

**Matthew 14:19-25** 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. Jesus Walks on the Water 22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, 24 but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. 25 And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

**Luke 22:41-46** 41 Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, 42 “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.” [[ 43 Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. 44 In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] 45 When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, 46 and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.”

**Romans 8:26** 26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.

Six Lessons today, we have heard in scripture about prayer

1. **Do it always.**
2. Do it **in times of desperation**, like Hagar.

3. **Whatever you ask in Jesus' name will be given you.** This does not mean that so long as your last words before the word "AMEN" are "in Jesus' name" that you have a genie in a bottle. Rather, it means that when your desire is linked to God's Will, then you are going to experience the peace that passes all understanding.

Your prayers will be answered because you have shed the *human-over-God* notion of "**MY WILL BE DONE**" and realized the truth of **THY KINGDOM COME THY WILL BE DONE on earth as it is in heaven.**

THEN Romans 8:28 becomes your outlook on life: **ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD AND ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO GOD'S PURPOSE.**

4. **Do it in times of success**, like Jesus after that miraculous feeding, and before he walked on water.

*cf. Mark 1:32-35 <sup>32</sup> That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered around the door. <sup>34</sup> And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. <sup>35</sup> In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.*

*This may be the hardest time for us to pray – when things are going our way – if our prayer life is limited to the Hagar times. But it is also the time when we are so desperately in need of prayer – when we think that WE ARE RESPONSIBLE for the good times, when we forget that **ALL IS GIFT**. When you remember this, it's easier to understand the value of the cartoon on the bulletin tear off strip from the spiritual giant of the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart. I invite you to take that home and put it on your refrigerator as a reminder.*

5. Further amplification of #3 (whatever you ask in Jesus' Name will be given.) **Prayer is about joining your willingness to God's plan.**

Jesus did not want to go from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Cross of Golgotha, and he told God so. But, in the end, he prayed that God's will be done, not his own.

6. **The words & formulaic pattern are not that important.** See 1 & 2 above. (pray without ceasing; pray when desperate)

God's Spirit will pray the right words for us when we do not know what to say.

Indeed! the very best (albeit hardest) prayers I pray are when I pray in complete silence – not even forming silent words in my head, but merely gazing into the wonder of God in complete wordlessness. This prayer time (called “contemplation”) works the most powerfully, but can only be accomplished with much practice, but indeed bears much fruit.

***Those six lessons lifted up, let me follow up briefly by saying:***

Prayer is mostly about a relationship, about a companionship. Picasso once wrote: ***“Painting cannot be taught; it can only be found.”*** In many ways the same is true of prayer.

Just as Danny Devito said in the movie, *Throw Momma From the Train*: “A writer must write,” so, too, ***a pray-er must pray.***

The best way to learn **HOW TO PRAY** is simply **TO PRAY**. That is why today’s worship is centered on times of silence and scriptures about prayer, rather than about a preacher telling you HOW TO.

The language in which God speaks is the **LANGUAGE OF SILENCE**. The only way to learn it is to spend time listening to it.

It is something like how your foot starts tapping when you listen to music being played. ***If you don’t want to tap your foot, don’t go to a concert,*** or even put on headphones connected to your favorite music.

***If you don’t want to pray, then don’t read the prayer books*** – most importantly the longest running printed prayer book of all – **THE BOOK OF PSALMS**. But if you do – and let the prayers of God’s people over the centuries get into your soul – without trying to evaluate them, without trying to decide if “you like them” – then they become the foot tapping of your prayer life.

**Of the six lessons** lifted up in today’s scripture readings, it is hard for me to pick which is **the most important**. But, if you put a gun to my head and said I had to, I’d probably pick number 1: ***Pray without ceasing.***

If the only time I pray is when I get into a jam, like Hagar (or when someone about whom I care much is in trouble) then my prayer life is much like when, as a child, I wrote letters to Santa. And if my prayer life is like that, I ought not be surprised by the results I receive.

One of the things that I learned from my week long trips to the monastery is one of the same things Janet and I also learned when we attended the two year Academy of Spiritual Formation:

One day, while at the monastery I looked at my watch to see if I had time to walk into town for an errand before the next scheduled time of prayer. And in that moment, I had the insight of the difference between those monks' life and my own. Back home I ask the question, "Do I have time to pray here before my next appointed task, before the next television show comes on that I want to watch, before ... anything else that is more important in my life than prayer. The monks are very, very, very ordinary people. The difference between them and most of us is that prayer for them comes first; everything else works itself around that.

**During the Academy of Spiritual Formation experience, you don't get to eat in the morning before you pray.** It's not all that rigorous: everyone is just into that rhythm ... and the fact is that they don't open the cafeteria until after morning prayer is completed.

- Each day begins with the notion of the **centrality of the lifeblood of prayer.**
- And each day continues with **regularly appointed times to come together in prayer.**
- Even if you are not in the mood,
  - even if the appointed prayer time does not particularly "move" you,
  - you do it, to keep prayer at the center of your being, to make it the framework around which the rest of your life is built.
- **It changes prayer from being: "Does it feel good in this moment?"**

Praying without ceasing is about the role that prayer takes in your life. When prayer – communion with, relationship with, time spent with God – is center in your life, then everything else fits in.

That takes discipline.

That takes practice.

But it is NOT ALL THAT HARD ... **if you choose.**

But, as in all things of the Kingdom – God never forces himself upon us. We always get to choose that relationship.

*If you only turn on the prayer light switch, when you want a miracle, don't be surprised if the bulb does not burn.*

Praying is the lifeblood of our relationship with God.

God never forces us TO PRAY. But a life of prayer is never wasted.

***“Painting cannot be taught; it can only be found.”      Praying cannot be taught; it must be experienced.”***

If as many people PRAYED AS MUCH as people TALK ABOUT praying, there would be far fewer questions about prayer.

In the movie *Shadowlands* – the story about the profound and prolific Irish born Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, and his falling in love with the American woman named Joy – there comes a time when Lewis’ atheist colleague professor Riley asked him if his prayer life was causing God to cure Joy of her cancer.

Lewis said, very seriously:

**“That's not why I pray. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God. It changes me.”**

“That's the first sensible thing I've ever heard anybody say on the subject,” ceded Riley [, the atheist].

The American Trappist monk and prolific author of the last century (Thomas Merton) wrote: ***The fact remains that we are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the wind, and join in the Dance.”***

I would invite you to follow his advice ... and do it without ceasing. Then, instead of saying, “**Lord, how do I pray?**” you may say, “**Lord, thank you for the dance.**”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN