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Title: Habit Forming: Prayer

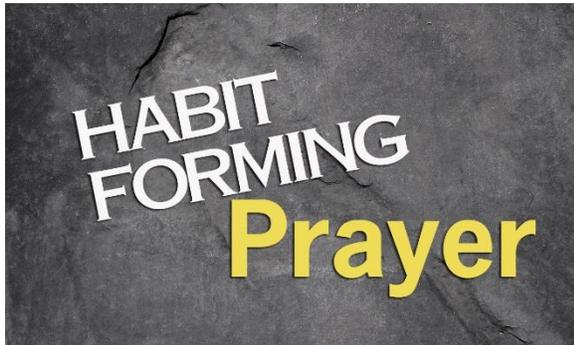
Date: October 14 & 15, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Colossians 4:2-6](#)

Text: [Luke 11:1-10](#)

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We all have something in common today, every one of us. We all got up this morning. Am I right? Here is a question. What is the first thing you did? If we are creatures of habit, and we all are, then you have a morning habit. What did you do, first thing this morning?

Some of you are thinking, "I went to the bathroom" or "I brushed my teeth" or "put on the coffee" or "went for a jog." Those answers might be true for most of us but not all of us. The number one answer for 99% of us is walked. The very act of getting out of bed to do any or all those things required you to become mobile. The first ritual of the morning, the first habit of the day was a habit that you formed years and years ago.

We were born to develop habits and the habits we form end up forming us. There is none so powerful and life changing as walking. It might seem strange to call walking a habit but in many ways, it is. It is something you learn. A little baby begins this life long journey to be like those around him. For a parent, there is nothing as exciting as watching a baby go from a snugly little lump that you hold in your arms to a roller, to a crawler, cruiser and finally, walker. Babies are driven to get to their feet, practicing the act over and over. No matter how many time they fall, no matter how many bumps or bruises they have, they want to learn how to walk, just like their parents who are walking all around them. Behavioral scientists point out that children end up having the same gait, walking just like their parents. Why? Why else than the behavior is modeled. Standing upright, walking and running with a straight back and straight legs — these are the marks of the human being. It is this posture that sets us apart from all other living creatures on earth. Or is it?

There is another position that reveals even more about the uniqueness of being human. Standing up defines our most remarkable physical gift. Kneeling down reveals our most miraculous spiritual gift: prayer.

Today we continue a series of sermons on habits. Last week, as we began the series, we talked about how brain scientists understand how habits are formed. When we do something over and over again, we create a path in our brain, like river through a canyon. Eventually, this pathway becomes a deeply ingrained habit, something that we can do automatically, without thinking. We are hardwired to form habits and the habits we form will end up forming us. ` Scientists call the formation of these pathways neuroplasticity. Christians call them spiritual disciplines or spiritual practices, the habit-forming behavior that help you become like Jesus. If you are going to become like Jesus, you have to practice his ways and, develop his habits "Spiritual formation in the Christian tradition is a process of increasingly being possessed by the character traits of Jesus..."¹ The character trait of Jesus which needs to become a strong habit is prayer.

If I were to ask for a show of hands, and I'm not going to, how many of you feel like you are awesome at prayer, that you are just killing it at prayer? You love prayer. You wake up in the morning and that's the first thing you do. You can't wait to get to it, to fall your knees and give God thanks. You think, "Randy, I don't need this sermon. I'm a prayer expert." How many of you would check the yes box on that?

If we are brutally honest, most us know we need to pray but we don't. Or at least we don't spend enough time at personal prayer for it to become a daily, transforming habit. Many admit that the only time they pray is in a time of crisis. Some of you feel guilty about that and you shouldn't. One of God's most amazing attributes a willingness to accept people who pray in sheer desperation, even when they have been ignoring him for years. Desperation prayers can be the beginning of spiritual life for many people. But by themselves such prayers are not sufficient to sustain spiritual life.²

Prayer that is transforming, that changes you from the inside out, habit forming prayer is talking with God. Did you hear that right? Not talking to God but with God. Prayer is the medium which we experience and connect with God and as such it is a means to an end. The end result of prayer is an abiding relationship with God. The best teacher on prayer is Jesus in a truly startling moment in the gospel of Luke. "Lord, teach us how to pray..." (Luke 11:1b)

This is a remarkable statement. In the four gospels there is only one occasion when there is a request like this. Jesus did amazing stuff. He cast out demons, healed the sick, turn a kids lunch into a feast for five thousand, walks on water. Not once do the disciples say, "Jesus, teach us to heal. Teach us to take leftovers and make a feast. Teach how to walk to calm the storm, walk on water, cast out demons." They say, "Teach us to pray." Why?

It wasn't that the disciples didn't know how to pray. They knew from their childhood how to pray. They would have grown up with prayers offered through the day, before meals, at the beginning of Sabbath, and when they went to synagogue. They weren't just asking what words to say. The disciples noticed Jesus looked forward to prayer and hungered for it. They saw that somehow prayer fed Jesus' soul the way food fed their stomachs. They observed a richly interactive life between Jesus and God. They wanted to be nourished by prayer the way that Jesus was. So, they asked him, "Lord, teach us how to pray..."³

"He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial." (Luke 11:1b) They may be a single set of words spoken more often than any words in history but its familiarity might get in the way of realizing that it is the key to a habit-forming prayer life that nourishes your soul. I want to lead you through this template as a tool to form a habit of daily prayer.

Who you pray to is the way Jesus starts. He starts with Father, Jesus favorite name for God. Father. There is strong evidence that Jesus would have said, "Abba" the Aramaic word for father. We see this explicitly spelled out when Jesus is praying the garden of Gethsemane and says, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36) Abba really has its origin in the baby babble that all languages have. Go back to that cuddly lump in the arms of proud parents, looking into the face of their child. As the child first begins to verbalize, mothers and fathers alike compete to hear their name called first. In truth, at first they are just verbalizing, forming the habit of speech which most easily comes with "ah" sounds and syllables. "Ah, pa, ma, ah, ba, pa pa, ma ma, abba." It is the sound associated with the loving parent who holds a child in their arms.

It would have been startling to the disciples when they heard Jesus use this word. It wasn't the language that they grew up using when they addressed God. It was overly intimate but that's what Jesus wants us to have, an intimate relationship with God. Who you pray to, what's in your mind's eye, will make or break your prayer life. If you think of God as a grumpy old man, up in the sky, mad at the world, with a lightning rod in his hand; or you see God as the CEO of the universe, creating all of the galaxies far, far away and you are just a one person out of many and why bother the CEO; or imagine God as an energy force out there, not really a person. If you think of God in these ways, as some of you do, you will never want to pray.

Add to this some of you have father wounds, a dad who abused you or left you or maybe wasn't even around, it can be hard to pray to father. There is just too much emotional trauma to embrace your father.

Jesus' template of prayer isn't asking you to. Jesus is saying pray to the one who shapes and forms you. Think abba, da da, ma ma, the one who gave you life, created you and held you in loving arms. We have this intimate relationship with God, like a baby looking up into the loving eyes of her father or his mother, and it doesn't matter who he calls "Abba"

Then, "In heaven." I know I didn't read that earlier but we can go down to the footnotes and find it. Half the manuscripts of Luke half "in heaven" and half don't. Matthew, which is the longer version of the prayer of course, does. Let's use it today but acknowledge that heaven is a tricky word because it too comes with a lot of baggage. We immediately imagine a cloud city with pearly gates, far away, out there someplace in the universe, that place you go when you die. This isn't at all what the word means in the New Testament.

The word translated heaven here is actually plural, the heavens. It is the Greek word οὐρανοῦς—ouranois which means the air and the sky. When Jesus is transfigured, God spoke out loud. "This is my son from the "oranois" from the heaven, from the sky, in the air, all around Jesus. Hear it this way? Our father, in the air. Think about that. The air is all around, up against your skin, even inside you, the air you breathe in. God is that close. The damage of thinking about heaven as a far-off place in the future rather the heaven as a place all around us can't be put into words. Most of us don't feel close to a God in a far-off place. It makes God absent, way out there. It is why Jesus came announcing, "The Kingdom of heaven is at hand." God's here, near. Augustine defined it this way, "God is the reality whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." Jesus offers this beginning so that as we begin our prayer, we are experiencing the intimate, joyful company of God. "Abba, here, around me, against me, in me."

Then, "hallowed be thy name." There is a word we use a lot, isn't it? Hallowed. It's a little out of fashion. It is a word that kind of means holy but in a different way than we use the word holy today. When we use the word holy, it is a moral word. But in scripture, it has an aesthetic nature about it that is reflective of all that is beautiful, lovely and true. To be hallowed or holy is to be unique and special without any parallel in the universe. God is holy, beautiful, unique, true. There is no other being like God, so full of love, joy and peace. God is holy. In fact, the angels in the throne room of heaven use this as their one-word prayer to God. Holy, holy, holy. Since creation they can't get past that one word for God, holy.

To hallow God's name is to have a heart of joy toward God—and even more, a wondrous sense of his beauty, to experience God's love, peace and joy. Paul calls those things the fruit of the spirit and it is exactly what Jesus is getting out with hallowed. Why is it that when we finally get around to praying, when we set aside some time to breathe deeply, to have communion with God, we begin to feel God's love for you and yours for him. You start feeling a sense of joy and peace. Does that ever happen to you? It's more than mindfulness. It is coming before the presence of God who is hallowed, holy. Jesus is saying that the main point of prayer is to have an intimate relationship, to say to God, "You are hallowed, special, unique, holy, set apart in my heart and mind and soul, the source of my joy and peace and love, my well-being.

Then, Thy kingdom come. The way the kingdom of God comes is through our prayers. Your prayer helps usher heaven into earth. This is a both "in here" (interior) and out there (exterior) petition. It is about you and about the world. The "in here" (interior) kingdom is a prayer for God to come and rule in your life. We need God to come rule in our lives, to fill us with the Spirit correcting our desires and shaping our very being. It is yielding your life to God, a "Lordship" petition: It is asking God to extend his royal power over every part of our lives: emotions, desires, thoughts, and commitments. When you pray this prayer, you are saying, "I'm all in God. I'm yours. My allegiance is to you and your kingdom. Take my life, mold me, shape me, form me into your servant. We are asking God to so fully rule us that we want to obey him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength.

But is also an "out there" (exterior) petition. Even though Jesus said that the kingdom of God is at hand, we know there is much around us that doesn't reflect that kingdom; that still hasn't embraced the God of light. The reign of God on earth is only partial now, but the fullness of the future kingdom is unimaginable. All suffering, injustice, poverty, and death will be ended. To pray "thy kingdom come" is to "yearn for that future life" of justice and peace, and to ask that "your future kingdom may be the end and consummation of the kingdom you have begun in us."⁴

I want to stop and recap because at this point, Jesus has spent more than half of his model prayer in a form we call contemplative, a type of prayer designed to shape and form who you are in relationship to God. It is a prayer for communion with God. Jesus wants to accomplish four things. He wants you to have an intimate relationship with God the father, like a child feels when saying "abba" to a mother or father, holding them in their arms. He wants you to know that God is close by, not far away. He wants you to enjoy communion with God, experiencing God's beauty and holiness, so you

discover love, joy and peace. And he wants you to embrace God's kingship over your life and eventually around the world

Only then does Jesus turn to intercessory prayer, to a type of prayer where you offer up petitions and requests. There is a time and place to ask God for your needs and your wants and after forming the relationship with God, now is the time. "Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive. Do not bring to time of trial."

All of our wants and needs can be summed up in those three statements. Food, grace, strength and well-being. Jesus knows that we have these needs so his prayer template isn't just for building a relationship with God; it is also about addressing the wants and needs of being human. He is saying, "God doesn't just want you to survive; God want you to thrive." But God isn't the giant Ikea store in heaven. This isn't where you get out your genie lamp to rub. It's the time when you ask openly and honestly about physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Because now you have the right heart posture formed with your contemplative prayer, you now can honestly express your dependence upon God's providence and grace. Jesus is charging us to bring our prayer list of needs in light of our new frame of heart.

"You are my God, my Abba but I am your child. So, I am going to ask like a child would ask a parent. I am turning it all over to you because, I can't do it without you. These are my needs, my petitions, my hopes and desires. Feed me. Give me bread. Forgive me. Offer grace that I will offer to others. Strengthen me so that I can overcome challenges." In some ways, the last three petition statements of this prayer come into simple focus when you have established communion with God in the first four statements.

"Lord, teach us to pray..." I am confident that when answering, Jesus didn't have in mind that you'd wake up in the morning and the first thing, recite the Lord. I seriously doubt that he would have ever imagined that this prayer would be used in worship the way we use it. Rather, it was Jesus way of giving a template follow, a pattern of prayer that we could use to get into the habit of praying. Jesus wanted prayer to be the center-point of our life with God, just as it was in his life. It should be woven into the fabric off our lives, a daily schedule.

So, this week, I going to challenge you to take the Lord's Prayer and use it as your pattern for prayer. Set aside a time, perhaps no more than 5 minutes. Pray the pattern of the Lord's Prayer. Start with the orientation, acknowledging who you are praying to, "Father, ABBA, Creator. Source of Life. Sense the one to whom you pray is like a parent holding you as a child.

Spend a minute experiencing who God is. Then, sense God presence, all around you, in the heavens, the sky and air, even in you. Sense him all around you so you can connect with God's beauty, God's holiness. Pray the one-word prayer of angels. Holy, Holy, Holy. Then breathe deeply and receive his love, joy and peace and when you do, yield your life to your king, yield your life to his Lordship that the coming kingdom might

Follow that guide line and then, after you have shaped your heart, ask. Ask and you will receive. It is Jesus' promise. Ask openly and honestly about your physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

The uniqueness we have as human beings is not just to walk, it is to bow on bended knee before God in prayer, to have a conversation with the Creator of all life, our father God, Abba. Try it this week, each day, for just five minutes a day, using this simple prayer as your template. Form the habit of prayer. At the end of the week, I'm confident you'll discover it is habit forming.

¹ Dallas Willard

² Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Kindle Locations 1338-1342). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

³ Ortberg, John. *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Kindle Locations 1394-1404). Zondervan. Kindle Edition

⁴ Keller, Timothy. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (pp. 111-112). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.