

“THE LORD’S PRAYER – AN OVERVIEW”

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Matthew 6:9-13

(09-12-21)

As many of you know, I began my ministry as the minister of Richmond Presbyterian Church in 2016. My family and I moved into the manse that RPC had purchased, where RPC’s ministers have lived while engaged in ministry here. I remember reading about the manse when I was considering the call to RPC. The congregational profile described the manse as an attractive wood framed, metal clad, 1809 sq. foot side split house built in 1977. It’s a very nice house and my family and I have been happy to call it home since our move to Richmond. Having been built in 1977, it is now nearly 45 years old. Over the years there’s been a lot of renovations which have been done to the house. Among other things, the kitchen was rebuilt with new appliances in 2007, and it looks like a new dishwasher was put in just before our arrival. We’ve since updated the microwave and I think the washer and dryer are newer as well. New flooring was installed in 2006 and new windows in 2009. We had the master bath redone a couple of years ago and the main bath is due for an overhaul sometime soon. The hot water tank was replaced recently and a major renovation of the entire roof took place a few years ago.

This congregation has done a good job in keeping the manse updated, making it both safe and attractive, a welcoming place for your ministers to live. If you’ve owned a home, you know that without redoing and renewing the parts of the house that need care, the house would fall into a shambles. **Truth is, it’s not all that different with people.** The manse may be almost 45 years old, but I’m about to turn 56 in a couple of weeks. That may not seem all that old to some of you, but believe me I know that I’ve crested and have started down that gentle slope on the far side of life, and sometimes not all that gentle, if I’m being honest. **And there are times when I wonder, how’s my house in here? What’s the shape of my inner home?** Is it a safe place, is it suitable for habitation?

Do you remember hearing how lumber prices skyrocketed during the pandemic? I heard that it was due to people wanting to renovate their homes during a time when people were more or less in lockdown and needed to work from home. But each year, pandemic or not, billions of dollars are spent by Canadians on home renovations. The CBC reports that in 2020 Canadians spent over 80 billion dollars for renovations. **But how much will be invested in renovating or improving our inner selves,** the homes for our spirits, where what we build isn’t for 20 year or 50 years, or even 100 years, but where what we build is for a lifetime and for eternity? **How many people will ever take the time to assess the condition of their inner homes, where the spirit resides and where the Holy Spirit desires to live, and furthermore, how many people will familiarize themselves with the tools needed to bring our inner homes up to current needs?**

If we want our inner homes to be as attractive as our outer ones, and really shouldn't our inner homes, our spirits, demand even more attention than our houses, then prayer must be the foundation upon which our spiritual homes must be built. **Prayer is at the core of all Christian life because it is the method by which we most commonly and intimately communicate with God. Prayer grounds us in relationship with our Creator.** There are multiple facets to this relationship, **but the first is always that prayer is about gratitude, gratitude to God for life, for love, for the opportunity to know and respond.** The purpose of prayer is to come to love God as much as possible. After all isn't that what all great relationships are about? **The more love we have for God and the more we understand God's love for us, the more sound, stable and secure our foundations will be.** I've watched enough episodes on HGTV to know that when the foundation is shaky, the whole structure is rendered unsafe. If our practice of prayer doesn't form a love filled foundation for our relationship with God, how can we expect our lives to be able to endure the storms of life? Over the years I have heard, and participated in, many discussions about the efficacy of prayer. The simple question that often gets asked is, does prayer work? **Of course, that's not a simple question at all!** Countless volumes have been, and will continue to be written about how prayer works, some of which will do more harm than good. The answer to the question, does prayer work, **depends so much on what we assume the work of prayer to be.** There are prayers that come from the deepest places of our being. These prayers are the most honest words that can ever come from us. They are prayers of need, desperation, they are prayers rooted in a faith that believes that God hears us and that God cares for us. **Everyone has prayed like this at some point. Scripture is full of such prayers. And there's nothing wrong with praying like that.** But there is the risk that prayer viewed in this way **can become very much a utilitarian exercise.** Prayer becomes a means by which we try to get God to bend the divine will to our needs and wants. Often those needs and wants are not selfish, but are requests for others, for their well being. Still, when we struggle with prayer, with questions such as why doesn't God seem to answer prayer, mostly it stems from this approach to how prayer works, **that prayer is a means of bending God's will to our needs and wants.**

But there is another perspective about how prayer works and how we understand the way in which God answers prayer. It is the perspective exemplified by Jesus in the prayer he taught his disciples. **The key difference in this prayer from those prayers that often emanate from our needs and wants is that rather than trying to bend the divine will towards us, the prayer that Jesus taught is meant to change us and shape us, to bend us toward the divine will and to find our peace, our wholeness and our joy in finding our place and our role within the divine purposes of God, in God's dream.**

Over the next 5 weeks, I along with Dr. Anne-Marie Ellithorpe, will preach on the Lord's Prayer, about how we can pray this prayer, not as a means of getting God to do our will, **but as a means of journeying with God so that we may be shaped toward God's will,** after all the

prayer says about God, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. We will emphasize the fact that this is the **Lord's** Prayer, not Victor's prayer or Anne-Marie's prayer or anyone else's prayer, it is the prayer of our Lord and as such it serves **his** purposes **and it is only in bending our lives to our Lord's purposes that we might truly find our purpose**. Today I want to just touch briefly on some themes in the prayer, which we will explore more thoroughly in the weeks to come.

The prayer begins with the confession that God is holy. **From the outset the focus of the prayer that Jesus taught is not our needs or wants, but the holiness of God**. The purpose of a prayer that begins with such a confession is markedly different from one that begins by naming our needs, **because the end result isn't necessarily a change in the condition from which we seek deliverance or relief, but a change in us**. It's not our will that we seek to be done, but God's. Jesus teaches us to pray that God's will be done, both on earth as it is in heaven. **Matthew Henry writes that the purpose of prayer is to move and oblige ourselves, not to move or oblige God. Prayer isn't about making God understand us, for God knows us better than we know ourselves. Prayer helps us to understand God and our role in God's creative purpose**.

Only then do we pray for our needs, praying with an attitude that recognizes that God is the provider of those needs. **The prayer also implies that if God is holy, if it is God's will and purpose that we seek to move toward and oblige ourselves to, then what God provides for us, must surely be sufficient and suitable for this day, even if we are not so clear about that right now**. The prayer continues with an acknowledgment that just as our relationship with God is central to our well-being, so are our relationships with one another. We cannot claim to love God whom we have not seen, if we are not willing to love our brother or sister whom we have seen. The prayer Jesus taught understands that the two relationships cannot be separated. Love God and love your neighbour as yourself are not two different commands, they are together the Great Commandment. **We are to pray putting the needs of others before our own. We are to forgive before we seek to be forgiven. And the prayer concludes with a petition to be delivered from trials as well as to be kept from the clutches of evil**.

Does prayer work? It depends on what we assume the work of prayer to be. Every honest prayer is answered. Sometimes the answer is no, others times its not yet. Sometimes the answer is yes, but not in ways we have expected or easily understand. Prayer doesn't always change every situation we pray for or every person we pray about, **but prayer, the prayer that Jesus taught, has the power to change us**. The purpose of many prayers is to get something, **but the real purpose of every prayer is to become something**. (Charles Hodge, "Conference Papers," 1987)

Do you realize that at no time of the day or night are we not thinking about something? Our thoughts are always active, whether consciously or unconsciously. **The question is, where**

does our mind go when there is nowhere specific defined for it to go? Joan Chittister writes that this question is an important one because its answer defines what kind of person we are choosing to become. (Joan Chittister, *The Breath of the Soul – Reflections on Prayer*) Prayer is so foundational to who we are, to our entire structure, **because prayer is not only our path of communication with God, but God's path of communication with us.** It is through the practice of prayer, a prayer that seeks to bring move our lives into concert with God's purpose, that we come to understand what God wants of us, the role and place God has in mind for us in God's purposes. **Prayer brings us into that place where the will of God and our wills are moving parallel to one another, and no longer on tangential paths.**

When we come to understand that the purpose for our lives is to find our purpose in God's creative intent, **when we begin to understand that all of life is a prayer and that when our minds have nowhere specific to go, that they go to God's desire for us, God's love for us, then we begin to be shaped and changed into the creations God has always intended for us.** If the purpose of prayer is **not merely to get something but to become something,** we will know that God answers prayer **when we find ourselves being changed.**

One final thing, home renovations rarely finish on time and they rarely cost what we were originally quoted. Once you start tearing apart a house, there can be many unexpected surprises. Rare is the renovation that proceeds smoothly from start to finish. **Expect the unexpected. And expect it to take time. And expect it to cost you more than you planned.** As we pray the prayer Jesus taught, we need to expect the unexpected. When we begin to really be open to what God has in mind for us, when we really are open to a change in us, **a lot of our original plans can go out the window. The results of regular prayer are often not what we thought we were originally seeking.** There may be painful times when we are brought to a place of clarity about something in our lives, things and issues we have avoided or wished to forget. **Renovations always cost more than planned. Plan on it. And it will take more time than we expect, so we need to be patient. Prayer is the tool that produces firm foundations. Prayer is the path by which God invites us into a living relationship and the means by which God continues to mold and shape us into the people and disciples God would have us be.**

And to God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen.