

A Journey Through the Lord's Prayer

DESCRIPTION

This ten-week series will walk your congregation through the phrases of the Lord's Prayer. Although the primary text is the Lord's Prayer, each sermon also includes a secondary text. The following phrases are covered during this series. However, some of the phrases could be combined for a shorter series, if so desired.

- "Our"
- "Father who art in heaven"
- "Hallowed be thy name ... for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."
- "Thy kingdom come"
- "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"
- "Give us this day our daily bread"
- "And forgive us our trespasses"
- "As we forgive those who trespass against us"
- "And lead us not into temptation"
- "But deliver us from evil"

Note: Although this series contains ten sermons, one of the sermons has an extended reading from a Philip Yancey book, one is a fairly short message for a Communion Sunday, and some of the examples are unique to my own congregation.

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“A Journey through the Lord’s Prayer” (Part 1) “Our”

Matthew 6: 9-13

[Note: We often use projection during worship. Throughout many of the following sermons, you will see the notes we used to communicate with the media team.]

Every Monday afternoon, several members of our worship team gather together to review the order of worship for the following weekend. Last August, after having served at Brentwood United Methodist Church for only one month, I noticed that we said the Lord’s Prayer at every service. So I asked the Monday afternoon worship team, “Do we say the Lord’s Prayer every week here?” They all said, “Yes, we do.” Then I asked them, “Do you think we NEED to say the Lord’s Prayer every week?” They looked at me with eyes that said, “If you want to live to see another Sunday, you better not mess with that.” So I didn’t. And now, nine months later, we continue to say the Lord’s Prayer every week, and we probably always will. And that’s fine with me. It’s a good thing to say Jesus’ sacred prayer every week as part of our liturgy.

Since the Lord’s Prayer is such an important part of worship at BUMC, our worship team decided it would be a good idea to take a journey through the phrases of the prayer, starting today. But we are not going to get very far today. In fact, we are going to stop with the first word, “Our.” There are 68 words in the Lord’s Prayer, so at this rate we will finish this sermon series in about a year and a half! It really won’t take that long. But it’s important to stop with the first word and consider how important that word is. The Lord’s Prayer begins with the word, “Our.”

So the first thing to notice about the Lord’s Prayer is that it is a community prayer, not an individual prayer, as you can see on the screen. ***[Slide of the Lord’s Prayer (please make the capped words stand out, perhaps red or another color that really stands out, and put a photo of our congregation praying, or another congregation in prayer, in the background, it could be a few people, close up image): OUR Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give US this day OUR daily bread. And forgive US OUR trespasses, as WE forgive those who trespass against US. And lead US not into temptation, but deliver US from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.]***

Notice that the Lord's Prayer doesn't say, "My Father." Instead it says, "Our Father." The prayer doesn't say "Give me my daily bread." Instead it says, "Give us our daily bread." The prayer doesn't say, "Forgive me my trespasses." Instead it says, "Forgive us our trespasses." On nine occasions, the Lord's Prayer uses the terms "our," "us," and "we." You see, Christianity is not an individual religion. It's a community religion. You and I can't be a Christian in isolation. We can only be a Christian in relationships with other Christians. **[END SLIDE]**

Several months ago, I heard about a Presbyterian pastor who received a complaint from a person who visited his church. This church, like ours, has a time in the worship service for the passing of the peace. **[Video of passing of the peace from previous Sunday (a photo would also work here)]** This ancient tradition goes all the way back to the New Testament. During the passing of the peace, people greet one another in Christian love and friendship. It's a way of saying—we come to worship not only as individuals, but as a community of faith, as a church family. Well, this visitor did not like the passing of the peace. He said to the pastor, **[Show still photo of passing of the peace and add this quote: "The passing of the peace feels like an invasion of my privacy."]** The pastor replied, **[Drop the previous quote and put this quote up: "When you come to church, to some extent, you give up some of your privacy."]** This pastor is exactly right. Church is not a private affair. Christianity is not an individualistic religion. It's a community religion. It's a religion of "we," not "me." **[END VIDEO OR SLIDE]**

I want to show you how crucial this is in the Bible. Over and over again in the New Testament, you find the phrase, "one another." Let me give you just a few examples. [Slide: add these verses as I rapidly review them (image of our church worshipping in the background):

- "Love one another" (John 13).
- "Accept one another" (Romans 15).
- "Instruct one another" (Colossians 3).
- "Greet one another" (1 Corinthians 16).
- "Serve one another" (Galatians 5).
- "Be kind to one another" (1 Thessalonians 5).

- “Be patient with one another” (Ephesians 4).
- “Forgive one another” (Ephesians 4).
- “Encourage one another” (Hebrews 3).
- “Pray for one another” (James 5).

There are over 50 of these kinds of “one another” verses in the New Testament. The Bible is clear—we are part of a “one another” religion. **[END SLIDE]** Now, I don’t want you to over-romanticize this notion. That doesn’t mean we always get along perfectly. It doesn’t even mean that we all have to like each other. Do you get along perfectly and like everyone in your extended family? If your extended family is like mine, I doubt it. So this “one another” theme of the Bible is not some kind of idealistic, warm and fuzzy church where everyone holds hands all the time and sings *Kum Ba Yah*. But it does mean that we are all part of God’s family, connected to one another by our common faith in Jesus Christ, and that we live out our faith—not as individual believers—but together—as a community of faith. In Southern lingo, this means that Christianity is a “y’all” religion, as in “all y’all are my church family.” You cannot do this online. You cannot do this watching religious television. You do it connected to real life, flesh and blood, and flawed broken people in Christian community.

There are many ways to live this out this “one another” faith of ours. Let me briefly mention two. The first is by attending weekly congregational worship. **[Slide with image of our church in the background: 1. Attending Weekly Congregational Worship]** Gathering with the community of faith every Sunday is at the core of our faith. It’s crucial that we sing together, and pray together, and pass the peace of Christ together, and hear God’s word together, and celebrate Holy Communion together. Unless we are homebound, or sick, or out of town, God expects us to gather with our church family every week for worship. It’s what Christians do. God deserves it. We need it. And, our church needs it. Weekly worship is a vital part of living out our “one another” faith.

A second way we can live out our “one another” faith is by connecting to others through group-life. [Add to slide: 2. Connecting To Others Through Group-Life] As important as weekly worship is, it is not enough by itself. Every Christian believer needs to connect to a group of Christian friends for support, for learning, and for service. The Church began—literally—as a small group of twelve disciples, and that model of group life Christian connection will never

go out of style. Our church takes this mandate very seriously. BUMC offers well over one hundred group-life opportunities, from SS classes, to support groups, to Bible study classes, to service groups of all kinds. If you are not currently connected to a group, I hope you will do so soon, because it is a crucial part of living out the Christian life. **[END SLIDE]**

Years ago an interesting story was published in the Los Angeles Times. A young woman fell asleep while driving her car over a huge LA overpass. The car plunged through a guard rail, and was left hanging by its left rear wheel, dangling in space. The highway below was at least one hundred feet down, and a fall would kill her. About a dozen passing motorists stopped, grabbed some ropes from one of their vehicles, tied the ropes to the back of the woman's car, and hung on until the fire unit arrived. The fire truck extended a ladder from below to help stabilize the car while firefighters tied the vehicle to tow trucks with cables and chains. It took three hours for the passers-by, the firefighters, and the tow truck drivers, about 25 people in all, to secure the car and pull the woman to safety. "It was kinda funny," the LA County Fire Capt. recalled later. "She kept saying, "I'll do it myself." Brothers and sisters in Christ, we cannot do it ourselves. Self-sufficiency does not work, at least in the Christian faith. We need the love, support and help of other Christian believers to live out our faith. That's why the Lord's Prayer says "our" Father, not "my" Father. That's why the Lord's Prayer uses the words "our," "us," and "we" instead of "me," "my," and "mine." Our faith is not an individual faith—but a community faith. Even God is a trinity.

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A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (part 2) **"Father, who art in heaven"**

Galatians 4:4-7

We are currently taking a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the phrase, "Father, who art in heaven." As you know, this concept of God is problematic for some people. It's difficult for some folks on a personal level. As one woman said, "My father abused me as a child. How can I love God as a heavenly father when I hate my earthly father?" Although most of us were not abused by our father, many people never felt loved and affirmed and blessed by their father. If so, affirming God as heavenly father may be difficult. Others have a problem affirming God as father on a theological level. They believe that masculine images of God do a disservice to women. These folks note that the Bible includes both masculine and feminine images of God, and that God is beyond gender. They argue that when we speak of God, we should do so with inclusive language rather than language about God as father, like calling God creator, comforter, sustainer, compassionate one and ever-loving God.

While I respect people with this opinion, and use inclusive language whenever possible, I'm not ready to completely discard the image of God as father—for several reasons. First, God as heavenly father is the primary image of God that Jesus gave us. In fact, Jesus' last words on the cross before he died were, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." God as father was at the heart of Jesus' theology and practice, and we must take that seriously. Second, God as father is a major biblical theme. In the New Testament alone, God is called Father 245 times. Finally, this image of God, even with its limitations, holds great promise and meaning for us.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus tells us to pray to God as a heavenly father. The Hebrew word Jesus uses is "Abba," which basically means Daddy. This is an incredible statement by Jesus. Jesus wants us to understand that God is like a good father who deeply loves his children. If you prefer to think of God as a heavenly parent—like a good father and a good mother—that's a perfectly valid way to interpret this. The point is that the God of all creation, like a good parent, claims you and me as beloved children.

On Monday I received an email from one of our members, telling me what it means to her to think of God as heavenly father. She said, “I would like to share with you what the words “Abba Father” mean to me. I have two birth certificates. One has “unnamed white female” listed on it, along with my biological parents, whom I have never met. The other birth certificate has my name on it, along with the names of my adopted parents. The difference is this. In three days’ time I went from unwanted, unnamed, abandoned and alone, to two people coming to the hospital, signing some papers, and giving me love, a name, a family, shelter, food, protection, an education, and a Christ-centered foundation.” This woman understands that what her adoptive parents did for her, God has done for us. She gets Jesus’ metaphor of God as Abba Father and why Jesus teaches us to pray “Our Father, who art in heaven.”

[Note: you could substitute another story here, or use a similar one in your own life if that is possible, or use this story and simply say: I once heard about a young minister who had an extremely poor relationship with his father ...] I’m going to share with you on a very personal level today. You see, this concept of God as father is not just a sermon topic to me, or a theological concept, but a deeply personal spiritual issue. Like some of you here today, I had an extremely poor relationship with my father. I don’t need to lay out the details. Suffice it to say that my father, who died years ago, was a good man in many ways, but he was not a good father, quite the opposite.

Well, many years ago, when I was in my mid 30s, I was struggling with a major career decision. So I took a day-long retreat out in the woods, all alone. I wanted to just get away for a day and think through and pray through this issue. But as I walked through the woods that day, I was unable to focus on my career struggle. Instead, I began to think about my father, who had died a few months earlier. The more I thought about him, the more upset I became. I was upset that my father had not loved me, upset that he did not give me the blessing, upset that our relationship was so negative, and upset that it was now too late to get what I needed from my father because he was dead.

Here I was, a grown man with children of my own, and I was deeply struggling with my own need to be loved by my father. I felt cheated and angry. I was angry that my dad taught me to produce but that he never taught me to love. I felt angry that I had spent years producing, but I was not very good at loving. I felt very empty at that moment. Although I was on a retreat for

the purpose of praying and seeking God's will for my career, I could not get beyond this anger over my relationship with my father. In fact, I even started to get angry at God. I was angry at God for not giving me a loving father that I needed and wanted so badly. And then something happened deep in the core of my soul. I don't fully understand it to this day. But I began to weep like I've never wept before or since. I stood there in the woods before God and I cried tears of pain and anger and hurt and emptiness. And finally, my anger was over, and like a little boy hungry for his father's love I said, "Dear God, will you be a father for me? Will you love me? Will you just love me for who I am and not for what I produce? Will you love me in spite of all my failures and weaknesses and doubts and insecurities and insufficiencies." And in that moment I had the most profound spiritual experience of my life.

As I stood in the woods weeping, it seemed to me that the wind on my shoulders was like the arms of God holding me and hugging me, and the sun on my face was like the smiling face of God's love, and the ground under my feet was like God's heart, pulsating with love. And in my heart I could hear God say, "Yes my child, I love you, I love you more than you'll ever know." And then I began to sing, straight from my heart, a song I hadn't sung in many, many years. I begin to sing, **(sing the song)** "Jesus loves me **(please join me)** this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." After the song I got on my knees and prayed the Lord's Prayer. When I said the words, "Our Father, who art in heaven" I've never been quite the same. When I left the woods that day I still had plenty of unresolved problems, but I knew that God loved me as a heavenly father, and that made all the difference.

That is the day when my primary identity in life changed. Instead of seeing myself primarily as a minister, or a husband, or a father—I primarily saw myself as a beloved child of God, and my life has never been the same since.

In the heart of every person is a need for a heavenly father. Why? Because our earthly fathers, good or bad, are not enough, they are inadequate. As John Killinger once said, "What we all need is a Father beyond all fathers, a Father who will not die, a Father who will always love us, a Father who will always be there for us, forever and forever. And so Jesus teaches us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." The world begins when we can truly say it."

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A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (part 3)
"Hallowed be thy name ... for thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory, forever. Amen."

Psalm 147

It happened at Sunday lunch. A young family came home from church, roused up some leftovers for lunch, sat down to eat, said a prayer, and began to eat. While they passed the food around the table, the youngest child, a young girl, asked her parents a theological question. She said, "Why don't we call God by his name?" "What do you mean?" asked her mother. "Well," she explained, "at church every Sunday we pray 'hallowed be thy name.' So how come we don't call God by his name?" Well, this child was a bit confused, but she asked a very good question. Why don't we focus more on the hallowedness of God? The truth is, we often forget that God is hallowed, holy, and transcendent. We are currently taking a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the phrase, early in the prayer that says, "Hallowed be thy name." The prayer ends on the same theme by saying, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever." So, we are exploring both of these phrases today.

About a year ago, while driving in Nashville, I saw a personalized license plate on a car that took my breath away—and not in a good way. The license plate read **YAHWEH**. As you may know, Yahweh is the personal name of God in the Old Testament. The name is translated, "I Am Who I Am," which is purposely mysterious. The name says you cannot fully know God, you cannot put God in a box and think you have God figured out.

The ancient Jews considered the name Yahweh too holy to speak. For example, whenever they read scripture in worship, and came to the holy name "Yahweh," they substituted the word "Lord" instead. They believed that to invoke the name Yahweh brought the risk of death itself. So the name Yahweh was only spoken once a year under very special circumstances. On the holiest day of the year, a priest would enter the holy of holies of the Temple and say the sacred name of God. Tradition tells us that before the selected priest entered the holy space, his fellow priests tied a rope around his leg. That way, if God's awesome holiness killed him, the other priests could drag him out without risking their own life.

Ancient Israel took God's holiness with radical seriousness. They knew God was powerful and awesome and glorified and transcendent. Today, we plaster the holy name of Yahweh on the back of our automobiles. Clearly many people have lost their sense of awe before God.

Years ago, Frank Slaughter wrote a novel about Simon Peter called *Upon This Rock*. In the novel, Slaughter wrote about Peter raising a man from the dead. He wrote, and this is a direct quote, "This was the first time Peter had raised a person up from the dead and he could not help feeling a little bit awed by it." Well, I'm no literary critic, but that's certainly not a great line. If you just raised a person from the dead it's likely you would be more than "a little bit awed." But that phrase, "a little bit awed"—that's precisely the problem of American Christianity. We are only a little bit awed by God anymore. Instead of being the almighty, transcendent, holy, mysterious God who flung the planets and stars into space, and parted the Red Sea, and raised Jesus up from the cold clutches of the grave, we have domesticated God into our warm and fuzzy best friend and buddy.

I believe that American Christians desperately need a renewed theology of the hallowedness of God. The people of the Bible understood that God was hallowed. Remember Moses at the burning bush. God told him to take off his shoes, for he was standing on Holy Ground. Moses fell to the ground and hid his face in the terrifying presence of the Holy. Moses understood the words, "Hallowed be thy name."

Or consider Job. He was complaining about all the bad things that had happened to him when God interrupted him with some questions. He said, "Job, were you there when I laid the foundation of the earth? Were you there when I threw the stars into space? Were you there when I scooped out the oceans and filled them with water? And Job fell on his face and cried out, "O God, I am unworthy!" Job understood the words, "Hallowed be thy name."

Or think of Isaiah. When he worshiped God he saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and he heard the seraphim cry "Holy, holy, holy, Lord, the whole earth is filled with your glory!" Isaiah understood the words, "Hallowed be thy name."

Or consider Mary, the mother of Jesus. When Mary learned that her unborn child would save the world, she broke forth into a song, exclaiming, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary understood the words, "Hallowed be thy name."

Or think of John in the book of Revelation who describes the final kingdom of God by saying, “Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea ... singing, To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessings and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” John understands the words, “Hallowed be thy name.”

Like Moses, and Job, and Isaiah, and Mary, and John, and like the other women and men of the Bible, we need to recapture a sense of awe before God.

Several years ago I read a scientific article about the incredible vastness of the universe. The article said that our universe consists of at least 100 billion galaxies, and each galaxy has about 100 billion stars. How many stars are 100 billion by 100 billion? It's a lot of stars! It sounds like the number of the federal deficit! But in today's Scripture reading from Psalm 147, the Bible says, “God determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.” We worship and serve a God that has a name for over 100 billion times 100 billion stars. It's no wonder that Jesus teaches us to pray, “Hallowed be thy name.”

Many years ago, when our daughter Laura was just a little girl, we tried to teach her to say grace at mealtime. We taught her the simple prayer, “God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food.” Well, at first she didn't quite get it. What she said for several weeks was, “God is great. God is great. God is great. Amen.” Well, her prayer was wrong, but her theology was right. God is great. God is great. God is great! So Jesus teaches us to pray, “Hallowed be thy name.”

###

Journey through the Lord's Prayer (part 4)
"Thy Kingdom Come"
Mark 1:14-15, Matt 13:31-33

One of the best parts of my job is getting pictures from children in the congregation. Here are a few I've received from some of our BUMC children. **[Slide: lizard picture]** This one is a nature scene with a cool lizard, a bee and butterflies. **[Slide: colorful picture]** Here's a colorful abstract one. I'm not sure exactly what it is but it's pretty! **[Slide: me preaching]** This one is of me in action on a Sunday morning. I have a file of these from every church I've served. They are among my most prized possessions. I want to show you one from my last church. Several months before I left Lebanon, I preached a sermon from one of Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of God. After the service, a nine-year-old boy gave me this picture. **[Slide: Kingdom picture]** At the top it says, "God's Kingdom." Under that it says, "Jesus' Kingdom." There is a heart in the middle depicting God's love. And at the bottom it says, "God and Jesus Rule!" Although this boy is only nine years old, he has a very good understanding of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is what the world would look like if God completely ruled the world. **[End slide]**

We are currently on a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the words, **"thy kingdom come."** When Jesus taught us to pray, "thy kingdom come" he was teaching us to pray for God's rule in the world. If the Kingdom of God were completely realized on earth, there would be no more war, hunger, poverty, terrorism, illness, pollution, hate, intolerance or prejudice. Love and justice and peace would reign. But sadly, when we read the morning paper, watch the evening news, or browse the Internet, we don't see much of God's reign on earth. Instead of God's Kingdom we see things like war and terrorism and environmental crisis and global financial strain. Where's the Kingdom in all that?

I recently read about a pastor who was leading his church in prayer. He prayed for peace and justice and compassion and healing. And then, in the middle of his prayer he stopped abruptly and burst out in frustration, "Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week, and it doesn't do any good." Well, that woke up his congregation! But can't you relate? We pray for God's Kingdom to come, but the Kingdom seems a long way off. So, most Christians don't take the Kingdom of God seriously, or if we do, we relegate it to the future—when Jesus

returns, then we'll see God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. And there is truth in that. God's Kingdom will never fully come until God ushers in a new age.

But let me tell you something important. Jesus didn't say the Kingdom was just for the future. In today's text in Mark 1 he said "the Kingdom of God has come near." In other passages Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you." Oh, it's not yet fully realized to be sure. As we heard in today's text from Matthew 13, the Kingdom of God is like yeast in the dough, slowly making the bread rise, or a tiny mustard seed quietly growing into a large bush. It's not easily seen, but if we'll look carefully, we can see many glimpses of the Kingdom of God.

One of the privileges of being a pastor is that I get to see glimpses of the Kingdom all the time. **[Note: you will want to use examples from your own church and community here].** A couple of weeks ago I went to our annual Harvest Hands breakfast. **[Slide from Harvest Hands]** As many of you know, HH does inner city development work and is one of our key ministries at BUMC. During that breakfast I heard wonderful stories about individuals and a community being transformed. **[Slide: Habitat photo from current build]** This afternoon we'll dedicate our newest Habitat for Humanity house. This house will totally transform the family moving into the home. That's Kingdom work.

[Slide from South Africa mission showing children] Last weekend the pastor from our mission in South Africa spoke during our worship services and told you about some of the Kingdom work we do there. **[End slide]** Last week I talked to a couple in our church who do volunteer work with the disability community. They are advocates for helping disabled people, and it is Kingdom work. A few days ago I talked with a person in our congregation who volunteers with addicts. It is tough work, takes a lot of patience, but he had amazing Kingdom stories about recovering lives and transformed people. A couple of weeks ago I had correspondence with a member of our church who helps abused children overcome their trauma and my goodness, that is Kingdom work.

In recent weeks we've baptized numerous adult believers, even one who had a Hindu background. When people come to faith in Jesus that is Kingdom activity. A day rarely goes by that I don't get to see the Kingdom of God advanced through this congregation. Sometimes it happens in big ways. Usually it happens in small and quiet ways, like the leaven

in the bread and the mustard seed as Jesus mentioned in today's text. But kingdom work is always happening.

So Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come." **[Slide: in the middle of the screen (you'll add photos later in each corner like a collage) put: "Thy Kingdom Come"]** Let me cut to the bottom line. If we took this prayer seriously it would make drastic changes in our life. For example, it would impact our family life. **[Add to slide in one corner a photo of a mid-range house]** If God ruled in our family—can you imagine? We would treat each other with love and compassion and respect. And, when family members messed up, we would readily offer grace and forgiveness.

If we took this prayer seriously, it would impact the way we spend our money. **[Add to slide in one corner a photo of an open checkbook]** We would keep far less in our checkbook and investment accounts, and we would put far more into these offering plates which support Kingdom work locally and around the world. It would mess with our finances in ways that are inconvenient.

If we took this prayer seriously, it would impact the way we use our time. **[Add to slide in one corner an open calendar, June 2012 if possible]** We would use less time in selfish pursuits, and more time in helping others.

If we took this prayer seriously, it would impact the way we do our jobs. **[Add to slide in the final corner a photo of a woman at work in an office]** We would work with better attitudes and with absolute integrity. If we took this prayer seriously, what a difference it would make in our lives.

So Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come." May that be true in my life, in your life, in the life of our church, and in God's world.

###

Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 5) **"Thy Will be done on earth as it is in heaven"**

Matthew 26:36-44

(Note: a listening guide for this "teaching" sermon can be found at the bottom of the sermon manuscript).

An overweight man had been dieting for several months. ***[Slide: photo of moderately overweight man checking his weight on a scale]*** He belonged to a weight loss club at his church. The club's motto was John 3:30, ***[Add to slide: "Christ must increase, I must decrease." John 3:30]*** He had been extremely disciplined with his diet for months and had lost a lot of weight. But one day, while driving, he could see, about a block away, a donut shop. ***[Slide: donut store. If you show parking spaces, make sure they are filled with cars]*** He thought to himself, "Man, a cup of coffee and a couple of donuts would taste so good." So he prayed, "Lord, if it is your will that I stop for donuts, let there be a parking space right in front of the donut store." Sure enough he said, "The 7th time around the block ..."
[End slide]

I want to talk with you today about God's will. We are currently on a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the phrase, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The will of God is an important, yet complex, subject. Because of that, today's sermon will be a teaching sermon, which means it's going to be longer than normal. Please look at the listening guide on the back of your bulletin. We'll begin by mentioning two common myths about God's will. ***[Slide: Two Common Myths About God's Will] (background image of a fork or several forks in the woods, different directions you can go, or fork in a road)***

Myth number one is ***[add to slide: 1. Everything that happens is God's will.]*** Years ago, I went to the funeral of a seventeen-year-old boy, a friend of mine, who was killed in a car wreck. The preacher said, "Although we can't understand it—God's will has been done." Although I was only sixteen and a new Christian, I knew that was wrong. How could it be God's will that a teenager be killed in a car wreck? A drunk driver, not God, killed my friend. Unfortunately, people attribute awful events to God all the time. A child dies of leukemia and people say, "God wanted another angel in heaven." A tornado wipes out a community, killing

people, including children, and people call the tornado “an act of God.” Clearly, these sorts of things are NOT the will of God. A biblical example is listed in your listening guide from Luke 13. In Jesus’ day a group of people were killed in an accident. People assumed God killed them off to punish them for their sin. Jesus said that was not the case. It was just an accident. This is a complex issue, and it’s not the focus of today’s sermon, so I must move on. But please remember that everything that happens is not necessarily God’s will.

A second popular myth is that: **[add to slide: 2. God’s will is a detailed road map.]** This myth says that God’s will is like getting directions from MapQuest or Google map or having a GPS system, with every detail mapped out—where to go to school, what to major in, whom to marry, what job to take, and what house to buy. But this is a myth. The Bible does not support the idea that God has a complete, detailed, specific plan for our life. God’s will for us is much more of a broad strokes game plan than a detailed blueprint, as we see in this text from Micah 6. I’ll come back to this topic in a few minutes. Other myths could be covered, but we need to move on. With the rest of our time, I want to lay out four keys for discovering God’s will for our life.

[Slide: Four Keys To Discovering God’s Will] (same background image) Key number one is [add to slide: 1. Obey God’s general will.] There are many things in life that are clearly God’s will for us, like living out the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor, which is listed in your guide. They are not complicated decisions. Instead, they are clear-cut issues that are absolutely God’s will for us, and they cover about 95% of God’s will for our life. These things don’t have to be debated or struggled with. For example, it’s God’s will that we affirm faith in Christ. It’s God’s will that we belong to a local church. It’s God’s will that we behave in an ethical manner—like obeying the Ten Commandments. It’s God’s will that we have integrity. It’s God’s will that we seek peace and justice in the world. These broad strokes issues cover most everything we need to know about God’s will. Our job, therefore, is to obey God’s general will.

Sometimes, however, we face specific situations where we have to make hard decisions, like Jesus did in today’s Scripture reading, a portion of which is printed in your guide. In this text, Jesus went to the Garden to pray, trying to determine God’s will for his life at that specific moment. In these kinds of particular circumstances we need to **[add to slide: 2. Seek God’s specific will.]** However, it needs to be clearly said: it’s not always easy to determine God’s will

in every specific situation. For example, think about today's Scripture reading. Jesus agonized over what God wanted him to do. It's not always clear-cut. Sometimes it's a real struggle to determine God's will in a particular situation.

The good news, however, is that God has given us resources to help in this process. Through the centuries, the Church has pointed out at least seven resources in discovering God's will in specific circumstances, all of which can be found in various Scripture passages. Let me rapidly mention them. **[New slide: 1. Use your mind.] (same background image)** God has given us the gift of intelligence. When we are facing big decisions, we need to use our God-given minds to look at the various options and consider the consequences. **[add to slide: 2. Listen to your conscience.]** When we are making decisions, we need to listen to our inner conscience—it will often guide us in the right path. **[add to slide: 3. Pay attention to the circumstances.]** At points along the way, some doors seem to open, and others seem to close. So pay attention to the circumstances around you. **[add to slide: 4. Consult others.]** We should never make a major decision without consulting other people, including our family, close friends, and mentors. **[add to slide: 5. Read the Bible.]** I'm not talking about a magical, one-shot Bible verse for finding God's will. Instead, I'm speaking of a lifetime habit of reading Scripture, which is, in the words of Psalm 119, "a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." **[add to slide: 6. Pray.]** Talk to God about the various decisions in your life. Share your heart, then be still and seek inner direction. **[add to slide: 7. Trust your intuition.]** After prayer, and consulting with others, and thinking through the options—listen to your heart. God often gives us a gut-level intuition of what we should do. These seven helps don't exhaust all the resources for seeking God's specific will, but they are a good start. Through this discernment process, we can better discover God's specific will for our life.

As we seek God's will in our lives, we would do well to remember two last things. **[back to previous slide, "Four Keys ..." (the one before the seven resources). Add: 3. Remember that God's will is rarely an either/or decision.]** Let me give you both a biblical example and a personal example of this truth. First, a biblical example: the Apostle Paul's advice on marriage. Back in biblical days, the church at Corinth wrote the Apostle Paul a letter, asking him several questions. Among them was a question by unmarried members of the congregation. They asked Paul, "Is it God's will that we get married—or that we stay single?" They saw marriage an either/or decision. So they asked Paul, "Should we A. stay single, or B. get married?" But Paul said—"Either one can be God's will for you." You can read all about

this in 1 Corinthians 7, some of which is printed in your Listening Guide. Paul said to single people, “Getting married is not an either/or decision. Instead, you have to choose what is right for you.” This is an extremely significant example. Marriage is a huge decision. Yet Paul says, God’s will concerning marriage is not an either/or decision. Instead, it’s open-ended, depending on you, and upon your circumstances.

That’s a biblical example; now let me give you a personal example. Many years ago, I had to make a major career decision, so I prayed for God to show me his will. At the time, I was debating between two job offers. Ouachita University, where Paula and I went to college, offered me the position of campus minister. I loved my Alma mater and would have loved to be their campus minister. The other job opportunity was a worship and preaching consultant and editor position at denominational headquarters of my old church, which was also a wonderful opportunity. For several weeks, I struggled with the decision.

Every day I prayed, “God, show me your will. Which of these two jobs should I accept?” During that struggle I went to visit Ben Elrod, the president of the college that had offered me the campus minister position. I told Ben about my dilemma, and how I was seeking God’s will in my decision. Ben was an older and wiser Christian than me, and he said something I’ll never forget. He said, “Martin, God’s will is rarely an either/or decision. The truth is, either one of these two jobs can be God’s will for you. You can serve God faithfully in either place. So you must choose which one is best for you at this time in your life.”

At first I got sort of mad at Ben. I wanted an easy answer, not a complicated one! But the more I thought about it, the more I came to believe that he was right. I could be in God’s will in either of these ministry positions. The fact is, God’s will is rarely an either/or decision. For example, a person can choose one of several careers and still be in God’s will. Or a person can marry one of several people and still be in God’s will. It is God’s will that that person you marry be a believer in Christ—the Bible says so. But, there’s no biblical teaching that says there is just one person in the whole world you can marry. We can choose many options in our life—where to live, where to go to college, what to major in, what job to take, who to marry, what house to buy, and still be in God’s will. Why? Because God will is rarely an either or decision.

All of which brings me to one final point. When we are seeking God's will in our life, we must remember that: **[add to slide: 4. God is like a good parent.]** The Lord's Prayer begins, "Our Father, who art in heaven." Let me ask you, does a good parent make every decision for his or her children? Absolutely not! That would be a horrible parent. Can you imagine the parent of a thirty-year-old adult telling their child what clothes to wear, or what car to buy, or what job to take? The fact is—we are responsible for most of our own decisions. Remember, God is like a good parent. What does a parent want for their child?

A good parent wants her child to do the best she can, be the best person she can be, and reach her full potential as a human being. Good parents don't make all decisions for their children. But good parents don't neglect their children either. A good parent is always available for consultation, guidance, and support—and so is God. This teaching of Jesus—that God is like a good parent—helps us to see that God mostly wants us to do the best we possibly can in the circumstances we find ourselves in.

When you get down to it, discovering God's will is not all that complicated, at least not very often. As you seek God's will for your life, remember these four things that we've covered today. First, Obey God's general will. Second, Seek God's specific will using the seven resources we mentioned earlier. Third, Remember that God's will is rarely an either/or decision. And finally, Remember that God is like a good parent. God won't make all our decisions for us—but God will be there for support and guidance. And so Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

LISTENING GUIDE

Two Common Myths about God's Will

1. _____ is God's will

"Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you." (Luke 13:2, 3-5)

2. God's will is a _____

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Four Keys to Discovering God's Will

1. Obey God's _____

“Love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength ... and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mark 12:30-31)

2. Seek God's _____

“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want ... your will be done.” (Matthew 26:39, 42)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

3. Remember that God's will is not always _____

“But to the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry.” (1 Corinthians 7:8-9)

4. Remember that God is like _____

“Our Father who art in heaven.” (Matthew 6:9)

###

A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 6)

"Give us this day our daily bread"

Luke 12:13-21

This morning I want to share with you one of my most vivid childhood memories. Way back in the 1960s, when I was just seven or eight years old, a kitchen product came out called "The Veg-O-Matic." It was advertized on TV non-stop for months. This was before the days of food processors. Well, it looked really great, at least on the TV ads. You could slice a whole tomato with one swoop. Or, you could cut onions, or hard-boiled eggs, or make cold-slaw. My sister and I decided to buy one for our mom on her birthday. It cost \$19.99 and even included a free knife. I'll never forget showing my Mom how it worked. I got a big red tomato and laid it on the Veg-O-Matic. I pushed down—hard—on the Veg-O-Matic to beautifully slice the tomato. Unfortunately, it didn't quite work like the TV ad. Do you remember Tommy Tomato on the home video show? If so, you know what is coming next. When I dramatically pushed down the Veg-O-Matic on the tomato, it exploded like an atomic bomb. Pieces of tomato splattered all over my mom and my sister and me. Thank goodness my dad was out of town! It went all over the kitchen. Tomato guts were dripping off the kitchen cabinets and everything else. Pieces of tomato even shot up onto the kitchen ceiling. It took about an hour to clean up the mess. Happy birthday Mom! I was just a kid, but even then, it was becoming clear to me—a lot of the stuff advertized on TV was highly overrated.

I can't say for certain, but I doubt that Jesus would buy a Veg-O-Matic. You see, Jesus was not impressed by things. In fact, Jesus constantly warned his followers not to be consumed with accumulating more and more stuff. He did not want his followers to clutter their lives with too many possessions. We are currently on a journey through the Lord's Prayer, and today we come to the phrase, "give us this day our daily bread." It's significant that Jesus taught us to pray for daily bread. Jesus didn't pray for tomorrow's bread, or next year's bread—only for today's. He prayed only for the basic necessities of life, for daily bread. We see the same message in our secondary text today in Luke 12 when Jesus said, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke 12).

I know that some of us here today are struggling to make ends meet. Because of a layoff, or major medical expenses, or a divorce, or overwhelming debt, or other factors, daily bread is hard to come by for you. But most of us here today do have daily bread, and some of us have a lot more than daily bread. So we need to grapple with Jesus' words about being content with the basics of life, about being content with our daily bread.

Throughout the New Testament, it's clear that Jesus is not very interested in acquiring material possessions. Why is that? For one thing, Jesus knows that things do not satisfy. We think they will. We think, if I can just get enough stuff, then I will be happy—but it doesn't work. Buying a new entertainment center, or a new SUV, or a boat, or a larger house—does not buy happiness. Even secular scientists have discovered this truth. After our basic needs are met, all the extra stuff in the world does not make people happier. Social scientists have learned that a new car or a new house spikes happiness for a few weeks, but then our happiness level drops right back to where it was before the purchase. Study after study of hard secular science has shown that after our core needs are met, additional stuff does not make people happier. Therefore, spending our life accumulating things is futile. Jesus knows that too many possessions clutter our lives, consume our time, and eat up our money. So, Jesus teaches us to pray for our daily bread, for our basic needs only.

This is a message that the United States desperately needs to hear. I read not long ago that Americans make up less than 5% of the world's population, yet we consume 25% of the world's resources, and we produce 35% of the world's pollution. More than any other people on the planet, we need to learn to be satisfied with our daily bread. Doing so would set us free from the bankrupt pursuit of material acquisition, would allow us to be kinder to God's planet, and would allow us to more generously support God's work in the world.

Please don't misunderstand. Jesus is not against money or naïve about finances. Even Jesus had to eat. And, Jesus and his disciples depended on the financial gifts of others to fund his ministry, just as the Church does today. Jesus knows that people need money, that we all have basic necessities that have to be met. It's not sinful to own a house or a car or make contributions to your 401K account. And, Jesus knows that it takes financial resources to do God's Kingdom work in the world. The ministries of this church alone cost 6.3 million dollars a year. Jesus is not against money. But Jesus doesn't want us to make things and money the primary focus of our lives. He knows that an over-emphasis on personal possessions diverts

us from the main point of living. Jesus knows that materialism is too small a god to give our life to.

Acquisition of more and more stuff is not worth sacrificing our marriage for. It's not worth sacrificing our relationship with our children for. It's not worth sacrificing our health for. And it's not worth sacrificing our spiritual life for. What Jesus is doing in this prayer is trying to liberate us from the dead end street of endless material acquisitions. So Jesus is telling us in this prayer, don't get sidetracked. Things are not what life is primarily about. Having daily bread, having the basics, that is ENOUGH. And, if we are fortunate enough to have more than enough, which is true for many of us here today, then we can experience the joy of being generous givers to people who don't have adequate daily bread. And, if we have more than enough, we can experience the joy of being generous givers to God's Kingdom work in the Church.

And so, Jesus teaches us to pray—give us this day our daily bread. And that, brothers and sisters in Christ, that is enough.

[At communion invitation: It's appropriate that today's theme of daily bread falls on Communion Sunday. You may remember that Jesus once said that human beings cannot live by bread alone. Jesus knew that we are not only material creatures, but we are also spiritual creatures. So beyond our daily physical bread, we also need daily spiritual bread. Jesus once said, "I am the bread of life." So today, as we gather around the Table of Christ, we will receive spiritual bread and spiritual sustenance that connects us to God and helps us to live out our Christian journey.]

BONUS STORY

Once upon a time there was a man who had a small farm of thirty acres where he grew vegetables for his wife to sell at their roadside stand. The man worked by day at a factory in town and managed to farm the land early in the morning and on weekends. At night, when they would sit alone at the kitchen table, his wife would say, "Charles, we are most fortunate that our vegetables grow so well. People buy everything we grow." But Charles was not satisfied and said, "I do not have enough land. If I had more land, I could quit my job in town and farm full time."

Soon an opportunity arose, and Charles borrowed money to purchase a field of equal size adjoining his property. Since he kept his job in town to help pay for the field, he now worked far into the night preparing the land, planting and caring for the plants that grew lavishly and beautifully. When he would return late at night, his wife would say, “Charles, God has been good to us. The warm sun and the abundant rainfall have filled our stand, and still the people buy all we grow.” But Charles was not satisfied and said, “I do not have enough land. If I had another farm, we could sell vegetables to the stores in town as well as at our stand.”

Soon an opportunity arose, and Charles was able to purchase 140 acres nearby. He no longer worked in town. Although his wife worked faithfully by his side, there did not seem to be enough hours in the day. Early each morning he drove his produce truck to three small grocery stores that were eager to purchase his vegetables. When they had time together to talk, his wife would say, “Who could be more fortunate than we, Charles? Our fields are full and we sell everything we grow.” But Charles was not satisfied and said, “I do not have enough land. If I could buy more land, we could sell to the chain stores—that is where the real money is.”

Soon an opportunity arose, and Charles purchased a farm of nearly 250 tillable acres. He closed the roadside stand, hired men to manage each farm, and a woman to truck the produce during the harvest season. He built refrigerated storage buildings so that he could sell when the prices were highest. Charles’ wife did the bookwork while he supervised his many employees, including the seasonal help who migrated in to assist at harvest time. He now sold to many small stores within a 40-mile area as well as to a national chain. On weekends, when they would go out for dinner, his wife would say, “God is good to us, Charles. There is nothing we lack.” But Charles was not satisfied and said, “I do not have enough land. If I could buy land south of here, we could grow other crops that our climate will not allow.

Soon an opportunity arose to purchase a large farm about 100 miles south of his home. Now Charles commuted between farms and began to work long hours on weekends. After a very long day, Charles suffered a heart attack and died. He was buried in a small cemetery plot, seven feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep. Just enough land.

###

Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 7)

"Forgive us our trespasses"

Luke 15:11-24

Not long ago, I heard about an interesting listing on Craig's List. If you are not familiar with it Craig's List, it's like classified ads on the Internet. This listing said, "Will trade one white wedding gown—size 14, never worn." I think the emphasis was on never worn. "Will trade one white wedding gown—size 14, never worn, for a 357-magnum." I'm not sure, but it sounds like the woman who wrote that ad had not recently prayed the Lord's Prayer, at least not the part that says, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

We are currently on a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses." Of course, "trespass" is just another word for sin. When Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses" he was telling us to pray, "forgive us our sins." Forgiveness was a favorite topic for Jesus. You might say that Jesus was in the forgiveness business. He was constantly a bearer of grace and forgiveness. Everywhere you look in the New Testament, Jesus is forgiving someone.

Throughout his ministry Jesus associated with sinners, and He treated them with amnesty, offering to them the gift of grace and forgiveness. Even when He was being crucified, He was in the forgiveness business. As the soldiers executed Him and the crowd jeered at Him, he said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not understand what they are doing." Jesus' whole ministry revolved around forgiveness. So it's only natural that when He taught us how to pray, He included the subject of forgiveness. Jesus said, when you pray, ask God to forgive your sins. The fact is, all of us need to be forgiven, over and over again. Forgiven for the words spoken in anger, for the people we have hurt, for the chances we have missed, for the years we have wasted, for moral failures. We are sinners, every one, and we need to be forgiven. So Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our sins." And like a good and loving parent, God will forgive.

Jesus once told a great story of forgiveness that we call "The Prodigal Son." But really, the story is mostly about the father. In particular, the story is about the father's love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness. This father, of course, represents God, and God's forgiveness. So today we

will listen to the story that Jesus told, then hear a song about God's forgiveness, and then I want to share with you a modern retelling of the story by a writer named Philip Yancey. ***(Note: at this point I simply read the story to them).***

(Copyright laws prevent me from including this powerful story. However, you can find the story in Philip Yancey's book, What's So Amazing About Grace? (p. 49-51, Zondervan, 1997) This story alone is worth the price of the book.

###

A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 8) **"As we forgive those who trespass against us"**

Matthew 6:14-15, Ephesians 4:32

A middle-aged United Methodist minister owned a bright red 1967 Ford Mustang. **[Slide: photo of red Mustang, year 67 or close to it, mint condition]** He completely restored it to mint condition; it was absolutely immaculate, and it was his pride and joy. This minister also had a teenage son, and it was almost time for his son's senior prom. The boy begged his dad to let him drive the Mustang to his prom. At first the preacher said no, he was worried that his son might damage his beloved car. But finally, he gave in. The boy promised to drive carefully, to drive slowly, and to park it away from the other cars so it would not get dinged. Well, at 11 p.m. on the night of the prom, the minister received a phone call from his son.

"Dad," he said, "my date and I are OK, but I've had a minor accident in your car." "You what?" Well, the pastor and his wife rushed to the scene, and when he arrived his heart sank. The whole side of his beautiful Mustang was smashed in. Outraged, he began to tear into his son. His wife, however, said, "Now Honey, you need to forgive him." "But my Mustang" he replied. "Now Honey," she continued, "You tell the people at our church all the time that they must forgive the sins of others." "But my Mustang" he said. Finally, she said, "Now Honey, as you always say, "To err is human—to forgive divine." The pastor said, "That's true, it is divine to forgive. But God doesn't own a fully restored 1967 Mustang." **[END SLIDE]** Well, the preacher, like all of us, had a hard time forgiving.

In recent weeks, we have been on a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today, for a second time, we are looking at the phrase, **[Slide: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."]** Last time we focused on the first half of that phrase, "Forgive us our trespasses." We affirmed that God, in God's mercy, forgives our sins. But that's only one half of the prayer. Today we're going to focus on the second half of the prayer, which adds, **[underline: "as we forgive those who trespass against us."]**

Jesus is telling us something important here. He says, since God has forgiven our sins, we need to forgive the sins of others. Let's look again at today's text. Right after Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer, he added these words, please read them with me: **[Slide: "For if**

you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matt. 6:14-15)

Over and over again, Jesus said, “Since we have received God’s forgiveness, we must give forgiveness to others.” That’s the deal. **[END SLIDE]**

And that’s the hard part, isn’t it? Forgiving others who have wronged us is no easy task. The parent who wounded us, the child who failed us, the co-worker who stabbed us in the back, the fellow church member who hurt our feelings, the spouse who disappointed us. Yet Jesus says, you must forgive these people, just as God has forgiven you. And it’s not just a suggestion, it’s a command.

Why is that? Why was Jesus so adamant about forgiving people? Because Jesus understood the enormous benefits of forgiveness. I used to think that forgiveness was primarily for the benefit of the person being forgiven, and there is some truth to that. When people sin, they need to be forgiven, to be absolved of their sin. But after three decades in ministry, I’ve come to realize that forgiveness benefits the person who forgives even more than it benefits the person who is forgiven.

It’s like the divorced woman who, for years, nursed bitterness against her unfaithful ex-husband. But over time, keeping that anger, hostility, and bitterness alive became a cancer in her mind and body and soul. Finally, for her own physical, emotional, and spiritual health, she decided to forgive him, even though he didn’t deserve it. Several months later she told her pastor that forgiving her ex-husband felt like taking a 100-pound weight off her chest. She said, “I can sleep again. I can smile again. I can laugh again. I can live again. It beats tranquilizers all to pieces.”

You see, forgiving others is one of the most liberating actions we can ever take. So Jesus tells us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Of course, forgiveness does not mean that we condone bad behavior, or that we don’t hold people accountable for their behavior. You can forgive someone without condoning what they did. And, you can forgive someone but still expect them to take full responsibility for their behavior. But, for God’s sake, for the person’s sake, and for our own sake, Jesus says—forgive.

Like many of you, I have been watching 60 Minutes **[SLIDE: image of 60 Minutes]** for several decades now. Several years ago I watched an episode that touched me profoundly. I want to tell you about that story today. **[END SLIDE]**

Way back in 1984, a young college woman named Jennifer was raped in her apartment. After the rape, the police found a suspect. The man worked near Jennifer's apartment, and had been in some minor trouble with the law before. His name was Ronald. Jennifer was shown a picture of Ronald. She also saw him in a police lineup. Several mistakes were made in how the evidence was presented. As a result, Jennifer made a positive ID of Ronald, saying he was the man who raped her. On the basis of her eyewitness account, Ronald was found guilty and given 50 years to life in prison.

Throughout it all, Ronald proclaimed his innocence and fought for a new trial. It's a long story, but 11 years later, DNA evidence completely cleared Ronald of the crime. That same DNA evidence was used to convict the man who actually did rape Jennifer, who looked very similar to Ronald. When Jennifer learned that she had sent an innocent man to prison for 11 years, she was absolutely devastated. For a long time, she was consumed with guilt and shame. The guilt was so bad it became debilitating. Finally, Jennifer asked to meet with Ronald at a local church, and he agreed.

During their visit, Jennifer was overwhelmed with emotion. She told Ron that she could tell him she was sorry for the rest of her life, and it would never be enough. Ron saw her great pain, leaned toward her, put his hand on hers and said, "I forgive you." Jennifer says those words changed her life. She said receiving forgiveness from Ron was like receiving physical healing for her heart.

That, by itself, would be a remarkable story of forgiveness. But that's not the end of the story. After they met, Jennifer and Ronald became unlikely friends. Then they decided to work together to help prevent the same mistake from happening again. For years now, Jennifer and Ronald have traveled around the country educating legal and police workers on ways to make police lineups and eyewitness testimony more reliable. Through that process, they and their families have become dear friends.

Well, I need to wrap up. But the point is clear. If Ronald Cotton was able to forgive the woman who put him in prison for eleven years for a crime he did not commit, you and I can choose to forgive the people who have hurt us. When Ronald Cotton forgave Jennifer Thompson, he engaged in holy gift giving. First, Ronald gave a gift to Jennifer, setting her free from her overwhelming guilt. Second, Ronald gave a gift to Jesus. When you and I forgive people who hurt us, we honor our Lord who taught us to forgive those who trespass against us. And finally, when Ronald forgave Jennifer, he gave a gift to himself.

By forgiving Jennifer, Ronald liberated himself from a life of bitterness and anger and resentment. By forgiving Jennifer, Ronald set himself free. So, Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

(Note: We invited people to write down a name or a situation on a piece of paper (we provided a tear off in the bulletin) that they wanted to forgive, and gave them some time to do so. Then we asked them to come forward to the chancel rails and leave the piece of paper in baskets, symbolic of forgiving the name of the person on their sheet of paper. We explained that we would immediately shred them, and nobody would read them. Large numbers of people participated. During that time the congregation sang, "Let There Be Peace on Earth.")

###

A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 9) **"And lead us not into temptation"**

Joshua 24:1, 14-18

If you came to eat at my home, you would, on most occasions, get healthy food. I can't take much credit for this. I rarely cook and almost never go to the grocery store. So my lovely spouse is the one who keeps the fare healthy at our home. However, a couple of months ago, when my wife left town for a week to visit her family, I went to the grocery store to get provisions for my week of bachelorhood. When I did, I realized that grocery stores should not be called "Kroger" or "Publix" or "Fresh Market" or "Harris Teeter." Instead, they should have a huge sign out front that says, temptation! For example, when I went to get some skinless chicken breasts to bake, there were some BBQ ribs looking right at me—already cooked, and man, they looked good. When I went to get some black beans, I passed by a whole section of chocolate bars, including dark chocolate with almonds. Then I went to get some frozen blueberries, and saw all kinds of delicious ice cream. As I walked to the checkout line, I walked right past a big display of Masterpiece BBQ potato chips. Everywhere I went, I was bombarded with TEMPTATION! I won't tell you if I succumbed to the temptation or not. But I'm glad I didn't have my cholesterol levels checked that week!

We are currently on a journey through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the phrase, "And lead us not into temptation." This phrase is hard to interpret. The Bible is very clear that God does not lead people into temptation. James 1 says, "No one, when tempted, should say, I am being tempted by God, for God tempts no one." So a better interpretation of this Lord's Prayer phrase is, "Let us not yield to temptation." That, I believe, is what Jesus is saying here. But that raises the question, what kind of temptation is Jesus referring to? Is Jesus talking about the kind of temptation I had at the grocery store? Is Jesus referring to the temptation to buy BBQ ribs, chocolate, ice cream, and potato chips? Now what we eat is important—God wants us to take good care of our bodies.

But Jesus is not referring to anything minor or frivolous in this prayer, like being tempted to eat ice cream. The word temptation literally means "the time of trial." The early Christians understood that the time of trial was the temptation to abandon their faith, to renounce Jesus Christ.

This prayer reminds me of a haunting scene in the novel *Barabbas*. In this novel, Barabbas became a Roman slave, and is transported to Cyprus, where he works in the copper mines. There he meets an old Armenian slave named Sahak, who is a devout follower of Jesus. Each slave wears a metal disk proclaiming that he belongs to Caesar. But Sahak has strange markings on the back of his disk, which spell out the name Christos Jesus. Although he belongs to Caesar, his real allegiance is to Jesus Christ.

Professing that he, too, wishes to follow Jesus, Barabbas asks that his disk be inscribed with the name of Jesus. Working secretly down in the copper mine, they take Barabbas' disk, turn it over, and etch in the name of Jesus, just like Sahak's disk. But someone overhears them and they are reported to the supervisor, who tells the governor. Sahak and Barabbas are brought before him. He questions them about the markings. Sahak says it's the name of his god—Jesus Christ. The governor reminds him that Caesar is their god, and warns him that having other gods before Caesar is punishable by death. The governor questions Barabbas.

“Do you believe in this god Jesus whose name is inscribed on your disk?” Barabbas shakes his head. “You don't?” asks the governor. “Why do you bear his name on your disk then?” Barabbas is silent. “Is he your god?” asks the governor. “Isn't that what the inscription means?” “I have no god,” Barabbas answers at last. Sahak gives him a look of despair and pain. Once more Sahak is questioned. “Do you realize the consequences of wearing the name of this god named Jesus?” “Yes.” “If you renounce your faith in Jesus Christ no harm shall come to you,” says the governor. “Will you do it?” “I cannot,” says Sahak. So the governor orders him to be taken away and crucified. “Extraordinary man,” he says. Then he takes a knife, and, holding Barabbas's disk in one hand, he crosses through the name of Jesus. “There's really no need,” he says, “as you don't believe in him in any case.” And he commends Barabbas for being a sensible fellow, and orders that he be given a better job. And, for the rest of his life, Barabbas wears the crossed out name of Jesus around his neck on his disk.

That scene has troubled me for years. I don't think I'll ever forget that image of the crossed out name of Jesus. This, I think, is what Jesus had in mind when he taught his disciples to pray, “let us not yield to temptation.” He didn't want them to abandon their faith in times of trial; he didn't want them to cross out the name of Jesus.

And what about us? Are we tempted to renounce Christ, to cross out the name of Jesus? Certainly not like the early Christians were. On many occasions they were ordered to renounce their faith or die. We know nothing of that kind of religious persecution in the United States. Tragically, in some countries that does occur, and we need to be much in prayer for persecuted Christians around the globe.

But even in the US, the temptation to abandon our faith is still very real. Only today it's far more subtle. It happens quietly. We simply drift along and one day we realize that we have let go of our faith, that we have crossed out the name of Christ. Through the years I've talked to many inactive Christians. I've never met one yet who came to a point where they publicly or privately renounced their faith. They just slowly forgot the importance of God. They quietly fell away. They got busy with other things, even good things like family events, or sporting events, or time with friends, or career concerns. And they got so busy they forgot to pray, and to read the Bible, and to connect with other believers, and worship God. And before they knew it, God and Christ and Church and spiritual issues became unimportant. Slowly but surely, they crossed out the name of Christ.

More people are lost this way than any other. This is a massive problem in America. One third of American church members are completely inactive in the life of their church. For one reason or another, they crossed out the name of Jesus from their lives, at least in relationship to their community of faith. So Jesus says, pray that you won't succumb to the temptation to have a half-hearted, casual, nominal Christianity. Don't cross out the name of Christ in your life. And the best way I know to avoid that is to practice core Christian disciplines, the ones we are emphasizing this year. Worship God daily and weekly. Connect to a group for Christian support and growth. Serve God in the church or in the community. Invite and welcome others to participate in our community of faith. And give generously to God's work. These practices will help keep us close to God, and keep us from crossing out the name of Christ in our busy lives.

In this prayer, Jesus is calling us to take our faith seriously, to put God at the center of our life. We see that same spirit in today's secondary text. Our primary text, of course, is the Lord's Prayer. But in our secondary text today, the prophet Joshua challenges the people to make a clear commitment to God. Joshua says, "Choose this day whom you will serve. But for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." Joshua challenges the people of Israel to make God

first in their lives. To take their faith seriously. So, like Joshua of old, I challenge you to make God your first priority. Don't scratch out the name of Jesus in your life by living a casual, nominal, half-hearted faith. Instead, make Jesus Christ the center of your life, this day and forever.

[Note: We concluded the sermon with the following song and invitation. "Twenty-five years ago, a man named John Bell wrote a beautiful song about being a devoted follower of Jesus. The song is called 'The Summons.' James is going to sing the first stanza, and then all of us will stand and sing the rest of the song. If you want, during the song, you are welcome to come to the chancel rails and offer a prayer of dedication to God."]

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A Journey through the Lord's Prayer (Part 10)
"Deliver Us from Evil"
Psalm 23

The recent mass shooting **[Slide depicting Colorado tragedy, perhaps movie theatre image with police tape, or the "shrine" of flowers there, just something that depicts that horrible shooting event. (Note: you will want to use a current example of evil in the world or in your community)]** at the movie theatre in Colorado reminded all of us, once again, that evil is very real in this world. And it's reminded us that none of us are immune to its influence. We've recently been walking through the Lord's Prayer. Today we come to the last phrase of that prayer as it is recorded in the Sermon on the Mount. It says, **[Slide: same image with the words, "But deliver us from evil."]** It's important to note that Jesus does not say, "Protect us from experiencing evil." Jesus knew that none of us are immune from evil—none of us are protected from harm. The fact is, evil is all around. And one day it will pounce on us.

The poet and novelist James Dickey understood this. Years ago he wrote a short novel called *"Deliverance."* **[Slide: front cover of novel]** In this story four men take a canoe trip on a wild white water river in north Georgia. On the way they are ambushed by some of the locals. The rest of the story covers their hair raising escape. They finally reach safety but only barely, and the experience traumatized them deeply. **[END SLIDE]** James Dickey, the writer of this novel, is saying—life is like a passage down a wild primitive canyon, and we are easy marks for evil along the way. Evil is always there, lying in wait, ready to spring out and devour us when we least expect it. Examples abound. Our son is arrested for drugs, our 15-year-old daughter becomes pregnant, our spouse betrays us, the company downsizes and we lose our job, we lose our zest for life and grow depressed, we face financial crisis, the diagnosis comes back malignant, we get a call on the phone saying there has been an accident, we lose our faith and can't seem to get it back, our spouse of many decades suddenly and without warning dies. Evil is real in this world and it will come calling on every one of us one day.

But when evil does come into our life—the Lord's Prayer promises us that God will deliver us. God will help us face the evil. God will walk with us through the evil. God will give us strength to endure the evil. And if the evil leads to our physical death, God will carry us safely to the

other side. One day, when God’s Kingdom fully comes on earth as it is in heaven, evil will be defeated forever. Until then, we must face the evils of this world—but we don’t have to face them alone, for God will be with us. And because of that, we can face and endure whatever evil comes our way. That’s the promise of Psalm 23 that we heard earlier. It says, ***[Slide of text (appropriate image would be nice, perhaps a shepherd image, or something that depicts the “dark shadows” concept (see following sentence): “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death—I will fear no evil for thou art with me.”]*** That phrase, “valley of the shadow of death” literally means “dark shadows.” When dark shadows come into our life—God will be with us.

Most of us here today still vividly remember 9/11. On that awful day on September 11, 2001, not all the terrorist hijacked airplanes made their planned destination. Many of you know the story of United Airlines flight 93. Terrorists hijacked the plane and were flying it to an unknown but highly symbolic target, perhaps even the White House. Through cell phone communication, the 40 passengers aboard United 93 learned about the airplane attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. They knew they were next. So, rather than allowing the terrorists another victory, they fought back, and the plane crashed in rural Pennsylvania, sparing even worse loss of life and emotional damage to our country.

One of the heroes of that story was a man named Todd Beamer. During the flight, Todd used one of the air-phones to call for help. He reached a Verizon telephone operator, who stayed on the phone with Todd through that awful journey. Todd and the other 40 people on that plane had already agreed to attack the terrorists and they were making preparations to do so. Todd knew his chances of survival were slim. So, he asked that Verizon telephone operator to tell his family that he loved them. And then, Todd, a Christian believer, asked her to pray the Lord’s Prayer with him, which is an appropriate thing to do when you’re getting ready to attack terrorists in mid-air and you’ll probably meet your Maker within the hour. ***[Note: if you have projection capability, the following clip is a powerful addition to the sermon.]*** A made for TV movie called “Flight 93” depicts that moment. I’d like to show it to you now. ***[Clip from “Flight 93: Chapter 15, The Lord’s Prayer”, 108:20 to 110:30]***

[Pause] One day, you and I will face evil in our lives—probably not from terrorism, but just the same, evil will come. We will walk through dark shadows. And one day, every one of us will walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And when we do, only God himself can

deliver us. Therefore, like Todd Beamer, we had better be people of faith. Brothers and sisters in Christ—hold tight to your faith. Always stay close to God. That way when evil comes, as it always will, we can face it with courage and strength and hope. For God Himself will be our deliverance.

[Note: we followed with Holy Communion].

