

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Sermon Title: My Prayer Life  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Pastoral Prayer with Scripture

## Pastoral Prayer, with Scripture – Luke 11

**Deacon:** One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him,

**Congregation:** "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John (the Baptist) taught his disciples."

**Deacon:** Then Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say, 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name . . .

**Congregation:** . . . Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

**Deacon:** . . . Give us this day our daily bread . . .

**Congregation:** . . . And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us . . .

**Deacon:** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil . . .'

**Together:** For thine is the Kingdom  
and the power  
and the glory  
forever and ever.

**Deacon:** . . . So I say to you: "Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; those who seek, find; and for those who knock, the door will be opened."

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I'm not saying I matured early or was wise beyond my years, but I can clearly remember lying on my bed up in Monson, Maine, around age 4, as my mother patiently taught me the classic children's prayer:

Now I lay me down to sleep,  
    *Now I lay me down to sleep*  
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.  
    *I pray the Lord my soul to keep*  
If I should die before I wake,  
    *If I should die before I wake?*  
I pray the Lord my soul to take.  
    . . . WHAT?

What was my mother talking about? How did *that* get into my bedtime prayer? Does she know something? I'll tell you this: I did not close my eyes to sleep that night, for sure. All kidding aside, that was my introduction to prayer as a big deal, life and death, do anything you can do to keep God watching over you.

As we advance through life, we experience prayers in lots of ways. In Sunday School we learn the "Our Father," the Lord's Prayer, the one we just sneaked into our Scripture lesson, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, etc." Some of us grew up in homes where a prayer was said before every dinner. "Grace," we called it, ranging from profound, ethereal gratitude, to the more fraternity house prayer,

*Rub a dub dub,  
Thanks for the grub,  
Yay, God!*

At family gatherings—Thanksgiving, Easter, Mother's Day—some distinguished relative, usually older, grayer, would offer a respectful, dignified prayer, maybe even with "Thee" and "Thou" thrown in. And as you and I traversed life and met its challenges, we began to utter our own prayers, usually at points of crisis. "Help me pass this test. Help me make the team. Help me catch the ball. Help my mom get home from the hospital. Help Dad find a job. Help my dog get better."

The older we got, the more serious the issues. Whenever you went to Church, the pastor's prayer would highlight big stuff: even here, we pray for soldiers fighting our wars, we pray for people undergoing cancer treatment, we pray about survivors and victims of one tragedy after another, we pray about terrorism, floods, epidemics.

And whenever something really important happens, our president, every president comes on the TV, and no matter how bad it is, at the very end, he'll say, "God bless you, and God bless the United States of America." That's a prayer.

And in recent years, with gun violence and domestic terrorism, we hear the mantra from all our leaders, "My thoughts and prayers are with you." But, *but* with all this prayer going on, and all of us growing in experience, reality hits us square in the face. There are a lot of people we pray for who die. A lot of wars we pray about that go on and on. A lot of national tragedies that continue. A lot of sunny days we prayed for that it rained. A lot of athletic success, college acceptance success, personal success we prayed for that didn't happen.

Now what? I'll tell you the two biggest lessons of my life about prayer. The first I've told and written about so often you can probably repeat it word for word. When I was fresh out of seminary, I was associate pastor of a large Baptist Church, which meant I didn't get to preach much. My job was to pray during the Sunday service. That was my one moment to shine, to strut my stuff, to prove I was ready for prime time.

Last week I told you I was taught to put 20 hours into preparing a sermon. Well, I applied those hours to my Sunday morning prayer: I wrote, rewrote, edited, corrected, practiced, crafted it into some magnificent, soaring, impressive appeal to God. When my moment came each Sunday, I strode up to the pulpit, placed my masterpiece there for me to read. Oh, I was good! So polished. So erudite. So perfect!

One Sunday, the senior pastor stood up behind me, reached in front of me, pulled away all my prayer papers, and whispered in my ear, "Time to learn how to pray, boy!" *Time to learn how to pray*. No more reading a perfectly crafted script. Just talk to God.

That was almost 50 years ago, and I've thanked God for that every day, seriously, every day since. No more preparation. No more time to think. No more making sure that every noun, verb, and adjective was just so.

Because life doesn't allow me 20 hours to write the perfect prayer every time someone needs prayer. And you don't want me standing there with a book in my hand, going, "Oh, yes, prayer for a tumor, let's see, that's page 121 . . ." "Ah, prayer for family crisis? Page 14, insert name here . . ." "Wonderful! Birth of a baby prayer, that would be under B; yes, I have it here." That makes people think that prayers have to be "just so," perfect, classic, same prayer for everyone, just change the name.

So, I'm glad that old pastor grabbed my prayer papers away for me. It was "time for me to learn to pray, boy!" Because . . . you don't need to prepare, you don't need time to think, you don't need every noun, verb, and adjective just so. The best human analogy I can make for prayer is that it's like everyday conversation with your best friend. With your best friend you don't write it all out ahead of time, you don't worry about it, you don't hold anything back. You just do it. You open your mouth, you open your heart, and just talk.

In fact, one of the best definitions of a good friend is what I often hear people say: "When we're together, even if it's been a while, it's as though we were never apart. We pick right up where we left off. It's so cool!"

Yes, it is cool, and all too rare, and much needed and very precious. That's why we'll end Church this morning with that lovely old hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

"What a friend we have in Jesus," we'll sing, "All our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer." Not some things. Everything.

Prayer is not a substitute for action. That's what frustrates people about public figures who respond to tragedy with "thoughts and prayers." Nothing ever seems to follow. Prayer is talk with words. What follows is action. There's an old soldiers' saying (some say it's from the Revolutionary War; I've also heard the Civil War) that has to do with the role of faith in the midst of battle: "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition." Another version is "Praise the Lord, but keep your powder dry." In other words, yes, pray, praise, stay connected with God, pray your heart out, pray to win, pray to survive, pray for peace. And get yourself ready for action.

A more updated version is a series of billboards on I-95 between New Haven and Fairfield. I've seen all three, all variations on the same theme: "Pray to God, And Vote for Science." *Pray to God, and Vote for Science.* Good advice.

I spend a lot of time in hospitals, visiting our Church people, and I have this conversation plenty of times every year, as recently as this week. I go into a hospital room, visit with the patient; after a while, I take their hand and offer a prayer. Almost at that moment, the patient's medical team walks in. They stand there, respectfully, and when I finish, I say to them, "Oh, I was just leaving, you're more important." And every time, *every time*, one of the doctors will say, "No, what *you* do is more important." Together we are living the I-95 Billboard: "Pray to God, and Vote for Science."

So what should we pray for? The answer is provided by one of the toughest verses in the Bible: "Pray without ceasing." (1 Thessalonians 5:17) Without ceasing? Really? Is that even possible? Practical? Desirable? "Without ceasing," that's a lot.

Well, here's what I can tell you. I take my life, divide it in half. For the first half of my life, I thought, "That's a stupid verse, nobody can pray ceaselessly, you'd go nuts, or you'd drive God nuts. It's obviously an exaggeration to make a point: the point being, pray a lot, pray regularly."

Well, let's face it, the problem with doing something regularly, a lot, is boredom. When Jesus taught the Disciples to pray in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus's very first advice is really about boredom. He warned against "vain repetitions," saying the same thing over and over again because your mind goes blank, the words lose their meaning, and we might even doze off.

So, if we're supposed to pray all the time, "without ceasing," how do we do it without our minds going blank, words losing their meaning, or dozing off? As with anything, the answer is variety: pray about this or that, pray here and there; change topics, times, venues; surprise yourself. Hey, how's this? Pray for people you don't like, your enemies. You won't doze off on that one.

I mentioned looking at my life in two halves. The first half I thought "pray without ceasing" was hyperbole and impossible. Well, the second half of my life I'm trying it! I'm trying to pray more and more, all the time, about anything. Once I have the commitment to prayer, then I just let everything trigger a prayer, building upon that original prayer.

I'm driving up I-95 in the fast lane, a car zooms past me on the right, cuts sharply in front of me, I veer to the left, almost crashing into the divider. My old routine was fairly standard: a few choice words, some hand gestures, regain control of the car, speed up, find that car and cut it off. Job done!

Now I use such a thing as a "prayer trigger." Start with the obvious, and keep it simple. "Thank you, God, that I'm not dead," and once you get in the habit, I promise you it will take off from there: "Thank you, God, that I'm not dead or crashed and my insurance rates aren't going up. And now, Lord, protect all the other drivers on I-95 from being endangered by that idiot."

And before you know it, I'm praying for that bad driver too, that he not kill anybody or hurt himself, that whatever is wrong in his life that has him so out of control will be healed, that all those driving along I-95 will be protected, that we'll drive well, stay alert, arrive safely. Amen. Let me tell you, this "prayer trigger" thing really works. Maybe I need to trademark it.

For most of my life my prayer life was what we all know. I'd start my prayer in bed at night and promptly fall asleep, not even halfway through. So I added daytime prayers, but they became too perfunctory, too predictable. Same issues, same nouns, verbs, and adjectives; a laundry list of pastoral and personal requests. It occurred to me that if these prayers were boring to me, then A, I won't keep at it, and B, God is probably dozing off. So, vary it up, for the sake of your own sanity and God's.

Remember the movie "Bruce Almighty"? God gets so tired of people's selfish prayers that he turns the whole prayer enterprise over to Bruce, who quickly gets tired of the number-one prayer request across America: "Dear God, help me to win the lottery . . . give me the right numbers!"

Well, O.K., let's begin with that selfish prayer. First off, most of our prayers are at least self-centered if not "self-ish." They are about us, what we know, about our intimate circle, about needs and issues and people close to us. Your dad has a heart attack. Your sister is looking for work. Your granddaughter is applying to college. Your child's team is playing for the championship. Your daughter is getting married on Saturday outdoors. If we pray, all those self-centered concerns come to mind. We can't help it. And guess what! Don't worry about it! Go for it!

Another Sunday we can dig at what's appropriate and what isn't, but Alida and I pretty much stick to this rule: if it's important to you, it's important to God.

This is where the "prayer trigger" idea can kick in. O.K., you start with an entirely self-centered prayer. I'll go with the obvious: "Dear God, help me to win the lottery. I promise that I'll give \$1 million to my Church to help the poor and needy in Bridgeport, Appalachia, and India. Which reminds me, Lord, those people need help with or without my lottery winnings. So, God, help me to motivate others to help. May help come from lots of places, lots of people, in lots of ways, to touch people however they are hurting: addiction, unemployment, black lung disease, prejudice. May the real miracle be your love, working through all of us.

"And speaking of the lottery, Lord, I am so grateful. I realize I've already won. I think of the house I live in, the family I grew up in, the children I treasure, the freedoms we enjoy. Lord God, I know it now. I already have the right numbers. Thank you, Amen."

This really is my prayer life now. Several times a day, whether planned or unplanned. I get started: maybe with the sick, maybe with myself, maybe with our Church, maybe with the world, maybe something very specific, some news events, some activity, some urgency; and then off I go.

In music it's called a "riff," a series of notes that you keep returning to, but in fresh ways. Maybe your prayer starts with nature, a beautiful day, and you end up remembering all creation and our responsibility toward all creation. You start with cancer and end up with medical research and survivors and doctors and nurses. You start with your kids' problems at school, and you end up praying for teachers, other kids, and all who help your child. Call it a "prayer trigger" or a "riff" or a "spiritual stream of consciousness," but start with something, however self-centered, and let it take you in surprising directions.

I'll close with two quick thoughts and a story: First, prayer is valuable in and of itself. I've been asked a million times if someone could prove to me that there is no God, would I keep praying? The answer is YES. Prayer works, prayer works in 100 different ways that deserve their own sermon; and prayer works mysteriously, but it works. It works by focusing your attention and ordering your thoughts.

Second, we often turn to prayer at our darkest, hardest times, when our need is urgent, our request almost impossible. There are things that can't be done, things that can't be changed, hopes that can't be realized, wants that can't be met.

Well, all those things we're told can't happen? If you don't do it, it won't happen. That part is true. But what if you try? Yes, prayer is a mystery, it's an exercise in faith; and faith, by definition, is stepping out into the unknown. That's why we pray. For the most part, we don't pray for what's certain.

Maybe some of us do, and that's a good thing. In the middle of a beautiful day, a few of you might be good enough to pray, "Thank you, God, for this beautiful day!" But most of us are likely have our eye on tomorrow. "Thank you God for this beautiful day, and if you please, give us another nice one tomorrow for our golf tournament." Even our most mundane prayers take us beyond certainty. Why not? Go for it. Why short-circuit something by your own negligence? Send your prayers out into God's universe.

And for my story, I return to my father. Last week I preached about my father and what our Church can learn from his long career as a pastor. My father was a classically trained post-World War II pastor: very scholarly, very literate, very well organized, very proper. And it showed in his preaching and his praying. The last two years of his life were a slow decline: less conversation, less eating, less response, a sort of gentle retiring from life. Yet, one thing remained strong: his prayers. Every time we visited, at the end, before we left, even if he hadn't spoken much that day, Alida and I would ask him to pray. We'd hold hands together, and you could feel him digging deep down inside, finding the roots of his lifelong faith, and then he'd begin to pray. From deep within the

wellspring of 96 years of Church life and prayer life, he called forth the greatness of prayer, something like this:

"Eternal and most gracious heavenly Father, we come before your throne of grace this afternoon. We, your humble servants, beseech your favor upon those we hold dear. Uphold them in faith, strengthen them in service, preserve and protect them from every harm. For the privileges and pleasures of daily life, we offer our sincere thanks; for labor and its rewards, for family and its joys, for nation and its promise, for creation and its majesty, we bow before you in earnest praise."

"Now guide and guard these, my children, until they are safely home."  
Amen.

Only in our last visit did he choose not to pray, nodding instead to Alida, as if to say, "It's time to learn how to pray, girl!" And the torch was passed, and she did . . . drawing upon her own lifetime of knowing that our friend Jesus was ready to hear whatever we needed to pray.

And now let us join together to sing that great old hymn of prayer, No. 585,

### **"What a Friend We Have in Jesus."**

*What a friend we have in Jesus,  
all our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry  
everything to God in prayer!*

*Oh, what peace we often forfeit,  
oh, what needless pain we bear,  
all because we do not carry  
everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations?  
Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged;  
take it to the Lord in prayer!*

*Can we find a friend so faithful  
who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our every weakness;  
take it to the Lord in prayer!*



*Are we weak and heavy laden,  
cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge,  
take it to the Lord in prayer!*

*Do your friends despise, forsake you?  
Take it to the Lord in prayer!  
In his arms he'll take and shield you;  
you will find a solace there.*