

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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TEACH US TO PRAY

Luke 11:1-4

Tony Campolo is one of the greatest story tellers I have ever heard. Some of you may know his name or have read some of his books. A high-profile evangelical author, speaker, and pastor, he taught sociology at Eastern University in Philadelphia for more than 40 years. Mary Sue and I first heard him speak 40 years ago at a college student conference in Pittsburgh. At the age of 84, he still preaches at a Baptist church in Philadelphia every Sunday.

I have always held him in high regard, so it grieved my heart deeply a few years ago when he announced that he had changed his mind about same-sex sexual relationships and marriage, and no longer believes homosexual practice to be sin. The reason I tell you this is so that, if you know about Tony Campolo and his position on same-sex marriage, you won't think that I agree with him just because I tell you one of his stories.

I do not agree with him on same-sex marriage or homosexuality in general. I cannot agree with him, because his new view is contrary to the clear teaching of the Bible and contradicts the revealed will of God for marriage and sexuality. We both agree that Jesus loves sinners of all kinds. Jesus loves sexual sinners of all kinds. But Jesus does not affirm us in our sin, whatever our particular sin(s) may be. So, in case any of you may wonder, I want to be on the record as saying that by telling one of Tony's stories, I am not endorsing his views on same-sex sexual relationships and marriage. I wish it weren't necessary to preface the story this way, but it is.

CHARLIE STOLTZFUS

This story I want to tell you is about a man named Charlie Stoltzfus. If you have ever heard the story of Charlie Stoltzfus, you know what a remarkable story this is.

Tony was invited to speak at a small Christian college not far from where he taught at Eastern University. He says: "I love(d) going to this little school because the people there seem to be so in touch with the power of the Holy Spirit." Before the chapel service, several members of the faculty took Tony into a side room to pray for him. Tony got down on his knees, and the six of them put their hands on his head and prayed for him, asking the Holy Spirit to fill him and use him effectively as he spoke to the students. They prayed long prayers, Tony says, and the longer they prayed, the more they leaned on his head. "They prayed on and on," he says, "and leaned harder and harder." One of them kept whispering: "Do you feel the Spirit? Do you feel the Spirit?" Tony says (in jest): "To tell the truth, I felt something right at the base of my neck, but I wasn't sure it was the Spirit."

One faculty member, he says, prayed at length for a man named Charlie Stoltzfus. “That kind of ticked me off,” Tony recalls, “and I thought to myself: *If you’re going to lean on my head, the least you can do is pray for me.*”

This faculty member prayed on and on for this guy who was about to abandon his wife and three children. Tony says: “I can still hear him calling out:

‘Lord! Lord! Don’t let that man leave his wife and children! Send an angel to bring that man back to his family. Don’t let that family be destroyed! You know who I’m talking about, Lord ... You know who I’m talking about ... Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives down the road about a mile on the right-hand side in a silver house trailer.’”

With some degree of exasperation, Tony thought to himself: *God knows where he lives. What do you think God is doing, sitting up there in heaven saying, Can you give me that address again?*

After his chapel talk, Tony got in his car and headed home. He was getting on the Pennsylvania Turnpike when he saw a young man hitchhiking on the side of the road. So he pulled over and picked him up. Tony says: “I know you’re not supposed to [do that], but I’m a Baptist preacher and whenever I can get someone locked in to where I can preach to him, I do it.”

As they pulled back onto the highway, Tony introduced himself. He said: “Hi, my name’s Tony Campolo. What’s your name?” The guy said: “My name’s Charlie Stoltzfus ...:”

Tony didn’t say a word. He drove down the Turnpike, got off at the next exit, turned around, and headed back the other way. Charlie looked at him and said: “Hey, mister! Where are you taking me?”

To which Tony said: “I’m taking you home.”

“Why?” asked Charlie.

“Because you just left your wife and three children! Right?”

“Right,” he said.

Charlie leaned against the passenger door the rest of the way, staring at Tony. They got off the Turnpike and drove onto a side road, straight to his silver house trailer. When Tony pulled into the driveway, Charlie looked at him with astonishment and said: “How did you know I live here?”

Tony said: “God told me!”

He told Charlie: “You get in that house because I want to talk to you and I want to talk to your wife.”

Charlie ran into the mobile home ahead of Tony. Tony says he doesn't know what Charlie said to his wife, but when Tony got into the home, her eyes were as wide as saucers. Tony sat them down and said: "I'm going to talk and you're going to listen."

They did listen, Tony says. That day they both came into a personal, saving relationship with Jesus, and their marriage was saved as well (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, 60-62).

I tell you this story to illustrate the power of prayer and the sometimes mysterious, miraculous ways God works through the prayers of His children – which we are, through faith in the person and saving work of Jesus Christ our Lord. Does our Heavenly Father always answer His children's prayers in such a powerful and dramatic way? Not always. But the story of Charlie Stoltzfus is just one example of the truth that sometimes God *does* answer prayers in surprising and unexpected ways.

Before we inaugurate our new prayer initiative called *Plowing with Prayer* in September, which I spoke about a few weeks ago, I want to talk with you for the next Sunday or two – at least today and next Sunday – about prayer, its place in the life of a Christian, and its place in the life of the church as both a gathered and scattered community of the followers of Jesus.

THE PRAYER LIFE OF JESUS

One of the things that should strike you about Jesus as you read the Gospels is that He was a man of prayer. He was a man of action, without a doubt. But He was also a man of prayer. It wasn't an either-or for Jesus. And it doesn't have to be that way for us. It was a both-and in His life. Jesus – the Son of God from all eternity, the second Person of the Trinity, God incarnate, God with us in flesh and blood – took prayer seriously. Communion with God the Father in prayer was absolutely crucial for Jesus. The Gospels don't go into elaborate detail about the prayer life of Jesus, but they tell us enough to know how important it was to Him. Early in Mark's Gospel, for example, in Mark 1:35, we're told that "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house" where He was staying (the home of Peter and Andrew) "and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed."

Luke 6:12 says that before choosing the 12 disciples, "Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God." Later on, after the miracle of multiplying the loaves of bread and the fish to provide a meal for a crowd of 5,000 men plus women and children, and then sending the crowd home, Matthew says that Jesus "went up on a mountainside by Himself to pray" (Matthew 14:23). Meanwhile, His disciples were in a boat out on the Sea of Galilee contending with a storm that had come up suddenly. It was on this occasion that Jesus came to them in the middle of the night, walking on the water in the midst of the raging storm (14:23-34).

John 17 records the prayer Jesus prayed for His disciples (and for us) in the Upper Room before His arrest and subsequent crucifixion. The Gospels also record His anguished prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, asking the Father, if possible, to spare Him the suffering and hell of the cross, but affirming and reaffirming His resolve to do the Father's will and to finish the work of redemption for us.

“LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY”

I’m convinced there is a whole lot more to the prayer life of Jesus than the glimpses we are given in the New Testament. It is obvious the disciples noticed something out-of-the-ordinary about Jesus’ practice of prayer. In today’s Scripture, in Luke 11:1, after Jesus had spent some time in prayer, one of His disciples, probably acting as a spokesman for the group (perhaps it was Peter), came to Jesus and said: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John (the Baptist) taught his disciples.”

John the Baptist, as the God-ordained forerunner of Jesus, had disciples of his own before Jesus began His public ministry. Evidently he placed a strong emphasis on prayer in his discipleship program. The disciples of Jesus knew about it and wanted Jesus to teach them to pray.

By the time we come to Luke 11, Jesus’ disciples had been with Him for almost two years. They had front row seats whenever Jesus preached. They had watched Him in action. They had seen Him heal the sick and feed the crowds. It is interesting, though, that as far as we know, they never came to Jesus and said: “Lord, teach us to preach the way You do.” Or: “Lord, teach us to perform miracles.” Or: “Lord, teach us how to answer the hard theological questions people ask.” If they ever asked Jesus to do any of these things, it is not recorded in any of the Gospels of the New Testament.

What they did ask was: “Lord, teach us to pray.” They were well aware of Jesus’ habit of withdrawing from time to time to go off to a quiet place and spend extended periods of time with the Father in prayer. It is probably not too much to conjecture that the disciples made the connection in their minds between the quality and vitality of Jesus’ prayer life and the power of His life and ministry. Even though they needed (and wanted) instruction in prayer, the disciples of Jesus seemed to recognize that there was a connecting link between the power Jesus displayed and the intensity and consistency of the prayer life to which He gave Himself. (See R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: Luke*, 233.)

Do you see that connection?

The response of Jesus in Luke 11 is to give the disciples a condensed version of the Lord’s Prayer, the longer version of which is found in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:9-13. In both places, Jesus introduces the prayer in basically the same way. In Matthew 6:9 He says: “This, then, is how you should pray.” In Luke 11:2 He says: “When you pray, say ...”

We know the prayer Jesus taught as “The Lord’s Prayer.” That is what we call it, which is appropriate since it comes to us from the Lord Jesus. More than one preacher and theologian have suggested that we call it “The Disciple’s Prayer,” because it is a prayer designed for disciples – for followers – of Jesus to pray. Jesus intends it to be a model prayer, not something we are to repeat word for word without thinking about the meaning of the words. It shows us how to address God in prayer (as our father in heaven). It tells us what we are to pray for and gives us an outline or template for our prayers.

I'm not going to dissect the Lord's Prayer and talk about each theme or petition contained in it. But I do encourage you to make it a regular part of your prayer life and to allow the priorities and petitions in the Lord's Prayer to guide you in your praying, so that the values and priorities expressed by Jesus Himself may be central in your life and prayers. And in ours as a church.

NOT AS EASY AS YOU THINK

The fact that His disciples felt it necessary to ask Jesus to teach them about prayer, and that Jesus included instruction on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, indicates that prayer is not something that comes naturally to us. A meaningful prayer life doesn't just happen automatically or by accident.

What this means is that prayer is not as easy as some people may think it is. In one sense, of course, it *is* easy. Peter Kreeft, in his book *Prayer for Beginners*, makes the point that prayer is not as hard as some people make it out to be. He says: "We want to think it is too hard or too high and holy for us, because that gives us an excuse for not doing it. This," he says, "is false humility. We can all do it, even the most sinful, shallow, (and) silly ... of us."

He continues: "You do not have to master some mystical method. You do not have to master a method at all. Can you talk to a friend? Then you can talk to God, for He is your Friend. And that is what prayer is. The single most important piece of advice about prayer is one word: Begin! God makes it easy; just do it! God also makes it easy to progress in prayer ... for it gradually becomes more natural and delightful" (Kreeft, *Prayer for Beginners*, 23-26).

On the one hand, prayer is not as easy as some people think. If it were easy, I suppose most of us would not have so many jitters or hesitations about praying in public. As it is, though, we feel self-conscious and worry that others will find our prayers to be inadequate or inarticulate.

NOT AS HARD AS YOU THINK

On the other hand, prayer is not as hard as we might think. Yes, it is like having a conversation with a friend, and God desires to be your Friend. In fact, if you know and trust Jesus as your Savior and Lord, God *is* your Friend. And you are God's friend. If you know and trust Jesus as your Savior and Lord, God is your Father, and you are His beloved child.

As Rick Warren points out in his mega-bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, God deeply desires that we become His friends and develop an intimate relationship with Him, a relationship of love and trust. "Friendship with God," as Warren says, "is possible only because of the grace of God and the sacrifice of Jesus" for us (Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*, 86). "Knowing and loving God," he says, "is our greatest privilege and being known and loved is God's greatest pleasure" (87).

We studied Warren's book as a church family after it first came out more than 15 years ago. If you have never read it, or have not read it in a long time, I encourage you to read it as part

of a personal 40 Days of Purpose discipleship program, or to read and discuss it in your small group.

After coming to a personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, how do you grow in your relationship with God? How do you develop your friendship with God? One way is through the cultivation of your prayer life. How?

- Through constant communication and conversation with God.
- Through a regular daily “Quiet Time” appointment with God to read the Bible, to reflect on His Word, and to bring your cares and concerns, as well as your expressions of praise and thanks to Him, in prayer.
- Through “pray(ing) without ceasing,” as the Bible says in 1 Thessalonians 5:17. This doesn’t mean that you do nothing but pray, or that you neglect the duties and responsibilities of daily life. What it means is that “you carry on a continuous, open-ended conversation with (God) throughout your day, talking with Him about whatever you are doing or thinking” or whatever or whomever God brings to your mind at any given moment. It means conversing with God while you shop, while you drive, while you work, while you walk, while you cook or carry out any other tasks in your daily routine (Warren, 87-88).

Prayer is not as hard as some people may think. Anne Lamott’s book *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* makes this point. Sometimes, meaningful prayer is as simple and powerful as crying out for help, or saying thanks to God for some manifestation of His mercy or grace, or seeing the hand of God at work in some way and saying “Wow!” If prayer seems hard or intimidating to you, perhaps these cries of the heart to God are a good place to begin.

A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

But they are only a place to begin. God wants you to go deeper in the life of prayer. God wants you to have a much richer, fuller relationship with Him in prayer. Ultimately, this is what prayer is about: a relationship.

It is a relationship with a Father who loves you with an unconditional love and who will never stop loving you.

It is a relationship with a Father who desires to be known by you. It is a relationship with a Friend who always has your best interests at heart.

It is a relationship with Someone with whom you can be real.

It is a relationship characterized by both intimacy and reverence (or respect).

There is never a time when it is not time to pray. But there is never any place for insincerity or irreverence in prayer. The Bible says that the prayers of a righteous person – that is, a person who is rightly-related to God through faith in Jesus Christ – are powerful and effective (James 5:16). Prayer is not a box you just check off and then get on with your life. If you

treat God without the reverence and respect He deserves, if you pray shallow, selfish, or insincere prayers – prayers you don't really mean – don't be surprised when God doesn't answer your prayers the way you want.

We'll talk about prayer some more next Sunday. In the meantime, remember Charlie Stoltzfus. Let the story of God's intervention in his life through Tony Campolo remind you of the power of God to use prayer – even *your* prayers – to change things, to change lives, and to change relationships.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.