

The disciples say to Jesus in Luke chapter 11: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And in response to what they were asking, Jesus gives them the Lord's Prayer. Because the Lord's Prayer is certainly an excellent prayer. It's good for us both to use and to use as an example. We can learn from the Lord's Prayer how to shape our own prayers that we pray to God. But we also learn, Christians, through imitation and through example. We learn by watching someone else do something. And what better example do we have of prayer than Jesus Christ himself? If we copy him and do what he does, we will certainly learn to pray. And during this Lent, we are going to look at some of his prayers, especially those that come from his passion.

So the first example appears on Maundy Thursday, as they're all sitting at the table. Jesus is warning them about what is to come, because he tells them that he's going to suffer and die at the hands of men. But it's not going to be easy for the disciples either. It will be a time of great testing for everybody, so they need to be prepared for what is to come. But Jesus also warns them in our reading for tonight that Satan wants to test them. He says: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers." So Jesus compares Satan, then, to a man who is sifting grain: shaking it, twisting it, throwing it, whatever he needs to do in order to bring out the chaff and anything else that's not supposed to be there. And for the grain I'm sure that seems like a very violent thing indeed. We can imagine ourselves being tossed and turned in that way. Yeah, it would be pretty violent. But Satan is not doing this to the grain in order to improve it, and he's certainly not trying to cleanse it. What Satan is doing is looking for every little fault. Satan is nitpicking, looking for every little thing that might be wrong, doing everything that he can in order to accuse us. It's kind of like Job when Satan tried to test and accuse him. In Job chapter 1, we are told that Satan said to the Lord: "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." Notice what Satan is doing here. He is doing everything that he can to find fault with Job. "The only reason he's faithful to you, God, is because you've been too nice to him! Take away everything that he has, and you'll see what he's really like." And that's what he wants to do with Peter and the other apostles, to shake them up so that we can see what kind of people they really are.

But Satan is not doing this just as a test, Christians. Satan is also seeking to destroy them. He wants to find anything that he can so that he can cause them to fall away entirely. We're told in 1 Peter chapter 5: "Be sober minded, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." Satan wants us to fail. Satan wants us to fall away. He is a murderer from the beginning, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John. His goal is to kill and to destroy. But the danger for the apostles was especially great, because Satan had already made one of them fall. We're told in the first part of chapter 22 that "Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve." So Satan has already made Judas fall because of his greed, and if he's got one apostle to fall, then it's very likely that others will go with him. So Peter and the others are in grave danger. It's a very difficult time for them in the hours to come.

And Peter is certainly straining under all of this pressure that Satan is applying to him. This is why he denies Jesus three times, because Satan is sifting him like wheat. And if Peter had been

on his own, he certainly would have become like Judas. He certainly would have fallen away. But Jesus prays for Peter that his faith would not fail, prays that he would withstand the test and not fall away forever. Without that prayer, Peter would have fallen, and he never would have come back to the Lord. But because of that prayer, Peter returns, and Peter repents of his sin. Jesus's prayer brings him through this time of testing so that he can turn again to the Lord.

Now, I want you to note that Jesus does not pray here that Satan would be unable to do anything altogether, nor does he pray to remove the temptation entirely. God allows Satan to do this, just as he once allowed Satan to test Job. We're told again in Job chapter 1, verse 12: "And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand.'" God permits Satan to test Job, and God permits Satan to test Peter and the others. Why does he do that? we might ask. Why does God allow Satan to do this? Because through such testing, Christians, he strengthens us. God uses Satan sifting us like wheat in order to strengthen our faith, in order to make us better than we were before. He disciplines us so that we don't fall away forever. James chapter 1 says: "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." So these trials and these temptations make us patient. They teach us patience. They teach us to be steadfast, how to hold on even through the very worst of times. Through this testing, God builds us up in faith. And even if we go through a severe test, as Peter did, this time of testing will be very short. Jesus says to the church in Smyrna in the book of Revelation: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." And so it is with Peter. Jesus prays that even through this severe trial that he must go through, that his faith would not fail. Through this time of testing, Peter will be stronger in faith than he was before. And that's exactly what happened. Even though Peter fell, denying Jesus three times, he did not fall away forever. And he came back to the Lord, and he learned how to speak fearlessly about Jesus, so fearlessly, in fact, that he would later lose his life for the message that he proclaimed. Yes, Peter learned through this experience what it means to be steadfast, what it means to confess Jesus.

So what do we learn, then, from what Jesus does here? What do we learn from his example of prayer? We learn first of all to pray for others, especially in times of great trial, in times of great tribulation. Because Jesus was in far more danger than Peter and the others were, without doubt. Jesus was about to go through a much more severe trial than any of us will ever pass through. And yet he prays for his disciples. He prays that their faith would not fail, to strengthen them in the hour of their need. And so while we can pray for ourselves--and that's fine. There's nothing wrong with that. Jesus will pray for himself too--we should pray for others more, to bring their needs and their trials and their tribulations before the throne of grace, so that they would be strengthened in their faith.

Second of all, we learn to pray for specific things, to not just pray generally. Because Jesus prayed about what was just about to happen. He prayed about what Satan was going to do in the next couple of hours. And when we pray in this way, we bring those specific troubles, those specific problems before the Lord. Because sometimes when we pray generally, when we don't have anything specific, we may not really have anything in mind. But when we bring those specific things to the Lord, then we deal with those specific problems. And so it is good to pray in this way, just as Jesus prayed to the Father.

And lastly, Jesus teaches us to pray that others would be built up in their faith. We can and we should pray, "Lead us not into temptation," the way that we do in the Lord's Prayer. But even when we pray it in the Lord's Prayer, we're not praying that there would be no temptation. After all, Jesus says that temptations are sure to come. They're inevitable. We can't get away from them in this life. But when we pray, "Lead us not into temptation," what we're asking for is the strength that only God can provide, the strength that God gives in order to bring us through that temptation and provide the way of escape. We pray that God would give us that strength so that our faith would not fail. We pray that God would give us that strength so that we would turn again and strengthen those around us. And we also pray that for others. We pray that they too would be strengthened by God, so that they too could turn and strengthen those around them.

In all of these ways, Christians, Jesus shows us what it means to pray. So may we follow his example, then, in praying for others, especially in their times of great need. And in that way, we will glorify him and bring all of our trials and tribulations before the throne of grace, to the one who can do something about them.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, teach us how to pray. Show us how to pray for others in their time of need, so that their faith would not fail. Lead us always to trust in the strength that you alone can give, because you are a strong fortress to those who call on you; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.