

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY:

We Can't Not Pray, but We Often Do So Poorly—So We Need Help

Lk 11:1-13

I. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR IGNORANCE—Isaac Walton: “So long as thou art ignorant be not ashamed to learn. Ignorance is the greatest of all infirmities, and when justified, the chiefest of follies.”

A. One consequence of Adam's Fall:

1. Plato: “Better to be unborn than untaught, for ignorance is the root of misfortune.”
2. Aquinas: one of “four wounds of the soul” (negation of prudence, one of four cardinal virtues)

B. Evidences everywhere

1. Personal confirmations—both innocent errors and stupid (repeated) mistakes
2. Flagrant follies—*Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (Charles Mackay);
3. Current concerns
 - a. Educational failures: *The Dumbest Generation* and *The Dumbest Generation Grows Up: From Stupefied Youths to Dangerous Adults* (Mark Bauerlein)
 - b. Politicians' foibles—S.C. congressman fears Guam may tilt if too many people arrive
 - c. Professors' fallacies—*ad hominum, non sequitor, et al.*
 - d. D.D. Eisenhower: “Ignorance of communism, fascism, or any other police state philosophy is far more dangerous than ignorance of the most virulent disease.”

II. CONFESSING OUR NEED—“He who would be cured of ignorance must confess it” (Montaigne).

A. “Invincible ignorance” comforting perspective, necessary caveat

B. Ignorance useful when acknowledged—prelude to learning

1. Expectant when enrolling in classes—philosophy in college, Indian history in grad school
2. Positive result from asking help from electrical inspector
3. Anxious to explore new books, trusting authors' expertise

C. OT texts: Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27; Num 15:24-25

1. Voluntary, known transgressions require particular sacrifices
2. Involuntary, ignorant transgressions require different sacrifices

D. NT teaching: “being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them (Eph 4:18)

1. “Ignorance is not innocence but sin” (R. Browning)
2. “Ignorance is the curse of God; / Knowledge the way whereby we fly to God” (Shakespeare).
3. “For they being ignorant of God's righteousness” (Ro 10:3)
4. “They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into the ditch” (Mt 15:14)

E. St Anselm: “O Lord our God, grant us grace to desire thee with a whole heart, so that desiring thee we may seek and find thee; and so finding thee, may love thee; and loving thee may hate those sins which separate us from thee, for the sake of Jesus Christ.”

III. TRUSTING OUR TEACHERS

A. Ubiquitous, significant, fully human endeavor

1. Aristotle: “Teachers, who educate children, deserve more honor than parents, who merely give them birth; for the latter provided mere life, while the former ensure a good life.”
2. “There are two things that pertain to the office of a teacher: to instruct the devout, and to repel opponents” (Thomas Aquinas)
3. Henry Adams: “A teacher affect eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”
4. Anatole France: The whole art of teaching is only the art of awakening the natural curiosity of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.”
5. Seneca: “My joy in learning is partly that it enables me to teach.”
6. Vladimir Nabokov: “Discussion in class, which means letting twenty young blockheads and two cocky neurotics discuss something that neither their teacher nor they know.”
7. “For every person wishing to teach there are thirty not wanting to be taught.”

B. OT emphasis & rabbinical traditions

1. The *Shema*: routinely teach (Deut 6:1-9)
2. Wisdom Literature—significant part of OT

- C. Christian Church's central concern throughout ages
 - 1. Early Church fathers incessantly instruct—e.g. Clement & Origen in Alexandria; Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome set pattern for West
 - 2. Classical curriculum embraced: *Trivium* (grammar, logic, rhetoric) & *Quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, music)
 - 3. Medieval cathedral schools & universities
 - 4. Modern endeavors—e.g. colleges from earliest days of America, from Harvard onward; Sunday schools

IV. HEEDING CHRIST “THE EDUCATOR,” THE “MASTER TEACHER”

- A. Routinely recognized for teaching authority (ca. 60 times in NT called “teacher”)
 - 1. “He opened His mouth and taught them” (Mt 5:2) with “authority” (Mt 7:29) sermon on the mount
 - 2. Nicodemus: “we know you are a teacher come from God” (Jn 3:2)
 - 3. Great Commission: “Go ye into all the world and teach” (Mt 28:19)
 - 4. “No man ever spoke like this man” (Jn 7:46)
- B. Jesus’ methodology crafted to effectively communicate
 - 1. Stressed essentials, truly important issues—gets to “heart of matter”
 - 2. Addressed available situations—diverse audiences, notable surroundings, events
 - 3. Seized on give opportunities—in Temple, in hills, lakesides, homes, pathways
 - 4. Used comprehensible terms, illustrations
 - 5. Employed analogical thinking—Parables especially striking—stories ever-important in communicating
 - 6. Turned, at times, to didactic methods—lecture, explain
 - 7. Engaged in personal conversations—woman at well, Nicodemus
- C. Disciples’ singular request: teach us to pray

“When I was a much younger man, I almost worshipped Shakespeare. He seemed to me almost literally “inspired,” the most eloquent man who ever lived. . . . When I returned to the Catholic Church in my early thirties, I began to see him differently. As a professional writer myself, I still admired him immensely, realizing how impossible it was that I should ever emulate him. But I no longer regarded him as a god. I had another god — namely, God. I began to marvel at the words that were truly the most inspired ever uttered: those of Christ. As a writer I felt honored when anyone quoted me or remembered anything I’d written. But Christ is still quoted after 2,000 years. An obscure man, he wrote nothing; we have only a few of the many words he spoke during his life, not in the Hebrew or Aramaic he spoke them in, but translated into Greek and thence into English. His words have a unique power that sets them off from all merely human words. Even two removes from their original language, they still penetrate us and rule our consciences. They have changed the world profoundly. He didn’t just perform miracles; he spoke miracles. The words we read from his mouth are miracles. They have a supernatural effect on anyone who is receptive to them. One proof of their power is that we also resist them. Sometimes they are unbearable. Like some of the early disciples who fell away, we are tempted to say: “This is hard stuff. Who can accept it?” It’s the natural reaction of the natural man, fallen man. Great as Shakespeare is, I never lose sleep over anything he said. He leaves my conscience alone. He is a tremendous virtuoso of language, By the same token, nobody ever feels guilty about anything Plato or Aristotle said. They spoke important and lasting truths often enough, but never anything that disturbs us inwardly. We are never afraid to read them. We aren’t tempted to resist them as we are tempted to resist Christ.

“Yet he said: “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” And so far this certainly appears true, though we know of no measures on his part to see to it that his words would be preserved. He seems to have trusted that they would somehow have their effect by their sheer intrinsic power, just as he trusted that his enduring the humiliation, agony, and death of a common criminal would confound every human expectation and fulfill his tremendous mission.” St. Thomas Aquinas wrote that the Redemption was an even greater miracle than the Creation. I’ve often wondered just what he meant by that, and I think I’m starting to see. The human imagination can readily conceive of God creating the world. The human race has many creation stories and myths; every culture seems to have its own. But nobody imagined, no human being could ever imagine, God becoming a human being and redeeming the human race by submitting to utter disgrace, unspeakable physical pain, and death, ending his life in what appeared even to his disciples to be total futility. The greatest genius who ever lived could never have foreseen or supposed such a story.” —Joseph Sobran, *Subtracting Christianity*