

**1. “Lord, teach us how to pray!”**  
**Jesus, the one who teaches us how to pray**  
*Lectio Lk 11,1; Mt 6,9a*

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Jesus of Nazareth was a profoundly religious man, whose personal piety was nourished by faith and the religious spirit of his people. His was a nation of prayerful people who, contrary to their neighbors, believed that a God had appeared in history, chose them out of pure sympathy (Deut 7,6-8) and revealed his name (Ex 3,13-1). A God who was close and merciful being invoked since the dawn of creation (Gen 4, 26) and to whom one felt obliged to give praise at all times (Jdg 13, 14; Ps 135,1-3; Tob 12,6.17-18.20).

In Israel, prayer was a habitual act not only throughout daily life, when it was the custom to dedicate three hours of prayer daily but also during great festivities. Jesus was bound to know the common pious practices typical of Jewish worship (Mt 26,30) and how to celebrate annual religious festivities. (cf. Lk 2,41; Mk 14,12; Jn 13,1).<sup>1</sup>

Luke is the evangelist who most frequently presents Jesus in prayer.<sup>2</sup> In most cases, he doesn't specify the concrete motive that brings him to pray, but while stating that he prayed, he sometimes mentioned what he prayed about and what consequences prayer would bring about. Luke does not present the prayer of Jesus as a casual episode, but rather as a *habit of prayer* which is obvious in his public ministry.

**REFLECTION**

Jesus prays frequently, either alone (Mk 1,35; 15,46; Mt 14,23) or else with his disciples (Lk 9,18.28). He prays with a spirit of detachment, at decisive moments regarding his personal life as well as in his public ministry (Lk 3,21; 5,16; 6,12; 9,18.28-29; 11,1; 22,32.44-45; 23,34.46).<sup>3</sup> And while he prays, he reveals how he himself lives in a spirit of faith, for his prayer is both the expression and part of *his interior life*. For this very reason, by praying, he gives meaning to his apostolic activity: prayer is an indispensable part of his *personal mission*: “*But the news of Jesus spread all the more widely, and crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed from their diseases. But he would go away to lonely places, where he would pray*” (Lk 5,15-16).

Prayer was the source of his teaching (Lk 8; 11,1-4), and what preceded his miracles of healing (Mk 1,35-39). It was with prayer that he prepared his most important decisions, as it was for baptism (Lk 3,21), the choice of the twelve (Lk 6,12), the transfiguration (Lk 9,28-29), the agony in the garden (Mk 14,35-36)..., and the way he expressed his last breath (Mk 15, 34.37; Mt 27,47.50; Lk 23,34.46).

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. R. ARON, *Los años oscuros de Jesús*, Madrid 1963; ID., *Ainsi priait Jésus enfant*, Paris, 1968, this publication refers to Jewish prayer in the time of Jesus, claiming that it must have influenced his childhood and his adolescence.

<sup>2</sup>Luke, surprisingly, does not portray Jesus praying in the temple, the place of prayer (Lk 1,10; 18,10) converted into 'a den of thieves' (Lk 19,46); for him, the temple is, above all, the appropriate place for the teaching of Jesus (Lk 2,46-47; 19,47-48; 21,37-38).

<sup>3</sup>A fact which is not considered by the other two synoptics Lk 3,21, cf. Mt 3,13/Mk 1,9. Lk 6,12, cf. Mt 10,1/Mk 3,7. Lk 9,18, cf. Mt 16,13/Mk 8,27. Lk 9,28, cf. Mt 17,1/Mk 9,2. Lk 11,1, cf. Mt 6,9. Lk 23,34.46, and having no similarity).

***An example of one who prays, a teacher of how to pray (Lk 11,1)***

As an example of one who prays, he could - and wanted to be - a teacher of how to pray through his way of acting (Lk 11,1: “*One day, Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he had finished, one of his disciples said to him: 'Lord, teach us to pray'*” and he taught them (Lk 11,2: “*When you pray, say*”: Mt 6,5.7.9: “*When you pray ...; you, instead, when you pray ...*”, before teaching his disciples, so that they knew *what* and *how* to pray. A perfect example of how Jesus taught how to pray is, *par excellence*, the *Our Father* (Lk 11,1-4; Mt 6,5-15).

Well, then, in Luke Jesus teaches how to pray immediately after having prayed himself. Having observed how he expressed his intimacy with God, one of his disciples asked him to show them how to pray so that they might be known as disciples of the Baptist (cf. Lk 5,33) through the way they prayed.

***“One day, when Jesus was praying in a certain place, one of his disciples asked him: ‘Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples’”.***

The precise occasion when this happened, is irrelevant to the narrator: “*once*” could mean sometimes. Luke indicates that *while Jesus prayed* one of his disciples was watching him. It is significant to note that Jesus stands out as a teacher of 'how to pray' after having set the example of how he himself prayed.

His first lesson on how to pray was instigated by the desire of one of his disciples who, having seen him pray, wanted to *learn how to pray like him* (Lk 11,1). Jesus responds by teaching the *Our Father* (Lk 11,2-4) and by encouraging him to pray without ceasing (Lk 11,5-13). Later, in a second catechesis (Lk 18,1-14) he tells the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Lk 18,1-8) and that of the pharisee and the publican (11,9-14), thus indicating that one must pray without ceasing and with total honesty. He starts by telling them *what to say* when one prays, and then how to *support this practice* with a double catechesis.

According to Luke, *the prayer of the disciple must follow the example of the way Jesus prays* (Lk 6,28; 22,40.46), who, because of his intimacy with the Father and the intensity with which he turns to prayer, becomes a teacher of prayer (Lk 11,1). He teaches *the words* to use (Lk 11,2-4) and uses parables to express the *attitudes* with which to pray, indicating perseverance based on friendship. (Lk 11,5-8), confidence nourished by filial piety (Lk 11,11-13), insistence to the extent of being heard (Lk 18,1-8), like sinners who, because of acknowledging their sinfulness, yearn for God's forgiveness (Lk 18,9-14).

Luke does not place this instruction of Jesus on a mountain, as it was for his inaugural address in Mathew (Mt 5,1-7,29), but he chose instead the journey towards Jerusalem (Lk 9,51-19,46), soon after he had praised Mary for having chosen “*the only thing necessary*” (Lk 10,42). Thus, Jesus acts according to what he teaches and teaches what he himself does, since the only thing necessary and what comes first is to attend to God. While teaching his disciples to pray, he indicates what an integral element prayer is in order to follow him, for whoever neglects to pray will sooner or later abandon him. Whoever does not pray as he did, will end up by not following him (cf. Mk 14,38.50-51; Mt 26,40.56; Lk 22,46.54).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In the fourth gospel, the betrayal, apart from being due to a lack of prayer, is focused on Judas (Jn 13, 21-30; 18,2-3) and on Peter (Jn 13,36-38; 18,25-27).

It is obvious that if Jesus teaches his disciples what to say (Lk 11,2-4) and by means of parables instructs them regarding how to speak in parables and how often to do so, (Lk 11,5-13), it is because one of them had seen him pray and wanted to learn how to pray like him (Lc 11,1). When speaking in parables, Jesus is bold as he imagines God to be an annoying friend, the best father ever, more just than a dishonest and insensitive judge and the one who justifies whoever acknowledges himself to be a sinner in his presence. The fact that he dares speak like that of the Father stems from his personal prayerful experience. Only the one who prays alone and prays frequently will be able to teach others how to pray as Jesus did.

***One who proclaims greater justice and a teacher of how to pray (Mt 6,9a)***

Like Luke, Matthew presents his version of the *Our Father* addressed to the disciples of Jesus, within a broader catechesis regarding prayer (Mt 6,5-15; cf. Lk 11,1-13). Both evangelists coincide in not regarding this prayer as a practice imposed by Jesus, for neither of them use the imposition that *they had to pray*, but rather *how* and *when* they are to pray (Mt 6,6.9; Lk 11,2). Both evangelists take it for granted that the disciples pray. It was typical of the disciples of Jesus not so much that they neither prayed nor fasted (Mc 2,19; cf. Lc 18,12), but rather that they pray in a particular manner with precise words chosen by Jesus himself.

However, while in Luke, Jesus first models how to pray, it is only later and after having prayed, that he teaches how to pray at the request of one of his disciples. In Matthew we read that out of his own initiative, and before teaching how to pray, Jesus warns his disciples about the risk that prayer might not be efficacious when stemming from hypocrisy and self interest (Mt 6,5) or with a lot of meaningless words (Mt 6,7).

**“<sup>9a</sup>You, pray like this”**

Luke seems to have wanted us to understand that before learning how to pray like Jesus, it is necessary to desire him and that this desire should have its source in the disciple who is with him and contemplates him. Jesus encourages the disciple to pray like him because he allowed himself to be seen praying. On the other hand, in Matthew, Jesus is freely portrayed as master of prayer without having been asked to be so.

Above all, Matthew includes the catechesis on prayer (Mt 6,1-18) in the first formal discourse of Jesus when he refers to *greater justice* that he expects from his own. After he had demanded the same from his disciples and his people (cf. Mt 5,1) a “*greater justice than that of the scribes and pharisees*” (Mt 5,20) and having explained this in a non-ethical form with six similar cases (Mt 5,21-48), Jesus continues to instruct his disciples on how to pray in secret, contrary to the way the scribes and pharisees prayed (Mt 6,1).<sup>5</sup>

In Mt 6,1-18 Jesus teaches about the correct attitude that must be assumed before God. He uses the category of *greater justice* that the believer should maintain in his/her relationship with God, and warns his own that his justice, besides being greater in its demands, should be hidden.<sup>6</sup> This means that in the actual context, a *hidden piety* is to be seen only by God and this is the valid form of realizing *greater justice*. Whereas, in times past, when the justice of

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<sup>5</sup>Undoubtedly, the hypocrites, scribes and pharisees (2.5.16), are the opposite to what is contained in this passage.

<sup>6</sup>Almsgiving, which is effective compassion, is the expression of a relationship which involves one in the needs of another. Prayer is born from, and manifests directly, our relationship with God. Fasting relates to oneself in self-discipline.

the disciple was in contrast with that of the *Torah*, hidden justice was to be part of the three duties, namely, that of giving alms (Mt 6,2-4), prayer (Mt 6,5-15) and fasting (6, 16-18) typical of Jewish religious practice.

Attention is thus given to the fact that strict observance of the law should make way for a religious practice centred on God. The kind of justice that is now called for (Mt 5,20) is that of living in the presence of God the Father who, though living in heaven above, (Mt 6,1) sees what is in secret (Mt 6,4.6.18). The Christian is to realize greater justice, but only in the presence of the Father. Whoever lives before God alone, as a son/daughter in relation to his/her Father, will fulfil all justice.

## **MEDITATION**

Especially for a people for whom praying was as common and natural as eating, it is not surprising that Jesus prayed often. What attracted more attention was that, for Jesus, it was most natural to pray during his public ministry. While feeling the need to turn to the one and only Good, he didn't by any means neglect dedicating himself entirely to do good to others (Mc 1,34) and to seek to draw them closer to the Kingdom of God (Mk 1,35; cf. 10,18).

How could one explain how a life consecrated to a mission would so easily and so often be detached from a life of prayer? If we do not speak to God, with what right are we going to speak to others about God? Whoever does not speak with God will sooner or later neglect proclaiming him. And should we dare to continue to talk about him, we would only be speaking from hearsay and not from our personal experience of God. The apostle who abandons prayer is a traitor to his/her vocation to which he/she had been called by Jesus himself, precisely at a time of prayer. (cf. Mk 14,32-42)

The importance that Jesus placed on personal prayer is evident, not only because of how frequently he prayed, but because he believed and wanted that prayer would accompany his most decisive life choices from the beginning (Mk 3,21) right to the end (Lk 23,34.46). Though we cannot be sure what he prayed in those moments, it is enough for us to know that he prayed. The decisions we make when we are sent in God's name should be taken together with him - while talking to him.

Whoever acknowledges to be a son/daughter who represents God never dares to cease communicating with God while doing his will. How can we know what God wants of us, if we do not take time to listen to what he wants of us? However more vital be what he asks of us, so much more necessary it is that we take time to talk to him who sends us. The apostle who first of all prays, will entrust to God those to whom he/she is sent. Since the desire to pray was born in a disciple because he saw Jesus in prayer, where can we see Jesus in prayer? Where can we see him praying? How can we guess where he is going to retire to pray alone in order to contemplate him? The disciple saw him "once", because he kept on following him. To stay beside him and never to leave him is the only possibility to meet him in prayer. To learn how to pray as he did, one has to stay close to him. In order not to lose the moment in which he chooses to retire to pray, one must always follow him closely.

We owe the *Our Father* to a disciple who, while he observed Jesus at prayer, wanted to learn how to pray, from him. While we must be grateful to that disciple, we owe even greater gratitude towards Jesus, who not only acceded to the request of the disciple, but above all, before teaching how to pray, Jesus set the example by allowing himself to be seen in prayer.

Having seen him in prayer convinced the disciple, who did not know how to pray like his master, to ask to be taught how to do so. The fact that it was not Jesus who took the initiative to teach was not surprising, because a teacher would normally include prayer as part of his/her teaching, as John did when he was with his disciples.

It seems rather interesting that after so much time with Jesus and knowing that Jesus rarely spent time alone in prayer (Mk 1,35; Lc 4,42), the disciple realized that he wanted to learn how to pray well. We ask ourselves, why Jesus waited so long to teach his own how to pray? Why did he wait until one of his disciples asked him? Why would learning how to pray be something that one would desire before being taught? And why in order to desire him ardently, is it necessary to spend much time contemplating him and not simply being with him?

Besides the frequency with which Jesus prayed, the disciple was to notice his intimacy with God and how much he seemed to love and to enjoy it. To pray very often may stir up admiration, but it would not necessarily attract one to imitate it. Something unique and exceptional must have been perceived by the disciple as he watched Jesus pray and which stirred up in him the desire to learn from it. This must have been the fact that Jesus spoke with authority of the Kingdom (Mk 1,27; 2,10), and he talked to his God as a Son to his Father by saying: "Abba. Father!" (Mk 14,36).

The fact that Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Lk 11,2; Mt 6,9) indicates that he considered prayer a vital part of his teaching and that whoever wanted to follow him would do so by praying with and through him. Jesus became a master of prayer because he himself prayed much and had prayed alone. He therefore wanted those who accompanied him to follow his example. Only thus and after much prayer in solitude, would they be converted into teachers of prayer like him.

The responsibility that followers of Jesus have is no small matter. They are to pray as he prayed with the same words and accompanying attitudes that he suggests before attempting to teach others to do so. He/she who claims to teach must have learned how to do so from the master.

In Matthew, the Our Father occupies a large part of what is contained in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5,1-7,29). Although it coincides with Luke in being presented as part of the magisterium of Jesus, Matthew does not consider it an instruction in the same sense as something tied up between a master and his disciple. According to him, the nature of the content of his first sermon is addressed to the people at large, along with his disciples (Mt 5,1-2).

The difference is remarkable in as much as for both evangelists, it is mandatory for a disciple to submit to what Jesus has taught him/her. In Matthew, the Lord's prayer<sup>7</sup> is tied to the will of Jesus. The disciple who is to live 'more justly' is to pray 'like this' and neither in any other way (Mt 6,6.8), nor with other words (Mt 6,1). To 'pray 'like this' is related to 'greater justice'.

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<sup>7</sup> By its origin, and right from the beginning, the *Our Father* was known as the Lord's Prayer: *The Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles* (Didaché), written in the late first century, contains the most comprehensive version of the *Our Father* and the recommendation to recite it three times a day (Did 8,2-3). See one of the first comments, CYPRIAN, *On the Lord's prayer*.

In the life of discipleship, prayer is neither optional nor an individual decision, for when disciples pray, they are to do so 'like this' with words that they are to learn and repeat while avoiding certain attitudes. With his initial words, "when you pray", Jesus presents the prayer of the disciple, not only as well defined, but also different to other ways previously criticized (Mt 6,5.7). While being selfless and brief, the prayer of the disciple stems from a previous relationship with God, who knows what one needs even before being asked (Mt 6,7-8).

Besides, and no less significant, is the fact that, by initiating his teaching with the imperative "when you pray" and continuing to do so when presenting the first three petitions, Jesus once again uses the imperative "when you pray" and the passive "May your name be blessed, your will be done". Thus, Jesus does not only suggest what to pray for, but imposes what he thinks should be the intentions for which to pray. It is understood that Jesus is not imposing that we pray, since it is taken for granted that we do pray, but rather that we pray "as he did". The disciple of Jesus needs others to teach him how to pray, since in reality he/she has only one teacher (cf. Mt 23,8.10).

With the words he chooses, Jesus above all indicates the sentiments that a disciple should have when he prays. Prayer is related to personal fidelity to the teacher, who knows that it is not enough merely to pray, but rather to be able to pray as he/she has been taught by the master.

The prayer of the disciple, rather, the prayer that converts one into discipleship, is that which we have learnt from the master, when and how he chose to do so, and which was born of the desire to instruct them. Hence, all my prayers should conform me to him with the same sentiments. We may not repeat the same words Jesus used, but we may at least reflect the same intentions, sentiments and priorities in what we ask God, for myself and for ourselves.

## **PRAYER**

I do not understand you well yet, my master and teacher. I am unable to comprehend what made you withdraw and pray on your own, while there were so many people who sought after you (cf. Mk 1,35-37). Why was it so important to you to speak to God, since you were (cf. Mk 1,11), and knew (cf. Lk 2,49) that you were, his Son and while doing so, to have frequently interrupted your mission of preaching the coming of the Kingdom? Why was it that you could not practise your mission without first speaking to the One who sent you? Was it not enough for you to know that you were his Son and the one sent by him, that you needed to meet often with him? I do not seem to understand this well, because I realize that this is not my case. I think that, being your apostle, I may have no more need of referring to you, since while representing you, there is no more need to turn to you. As I fulfil the mission, I have neither time nor need to encounter you frequently.

For this reason, it seems to me, that I neither know how to pray, nor seek to learn how. Unlike the disciple, who, while seeing you at prayer, was filled with the desire to learn how to pray like you, and because of not spending time with you, I do not succeed in knowing you better, by contemplating your intimacy with God (cf. Mk 9,2-8). I need to follow you once again, so as to see how you dialogue with your Father. To live without you weakens my desire to pray as only you know how. Show me, Lord, how to pray. Allow me to observe your intimacy with God. Keep me close to you, that I may be able to succeed in praying with your Father and my Father.

Moreover, you not only permitted that your disciples watch you at prayer, but above all you even wanted to teach them what to say and how to avoid certain attitudes at prayer, for you have shown that prayer is indispensable to discipleship. Any follower of yours who does not pray is disobedient and does not succeed to be what you want of him/her. I cannot be content with just doing much good, if I do not choose “the only thing necessary” (Lk 10,42), I do not serve you according to your will. Convert me that I may pray like you, in private and frequently.

What strikes me is how, besides making prayer a habit during your public life, you prayed promptly, when you wanted to take a decision. Did you entrust to your Father what you proposed to do, or did you ask for light and strength to realize the way? Did you always dialogue with God when you were about to take a crucial life decision? How do I act and what's wrong with me when I do not turn to God when making important choices regarding the service that he has entrusted to me? Why does being an apostle not increase my confidence in God? What can better guarantee the way I present myself to your people as one sent by you, if I have not spent time with you beforehand? That I may speak in your name and not only about you, help me, Lord, to speak to you more often, alone.

What surprises me most, Lord, is that besides encouraging us to pray, you determine the way we should pray. It would seem that it is not only important that we pray, but you tell us to pray in a particular way with certain words and attitudes. If you took it for granted that we would make prayer a habit, you are very wrong. Of what use would it be to know what and how to pray, if I were not accustomed to do so?

By teaching us how to pray, Lord, you may have thought that it would become easier to pray. The fact is that I can only be identified as your disciple, not so much by praying little or more, but if I pray as you taught me. To pray “like this” will convert me into your follower. It is no small thing to succeed in being your follower to be able to pray as you taught us to do so. Grant, me, Master, all that you expect of me; help me to pray like you. Given that you have taught me how to pray and expect me to do so, you have not allowed me much free will to invent other ways or formulas. I have no choice in telling you, my Lord, that I want you to count me among your disciples.

I acknowledge that the way you want me to pray also includes the sentiments that need to motivate my prayer. It would indeed be praying in vain if I were to articulate words perfectly, if they did not come from my heart. Your way to pray, Lord, comes from the heart and makes one stand before God. I do not know how to thank you ... but in the meantime, I will follow your instructions and while speaking to God, I will be obeying you.