(slide #1 [title slide]) “Lord, Teach us How to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_: Learning from the Master, Jesus”

NWLC plenary, Wednesday morning, May 17; Lester Ruth

(slide #2) Lord Jesus, teach us how to blank. What word should go in the blank here? What is so important that we should ask Jesus Christ to teach us how to do it? What skill or capacity is so critical that we need to learn how to do it from the Master himself? What would you ask Jesus to teach you how to do?

Lord Jesus, teach us how to blank. From what I can tell this request occurred only 1 time in the whole New Testament. 1 time in which a disciple asked Jesus for instruction on how to do something. Now in his life and ministry Jesus does a lot of teaching and the disciples were eager to find out about things. That’s true. But as far I can tell on only one instance does a disciple ask for instruction on doing something—not just knowing about something—but teaching on how to accomplish a particular task or skill. Lord, teach us how to blank. What word should go in the blank here?

This solitary how-to-do-something request comes at Luke 11:1. Jesus had been praying. His disciples had been observing. When he finished, one of his disciples came up to him (did the disciple come in great boldness? Did he come in halting hesitation? We don’t know because the verse doesn’t say) one of his disciples came up to him and asked, (slide #3) “Lord, teach us how to pray as John taught his disciples.”

Now, isn’t that interesting? Lord, teach us how to pray. That’s the single skill or ability the disciples ever asked to be taught how to do.

If you think about it, there were other skills they could have asked Jesus about learning how to do. They could have started with Jesus’ background in carpentry: Lord, teach us how to make tables and chairs just in case the fishing business ever takes a turn for the worst. Lord, help us to diversity. Or, speaking of fishing, this is surely a thought that crossed their minds at some time or another: Lord, teach us how to know exactly where to throw the nets so that we always catch some fish.

Or they could have focused on Jesus’ way with words. Lord, teach us how to spin out those parables that seem to turn the Pharisees’ questions on their head. That’s one. Lord, teach us how to have your uncanny ability to answer a question with a question that confounds your opponents into silence. Wouldn’t you love to have that ability: to have the capability to shut down an opponent just by asking a question that doesn’t leave them any wriggle room? I know I would love to have that ability.

Oh, wait. This one’s even better: Lord Jesus, teach us how to manage anger the way you do. What do you need to know to be able to only show anger that is righteous anger like Jesus did? I don’t know about you but a lot of my anger is not righteous anger but right-to-me anger.

But the disciples never asked for any of those skills or capacities. There was only a single one in the New Testament from what I can tell: Lord, teach us how to pray.

This skill must be pretty important.

Indeed, the way the request is framed indicates that it is.

For one thing, it was observing Jesus praying that sparked the question. This disciple, who is not named by Luke, appears to have just watched Jesus pray before popping the question. It’s not unreasonable to think that the disciple saw something there that he wanted to learn, something in how and what Jesus prayed that he wanted to imitate. Jesus as the master exemplar of prayer. Prayer, if it’s good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for us. Wouldn’t we want our prayers to match those prayed by Jesus?

Another reason to see this skill as important because it seems to be something that a disciple expected to learn from one’s teacher. Notice what came after the initial request: Lord, teach us to pray just as John (surely John the Baptist) taught his disciples. Jesus, don’t leave us in the dust. Don’t leave us as second class disciples. John taught his disciples how to pray. Do the same thing for us. We don’t want to be the have-nots in the world of 1st century disciples.

(slide #4) Isn’t that an interesting fact? In the world of the big-name, 1st century Jewish religious leaders, the disciples expected to learn from their respective leader the ability to learn how to pray. Prayer. Where the vision and sense of calling and mission of the religious leader gets expressed as speech addressed to God. Somehow, someway the prayer of the religious master reflected the mission of the master. Prayer, where a grand religious mind’s worldview gets turned to simple address to God.

And, finally, the skill of preaching seems important because the individual disciple’s request was actually one for the entire group: Lord, teach *us* how to pray. That makes sense that it would be a corporate request. If a religious master’s prayer articulates their sense of purpose and mission, then this should be something learned by that master’s entire community. If the one at the receiving end of the request is a “Lord,” then it’s fitting that the entire group of disciples learn from what’s taught.

And so, what did Jesus teach in response to the request?

(slide #5) On the screen are the words of the prayer Jesus taught them in the version in Luke. You’ll recognize it as a form of the prayer known as the Lord’s Prayer. Most of us know the version in Matthew a bit better because it is the one more commonly used.

The first thing that I notice is that in a very brief time it actually says lots of things, it prays lots of ways. Now, presuming that the prayer provides not only with an actual prayer to pray but serves as a model for prayer generally, I decided to take a crack at identifying the different kinds of things that the prayer says. I think that’s reasonable since the disciple asked to be taught how to pray, not simply be given a single prayer to say.

Here’s what I came up with. (slide #6, leave us slide until paragraph finished) The prayer begins with naming God. It then moves to praising God (May you name be hallowed); It then asks something of God broadly for the sake of the world; I’ll call that intercession (Let your Kingdom come) because it asks something for the entire world. It then asks something of God for the pray-ers (Give us each day our daily bread); I’ll call that petition because the asking is for one’s self. It then repeats another petition, asking for forgiveness, which implies a confession of sins. All that prayer about sin (explicit and implicit) is connected to a statement of commitment (for indeed we ourselves have forgiven those indebted to us). The prayer then concludes with another petition, asking something for the pray-ers, but this one has an edge: God, do not lead us into temptation. The edginess is that it implies that God could lead us into temptation or allow it to happen. That sounds a bit like the sort of things we see in the psalms of lament in the Old Testament, things which can get quite edgy at times: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (A prayer found on the lips of Christ as he hung on the cross.)

Anyway, back to the main point: to pray as a disciple of Christ means to learn to pray different things: praise, asking for others, asking for ourselves, all with some variety of emphasis. I could call this as achieving a full diet of prayer. Like all good diets it has some balance and breadth.

But don’t we know that diets, even diets of prayer, can be hard to achieve?

The Methodist founder, John Wesley, found that out 250 years ago. A priest in the Church of England, Wesley was encouraging the early Methodists to continue to go to worship in their Anglican parishes. “But we don’t wanna,” was their reply, “We like our Methodist worship better.” “But you need to go,” Wesley answered. “Why?” they asked back. “Because Methodist worship on its own doesn’t have a full diet of prayer,” Wesley said. Specifically, here’s what he said: (slide #7) “If it (parachurch Methodist worship) were designed to be instead of Church service, it would be essentially defective. For it seldom has the four grand parts of public prayer: deprecation, petition, intercession, and thanksgiving.”

And a good diet of prayer can be hard to achieve today, too. Recently I’ve been looking at the types of prayers found in the most used contemporary worship songs, compiling a complete list of every song that has ever appeared on a top-25 CCLI list since the first list in 1989 and looking at how they pray in their lyrics. I’ve put my assessment into a spreadsheet so I can see what tendencies and trends there have tended been.

Let’s look at my analysis. (slide #8). I’ve grouped the songs that contain prayers, which I identify as making direct statements to God (e.g., “Lord, You are great” I counted as a prayer; “The Lord is great” I didn’t.) And then I tried to create a kind of grid to assess the types of prayer. To create the grid I brought together my familiarity with the lyrics and the history of contemporary worship along with thinking about the types of prayer I’d seen in the psalms and in the history of worship along with looking at the schemes to classifying prayers I found in a few authors.

This is what I came up with: 3 main sorts of prayers: (slide #9) an honoring cluster (identified by the blue) that aim to honor God somehow, (slide #10) a requesting cluster (identified by the middle white columns) that asks something from God, and (slide #11) a self-disclosing cluster (identified by the green columns) that breaks open the relationship and position of the pray-ers to God or God to the pray-ers.

Let me take a break for just a second and acknowledge I’m more than happy to have this taxonomy critiqued and tweaked. This schema was not on the tablets that Moses brought down from the mountain and so I’m not going to defend it to the death. It’s just my honest attempting, using a variety of historical and scriptural sources, along with familiarity with contemporary worship songs born from prior research, to come up with a reasonable taxonomy to see what’s going on. And let me acknowledge that I’m not trying to turn prayer into a science only to be observed from afar. I pray and I expect you to pray, too. And I expect our churches to prayer, which you’ll see in a minute, is my main point. And, finally, I’ll happily acknowledge that it was really hard sometimes to figure out according to my schema every instance of prayer in every song I looked it. Sometimes I just had to shrug my shoulders and say, “Hmmm. It seems more X than Z.”

Having acknowledged that we’re dealing with clay that still pliable and not concrete that’s fixed, let me get back to explaining my taxonomy of prayer. Within each cluster I identified several different sub-types. There were 4 in the honoring cluster. (slide #12) Ht identifies prayers of thanksgiving. I looked for explicit statements of thanks, thanksgiving, or gratitude. (slide #13) Hp identified praise. Here I included direct statements to God that used words like glorify, praise, awe, holy, worthy magnify, lift, honor, or hosanna. (slide #14) There’s also Had, which are statements of adoring God. I looked for prayers that seemed to have a little bit stronger emphasis on honoring arising from love. Key words might be adore, love, or even worship. (slide #15) Finally, there were a group of prayers I labelled as Haf: these honored God by affirming honorable things about God; they were plain statements of truth that set up or hinted at honoring God without using an explicit statement where the pray-er honors God directly. Haf prayers tended to be cosmic or big-picture leaning.

(slide #16 leave up for entire paragraph) Perhaps some examples would be helpful. “I thank you, God, for creating all things” would be Ht, a prayer of thanksgiving. “I magnify you, Lord, as the creator” would be Hp, praise. “I adore you, my God and my creator” would be Had, a prayer that adores. And “You, Lord God, are the creator and ruler of all” would be Haf, a statement that honors God by what it affirms without a verb by which the pray-er explicitly and directly honors God (thank, magnify, and adore in the first three examples). Like I said earlier, precise classification could be like trying to grab hold of a greased pig at a rodeo. It’s not always clear.

There are 3 subtypes in my requesting cluster. This whole cluster can be a bit easier to identify because all 3 subtypes are usually expressed as an imperative: God, do this! The difference is what’s being asked or who would benefit from the request. (slide #17) Rint are prayers of intercession in which ask on behalf of others, elsewhere, not part of that worshiping assembly. (slide #18) Rpet are prayers of petition that ask for the pray-er or others part of the worshiping assembly. (slide #19) Rinv are prayers seeking God’s presence at that time or in the worship service. I looked for requests or statements like welcome, come, or fill.

Finally, there’s the self-disclosing cluster that breaks open the relationship and position of the pray-ers to God or God to the pray-ers. (slide #20) The first of these is Sl, which stands for lament. I’m pulling this from those psalms that express complaint or wondering about God. Think Psalm 13 (How Long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?) or Psalm 22 (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?). (slide #21) Then there’s Sc, which is a confession of sin. And so I wasn’t just looking for a reference to sin (Lord, you wash away our sin) but for a plain admission of doing something wrong (I have sinned and it needs to be washed away). (slide #22) Sd were disclosures of desiring; I looked for the prayer to express a want, desire, or need for God. And, finally, there were Sa prayers that affirmed relationship between God and the worshiper. (slide #23) SaG affirmed something about God in relationship to the worshiper (Lord, you are the friend of sinners) and (slide #24) SaH affirmed something about the worshiper in relationship to God (Lord, I am your friend).

And so, what can we find once we have a complete spreadsheet? We could break it down several ways. It’s interesting to look at some trends, for instance, (slide #25) in how earlier songs tended to have more direct statements of praise and adoration (think phrases like “I lift and praise your name” or “Lord, I love you”) but (slide #26) since the mid-2000s recently written songs have more of a tendency to generally affirm positive attributes or actions about God. Or I could point out the tendency toward greater prayer complexity within recently written songs. In other words, as songs have gotten more structurally complex over the last 20 years as we’ve moved from simpler verse/chorus structures to the use of bridges and pre-choruses, the lyrics have tended to increase in the number of distinct expressions of prayer within any one song. This first slide (slide #27) shows the fewer distinct statements of prayer in some of the earlier songs while this second slide (slide #28) shows the greater number in more recent songs. (slide #29) I have a graph, too, that charts the numbers in that pink column so we can see the tendency toward greater prayer complexity over the time.

Those are all interesting factors but I’d like to look at two significant omissions or gaps in the type of prayer.

(slide #30) One is the absence of confession of sin. By that mean I mean a clear statement we have done something wrong. The songs are relatively weak in acknowledging human activity that misses the mark. The key is activity, us doing some astray, us missing the mark. (slide #31) Of the songs that have appeared on a top-25 list there are only a few instances: In “The Heart of Worship” we’re sorry for the thing we’ve made of worship; in “From the Inside Out” we honestly and rightly acknowledge that a thousand times we’ve failed; in “Your Love Never Fails” we’re open that we keep making mistakes; and in “Lord I Need You” we’re honest about our dependence, telling the Lord that without him we fall apart.

Making too much of worship, failing, perpetually making mistakes, and falling apart without the Lord. All true, absolutely true. But those phrases don’t even begin to explore my complicity in the complexity of sin. Ask anyone that I’ve ever sinned against. They’ll tell you that the songs are letting me off the hook too easily. And I’m no John the Baptist, a prophet announcing people’s sin in the wilderness, but my guess is that your sinful activity runs a bit deeper, too.

Let me point out that the songs do use the word “sin” a pretty good bit: 16 different songs (about 1 in 10) use the word. But here’s the interesting thing: it’s always used a noun, not a verb. That creates the impression that sin is something we have—and with which the Lord deals, cleansing, forgiving, etc., thank God—but not necessarily something we do. These songs create the impression that sin is something we have, like acne, not something we do (perpetually and perennially I engage in corrupting and disfiguring behavior). Sin as something I have and not something I do. I could only wish it was like that.

There’s a problem here because the Bible’s real clear on this point: we sin. Whether in thought, word, or deed, we sin. And so, for me, here’s the million dollar question (slide #32): are we as honest about our sinning activity as the Bible is?

If we’re not doing confessing it in our songs, when are we doing it in our worship? When do we get to confess that we are a people of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips?

(slide #33) The other significant gap or omission is the absence of intercession for others. There’s a good, steady stream of petitioning for ourselves going on. There is a lot of asking from God going on. Asking is not the omission; asking for others is.

But the songs seldom ask God for anything for anyone beyond the four walls of the church. (slide #34) You can count the number of instances on one hand: “Shine Jesus Shines” asks Jesus to fill the land with the Father’s glory and also asks for the divine river to flood the nations with grace and mercy. “Your Grace is Enough” asks the God of Jacob to remember God’s people and children. In “Mighty to Save” we request that the whole world will be able to see the light of Christ. And that’s it. These are fine, outstanding requests but it is a short list.

Perhaps we can rely upon the rest of a typical service to request God’s activity in the world and for the world. But in my experience as I visit a range of churches, nope, that’s rarely done there. It’s easy for me to find services that never pray for anyone beyond the walls of the sanctuary. I could include my own congregation in that. Even though we’re small enough to be able to have people lift up “joys and concerns” for prayer and even though the congregation has a strong social consciousness (apart from prayer it thinks about the world and others a lot), when we say “let us pray” our focus tends to narrow.

I don’t know why that is but it’s a problem in two respects. First is the matter of whether we’re fulfilling our vocation as a royal priesthood if we are not praying for others. The New Testament is real clear that in Christ we’ve been made into a priesthood. Can you imagine priests being self-centered in their ministry, including their prayer ministry? Well, you know, that’s not real hard to imagine because it happened several times in the Old Testament. And it’s not a pretty picture. God’s got a thing or two to say about such priests.

And imagine Jesus Christ’s own priesthood. He has an ongoing intercessory prayer ministry in heaven. Can you imagine what it would be like if he became self-centered in his prayers? If Jesus as priest only interceded and prayed for himself? Poof! Pack your bags and head for hell. There goes all hope for us.

And so here’s another million dollar question: (slide #35) Are we fulfilling our vocation as a priesthood if we are not praying for others?

There’s another way to get at the propriety of praying for others. I like to ask folks an easy question: how broad is the Lordship of Jesus Christ? What or who falls outside of his lordship? That’s a pretty easy list to compile: nothing! And so, (slide #36) are we truly confessing Jesus Christ as Lord if our prayers are not as broad as his Lordship?

I have this silly habit of wanting to take ideas and turn them into bumper stickers or t-shirts. Those are profound ideas: what’s the nature of Jesus’ ongoing intercessory ministry as priest? What’s the breadth of the lordship of Jesus Christ? And I can’t help but try to find some way to get them on my car’s bumper.

A few years ago, taking my cue from those old WWJD (what would Jesus do?) bracelets—do you remember those?—I turned this reflection on the prayer of Jesus Christ into an acronym: (slide #37) WDJP? What does Jesus pray? Notice the present tense verb: what *does* Jesus pray?

That present tense verb is important because there’s an ancient way of thinking about Jesus’ prayer not only occurring as part of his great high priestly ministry in heaven but through us as his body, the church. (slide #38) Here’s how the 5th century bishop and theologian Augustine put it when he was once preaching on Psalm 85: “When the body of the Son (i.e., the church) prays, it does not separate its Head from itself; and it is the one Savior of his body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who prays for us, and prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our head; he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize our words in him and his words in us.”

WDJP? What does Jesus pray? What does Jesus pray through us? I tell you what, if you start thinking about the stewardship involved in using our mouths to pray what Jesus prays, would pray, wants to pray using us, the realization of that stewardship will motivate you to get rid of all trivial songs and prayers. And it should motivate us to seek a breadth and balance in our prayers that’s fitting to the life, lordship, work, and priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Lord, teach us how to pray as John taught his disciples was not simply a request to learn a few words; it was a disciple’s request and thus it was a request to be conformed to Jesus Christ when our mouths address God in prayer. Isn’t that always the way it is with discipleship to Jesus Christ? It’s not just a matter of learning a few things—or how to do a few things—it is a matter of learning him and learning how to be more like him. Like Master, like disciple, that’s how it is with Jesus and those who wish to be his. Lord, teach us how to pray. Perhaps it is the only skill we need to learn from him.

And so, what’s the takeaway? I can think of three.

(slide #39) Now that you know what the gaps are and the tendencies are of the most popular songs, write or find songs that fill in the gaps and smooth out the tendencies. Surely there’s a wealth of examples and materials in the New Testament about how to confess our active doing of sin, isn’t there? (That’s a rhetorical question. Of course there is)

(slide #40) Secondly, continue to use these songs but be aware of the gaps and tendencies when you do. Balance and compensate with the spoken words in a service. Whether as independent prayers or as the brief, spontaneous prayers that are sometimes said in a set between songs, use those opportunities to provide the balance and breadth missing in the song lyrics.

(slide #41) Finally, as a stopgap measure: teach your folks to have a full diet of prayer in their private devotional life and model it at other times in the life of your church. While it’s best and more historically faithful to have a breadth of prayer within a service, if you can’t or don’t, somehow and someway make sure you are interceding for the world. In a world that’s self-absorbed, the least the church can do is model sacrificial service in our prayer life.

Let us, therefore, recognize our words in him and his words in us. And there’s one main thing we need to do to aim for that end. It’s to make this request.

(slide #42) Lord Jesus, teach us how to pray, please.