

**Sermon File # 596**

**Scripture Text: Luke 11:1-13**

**Sermon Title: *Jesus Teaches about Prayer***

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## ***Jesus Teaches about Prayer***

### **Introduction:**

Open your Bibles with me to Luke 11:1-13.

This past Sunday we looked in the Gospel of Luke to consider Jesus' call to discipleship (5:1-11). Luke also has a great interest in sharing with us what Jesus said about prayer, and writes today's text after his account of Jesus' experience at the home of Martha and Mary (10:38-42). There he has taught Martha about the importance of seeking first, above the pursuit of nonessential activity, worship at his feet. Luke now shares an important segment of what Jesus teaches about prayer, which is a part of our "sitting at Jesus' feet" as his disciples.

Follow as I read **Luke 11:1-13**.

Perhaps no subject is of greater interest to Christians than the subject of prayer. In fact, almost everyone is not only interested in prayer, but perhaps at some time of other, has practiced prayer. Some prayers are not even thought of as prayer in the religious or spiritual sense of the word. Occasionally prayer is simply a reaction to danger or distress when someone gasps, "Help!" looking to a higher power for deliverance. As some military chaplains will attest, there are rarely any "foxhole atheists." When even unbelievers are facing real and present

danger often they become believers, or at least are willing to take a chance on there being a God who helps in times of trouble.

As you're aware, the Supreme Court in 1962 passed a law forbidding class participatory prayer in public schools, in deference to First Amendment religious establishment clause of separation of church and state. Some years after this law was established, walking through the corridors of the elementary school where my wife was a teacher, I saw a sign posted on the bulletin board, which read: "*NOTICE! In the event of a nuclear attack, the ban on prayer will be temporarily suspended.*"

Even by Christians, prayer is often regarded as a means to the end of obtaining God's protection or provision of something we want, either for ourselves or for others. We know that the Bible teaches prayer and that it is filled with prayers, particularly in the Psalms. Also, as Christians we know that we should pray and yet we find that our practice, discipline and experience of prayer often leaves us disappointed, either with ourselves or with the results we expected from prayer. I recommend to you Philip Yancey's book, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* which honestly grapples with the issue of unanswered prayer vis-à-vis all of the biblical promises about prayer.

The late Roy Honeycutt, when he was president of my alma mater seminary, during the time I served as a trustee, related an experience when he was guest preacher in a rural church in Kentucky. After the worship service, when members of the church were greeting him and thanking him for his sermon, the president was approached by a layman who offered his greeting and compliments. This man, whom Honeycutt perceived to be a farmer, invited the seminary president to share with him any prayer requests that he might have, either for himself or for the seminary community. To encourage Honeycutt to share his requests the farmer said, "I've been havin' a lot of luck with my prayers lately."

If we are honest we will admit that there are times when we doubt the power and efficacy of prayer. We wonder why prayer is even necessary, since God is sovereign and he knows our needs and the needs of others before we do and much better than we do. We are likely to become discouraged also if we spend time offering prayers that often are not answered and are tempted to think we're not having much "luck" with our prayers. So "Why bother?" we ask ourselves.

These thoughts and disappointments betray an underlying misunderstanding of the nature of prayer. Let me be quick to add, however, that prayer is a mystery that no one can fully understand. And I certainly am not qualified to be an answer man about prayer. But Jesus, the eternal Son of God, is the one to teach us about the nature of prayer and its importance for us. In our text, Jesus teaches with precept and with parable, and shows us that prayer is much more than an exercise in futility, informing God about something he already knows.

Prayer is not an onerous duty that requires hours of torturous rigor in trying to change the mind of God about something or other that we want changed. And certainly there is no luck involved in prayer. And there are no prayers that are regarded as superior or inferior, based on the form they use.

In our text, Jesus shows us, first of all, that...

### **Prayer is a *priority* (verse 1)**

One of Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them to pray. The fact that this disciple said, "teach *us*" indicates that this was not his request alone, but rather he was acting as a spokesman for the other disciples as well. It was common in first century Judaism for various sects and groups to have distinct prayers and ways of praying that reflected their particular theologies and teachings (See Walter L Liefeld, page 946, vol. 8, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*). As John the Baptist's disciples had learned to pray from him, the disciples of Jesus want to learn from him. It may well be that the request was not only *how* to pray but to make prayer a priority. "Lord, teach us how to pray and teach us *to* pray, that we *ought to* pray," may have been the thought behind the request. Perhaps he was voicing what we often think: "Teach us that prayer is worth the effort."

They had come to realize that for Jesus prayer was a priority...

#### *As seen in his life*

The disciples had seen that Jesus, whom they had come to believe and follow as the Messiah, the anointed Son of God, was a man of prayer. They had seen him perform mighty works and give wise teaching that seemed to flow out of his life of prayer. They saw him on many occasions rise from sleep and slip away to pray to the Father in heaven. All night was spent in prayer before Jesus chose the disciples (Luke 6:12). And they were to hear him offer his great High Priestly Prayer on the night of his betrayal and arrest (John 17), when also he prayed his agonizing prayer of surrender in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:39-46, and parallels). Some of the disciples may have heard Jesus' final prayer of committal from the cross (Luke 23:46). No doubt they must have thought that if their Master and Lord so depended on prayer, how much more should they! They needed to be taught the importance of prayer and how to offer their prayers to the Father.

#### *As heard in his teaching*

These disciples also had heard Jesus' admonitions to pray. When Jesus came upon the scene of his frustrated disciples, who could not deliver or heal the boy with an evil spirit, Jesus succeeded where his disciples had failed. When asked the reason for their failure, Jesus replied, "This kind (of demon deliverance) can

come out only by prayer” (Mark 9:29). Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples the priority of prayer for life and service.

All the way to the end of his earthly ministry and life, Jesus taught the importance of prayer. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus admonished his inner core of disciples (Peter, James and John) to “Watch and pray” so that they would not fall into temptation, warning them that “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Mark 14:38). Prayer, according to Jesus, is a priority.

And also...

### **Prayer has a *pattern* (verses 2-4)**

Jesus responded to this request with what is known in many circles as The Lord’s Prayers, and in other quarters as The Model Prayer. Perhaps it’s best called The Disciples’ Prayer, and that in the plural. Jesus said to *them*, “When *you* (plural) pray.” The Disciples’ Prayer is in a somewhat different and longer form in Matthew’s Gospel (6:9-13), in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. There is good reason to believe that Jesus gave this prayer on more than one occasion because of the way it summarizes the heart of his teaching and the core of what should be the concern and passion of his followers.

As New Testament scholar I Howard Marshall says, “This prayer sums up the teaching of Jesus in brief fashion, expressing the longing which the disciples should feel for the action of God in setting up his kingdom, their dependence on him as Father for their daily needs, their relationship of reconciliation with him and their fellow man, and their need of his power to preserve them from yielding to temptation” (page 455, *Commentary on Luke* (NIGTC)).

Although there can be merit in reciting this prayer in worship and other gatherings, I find that it serves as an outline of essentials that should be included in our praying, whatever the form our prayers take. Our praying includes always the pattern of...

### *Addressing the Father*

Although the exact form of address is not important, and whether we address our prayers to the Lord Jesus or the Holy Spirit as well as the heavenly Father we are always speaking to the Triune and one God. But we do well do listen to Jesus who teaches us to address our “Father “(verse 2), and in Matthew’s account, “Our Father in heaven” (6:9).

This is our incredible privilege. In the Old Testament, God was not addressed as Father by the individual and was thought to be Father of the nation in a collective sense. Jesus dared to address God as his Father, using the intimate Aramaic word, “Abba.” And the “amazing new thing” was that Jesus invited his disciples

into this same relationship with the heavenly Father, teaching them to call him, “Abba,” our Father (See Marshall, above citation, pages 456-457 and Robert Stein, page 324, *Luke: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC). Jesus is saying that through prayer we address God as a Father of love and care who desires a personal relationship with us.

This relationship with God as Father is possible only through faith in Jesus Christ, who has opened the way for us to the Father in heaven. As John Calvin wrote, it would be foolish, “nay crazy and presumptuous to invoke God as Father unless we were made his sons” (page 206, vol. 1, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*). Through faith in Jesus and repentance from sin the barrier of sin is removed, our sins are forgiven and a relationship is established between God and us (Romans 5:1). Without this relationship, we can only mouth prayers, hoping that at best they will invoke good luck. But prayer is really about a relationship with God as our Father, who invites us to share with him the concerns he already has for us and the world. Prayer is joining God in his agenda...

### *Seeking his honor and kingdom*

“Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come” (verse 2). Prayer is not about getting on with our wish list, but is first of all a centering of our lives once again before the throne of God. And the first thing we realize in God’s presence is his majesty and holiness. Our desire is to worship him and that all the peoples of the earth shall worship and glorify him, as indeed they shall (Philippians 2:9-11). This desire for the honoring of God serves to keep our prayers from being petty and self-centered.

We also pray that the kingdom of God will come. As disciples of Jesus we learn to share his passion for his rule to be re-established in this fallen world. This is why Jesus came to earth, that he might rule as Lord in the lives of those he calls to forgiveness, redemption and transformation. By faith in Jesus we become his children and part of his holy nation, his kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9). And now our primary loyalty and passion is no longer with this fallen world order, but with the kingdom of God. We live by his grace and the power of his Spirit, with a new morality, ethic and agenda, to promote the gospel of salvation through Christ and the transformation of society in preparation for the consummated kingdom of God. As we live our daily lives we seek for Christ to make us more kingdom-of-God minded and to be on his agenda.

Before we begin to ask for things, we first ask ourselves how this request or concern fits with the agenda of God’s kingdom. Will this advance the gospel, leading someone to Christ and strengthen his church? And we ask that we might live in the awareness that the kingdom of God, though appearing powerless and insignificant to this fallen world, is where the triumphant power of God resides. We place our prayers under the shadow of the cross. And we pray, as did the

first century church, “Maranatha, our Lord Come” (1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20). We know that the kingdom will be consummated and that everything needs to be done with that expectation.

Matthew’s Disciples’ Prayer adds, “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10). When our desire is for God’s name to be honored and his kingdom to come, that *is* God’s will being done. If we sincerely desire his glory and his agenda to be advanced, then necessarily we submit to his will for our lives. I have to confess, submission to God’s will has been most difficult for me lately. But if we seek his kingdom and righteousness above all else, even though it leads in the way of surrender to a cross of self-denial, we can be assured that “all these things will be given (us) as well” (Matthew 6:33). When we seek the kingdom we are ready for...

#### *Asking for what we need*

We are taught to ask for our daily bread. What does this mean in our day and culture of fully stocked cupboards and refrigerators? It means that we are to realize and to never forget our absolute dependence on God, for even the material needs of life. This sense of dependence also cultivates gratitude. We learn to pray for the necessities of life, remembering to keep these needs subsumed under the glorifying of God’s name and the advancement of his kingdom. We are spiritual but also creatures of real flesh and blood. And we need to sense Christ’s presence even in the food we eat, upon which we depend for our mortal life.

But also, as Jesus said, we are to seek the food that never perishes, the life of God, our life in the Spirit (John 6:25-58). Prayer is our daily and even constant declaration of dependence on God and the life he gives us by his Spirit. Jesus rebuked the crowd who sought him only for his power to provide their physical food and who spurned his offer for the true spiritual Bread of Life through a vital personal relationship with him (John 6:26-27).

#### *Keeping relationships right*

“Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (verse 4). Our relationship with God is possible only because of his forgiveness and reconciliation through the blood of the cross (Colossians 1:20). As forgiven sinners, we have a daily need, not to be restored to our relationship (which can never be lost) but to maintain our fellowship with Christ. This is the “foot washing” of daily forgiveness for fellowship that Jesus spoke about and that John says is necessary (John 13:1-11; 1 John 1:9).

And we cannot enjoy or expect God’s forgiveness of us if we are not willing to forgive others. We must remember that we will never have to forgive the enormity of offences done against us that Jesus suffered because of our sins.

As Darrell Bock says, it is wrong to ask from God what we are not willing to give to others—namely forgiveness (page 309, *NIV Application Commentary: Luke*). Jesus expounded a bit more in his Sermon on the Mount about the fact that we when shut our hearts toward others we of necessity have shut our hearts to God's forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15).

### *Avoiding evil*

“And lead us not into temptation” (verse 4). Matthew adds, “but deliver us from the evil one” (6:13). We are called to salvation and to life in the kingdom as a holy nation, a distinct people. And so we learn to pray with this awareness of our dependence on God to give us grace to conquer in spiritual warfare. We know that Satan hurls his fiery darts at us and thus we must always and constantly put on the armor of God through prayer (Ephesians 6:10-18).

I know that the greatest battleground for Satan in my life is within my old, sinful flesh. That's why I must pray for God to give me victory over the downward tug of the flesh. I'm often my own worst enemy in this matter of spiritual warfare. *The Message* paraphrases this last line as “Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.” I depend on God's grace to sustain me through whatever challenges he allows to come my way, whether temptations or tests, which are temptations to fear and to distrust.

Knowing the priority and the pattern, Jesus knew, was not enough. And so he taught a parable that shows us that...

### **Prayer is based on a *principle* (verses 5-8)**

In this story Jesus creates a situation familiar to his audience. In the ancient Middle East hospitality was an important responsibility, not just for individual families, but for entire communities. Often, because of extreme heat, travel was done at nighttime. So, it would not be strange for a friend to show up late and night, expecting you to show hospitality by providing food and lodging. And so, a man, whose own groceries are in short supply, knows of a friend who has a good stock of bread left over and so goes to him at midnight to borrow enough bread for his guest.

What Jesus seems to be creating in this illustration about prayer is a picture that shows us...

### *The glory and character of God*

This is a story of contrasts between the friend in bed, with the provisions the man needs, and God, who never sleeps, and who has all the provisions we need (Psalm 121:4). But more than the fact of God's ability to meet all of our needs is

the fact of his willingness. The man in the story is a friend, but somewhat short of being a friend willing to eagerly jump to meet his friend's need. You might say that he comes across as a grouch. And he gives excuses for his immediate unwillingness—his children are asleep on what is probably the family mat on the floor of the one room in the house. And removing the lock was a cumbersome and noisy business.

But Jesus is drawing a contrast between this reluctant grouch and our heavenly Father, who invites us to come and even to come at midnight. In the Bible midnight is the time when urgent needs are pursued and when many things that are most important to us, which cannot wait till the next day, are pursued. Examples are the plague upon the firstborn in Egypt that allowed the exodus of the Israelites during the night (Exodus 12:29ff); the praying and singing of Paul and Silas that set the stage for the dramatic earthquake and conversion of the jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:25ff); the preaching of Paul in Troas (Acts 20:7ff). These were events at midnight, bringing the unexpected and the sometimes dramatic acts of God (See "Midnight," page 550-551, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, et. al., editors).

I recall a need we had when it was almost midnight. After attending the wedding of some good friends in Western Kentucky, we drove on to Nashville, Tennessee, USA, to rendezvous with members of Nancy's family at the home of her sister, who would join us the next day on a trip to Florida. We were amazed and bewildered to discover that her sister had no listed telephone number and we had lost the address and phone number we thought was with us in the car. As we began looking for a hotel room we soon realized that a big country western show had drawn tourists who had filled about every hotel room within an hour or two of Nashville. And our little children were in no mood for another hour of riding in the car. Nor did I want to drive further away from where we were supposed to meet up with Nancy's family. I remembered that I had a friend in Nashville. But I decided, about the time I finally found a good hotel room, that he was not the kind of friend I could waken at midnight.

But Jesus is saying that our Father is one we can approach, and like the man in the story, there is the matter of...

#### *God's reputation and his "avoidance of shame"*

In verse 8, our text reads that the sleeping man finally and reluctantly got up to give his friend the bread he needed because of the beseeching man's boldness. The footnote says the word can be translated "persistence," as some translations do. Admittedly, the word is difficult to translate because there are no English equivalents.

The best explanation and interpretation are given by Kenneth E Bailey, who lived for 40 years in the Middle East and was Professor of New Testament at the Near

East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon. In his landmark book on some of Jesus' parables, he makes the main idea of this parable come into clearer focus. He says that in this parable Jesus is teaching us that God is a God of honor and that we can have complete assurance that our prayers are being heard. Once the key word of the parable is understood, the cultural elements fall into place and the main idea comes into focus. The key word is that difficult to translate word in verse 8, "anaideia," that Bailey says is best translated "avoidance of shame."

As we have noted, the entire community was responsible to provide hospitality for a traveling guest. "In going to his neighbor, the host is asking the sleeper to fulfill his duty to the guest of the village," not just his private guest. And Bailey said that his refusal would be unthinkable and would bring him great shame if he refused his duty. Had he refused to help, the host would have cursed the stinginess of the sleeper and gone to another house in the village. And the story of the man's stinginess would have been all over the village by the next morning. The sleeper would have heard cries of "shame" wherever he went. So, because of his desire for "avoidance of shame" he will arise and grant what the borrower wants (See pages 132-133, *Poet and Peasant and through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*. See also Mark Strauss, page 1729, *NLT Study Bible, New Living Translation, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, notes on Luke).

Jesus is assuring us that the heavenly Father will respond to our prayers and to our needs because his reputation is at stake. Throughout the word of God we read about his being perfectly righteous, faithful and trustworthy. And when God makes a promise to meet our every need and to fulfill his purpose for our lives, he will act in order to keep his name and reputation in tact. As we see in the Disciples' Prayer, we are to pray for God's name to be hallowed, to be regarded as holy. And the great intercessory prayers of Moses were motivated by his desire for God's name, his reputation, to be protected from his enemies (Deuteronomy 9:25-29). When you, a child of God, come before him with a need, it is according to and consistent with his character of love and faithfulness to meet your need. But the way he meets our needs and also his timing are not always what we expect or even desire; thus, once again faith and trust are essential.

But in our coming boldly before the heavenly Father Jesus says also that...

### **Prayer requires *persistence* (verses 9 & 10)**

Jesus has told us that the Father will preserve his honor by responding to our prayers, proving his love and absolute faithfulness. But he expects us to continue to come before him with persistence, as we see in verses 9&10. There is to be...

### *Continuous asking, seeking and knocking*

In these verses Jesus uses the present tense: “Keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking.” This addresses the fact that we are not to recite a prayer as though it were some kind of magical incantation or ritual that God is bound to honor. Prayer is an ongoing conversation that is the warp and woof of a relationship with God. I don’t think that Jesus is saying we are to spend hours, days and weeks and more trying to overcome God’s reluctance or trying to prove that we really want something. I agree with the person who said that sometimes our most eloquent prayer is simply, “Help!”

I think Jesus is saying that prayer is our ongoing conversation with God by which we repeatedly and continually offer our requests to him and assert our total dependence on him throughout the day. I think we see something of this in the letters of Paul, when the apostle assured the churches that he always remembered them in prayer. When he was thinking about them, even as he traveled by land or sea, he was keeping them before God in the attitude of prayer.

And for us as well, we are to live each day, building into our way of thinking, the attitude of prayer. I begin my days with my personal worship with listening prayer, as I read the Word and write prayers in my journal and seeking to center my life under the Lordship of Christ. But then, throughout the day I call myself back into the attitude, spirit and focus of worship and concern with which I began the day in my listening prayer. And this requires discipline, but is also what enables me to “wait upon the Lord” for renewed strength (40:31, ESV).

The normal days of our lives are inimical to this life of prayerful dependence. We are surrounded by a fallen world that bases itself on human power, invention and self-reliance and self-assertion. We are told that the life of prayer is one of weakness. But as praying believers we understand that our strength and wisdom come from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth (Psalm 46:1, etc.). Moment by moment we remind ourselves of our dependence on the Lord to give his daily bread, to keep us forgiven and forgiving and to deliver us from the evil in ourselves and the evil one and his minions around us. We are, with every encounter, asking the Lord for his kingdom to come. We seek, as we face each opportunity, the advancement of the kingdom. We knock at the door of opportunity to feed upon Christ and his word, that his perfect will might be done in us and through us (Verses 2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13).

### *Assured results*

There are many benefits to our continual asking, seeking and knocking. We learn that God’s timing is always best, and God may be saying, regarding our requests for a specific need, “wait a while.” He may be waiting till we ourselves have grown in faith and patience or until the timing of circumstances is right. He

may be waiting until the thing we desire grows less important to us, thus refining our requests and showing us that what he wants us to desire more than anything else is his presence in us. I think this may well be the “idea” behind the promise of Psalm 37:4: “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” As we grow in our delight in the Lord our desires are changed from our desires to his desires for us. Perhaps this is also what Jesus means by our seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and then God’s giving us “all these other things as well” (Matthew 6:33). Perhaps the greatest result of our continuous asking is our inner transformation into a greater likeness of Christ himself. He indeed desires to provide us with all we need. But his will for us is that we have desires that reflect his desires that indeed coincide with his desires for us.

I have often wondered about the promises of Jesus that if we ask for anything in prayer, believing, we will receive (Matthew 21:22). I have come to realize that this is not a promise to those who have such faith that they can bring a “grocery list” of needs to God and expect to receive what they have asked, be these things a better job, better health, or financial circumstances. I think rather Jesus is saying that when we lose ourselves in him, and seek him first of all, that we begin to ask for the things for which Jesus himself prayed. As you study the prayers of Jesus, you find that he asked for kingdom of God things, for the church to be protected from the evil one and be united in him and for the Father to glorify himself in the Son (e.g., John 17). Jesus gives a very important condition for assured results from prayer:

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7).

That new car is no longer the object of your affection and the desire of your heart. Rather, it is to ask, seek and knock at the door of the Father, to know him in his fullness and enjoy his fellowship as never before. And then you can be sure he will take care of your transportation needs, and he might even do it “in style.” Or, better, he give you a greater heart for him and less of a heart for material things.

Finally, in this passage Jesus teaches us that...

### **Prayer looks to a *promise* (verses 11-13)**

In the parable of the friend at midnight (verses 5-8), Jesus implied a “how much more” argument, giving a “lesser to greater” application to make his point. If a sleepy, surly “friend” will reluctantly acquiesce to a persistent request in order to avoid being shamed by his neighbors, *how much more* will an ever-awake, all-powerful, wise and loving heavenly Father act in a way that is consistent with his reputation, maintaining his honor and glory?

Now Jesus uses an illustration that shows “how much more” a much greater Father in heaven, far greater than the best earthly parent, is certain to keep his promise to give us what we need.

This promise is...

*From a much greater Father in heaven*

*The Message* paraphrase helps this image to come alive for us:

“If your little boy asks for a serving of fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? If your little girl asks for an egg, do you trick her with a spider? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing—you’re at least decent to your own children.”

For our prayers to please and cooperate with the purposes of God we must begin to think more highly of the kind of God who invites us to pray. Tragically, the faith of many is stunted by a damaged concept of fatherhood because of their experience with and memories of a dysfunctional father. Jesus seems to at least obliquely allude to this phenomenon by contrasting the fatherhood of a perfect heavenly Father with evil earthly fathers. Jesus says that even bad fathers are not usually cruel to their children. And so, if we as fallen fathers are likely to give our children food for survival, how much more likely is a gracious, faithful and loving Father in heaven likely to give us the things we need?

Our prayers are likely never to rise above the level of our worship. Only in the context of worship do we gain a concept of the kind of God to whom we pray. Our God is the great Creator and sustainer of a universe far beyond our comprehension. He is not only omnipotent but also omniscient and he is aware of all the thoughts and motives of all people everywhere. And in our praying as followers of Christ, we are to keep the cross always in view. The cross proved once and for all that God deeply and tenderly loves us. And so Paul expresses this concept of God’s love that should dominate our every prayer:

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). Indeed, our Father in heaven will give us, says Jesus...

*The best gift of all*

Again, we see the mysterious nature of prayer, when all of a sudden Jesus ends this lesson by talking about the Holy Spirit. Wait a minute! Weren’t we being taught to pray for things like daily bread and right relationships, and didn’t Jesus even give illustrations about seeking bread and also about putting food on our children’s dinner plates? But then, here again is the “how much more” principle.

The Father in heaven will give to us his greatest gift, so how much more will he not give us the other things we need? And this greatest of all gifts is the Holy Spirit. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says the Father in heaven "will give *good gifts* to those who ask him" (7:11). I take this to mean that the good and best gifts the Father gives us are eternal and have to do with our life in the Spirit and the spiritual blessings that God wants to pour into our lives.

The most important, life-changing, heaven-guaranteeing possession we have as followers of Jesus is the Holy Spirit. He is the assurance of eternal life and is indeed the essence of eternal life, the life of God himself within us and the guarantee of everlasting life to come (2 Corinthians 1:22; 5:5; Ephesians 1:13-14). The person of the Holy Spirit is Christ in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). He is the source of all Christ-like graces, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

But you may say, "But what I really need is a job, a house, healing from my debilitating illness, or restored relationships with my wife and/or children. I'm already saved," you continue, "so I already have the Holy Spirit. What I need are some practical, physical and material things, not spiritual." But Jesus is seeking to get our focus on the most important gift of all.

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus is saying to us in his surprising but "clinching" statement, "First things first." In this teaching about prayer Jesus is calling us into a deeper relationship with himself. As he taught his disciples in his "Paraclete" section in John 14-16, the Holy Spirit would be his actual presence within us (John 14:17). And when we live in the awareness of his presence and in good fellowship with him, we are in a position to receive all of his "good things." And when the Holy Spirit begins to dominate our thoughts and emotions we begin to ask for the things that he wants for us, which he will hardly deny us. Our desires are changed to be like his desires. Our perspective is no longer consumed by the immediate and transient but rather by the eternal. And we enter into true partnership with Christ. Our relationships become opportunities for Christ to draw others to himself. Indeed, our living is turned into praying.

As Eugene Peterson says, "Prayer is shaped by Jesus, and in prayer we are most ourselves. It is the one act in which we must be totally ourselves, but also is the act in which we move beyond ourselves" (Page 617, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin Van Hoozer, General Editor).

I have come to see prayer more as a way that God changes us than as a means by which we get God to do something for us or even for other people. I am beginning to understand prayer as the way we join Christ in his continuing work

in this world. Prayer opens our eyes to others, to those the Savior is drawing to himself. Prayer makes us sensitive to the needs of others and makes us alert to unique opportunities to show Jesus to them and share Jesus with them. The greatest of all gifts, the Holy Spirit, gives us Christ-like character and also equips us for prayer and for ministry. The Holy Spirit also teaches us how to pray for kingdom agenda matters. The Holy Spirit in us, because he is Jesus in us, lifts our thoughts and prayers and even our emotions to “Abba Father” (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). There are times when I think I understand what Paul is speaking about when he says that “the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). Some of you attest that this has meant for you the gift of a private prayer language, which to you is a precious and encouraging gift.

Jesus teaches us to pray and teaches us that we *ought* to pray. And when we live in a spirit of prayerful dependence on and worshipful fellowship with Jesus, we turn life into prayer. In times of trouble or danger, our prayers may be nothing more than the word, “Help!” But we continue to pray, to keep coming, even at the midnight hour, to ask Jesus for the daily Bread of his precious Spirit in us. We keep on asking, seeking and knocking for the fullness of the Holy Spirit and his perfect peace, power and control every day of our lives. And such infilling is an ongoing process (Ephesians 5:18). Simply, we *must* pray. It’s God’s great gift to us, which opens the way to receive his best for us and to do his great work in us, through us and as us.

### **Questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. What are some disappointments that you have experienced in prayer?
2. In what ways did Jesus practice and depend on prayer?
3. In four sentences, summarize the four elements Jesus lists in The Disciples’ Prayer (verses 2-4) for which we are to pray.
4. How is God’s reputation (his glory and honor) at stake in the way he answers prayers (verses 5-8)?
5. Why do you think that Jesus wants us to “keep on asking, seeking and knocking,” that is, to be persistent in prayer (verses 9&10)?
6. Why is the gift of Holy Spirit the best answer to our prayers?
7. What changes do you think you should make in your prayer life?

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