

"What Good is Prayer?"

Luke 11: 1 – 13

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Grace be unto you...

Once upon a time, Joe, Dave, and Bob were hiking in a wilderness when they came upon a large, raging, violent river- something like the Mighty Mississippi on steroids. They needed to get to the other side of the river, but they didn't know how they were going to do it.

So, Joe prayed to God saying, "Please God, give me the strength to cross this river."

Poof! God gave him massive arms, powerful legs, and healthy lungs. He then jumped into the river and was able to swim across to the other side in about 45 minutes, but he almost drowned doing so.

Seeing this, Dave also prayed to God, saying, "Please God, give me the physical strength and a boat so I can cross this river."

Poof! Just like that, God gave him massive arms, a strong back and a rowboat. Dave jumped in the boat and began paddling. In a half hour he was able to row across the river to the other side; but because the river was raging so violently, he nearly capsized the boat and came "this" close to drowning!

Having watched his two buddies and seeing how things worked out for them, Bob prayed to God as well, "Please God, give me the physical strength, all the equipment I need, and the intelligence to cross this river."

Poof! Just that fast, God turned him into a woman. She looked at the map, hiked upstream a couple hundred yards, and then walked across the bridge.

(www.praize.com/jokes/prayer)

That, my friends, is how prayer is suppose to work – or, at least that's the way we want it to work when we need it to work that way! But truth be told, rarely is God going to turn me into a woman or part the Mississippi just so I can get where I need to go. So

then, what good is prayer? What good is prayer if we ask for what we need and don't get it? I don't know if that was behind the disciples' request of Jesus, but it certainly is my question for God from time to time.

Our Gospel lesson is a familiar one. In this passage from the Gospel of Luke (and also in Matthew), Jesus teaches his followers how to pray by using what we call the Lord's Prayer as a template, or a kind of guide.

There isn't nearly enough time to explore all of the riches that can be found in this prayer and its multi levels of meaning. But I will make a few, broad, sweeping comments about the petitions of this prayer, their meaning for our life, and most importantly the point of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus said to the disciples and now to us, "When you pray, say..." and then he gave the prayer that hundreds of millions of Christians have owned as their personal prayer. Some Christians pray only the Lord's Prayer when they pray; others represent the opposite end of the prayer continuum and won't pray the Lord's Prayer at all due to believing that it was not a specific prayer Jesus was teaching his disciples, but rather an outline or a listing of the kinds of prayer concerns God invites us to bring to him. Most of us hold to a combination of those two perspectives. We pray the Lord's Prayer as is, and we use the petitions as reminders of the deep concerns we need to bring before God.

For example, Jesus wants us first and always to focus on the one to whom we are praying – the Heavenly Father and Creator of all that is good. Jesus wants us to approach God with confidence trusting that God cares about us and that he always has our best interest in mind. After all, He **is** THE Creator and the **Maker** of all good promises and thus has the ability to back up every commitment he has made to us in Scripture.

So, prayer always begins by remembering who we're talking to! We remember his holiness, his might, and his sovereignty. And then, Jesus instructs us to remember the Kingdom of God. Praying is really all about the kingdom! Life, our life with God is all about *living in God's kingdom* and *living to serve the King's will*. Imagine how your life would be different if, after awaking each morning, your first concern was to seek clarity about what God wants for your life that day. Who needs your love that day? Who needs your forgiveness? Who needs your service? And, from whom do you need love and forgiveness and service?

Once we are oriented to life as God has planned it for us in his kingdom, then Jesus says, go ahead and talk with God about what you need. Our needs – at any particular

moment – are not necessarily upper most in God's mind; but the fact that Jesus makes the point of encouraging us to bring our needs before God should tell us that God does have our back. He is looking out for us. He wants us to have all that we need to be satisfied and fulfilled as his daughter or son. He wants us to ask for what is needed! **And**, if we get all confused about our needs verses our wants, if we forget and put *our* priorities before God's priorities, he'll sort it out with us!

Then on the heels of praying for our daily needs, he tells us to seek forgiveness. Because **daily**, our biggest temptation – that is, **the temptation** every one of us will face every day – is the temptation to make God's kingdom all about us. We will too easily try to make our needs and our struggles the center of God's attention. What you or I are reacting to in life too quickly becomes the center of our attention, and thus it is very human to expect God to make it His center as well.

Forgiveness! Seek it! Jesus admonishes! For you and I will need it – every day. Seek it and claim it and just as quickly, give it. Harbor no bitterness or hatred towards others or yourself. For if we do, it will eat at us inside out! God loves us too much to let us be burdened by unreleased anger or hurt. By God's grace, let it go and beseech God to let go of any anger he may have toward us.

Forgive us, Lord, Jesus instructs us to pray; forgive us and *lead us not into temptation!* Or to phrase it in a way that may make more sense, "lead us away from temptation." That is, we are asking God to help us to **be aware at all times** where evil is lurking, and then to lead us so we think to stay clear of the tempters powers. For we can be absolutely certain that evil and its many faces wants us in its grasp! **And we know** from life and from this Lord's Prayer that evil will sometimes have its way with us; and when it does, Jesus admonishes, pray that the Almighty God will deliver you from evil's hold and evil's control.

Then as Jesus is answering the disciple's request for a lesson in praying, an illustration comes into his mind – something that happened often in his teaching. Remember, we (the Lord's disciples) are being taught "how to pray."

I want you to imagine, Jesus teaches, that it is late at night; everyone in the neighborhood has gone to bed – including you. Just as you are falling sound asleep, the phone rings and it's your cousin. He was driving through town when there was an accident and he ended up stuck in traffic for three hours. But by the time the traffic opened up, it was late at night, and he was sleepy and hungry. Because he had no money, he is thankful that God reminded him that you live nearby, and although he hasn't seen you in more than ten years, he comes by – since you *are* family after all.

So in the early morning hours you have been awakened and are now practicing hospitality with a shirt-tale cousin. The problem is, you don't have any food in the house! Then again, you know people too. So with all of the lights out in the house of your next door neighbor, you bang on his door!

Yea, it's embarrassing, but what are you going to do! Your cousin is in need which makes you in need since he is depending on you. So you **knock**; and when the neighbor does not come to the door, you **knock again** – this time while leaning on the doorbell. Finally, he answers the door with a question that probably would have never gotten asked if the neighbor had already been awake, "Are you nuts! Do you know what time it is?"

"Well, actually I *am* feeling a little nuts, and yes, I do know what time it is. Do you happen to have any bread, and maybe some lunch meat and lettuce I can borrow? My cousin dropped by..." Slam! The door shuts in your face!

Knock! Knock! Knock!

"I can't believe it," you hear your neighbor exclaim from the other side of the door. "Go away! My kids are asleep! I've got to go to work in a few hours. Tell your cousin that fasting is good for him. Tell him whatever you want, but quit bothering me!"

Knock! Knock! Knock!

I bet you Jesus was a great storyteller. And when he started on one of his parables or life illustrations, I imagine that the people who had been around him for awhile dropped what they were doing and listened carefully. For Jesus was about to deliver an insight into life!

Remember, we are still being taught how to pray: So Jesus finishes his illustration, looks into the eyes of his disciples and says, "You know, even though that sleepy friend will not get up and take care of his neighbor's needs, he will get up because the man is relentless and won't go away. That is **not** how it will be when you go to God for help!" Jesus reassures. This is excellent teaching by the teacher of all teachers! ***He used an illustration in reverse reasoning!***

God will not be asleep when you are in need and call upon him; he will not become impatient with you. So **ask** for what *you need* and for what *God needs from you*. **Seek** for the solution to your problem; **search** for God's will in His word! **Knock** on door of God's heart! He may not have it within himself to give to you what you think you need, but he will not disrespect or dismiss you.

God will give to you his attention. And when you finish making your request known to him, there will be no uncertainty that he heard you, took you seriously, and will attend to your need one way or the other – and the way he will answer your prayer will be to **his** liking! That is to say, his answer to your prayer will be because he likes you – and more than that, he loves you like a father who can't get enough of his child! Indeed, long before we even ask God for what we need, he sees us and knows us and knows how he is going to address our need so we are *truly served, and* so our **deepest desire to love and serve God faithfully is met.**

You say you didn't know that was your deepest desire, "to love and serve God faithfully"? Well, it is! That desire was planted in our heart when we were baptized. You and I have been made a Christian, as the song says. And being a Christian in a close and saving relationship with Jesus Christ is first and foremost about living in God's kingdom and serving God's will: "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." We pray. "**Thy** kingdom come, **thy** will be done on earth..."

Absolutely, prayer includes asking God for what we want and need. God does want us to get to our destination safely on the other side of the river, so to speak. He does want to gift us and care for us and look out for the people we carry around in our heart. But prayer is so much more than asking for what we want and need! Prayer is about a close, very personal relationship with God our Father. Prayer is about being and remaining connected to God and learning how to live in his kingdom as Christians – as his people devoted to his word and to his love for all of creation.

In our prayer life with God, he wants us to think big, really BIG! He knows we will be asking for what we believe is important and necessary – like fish and eggs, to use the illustration from today's gospel reading. Fish and eggs are like the basics in life, which all of us need in order to live a more or less secure and comfortable life. Fish and eggs are important, very important for day to day living! But none of the things of this life for which we ask – and about which we care – begin to compare to what God really wants to give to us. What God wants to give to us is his Spirit, the **Holy Spirit!**

Jesus says, "...if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (who pray)!" Where did that comment come from inside of Jesus? The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. So, he gives to them a list of the most important things about which they can pray. To clarify his point, he gives a couple illustrations about how God is always there (or here) for us. His illustrations note that God cares about us like the best of human fathers and way better than any disgruntled neighbor; and the illustrations make it clear that he wants what's best for us.

Then Jesus – seemingly out of nowhere – tells his disciples (us) that the greatest of all gifts God can give to you is his Spirit. Why the Spirit? Why does Jesus talk about The Father giving us the Holy Spirit when Jesus is teaching us how to pray? Because with God's Spirit comes life – full, rich, complete life – life that starts now and continues into eternity. With God's Spirit – with an ever-increasing measure of God's Spirit – comes trust in our Creator and wisdom to make sense out of the world and what is going on in our lives – both of which we desperately need!

So, *what good is prayer* if God isn't going to do the dramatic for us and part the Mississippi or give me six-pack abs and the energy of a 30 year old? What good is prayer if God will not do what obviously needs to be done – especially when we repeatedly point it out to him? Just this: Prayer is our always-present, minute-by-minute-connection with our Creator and Savior. Prayer is the means by which we can at any moment be in touch with the Holy Spirit who seeks to fill us with his strength, courage, wisdom, and love – and with direction in the way of the Kingdom!

Honestly, to be completely frank with you, there are many, many days when I'd rather have a dramatic miracle. But God, out of his immeasurable love for me and in his grand overview of life, decides to give to me (as he decides to give to you) the Holy Spirit instead. Like you, I may not get it at the time. But when I look back and am graced to see how the Holy Spirit was at work in my life, in the life of those who are dear to me, and in the world around me, I remain eternally grateful for God's wisdom and foresight.

How about you? Do you pray? Do you want to learn how to pray? Do you want to get past your anger at God for not doing what you have been pleading for him to do? Do you want your **life** to become a prayer – an intimate, ongoing conversation with God? Are you ready for and do you really want to invest your life in the embedded promises and petitions of the Lord's Prayer? **Ask Jesus! Tell him** you want what the Lord's Prayer has to give. Don't hold back! What he did for the first disciples, he will do for you.

Amen!

May the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.