

Persistence in Prayer
Luke 11:1–13
Sunday, July 24, 2022

Let us pray: Living God, by your Holy Spirit, open our hearts and minds, that as your Word is proclaimed, we may be led into your truth and taught your will, for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Before we get into this, I have to start by noting the irony in this week's scripture reading when paired with *last week's* reading. This week Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you...For everyone who asks receives." Last week Jesus was in the home of Mary and Martha. Martha was busy running around getting the food prepared, making sure everything was perfect for Jesus, while her sister Mary was just sitting at Jesus' feet listening to him. Mary left Martha to do all the work by herself. So Martha says to Jesus, "Lord, tell her to help me!" And Jesus says, "Nah." So, "Ask, and it will be given to you...except for *that!*"

And that's what prayer can feel like sometimes. We're *asking*, but we don't *receive*. Some of that has to do with our understanding of the *purpose* of prayer. Remember, as we always say when we talk about prayer, the purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we want, but to be properly formed in the likeness of Jesus Christ. Back in the 3rd century, the early church theologian Origen said that we should think of prayer not as a way to gain some benefit, but rather as a means to become more like God.¹ Prayer is about *being with* God, so that we might *know* God. And we don't always know how to pray like *that*. We're good at *making requests* of God, asking God for what we need, but simply *being with* God is actually a lot harder. That's something we need *help* with. It's something we need to be *taught* how to do.

¹ James C. Howell, *The Beautiful Work of Learning to Pray*, pg. 30.

I've heard people say when it comes to learning to pray, "Just *talk* to God!" And yes, of course we can just talk to God as one would talk with a friend. But it's not always that easy. Sometimes we just don't have the words, or we don't *know* what to say. Like Paul wrote, "We do not know how to pray as we ought." And "just talking" to God like a stream of consciousness isn't always the best approach. St. Augustine wrote back around the year 400, "We may pray *most* when we say *least*, and we may pray *least* when we say *most*."

There is a sense in which prayer comes very *naturally* to us, because it is the expression of our soul's deepest longing for communion with our creator. There is something about us that is just naturally inclined toward that, toward connecting with our creator. At the same time, there is a sense in which prayer is *hard*. We know what we *want* – communion with our creator – we just don't always know how to *get there*. But we are not *alone* in that. Jesus' disciples come to him and say, "Lord, teach *us* how to pray, as John taught *his* disciples." They needed *help*. So Jesus gives them three things: a prayer, a parable, and a promise. We're going to look at each of those and what they teach *us* about prayer.

First, Jesus gives his disciples a prayer. That seems obvious. They say, "Lord, teach us how to pray," and he says, "When you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.'" Jesus *didn't* say, "Just talk to God!" Because Jesus *knows* that we do not know how to pray as we ought, so he gives us *structure*. He gives us *specific words to pray*.

I heard a pastor say once, "When you don't know how to pray, say your prayers." It sounds funny, but there is some really helpful truth in that, and I relate to it this way. Sixteen years ago,

when Jen and I lost our first child, we were obviously devastated. And out of that devastation, I found that I did not have words to pray to God. I just didn't know what to say. I was so heartbroken, and I couldn't put that heartbreak into words. But I felt a *need* to. I knew that I *wanted* to pray; I just *couldn't*. So, what I did was, I just started praying the Lord's Prayer. Over and over again, day after day. Words that I did not have to *think* about, but they still grounded me in a relationship with God. They kept the conversation going. And eventually, the words came. *When you don't know how to pray, say your prayers.*

There is an incredibly rich 2,000-plus-year history of prayers available to us. Words that faithful people have prayed before us, and those words have been handed on to us, given to us as a gift for *us* to use. When you don't know what to pray, when you can't think of the words on your own, use someone else's. There is an ancient writing called the *Didache* (that's the Greek word for *teaching*). It dates back to the second century, possibly the *first* century, and it is one of the oldest documents outside of scripture that tells us in specific detail how the early Christians lived and practiced their faith. And one of the things that it instructs believers to do is to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day – morning, noon, and night. Just pray the words that Jesus taught us. If you are looking for a place to start praying regularly, that is a great place to start. Pray it *slowly* and *think* about the words that you are praying.

So Jesus gave us words to pray, but *Jesus* was *also* taught words to pray, and those words came from the Psalms. We see Jesus praying them throughout the gospels. When he is dying on the cross, he cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," the first verse of Psalm 22. There are 150 psalms that cover the entire range of human emotion and experience. You're sad? There's a psalm for that. You're angry? There's a psalm for that. You're happy? There's a psalm for that. You're scared or anxious? There's a psalm for that. You have royally messed

up your life beyond all hope of repair? There are quite a few psalms for that. When you don't know what to pray, pray a psalm.

What I do is, I pray one every day. If it's the first day of the year, I pray the first psalm. If it's the 150th day of the year, I pray Psalm 150. Today is the 205th day of the year (there are only 150 psalms, so you have to circle back around), so this morning I prayed Psalm 55, "Give ear to my prayer, O God. Do not hide yourself from my supplication. Attend to me and answer me. I am troubled in my complaint. I am distraught by the noise of the enemy, because of the clamor of the wicked. For they bring trouble upon me, and in anger they cherish enmity against me." Those words didn't especially speak to where I was today. Sometimes they *do*, but they won't always. What it does is, though, it helps you *learn* them, so they are at your disposal when you *do* need them. And they give you a *vocabulary* for prayer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that children do not just *know* how to talk. Rather, they learn to speak because their father (or mother) speaks to them. They learn the speech of their father. So maybe the best way to learn how to pray is by praying the words of our Father, the Word of God.

But there are *other* prayers that we can pray, too. Each morning, I pray a prayer written by Thomas Merton that's on the cover of the bulletin. I've prayed it so much that I have it memorized, and I can pray it anywhere, anytime. Every morning, as a part of my daily prayer, I pray the prayer of confession that we prayed earlier from the *Book of Common Prayer*. There are *so many others*, and I have included a few on the insert in your bulletin, but that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface. The point is, there is a *wealth* of prayers throughout the history of our faith that is available to us. So when you don't know what to pray, say your prayers.

It is helpful to have prayers that come from *outside* ourselves. Of course we can come to God with our own words and lift up to God our joys and concerns and hopes and fears and needs. But when we only pray *our own* words, from *inside* ourselves, what can happen is that our prayers begin to reflect only our own thoughts and desires. And the purpose of prayer is to be properly formed in the likeness of Christ, not to form Christ in the likeness of us. So sometimes we need to step outside of our own hearts and minds. To help us do that, Jesus gave us a prayer.

Jesus also gave us a *parable*. A man goes to a friend at midnight and says, “Lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.” And the friend answers, “Don’t bother me. The door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.” But, Jesus says, “even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his *friend*, at least because of his *persistence* he will get up and give him whatever he needs.”

Oftentimes how we *hear* this parable is that the man who is being asked for bread is God, and we are the one at the door, and if we are persistent enough, God will give us what we need. But that’s not actually the point Jesus was making. Jesus was not *comparing* the one being asked for bread to God. He was *contrasting* him with God. He is saying, “Eventually, that friend will relent and give you what you need. But *how much more* gracious is *God*? With *God*, knock, and the door will be opened for you. If *we*, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to our children, *how much more* does God?”

What this parable tells us about prayer is that prayer is not about badgering God until we get what we want. God is *good*, and out of that goodness, God will give us what we need. *Persistence* in prayer is not about wearing God down until we get what we want. It’s about

sticking with prayer, regardless of the results. It's about not giving up if we don't get what we want or something doesn't go our way. It's about being faithful in our praying, as God is faithful to us.

In his book *The Beautiful Work of Learning to Pray*, James Howell writes, "Prayer is not something we do because it 'works'...When the great saints of the Church speak of prayer, they very rarely talk about whether it works or not. For them, prayer is all about love, the creation of communion with the God from whom the soul cannot bear to be apart."² Prayer is not about the *results*, it's about the *relationship*. It's about nurturing our relationship with God so that we can *know* God and be formed more and more in the likeness of Christ who lived in *perfect* relationship with God.

Persistence in prayer involves the *regular practice of prayer*. Not just praying here and there, from time to time, but developing a regular, consistent practice of daily prayer. Like saying the Lord's Prayer three times a day. Or praying each morning. Or praying each night. But we need to develop some kind of consistent practice of prayer. Not because of how it changes *God*, but because of how it changes *us*. And the only way you grow in prayer is by praying. It's like learning a foreign language. The only way you learn it is by practicing it. Prayer is the language of the soul. And the only way we learn it is by practicing it. If we persist in a regular practice of prayer, we will grow in the Spirit and come to desire the things that God desires.

Which leads us to the third thing that Jesus gives us: a promise. Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will

² James C. Howell, *The Beautiful Work of Learning to Pray*, pg. 34.

be opened.” But like we said, that doesn’t always match up with our experience of prayer. Plenty of us have asked and *not* received. But I don’t think *that* part is the promise. I think the promise is found in what Jesus says next: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to *your* children, *how much more* will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

You notice, Jesus doesn’t say there, “How much more will the heavenly Father give you what you ask for.” He says that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. The Holy Spirit is the *experience* of God. And we can *all* have an *experience* of God. We can *all* experience God’s presence with us and love for us. In order to *do* that, we just have to open ourselves up to the presence and love of God by *spending time* with God. By making space in our lives for God. The Holy Spirit is God’s presence with us today. And God will give the Holy Spirit to those who *ask*.

God does not just give us whatever we want. I had a professor in seminary who used to say, “God is not just some cosmic vending machine that if you push the right buttons, you’ll get what you want.” God doesn’t just give us whatever we want, but God gives us the Holy Spirit, so that God *dwells* in us, and we can share in the mind of God.

We talked about how Paul says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought,” and the very next thing Paul goes on to say is, “but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” When we do not know how to pray, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf, praying *in* us and *for* us according, Paul says, *to the will of God*. It’s about *being with* God, *knowing* God, so that we can know God’s will and desire the things that

God desires. There was a 16th century mystic who said, “Prayer is not to ask what *we* wish of God, but what *God* wishes of *us*.”

So when we do not know how to pray, Jesus promises us that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. So *ask*. Make *that* your prayer. “Lord, I want your Holy Spirit. Give me your Holy Spirit, so that I might be *with* you and *know* you and desire the things that *you* desire.” If *that* is your only prayer, it is enough. It might not happen right away. Remember, one of the fruits of the Spirit is *patience*. So you have to be persistent in your practice of prayer. And in that persistence, God will form you more and more in the likeness of Christ. Amen.