

“Three Power Words: Let Us Pray”

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

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Today’s Scripture reading flows in three steps about prayer: First, the content of prayer; second, how to pray, and third, the results. Listen now to the Word of God.

11 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” ² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ And forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

⁵ And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, 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.

⁹ “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³ 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!”

The ancient Hebrew understanding of humanity is that God took a lump of clay and breathed life into that lump of clay. We are lumps of clay with breath of life...God’s Spirit. Obviously, death then is when we stop breathing. And if you have ever been with someone as they die, you know that the breathing begins to slow, sometimes labored, but oftentimes not. The breathing slows...the intervals between breaths becomes longer and longer until there is stillness...a peace...a culmination...death. Breath is a gift from God: every time we breathe in it is a new gift from God.

When Jesus’ disciples say, “Teach us to pray,” they are saying, “Teach us to breathe back what God has breathed into us.” Years ago, a writer named C.S. Lewis said we are all in danger of becoming “men without chests.” By “men,” he meant human beings. We live in a world that will provide for the stomach—we have an appetite for things that feed us...food, beverages, good company, entertainment, and so forth. We live in world that will provide for the head. There is so much information that is available to us. “24/7” has become the mantra: there is information around the clock available. Stomach and head...but, said C.S. Lewis, we are all in danger of becoming people without chests, starved for breath. When Jesus’ disciples say, “Teach us to pray,” they are saying, “We want to be people with chests.” And Jesus answers with content, process, and results.

Content...what to pray...the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are our model. There are three ancient versions of this prayer: the one read from the Gospel of Luke, one from the Gospel of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount, and another ancient version from *The Didache* (literally, "the teaching"). If you ever wondered about the differences among churches in the saying of the Lord's Prayer, understand there have been differences since the time of the early church. But here are some pointers about the content of the Lord's Prayer:

- First, in every version of the Lord's Prayer, there are no first-person, singular pronouns. No I, me, my, mine. We cannot pray in the singular. Yes, we can pray as individuals but our prayers drive us back to one another.
- Second, the focus of prayer is on God's ways: God's name is to be made great...God's kingdom is to come. It is not about my will but God's will.
- Third, what we ask for ourselves is to make it through this day: daily bread. That phrase "daily bread" is most likely a reference to the manna that the people of Israel found on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Manna fed the people during their journey, their 40 years in the wilderness. Manna was good for one day and no more. And so daily bread is about what we need today...not about what we want for two days from now, or a year from now, or ten years from now. Prayer is about one day at a time.
- Fourth, there continues to be confession of my own brokenness and my need to forgive the brokenness of others. What hangs us up...what ties up...most often is what someone else has done. We get fixated on how they have failed me, failed others, hurt me, hurt others. What I see most often in myself and in others is this: I can't get over what someone has or has not done. Getting stuck...like the old vinyl records many of us had when they became scratched. A record when it was scratched would keep playing the same phrase. So when my copy of the Beatles hit song, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" was scratched, it would play along until the needle reached the scratch, and then it would go, "I wanna...I wanna...I wanna...I wanna." It wouldn't continue until you bumped the needle over the scratch. Jesus' prayer includes bumping us over those scratches: forgive me as I forgive others.
- And, fifth, the prayer Jesus taught focuses on how not fall back down in those scratches again—lead us not into temptation...save us from the time of trial...deliver us from evil...keep us away from the evil one. All too often, we are like Augustine who early on prayed, "God make me holy...but not just yet." Do you know those tentative prayers? God, help me do the right thing...but only after I get even. God help me to be generous...but only after I get what I want. God, help me to think straight...only after I "waller" in the mud that I so enjoy. Jesus teaches us to pray as one who says, "There is no better time than the present to avoid those places that bring us down...those temptations...those trials."

So we have content...and then there is process, the "how to." Jesus tells a parable of a man who has a late night guest arrive and who then goes to neighbor to borrow some bread. The neighbor is

asleep; the children are asleep; the house is locked up. But the neighbor will get up and help because, according to the NRSV, the persistence of the man needing the bread. The point of persistence is certainly worthy and encouraged in other places in Scripture—pray persistently. However, there is very likely a mistranslation here. Persistence is a possible meaning of the Greek word here but not the most likely. In every recorded instance of the use of this word up until the time of the New Testament, the word does not mean “persistence.” It means something entirely different. The world means shamelessness.

Shamelessness...consider the parable: after six hours of darkness in world where are no electric lights and candles are expensive, midnight very late; everything is shut down. And a single guest arriving at midnight does not need food but rather rest...the beginning of the new day is not that far off. So the man waking up his neighbor at midnight for bread is not just persistent but shameless. For example, I live very close to a couple members of this congregation. Can you see me knocking on their door at three o'clock in the morning and saying, “I have run out of potato chips and a dear friend has just arrived? Do you have any chips...maybe some dip too? Shameless. How is prayer to be shameless?

Shamelessness...not so much doing something to be ashamed of...but rather being free enough to name our need, to lay it out, to let go, to put it forth even before our neighbors. Like putting names on the Prayer Board...how often I hear someone tell me a need for prayer but then be told “But don't put my need on the Prayer Board.” Oh no, not where others will see what God sees! Jesus counsels a prayer that is persistent and downright shameless...the freedom and willingness to lay it all out.

So we have content...process...and then results. Results are promised. Ask...seek...knock, and it all will be given to you. All will be given to you. You may recall that Mark Twain's character, Huck Finn, thinks long and hard about the results of prayer. Here's how Huck Finn, the theologian, thought about prayer:

Miss Watson, she took me in the closet and prayed. But nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day and whatever I asked for, I would get it. But it weren't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish line but no hooks. It wasn't very good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why and I couldn't make it out anyway.

I sat down one time back in the woods and had a long think about it. I said to myself, “If a body can get anything they pray for, why doesn't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? And why can't the widow get back her silver snuff box that was stolen. And why can't Miss Watson fat up? No,” says I to myself, “there ain't nothing in it.”¹

¹ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, by Mark Twain, quote found in multiple places on the Web but see <http://books.google.com/books?id=Vs3-XYylmnoC&pg=PA20&lpg=PA20&dq=%22miss+watson+she+took+me+in+the+closet+and+prayed%22&source=web&ots=E6y7b-9ATD&sig=Fhs-xFnm6ST3FZ10NMFh6cXaLEM>

“There ain’t nothing in it.” That’s the Huck Finn way. Others take the prosperity gospel way...that if you accept the gospel you will have a prosperity that exceeds everyone else. Let me give you a specific example: There is a preacher who sells car decals and says, “Buy a decal, pray over the decal everyday...buy one or buy ten...and if you pray over them everyday and set your mind to accomplish what you want, why you are going to have that car or ten cars to go with each one of those decals.” That’s a pastor in a church movement called Winners Chapel in Africa, one of the fastest growing churches in the world. This movement can be found in 40 African countries, with a home facility in Nigeria that will seat 50,400. Winners are heavily influenced by North American preacher-types like Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, and Joel Osteen. The message seems to be: “If you do not get what you prayed for...then you just were not faithful enough...after all, just look at my gold rings, cars, and houses.”

Lord, save us from the Huck Finn way! Lord, save us from the prosperity gospel way! There is a middle way here...a way between the Huck Finn who gives up and the prosperity promise to get all you wished for. The middle way is Jesus’ conclusion: that the heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

Ask, seek, knock and all will come to you: all that brings life. Here’s the catch...we keep getting confused that it is our wants and desires that will bring us happiness and contentment. The classic Greek story of King Midas reminds us of that this confusion has been with humanity since before recorded history. Remember the story: Midas loved gold. Gold bought good things, gold could be made into great things, gold was everything. And Midas was given his wish: whatever he touched turned to gold. He had touch grapes...they turned to golden grapes. He touched furniture...it turned to brilliant, glowing gold. He reached out and touched his beloved, only daughter: and she became a gold statue. Beautiful yes, but lifeless...never to laugh, and sing, and share life with him again. He got what he wished for and it was not what he wanted. As Oscar Wilde once said, “When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers.”

Again, let us go back to C.S. Lewis who wrote in *Mere Christianity*:

The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists in shoving it all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.²

Let it come flowing in. You may know that in the Biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the word for Spirit and breath are the same? Let Spirit and breath flow in. We are made with a stomach to feed the body; we are made with a mind with curiosity and wanting to know...but will we be men and women with chests? That’s the result of prayer...praying in God’s Spirit. Pray the content...be persistent even shameless in prayer...and look for the results: the gift of God’s Spirit.

²From *Mere Christianity*; in multiple places on the Web, e.g. <http://www.onlyinternet.net/lori/quotes%20Lewis.htm>