

March 20, 2016

Keep on Praying

Luke 11:1 – 13

Starting tomorrow night, we are beginning a week of concentrated prayer at the church, from 5 pm to 10 pm every night through Thursday. On Friday night, we will end this time with some directed, corporate prayer starting at 7:30 in the evening. During this week we will be asking God specifically to save our friends, relatives, co-workers, neighbors – anyone whose name is written on these cards. And this morning I want to take some time before we do that to talk a little about why we ought to be doing this. Because, quite honestly, prayer to many people is a little mysterious, even intimidating. And we know we don't pray as we should.

But we know we need to pray. Some of us are consumed with guilt over the fact that we don't really pray that much. Others have transcended the guilt with indifference and apathy. Others are simply too lazy to pray. Still others who do pray regularly, have a deep sense that more prayer is needed. And then there are those who just don't know how to pray. Regardless of where you find yourself this morning, I want you to look with me at this passage in Luke where Jesus is teaching on prayer. This whole passage is in response to a request by Jesus' disciples to teach them to pray. *Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."* [Luke 11:1] The gospels, and especially Luke, are full of places where Jesus is found praying. He went out to the desert to pray, or up on a mountain, or, as Luke records here, He went to a certain place. And no doubt His disciples were watching this and began to understand that prayer was somehow a needful and necessary thing and they wanted what Jesus had.

It was also the custom for prominent rabbis or teachers of that day to compose and teach a prayer or prayers to their followers that encapsulated their beliefs or theology as a way of identifying those who followed them. Evidently John the Baptist had done so for his disciples, although we have no historical or Biblical record of any prayers – and so Jesus' disciples wanted something for themselves that would identify them as belonging to their rabbi, Jesus. And so Jesus responds to that request by giving them a prayer, a parable and practical application. In other words, disciples of Jesus pray like this. *And He said to them, "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 who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."* [Luke 11:2-4]

The first thing He taught them was that **prayer is intensely God-centered**. And there are two things about that we need to notice. Jesus says, *'When you pray...'* He is not offering them a formal prayer that they would recite now and then, but rather He was giving them the summery content of prayer. He was saying, *'Whenever you pray – pray like this'*. And the first thing He does is pray that His Father's name would be hallowed or literally made holy. And right on the heels of hallowing His Father's name, He prays that His Father's kingdom would come. He was praying that the kingdom would come into being, arise, come forth, show itself, find place or influence, be established, become known. *Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come*. In Matthew's account of this he adds, *'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'*.

The content of our prayers should have as their focus the desire that **God's name would be hallowed and His kingdom would be established on the earth**– that He would be honored more and more in our lives, in the church, in the world – that His worth and glory would be magnified and valued and esteemed and He would take up His kingly rule more and more over us and over the world. **'Hallowed be Your name – Your kingdom come'** is a prayer for passion in our souls and revival in the church and an awakening in the world. That is the focus of prayer. It is a cry to see God's will, His rule and reign, made a reality on earth even as it is a reality in heaven. All the rest of prayer is a plea that He will meet our physical needs and keep our hearts pure for the purpose of exalting His name and praying His kingdom come. We pray for our daily needs in the context of wanting to see God's name hallowed and glorified through us and in the world. We keep our accounts short, forgiving and receiving forgiveness for the sake of His name and His kingdom.

We pray for His power and grace to keep us from anything that would seduce us away from His purpose and steal our affections for Him, and keep us from anything that would cause us to bring shame to His name. There are a thousand ways to say this, but all of them point to the priority of prayer which is '**Father, glorify Your name – cause Your kingdom to come, cause Your will to be done, on earth, even as it is in heaven**'. Our prayer life needs to mature to line up with God's will in the earth. His name will be glorified – He will vindicate the greatness and the glory of His name – the nations will know that He is the Lord. But God has decreed that our prayers work to bring His will to pass. So pray, pray, pray – in as many ways and as many words as you can think – '**Father, let Your name be hallowed and Your kingdom come**'.

And then to illustrate the fact that prayer is not simply a one-time event, Jesus tells this little parable, *And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.* [Luke 11:5 – 8]

Here's the scene: you go to your friend's house around midnight, bang on his door and ask for bread. It's not an emergency. No one is dying. Your house is not burning down – you just had some other friends arrive late and you need to feed them. And you are banging on the door, until the poor guy asleep in the house, finally tells you to quit bothering him. Notice it was midnight, so this guy had been asleep awhile. And he was not a rich man, because he told the guy '*my children and I are in bed*' – which meant that it was probably a one-room house and everyone slept in the same bed – and it would have been impossible for him to get up without disturbing the rest of the house. But Jesus says that while even friendship was not a motivating factor here – the fact that the guy kept knocking was the key. And the point is not that God is a grumpy neighbor at whom you have to keep banging away until He comes across. Rather the point is that prayer somehow requires relentless and even shameless persistence.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray – and Jesus says – '**Pray this way**'. The reason the guy finally gets up and gives his neighbor the bread is not first of all because they are friends but because the guy knocking is shameless about his asking. He wants bread, and he's not going to go away without it and he doesn't care who he has to wake up to get it. One translation says '*because of his persistence*' and that is right. But it is more than just persistence. The word really means shamelessness. The man knocking has no shame about his request. And Jesus says, '**Pray this way**'.

But what is so interesting about this story is not so much the shameless nature of his request, but that his request is not first of all for himself, it's for his friend. He's asking for his friend. '*A friend of mine has come and I don't have anything to give him*'. Prayer is first of all intensely God-centered; and secondly, prayer is fundamentally intercessory. Prayer is not meant to terminate on us but on others. The man has a friend; the friend is in need; and he bangs on the door until he gets something for his friend. And we have friends in need. We have relatives in need. We have neighbors and co-workers in need. We are talking about the greatest need any human being has. The need to know God. The need to have a saving relationship with His Son. And we need to be going to God for their need. We need to be shameless in our praying for their coming to faith. Does that mean that we shouldn't pray for our own needs? Not at all. But praying for our own needs comes in the context of seeing God's kingdom come and His will be done. The object of prayer is for the purpose of building His kingdom and doing His will on the earth.

Built into this idea of praying shamelessly, is the thought that we should be relentlessly persistent about it as well. *And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.* [Luke 11:9 – 10] To His admonition to pray shamelessly, Jesus says here to '**Pray persistently**'. Again, Jesus is not saying that God is a grumpy god you have to bully into granting your request. He is saying that the nature of prayer is such that it requires persistent asking, and seeking, and knocking. In other words, that is how God designed that prayer should be. Don't ask me why – ask God – He's the one that designed prayer this way.

350 years ago, Thomas Watson, a Puritan pastor essentially asks the question, 'Why would God ever keep us asking, seeking, and knocking when He could certainly respond sooner? And he gives four reasons he thinks this is so. **First** of all God loves to hear the voice of prayer. He delights in hearing His children call to Him. He does not want people who are like the man who told his wife when she asked him, 'Do you love me' and he responded, 'I told you I loved you in 1957, why do I have to keep telling you'? God delights in the prayers of His people. **Secondly** Watson says that sometimes He doesn't answer us right away so that He might build humility into our lives. **He is not our butler** and too many people pray as though He were. The **third** reason he gives is that we may not yet be fit or ready for the mercy we seek. The trial or test may need to run its course so that what God intends to accomplish may be completed. And **finally** he says that God may keep us asking, seeking, and knocking so that the mercy we pray for may be the more prized and may be sweeter when it comes.¹

The reason we know that Jesus did not intend to leave us with the impression that God is a grumpy neighbor we have to bully into submission is that He moves from the relationship of a neighbor to the relationship of a son: *What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?* [Luke 11:11 – 12] What Jesus is saying here is that God is our Father. He didn't tell us to pray this way, '**Our Friend, who art in heaven...**' God is our Father and we should pray secure in the knowledge that our Father loves us like sons and daughters, and longs to hear and answer our prayers and He will always give us just what we need. He will always give us what is best for us.

In other words, **Pray with the assurance of a child.** A father doesn't give what is evil, or harmful or dangerous to his child, and neither will God. If we ask for fish, we can be sure we won't get a snake. If we ask for an egg, we can be certain we won't be handed a scorpion instead. And if you understand the way Jesus puts this, you begin to see that He is saying that sometimes children ask for fish and eggs but they don't realize that they actually have asked God to give them snakes and scorpions. Fathers, good fathers, **(and God is the best Father)**, always reserve the right to do what is best for their children, even if the children don't understand why and ask for things that will hurt them. **Our Father gives us what we would have asked for if we knew everything He knows.**

Shortly after graduating from high school, Joni Eareckson dove into the waters of Chesapeake Bay. Her head hit the bottom, leaving her instantly paralyzed from the neck down. Family and friends joined Joni in praying for her healing, but in spite of those persistent prayers, she remained paralyzed. Her despair was so great that she begged a friend to help her commit suicide. Although Joni remains a quadriplegic today, she has an incredible testimony of faith and is a huge inspiration for people all over the world. Today, millions of people worldwide know her through her books and her paintings, which she does by holding a pen or brush in her mouth, and by the fact that she is in great demand as a speaker. She prayed for healing and God said, '**I'm not going to give you a snake – I'm going to give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything I know**'. I believe that our loving heavenly Father hears and answers every prayer His children pray – it's just that the answer may not be what we had in mind.

And then finally, Jesus brings it home by saying: *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!*" [Luke 11:13] This is incredible hope and security for every child of God. Jesus makes the comparison between sinful, evil, human fathers and a pure and holy Father and says, 'If evil fathers know how to give good gifts – **how much more** will a holy heavenly Father do that?' This not only tells us that our Father indeed answers our prayers, but that it is absurd to think that He would give anything but good gifts to His children. **Prayer is inspired and sustained by the confidence that our Father in heaven is more inclined to give what we need than the best human father.** And here Jesus says something we probably do not expect. The answer to all our prayers, the answer to our relentless and persistent appeals to heaven's throne is the Holy Spirit Himself. We should **pray expecting the Holy Spirit.** And you are probably scratching your head right now saying, 'But I didn't pray for the Holy Spirit'. But Jesus doesn't tell us to pray **for** the Holy Spirit here, He says that He **gives** the Holy Spirit in response to our prayers. And you are no doubt saying, 'How does that help me when I pray for tangible things? How does that help me when I pray for wisdom and strength and healing and funds to pay the bills and for my loved ones to come to Christ? How does that work?'

¹ Thomas Watson, Body of Divinity, (Baker Book House, 1979),399–400.

When you go to the Father, for whatever you ask Him, whatever it is, He gives the Holy Spirit in response to your asking. You ask for strength – He gives you the Spirit of power. You ask for help, He gives you the Helper. You ask for comfort – He gives you the Comforter. You ask for wisdom – He gives you the Spirit of wisdom. You ask for love and joy and peace and gentleness and goodness and faith and self-control – He gives you the Spirit whose fruit is released in your life. You ask for salvation for your family, He sends the Holy Spirit to them. You ask for the gift – He gives you the giver. You ask for the effect – He gives you the cause. You ask for the product – He gives you the source. Ephesians 3:20 gives a little glimpse into this: *Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.* [Ephesians 3:20-21] Who is at work in us? It is the Holy Spirit. And all of our prayers work toward the end that God is glorified.

In the parallel passage on this in Matthew 7, it is recorded a little differently: *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"* [Matthew 7:11] Here it doesn't mention the Holy Spirit – it mentions 'good'. Your Father in heaven gives what is **good**. And no doubt the Holy Spirit is ultimate good. But I think the Bible is saying much more here. If you turn to Romans chapter eight, verses 26 – 28, you get a picture of what prayer looks like from God's perspective: *In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* [Romans 8:26 – 28]

Paul says that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, and he has just outlined our weakness in the preceding verses. And if you look you will see that it has to do with our fallen condition. It has to do with the fact that all creation is groaning under the futility to which it has been subjected in the future hope of the revelation of the sons of God when it will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And Paul says that we groan along with all creation, praying and waiting for that day when our bodies are redeemed. And then he links that groaning with prayer: *for we do not know how to pray as we should but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* In other words, in our praying, the Holy Spirit Himself is praying. **And what He is praying, even in our praying, is all according to the will of God.** That's how He helps us.

But it is the content of His prayer that is crucial here. Paul says, 'We don't know how to pray as we should – or we don't know what to pray – we don't know **the specific 'what'** that we should be praying'. But, he says, **'The Spirit is praying the specific what that we would have prayed had we known everything our heavenly Father knows.'** Because then he says that in response to the Spirit's praying, 'God causes all things to work together for **good...**'. That is why in Matthew, the gospel writer could say, *how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!* Look at this. God is pouring **good** into our lives and into the lives of those for whom we pray, in response to our prayers – the Holy Spirit is praying the specific what that works to bring about the **good** that God intends for us and for them – so what is that **good** that God intends and the Holy Spirit is praying for? Verse 29 of Romans tells us: *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren* [Romans 8:29]

I believe the giving of the Holy Spirit here in response to our prayers is a releasing of the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about all the good that God intends for us as His chosen, redeemed, justified and beloved children – that is to conform us to the image of His Son. The more we look like Jesus, the more our Father's name is hallowed and the further His kingdom advances in the world. I believe that as we pray, the Holy Spirit is given to work on the hearts and minds of those for whom we pray to bring them to faith. Pray relentlessly and shamelessly. Keep on praying – knowing that God delights in hearing and answering your prayers. Pray like a child – secure in the knowledge that because He is your Father and loves you as His child, He will always give us what is best. Keep on praying, expecting the Holy Spirit to be released in us to bring about the good that God intends for us. Keep on praying, expecting the Holy Spirit to move in the hearts and minds of your friends and relatives and neighbors to bring them to the cross. And make the focus of all your praying the glory of God and the hallowing of His name among the nations and the advance of His kingdom on the earth.

Our gracious God and Father,

Hallowed be Your name. May Your name be glorified in us and in the world. Magnify Your name through us. Father, we long to see You honored more and more in our church and our city, and in our nation and in the world. Magnify Your worth and Your glory in our midst. And let Your kingdom come. Take up Your kingly rule more and more fully over our church and our lives and our families. Meet our physical needs we pray, so that we can press on with joy in the work You call us to for Your name's sake. Forgive us, O Lord, where we have sinned and fallen short of Your glory. Fill us with a passion to pray. May we be among those who cry to You day and night, relentlessly and shamelessly asking, seeking and knocking on heaven's door until Your kingdom comes and Your will is done, until Your name is glorified on earth as it is in heaven, we pray in the precious and exalted name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.