

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 24, 2022

Ask, Seek, Knock
Luke 11:1-13

In a sermon on today's text from Luke, pastor Travis Norvell says,

When I was a teenager, I asked my parents how to pray. They replied, "Travis, just do it." Since I didn't know how to just do "it," I asked my pastor. He looked at me with a suspicious side glance, like I was trying to trap him. He replied the same way as my parents did, "You just do it." But I wouldn't take that for an answer. He finally gave me a book on the topic of prayer that he had not read, but he thought it might help. It didn't.¹

In our Scripture passage, when one of his disciples says to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus doesn't say, "Just do it." Nor does he just hand them a book on the subject. In this case, Jesus actually hands them a prayer. We call it the Lord's Prayer. "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation" (vv. 2-4).

You may recall that last fall I preached a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. We explored each of the prayer's petitions in order to get a better sense of the priorities of Jesus' life and ministry, to grow deeper in our communion with our Lord, and to be formed more into his likeness. When someone wants to learn how to pray, it's not enough to take the text of the Lord's Prayer, simply sit it in front of them, and say, "Here, this is how you pray." This prayer calls for some elaboration, some expansion, some interpretation.

And that's exactly what Jesus does in today's text from Luke. After giving his disciples this prayer, Jesus continues his teaching with two parables. In the first one, a neighborhood friend comes knocking at midnight, asking for help with food to provide for an unexpected guest. Thankfully the homeowner has recently installed a Ring Video Doorbell system, so he doesn't even have to get out of bed. He just grabs his phone from the nightstand, looks at the screen and sees his neighbor standing there on the front porch, and politely reminds him that everybody in the house is asleep. It's too late to be borrowing bread.

At first, that seems like a reasonable response, given the circumstances. But in the culture of the biblical world, hospitality was so prized and expected that the friend's request isn't really that out of bounds. In fact, the man who was awakened by the knock at his door might actually end up incurring dishonor if he fails to help his friend provide the essentials for his surprise visitor. Note that in the parable, Jesus uses an interesting term. The NIV translates it as "boldness." It could also be rendered as "shameless." It's not completely clear who in the parable is shameless. It could be the breadless host, who acts shamelessly by showing up in the middle of the night begging for food. Or it could be the man who has been awakened from his sleep, who would be acting shamelessly if he refuses his friend's request for bread. In this case, it's probably the latter, because honor and community expectations about hospitality would demand that a neighbor get up, awaken his whole family if necessary, and supply his neighbor's need. By doing so, he will bring honor to them both.

Remember that this parable is meant to expand on the prayer that Jesus has just given his disciples, the Lord's Prayer. And the focus of the Lord's Prayer isn't on technique but rather on the character of the one to whom we pray. In other words, the key to prayer isn't "What should we say?" but rather "Who is God?" "What is this God like?"

According to Jesus, prayer is grounded in the reliability and responsiveness of God. If a neighbor will get up in the middle of the night to help a friend avoid being shamed, and to preserve his own honor as well, how much more can we count on God's readiness to answer a call for help. This means that prayer is "effective," that prayer "works," not primarily because of our persistence but because of God's goodness. Prayer isn't about cajoling God or hounding God until we finally get what we want or think we need. Rather, prayer is about God hearing us and responding to us based on his own compassion and care.

That's why Jesus goes on in the second parable to emphasize how God's goodness is greater than that of any human father. Jesus tells his hearers to think about their interaction with their own children. When your hungry child asks you for something basic like a fish or an egg, you don't give that child a snake or a scorpion, do you? No, you give that child something that's going to nourish them, something that's good for them. So if you, being a human parent, a flawed mortal entrusted with the care of sons and daughters, know how to give them things that are good for them, how much more we should trust that God, our heavenly Father, our divine, loving parent, knows what we need and will provide what's best for us. Again, prayer is about coming to God with confidence in his goodness and compassion. As one commentator has summarized it, "Where we bring our need to God's love in faith, that is prayer."²

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes that our two best prayers are, "help me, help me, help me" and "thank you, thank you, thank you."³ Awareness of our need and appreciation for God's gifts are fundamental to being followers of Jesus. When we come to our Lord and say, "Teach us to pray," learning module number one is about prayer as a relationship of childlike dependence and gratitude. The course goal isn't to master a set of techniques or to acquire the right vocabulary to get God to do what we want, but to live in intimate relationship with God, desiring and participating in his redemptive will for the world. Remember again that Jesus is elaborating on the Lord's Prayer: "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come."

In whatever ways we come to God in prayer, and whatever we say, these are simply responses to how he has already come to us, and spoken to us, most of all through Jesus Christ. Our prayers don't launch the kingdom. Our prayers are simply cries for the full revelation of the kingdom that's already underway among us. "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). No wonder Jesus calls us to prayerfulness that's active. Ask, seek, knock. The God we worship and serve is a God who gives, so ask. The God we worship and serve is a God who desires to be found, so seek. The God we worship and serve is a God who opens, so knock.

This doesn't mean that prayer is a blank check that we can use to get God to give us what we want, when we want it. No, prayer is relationship with God in which God shapes us to want what God wants, cosmically, collectively, and personally. So we can ask, seek, and knock with confidence that God's answers, whatever form they take, will always come out of his unchanging goodness and love, in God's time and way.

Pastor H. B. Charles provides a helpful illustration of why God often makes us wait for the answer to our prayers. He says:

One hot afternoon, a certain woman walked to her neighbor's produce stand to buy grapes. The line was long. And each person seemed to get special attention. But she waited patiently. When she finally made it to the front of the line, the owner asked for her order. She asked for grapes. "Please excuse me for a minute," was the answer. Then the owner walked away and disappeared behind a building. For some reason, this rubbed the woman the wrong way. Everyone in line before her was greeted warmly. They were given special attention. And, most importantly, they were served immediately. But she was forced to wait. And when she got to the front of the line, she was forced to wait some more. She was offended. She felt the owner took her regular business for granted. The longer she waited, the angrier she became.

Finally, the produce stand owner reappeared. And with a big smile, he presented her with the most beautiful grapes she had ever seen. He invited her to taste them. She had never tasted grapes so good. As she turned to leave with her delicious grapes, he stopped her. "Oh yeah, I'm sorry I kept you waiting," said the farmer. "But I needed the time to get you my very best."

How long have you been in line waiting on God to get to your request? How long have you been waiting in line for God to meet a need, solve a problem, or open a door? Whatever you do, don't get out of line. And don't stop praying. Wait on God.⁴

As disciples of Jesus, our lives, individually and together, are lives of waiting upon the Lord. And our waiting involves praying. In fact, our praying is part of how we wait. All our asking, seeking, and knocking are part of how we live in anticipation of the coming kingdom that the Father has promised. Coming in a grand and global sense. But also coming deeply and personally.

Notice that after giving us the two parables that expand on the Lord's Prayer, Jesus closes our text by saying that of all the things the heavenly Father provides, his greatest gift, the one he most wants us to receive, is the Holy Spirit. In other words, God's own personal powerful presence in your life. The kingdom of God taking shape in you as you follow Jesus, and become like Jesus, and pray like Jesus.

In the movie *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carey plays a mediocre news reporter in a midlife crisis. He complains to his girlfriend that God does a poor job of running the world, and believes that he could do much better. So God, played by Morgan Freeman, gives him a chance. After doing a poor job of playing God, including wrecking his relationship with his girlfriend, Grace, Bruce begins to ask God for help. Things start to change when God teaches Bruce how to pray about the real issues in life. Their dialogue goes as follows:

"What do you want me to do?" Bruce asks.

"I want you to pray, son. Go ahead."

Bruce squints his eyes and attempts a prayer, "Um...Lord, feed the hungry and bring peace to ... um ... all of mankind. How's that?"

"Great ... if you want to be Miss America," God responds. "Now come on. What do you really care about?"

"Grace," Bruce says, thinking of his girlfriend.

"Grace. You want her back?"

Bruce seems surprised by his own response. "No. I want her to be happy, no matter what that means." Bruce closes his eyes. "I want her to find someone who will treat her with all

the love she deserved from me. I want her to meet someone who will see her always as I do now ... through your eyes."

"Now that's a prayer," God says. "I'm going to get right on it."⁵

Maybe Bruce is onto something with his prayer. Part of the purpose of prayer is that in the process we take on more of the character and will and purpose of God to whom we're praying. Wanting to see others through God's eyes, and having more of his love, goodness, and compassion being formed in us. When we come to the heavenly Father with a deep sense of our need, asking for the Holy Spirit, seeking the kingdom, and knocking on the doors of heaven, we can be confident that God will answer out of his eternal faithfulness and care.

¹ G. Travis Norvell, "Prayer Lessons." Day 1. July 24, 2022. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/62c8308e6615fb108200000a/travis-norvell-prayer-lessons> (July 20, 2022).

² R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) n.p.

³ Quoted by David Lose. Commentary on Luke 11:1-13. Working Preacher. July 25, 2010. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-3/commentary-on-luke-111-13> (July 21, 2022).

⁴ H. B. Charles, *It Happens After Prayer* (Chicago: Moody, 2013) 37.

⁵ *Bruce Almighty*. Directed and produced by Tom Shadyac. Written by Steve Kornen and Mark O'Keefe, Universal, 2003.