

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS
(3) JESUS AND PRAYER

Luke 11:5-13

Jeffrey S. Carlson

March 10, 2019

SCRIPTURE

⁵And 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; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷And 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.'

⁸I 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. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If 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 11:5-13 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Biblical literacy is becoming scarce no matter what denomination you are talking about. Consider the case of two attorneys who were friends. One went to a Presbyterian Church and the other attended a Baptist Church. One day the Presbyterian told his friend that he had become a Sunday School teacher. His Baptist friend was astonished, "You, a Sunday School teacher!? I'll bet you ten bucks you don't even know the Lord's Prayer!" "Why everybody knows that," the other answered, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." His friend shook his head. Then he pulled out his wallet and handed him ten dollars, saying, "You win! I had no idea you knew so much about the Bible."

Prayer is a dominant theme in the Gospel according to Luke. Prayer plays a significant role at key moments in Christ's own life and in his teachings. Luke tells us that Jesus often:

. . . would withdraw to deserted places and pray (Lk 5:15 NRSV; see also Lk

6:12; 9:18, 28).

1. THE MODEL OF PRAYER

Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. Luke reveals to us that:

[Jesus] 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” (Lk 11:1).

We usually refer to this as the Lord’s Prayer. But this is a misnomer. It is not a prayer that the Lord would pray, if for no other reason than the fact he would never need forgiveness. If you want a true example of a prayer of our Lord then look at John 17. This chapter contains an account of a prayer that *only* our Lord could have prayed. It says, in part:

Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed (John 17:5 NRSV).

No disciple could pray such a prayer. But the prayer we call the “Lord’s Prayer” can only be prayed by a disciple. Perhaps it would be better to call it the “Disciples’ Prayer.”

But whatever name we use, it is the best known prayer in Christianity, and possibly the best known prayer of any kind in the world. It has brought inspiration, courage and hope to hundreds of millions of people.

The Disciples’ Prayer comes from Jesus. We know he taught it to his inner circle of followers before it was taught to others. It was not uncommon for rabbis in Jesus’ day to teach their students prayers. Apparently, John the Baptizer did this for his disciples (Lk 11:1).

In order to understand the nature of this prayer we need to look at both Matthew and Luke’s versions. In Matthew we read:

"Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" (Mt 6:9-13 NRSV).

The account in Luke goes like this:

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 indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial" (Luke 11:1-4 NRSV).

You will note at once the wording and setting are different from Matthew's account. I have seen many ingenious attempts at reconciling the two accounts. But the problem with this is that there is no problem. They are two different accounts – and that is Okay.

Matthew indicates how this can be so when he describes how Jesus taught: "[Jesus] opened his mouth, and taught them" (5:2 KJV). This sounds redundant to us but it is from a figure of speech meaning that what follows is not only important but it is also a summary of what has been taught on more than one occasion. Jesus did not teach his followers the Disciples' Prayer only once or even twice but several times until the key words and concepts were clear in their minds.

The result is a model for prayer. Matthew provides an example. Luke provides the basic form. Ironically, we tend to use Matthew's version as if it were the definitive form and we ignore Luke's version altogether. (Although we will be using Luke's version later on in today's service.) What are we to do? Are we bound to say this prayer as it is written or is it a guide for putting our own words into prayer? I do not think we are forced to choose. We can use the prayer as it stands or as a guide for prayer. But remember, just saying words is not the same as praying. Two billion people can say the Lord's Prayer. Very few ever learn to pray it.

2. THE ATTITUDE OF PRAYER

Prayer in Luke is often joyful. The phrase "praising God" occurs more often in Luke than in all the rest of the New Testament put together. This praise can be expressed in song. We see this, for example, in the Song of Mary (Lk 1:46-55) that I talked about last week. It is also found in the Song of Zechariah (Lk 1:68-79) and the Song of Simeon (Lk 2:29-32).

If we want to use our voices for praise and not cursing then it begins with prayer. For centuries, Christians have used the songs of Zechariah, Mary and Simeon to help them offer prayers of praise on a daily basis. If you are struggling in this area or just want to grow in this area let me offer a practical, three-step suggestion that may help you rediscover these biblical treasures.

- In the morning, read the prayer of Zechariah—aloud if possible (Lk 1:68-79). Then

offer a brief prayer praising God for what he is *going to do* that day. The key word is knowledge. Ask God to help you learn what he wants you to learn.

- Sometime in the afternoon, read the prayer of Mary (Lk 1:46-55). Then offer a brief prayer praising God for what he *is doing* that day. The key word is service. Ask God to help you be his faithful servant.
- Before going to bed, read the prayer of Simeon (Lk 2:29-32). Then offer a brief prayer praising God for what he *has done* that day. The key word is trust. You can entrust your life to God knowing that even if you die, yet shall you live.

3. THE PERSISTENCE OF PRAYER

Prayer is also the central focus of three parables unique to Luke: the Friend at Midnight (11:5-8), the Persistent Widow (18:1-8) and the Pharisee and Tax-collector (18:9-14). This morning we are going to look further at the story of the Friend at Midnight.

People tend to think of prayer as asking for things. Is it wrong to ask for gifts? Jesus addressed this question in the context of a lesson on prayer. He told a story about a man asking for bread in the middle of the night. From this story we learn that it is not wrong to ask God for gifts. But the real issues are, “What are we asking for? What is our attitude in asking? And how well do we know the Giver?”

Travelers in the arid climate of Judea often journeyed late in the evening to avoid the heat of the day. In Jesus' story one such traveler had arrived in the middle of the night to his friend's house. In that time and place hospitality was a sacred duty. Although many homes would have used up their day's bread by nightfall, in a small village people would know who still had bread left over. In modern villages of that region, bread might last for quite a few days, but one must serve a guest a fresh, unbroken loaf as an act of hospitality.

The late arrival of the traveler confronted the householder with an embarrassing situation, because his cupboard was empty. So he was compelled to go out and borrow from a friend.

The typical Palestinian house of that time consisted of little more than one room. The floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds. There would be a small stove around which the family would sleep at night, not on raised beds but on sleeping mats. Families were usually large and they slept close together for warmth. Further, it was customary to bring the livestock, the hens and the goats, into the house at night. Going to bed was a major undertaking so was it any wonder that the man who was in bed did not want to rise? But he did rise. Why?

The answer depends a great deal on the word *anaideia* (an-ah'ee-die-ah) found in verse 8. This word originally meant “the avoidance of dishonor.” Hospitality in the first century was a matter of honor. Failure to extend hospitality would have been considered disgraceful.

But we human beings often have some unusual expectations when it comes to honor. In South Carolina in 1838 there was a rule for those fighting a pistol duel that stated that you had to discharge your weapon within three seconds. Aiming for any longer simply was not considered gentlemanly. Now in my mind there is something really twisted about this. Why is the question of aiming 4 seconds a more serious matter than the question of breaking God’s commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”?

Modern, urban gangs, including those in Battle Creek, often have distorted notions of honor and the violent responses required if that honor is threatened. I am also amazed to hear about organized crime families, who routinely engage in murder, theft and extortion, claiming to have a code of honor. Is there honor among thieves?

A burglar needing money to pay his income taxes decided to burgle the safe in a store. On the safe door he was delighted to find a note reading, “Please do not use dynamite. The safe is not locked. Just turn the knob.” He did so. Instantly a heavy sandbag fell on him, the entire premises were floodlighted, and alarms started clanging. As the police carried him out on a stretcher, he was heard moaning, “My confidence in human nature has been rudely shaken.”

Based on this word *anaideia*, the parable that Jesus told seems to mean that just as the man in bed would respond to his neighbor so as not to incur dishonor (for having refused the needs of a visitor to his community), so God will always do what is honorable and consistent with his character. In other words, before we ask God for something in prayer we need to ask ourselves, “Does this request honor God? Does the answer I seek reflect the character of God?” For God will honor, honorable requests.

Over time the word *anaideia* also came to mean “boldness” and that is how the NIV translates the word. The KJV uses “importunity” and the NRSV “persistence.” To put it in modern terms, the word conveys the idea of hanging in there for a good cause.

Jesus wants us to “hang in there.” He encouraged people to be bold and persistent in prayer, not in order to change the mind of God but in order to change our own attitudes so that we are more receptive to what God desires to give us. All that we have is a gift from God but to what extent do we know and appreciate this fact? Too often we are like the teenager who, with feigned sincerity opens his Christmas present and says, "Oh wow...

socks."

Jesus tells us to ask, seek and knock. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "Don't bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This is not a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we're in." We are to be bold and persistent in prayer even (and especially) through difficult circumstances because this produces a Christ-like character in us (see Rom 5:3-5).

Jesus asks:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? (Lk 11:11-12).

The bizarre examples in these verses reinforce the point that God will respond to our prayers in a loving manner. You see, God's gift-giving is in sharp contrast to our gift-giving.

But what does God want to give us? Jesus tells us:

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! (11:13).

He wants to give us his Holy Spirit! So let us ask for the Holy Spirit, not only to help us pray but also to receive all the blessings included in that one request. For by the influences of the Holy Spirit we are brought to know God and ourselves, to turn to, believe in, and love Jesus; and love one another; and so we are given strength and encouragement in this world, and made ready for everlasting happiness in the next. All these blessings our heavenly Father is more ready to impart to every one that asks for them, than an indulgent parent is to give food to a hungry child.

Here is an amazing thing to consider— we are not only permitted but encouraged to ask God for gifts. But when we ask God for gifts are we asking for something that will honor God and be true to God's character? Are we asking with an attitude of bold appreciation and persistence? And when we come to God, who is the Giver of all good things, do we know the full measure of his love for us?