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Luke 11:1-13

Second Message

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"LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY"

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

If I were to ask you what is the one thing you would most like to improve in your relationship with God, what would your answer be? I'd venture to say that if we surveyed the congregation this morning, most people would say that they would like to pray more. That would be my response certainly.

Christians making New Year resolutions almost always put prayer near the top of the list. We resolve to eat less, get more exercise, read the Bible, and pray more often. We start getting up half an hour earlier in the morning to read the Bible and pray. Usually this lasts but a short time, then the next crisis strikes and we have to rearrange our schedules. It is probably true to say, therefore, that for most Christians prayer is like dialing 911: we only use it in emergencies.

Is there something that will help us move beyond good intentions to a lifestyle of praying? Once, when the disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray," he responded by telling them a parable. Today we will look at what he said.

In this series of messages we are studying the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke. Jesus was in Samaria when he delivered these parables, a place in-between Galilee and Jerusalem, a place in-between home and destination. As the disciples were walking and wandering with Jesus in this place he used the language of parables, the language of the Holy Spirit, to blow apart their categories, expand their thinking and give them a greater vision of God. His parables, as we have seen, contain truth that requires thought. Parables are not mere teaching or proclamation. They have a way of entering through a side door of the mind, in a manner of speaking, but once inside, they explode.

Our text is taken from Luke 11:

And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'" And He said to them, "Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he shall answer and say, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?

Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:1-13 NASB)

This is the only occasion recorded in the gospels that the disciples asked Jesus to teach them something. Our Lord, as the text says, was praying at a certain place. Already the disciples had watched him do this throughout a couple of years of ministry. To them it was a common sight, part of everyday life with Jesus. At last, one of them asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." This was not a request for instruction about behavior or theology. They wanted to be trained in source action. They recognized that prayer was central to the life of Jesus, in fact it was the very key to his spiritual life. They knew all the Jewish requirements for prayer: the appropriate prayer for certain occasions, how often they were to pray, etc., but something was missing in their experience.

Jesus responded by illustrating with a brief model prayer; then he told them an odd-sounding parable, and followed this with a brief antidote. His instructions on prayer were surprisingly brief. The text can be read in a mere 75 seconds. At the bookstore you can find an entire shelf of books on prayer, but Jesus would not have one among them. He would not have made the best seller list. What he said on the subject would not have filled a book.

We are used to being schooled and having things explained to us, but some activities, like walking, talking, loving, hoping, aren't learned in school. For instance, how many of you went to a class to learn how to ride a bicycle, or sent your children to a class to learn this skill? Riding a bicycle is learned by a child as his parents walk or run alongside him. It is the same with prayer. We learn to pray by observing and listening to someone who is praying.

Jesus' prayer here in Luke's gospel appears in a slightly different form from the parallel account in Matthew 6. Luke was familiar with the account in Matthew, but evidently he changed and shortened it. He begins with just the word "Father," omitting the words "our" and "in heaven." Luke also omits the phrases "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," "deliver us from the evil one," and "yours is the kingdom." The six petitions in Matthew become five in Luke's gospel: "Hallowed be your name; come (your kingdom); give us our daily bread; forgive; lead us not."

Jesus follows his prayer with the parable, which is given in two stanzas, the first in verses 5-7, the second in verse 8. Clearly the theme of the parable centers on the idea of giving: "friend, lend me three loaves...I can't get up and give you anything...even though he will not give him...he will give him as much as he needs."

Verses 5-7 could easily be rendered as a question: "Can you imagine this happening?" An emphatic negative answer is anticipated. Thus the response of verses 5-7 is what will not happen, while that of verse 8 is what will happen.

Once again, cultural nuances are critical. In this instance, the notion of hospitality must be carefully examined. Oriental/Middle Eastern hospitality is legendary. The listener or reader could not imagine being given silly excuses about a closed door and sleeping children when the entertainment of a guest was at stake. These hypothetical excuses were so unthinkable they were humorous. Our singles ministry people have been greeted with marvelous hospitality in the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico in recent years. Families move out of their homes so that our young people can have lodging. We have even had offers from villagers who have two turkeys to kill one of them for us to take home.

In the parable, the guest arrived at midnight. Apparently, because of the intense heat in the desert, traveling was done at night. The host asked his friend for three loaves, more than were needed probably but, in keeping with custom, the host would have to put before the guest more than the number of loaves required for one adult meal. And he would know who had fresh-baked bread in the village. Further, custom demanded that he serve his guest, and the guest had to eat, no matter how late it was. Our staff encountered this custom a number of years ago in Indonesia. In a remote village we held an evening church service, and following the meeting we went to someone's home to eat a meal. It was late, but that didn't seem to matter. I was sick, but I still had to eat. Our hosts served us their very best fare. They didn't even eat with us, but remained out of sight, appearing only to serve us when we needed food. This was the kind of hospitality demanded here in this setting in the parable.

A crucial element in the parable is that the visitor was a guest of the community, not just the individual mentioned. Their reputation was at stake. In the Yucatan, we learned, the entire village cares for their guests. They watched over the houses where we stayed. Unasked, they washed our laundry. They gave up their precious water so we could take showers. Once, when one of the young women on our team went for a walk, the villagers sent out a search party, thinking she might be in danger. The whole community was involved in making us feel welcome and secure.

The host in the parable had plenty of food. The words, "I have nothing adequate to set before him," convey that the host wanted the best so that the honor of the village would be upheld. Finally, bread was the humblest element of the meal. Bread was not the meal, rather it was the knife, fork and spoon with which the meal was eaten. The host would also have borrowed a tray, pitcher, cloth, and goblets. The neighbor ended up offering "whatever he needed."

The significance of the passage hangs on the meaning of the key word in verse 8, which is translated "shamelessness" or "persistence." Shamelessness is a negative quality; persistence is a positive one. Some say this word describes the host. He got what he wanted because he was persistent: he kept knocking at the door. (Chapter 18 of this gospel records a parable about a widow that seems to have the same thrust.) But that was not what was happening here. In this story, the subject of the stanza was the sleeper, not the host. The word must therefore apply to him. Further support for this is found in the fact that the host got whatever he wanted, not just what he needed, from a reluctant giver.

Everywhere in Greek literature, this word points to a negative quality, hence the translation "persistence." The word, however, comes from a term which can have two meanings: a sense of shame (positive), or shame (negative). Shame is an extremely important emotion in Middle Eastern society. While some areas of life are gov-

erned by law, much of life is controlled by the "shame" (negative) that is to be avoided because of the individual's "sense of shame" (positive), i.e. his sense of honor, involvement or commitment. The translator began with a word denoting a negative quality, then he changed the term slightly to negate it, and thus ended up with what was for him a positive quality.

The sleeper knew the borrower had to gather up the essentials for the banquet from various neighbors. If the sleeper refused the request for something as humble as a loaf of bread, the host would continue on his rounds, cursing the stinginess of the sleeper who would not get up even to fulfill this trifling request. The story would be all over the village by morning. His name would be mud; he would be met with the cries of "Shame!" everywhere he went. Because of his desire to avoid being shamed, therefore, and because he was committed to community and relationships, he would get out of bed and grant whatever the borrower requested. The fact that the host received much more than bread is evidence that the entire transaction was completed in a spirit of goodwill.

What does all of this say about prayer? And how did Jesus answer his disciples? We could talk for a long time about the Lord's prayer, the five verbs of the prayer, etc., but Jesus seemed to be emphasizing certain things.

First, he gave the spiritual condition that was necessary for prayer. Poverty, according to Jesus, is the condition needed for prayer. In both the prayer and the parable there is something central about bread. "Give us our daily bread" is the center line in the prayer: "Lend me three loaves" is the host's request. Bread is the most basic element of the meal. To request bread was to admit poverty. The gospel always climaxes where you least expect it: in a stable, in the upper room, in the garden of Gethsemane, in the washing of feet, in the provision of daily bread.

Prayer should be anchored to our most immediate needs. When we are poor, we pray. If we are to enter into what Jesus teaches on prayer, therefore, we must accept this place of poverty. Like children, we must begin with our most basic need. Unless we realize our poverty we will live dehumanized, anti-social lives. But sin keeps us from recognizing our condition, while pride keeps us from confessing it. We need to recognize our need, our poverty. If we do not, we will not pray, and our worship will be insincere. If on the other hand prayer comes as a result of wealth, it is only religious consumerism; it stems merely from a want.

Ray Stedman wrote,

We must either be praying or fainting; there is no other alternative. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal, vital touch with God. True prayer is an awareness of our helpless need and an acknowledgment of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing, the very breath of his life.

Jesus said in John 5:19, "The Son can do nothing of Himself." Perhaps this is why prayer is so difficult for us: we have to admit our poverty. This is hard to do, isn't it? Often when people are told about God, they respond by saying, "That's fine if you need something. But I'm not needy. I'm able to take care of myself. God helps those who help themselves." If you do not need God, however, then you will never talk to him. Take away all the externals—your clothes, car, home, furniture, vacation, career, title, abilities—and what is left? Are you poor materially and spiritually? If you are, count yourself fortunate. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." After studying

this material my morning prayer has become, “Father, I need daily bread.”

Poverty, then, is the condition necessary for prayer.

The second thing Jesus teaches has to do with the language of prayer. Notice that in his prayer, all the verbs are voiced in the imperative mood. The controlling verb in the parable, “give,” is an imperative. The host is bold; he has a sense of urgency in his request. Then, following the parable, Jesus uses the imperatives “ask, seek, knock.” The request is not a demand. It is a statement of truth, of fact: “God, I need you.”

Once semester in college I was concerned whether I could complete the course work assigned. I was getting an “A” in one class, so I decided to ask my professor if I could skip the final. I explained to him that it would be of no benefit to me to take the final. I had other work needing completion, so would he allow me to skip the final? I asked. To my surprise, he agreed. (I tried this tactic later, but it never worked again.)

But God is always approachable. We can come to him again and again and make our requests to him in prayer. The imperative is the form of speech that changes the way things are. It changes the present; it reaches into the future. The present tense of the verbs “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” indicate continued action. “Keep on asking” implies a faith that makes requests; “keep on seeking,” indicates a sincerity that is more than casual; “keep on knocking” shows that initial barriers are not to be seen as final refusals. Prayer does not begin in acquiescence; prayer is action that creates change. God is approachable. If you ask, you will not have your head bitten off. You can come to him boldly and ask, seek, knock. James has an appropriate word for us here: “You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives” (James 4:2-3).

Third, Jesus lets the disciples in on the secret of prayer. The secret is understanding the nature of God. The disciples asked our Lord how to pray, but what he really did was tell them about the Father. Notice that “Father” is the first word in Jesus’ short prayer. The Jews were used to beginning their prayers by saying, “Lord God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God most high, creator of heaven and earth, our shield and the shield of our fathers.” But Jesus merely said, “Father.” He reemphasized the notion of fatherhood at the end, saying a father who is asked by his son for a fish will not give him a snake; if you know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your heavenly Father give, etc. And what Jesus tells us about his Father is that he gives. His very nature is a giver.

In the parable, everything was stacked against the host. It was night; the neighbor and his children were asleep; the door was locked. Yet the neighbor would give even more than was requested because he was a man of integrity, honor, and shamelessness, and he would not violate those qualities. The God to whom we pray also has an integrity that he will not violate. And beyond this, he loves us. Some people think the neighbor in the parable is included in the story to set him in contrast to God, but I think Jesus is using a theme from the culture and building on it to demonstrate the very nature of God. Even if the neighbor was reluctant, God is not. We do not get from God because we are persistent; we get because God is a giver. It is his nature to give.

I take great delight in giving to my three children. I would rather give to them than give to myself, even when they are rebellious. That is the nature of fatherhood. Understanding the nature of the Fa-

ther is the key to praying. Prayer should always be personal, never indifferent. If we understand who we are and who God is, then we will pray naturally. God is our Father; we are sons and daughters. Everything is based on knowing in our hearts that this is true. If we understand the nature of Father, then we will pray. We will relate to God in an intimate, confident way as we would to a loving and caring father. If we do not understand this, then our attempts at praying will be routine—external actions with no relationship. This perhaps is why the disciples asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

A couple of weeks ago there was an article in *Time* magazine on fatherhood and the growing problem of fatherless homes. David Blankenhorn, the founder of the Institute for American Values in New York City, said: “This trend of fatherlessness is the most socially consequential family trend of our generation...As children get older, noted William Maddox, director of research and policy at the Washington based Family Research Council, fathers become crucial in their physical and psychological development. Studies of young criminals have found that more than 70% of all juveniles in state reform institutions come from fatherless homes.” The article opened with a story about Megan, an 8-year-old fatherless girl. When she was asked what fathers do, she responded: “Love you. They kiss you and hug you when you need them.” When she was asked what would she like to do with her dad, she said, “I’d want him to talk to me...I wish I had somebody to talk to.”

As I was growing up, I did not have many deep conversations with my father. I like to talk about deep, not surface things, and I kept trying to talk on that level with my father. But although he loved me very much there was not that deep level of communication that I desired. In my twenties, I decided to take a new approach. My father and mother came to visit us in California, and when they arrived, I gave him a hug, something I had not done since I was very young. He was not a tall man, but he was a big man, with big hands and strong arms. When I hugged him, he gave me the biggest bear-hug I ever had. At that moment I learned something about him that changed my relationship with him. I had thought he might be a bit shallow, but in that instant I realized that he never revealed his deeper feelings because he was afraid he would cry. He did not know how to express his emotions. But from that day forward whenever we met we didn’t have to talk a lot. We hugged and kissed and said we loved each other. The communication barrier between us was removed. We had an intimate, although non-verbal relationship.

This is the place we need to come to in our relationship with God. We need to see him as a Father who loves us and desires to have a relationship with us, a Father who wants to give to us. This may be hard for some who perhaps did not experience this with their own fathers; there is a barrier that needs to be breached. This is what will motivate us to pray.

Jesus says that the secret to prayer is having the correct view of God.

Finally, our Lord gives assurance for answered prayer. If we are confident of having our needs met when we go to a neighbor in the night; if we are confident that our own father will not give us a snake when we ask for a fish, or a scorpion when we ask for an egg; if earthly fathers who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children; then how much more can we rest assured when we take our requests to a loving, heavenly Father? He who asks, receives. He who seeks, finds. To him who knocks, it shall be opened.

Does this mean that we will get everything we ask for? My own experience has taught me that we won't. I do know, however, that God wants to give me the character of Christ—love, wisdom, patience, strength. I can ask for these things in faith. Other things I am not so sure about. But I know that if God is truly my loving Father, then he will filter my requests accordingly. It would not have been in my best interests to receive everything I have asked from God. So, God may not give me everything I want, but I can trust him to give me everything I need. With some things there might be a delay, but if I knock and keep on knocking, this will deepen my dependence upon him.

Notice that the text says God will respond. He will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Is this referring to conversion, when we receive the Holy Spirit into our lives? Certainly it is true that when we ask to receive Christ, God will give us his Spirit. However, this is a word to believers. It doesn't mean that the Spirit comes again and again, but rather that we need to be continually filled with the Spirit, to be strengthened with power in our inner being through God's Spirit.

Sometimes then we don't get what we want, but we can be assured of receiving the Holy Spirit who ministers to the deepest needs of our hearts. We receive God himself, his presence in our lives. This is the meaning of the words of Psalm 73, "My flesh and my heart may fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever...as for me, the nearness of God is my good."

Last week, the elders of our church gathered around Art David's hospital bed to pray for our brother who has been stricken with cancer. We prayed for healing. This is what we want, but we don't know if it is what we need. We asked, and then we turned the matter over to God. We were assured of one thing, however: God was near. The presence of the Spirit was evident and the joy of the Lord overflowed. The most critical prayer was answered as we beheld Art's countenance. This is what our Father God most readily gives.

Most of us would say we need to pray more, but Jesus didn't say a lot about prayer when he was asked by his disciples to teach them to pray. He told them that the condition for prayer is poverty; the language is imperative; and the secret to praying is knowing and understanding our Father. And if we understand our Father, then we can be assured that he will hear and respond to our deepest needs. This is what Jesus modeled to his disciples.

Ray Stedman put it this way:

The greatest thing anyone can do for God and man is pray. It is not the only thing; but it is the chief thing. The great people of the earth today are the people who pray. I do not mean those who talk about prayer; nor those who say they believe in prayer; nor yet those who can explain about prayer; but I mean those people who take time to pray.

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