

PRAYER: IT'S ABOUT WHO, NOT HOW**LUKE 11:1 – 13**

by Elaine Poproski

If Jesus were standing right here in front of us, like a regular person, what would you want him to teach you?

Maybe how to turn a couple loaves of bread and a few fish into a feast for thousands?

Maybe how to deal most effectively with the religious fundamentalists?

What would you want to learn from Jesus, if he were physically present with us this morning?

(invite people to respond to that, or at least give a few moments to consider)

In Luke 11, we read that one time when Jesus had finished praying, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

This wasn't the first time they'd witnessed him praying. It was something he did a lot. It was something most Jewish people did a lot. There were prescribed prayers at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day, as well as all sorts of other prayers for every imaginable occasion. So why would the disciples – these Jewish men – ask Jesus to teach them to pray? Surely they already knew how? They'd been praying since they were toddlers.

I think, as much as prayer was probably a part of everyday life for the disciples, as much as they knew dozens of different prayers off-by-heart – and had known them off-by-heart since childhood – there was probably something different about the way Jesus prayed. They were witnessing him cast out demons with a word, heal chronic diseases with a touch, speak and raise the dead. If I was one of them, I would want to know how Jesus did all the things he did, as well. I wouldn't be surprised if they made the connection between all the miracles and Jesus' prayer life. I wouldn't be surprised if when they asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, what they really wanted was for him to teach them how to pray in such a way that they could do miracles like Jesus did. Wouldn't we like to know the same thing?

I wonder if what came next might have disappointed the disciples. I wonder if it maybe disappoints you a little bit? I know we're maybe not supposed to think that way, but if what we want is for Jesus to teach us to pray like he prayed – to pray as *effectively* as he prayed – to pray in the kind of way that gets things done – doesn't what comes next seem a bit... simple? uninspired even?

Listen to what Jesus said:

“When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed [that means holy or sacred] 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.”

Those words may sound a bit different than you're used to. Most of us are more used to the way they're presented in Matthew's gospel. That's the version people memorize. It's the version people tend to recite in church. Matthew uses more words, and his version is a bit more poetic, but it's the same prayer. Luke is just...more succinct.

Let's take a few minutes to really think about the words in this simple prayer Jesus taught. As we go through it, keep in mind the request that inspired it – “Lord, teach us to pray...”

The prayer begins by calling God, “Father.”

Probably this doesn't sound strange to you. Christians have been calling God “Father” (among other things) ever since the first disciples. But what does it actually mean to address God as “Father”?

Over the years, lots of people have struggled with the idea of referring to God as their father. The main argument is that the name carries a lot of baggage from our own fathers. The argument isn't wrong. The meaning of words is heavily impacted by our experiences. But this isn't a new phenomenon. It's not like all the people in Jesus' day had really great fathers, or like Jesus just didn't know some people had lousy fathers. My goodness, in Jesus' day, fathers could sell their children or even kill their children and it was perfectly legal.

When Jesus calls God, “Father,” he's inviting us to imagine the best possible kind of parent we can – a parent who loves unconditionally, who protects and provides, who encourages... He's a father of whom we need not be afraid, a father who knows what we need before we know it ourselves, a father who enjoys giving good gifts. Yes, our understanding of the word *Father*, may have a lot of negative baggage attached to it, but never forget that our baggage is extraneous; just like whatever I carry in a literal suitcase doesn't at all define who you are, so our other kinds of baggage – the mental and emotional kinds – don't define God.

And so the prayer begins: Father, hallowed be your name. Holy be your name. Sacred be your name. The words are a command. They're a statement of fact, but not just a statement of fact. When we pray these words, we are presenting, in the strongest language possible, a request that carries within it an acknowledgement of God's unavoidable obligation to honour the request. We're not saying, “Father, if you please...” or “Father, perhaps if you're so inclined you might...” The words are straightforward, demanding, commanding: “Father, hallowed be your name.”

I wonder if, when the disciples heard Jesus start the prayer this way, they maybe got a bit excited. If they were, indeed, asking Jesus to teach them the secret to his prayers – the secret to getting God to do all the amazing things they'd seen, starting with a command sounds promising, doesn't it? I mean sure, to many of us, it might sound super presumptuous to even consider commanding God. But then again, prayer is often treated like it's magic – like if one just knows the right words – just says the right words in the right order – then God has to do what's asked.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it makes God out to be little more than a genie in a bottle or any other kind of magical wish granter. And there's nothing anywhere in the Bible that suggests such a description comes even remotely close to who God is. Yes, God clearly invites us to make our requests known. Yes, God clearly loves to answer prayer. But God isn't beholden

to us. He doesn't *have* to do anything. He's God – all-powerful, all-knowing, eternal, without beginning or end. But also, we call him "Father." And it's because he is our father, that we can, in the words of Hebrews 4, "approach [him] with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (v. 16).

I really like the way New Testament scholar Elisabeth Johnson explains and summarizes this prayer. She writes that the "hallowed be your name" part of the prayer is about asking God "to act in such a way that God's name is held in honour. [In other words, it's about asking God to be true to who God is – which doesn't really need to be asked, which is why it's maybe more a command, or a statement of fact, than a request. And then she points out that] The petitions that follow flesh out what this [asking-God-to-act-in-such-a-way-that-his-name-is-held-in-honour] means. When God's name is hallowed and God's kingdom comes, there is daily bread for all, forgiveness is practiced, and God delivers the faithful from the time of trial."ⁱ This is Jesus' prayer. This is Jesus' answer to the disciples' request that he teach them to pray.

But it's not the end of his answer. He goes on to tell them a parable. We read it, beginning in verse 5:

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.

I would guess that for many of us, this parable might be a little bit troubling. For me, the challenge with this parable has always been that it seems to equate God with a reluctant neighbour for whom our requests are a bother and an inconvenience. It fits with the idea of prayer as a kind magical thing. If we just say the right words in the right order, or if we ask over and over and over again, God will eventually give in, just to shut us up. But that image of God is so petty, so grumpy – it just doesn't fit with the God Jesus introduced us to. The God Jesus called Father is a God who stops at nothing for us, a God who was willing to die for us.

The problem isn't Jesus' parable. The problem is the way we've translated the parable – specifically the last part of verse 8, which reads this way: "...at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."

I compared a bunch of translations of this verse. Almost all of them translated it exactly the same way as what I just read. Even if they didn't use the exact same words, they all had the same meaning, which is, to quote The Message, "...if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbours, he'll finally get up and get you whatever you need."

The only translation I found that carried a slightly different meaning, was the NIV. It reads this way: "...yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." This translation is better than the others, but it's still problematic. It still makes it sound like, as one commentator put it, "prayer is the means by which we harass God until God finally submits to doing what we want."ⁱⁱⁱ

Apparently, there are some challenges for translators with the particular Greek word used by Luke, here. But the problem is that in translating the Greek word as persistence, they're translating it in a way that it isn't used in any other ancient text, suggesting that it's not a good translation.ⁱⁱⁱ Everywhere else the word means *shamelessness*, like the way the NIV translation reads. So, it's not asking over and over and over again that's the key, it's the attitude of boldness – of shameless audacity – that's the key. But even with that shift in our English translation, there's still a question that needs to be answered. Does this shamelessness refer to the person asking for bread or to the person who eventually gives the bread? Is this shamelessness the key to getting God to do what we want?

At issue here is the same problem as before. If the point is that the asker's shamelessness in the asking is what made the neighbour finally do what he wanted, then what we're saying is that we have the power to make God do what we want. If we're just bold enough, if we set aside all our societal niceties, if we don't worry about being polite about it, God will reward us by doing what we ask.

If this is what Jesus meant when he told the parable, the disciples were probably thrilled. Here was the key to praying as *effectively* as Jesus – to getting their own prayers to work as well as Jesus' prayers worked. "Ahhh," I can imagine them thinking, "He gave us the words to recite, but now, here's the key to turning those words from just words into the formula we need."

And at first glance, the next words Jesus spoke, the words we read in verses 9 – 10, seem to support that interpretation. Here's how Jesus concluded the parable:

⁹ "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to 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."

Isn't this great? First, be bold, be audacious, be shameless in your asking. And then, anything you ask for will be given and anything you search for will be found. Excellent! It even offers an implied answer to the question of prayers that God doesn't seem to answer. If he hasn't given what you've asked for, you just haven't been bold enough. You just haven't been shameless enough in the asking.

Most of us have heard things like this before, haven't we? God still hasn't given what you've been asking for? Well, just keep asking. Maybe add some fasting to the mix. And don't give up until you get what you want. Or maybe you don't have enough faith. Maybe someone around you doesn't have enough faith. Make sure only those with enough faith are involved in the asking.

None of that fits with the character of God we know through Scripture and especially through Jesus. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Prayer is not magic. God is not a genie in a bottle. Even though the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, what Jesus offered as a response was less of a *how* and more of a *who*.

He starts by addressing God as Father. That is who we approach in prayer – our perfect father who loves us unconditionally and completely. "Our Father," we pray, "hallowed be your name."

“Be who you are – act in a way that brings honour to your name, in a way that brings your kingdom.

Every ask flows out of that opening statement. Every answered prayer comes from that starting place. It’s not about how we ask. It’s not about using the right words in the right order. It’s not about asking boldly or persistently. It’s about God. It’s about who God is.

We call God Father because he first called us his children. We approach boldly – shamelessly – because he loves us, invites us, and welcomes us. It’s been said that when we pray, “we are pushing against an open door.”^{iv} Everything starts with God and with who God is. The disciples wanted to know how to pray. But Jesus wanted them (and us) to know to whom they were praying. That’s the point of the last part of today’s scripture reading – a second parable that builds from the first. it starts in verse 11.

¹¹ Is there anyone among you who, if your child asked for a fish, would give a snake instead of a fish? ¹² Or if the child asked for an egg, would 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 God we call Father is good and generous. He is the perfect parent – loving us without even a hint of the sinful human nature that infects all of our earthly parents. It is in him – in who he is – that all prayer begins and ends, that every answered and unanswered prayer rests.

You know, people have a lot of explanations for those times God doesn’t answer our prayers (or seems to not answer our prayers). Maybe the answer is no. Maybe the answer is not yet. Sometimes these explanations are comforting; a lot of times they aren’t. To date, it seems there has never been a truly satisfactory answer to the question of unanswered prayer. Especially in light of the whole, “ask and it will be given to you” thing. For me, I find the Apostle Paul’s words helpful. In 1 Corinthians 13 he wrote, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (v. 12).

I don’t know why God isn’t answering a particular prayer you may be praying. But I do know that it’s not because you’re not praying right. I do know that it’s not because you need to pray harder. I know it’s not because you don’t have enough faith or because you’re not being bold enough. I don’t know why he isn’t answering, but I do know the one you’re asking loves you beyond your ability to imagine. I know that he is good. I know that he is generous. I know that he has compassion for you. And I know that as mysterious as God’s ways sometimes are here and now, a day will come when the mystery will disappear like mist and we will know fully, even as we have been fully known.

There’s one last thing that I think is important to point out. You probably noticed it when I read it. It’s verse 13. “If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give...” It would make sense if the next words were “good gifts”, wouldn’t it? I mean, that’s the way the sentence is going. If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father give good gifts to his children. Except, that’s not what Jesus says. This is what Jesus says:

“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!”

This is what it’s all about. We tend to focus on all the things we want from God. We have them itemized. We pray for them one after the other after the other. Some, God gives. Some, he doesn’t. But it seems to me, from what Jesus said here in verse 13, that everything God gives is somehow summarized by the gift of the Holy Spirit. It’s like Jesus is saying, “You know all these things you want and need?... You know all these prayer requests you make?... God is going to give you the extraordinary, unprecedented gift of himself – his Holy Spirit. And in that gift lies everything else. Because when all is said and done, when we have – when we know – the Holy Spirit dwelling in, around, and through us, everything else just kind of fits. The key to prayer isn’t the words we speak or the order in which we speak them; it isn’t our persistence or our boldness or anything else we might be tempted to grab onto. The key to prayer is the Holy Spirit. The key to Jesus’ miracles – healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead – the key is the Holy Spirit. If we have the Holy Spirit, who Jesus promised God gives to anyone who asks, we will finally know the truth of the words: “everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened” (Luke 11:10).

Don’t stop asking for whatever you need from God. Don’t stop asking for whatever you want from God. He’s a father. You’re his child. He doesn’t want you to censor yourself when you talk to him. Just be real. Be honest. But maybe, if you haven’t already done so, it’s time to add one more prayer request. Maybe it’s time to ask for the gift of God’s Holy Spirit. That is a prayer request that never goes unanswered.

ⁱ Elisabeth Johnson. “Commentary on Luke 11:1-13.” [Working Preacher](#). July 28, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Brian Peterson. “Commentary on Luke 11:1-13.” [Working Preacher](#). July 28, 2019.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Alan Culpepper. “Luke.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Volume IX. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 236.

^{iv} Meda Stamper. “Commentary on Luke 11:1-13.” [Working Preacher](#). July 24, 2016.