

When You Don't Have a Prayer

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Union Congregational Church, North Aurora, Illinois — IX after Pentecost, August 1, 2004

Luke 11:1-13 NIV

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say: “‘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.’ “

Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

“Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

“They didn’t have a prayer.”

The sports car that pulled out in front of a speeding semi.

The guy who flunked out of college and then applied for a teaching position.

The geeky type who tried to date the high school homecoming queen.

The Cubs hoping to make the World Series.

Why is it that in these and so many other apparently hopeless situations, people who never darken the doors of the church will use this expression, “They don’t have a prayer”? Is there some latent recognition that prayer really *could* make a difference?

And why is it so hard for many people to pray, even people in Bible-believing churches? Why is it that in a gathering where the minister is present he’s the one who is often asked to lead in prayer — because nobody else has a prayer?

It used to be hard for me to pray in public, unless I was reading from a bulletin or a worship book. I’ll tell you why it was hard. It’s because prayer is talking with God. And if you don’t really believe there’s anyone on the other end of the line, it’s hard to keep up your end of the conversation. Yes, some people don’t have a prayer because they don’t have a God to pray to.

But that’s not your problem. And it wasn’t the disciples’ problem in our passage from the Gospel of Luke. When they asked Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray,” it wasn’t because they didn’t believe. Maybe they had a poor model in some of the praying people they knew. If their example in prayer was the Pharisee who prayed, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men” — making sure everyone would notice — then it’s understandable why the disciples wanted something else. Sometimes they could be pretty dense, but Jesus had at least got it through their skulls that *God is real* and is on the move, and it’s time to *get real* about prayer.

And maybe a little jealousy was at work here. John the Baptist had taught his disciples how to pray, and Jesus’ disciples didn’t want to be left out. They didn’t want to have it said of *them* that “they didn’t have a prayer.”

So they came to Jesus with a simple request, “Teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” Interestingly, Jesus didn’t use this occasion to make some cutting remark, like, “Get behind me, Satan,

you only want to pray because you're jealous of John's people." No, when his followers asked, "Teach us to pray," he just flat taught them how to pray!

He taught us several things about prayer. He gave us a *pattern for prayer*. He taught about *persistence in prayer*. And he taught about the *purpose of prayer*.

We'll come back to that first idea, the pattern, later on. But let's take up what Jesus taught about *persistence in prayer*. He used the example of the friend who comes at midnight, pounding on the door of his neighbor's house to borrow bread for company that's just arrived. Picture the scene: the householder is up on the flat roof with his family — in Palestine they slept up here because of the summer heat — and the Mrs. and all the children are asleep around him. If he gets up to find the bread, he has to clamber over all the kids and they're going to wake up cranky and the baby will start crying and the wife will have a fit. But what's he going to do? The friend beating on the door will wake them up anyhow. With friends like that, who needs enemies? As Jesus said, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

We ought not to push this too far. Jesus isn't teaching that prayer is a way of wresting away from a reluctant God something he doesn't really want to give. But he *is* teaching us that consistent prayer gets results. He follows up the story by saying, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

Some interpreters try to make this mean more than it says about persistence. [The Greek tense here is the perfect tense, which is taken to mean "Ask and keep on asking . . . Seek and keep on seeking . . . Knock and keep on knocking." The trouble with this is that Jesus didn't teach in Greek. The Greek New Testament is a translation of what he actually said, and the original Aramaic wouldn't have this nuance.] It's really just a simple truth: The way to get something is to ask for it, the way to find something is to look for it, the way to open a door is to knock on it. We just can't bypass *step number one*, to pray in the first place. But that's the very step we might forget to take — when we just don't have a prayer. As Jesus' brother reminds us, in James 4:2: "You have not, because you ask not."

Jesus goes a step further, in our passage, by showing us the *purpose of prayer*. He does it with a couple of illustrations: "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

We learn here two things about prayer. First, prayer is about relationships — specifically, a *family* relationship with our heavenly Father. There's no point in praying to a tyrant, a kind of heavenly Saddam Hussein. There's no point in praying to some nebulous, fuzzy blob, or to the good side of The Force. The only point to prayer is that we're talking with our Father, the head of our family who has our best interests at heart.

Think about this: if prayer is a family matter, those who aren't in the family really *don't* have a prayer. Our father ought to be willing to do good things for us, but if someone isn't *our* father why would we ever ask *him* for these things? Perhaps people who've never committed themselves to God *think* they are praying when they address him, but the first real prayer of the unbeliever is, "Lord, I repent. Take me into your family, through Jesus your Son."

Second, our Father *is eager* to give us good things — not just what we think we want, but things that fit into his plan for us. As John says, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us" (1 John 5:14). Jesus makes it plain that our Father wants to give one thing above all else — his Holy Spirit. Why? Because it's by the Spirit that you and I are enabled to be God's witnesses and servants in a world that desperately needs to hear about the benefits of being part of the family of God. "You will receive power," Jesus told us, "when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). And (if you'll pardon the expression) it's like God is just *itching* for us to ask him for the very thing he most wants to give us. The Holy Spirit is the key to making our lives count, as we're empowered to overcome the darkness around us and become beacons of light and love and healing.

So to undergird the *purpose* of prayer, to enable *persistence* in prayer, Jesus established a *pattern* for prayer. He gave the disciples a model prayer we call the Lord's Prayer, also called the "Our Father" from its opening words. It's clear, it's logical, it's short but it covers the bases of a well-rounded prayer life. We'll take a brief look at them.

First, Jesus teaches us to begin with adoration of the holy God: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." Prayer begins by recognizing who it is we are praying to: not a projection of our culture's values but one who is hallowed or holy — a biblical word that means set apart from the ordinary. There's a mystery about the being of God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways (Isaiah 55:8). He's our Father, but not the ineffective and bumbling father of a TV situation comedy. He's not the preoccupied or abusive father so many people have had to deal with today. He is a father of authority, dignity mystery — and compassion.

Jesus teaches us, *second*, to submit to our Father's will: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Think of this in its broad dimensions. It's not just for God's will for our personal lives that we are praying. We pray that his will may have its effect over all the earth: our community, our nation, our world. Such prayer is much needed today, and its purpose isn't to force our agenda on God but to align ourselves with what he wants to do in his world.

Third, Jesus taught us to pray acknowledging our dependance on God for every need. "Give us this day our daily bread." Three things about this. *First*, it's hard to pray this prayer, because we would like God to supply our needs not just for today but for tomorrow and the day after. There's no Social Security in the Lord's Prayer, no entitlement. Instead, it expresses a *daily* dependance on God that forces us to maintain the family relationship. If God gave us, right now, everything we would ever need, it wouldn't be a gift from our Father. It would be like a bequest from a dead uncle, and we could easily live off the interest and forget the family ties. *Second*, the bread Jesus is talking about isn't just food or material sustenance. In the Bible, bread is a symbol for all that sustains and preserves our life. It's a symbol for the life-giving Word of God; as Jesus told the devil, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." And bread is a symbol of God's healing and deliverance, for when the Syrophenician woman asked Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter he tested her faith by answering, "It is not right to take the children's *bread* and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27). When we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," we're appealing to God for healing of our lives, for insight into his purpose for us, and for ordinary physical needs. *Third*, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

*Break thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me,
As thou didst break the loaves beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page, I seek thee, Lord;
My Spirit pants for thee, O living Word!*

Jesus himself, in his risen presence, is the true Bread. That's why it's appropriate to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," just before sharing in Holy Communion, the emblems of Jesus' life in our midst.

In the *fourth* place, Jesus reminds us to come to God acknowledging our sinfulness. "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Instead of praying like the Pharisee, "God, I thank you I'm not like those sinners over there," we pray with the tax collector, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." We don't make ourselves out to be worthless scum. We are anything but that in our Father's eyes. But, as Paul wrote, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," and we need to acknowledge our brokenness before him. It's not only God we have sinned against, but other people, and they have sinned against us. That's just part of being human. As Alexander Pope said, "To err is human, to forgive divine." Forgiveness is God's gift. Jesus explains elsewhere that unless we forgive others we won't be forgiven our own sins. We can't clench our fist, clutch our hurts and refuse to release all those things that have been done to us by others, or we'll never grasp God's forgiveness. It takes an *open hand* to receive a gift.

Jesus concludes his pattern for prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." He's not just talking about moral temptation here, for the word *peirasmos* really means *testing* or *trial*. Here's

where we can put the Lord's Prayer into its historical context. In the first century the Jewish homeland was under the thumb of the Roman Empire, but there was a growing nationalist movement. Eventually it would lead to revolt, which the Romans crushed in the year 70 when they burned Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, a kingdom of mission and service that was far more important than the political issues of the time. He was seeking to redirect his people to their true purpose, to be a blessing to all nations, for he understood where this violent nationalism was headed. He wanted to spare his followers the horrible end that was sure to come if his message fell on deaf ears. So he taught them to pray that they would be spared this tribulation and testing. And they *were* spared, because the nationalist religious system was crushed but the church endured. "Lead us not into testing, but deliver us from evil." For us, these words are a plea that we might endure the evils of our time through the protection of God. As Paul says, "Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13).

Jesus gave us this prayer as a model, showing us the points that need to be covered in a well-rounded prayer life. We can always pray other prayers based on the same pattern:

- Acknowledge God as our Father
- submit to his will
- ask for his provision for life
- ask forgiveness for our sins
- appeal for God's protection in an evil time.

But it's also good to pray the Lord's Prayer itself. A very early Christian document, perhaps from the first century, is called the *Didache* or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. It contains this passage: "Neither pray as the hypocrites, but as the Lord commanded in his gospel: "Our Father in heaven . . ." Pray this way three times a day" (*Didache* 8:2-3).

If you're having trouble praying, use the Lord's Prayer as your model and just make up your own words to fit the pattern. Don't worry if it doesn't sound like a religious professional. You may think you're praying poorly, but as G. K. Chesterton said, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly." Or, if that's hard for you to do, just pray the Lord's Prayer itself. Let it never be said of any of God's people that "they didn't have a prayer."

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