

“Teach Us to Pray”

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

The purpose of prayer is not in the answers. The purpose of prayer is in the praying.

Luke 11:1-13

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Simplicity

Since Luke 11 raises the topic of prayer, I have a lot I *could* say. Yesterday I stacked on my desk some of my commentaries on Luke and some of my books on prayer. I also had my journal with notes on this week’s thoughts and conversations. One approach would be to pack all my best insights into today’s sermon.

Instead, my mind goes to a quote I read from one of those books on Monday morning. “The essence of profundity is simplicity.” Michael Card reminded me early in the week that Jesus’ approach, when he is asked to teach on prayer, is simple.

Why did the disciples make this request of Jesus? As Luke tells the story, they had not only observed that Jesus regularly prayed, sometimes all night, but that things happened when Jesus prayed. He prayed at his baptism and there was a voice and a dove from heaven. He chose the twelve apostles after a night of prayer. He prayed on a mountain at night, and the glory of God floodlit his body.

The disciples wanted some of that: “Lord, teach us to pray.” So he does, but he does so not with big words and detailed outlines. He keeps it quite simple. He answers three common questions about prayer. These are the same questions we still ask. (1) What should we say when we pray? (2) How long should we keep praying? (3) Can we trust God to answer prayer?

What should we say when we pray?

Jesus begins his response to the disciples, “When you pray, say....” Some of the most frequent comments and questions about prayer have to do with what to say. “She

prayed a beautiful prayer.” “I don’t feel comfortable praying out loud.” “I don’t know how to pray about this.” Those are all about what to say.

When Jesus answers, “When you pray, say...” it’s like a parent saying to a child, “Use your words.” It’s not that God needs information or advice from you, but you need to use your words.

What words? Jesus teaches us that we should Pray BIG and Pray NOW.

If verses 2-4 don’t sound quite right, it’s for a couple of reasons. First, the Lord’s Prayer we say in church is based more on Matthew 6 than Luke 11. Second, Christians have added to or rephrased slightly both versions. Don’t be bothered by any of that. Jesus probably taught this prayer on more than one occasion, and the differences remind us that it’s not about the precise words. But prayer is about using your words.

Pray BIG. Start with God. When you pray, remember who you’re talking to, and what his concerns are. “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.” To a child, a father is both personal and powerful. The disciples, having been raised Jewish, would not necessarily have found calling God “Father” scandalous, but definitely unusual. Jesus follows with asking that the Name of God be revered. That would have sounded right. The kingdom request is very much in keeping with what they had heard from him. Pray big. Start with acknowledging God and his purposes.

Pray NOW. Once your words have put prayer into perspective, pray for what you’re facing. “Daily bread” is about your needs, right now. The “forgive” petition is “now” too, isn’t it? “God, my relationship with you needs forgiveness and so does my relationship with others.” “Temptation.” Father, I keep struggling with doing the right thing, passing my tests. Help me!

Whatever words you use in prayer, that’s a good pattern to remember. Pray BIG. Pray NOW.

How long should we keep praying?

The next question Jesus addresses naturally follows after the first one. Whether you’re praying BIG (“Your kingdom come”) or NOW (daily bread, forgiveness, and temptation), these are not requests you ever check off. A popular prayer advice is to “be specific” and “keep a record of how God answers,” but this is actually not how Jesus teaches us to pray. The BIG requests are prayers we pray until Jesus comes, and the NOW requests are prayers we pray until we die. So how long should we keep praying for whatever it is we’re praying? Until God answers.

To answer that question, Jesus tells a delightful little parable about friends. You’re one of them. You have an unexpected guest and nothing in the pantry. Your

car's out of gas and you forgot to charge your phone. You go next door to your friend's house to borrow some food. You knock on the door because it's late at night.

Your "friend" doesn't answer the door. You figure he and his family are asleep, so you keep knocking. When the neighbor finally answers the door, it's not because you're a friend. It's because you're a pest.

Jesus uses a Greek word used only here in the New Testament, variously translated "audacity," "boldness," or "shameless persistence" (NIV). My favorite translation is the *Complete Jewish Bible's* "chutzpah." If you bug your friend long enough, he'll get up and give you what you're asking for.

"Ask," Jesus says, "and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened." Some translations, but not all, emphasize the present tense – keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking. To make sure you don't miss the point, Jesus continues in verse 10 – Everyone who asks receives, everyone who seeks finds, and the door opens to everyone who knocks.

The most honest comment I heard in Bible study all week was this: "We all know that's not true." People die. Bills don't get paid. Addicts go to prison. It's actually impossible for this to be true because people pray against each other. People fighting each other in court or on the battlefield both ask for victory. They can't all "receive."

This is one of those times I think it's unwise to claim this verse as a "promise." The Bible doesn't use "promise" in this way. I would prefer the term "teaching" for this verse. But what is Jesus teaching? *Keep praying until God answers.*

We tend to assume we need to find the right words, more prayer partners, or a better formula. I don't think that's Jesus' point. He's answering a simple question: How long do we keep praying? Until God answers.

The purpose of prayer is not in the answers. The purpose of prayer is in the praying. It's what Brother Lawrence called "Practicing the presence of God." It's about needing God. One of the first lessons Jesus taught his disciples is the danger of self-sufficiency. Getting the answers we want at the time we want them would destroy us.

When you keep praying, eventually you'll get to answers. They may be unexpected answers or surprising finds or new doors that open. Keep praying.

Can we trust God to answer prayer?

All this leads naturally to the third question Jesus addresses in this text. And remember, it's neither his intention nor mine to answer all your questions about prayer.

Can we trust God to answer prayer? Yes! Aren't we praying in vain if we keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking, and things don't happen? No! But can we trust God? Yes!

Jesus' mini-parables make the point. Fathers don't give their children snakes instead of fish, scorpions instead of eggs. And yes, Jesus says, I know human fathers are sinners, so the analogy is flawed. You're all evil. But even evil humans know to give good gifts to their children.

The idea is to keep returning to a childlike trust. If a little one can trust a human, flawed father – and instinctively that's exactly what children do – we can trust God. Last weekend, Linda and I took our daughter and granddaughter from Wilmington, NC, to Suffolk, VA, for my Mom's 95th birthday. Five hours is a long time for a 20-month-old to stay in a car seat. Avery napped part of the time. Jeni distracted her with books, snacks, songs, even extra time with Mommy's phone. Still, toward the end of the trip, Avery had had enough. Mommy knew we were just 10 minutes away, but Avery can't grasp time. As she cried, Jeni just said, "I know, Baby. I know. We'll be there soon."

Tim Keller says it this way: "God will either give us what we ask for in prayer or give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knows."

The really beautiful conclusion of Jesus' teaching on prayer is the last line. When we learn to trust the Father, we learn that in the waiting and wondering, the answer he lovingly gives is the Holy Spirit. Jesus will unpack this so much more for his disciples, especially in the Upper Room. Through the Holy Spirit, we find endurance, and peace, and strength. The Apostle Paul adds another layer to this. When we have no words, the Holy Spirit takes over and groans wordlessly on our behalf. When we don't know the right words to pray, the Holy Spirit conforms our prayers to the Father's perfect will.

My refuge

Does Jesus answer all our questions about prayer? Why do we pray if God already knows what we need? Does prayer actually change outcomes? Who's listening, other than God? Saints? Angels? Demons? Why do we pray in hopeless situations? Why does God answer some prayers for miracles but not others? Why do our loved ones die if we prayed earnestly for healing? No, Jesus doesn't answer them all.

My all-time favorite book on prayer is Philip Yancey's *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* He avoids no tough questions, and uses a wide range of real-life stories. I love his section on "prayer dilemmas." Here's an excerpt –

Ronald Goetz calls himself an "occasionalist": God acts in response to prayer, he believes, but with baffling unpredictability.... Review the alternatives, though. God could act alone, ignoring us and our prayers. Or God could leave matters entirely in our hands with no direct involvement in human history....

We have, instead, a relationship with God based on constant negotiation. We inform God what we think should be done in the world, and in the process God reminds us of our own role in doing it. Rarely do we get everything we want, and I imagine the same holds true for God.

The trail of God at work rarely follows a straight line, which means our prayers may well produce different answers than we expect. For whatever reason... prayers get answered in ways we could neither predict nor imagine.

Yancey's book is more than 15 years old. But about two weeks ago, Yancey [publicly shared](#) his recent diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease. He shares how a friend pointed him to Psalm 71:1: "In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame." Yancey says this: "My future is full of question marks, and I'm not unduly anxious. I have excellent medical care and support from friends. I trust a good and loving God who often chooses to reveal those qualities through his followers on earth."

That's all I have today. No mysteries solved, just Jesus' first lessons on prayer. Pray BIG, pray NOW. Pray until God answers. You can trust the Father. Amen.