

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Text: Luke 11:1-13

Title: Re-thinking Prayer?

Focus: This passage prompts us to reflect on what we believe or think about prayer as well as on our prayer practices. How do our prayers reflect our trust in the character of God as a loving parent?

Gospel Reading: Luke 11:1-13

¹He [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.” ²He said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.” 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!”

“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

What do you think about prayer or what would you say about prayer? What do you *do* or *how* do you pray? You might ask yourself, “What are my prayer practices—as in, what do I actually do?”

These are some practical questions that may come to mind as we read the gospel passage from Luke. Because Jesus’ disciples come to him in a very real or practical way, asking, “Lord, teach us to pray. . .”

This passage from Luke is a parallel to the passage on prayer from Matthew chapter 6, which is likely more familiar to us because the Lord’s Prayer more closely follows the text from Matthew.

Re-thinking our Prayer Practices

With the question or scenario from the disciples, Jesus has the opportunity (he could have created it before, but. . .) to model and teach about prayer.

- Incidentally, he modeled prayer all the time—this is just one such occasion.

So, this passage and the companion or parallel one in Matthew can provide us with the opportunity to reflect on our life of prayer and perhaps revise or adjust our views or our habits or prayer practices in light of the passage and our reflection.

Prayer is about *Relationship*

Prayer is about *relationship*. This passage presents God as a loving or trusting father/trusting parent. The passage begins (v. 2) and concludes (v. 13) with the image of God as father.

- ²[Jesus] said to them, “When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.
- God is described as a gracious and generous Heavenly Father at the close of the passage:
 - 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!”

So, the framework or foundation of prayer as presented by this passage is established by our relationship with God and the loving or gracious character of God. Accordingly, prayer ought to include or be about our relationship with God. Prayer involves renewing that relationship or being in touch with God.

One of my own views about prayer:

I am hearing and relying on this image of God as loving parent in this passage. I’ll counter that image of God to what I see as a distortion about prayer or how we pray or how we think of God when we pray:

I am sensitive to types of prayer which seem to me to pray to **God as Magic Genie (like Aladdin’s Genie) or Cosmic Santa Claus.**

Here’s the type of prayer or the orientation to prayer that I mean:

- Divine prosperity is God’s will for every believer! All we must do to receive God’s blessings and abundance is obey Him”¹
- “You can begin your journey of divine prosperity today by sowing the seed God has put in your hand. God gives seed to the sower—not to the taker—and as you sow seed, you receive more seed. That is God’s law of prosperity, an actual divine law that is activated only when we sow seed.” (Hinn article)
- “I urge you today, as your brother in the Lord and one who has seen this law work, to sow seed in high expectation that your debt will come to an end, that you will no longer live from paycheck to paycheck, and that abundance will be your inheritance, passed down to your children and your children’s children. Once debt is out of your life, you will leave an inheritance and be a blessing to the work of the Lord.” (Hinn article)

¹ “God’s Promises of Prosperity for You,” posted at Benny Hinn Ministries. <https://www.bennyhinn.org/gods-promises-of-prosperity-for-you/>

The primary promise is based on the view that “if humans have faith in God, [God] will deliver security and prosperity.”²

This type of prayer or way of praying is reflective of the “prosperity gospel:”

- “The prosperity gospel is a movement that grew out of Pentecostalism that said that God rewards the faithful with health and wealth within the course of their human life if they have the right kind of faith.” (Researcher and Duke Divinity professor Kate Bowler in *Fresh Air* conversation on NPR with Terry Gross.)
- “Put simply, the prosperity gospel is the belief that God grants health and wealth to those with the right kind of faith.”³

Or, as one pastor/missionary (who is a critic) summarizes it,

- **“The Prosperity Gospel is a twisted form of Christianity that teaches obedience, giving and faith as a way to get stuff from God.”**⁴ (Greenfield)

That last summary statement is kind of where I am when I hear prayers or statements oriented in this way—that it sounds like manipulation of God and using prayer or using God just to get what you want—which, in these examples, includes material stuff.

So, I’ll admit that I’m suspicious of these types of prayer or this orientation to prayer.

Counterpoint Presented by this Passage

In this Prosperity Gospel movement that typifies these views, there are sometimes obscure Old Testament passages that are raised to central status.⁵ For me, that’s part of what creates this distorted view.

This passage from Luke, in which the disciples pointedly ask Jesus himself to teach them about prayer, causes me, as I said earlier, to reflect on my views of prayer and my prayer practices exactly because it is Jesus and the model prayer which he presents rather than an obscure passage which we make to be the focal point, perhaps to serve our own purposes.

This is Jesus talking in response to a direct question about prayer.

- The first part of his response contains an example of prayer or words for the way in which we may pray.
- In the second part, verses 5-13, Jesus provides a correlation to how we may think of God or relate to God. It’s this second part that challenges me to continue to reflect on how I view prayer and how I pray.

² Prosperity Theology Wikipedia entry

³ Kate Bowler in NY Times essay: “Death, the Prosperity Gospel and Me” By KATE BOWLER FEB. 13, 2016.

⁴ Craig Greenfield, 5 sure signs you’ve been hoodwinked by the “Prosperity Gospel,” July 8, 2017. <http://www.craiggreenfield.com/blog/prosperitygospel>

⁵ The use of the Prayer of Jabez, an obscure passage from 1 Chronicles 4:9–10 comes to mind.

The correlations encourage us:

- Be persistent! (vv. 5-8)
- Ask! And it will be given to you
- Search and you will find
- Knock and the door will be open to you (v. 9 for each of the preceding)

Jesus says that God is like a friend who is willing to get up in the middle of the night to get us bread.

And then Jesus reasons with us: "If you're a parent and your kid asks you for a fish, do you give them a snake instead?" (v. 11).

- It is posed in such a rhetorical way that we are supposed to conclude, "No, of course not!"
- "How much more, then, if you as flawed parents are able to respond, would God as the Heavenly parent be able to respond" is the next rhetorical move in v. 13.

Rethinking. . .

So, Jesus' example or correlations at the close of the passage get me thinking:

- Am I too timid in my prayers?
- Should I be more bold?
- Should I be more persistent? Do I conclude my prayers too quickly?

I will still say, from this passage, and from elsewhere, that prayer is about relationship or connection with God or communion with God. So, prayer is about renewing that relationship with God.

And we have to recognize that we may be persistent or bold in prayer and that sometimes we still may come to understand God's response as "No" or as "Not yet" or as "Not in that way."

- We recall that Jesus, who prayed earnestly prior to his arrest asking God to remove the cup of crucifixion, did not have that happen in that way.
 - (Jesus also prayed, "but not my will, but yours be done.")
 - "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22.42)
- And we recall Paul persistently praying that the "thorn in his side" be removed. He prayed (at least) three times, but learned to live with that and rely on God's grace. (See 2 Corinthians 12:2-12).

A Helpful Model or Response

A contemporary catechism helps me bring together my thoughts and reflections. It does so in part by returning to that image of God as a loving parent who responds with grace and with wisdom:

- **Question 122.** How does God respond to our prayers?⁶
- **Response:** God takes all our prayers into account, weighing them with divine wisdom, and responding to them by a perfect will. Although for the time being God's answers may seem beyond our understanding, or sometimes even bitter, we know nonetheless that they are always determined by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. God answers our prayers, particularly for temporal blessings, only in ways that are compatible with the larger purposes of God's glory and our salvation. Communion with God is finally the answer within the answers to all our prayers.

Prayer is not about getting what we want by practices that seem bordering on manipulation. At the same time, Jesus urges us to be bold and persistent. Let us rely on the grace and wisdom of God as loving parent and be renewed in prayer.

⁶ The [Presbyterian] Study Catechism, Approved by the 210th General Assembly (1998) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)