

Title: Teach Us to Pray
Date: July 18, 2021
Subject: Prayer
Scripture: Matthew 6:5 – 8; Luke 11:5 - 10

When people have the opportunity to ask one question of an expert, they usually aim for valuable advice. If we were to ask a successful investment banker, it'd be about investing and not his favorite hip hop artist. Advice from a pro golfer.... From a doctor... That's where we like to get lots of freebies.

The disciples had plenty of opportunities to ask questions of Jesus and ask away they did. However, we only find one recorded instance of them asking Jesus to teach them something. By this time they'd been with him for over two years. They didn't ask Jesus to teach them how to evangelize, heal the sick, raise the dead, teach his word, tell spell-binding parables. They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray.

That's a great request for students in the school of Jesus. Haddon Robinson was a teacher, college professor and president, a man who utilized his God-given gift for preaching so that he was recognized among the most effective and influential preachers.

Here's a little of what he said about prayer: "I admire men and women who give prayer high priority in their lives. Frankly, prayer has proved to be the most demanding discipline of my life. At different times I have found it strenuous, boring, frustrating, and confusing. Over the years a solid prayer life has been more intermittent than persistent...Out of my experience I have learned that you cannot simply 'say your prayers.' Prayer, real prayer, is tough, hard business. To admit my lifelong struggle with prayer is something I do with great uneasiness. In the life of Jesus, prayer was the work, and ministry was the prize. For me, prayer serves as preparation for the battle, but for Jesus, it was the battle itself. Having prayed, he went about his ministry as an honor student might go to receive a reward, or as a marathon runner, having run the race, might accept the gold medal. Where was it that Jesus sweat great drops of blood? Not in Pilate's Hall, nor on his way to Golgotha. It was in the garden of Gethsemane" (Jesus' Blueprint for Prayer, pp. 2, 3).

Most of us feel like Haddon. I know I do. Hopefully, his struggle with prayer encourages us and doesn't discourage us because we think if someone like him can't make it -- how on earth are we supposed to?

Prayer has been defined "In a general sense, the act of asking for a favor, and particularly with earnestness. In worship, a solemn address to the Supreme Being, consisting of adoration, or an expression of our sense of God's glorious perfections, confession of our sins, supplication for mercy and forgiveness, intercession for blessings on others, and thanksgiving, or an expression of gratitude to God for his mercies and benefits" (KJV Dictionary). Long way of saying prayer is conversing with God about anything and everything.

We'll begin with the Scripture read earlier by Jeff -- Luke 11:1, 5 – 10.

The disciples had seen Jesus pray. They knew John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray. Jesus answers the disciples by giving them the prayer known as The Lord's Prayer. A better title would be The

Disciple's Prayer as Jesus couldn't pray "Forgive us our sins." We'll get into the nuts and bolts of the prayer in upcoming weeks. This morning we'll look at the surrounding material to help us understand the how and why.

After giving the prayer, Jesus tells a story, beginning in verse 5. Jesus brings listeners into an active role. The best understanding is you are the one who has a friend show up unexpectedly at midnight. He's tired and starving out of his mind from a long trip. The right thing to do is give him something to eat. Hospitality was extremely important during the time of Christ. It was viewed as a sacred duty. People were expected to welcome anyone who showed up whenever they showed up and provide them with not just a few scraps and some crumbs but an abundance.

However, your cupboards are bare. Most people of Jesus' time didn't keep bread from one day to the next as it got stale. You profusely apologize. Then you recall a friend who always has bread. You excuse yourself and run to the friend's house. You knock on the door. It takes a while for an answer as the man of the house had been sound asleep. You explain the reason for the disturbance - the need, how you'll lose face.

The former sleeper offers up every excuse in the book including some very valid ones. He begins with the most obvious - "The door is locked." Closed doors meant "Do not disturb. Don't not bother knocking. Just go away." The next excuse is kids, the children. The children were nestled all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced...well, maybe not. Families often slept in the same bed especially during the winter to keep warm. The dad would have to crawl over the kids, hopefully not step on any or wake them up. He wanted the friend to just go away. He's saying, "The children are sleeping and so was I."

This past week we had granddaughters Chloe and Sophie for a couple days. Sophie had a sleepover with Nana. Sophie is an active sleeper. She twists and turns. Her feet sometimes wind up on the pillow. If Jean had been in the situation of the friend in the parable, she probably would have been all too glad to get up.

The man pitifully moans, "I can't get up and give you anything" meaning "I really, really, really don't want to get up. Leave already and be quiet about it before my family and the neighborhood wake up."

Finally, the man resignedly got out of bed to grant the request. It wasn't because he suddenly felt a warm tug in the recesses of his heart for you. It was simply to get rid of the pain in his neck.

The man who preferred to stay asleep reveals the character of God through a contrast. God isn't selfish and indifferent. He isn't a reluctant spectator who has to have his arm twisted, be coerced, maybe even embarrassed into acting. He's not a grudging giver. He's generous and caring and does good. He isn't out to deceive us and play tricks on us. He won't give something that's harmful. Jesus is asking, "if imperfect and ill-natured human beings can muster enough compassion to act kindly, even though it might be forced upon them, how much more will the Heavenly Father who is love itself give that which is good?"

The purpose of the parable is to demonstrate the kind of prayer we're to use. Jesus says the request was answered because of boldness of the person with the need (persistence, shameless audacity).

Matt Maher song *Run to the Father* provides the rationale for prayer and the necessary attitude: "My heart needs a surgeon. My soul needs a friend. So I'll run to the Father, Again and again."

Jesus hooks the parable to an application – “So I say to you.” He brings in three words: “Ask. Seek. Knock.” They can be viewed as three levels of prayer. All are continuous action – asking, seeking, knocking.

Ask. A simple request. We converse with God about something we need or someone else needs.

Ray Stedman, whom I found extremely helpful (raystedman.org/thematic-studies/prayer/prayers-certainties), “Someone protests, *I have tried this. Not long ago I was in a situation to which I felt I did not know the answer, so I shot up a prayer, Lord, help me, give me wisdom, and nothing happened...It doesn't work.* Now, stop a minute. Is God a liar? Does he say he will give and he does not give? Is he like a father, a wicked, cruel and vicious father who, when we ask for an egg gives us a scorpion, or for a fish, gives us a snake? No, the question is not, *Did he give?* but, *Did you receive?* Did you ask in faith, did you believe God when you asked? Did you take?...All of God's gifts are given on the basis of faith, not to unbelief. The problem here is, what do you do after you have asked. What were you expecting when you asked God for wisdom? How did you think he would give it? Were you waiting for a sense of wisdom, some kind of clarifying of the brain, or increased mental power, so that you now see clearly all the answers? Were you expecting a feeling of power, some tingling stream that ran down your backbone and out to the end of your nerves? Is that what you were waiting for? No, faith takes the answer for granted. God is faithful. God gives. When we ask, we take it for granted that he has given, and go on to do the thing, to say the word that comes, counting on the fact that it is the word of wisdom or the word of power or the word of patience, or whatever we need. God loves to be trusted, but only faith can lay hold of what he gives, and when faith is there, it is invariably met. That is what Jesus is saying. Ask, and it shall be given. He does not say it will be accompanied by any feelings, or signs, or emotions. Just take it for granted, thank God, step out on it, and the answer is there.”

Seek is to go on the process of searching. We may not know the exact need. Think of how children and some adults, stereotypically men, look for something they can't find. They look on the surface, bend down a little bit, spend a brief time and declare the thing can't be found. Enter the mom or wife. She lifts up the couch cushion, pulls open the drawers, looks under the bed and “*voila,*” there's the lost object.

Paul was seeking when it came to his thorn in the flesh. We don't know what it was, but Paul identified it as a “messenger of Satan.” It was means through which the devil sought to speak doubt and discouragement into Paul's life. The apostle pleaded with the Lord three times for it to be taken away. It wasn't a simple statement of a request but a prolonged discussion with the Lord. Paul's search didn't end with him finding the thorn removed but discovering something much greater. He found God's grace to be sufficient in his life. God answered with what was best for Paul. He was dependent on the Lord.

Paul might have been unable to handle the thorn being removed. He did say it kept him from being conceited. Warren Wiersbe, “It may be that he (the Lord) cannot trust us with these things until our Christian character has grown...God cannot put things into our hands until first he prepares our hearts. He uses things as tools to build our Christian character, not as toys to entertain and pamper us.”

Knock. Knock implies time, repetition and endurance.

More from Stedman. "It is a request for admittance, repeated if necessary, and it suggests situations where we seek an entrance, or an opportunity. Someone has perhaps erected a barrier against our witness or against our friendship and we are seeking to surmount that, to get behind the wall of resistance and to have an opportunity freely and openly to speak, or to share, or to enter into a life. That requires knocking. Perhaps we have an unshakable desire to begin a certain type of work or ministry from which we are now excluded. We long to move into that area, we feel God leading us, calling us, to be this or do that. That requires knocking. We hunger, perhaps, after knowledge or friendship or as the Word of God says, *Hungering and thirsting after righteousness* (Matthew 5:6)." Paul again comes to mind with his desire to visit Rome (Romans 1:9, 10).

Ask, seek and knock are given in regard to the requests from The Disciple's Prayer. The book of Matthew has it as part of the Sermon on the Mount which provides more prayer opportunities (Matthew 7:7, 8). Before Jesus gives the prayer, he gives some of the problems connected to prayer.

READ Matthew 6:5 – 8.

The first is praying with wrong intent and motive. The hypocrites used prayer as an opportunity to show off. The Jews had scheduled times for prayer and 18 specific prayers for specific times. It became highly ritualized and formulaic. Some people would conveniently find themselves in very public places at the prescribed time of prayer. "Oh great. Just look at my sundial. It's time to pray. Guess I better." They'd then perform in their pre-selected place where there was likely to be a good crowd. They wanted to attract notice.

The same kind of thing also took place in the temple. The person posed as a worshipper making sure not to stand among the crowd but separately so he could be seen. He stood as if absorbed in prayer, secretly peeking to catch the impressions he was making on others who were looking his way.

But they gargled in the morning so their voices would be clear. Wouldn't want any frogs in the throat croaking when trying to show off and thanking God that they weren't a sinner like...all around him. They may have even inserted lots of Scripture so people would perceive them as being godly. They weren't. It was all hypocrisy. The only reward they'd receive was the nods of approval, pats on the back and tears from a mom who wished her children could be like him. That was it. No heavenly reward.

The second problem is babbling or vain repetitions. Pagans babbled, using lengthy prayers and repetition. They rattled off a long list of their gods, hoping to mention the one who was listening at that moment and had the power to grant their request. They were like Baal's prophets at Mount Carmel who went on and on saying the same thing over and over. It was more like superstitious incantations.

A rabbi named Levi said, "Whoever is long in prayer is heard." The assumption was many words guaranteed God would listen. They were necessary to change the will of God or to inform Him of what He didn't know or didn't care much about. They felt the need to batter down the door to the throne room.

When it comes to talking with God, repetition in and of itself isn't the problem. It's mechanical, thoughtless, heartless repetition. It's easy to learn a prayer formula and repeat it without giving any thought to what's being said. It becomes meaningless words. The person has little or no connection to what's being said.

Benson Commentary (Matthew 6:7, 8). “Indeed, all the words in the world, however well-chosen and uttered in prayer, are not equivalent to one holy desire; and the very best prayers are but vain repetitions, if they are not the language of the heart. But let it be observed, on the other hand, that repetitions proceeding from a deep sense of our wants, and a vehement desire of divine grace, and the spiritual blessings flowing therefrom, or connected therewith, are by no means prohibited here by the Lord Jesus, otherwise indeed he would condemn his own practice.”

Jesus prayed in public -- temple, synagogue, when he healed people, when he blessed the food for the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000 (Luke 10:21, 22). He prayed long prayers as in praying all night (Luke 6:12). He repeated his requests in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:44).

Gregory Brown (bible.org/seriespage/19-how-pray-matthew-65-8) “We must be careful about saying long prayers are bad and short prayers are good...Sometimes long prayers are needed... As we grow in our love and passion for God, we will find a desire to spend long times in conversation with him. Other times, our prayers might be long because of turmoil in our heart, the life of another, or the world in general.”

Proper prayer procedure. Practice is a better choice of words.

Privacy. V. 6. Remember that we pray for an audience of one. No matter how many people listen to our prayers, the only person to whom we should make them is God. It's tempting to pray so other people will like our prayers and think we've done a good job at praying. Got to get that out of our mind.

Privacy provides less distractions and helps us focus. We have to be careful that aren't like the guy who went into his closet to pray, feeling it would provide privacy and fewer distractions. His family found him hours later. He'd fallen asleep. Maybe need to walk and pray. Have paper to write down distractions – items for the grocery list, the to do list, etc.

Don't be a babbler. V. 8. Don't feel we have to just keep on babbling and repeating words and phrases and come up with our own magic formula or that the more words the more likely God is to hear. There's no need to pad a prayer just to make it longer and fill time.

The exceptional news is the Father knows what we need. This is given by Jesus twice in the space of a few lines of the text, in about 15 seconds when the words are spoken. What better assurance could we have. God will give what we pray for if it honors him, promotes the Kingdom is truly a need, and for our good.

William Barclay, “He (God) is telling us to persist in prayer; he is telling us never to be discouraged in prayer. Clearly therein lies the test of our sincerity. Do we really want a thing? Is a thing such that we can bring it repeatedly into the presence of God, for the biggest test of any desire is: Can I pray about it? Jesus here lays down the twin facts that God will always answer our prayers in his way, in wisdom and in love; and that we must bring to God an undiscouraged life of prayer, which tests the rightness of the thing we pray for, and which tests our own sincerity in asking for them...We can guarantee the reality and sincerity of our desire only by the passion with which we pray. But it does mean this, that we are not ringing gifts from an unwilling God, but going to one who knows our needs better than we know them ourselves and whose heart towards us is the

heart of generous love. If we do not receive what we pray for, it is not because God grudgingly refuses to give it but because he has some better thing for us. There is no such thing as unanswered prayer. The answer given may not be the answer we desired or expected; but even when it is a refusal, it is the answer of the love and wisdom of God” (Barclay Commentary on Matthew, p. 272; Barclay Commentary on Luke, p. 146).