

JESUS: A TEACHER OF PRAYER

Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8; 18:9-14

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road

Plymouth, Michigan 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 08.18.02

*“To pray . . . means to think and live in the presence of God.”*¹ That definition of prayer comes from the pen of Henri Nouwen, one of the great spiritual writers of modern times. *“To pray . . . means to think and live in the presence of God.”*

As I confessed in last Sunday’s sermon, the five lessons I plan to preach on prayer are for me. I hope that as we struggle and study together that we will not only better understand prayer, but that we will pray more.

Luke, the author of a Gospel that bears his name and the author of the Book of Acts, has been appropriately called “the evangelist of prayer.”² While the other evangelists mention prayer, none of them develop the concept as fully as Luke does. The Gospel of Luke opens and closes and the Book of Acts opens with references to prayer (Luke 1:10; 24:53; Acts 1:14). The Gospel sets up Jesus’ life and teaching as a model, while Acts demonstrates how the church and apostles applied the model to their situations.³ *What I want to examine in this sermon is Jesus’ teaching on prayer found in the Gospel of Luke—most of which teaching is recorded only by Luke.*

I ask that you turn in your Bibles to the eleventh chapter of Luke and follow along as I read, beginning with the first verse.

^{11:1}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.”

²He said to them, “When you pray, say:

¹Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Only Necessary Thing: Living a Prayerful Life*, compiled and edited by Wendy Wilson Greer (Crossroad, 1999), 32.

²Greg Sterling, “‘Pray Always’: Prayer in Luke/Acts,” in D. Fleer and D. Bland, eds., *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching (ACU Press, 2002), 67.

³Kyu Sam Han, “Theology of Prayer in the Gospel of Luke,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (December 2000): 675-676, fn. 8.

“Father,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come.
³Give us each day our daily bread.
⁴Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation.”

⁵Then 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, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’

⁷“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.’ ⁸I 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 [persistence] he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

⁹“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. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹“Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If 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!” (Luke 11:1-13, NIV).

“The Lord’s Prayer,” as we commonly call the first part of this passage, is something we will study in next week’s sermon. For today, let’s take a look at the parable of the friend at midnight—a parable recorded only by Luke.

The story is straightforward, but the punchline—v. 8—is ambiguous. Who is friend to whom? And why does the man inside the house finally answer the door and fulfill the knocker’s request? One thing is clear: sleepy-head (the man inside the house) does *not* give door-knocker (the man outside the house) bread because he is motivated by friendship. Sleepy-head—and here we have a translation difficulty—takes action due to “the man’s boldness” or “the man’s persistence” or—in the older versions—“the man’s importunity.” So, which is it? Boldness? Persistence? Importunity?—which means bold and persistent demands. The best one-word translation of the term used by Luke is probably “shamelessness.”⁴ But whose “shamelessness” is it? We could read v. 8 as,

⁴ἀναιδέια (*anaideia*): “lack of sensitivity to what is proper, carelessness about the good opinion of others, *shamelessness, impertinence, impudence, ignoring of convention.*” Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3d. ed.; University of Chicago Press, 2000), 63.

“Although sleepy-head will not get up and give door-knocker anything on the basis of friendship, yet because of door-knocker’s shameless disturbing of the peace at midnight, sleepy-head will get up and give door-knocker whatever he needs.” Or, we could read v. 8 as, “Although sleepy-head will not get up and give door-knocker anything on the basis of friendship, yet because sleepy-head does not want to be embarrassed by his shameless disregard of common courtesy, he will get up and give door-knocker whatever he needs.” I am inclined toward the first reading: door-knocker shamelessly bangs and begs for bread at a most inappropriate hour. What, then, is the point of the parable? Is Jesus suggesting that God only answers prayer if we bang loud enough and beg long enough? No! No! No! The parable sets up a contrast that is expanded in vv. 11-13 where Jesus compares the loving instincts of a flawed father to the loving instincts of a perfect God. If you and I can obtain what we need from stingy human beings who do not want to be bothered, *how much more* we will receive what we need from God who delights in giving. *It is because God is good and generous that we must persist in pray.*

Now, please turn to the eighteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel. I will begin reading with verse one.

^{18:1}Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’”

⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:1-14, NIV).

Here are two more parables that we have thanks to Luke’s Gospel. In the first one, it is not difficult to see the parallel between the friend in need of bread and the widow in need of justice, and the parallel between sleepily-head who does not want to get up and the worthless judge who does not want to be bothered. The widow’s request is granted by the judge *not* on the basis of the judge’s integrity or on the basis of the widow’s status; it is granted simply because of the widow’s refusal to be denied justice. Both door-knocker and abused-widow receive what they desire due to their tenacious persistence. Luke informs us that Jesus told the story about the widow to His disciples “to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (v. 1). Jesus then ends the story with the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” *As followers of Jesus, you and I must persevere in prayer; otherwise, when the Son of Man returns, He will not find faith on the earth.* But this is not the only emphasis of these parallel parables. There is also the stark contrast between sleepily-head and scoundrel-judge who eventually and grudgingly grant the requests of their persistent petitioners, and God who lovingly and lavishly grants the requests of His children. The point is this: *God’s children have every reason to pray because of God’s good and generous character and because of their standing before Him as His children.*

Now we come to the parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. Unlike the other two parables we have discussed, in this story the contrast is not between a petitioner and the one being petitioned; rather, the contrast is between two petitioners who stand before the one God. “While the parables of the friend at midnight and the persistent widow seem to be addressed to those who assume so little of God that seeking God’s blessing seems impossible, this one seems to be addressed to those who assume so much about themselves that seeking God’s blessing seems unnecessary.”⁵

Consider the Pharisee. Here is a guy who not only keeps all the religious rules, he goes beyond the rules. He fasts, he tithes, he prays, he lives a good life. The question is,

⁵Dean Smith, “We Will Pray: Preaching About Prayer in Luke/Acts,” in D. Fleenor and D. Bland, eds., *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching (ACU Press, 2002), 99.

Who receives the credit for that goodness? The Pharisee credits himself and asserts his own righteousness before God. In contrast there is the all-but-pagan tax collector, the one who has sold out his Jewish identity by working for the foreign government, making a living charging more than the government requires. He had to sneak into the temple because everyone knows he does not belong there. There are no righteous deeds by which he can assert himself and his own goodness before God. He can only plead for God to be merciful to him.

The ironic twist of this parable comes when we try to figure out which character we identify with the most. On the one hand, none of us want to be the Pharisee. Yet, he is the one in the story whose life would fit the best in this auditorium this morning. A man with religious convictions. A man who understands he has been blessed by God. A man who keeps his life focused by fasting and tithing and praying. The problem is that those attributes are not gifts from God but self-accomplishments that he lists before God. They are the jewels in his crown that he proudly displays before God. And with his accomplishments there is also an attitude toward other people. Those who have less and do less than him are worth less in his opinion.

On the other hand, the life of the tax collector is no model to be followed, except in his self-understanding before God. What makes the tax collector the good guy in this parable is his humbling himself before God. Nothing else about him is commendable. But he does understand prayer. He does understand that righteousness is a gift to be received, not a merit badge to be possessed and proclaimed. Furthermore, if we say, “I sure am glad I’m like the tax collector and not like the Pharisee”—What have we done? In so saying, have we not become like the Pharisee?⁶

Praying scares me. Not only must I face God, I must face myself. And when I look into the mirror of prayer, I often do not like what I see. So, I stop looking. . . Praying scares me because I know that through prayer God will change me, and I don’t like being changed. It hurts. The pain of change is greater than the pain of looking into the mirror. Besides, if I avoid the mirror, I avoid all the pain. But then, I feel guilt. So I tell myself

⁶The forgoing three paragraphs borrow heavily from John O. York, “Humble Yourselves Before the Lord (Luke 18:9-14),” in D. Fleer and D. Bland, eds., *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, Rochester College Lectures on Preaching (ACU Press, 2002), 133-137.

that I'm ok, that I'm a good Christian. I become the Pharisee. I like being the Pharisee. I feel right even when I'm wrong.

If you want to remain just the way you are, then do not pray. If you want to avoid the pain of the power of God at work in your life, then do not pray. If you want to believe yourself to be good because others are bad, then do not look into the mirror of prayer. But if you do pray, be sure to point out to God how good you are. That way, you can always feel right even when you are completely wrong.

Yes, praying scares me, but not praying has come to scare me even more. I am driven to my knees because I do not have the strength to stand on my feet. *This sermon has taught me that I must pray for two reasons: God is good, and I am not.*

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God....”

How will you and I go home today?