

Prayer and the Gracious Giver
Psalm 85, Luke 11:1-13
Elon Community Church July 29, 2007

Introduction

How would you feel this morning if I should simply at random start calling on one after another of you to rise and lead the congregation in prayer? Many of you would have little problem with my asking, but my guess is if I did, many of you would say something like this, "I'm not comfortable praying out loud in public. I don't know the right words and I would just prefer that you do the praying for us." (You can relax; I am not going to ask you to do this!)

Still, I suspect that most of us would like to know more about this universal tendency of human beings to pray. We may do it in different ways, and we may have various places where we feel comfortable praying, but confronted with some of the critical moments that life brings us, we pray. Not always with a clear understanding of what we are doing, and not always with much expectation of results, but we pray.

Think with me this morning about this matter of prayer. Jesus' disciples thought about enough to beg for His instruction.

I

Having observed Jesus in one of his frequent times of prayer, the disciples asked him, "Lord, Teach us to Pray." Jesus, teaching by his example, led them to seek more understanding of prayer. Matthew gives us the full version of this prayer, the one we most often use in our worship. Luke gives us the "Readers Digest" version, brief and to the point, but he adds some wonderful insights about prayer.

He summarized the model prayer, first with words that speak of honoring God with reverence, respect and a sense of awe. He further urged them to pray for the realization of what God has always been about. It is what Jesus called the "Kingdom," his way of speaking of a society in which people lived life as God intended with respect, compassion and justice.

The other three requests deal with our basic personal needs. The first is for physical provisions, one day at a time; second, the need for forgiveness which comes to us only as we are willing to extend forgiveness to those indebted to us; and third, our need for God's strength to help us contend with the multitude of temptations that come our way each day.

But wait. This text is about so much more than asking for things, nor is it primarily a formula for acceptable prayer. Jesus never meant for this to be merely a ritual to be repeated. I think he seized on this occasion to teach a much more important lesson for his disciples, and for us as well. As I see this discourse, Jesus wanted to lead us beyond seeing prayer as primarily a way of getting things, a kind of religious mail-order

system in which our wishes are fulfilled. Prayer for Jesus was much more than that, and the two stories that follow in the text show another aspect of prayer for his disciples.

II

Rather than simply giving a lesson on the proper language or posture for prayer, Jesus gives them lessons to remember about the one to whom prayer is directed. I call this One the “Gracious Giver.” Two marvelous, if somewhat puzzling, parables follow. Parables are like that. They are intended to leave us pondering their meaning.

The example of the request for bread

Persistence is the keynote here. It speaks of a person who goes to a friend at midnight and urgently asks for bread to feed guests who are coming. For the friend, it is a very inconvenient moment. Everyone is in bed – apparently this is a tiny house with everyone sleeping in a common bed so that when anyone moves, all will be disturbed. But the friend gives help, not so much out of friendship, says Jesus, but because of his persistence.

It has been pointed out that the scene Jesus has created would be preposterous to his original listeners. No one would act in this way. The neighbor would never refuse to help his friend extend hospitality to an unexpected guest. To do so, would bring shame upon him. Likewise, God is not going to ignore the requests of the disciples when they pray. If a neighbor will help a friend in the middle of the night to avoid being shamed, how much more will God help us in our need.

So, says the Lord, we are to “ask,” “search,” “seek,” and then we will receive, see, and find our answer. Does this mean that we must wear God down with our requests so that in exasperation our prayers will be grudgingly given? No, that is not where I see this passage leading us. Prayer is not about changing God’s mind. It is about persisting in our prayers until we see the situation as God sees it.

Scott Colglazier writes, *“The reason I pray is not primarily to get things from God so much as it is to enhance my relationship with God.”*

The example of a parent’s response to a child’s wish

“If your child asks for a fish would you give that child a snake? Or if the child asks for an egg, will you give a scorpion.” (You might also ask...“If your child asks for a snake, would you give that child a snake?”)

Just as a loving parent will not give their child something that is going to poison or harm them, so God will not answer our prayers with what will harm us. That can be a very hard thing to believe when things are not going well for us or for those we love. Illness, accidents, abuse, unemployment - difficult times and circumstances affect all of us at some point in our lives. Prayer doesn't make us immune to life's challenges and pain. Sometimes children who ask for fish or eggs, do get snakes and scorpions in this world.

But not from a loving parent, and not from God. Just as a good parent has the best interest of their child at heart, so God has our best interest at heart.

So often the answers to our prayers don't come in the ways we had hoped, and we can thank God for that! God gives in response to our prayers with Godly wisdom, not the fulfilling of our human wants.

I think of that powerful story in the New Testament when Paul spoke of his struggle with some unknown malady that he described merely as a 'thorn in the flesh.' (2 Corinthians 12:7-10) He said he prayed, and he prayed, and he prayed that God would take it away. This man of God, this dedicated missionary, this one so gifted and willing to be God's messenger, prayed that he might be freed from this thing that seemed to hinder his ministry in many ways. And it did not go away. For all his praying he remained impaired by this thing.

But hear what he said about his prayer-answer: *"Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."* That was what he needed most of all!

In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel is another powerful lesson about prayer. It is the story of Hannah, childless and in deeply depressed because she could not bear a son. Going to the temple to pray about this, Eli the priest saw her so intense and distraught that he thought she must be drunk. *"How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."* But Hannah answered, *"No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD."* (1 Samuel 1:12-18) Hearing this, Eli blessed her and when she came home, the scripture says, *"she went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer."*

Henri Nouwen commenting on this passage, wrote, "What touches me most in this story is that her depression left Hannah after her prayer, but long before God responded by giving her a son. It was her agonizing prayer, which brought all of her feelings of humiliation, rejection, and resentment before God, that took her inner darkness away." [The Road to Daybreak, p. 119]. God answers our prayers, but in God's wisdom, not our wishes.

III

What can we take away from these verses that can nourish our own prayers?

First, it strikes me that God gives from his gracious spirit, not from our proper words. We often hear well-meaning people say, "God helps those who help themselves." It sounds good when we want others to shape up, but it is not good biblical truth. God comes to us and surrounds us with his loving presence whether we think about it or not. But when we center ourselves on God's loving presence in quiet, focused prayer times, we can draw from that gracious gift great help for life.

How many of you have watched those touching appeals from the Christian Children's Fund, World Vision or Bread from the world with pictures of hungry children? Standing there in rags, empty looks on their faces, bloated bellies, they touch our hearts.

You are moved to respond, not because of the organization that makes the appeals, but because of the pain you see in the face of a child. Worthy as those groups may be, it is a child in need that calls for our response. So I believe God answers our prayers, not because we have said it right, or repeated our requests long enough to wear God down, but because He sees us in our need and desires nothing more than to come to us in gracious response.

A second reality is so obvious if we will only think about it. God gives what we need, not what we want. This is what baffles us so often since most of us are quite confident that know our real needs and need only convince God to agree. How often have we prayed for success, or prosperity, or some personal goal to be achieved? And how often have we waited in vain for those selfish ends?

Gayle and I learned recently about the origins of that organization known as Heifer International. Dan West was a willing volunteer for the Church of the Brethren working in Europe during the Spanish Revolution in the 1930's. He was involved with a feeding program for hungry people, and he came away with a conviction. He believed that while it was essential at times to have emergency aid for people caught up in violence and calamity, it would be far better to given them, not a cup of milk, but a cow that would sustain them in the future. Not exactly what they had asked for, but it was what they truly needed.

When we come to God with our needs: whether it be a new job, relief from pain, guidance, wisdom, healing for someone we love, or help in leading our children, God may not give us just what we are asking for. That's not the promise of this passage. The promise is that God will respond and that God will give us the Holy Spirit, the gift of God's self to be with us, to guide us, and to strengthen us in whatever we are facing.

Wrap all this together and consider this. When we pray, God will be there. Our desire to pray is not of our own doing. God initiates the desire within us. Prayer is our response to God's invitation. God is always there - our prayer doesn't open God's heart or bring his presence, it opens our heart and mind. Our asking, searching, and knocking opens our own hearts and minds to God's sustaining, life-giving presence, to the gift of the Holy Spirit that God is waiting to give, always, with gracious hands. Amen.