

“Teach Us to Pray” (reading: Luke 11:1-13)



There was once a man who lived on a flood plain. He ignored the warnings about the possible flooding and stayed in his home. Well, the water came, and pretty soon it rose to the eaves of his home. But he didn't panic. He was a religious person, and as he sat on his roof in the rain, he prayed, "God please help me. Please rescue me."

And so he waited for God to rescue him. But the waters kept rising, and after some time he heard someone shouting. It was a police officer in a row boat, and he offered to take him to higher ground. The stranded man refused, saying thanks, but he needed no help because God would help him.

Then a helicopter came along and a soldier was let down on a rope. He offered the man to hoist him into the helicopter. Again the man refused politely, saying God would help him.

Again the man prayed for God to help him. Just then a power boat came along and the person piloting the boat said, "You look like you need help. The waters are rising fast and the dam is about to break." Again the man said thanks but no thanks, God would help him.

A few minutes later, the dam broke and the man and most of his house were carried away by the raging torrent. Of course, the man was drowned. When he arrived in heaven he demanded an audience with God. When he talked to God face to face, he was very angry and said, "see here God, I was always taught that you answer prayer and I prayed and you did not answer me." God replied, "What are you talking about? I sent a row boat, a power boat and a helicopter. What more did you want?!"

There are many other jokes about prayer and the answers to prayer. Yet, prayer is not a joke, it is a crucial part of the Christian life.

Many people have some funny ideas about prayer. Whether we want to admit it or not, many of our prayers sound a lot like the wish lists to Santa Clause we made when we were kids, asking for this, asking for that that.

When talking about prayer it is much easier to start off by saying what it is *not*:
- Prayer is *not* about making our lives more pleasant, like praying for sunshine, or catching your plane, or for your team to win.

- Prayer is *not* asking God to do things that we have forgotten to do, or are not motivated to do, like losing weight.
- Prayer is *not* about God getting *us* off of the hook, like passing an important test; or about making bargains with God when we're in a mess.

The writer of Luke's gospel has gathered together an interesting assortment of Jesus' teachings on prayer. We have a version of the Lord's prayer, *and* a story about a persistent neighbour asking for bread.

Let's first look at the story of the persistent neighbour. We make a mistake when we interpret this parable to mean that we can change God's mind by a barrage of pestering prayer. To understand what's going on here, we have to interpret this parable in the context of a first-century Galilean village. Hospitality was of primary importance. When someone came to your home, you had to take them in and you had to feed them.

The listeners are asked to imagine a situation where one of them received a late night guest, but with no bread in the house. Since it would have brought shame on the house not to feed a guest, the home owner would have been obligated to go next door seeking bread. Knowing this, the person who was awakened by knocking in the middle of the night would have done what was asked. There was no question about this.

Jesus' argument is this: *even* if the sleeping neighbour was inclined to refuse, he would still help out because of the persistent request. Well, says Jesus, if you can hardly imagine a neighbour refusing you in the middle of the night, you can definitely count on God to come through.

So are we asked to be like a pesky child who nags and nags until our tired parents will buy that pair of name brand jeans, just to get rid of our nagging? Of course not. That is not how we are to pray and that is not how God answers prayer.



The movie *Shadowlands* directed by (Sir) Richard Attenborough is the touching story of an American divorcee named Joy Gresham and a British author and theologian CS Lewis. Joy is stricken with cancer and as Lewis arrives at the college where he teaches he is met by a minister who says: "I know how hard you've been praying... I'm sure God will answer your prayers." Lewis shoots back, "That's not why I pray. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. Praying doesn't change God - it changes *me*."

You probably know the expression: "marriage is work". If we don't spend time and effort on our marriage, it will suffer. That goes not just for marriage, but for all relationships: between partners and parents and children and friends and neighbours. It also goes for our relationship with God. Prayer is about developing a relationship with God. We come to God, and God touches, embraces, shapes, and changes us. By praying we receive the gift we really seek - intimacy with God.

Prayer is about seeking what we *need* rather than saying what we *want*. Sounds simple enough, but it isn't really; it can be hard to see the difference between what we want and what we need. Often we honestly believe that what we want is something we really, really need.

We probably realize that we don't *need* our team to win or our child to pass an important test. But many other things we pray for are not really needs, either, only wants! Often it is only after some time has passed that we realize it was a good thing we didn't always end up getting what we asked for.

One of the things that is affirmed in this passage is God's enduring goodness. Jesus gives a few examples to show how much greater God's goodness is than that of humans. Only a real stinker would give his child a scorpion when asked for an egg. Only a despicable person would give her child a snake when they needed a food. Of course you wouldn't do that!

So how much more then can we count on God to give us what we need. God never leaves us and God gives us strength to deal with what comes our way and God gives us the strength to cope, to rise above it, to become better people because of it. Through prayer we can become in tune with this power and this strength.

In 1984, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, of Capetown in South Africa received the Nobel Peace Prize. This was a lonely and scary time for black South Africans. The white minority was still in full control and Nelson Mandela's release was only a pipe dream. On his way to Oslo to receive his prize, Bishop Tutu spoke to a standing room only crowd of church people and peace activists. He said, "I'm going to tell you all what you most need to hear, the single most important thing you can do for South Africa." The sanctuary fell silent with everyone there waiting to hear what to do for this pain-filled country. He continued softly, "Pray. Pray for my people. Pray *for* us and *with* us, daily. Pray. That's what you can do. It will change the world."

He didn't ask to pray for an end to the brutal Apartheid regime or freedom for Nelson Mandela, or anything else. He just asked us to continually hold them

in our prayers so the world -and that includes us- would be changed. He understood what prayer was about.

The prayer Jesus gave us is almost hardwired in our brains; if someone woke you up at 3:00 am and asked you to say it, you could do it, too. It's the one prayer that is known all over the world, both by Christians and non-Christians. It's become part of who we are.

A few years ago I was at a church meeting with people from different countries. During worship we were invited to say this prayer, each in our own language. Hearing all these languages united in the same prayer was a very moving and powerful experience. But because we know it so well, it can also lose some of its impact. Sometimes we say the words, but don't really hear them anymore.

But if you listen closely to the words of the Lord's prayer you'll hear it's never about "me" and "I" - it's always about "we" and "us"; so it's about relationships. It's about our place in the wider community and in creation. It's about the courage to be renewed through the power of the Spirit.

We acknowledge that God gives us daily what we need - not what we want. We are to pray on a daily basis, not just when things are bad and we want God to magically fix things for us.

Going to God in prayer may not be something we want, but it sure is something we need. Going to God in prayer shows a willingness to be transformed to what God has in mind for us, a willingness to hear what we are called to. And frankly, that can be uncomfortable.

So in a few minutes, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, let us really listen - to ourselves. And let us listen to one another as we pray this prayer. And above all, let us listen for God, and be willing to be changed, hard as it may seem. Amen.