

# Why bother praying?

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[ 0 : 00 ] Our reading this morning comes from Luke chapter 11, verses 1 to 13. 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. He said to them, when you pray, say, Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.

Then Jesus said to them, Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, Friend, lend me three loaves of bread.

A friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him. And suppose the one inside answers, Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed.

[ 1 : 13 ] I can't get up and give you anything. I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

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.

For everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened to you. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If 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?

Why bother praying? What is the point of prayer? Most of us, I suspect, have had at least brief periods and perhaps much longer spells when we find ourselves thinking, why bother praying?

[ 2 : 39 ] What am I really achieving by sitting here in this prayer meeting? Why would I spend 15 minutes of my precious time in the morning in prayer? Why bother praying as I lay down to sleep at night?

Is there any reason why I would pray as I go about my day, as I sit down for a meal, as I enter the exam hall or the interview room or wherever it may be? What is the point of prayer?

And maybe when we're feeling uncertain that there is much value in it, maybe habit or determination carries us through, that we pray anyway even when we don't really feel like it.

And there is something to be said for that kind of habit. But maybe you've had times when you've simply stopped praying. Or never even started in the first place for that matter.

And maybe some of us are in such a season now. Whilst for some, the recent months have caused an upswing of interest in prayer, I imagine there are also plenty for whom the disruption to routine has been a serious issue for continuing our usual habits.

[ 3 : 42 ] And maybe you found it really hard to pray without being able to gather together in person to do so. Maybe our circumstances at the moment have caused you to doubt the value of prayer, to doubt the goodness of God.

Well, folks, if you have ever wondered at all whether or not to bother praying, then these verses that we're considering today are for you. Jesus is still answering the request of verse 1, Lord, teach us to pray.

Having looked at what we might call the how of prayer in verses 2 through 4, that was about a month ago now when we looked about it. But we're coming today to the rest of the section, verses 5 through 13, in which we could say we've moved from the how of prayer into now the why of prayer.

And Jesus offers here in these verses a series of reasons why his first disciples and we who follow in their footsteps, why we should bother to pray. There's three brief sections in these verses. You've got first the parable of the friend at midnight, that's verses 5 through 8. Then ask, seek, knock in 9 and 10. And then verses 11 through 13, fathers giving gifts to their children.

[ 4 : 55 ] The three sections make slightly different points, but overall the point of these three things is to say together, prayer is worthwhile. It's worth it. It's worth the effort.

It's worth persevering even when you don't feel like it. Prayer is worthwhile. Say these verses. So folks, if you are discouraged in your praying life, then I hope that the next 20 minutes or whatever we are, that it will be an encouragement to you.

So let's consider first this section from verse 5, the parable of the friend at midnight. The scenario here is straightforward. An unexpected visitor arrives late at night.

You have no food to hand at home, and so you turn to a neighbouring friend for assistance, hoping that they've got something that will at least tide you over until you can make a fuller provision in the morning.

What's going to be the result of coming with that request to your neighbour? Well, suppose, just suppose that your friend, verse 7, were to answer, don't bother me.

[ 6 : 01 ] The door is already locked. My children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything. Suppose that were to be the answer. I mean, without the numerous separate bedrooms of our modern houses and the convenient Yale locks that you just twist and open, if you cast your mind back into that different first century situation, to the thoroughly barred door and to the genuine disruption to the whole household as one person gets out of, if not quite a communal bed, at least a communal sleeping room.

The disruption is significant. These are genuine difficulties. But nevertheless, the force of Jesus' opening question in verse 5 is something like, can any one of you imagine that this is how it would go?

Can you really imagine that your friend would refuse to help you? Of course not. Surely his friendship would be sufficient to overcome such obstacles. He will grant your request.

And even if that weren't the case, verse 8 says, even if friendship isn't enough to motivate action, still your request will ultimately be granted. Why will that be the case?

Well, again, it's helpful to think back into the context that Jesus is speaking in. Because there are lots of things here that are different to how they are today. Now, most obviously, there's no 24-hour Tesco just around the corner.

[ 7 : 26 ] In fact, there's probably not a shop at all in the sense that we'd usually think of it. So the man can't just go and buy suitable food. And similarly, there's no option to just grab something out of the freezer and defrost it in the microwave.

It is very realistic that he doesn't have anything to offer his guest. But more than the practical differences between our life and theirs, we have to think about the differences of mindset, of attitude.

Because there's much more of an obligation of hospitality than perhaps we would tend to feel today. There's an expectation of providing whatever might be required for somebody who does just show up.

After all, the traveller can't phone ahead, can he? He may well just appear without warning. And the obligation to provide. That obligation doesn't only lie with the individual, with the friend of the traveller, but the obligation lies with the whole community.

There's a significant sense in which the traveller is the guest not just of the individual, but of the whole village. They are responsible. So there's a real responsibility here, not only on the part of the host, but also on the part of this friend who's being approached at midnight.

[ 8 : 41 ] There's a responsibility to assist. And it's helpful to recognise that responsibility because it makes it easier to understand what's going on with the reason given for assistance in verse 8.

See, here in the NRV translation that we use at Covenant Church, it says, because of your shameless audacity, he will get up and give you as much as you need. Other translations talk about boldness, impudence, persistence, shameless persistence.

There's something of a range here of translation. Of course, a single word in one language doesn't always map onto a single word in another language. Clearly, in the Greek mindset, the ideas of shame and persistence are closer in their heads than perhaps they are in ours.

And actually, most scholars seem to be agreed that the persistence meaning, that that's a meaning that arose for the word sometime after the period when Jesus was speaking and when Luke was writing.

And therefore, it is this idea of shame that seems to be what Jesus is talking about. It is because of shame that the friend will help. The question, though, is, whose shame?

[ 9 : 57 ] Is it because of the shamelessness of the asking? Or is it because of the shame of the one being asked? And the NIV at first seems to take it as the former, that it is the shameless audacity of the person coming with the request.

But if you look down at the footnote in your Bible, oh, I thought I had the footnote. Sorry. If you look down at the footnote, then you'll see an alternative understanding yet to preserve his good name. The idea here is that the friend at midnight will be willing to go to the effort of getting out of bed and disturbing his family sleep and unbolting the door and digging around to find first the light and then the bread, that he will be willing to do this in order to preserve his good name.

See, that understanding fits well with this sense of a collective responsibility on the part of the whole village to show this hospitality to the guest of the individual. It would be shameful for this man to refuse to help.

His name would be mud. He'd be shunned by his neighbours if he weren't willing to get up and assist. And therefore, says Jesus, therefore, even in this unlikely scenario where the positive motivation of friendship is insufficient, well, surely even then, the negative motivation of avoiding that shame, surely that motivation will be such that he will act.

[ 11 : 25 ] One way or another, you're going to get the bread that you need. The point? The point is this is how God will respond to prayer. Just as the man in bed would respond so as not to incur shame for having refused the needs of the visitor, so God will always do what is honourable and what is consistent with his character.

God does not act in a way that would shame him. God acts in a way that is honourable. God acts in a way that is consistent with his character. So why bother praying?

Well, because you can be absolutely certain that God will answer. Just as our friends, despite the inconvenience to themselves, do come through for us when we appeal to them in times of need, even with mixed motives, so God will answer our prayers.

Our Father, our Father in heaven, he cannot be less dependable than our human friends, can he? And then as we come into verse 9, the argument in this next section is closely linked.

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. For everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. And to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

[ 12 : 46 ] Now, I don't know what goes on in your head, but my suspicion is that you're at least a little bit like me in this respect, that when we feel like we're not praying as much as we should, our response is to beat ourselves up, to chastise ourselves, or worse, to condemn one another.

But Jesus, here in these verses, Jesus does not extend a rod of rebuke to those who do not pray. No, he extends a gracious invitation.

He offers a compelling promise. Everyone who asks, receives. The one who seeks, finds. To the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

This is an invitation to you that says, try it and see. If you've never prayed before, why not give it a go?

Just look back to the start of this chapter, to the Lord's Prayer that's printed there, and just pray that. The simplicity of that prayer is a great model for us. And in fact, whatever situation you're facing, just take it to God.

[ 13 : 59 ] That's the invitation here. Ask for what you need. Ask. When you remember, when you remember to whom you're praying, folks, this promise is absolutely incredible, isn't it?

Everyone who asks, receives. Now, now that doesn't mean that we should all of us be following in Joshua's footsteps from last Sunday, and praying for the sun to stand still in the middle of the day, expecting, I guess, that we can enjoy longer days on our summer holidays.

Now, let's, let's not render this promise absurd, but let's not render it toothless either. Folks, it is absolutely amazing that God does indeed promise that when we seek him, he is not far off.

He is ready to be found. Whatever, whatever degree of fear there might be that the neighbour's door would remain closed when the friend knocked at midnight.

Folks, there need not be any fear of that when we knock on the door of heaven. We're invited to come and to knock not only on our neighbour's doors, and not only on the outer gate of some palatial grand fortress in heaven.

[15:18] No, we're invited, we're invited to stand at the door of the throne room itself, and to knock on that door, and knock not as, not as a fearful supplicant who wonders what the response will be, whether we'll be allowed in or not.

No, we knock with the absolute confidence that the door will be opened, and that the one who, in verse 2, were invited to address as Father, that he himself will hear us, and will answer our prayers. That is the promise of these verses. The door is certain to be opened, and those who ask, receive. What a wonderful invitation.

And this idea of God as Father, it's picked up and developed in the third section. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?

Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? How utterly absurd. But if you then, though you are evil, if you know how to give good gifts to your children, well, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

[16:34] When these substitutions are suggested, the snake instead of the fish, and the scorpion instead of an egg, when they're suggested, there's a real cruelty here, isn't there?

As what's requested is refused, and the recipient is deceived, because the Father is coming with something, they think they're getting what they wanted, and then there's an element of danger as well, something positively harmful in the snake and the scorpion.

There is real cruelty in the idea of these substitutions. And whilst we're painfully aware of the reality that some fathers do indeed treat their children in this fashion and far worse, the fact remains that we instinctively rebel against this idea.

We all know that this is not how fathers ought to behave. We recognise an inherent wrongness to a father who would treat his child in this fashion.

Folks, even though human beings are evil, even though we have wicked inclinations, yet still it is thankfully very rare that parents treat their children in such a fashion.

[17:43] We know how to give good things to children. Children rightly expect, even assume, that not only will their basic needs be catered to by their parents, but also that good things will be given to them.

And a good father delights to bestow gifts upon his children. Well, says Jesus, your father in heaven is akin to this. Indeed, how much more will he do so?

If even finite human beings can manage to scrape together the enthusiasm to do something good for their children, how much more the infinite God of the universe will do so?

God repeatedly characterises himself as a father to his people. Remember, we said when we looked at verse 2 a few weeks back, we said it's not new to this prayer for the relationship between God and his people to be characterised as one of father and son.

In the Exodus, for instance, God revealed as the protective father, the one who sends the pillar of fire and smoke to shield them as they're able to cross.

[18:48] God explicitly uses that terminology of himself as the father of his people. There he's the protective father who takes steps to rescue his son from danger.

Here in Luke chapter 11, he's the generous father who gives good things. Specifically, says Jesus, how much more will your father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?

Now, don't take this as a cop-out, okay? This isn't somehow trying to get you to pray for the intangibles. You know, pray for the Holy Spirit because you won't actually know whether that prayer has been answered or not, will you?

So he wants something that you can get away with not really coming through on because you won't be able to tell. No, it is not a cop-out. Verse 3 invited us to pray for daily bread as well as the forgiveness of sins.

You will know whether you have bread in your belly or not. And elsewhere in the Gospel accounts that the God who forgave the man's sins also healed his paralysis. This isn't a cop-out.

[19:49] The God who grants forgiveness to you and to me will also provide our daily bread.

Everyone who asks receives. He's a good father who doesn't give a scorpion instead of an egg. So why the promise of the Holy Spirit?

Why is that what we're told the Father loves to give his children? Why that promise? I think because it's the best possible promise, isn't it?

I mean, we don't have time this morning to come anywhere close to plumbing the depth of the significance of the promise of God's Holy Spirit granted to his people. We can't spend a whole lot of time exploring what that means.

But even in the barest outline, this is huge, isn't it? Romans chapter 8, Paul talks about the Spirit that gives life because of righteousness in contrast to our bodies dead because of sin.

Our salvation, yours and mine, our salvation from God's justified condemnation of our sins. That salvation, that life, is tied up with the Spirit's work within us.

[ 20 : 52 ] Friends, your good and gracious Father in heaven loves to give the Spirit who brings life and salvation to those who ask him for it.

God delights to answer those kind of prayers. Those who seek God will find him. And similarly, the same Spirit, again Romans 8, enables God's people to live according to his ways.

Verse 13, If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. It is by the Spirit that here in Luke 11 we are assured that the Father will give us when we ask.

It is by this Spirit that we're enabled to put sin to death. Transformed by the work of the Spirit within us, we're no longer slaves to sin. Instead, we're adopted as heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.

What a glorious promise. What an immense thing to know we can expect in answer to our prayers.

[ 21 : 56 ] The spirit of adoption as God's sons. Heirs of God. Co-heirs with Christ. This is not a cop-out.

This is not a small promise. This is immense. And it is a promise to you and to me as we come in prayer to God. So folks, why do we bother to pray?

Well, we pray because God is sure to answer and because his gifts are good. He delights. Delights to give us not that which is going to harm us, but that which will be an immense blessing to us.

To give us the Holy Spirit that he himself will be with us. Amen. Praise God.