

The Picture Of Powerlessness

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[0 : 0 0] We're looking at this passage today, and it's a wonderful passage. You will remember we did a way back, you've had some sort of great speakers recently.

You've been fed rather well, so now we're back to that meat and potatoes again. And we're looking, we're continuing to look at Luke chapter 11.

And in Luke chapter 11, it opens with the disciples of Jesus, saying the disciples of John, praying and saying, teach us to pray.

And Jesus takes them aside and teaches them to pray. And he starts by giving them the pattern prayer, which you remember had five things to it.

I remember this is the pattern around which you build your prayer, that first you address God as Father, not as the ultimate progenitor of all it is, but as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 0 6] So you only learn through Christ to call him Father. And having addressed him, you then have five things to say. One is that his name would be hallowed, that is, that it is the ultimate reality.

God is the ultimate reality, and so he is to be hallowed. There's lots of things in the course of our life which we hallow until we come to the place of hallowing that the one who alone deserves to be hallowed.

You can think that one through, I won't fill in the details. The second subject is the kingdom, not the kingdom that we're building and asking God to help us finish it, but the kingdom which God himself is establishing and which we want to come in the midst of our circumstances.

The third thing we do is ask for bread, the sustaining reality of our lives on which we are all totally dependent, our daily bread.

Jesus says man doesn't live by bread alone, but he doesn't live without it either. And so it's important that he ask for his daily bread. The great transaction between us and God is that we are forgiven.

[2 : 2 7] The great transaction between us and between one another is that we forgive. The great, hallowed kingdom, bread, forgive, and temptation, which is in the immortal words which Frank Sinatra never got around to yet.

There may yet be time. Lead us not into temptation means basically save me God from doing it my way. And that's the temptation to do it is very strong.

And that's the prayer. So then having given us the pattern, Jesus then gives us the parable. Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight?

And if you sort of picture this house here and the road coming to it and your friend with the load over his shoulder coming to your house to visit you and you say, how nice to see you.

I know it's late, but you are so welcome. Do come in. Do have a seat. Let me get you something to eat. And so you bring your friend in. You sit him in the living room.

- [3 : 39] You go out to the kitchen and there is nothing there. And so you are stuck. You know, your welcome, warm as you may want it to be, has something lacking at the moment.
- So you step out the back door and you position yourself right here. And next door is your neighbor who lives here. And there you are.
- He has the resource that you need. You have the need sitting in your front room. And this is Jesus' wonderful picture of prayer.
- Standing alone in the dark. That's what prayer is. With a need on one side of you and a resource on the other side of you. And that's where you learn what prayer means.
- A parable is a sort of story you put alongside in order to illustrate it. And it's very graphically illustrated. He goes to the door and he knocks and says to his friend, I have someone come to my house.
- [4 : 47] I've got to be hospitable. Give me three loaves of bread. And his friend says, I would love to give you three loaves of bread. I am in bed with my six children.
- If I get out of bed, I crush three of them and wake the other three up. And I can't come to the door and answer you. So I'm afraid you continue to stand alone in the dark.
- And so he stands alone in the dark. But he persists and he bangs on the door again. Until finally his friend reluctantly gets up and comes to the door and gives him the bread.
- And he's able to take it home and provide the hospitality for his friend. But that's to illustrate what prayer is.
- Prayer is standing alone in the dark with a need on one side and a resource on the other. Very powerful picture. And that's why this talk is called the picture of powerlessness.
- [5 : 53] Now we live our lives always gravitating towards the place of power. Whether it's the great oak desk that you sit behind with buttons there to summon all the people into your service.
- Whether it's the car you drive. Whether it's the bank you go to where the manager bows politely when you come in. Whether it's the club you belong to.
- Or whether you are a prairie farmer with a 500 horsepower tractor that you roll over your thousands of acres in. We always gravitate to the place of power.
- And that's where we get our satisfaction from. Is being in the place of power. We dress to show our power. All our activities are always taking us towards demonstrating our power.
- And so prayer is not a familiar experience for us. There are moments when you're overdrawn at the bank and things like that when your power seems to seep away.
- [7 : 02] But basically we always gravitate towards the place of power. Prayer is almost ridiculous. Because the emphasis that it puts on our powerlessness.
- You know that husbands don't go home at night. Because when they get there, they're second in command if not third, fourth or fifth.
- You know. That's not the place of power. A whole new authority system comes into being when you walk through the door. And you get into...
- When you're relating to your children, you're very often not in the place of power. Prayer is marked by knees bent, head bowed, hands opened, eyes closed.
- Which is a picture of powerlessness. And so you won't go to that place unless there is some reason.
- [8 : 06] And the reason, as demonstrated in this story, is that here is a need that you can't meet. And there is a resource by which you can meet it.
- And you have to go out into the dark to find it. Out into the place of powerlessness. You have to pray. And you know that prayer is a universal experience of the whole of humanity.

Finding this place of powerlessness. And that's what... You know that we are so loathed to go into the place of our own powerlessness.

That prayer seems to be a terrible humiliation that comes upon us. And we get caught with it.

And we don't know how to deal with it. It's strange, I think, that this place of powerlessness is so difficult a place for us to come to.

[9 : 11] And it's difficult, of course, because the shift is from a kind of self-centered structure, in which we are master of our own home and so on, and we're in charge of everything, to a structure that's quite differently centered.

It's centered on God. And who he is and what he's doing and how he's doing it and where he's going with it and all those things. So that it's fundamentally different. And you really have to change gears.

There was a wonderful doctor whom I knew when I first became a Christian back in Toronto. His name was Overton Stevens. And he was a wealthy general practitioner who went with his wife down to New York to have a bash every so often, just to spend all the money he had and to enjoy himself.

He was given an address of somebody he was to look up in New York one day in his office. So he went to this office in downtown New York, went in to see this fellow, and the fellow greeted him warmly, said, Won't you come around to the house tonight?

Be glad if you could. And my wife and I would be glad to entertain you and your wife. And Overton Stevens said, And I had other plans for that evening, but there I was trapped. What was I going to do?

[10 : 37] And so he agreed to come. And the man said, Well, we'll see you tonight. Just before you go, let's pray. And that just about destroyed him.

It is such a grinding of gears to move from the normal living of our life, in which we are the center and focus of all the action, to a place where you're suddenly powerless and you want to pray.

And so I think you have to remember that. I was impressed by a line in the Globe and Mail this week, and another picture, which Dr. Paul Kinghorn, who was here not long ago, who was a particle physicist, and he gave a talk out at the university, and he talked there about a scientist looks at prayer.

And he described that down at the bottom end of particle physics, when you get into the smallest things there are, he said their behavior is totally random.

That is, you cannot predict what's going to happen. It's impossible. He said it's only when you begin to get some together that you can begin to rationalize them.

[12 : 15] Well, of course, he said for him, as a physicist, that was precisely what prayer was all about. Prayer was to take individual people whose lives are random activities that might go off in any direction, and to bring them into relationship so that their life becomes rational, so that it begins to have meaning once they get into relationship with someone or something else.

That's what prayer is. So he said for him, the pattern is that he's very much aware of how scientific prayer is in that sense.

It was interesting to read in the Globe and Mail an article on the business world, and the concluding line of the article, quoting somebody who had written this play on the business world, said, whether in luxury or in poverty, speaking of our society, it seems we've all withdrawn into our personal chaos.

That the reality of us as an individual is we're totally random, totally unpredictable, totally surrounded by our own chaos.

And it's out of that that something happens. Well, what is it that happens? Let me tell you. Jesus, when he's explaining it to his disciples, says to them this, ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be open to you.

[13 : 59] Now, I mean, it's sort of like when I asked Tom to give his name at the beginning, you see. I asked him. And it would have been a very peculiar thing if he had not responded.

I mean, if he had stomped his feet and walked out the door or done something rude, I wouldn't have known how to cope. But the fact is that we know in the sort of general, normal pattern of behavior, if you ask, you receive.

And if you seek, you find. And if you knock, it's open to you. We all know that. And I presume all of you who are salesmen at your Monday morning sales meeting before you get sent out, you're told, remember, ask, you've got to do it.

Seek, you've got to do it. Knock, you've got to do it. You know, or whether it's making cold calls, whatever it is, that's the principle. And he said, you understand that principle.

Well, he's, what Jesus is saying is that, that God's creative word fashions in us a confidence on which all prayer rests.

[15 : 17] So that we know this is a principle in our world, ask, seek, knock. But Jesus says, God can give you confidence that in terms of the ultimate reality of his kingdom, the same thing applies.

So that as you know, it works in the world normally. So normally it works in terms of your relationship to God. And so he says, you are to go on asking, seeking, and knocking as the man had to do here.

That he had to be quite shameless in his demand that his neighbor get up and respond. And we are told by Christ that this is an important and constituent part of our prayer that we be shamelessly persistent in asking God.

Because normally, God will give you what you ask for. In terms of the kingdom, what you seek, you will find. And you know what you're to seek first.

And when you knock, the door will be open to you. And so he says, this is the thing you've got to do persistently and you're to keep at it.

[16 : 35] Now, what happens then in the story, he says, this is how prayer works. Now, it can only work that way if in a sense, I don't like putting any conditions on prayer because, but when I say it can only work this way, I think it can work all sorts of different ways.

But the fact of the matter is that it can work only in the sense that as you ask, seek, or knock, as that happens, you are, that that is the central activity that you're engaged in.

And that is, in a sense, why you've got to turn off all the other systems. You know, why you've got to close your eyes, bow your head, block your ears, close yourself in a cupboard, or do something like that so that there isn't any other competing activity.

There is a total dependence upon God, the Father, to meet you in your prayer. And that's why he says, we've got to be importunate, we've got to be shameless, we've got to be persistent in asking for it.

And my friend, Dr. Polkinghorn, said, well, if God knows what's going to happen, why do we have to ask him? You know. Well, C.S. Lewis took the same problem and said, if you work from that premise, it means that if God knows what's going to happen today, I don't need to get out of bed.

[18 : 10] You know, I can just pull up the covers and go back to sleep because God's in control. Well, there's a sense in which we interact with God in terms of shaping a future in which God is present and active all the time so that every circumstance of our life is anchored in our willingness to stand in the place of our own powerlessness and be dependent on a resource over which we have no control.

And that's what prayer is, persisting in that. You know, rather than building the whole thing around yourself.

The story then ends with the three wonderful illustrations which I can hardly... He says that Jesus says if you ask for bread, this is going a little beyond Luke's gospel, you won't get a stone.

If you ask for a fish, God won't give you a serpent. If you ask for an egg, God won't give you what I'm told is a kind of egg-shaped monster which is called a scorpion.

that that won't happen. Now, I've been reading that book, Sarum, which talks a great deal about a world before Christ came in, you know, it's the story of Salisbury in England.

[20 : 00] and it's very graphic in showing one of the demonstrable facts of life and that is that we mostly expect the worst from God.

That we live our lives in the expectation that one day God's going to get us. And so we keep moving and even build elaborate rationalizations to try and convince ourselves that he isn't there and that he's certainly not interested in me if he is and what I do doesn't matter to him.

But inevitably as life goes on and God catches up on us, we begin to feel, well, okay, I'm going to get it now because I deserve to be punished.

I know this deep down. And I know that God knows I deserve to be punished. And I know that what's happened to me is a result of the fact that I wasn't able to run far enough, fast enough, and now I'm caught.

And so disaster awaits me. And a lot of people, I think, live with that philosophy of life through the whole of their years here on earth. That one day God's going to catch up on me and then I am going to get it.

[21 : 24] And deep in my heart, I know that I deserve it. And so all I can do is keep running. And you see, this book Serum, it has a very poignant story of an unfaithful wife.

And the high priest of this bloody religion comes around to the house and says, we need sacrifices. And he says, I want you out of this family.

And he points to the wife and takes her away. And the husband says, yes, that's God's retribution. We can't fight against him. It was inevitable that it would happen.

And so the pattern, we've been influenced by Christianity for a long time so that I don't think we recognize how basic this fear is.

That in fact what God will do is to give you a stone. And that you get all sorts of people who say, I ask for bread and I got a stone. Or I asked for a fish and I got a serpent.

[22 : 32] I asked for an egg and I got a scorpion. So I am through, finished. But Jesus says, the God with whom you are dealing in prayer doesn't work that way.

But I think the God that we probably worship most is our own fear that it does work that way. And therefore it's best to stay away from God for fear that, I mean, I talked to a lady this week who's been through a divorce.

And it would seem from all the external evidence that it had nothing to do with her responsibility. But from her point of view, somewhere she had failed and God had caught up to her.

and boom, blown her out of the water. That this inevitably had happened. And you see, I think that we have that kind of agony.

It's as though, you know, that when I walk into the office on Monday morning and there is a letter with my name on it and personal. I check my emotional balance before I open it for fear that the end of my world is contained in that envelope and that somebody is finally seen through me and I can't get away with it any longer.

[24 : 00] And that they put it in so many words. Well, I think that that's sort of the basic expectation of our humanity.

and I think that's why we need to know that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, instead of a serpent gives a fish, instead of a scorpion an egg, instead of a stone bread, and instead of the bad news, he gives the good news.

The good news of his love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. And that ultimately, because it our God is a God not of darkness, but of light, not of death, but of life, not of evil, but of righteousness.

And that our God is good. And that we can, in the position of total personal powerlessness, come before him, and with persistence, know that he will meet and go beyond meeting our deepest need.

and that's how Jesus taught his disciples to pray, in that awareness. And that, of course, is how we need to learn to pray. Let's, for one minute, our God and Father, we just ask for that confidence in your purpose of love towards us, that we may not hide from the places of powerlessness in our lives, but that we may go out into the place of powerlessness love towards us, and persist in calling on you to be the resource we desperately need.

[26 : 11] Teach us to do this as Jesus taught his disciples. We ask in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.