

Generous Access

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[0 : 0 0] An atheist, I've told you this story before, some of you anyway, an atheist was on a hike in the Alaskan wilderness when to his horror a huge grizzly bear came charging towards him on the track.

In just a matter of moments, he is pinned to the ground by the bear. Its paw is raised, ready to strike him. And without any thought, this atheist screams out at the top of his voice, please God, help me.

Okay, the bear is momentarily disorientated and the atheist in that moment realises the inconsistency of saying that God doesn't exist and then calling out to God in that moment of need.

And so he decides instead to throw a challenge out to God. If you exist, make the bear a Christian. After all, he thinks if the bear is a Christian, he'd have to turn the other cheek, he wouldn't be able to commit murder and he would go on living as he did and the bear would go on its merry way.

And would you believe it? In that moment, the bear pulled back its paw, knelt down beside him, collapsed its hands together, bowed its head and closed its eyes.

[1 : 2 7] And prayed. Lord, for what I'm about to receive, may you make me truly thankful.

Now, I don't know whether that's a true story or not. I don't think bears pray. But most humans on the planet pray at least sometime in their lives.

And while prayer is virtually a global activity, what prayer means is vastly different from individual to individual.

And the difference in prayer life, even from religion to religion, the difference in prayer life comes down to what you think the deity is or who that deity is, what he's like that you're praying to.

What you think your relationship to God is. Now, it's possible right now that you're thinking, you know, well, this isn't for me, this message.

[2 : 4 0] I don't identify as religious and I'm not a prayer. Let me say that's okay if you think this is not for you. On any given Sunday, when we gather together like this, there is a great deal of diversity amongst us here at St. Paul's and tuning in online from different parts of the world.

Great deal of diversity on the spectrum of faith. Some here gathered really know what they believe and some here really don't know what it is that they believe.

And some are even dubious about some aspects of the Christian faith or every aspect of the Christian faith. You just happen to be dragged along here on this day. That's one of the great things about St. Paul's, that diversity.

I would encourage you to stay tuned in though for the next 20 minutes or until I get to the end really. Because prayer is a clue to your heart.

Prayer is almost an involuntary reflex of the heart. It's a reflex of the human soul. No matter what you believe or how unbelieving you are, you have most likely prayed and even been unaware of it.

- [4 : 02] The American writer, humorist and enthusiastic unbeliever Mark Twain admitted that when his wife was dying, he took, quote, I prayed and prayed and prayed like a dog.
- A former prime minister of Australia, an avowed atheist, used to regularly say to the media when addressing a disaster or tragedy, my thoughts and prayers are with them.
- When our defenses are down and when we're at our most natural. It's when we're at our most natural when our defenses are down.
- When we are not thinking but we're reacting. When terrible things have happened and we are desperate, it tells us what we are really like and who we really are.
- At least one in four atheists turn to daily prayer in times of need. And given that atheists are a vast, vast minority in our world, that tells me the vast majority actually pray.
- [5 : 14] We are all religious. It's what makes us human. And when we experience deep vulnerability and our limitations as a human being, we pray.
- In fact, to not pray dehumanizes us. So, hopefully that's enough for you to stay tuned for the next little while as we explore the uniqueness of Christian prayer.
- Three points. It's got the St. Paul's app. If you've got that in front of you, that would be great to follow along where we're heading today. And the Bible passages, Luke 11 and Luke 18. First of all, shameless access.
- Jesus is praying at the beginning of Luke 18. It was just read out to us. And he's asked by his disciples, hey, Jesus, teach us to pray. And he tells them a story. There's a man in bed at midnight.
- Now, this is, you know, first century Palestine. Midnight is midnight. There's no electricity. It really is midnight. He would have been completely sound asleep. He's not up gaming or something like that.
- [6 : 19] He's completely sound asleep with his family. The cat's out. The door's locked. It's the dead of night. And he's most likely in the one room house of those times with his entire family in bed with him.
- The person knocking on the door is not coming to him with an emergency. That's the other thing here. He's not needing assistance for his wife. You know, give me your donkey.
- She needs to get to hospital. She's in labor. You know, my kid's sick. It's not an emergency. Knocks on the door. In the middle of the night, I need some bread.
- I need some bread. Eventually, the man who's knocking gets what he's asked for. Why?
- Not because he is his friend. It's because we are told in verse 8, his shameless audacity. Shameless audacity.
- [7 : 20] Now, Jesus is putting up here an approach to prayer that is opposite to other religions and even common sense. The word shameless can be translated as rudeness, discourtesy, impotence, impertinence.
- That is the model for Christian prayer. According to Jesus. He says, rudely bother God.
- Bother him. In fact, that's the word that's even used in the text. He continued to bother and he got his bread. Jesus says, pray like that.
- That's how you pray. He says it again in Luke 18. Tells a similar story. There's an indifferent and an unjust judge. And a widow seeking justice.
- And the judge doesn't want to give it to her. But finally, he caves in. And it says in verse 5. This is Luke 18. Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice.
- [8 : 33] And then in verse 7, Jesus says, And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Cry out to him day and night.

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. Day and night. God. God. God. God. God. God.

God. God. God. Now, on the surface, you listen to that and you go, well, that doesn't seem like a very attractive image of Christian prayer.

And so it's important to dig a little bit deeper here. Jesus is telling a parable. This is not an allegory. It's a parable. In an allegory, every part of the story corresponds to a spiritual truth.

In a parable, there's one point. Jesus was not asked by his disciples how God receives our prayers.

[9 : 37] He was asked how to present our prayers. Jesus is not teaching that God answers prayers like the friend asleep in the house or like the unjust judge.

The question is how we go to God with our prayer. And Jesus says relentlessly, shamelessly, rudely, constantly, with familiarity.

So how's it possible that we can pray like this when no other religion suggests it? And it doesn't even fit with common sense.

And Jesus gives the answer to us. And it's very, very important. It's all about his generous access to us. Generous access that we have.

The key to all of this Christian teaching on prayer is the Christian teaching of adoption. In verses 11 to 13, the metaphor for prayer changes to a father-child relationship.

[10 : 54] Jesus did not say to his disciples in verse 1 of chapter 11, When you pray, say, our friend or our judge or our boss in heaven.

What Jesus says about prayer only makes sense on family terms. Our father. Our father. Our father. To trust and relentlessly bug God.

Our father is really something that only a child can do to their father. Only as we see ourselves as his children.

Does prayer make any sense? Does Christian prayer make any sense at all? Think of the great rulers and powerful people of the world.

The only people that can approach them and take such liberties is their little children. One of the great images, I haven't got it for you this morning, one of the great images is of John Kennedy in the Oval Office.

[12 : 14] And little John, three-year-old, playing under the president's desk. I can't do that. I couldn't walk in there right now and say, Hey, Joe, just going to eat my lunch under your desk.

I can't even get into the White House, for goodness sake. Only little John can have that sort of access. Even their spouses can't do it in the same way.

The little kid reminding you of what you've promised, what you've said, tugging at your shirt rudely. The child also, a little child makes no distinction between the big petition and the little ones.

One of my kids sent me a thing recently. Can we buy this island? Can we buy this island? They are shameless in what they ask for.

What is rude and shameless in terms of me relating to Nat or to my neighbours or even to you, is not so when it comes to the Heavenly Father.

[13 : 43] There is absolutely no way to understand what Jesus says here about prayer unless we see ourselves in relationship with God is radically, completely changed when you become a Christian.

There's no other way of understanding it. Christian prayer only ever works on family terms. Only as we see ourselves as little, little children.

John 1 verse 12 says, To all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

Way too many people in our culture think that a Christian is someone who tries to work hard to do their best, pull their socks up and to do their best and God will find them approved. Too many people relate to God as if God is their boss.

You see, if you sign an employment contract, you expect certain benefits from that. You know, I expect that if I work my hours, I will get paid.

[14 : 57] It's an expectation. And there are times in that relationship where you will go to the boss's office and you will ask for some extra benefits. You know, a pay rise or a promotion or some holidays or whatever it might be.

But you don't go in there the way a child does. If God is like your boss, then you go to him formally with a sense that you've earned it.

He owes you something. But that's religion. That's religion. And that's not what it means to be a Christian. A Christian is not one who works for God, but one who has been adopted into his family.

You are his child. Adoption is not a change of nature. It's not even a change of behavior. Adoption is a change of status.

Status. And it's a change of status by the act of a parent, not the child.

[16 : 12] This generous access is possible because Jesus Christ is not merely an example for us to follow in life, but he is a representative of our substitution.

Jesus, the Son of God, came from God the Father. Lived the perfect life, died in our place for our imperfect life, so that we could be adopted as sons and daughters of God.

That's the Christian faith in a nutshell. Jesus has made it possible for us to be adopted into God's family, and Jesus has made it possible for us to go to the creator of the universe, the one who sustains all things by the power of his word, and say, Father.

Abba, Father, which translated is Daddy. Daddy. Jesus has generously opened the way for us to have shameless access to God.

Shameless access. All these leads Jesus is saying in verse 9 of chapter 11, Ask, and it will be given to you.

[17 : 30] Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. It's progression. Keep at it. You know, someone comes to my door and goes, what am I going to do?

Nah, something fell off the wall. You're not going to get my attention. At all. But in reality here, there's still something that just feels like it's inconsistent.

The instruction of Jesus here to bother God in prayer feels inconsistent with the teaching for us to feel secure in the Father's love. It just doesn't kind of work there.

And that's where, in Luke 11, the text takes a sudden turn in verse 11, with the shift from the image of the grumpy friend in the middle of the night to the image of the caring father.

And Jesus is saying that the God who you shamelessly have access to is not like the grumpy friend in the house.

[18 : 42] God is the caring, loving, approachable father. So let's have a look. Verse 11. This is about the insecurity implied in the word father in verse 1. 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?

What is essential in those verses is the words, how much more. They are utterly important for us. How much more.

They mean that God is much more inclined. Much more inclined. Much more inclined to hear me and to help me when I pray than I am willing to hear and help my daughters when they ask me for it.

And frankly, that astonishes me. Jesus wants us to feel utterly secure in the father's love when we come to him in prayer.

[19 : 53] He does not want us to feel precarious or unsure of our acceptance or even fearful that we will find him out of sorts or unconcerned with us at all.

This is the sense here of the security is utterly crucial for a life of consistent prayer. You cannot sustain a life of prayer if you believe that God is your boss.

You cannot do it if you think that he's stonewalling you in some way or he's angry with you or he's neutral towards you in some way.

Let me just quote very briefly from Dane Ortlund's book Gentle and Lowly. As you consider the father's heart towards you, remember that he is the father of mercies.

He is not cautious in his tenderness towards you. He multiplies mercies matched to your every need and there is nothing he would rather do. This God in whose hand are all creatures is your father.

[21 : 01] And he's much more tender towards you than you are or that you could ever be towards yourself.

Your greatest treatment of yourself is less gentle than the way your heavenly father handles you. Grab the book, read the entire thing and have your heart exploded for God's love for you.

Prayer is sustained by the confidence that God is our father and that he is concerned and that his disposition towards us is just what Jesus says it is.

So why does it take so long? Sometime for him to answer prayer. God sometimes gives us what we need only after a very long season of prevailing and persisting in prayer.

But it's not because he is uncaring or insensitive or unable. In this text, Jesus does not tell us directly, doesn't directly give us the answer to that question that we often have.

[22 : 21] Why are the answers to our prayers postponed? He says in verse 11, there's an indirect answer though. In verse 11, it says that a good father will not give his son a snake if he asks for a fish.

By implication, he's also not going to give them a snake if they ask for a snake. A good father will only give their children what is good for them.

And that's the only answer that Jesus gives to that question that we have in this text. When the father in heaven gives us a slow answer, when he wills that we persevere for a season in prayer without an appropriate answer, it is because he's giving us a fish and not a snake.

That's the only answer we have. Our heavenly father gives us what we would ask for if we knew everything that he knows.

That's what he gives us. Let me just say that again because I've picked that up the first time. I think it's worth saying it. Our heavenly father gives us what we would have asked for if we knew everything that he knows.

[23 : 57] Sometimes we get angry at God because he doesn't give us what we pray for. Even sometimes what we relentlessly pray for. We get angry because we are treating God and we're treating prayer like Aladdin's lamp.

Give it a rub. Genie pops out. I get three wishes. You get whatever you want. But remember, we are little children.

Reality is if Aladdin's lamp actually existed, you wouldn't hand it over to your four-year-old. Would you? Three wishes, kid.

You can have whatever you want. You know what you need to do in that moment? Get on a space shuttle and get out of here. Chaos is going to ensue for sure. Whatever that is.

Disaster would be the result. The power of prayer never means that God stops being God. We do not have the wisdom nor the grace to run the universe.

[25 : 05] God is God. He will continue to decide how to run the universe in the ultimate way for our ultimate good. So let me just land in two ways here.

First of all, for the Christian. If you're a Christian tuning in right now, I want to challenge you to something. Some of us have had excellent fathers and families.

Some of us have had mediocre fathers and families. And some of us have had, frankly, terrible fathers and families. If you watch little children, you will notice that with shameless audacity, they bug their parents trustingly.

Trustingly. They expect their parents to care for them. They expect their parents to love them. They expect their parents to be generous and kind to them and provide for them.

They expect it. Some of us have grown up in families where we learn relatively quickly that it doesn't work that way.

[26 : 16] And so we have lost the instinct to trust. We've lost that instinct. In fact, as I said, I think a couple of weeks ago, if you grew up with an authoritarian, abusive parents, one of the things that happens in the rest of your life is you distrust every authority figure.

And as you grow up in life, you tend to lose trust as you grow up anyway. We lose the sense that we are completely accepted.

Even if you don't grow up in a relationship with abusive parents, as you grow up in life, you start to lose the instinct to trust. Because you realize in society, I'm not completely accepted for who I am.

To grow as a Christian, speaking to the Christians in the room now, to grow as a Christian, you must get those trust responses back.

You cannot grow as a Christian without getting the trust responses back. Some of us are indifferent.

[27 : 44] Some of us are even bitter because God hasn't done the things that we've asked him to in the way that we've asked him to. We are anxious, we're bitter and we're apathetic because we are not practicing the fatherhood of God in our life day by day.

Some of us are insecure and uncertain and holding back in prayer because we feel unworthy. We are mindful of our sin. We're mindful of our flaws and our failures.

Maybe it's past failures. Maybe because fathers have failed us in the past. Either way, we are treating God like a boss rather than as the father of mercies.

See what Jesus says in verse 13? If you then, though you are evil... He's talking to his disciples, right? He's talking to his disciples.

Not saying, you who struggle with sin and have a few rough edges, you've got some flaws. He says, you who are evil. Yet they are still God's children.

[28 : 59] Still God's children. And he is their father. He's the father of mercies. And so knock, knock, knock. Keep going to him.

All of the Christians' ill discipline, all of their guilt, all of their unworthiness, all of their anxiety, all of their anger, all of their indifference in prayer is because they have forgotten that God is the father.

And theologically, you may completely agree with that. But if you're not on your knees, knock, knock, knock, knocking.

If you're not going to him in prayer, shamelessly, rudely. That's your actual theology. That's your actual belief system in God.

That's the Christian. Now, a closing word for those of us who may potentially now realise that they aren't one. They're not a Christian because they don't view God as their father.

[30 : 10] You may be moral. You may be decent. You may be religious. But you don't know God as a father. Your relationship with him is one of formality.

This kind of childlike, intimate, shameless audacity in prayer is not something that you know. Maybe you only pray when you are desperate.

That shows that you are a human being. Let me just say that shows you a human being. But that does not show you that you are his child. And so my challenge for you on this Father's Day is make the father of all mercies your father today.

And come to him humbly, humbly as his child. Thank you.