

In all things, at all times -- Pray

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-part series

June 21, 2015

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Luke 11:1–13 (CEB)

Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

² Jesus told them, “When you pray, say:

‘Father, uphold the holiness of your name.

Bring in your kingdom.

³ Give us the bread we need for today.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,

for we also forgive everyone who has wronged us.

And don’t lead us into temptation.’

⁵ He also said to them, “Imagine that one of you has a friend and you go to that friend in the middle of the night. Imagine saying, ‘Friend, loan me three loaves of bread’ ⁶ because a friend of mine on a journey has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷ Imagine further that he answers from within the house, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up to give you anything.’ ⁸ I assure you, even if he wouldn’t get up and help because of his friendship, he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs because of his friend’s brashness. ⁹ And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.

¹¹ “Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? ¹² If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? ¹³ If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

James 5:13–20 (CEB)

¹³ If any of you are suffering, they should pray. If any of you are happy, they should sing. ¹⁴ If any of you are sick, they should call for the elders of the church, and the elders should pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ Prayer that comes from faith will heal the sick, for the Lord will restore them to health. And if they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ For this reason, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous person is powerful in what it can achieve. ¹⁷ Elijah was a person just like us. When he earnestly prayed that it wouldn’t rain, no rain fell for three and a half years. ¹⁸ He prayed again, God sent rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if any of you wander from the truth and someone turns back the wanderer, ²⁰ recognize that whoever brings a sinner back from the wrong path will save them from death and will bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

James urges us to pray. The question is this: what holds us back?

This study is the last in our brief series on James. It is fitting and not at all surprising that James turns to prayer as he wraps up his letter. I hear two main themes from James in this final section. Pray in all things and trust God’s word that your prayers matter, that they can make a difference.¹

The topic of prayer is a challenge for many Christians. We want to pray. We want to know how. We want to think it really matters. Our concerns are James’ concerns. So, let’s go over a few of the basics on prayer.

What really is prayer?

We pray when we plead to God for help in times of need. We pray when we thank God for all we have and enjoy. We pray when we praise God. We pray when we reveal to

¹ Christians sometimes wonder what to make of James’ instruction about anointing the sick. This was a common “medical” practice in the ancient world. There often wasn’t much else they could do!

God our concerns for others. We pray when we pause to reflect upon the deep love that God has for us all. We pray when we offer our own love to God. In his well-known book, *Prayer*, Richard Foster writes about 21 forms of prayer. But even Foster does not exhaust prayer's meaning. Prayer is all this and more.

It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that prayer consists only of the words spoken to God. But Paul can urge the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing" because he knows that prayer is not a paragraph but a life. When we live with God at the center of all we do, when we live in oneness with Jesus Christ, we are living a life of prayer, a life of constant conversation with God.

Sometimes this conversation is spoken aloud (at least on our end!). Sometimes this conversation is spoken in silence. And sometimes this conversation is only felt. Indeed, there are times when God carries us in this conversation. Paul wrote this to the Christians in Rome: "In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will." (Romans 8:26-27, CEB).

Be persistent in your prayers

Jesus tells his disciples to be persistent in their prayers, to stay with it. One of the surprising joys of parenthood is how much we can learn from our children. Through them, we see the most everyday activities as new wonders. Through them, we can learn to shed some of our anxieties and enjoy the moment. Through them, we can learn the value of being pushy!

How many of us have not endured a child's relentlessness . . . "please, please, can I, can I?" They simply don't give up. Admittedly, it doesn't take long for their persistence to become annoying. But perhaps also, their persistence reflects their unshakeable faith in our love and our ability to satisfy their every desire . . . they know we won't give them a snake when they ask for a fish. This is the point of Jesus' story about persistence.

Take a moment and read again Luke 11:5-13. God as a sleepy friend? That is quite an image. What is Jesus' point here? Could he mean that we need to awaken God or that God will hear us only if we pound on the door long enough? Of course not. The inevitability of the sleepy friend's answer is part of the point. Of course God answers; that is not the problem. The problem doesn't lie with God, it lies with you and me. We are the ones who try to find ways to squeeze prayer into our busy schedule. We are the



ones who, like the "praying mantis," pray only when we feel like it. We are the ones who get frustrated when we think that God isn't answering us (usually meaning, God isn't giving us what we think we want.)

Jesus knows how easy it is for us to simply give up, how easy it is for our prayer lives to get shoved aside. In telling the parable, Jesus is teaching us that our prayer life requires dogged and

persistent discipline. It isn't about knocking loudly enough to wake God up; it is about the ease with which we slink away from the door. Jesus' message is simple: *Stick With It!* Ask and it will be given. Seek and we'll find. Knock and the door will be opened. When the friend arrives at the door, he knows with certainty that, eventually, the door will be opened and he will be handed the bread he needs.

Why don't we "stick with it"?

Why do so many of us find it difficult to pray with confident persistence? I believe that for many Christians, God just doesn't seem real enough. Metropolitan² Bloom urges us to ask the right question of ourselves: "Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some-one and not some-thing, not a power, but a real person?"

It is a pretty straightforward thing for me to sit down with my brother and seek his help and understanding. I can see him. I can touch him. I can hear him. But coming to God requires a deeper understanding of reality. I must trust in things that are unseen and cannot be touched. For the ancients, this may not have been as difficult as it is for us moderns. Such trust is not what comes naturally to us. We have trouble truly trusting that God is every bit as real as our friends and relatives. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, he is a person in the present. We don't simply learn *about* Jesus, we learn from him. It is easy for us to give a quick nod of the head to such claims, but we must learn to embrace them.

When I come to God, I am coming to someone as real and as concrete as my brother. When I come to God, I am coming to someone who loves me, who desires only the best for me, whom I can trust completely, who won't ever tire of listening to me. God is the essence of our lives; how can we not persist in our prayers?

But still we wonder, do our prayers really make any difference? When we doubt that prayers actually change anything, our prayers are robbed of their power. No wonder, we find it hard to persist when we think it doesn't really matter. Thus, James reminds the believers that their prayers really do matter!

Can prayer really change what happens?

I considered for a while the title for this section of the study. I wanted something clear and penetrating. Too often when we talk about prayer we limit ourselves to the change prayer makes in ourselves and in our relationship with God. But there is this ever-present question as to whether prayer can actually change the course of events. We pray for a friend's recovery from illness. We pray that we and our home would be spared from a devastating storm. Then, our home is destroyed and a loved one lost.

The Life of Prayer¹

"So often people come to see me and ask me to teach them how to approach a life of prayer; and when I ask them, "Do you *believe* in God? Is there within your experience a living God to whom you could address the words of your prayer, towards whom you could turn your heart, whom you could invoke – that is, to call to come and dwell within you?" So often the answer is, "No, I do not have such a God, I believe in a first cause of the universe. I believe that there must be, beyond or in the depth of things, a power that gives them existence and shape. I believe, with fear, that one day I will be answerable for my life to a Being whom I do not even know now." And at this point I always say, "Do not try to pray. Ask yourself more questions, because praying is like speaking to a friend. One does not speak to an imaginary friend beneficially. One can speak usefully only to a friend who is real, to someone to whom we can open our hearts, who is listening, before whose judgment we stand, and who will stand by us whether we are in the right or in the wrong.

So this is the question that I would like to ask, time and again, of myself, and now of you. When you go around in silence, when you pray, ask yourself: "Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some-one and not some-thing, not a power, but a real person?"

1. This is from an essay, "The Life of Prayer," by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who was the long-time head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain. The essay is from the April 2004 special issue of *Theology Today* on Orthodoxy.

²"Metropolitan" is a title used in Orthodox churches to denote an ecclesiastical office similar to that of Bishop. Thus, if we think of Metropolitan Bloom as Bishop of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, we won't be far wrong.

Not surprisingly, we wonder whether our prayers have any real effect at all. Or we begin to think that we prayed poorly, or lacked faith, or, worse, that perhaps there is simply no one on the other end of the line.

In his book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes:

God's response to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does and does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God doesn't respond to this. You wouldn't either.

Part of the problem is that we fail to comprehend how God has freely chosen to work in this world. God works through us. Going back to the creation story, we were the ones tasked with filling the world and subduing it. It is a mistake to think that when it comes to life, we do part A and God does part B. Or that we "let go and let God," waiting for God to do it all. Or that we try to do it all. Rather, we do it all and God does it all.

If I go back to school so I can get a better job, it will change the course of the future. But when it comes to God, all of a sudden I believe that what I do (pray) is pointless and has no effect – on God or on the future.

Our prayers not only do us good, they do God good, and they can affect the course of events. God works with my hands, my intellect, *and* my prayers. Indeed, the more fully I embrace a genuine trusting and faithful relationship with God the better instrument I become for God's purposes and my own. Yes, the truth is that our friends die prematurely and storms strike, but as Terence Fretheim writes:³

We confess that in response to prayer (and in other ways) God is at work in these devastating effects to bring about positive results in and through human (and other) agents. But one must also speak a "Who knows?" (e.g., 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14) or a "Perhaps" (Jonah 3:9 GNT) with regard to the effect of the divine work upon specific persons and particular generations. It is not a question as to whether God wills good in the situation, but whether, given God's own self-limited ways of responding to evil and its effects in the world, what can actually be done and how and when.

So, let us hear and heed James on this. Let us pray for those who sick. Let us sing songs of praise to our maker. Let us pray that those who don't know Christ will come to know him. Let us pray that we will be good ambassadors of Christ, so that others may see his love in us. In all things, pray . . . pray . . . pray.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by making a list of reasons for our lack of persistence in our prayer lives. In the study, I concentrated on our difficulty in truly embracing the reality of God, in understanding that God is every bit as real as our brother or sister. What other explanations help to account for our lack of persistence? Then you might discuss how we can overcome these challenges. Do you think this is more about tips and techniques or a change of heart and mind? Why? What are the implications of your answer?
2. In *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg observes that too many people resort to prayer only when they are desperate. In normal circumstances they are happy to make do with their own resources and abilities. Have you ever been a desperation-only pray-er? What do such desperation-only prayers reveal about our view of God, prayer, and ourselves?
3. Is there a time that a prayer of yours showed clear and immediate results? What was it like to experience such an answer? Was your request answered as you hoped it would be or were you surprised? How did things work out?

³ from Fretheim's book, *Creation Untamed*, Baker Academic, 2010. p. 146-147

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday 1 Kings 8:22-53 Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple	Tuesday Nehemiah 1 Nehemiah prays for help as he asks the King of Persia that he be allowed to begin the rebuilding of Jerusalem.
Wednesday Matthew 26:36-44 Jesus prays in Gethsemane on the eve of his death.	Thursday Acts 9:36-43 Peter prays that God would resuscitate Tabitha
Friday Psalm 62 Trust in God at all times. God will not let us down.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Matthew's Gospel

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the book of Acts

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes

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