

Scripture for Sunday 24th March 2019

Matt 6:5-8 (NIV)

⁵ “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Luke 11:5-13 (NIV)

⁵ 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; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity^[a] he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ “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. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ 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!”

Luke 18:1-8

¹⁸ Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Sermon: The Context of the Lord's Prayer

Over the last two weeks we have been exploring the *contents* of the Lord's Prayer, and today I thought we would end this short series on prayer by considering the *context* of the Lord's prayer. A quick glance at Matthew 6 and Luke 11 and you will see that the two gospel writers place this prayer in very different settings. For Matthew, it is incorporated into the Sermon on the Mount whereas Luke places it as a private conversation with his closest followers. This, in itself is curious, but not particularly important. What I want to pick-up on is what happens either just before or just after they introduce the Lord's prayer.

Matthew stresses that *all* spiritual disciplines must be *authentic, God-oriented worship*, including prayer. He makes it clear that when you give to good causes, or pray, or fast – do it in *secret*; don't be ostentatious about it.¹ Don't do these acts to be recognised publicly as a generous donor, or a flamboyant prayer, or a pretentious abstainer. If you do that, God will *not* be impressed.² Yes, others will notice and may be impressed, but God is interested in the purity of the motive. So when you give, be so private about that not even your left hand knows what your right hand is doing!³ When you pray, do it in a suitable manner. The synagogue was a house of prayer, and so formal public prayers were appropriate. The prayers here on Sunday have a certain formality about them, though that does not mean they are less heartfelt or authentic than personal, private prayers. But public prayers at street corner *were* inappropriate, sanctimonious, even vulgar; Jesus considered that hypocritical, not genuine worship! However impressive the oratory, don't think that it sways God.⁴ In stark contrast to that showy display, Jesus tells his audience, pray authentically in private. God knows *all* that can be known; so don't try to impress, or con, or manipulate God! God knows your heart and mind as you pray, whatever words you use. And remember he also knows your *needs*⁵ before you ask him. For Matthew, then, the context of the Lord's Prayer is that of *authenticity*. I encourage everyone to take heart from this. Some people struggle with private prayer fearing precisely what to say. They hear the formal prayers in a church service and say, "I can't pray like that!" I would hope not; liturgical prayers have a different context and function from private prayer. On another level, there *is* a good case that the "Prayers of the People" *should* be from a congregant, rather than the minister! However, the point here is that we must never be afraid of *how* we pray in private; God sees the heart.⁶ Simply be authentic; be yourself, that is true worship.

In Luke's gospel, after presenting the Lord's prayer, he follows up with two stories that highlight two things, namely, the *character* of the person to whom we are praying, and to be *shamelessly persistent* and *expectant* in prayer, for God *hears* and *answers* our prayers. First, we are praying to our "Father"

¹ Matt 6:1-8; 16-18. (He later speaks about not worrying – 6:25-34).

² Matt 6:1, 4b, 6b, 18b.

³ Matt 6:3.

⁴ Matt 6:7.

⁵ Matt 6:8.

⁶ See Rom 8:26-27. See also Luke 18:9-14; 21:1-4.

and there is a relational intimacy expressed here that is different from praying to, say, “God, our Creator,” which inadvertently makes God seem distant in some people’s minds. Luke wants to stress the character of God the Father by *contrasting* God⁷ with an unneighbourly friend⁸ and a mean and cruel father.⁹ The first parable assumes the setting of the Galilean village and has a guest arriving late in the evening, after folk have normally gone to bed. We are not told why the person arrived so late; that is beside the point. Hospitality was such a serious duty that any failure to provide an appropriate welcome meal would bring *shame* on the host. However, the host has run out of bread, which was considered an essential staple for any meal. Since the women baked bread in common courtyards everyday, they would know who might have bread left over at the end of the day. And so the host goes to his neighbour to request 3 loaves of bread. Their houses were simple structures of just one or two rooms, so knocking on the door would likely wake the whole household and be extremely annoying! The friend may initially respond in an unfriendly, don’t-bother-me-now kind of way, but he will relent in the end and give you as much as you *need*. Indeed, the friend who refuses to help in that situation would themselves violate the conventions of hospitality and incur social shame!¹⁰ The point is that *even if* the sacred obligations of friendship and hospitality won’t compel a friend to respond – which is itself an absurd proposition in that cultural context – the friend will finally supply bread because of the desperate persistence of the one who is asking. In contrast, Jesus makes clear that *God is eager to give assistance*; he is even *more* trustworthy than a friend, and he is committed to respond to those in need.¹¹ People should pray with a persistence so determined that it borders on presumptuousness!

That same point is repeated in another humorous parable in Luke 18, whose purpose is to stress keep on praying and don’t loose heart.¹² Widows in those days got a very raw deal. She could not inherit her husband’s estate; that was passed on to the deceased man’s sons or brothers. She had no social standing, and given she likely married as a young teenager, her children may still be young. She was vulnerable and her only hope of justice was through the local judge. However, the judge in this story did *not* fear God and was only concerned for himself.¹³ Clearly, he was unfit for the position and the widow’s only recourse was *persistence*! There is, of course, no confidence that the judge will execute justice or administer compassion, but he will eventually grant her justice “so that she won’t come and attack me!”¹⁴ Yes, the mention of “black eye” or the “slap on the face” is what it literally says in the Greek; although some translations tone it down saying, ‘he grants justice just to shut her up and get a

⁷ This contrast, or an argument going “from the lesser to the greater” is a standard rhetorical technique to make a point.

⁸ Luke 11:5-8.

⁹ Luke 11:11-13. What parent would give their child a snake instead of a fish, or scorpion for an egg? (These mockingly cruel substitutes bear a resemblance to the foodstuff requested. The snake scaly like a fish, and the scorpion that has rolled itself into a ball by being mistaken momentarily for an egg.) Matt 7:9–10 have different pairings, but the point is the same. Luke concludes by adding, “How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” And Luke later describes this in Acts 2.

¹⁰ See Prov 3:27-30. The point is that the sleeper will answer the petitioner’s request, if not from friendship, then to avoid being shamed!

¹¹ Moreover, God does not sleep! See Ps 121:4.

¹² Luke 18:1-8. Luke mentions the plight of widows frequently in Luke-Acts. God’s judges were to be *fair*, see Deut 1:16–17.

¹³ Luke 18:2.

¹⁴ Luke 18:5, NIV.

good night's sleep!¹⁵ Jesus is quite the comedian! Notice that the widow was *not* commended for her *faith*; given the nature of the judge, she had no grounds for faith in him. Indeed, Jesus insists that God is *nothing* like this selfish judge; in *contrast*, a compassionate God will swiftly bring about *justice* for his chosen ones.¹⁶ While these two stories have close parallels, there is an important difference that can't be overlooked. This last story immediately follows a section that addresses the question, "When will the kingdom of God finally come in all its fullness?"¹⁷ And Jesus responds cryptically and by speaking mysteriously about the "Son of Man."¹⁸ Rather than focusing on foolish question "When?" it seems Jesus wanted them to pray persistently for *God's justice* to come and to have *total* confidence that it *will* eventually come.¹⁹ And then he tells his parable.

Many people today hammer away at God's door, as it were, but to no apparent avail. Many people are just tired of waiting; waiting for God to respond to their prayer. Jesus seems to anticipate that matter, because at the end of the parable he asks, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"²⁰ By praying continually, and not giving up hope, we are demonstrating our confidence that God has not abandoned his world. Prayer is always about trusting in God and not in ourselves, and it has always been hard work in this interim period between Christ's first and second advent. Until that day, we live to work in whatever ways we can for that justice and peace that is coming within a world that may have lost hope.

In the two parables, notice what *kinds* of petitions were being asked: for *justice* and *bread*. Both of these are in-keeping with the contents of the Lord's Prayer. We are asking for "God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven,"²¹ and that *shalom* or peace includes *justice*. We are also asking our heavenly Father for our daily *needs* to be met; for food, shelter, health, work, protection, and forgiveness.²² Jesus expands on that later in the Sermon on the Mount when he tells them *not to be anxious* about their need of food, drink, clothing; God knows you need them.²³ Instead, Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and God's way of life, and all these things will be given you as well."²⁴ It is in this context of asking for our basic needs and for his kingdom to come we are given the bold commands to "Ask, seek, knock,"²⁵ which are three Jewish expressions for prayer. And not to "ask, seek, knock" just once, but

¹⁵ Luke 18:5, NRSV.

¹⁶ Luke 18:7-8.

¹⁷ Luke 17:20-37.

¹⁸ Luke 17:22,24,26,30 – hence see also Luke 18:8.

¹⁹ God has a persistent, unshakeable, everlasting love for us and all of his creation. Consequently, we can trust God to bring about justice. And we can be sure that God hears our prayers, even though we may not see any results yet.

²⁰ Luke 18:8b.

²¹ Matt 6:10; Luke 11:2b.

²² Later, Jesus reminds them not to be anxious about food, drink, clothing because God knows what they need; Matt 6:32–33.

²³ Matt 6:25–34.

²⁴ Matt 6:33. See also Luke 12:29–31.

²⁵ Luke: 11:9–10; see also Matt 7:7–11. Asking in the hope that something will be given to you puts you in the posture of a beggar. Seeking and finding is language common to the quest for wisdom, although it can have wider applications. And knocking in the hope of being received somewhere again puts the hearer in the posture of the destitute and the homeless.

shamelessly and persistently! And we can be assured that God, who is likened to a loving Father, will give what is necessary and beneficial, but *not* whatever we desire!²⁶

As every minister knows, there is always an element of mystery in what we commonly call “unanswered prayer.” Prayer is not a magic wand. But too often, our prayer request may be about what we *want* rather than need, and they may have little to do with furthering the Kingdom of God. So don’t expect God to answer every prayer for a miracle, let alone prayers that satisfy our personal whims and desires! But we are encouraged to pray persistently, even shamelessly so, for Kingdom-related prayers confident that God, in his good time, will respond to such prayers. Anticipate some surprises on the way, but don’t expect that God will ever let you down! Archbishop William Temple famously said, “When I pray, coincidences happen; when I stop praying, the coincidences stop happening!”

In conclusion, I stress three key points. First, we are to approach our Father *worshipfully* and *authentically* when we pray. Second, as the words of the Lord’s Prayer indicate, we pray acknowledging our *continual need* of God’s help. Too often, people come to God in prayer as the last resort, rather than the first port of call. Our regular praying is an expression of our on-going relationship with God as dependent children, and an acknowledgement that we are ultimately not in control of our lives. Conversely, when we don’t pray, we are saying that we don’t need God, or that we don’t believe our Father has the will or capability to act. Moreover, we should ask ourselves more often, “Does what I am praying for correlate with ‘seeking first the Kingdom of God’? Or are the petitions mainly about my own desires?” Finally, when we pray, what is the *image* of God – or of Jesus – that we have in mind?²⁷ (I preached on that four weeks ago.) Do we consider God to be the kind of father who would play mean tricks on us, or one who would graciously provide for our needs? Remember, prayer is effective *not* because of our cajoling, nor because we have found just the right words, but because God’s nature is as the father who loves his own and wants to give to those who are seeking and working for his kingdom. Amen. Let us pray.

²⁶ See James 4:3.

²⁷ See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Transforming-Jesus.pdf>