

Prayers

To God

Think about what has happened to you in the last 24 hours, and do your best to work out how God is involved in all that has happened. Praise Him for the work of His Holy Spirit, even in your own life.

For myself

Weekly theme: discipleship

Pray for the way your church promotes discipleship; through house groups, through teaching and worship, and much more. Pray that it will be successful in creating new disciples and nurturing them in faith.

For others

Father of all, and lover of the whole human race, draw people to yourself in this generation, we pray. There are many who are lost, there are many who reject You, there are many who are exploring other faiths and none, and there are many who have no interest in Your message of love. Break through the intransigence and ignorance of our age, and show Yourself in ways that people will understand so they may respond and receive Your grace. You are our eternal Lord and Saviour: **HALLELUIAH!**

Meditation

(some reflections on the prophecies to the seven churches in Revelation)

Wait patiently for the Lord and test all things;
And never forget the power of God's love.

Don't be afraid when you face of suffering;
And don't allow the devil make your life worse.

Hold fast to your faith, even if all seems lost;
And only accept teaching that points to Christ.

Persist in love, faith and patient endurance;
And do not give ground to Satan's deceit.

Be alive in the Spirit, and worthy of your call;
And don't turn a blind eye to the return of Christ.

Walk through the door Christ has opened for you;
And keep hold of the treasures you've been given.

Find wealth and eternal riches in the Lord, your God;

And never let the fire in your heart grow dim!

This is what the Spirit says to all who worship
This is the Lord's Word to His faithful today.

Bible Passage

Luke 11:5-13

⁵ Then Jesus said to them,

“Will anyone go to his friend at midnight and say,

‘Friend, will you lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶ for an acquaintance of mine on a journey has visited me, and I have nothing to put in front of him?’

⁷ ***“and receive this answer from within,***

‘Don't give me trouble; the door is now shut, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to give you anything!’

⁸ ***“I tell you this; though as a friend he will not get up to give him the bread, he will get up because of his unashamed persistence, and give him as much as he needs. ⁹ So I tell 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 all who ask will receive,
All who seek will find;
And all who knock will find the door open!***

¹¹ ***“Which one of you, as a father, will give your son a snake if he asks for a fish? ¹² Or give him a scorpion if he asks for an egg? ¹³ So then if you, evil as you are, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more then will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”***

Review

This passage contains some famous teaching, which encourages God's people to 'ask ... seek ... knock', and receive the good things of God. These words can also be taken out of context and wrongly made into a formula for trying to get what we want. So if we are to grasp the power of this great passage, then we should look at its teaching as a whole, here in Luke 11. These are not random pieces of advice given at various times by Jesus and gathered here for us by Luke; they are consistent teaching about one thing, introduced to us in yesterday's study. This part of Luke 11 is all about prayer; firstly, Jesus gives an outline of prayer for a disciple (11:1-4), and then in this passage, He gives further advice about the right attitude of heart suitable for prayer and for coming near to the Father.

Unfortunately, the beginning of our passage sounds like the start of one of Jesus' parables, but it is just a brief example. Having outlined a form of prayer (11:1-4), Jesus wanted to give an example of the manner of prayer that would be effective and bring God's approval. His

example is outrageous, for the idea of someone having to provide for a traveller who has come at midnight is far-fetched even today, let alone in first century Israel (11:5-7)! But Jesus persists with his illustration. The man asks for help from not just any neighbour, but a personal friend; what he needs is food, to put in front of his unexpected guest. Is it then reasonable to ask someone to help when they are asleep and settled down, and when waking them would rouse a whole household including children?

Jesus asked His disciples to ponder this situation, but He had His own conclusion. He said that if someone will respond to such an outlandish request (11:8), and has not everyone benefitted from such generous friendship at times, then surely a loving God will not fail to help even in the most outrageous situations or extreme difficulties. Jesus wanted the disciples here to know something of the extraordinary generosity of the God to whom they prayed. If their view of God was too small, then the prayers they said would be limited. If they truly perceived the enormous generosity of the Father's love, then the possibilities of their prayers would be huge.

This, then, sets the scene for Jesus' famous teaching, '*ask ... seek ... knock ...*'. as we can easily see, Jesus stresses the teaching by repeating it! First, he delivers the famous three line teaching, and then he says it again with an emphasis not on the enormity of things that may be asked, found and opened to the individual, but on the fact that this promise of God is for '*all*' (or as some translations say, '*everyone*'). In truth, those who do not believe in God are hardly likely to call Him 'Father' and bring Him their requests, but the generosity of God is nevertheless stated quite categorically as sufficient for all, even though pure logic says that not everyone will ask, seek or knock on His door.

These powerful words of Jesus are often recalled by Christians, but it is always wise to recall that they are given as advice for how to pray, for this is the context of this entire passage. If we look back to Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer for a moment, then we can see within it some of the prayers that Jesus recommends; the things for which we should be asking, seeking and knocking on heaven's door.

Firstly, this prayer suggests we praise our God and seek the coming of His Kingdom (11:1,2), and then we should ask the Lord for our daily provisions, for a heart to forgive, and for His help at times of trial (11:3,4). This covers a large and possibly sufficient range of basic human need. 'Seeking' and 'asking' are two words that mean virtually the same thing, and we should not be too worried about the difference between them. So, to ask for 'daily bread' is an urgent prayer for many, and we should join in with it in this spirit, whatever provision we are talking about, from food to water to financial help. We dishonour its meaning for those in real need if we focus this prayer on our personal and less than godly hopes and desires, by asking for sumptuous banquets! In the same way, our seeking of the Kingdom of God must surely be motivated by our desire for God's priorities, not our own, and our quest for God's help in forgiving others or His assistance in times of trial is surely no casual request for minor favours.

There is much we can explore here, and if we wish, we can each spend time with this text exploring what asking, seeking and knocking might mean for us, especially as an attitude of prayer that accompanies the Lord's Prayer.

Lastly, Jesus delivers an extraordinary piece of teaching, which asks us to consider again the supreme generosity of God, as Father (11:11-13). He asks His disciples to consider the natural affections and deeds of a human 'father', and reflect that if faulty and perhaps evil men exhibit pure and generous love towards their children, how much more can they expect from their '*heavenly Father*' (11:13)? It is He who give His children the '*Holy Spirit*' (11:13), that great gift by which the Christian is able to be effective as a disciple and know God's presence within.

In this passage, Jesus is asking those who hear Him to accept that the God in whom they believe is far greater than they have ever appreciated, and is far more generous, kind and loving than they imagine. But however much this message may be appreciated by Christians who know God's love, it is desperately needed 'out there' in the world. People who would never come near a church often reveal that they pray, so we need to proclaim as persistently and as kindly as we can, that the God to whom they pray is not what they think. He is far more glorious, generous, loving, kind and inspiring than they imagine.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V5 'will anyone of you go to his friend ...'

Other translations:

'suppose one of you has a friend ...' (NIV, NRSV etc.)

'which of you shall have a friend ...' (ESV, KJV)

Most Bible versions go with the NIV and NRSV above ('suppose ...'), but a few, such as the English Standard version and the King James are different ('which of you ...'). The Greek text says clearly 'anyone of you who has a friend ...', but if Jesus' story begins like this and you read on, it does not have a proper ending and the next two verses do not read very well. I have resolved the translation issues differently, by putting this in the form of a question, as if Jesus is asking 'will any of you do this? Then ...' It appears to me that this makes more sense as we read this passage.

V10 'all who ask will receive, all who seek will find ...'

Other translations:

'everyone who asks receives, and who seeks finds ...' (NIV, NRSV etc.)

This is a very well known passage of Scripture, so it will jar with some if I change the translation. However, there is a reason; having looked at it carefully, I find that the 'all at the beginning of the sentence is emphatic, and it applies to each of the phrases coming after it. Indeed, this is the reason for repeating the tri-fold saying about asking, seeking, and knocking. I have therefore translated this with an emphasis on the word 'all', and it seems to me to read more easily and straightforwardly.

V11 'will give your son a snake if he asks for a fish'

Other translations:

'If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?' (KJV)

This is one those instances where what we remember from the great 'Authorised Version' has proved, due to advances in archaeology and linguistics, to be incorrect. The AV was based on a good ancient Latin copy of the NT originating from the 5th century AD, so when more ancient Greek texts were discovered in the late nineteenth century and later, including papyri from the second century (the Dead Sea Scrolls), it was found that these more ancient

copies that were closer to the original texts, were in places, different. In this case, they omit the part about the son asking for bread ...

Further Comments

Learning by observation

Jesus' method here is to get the disciples to learn about God by observing people in everyday life situations. In effect, He asks them to look at how a 'neighbour' behaves (even if he is not a good one – 11:5-7) or a good 'father' (11:11-13), and reflect on the greater qualities of God. The human examples are not great or necessarily good ('*evil as you are*' – 11:13), but that does not stop anyone perceiving what is right from normal human behaviour. It is the combination of observation and the 'moral compass within' that Jesus suggests can lead us to a better understanding of the Father. Even small examples like this can lead us to conclusions about God, because He is abundantly more generous than we imagine.

Knocking on doors and forgiving

This is a purely personal opinion, but I would like to make a suggestion about the last picture in Jesus' teaching of knocking patiently at the door (11:9,10), and how this connects with the Lord's Prayer. Christians generally know that the picture of knocking on a door is taken up in Revelation, within John's warning to the church in Philadelphia (Rev 3:8f.) where we read these famous words, '*look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut ...*'. This is a picture of God's saving grace through Jesus. John also says to the church at Laodicea, '*listen! I am standing at the door, knocking, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you*' (Rev 3:20f.), which again, is a picture of God's saving grace.

But just because the idea of knocking at the door is used powerfully by John, this does not mean that we cannot use it in another way. One part of the Lord's Prayer that fits this idea is that of the request for forgiveness (11:4). Yesterday, we saw how the Lord's Prayer in Luke does not just contain a request for the Lord to forgive, it also speaks of the duty of the one who prays to forgive others. Forgiveness can be a hard thing, and people are not always ready to receive it even though we want to give it. The impasse can be soul destroying, especially within families. Jesus' words here encourage us to persist in both seeking to forgive others and seeking to receive forgiveness ourselves. We are to keep '*knocking at the door*', waiting for the time when those with whom we have fallen out are ready for this great spiritual grace. If we give up knocking, and stop letting others know that we are willing to forgive, then the wounds will fester far, far too long.

The superabundance of God's love

Scripture is full of examples of God's superabundant provision and grace. As we recalled yesterday, this is evident in God's provision of 'manna' for the people of Israel in the desert (Exodus 16,17). It is supremely shown of course by Jesus in His death and resurrection, for this is where we see the fullest example of God's love for us, as Paul says,

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Rom 5:9-10)

The last and final demonstration of God's superabundant provision will be His creation of a '*new heaven and a new earth*' (Rev 21f.) after Jesus has returned to earth and all things on earth have come to their conclusion with the defeat of all evil (Rev 20). Beliefs such as this seem outlandish to some, but if our faith is built on the evidence of God's super-abundant provision now, then we do not have difficulty believing it for the future.

God's primary gift, the Holy Spirit

It would be unfortunate if anyone read this passage and forgot that at the very end, Jesus says plainly that the gift the Father longs to give His children is that of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, present within the life of the believer, makes sense of the judgements we must make about what is appropriate to ask of God, and what is perhaps worldly and unworthy. The Holy Spirit empowers us for the work of the Kingdom, and He guides the hand of those who work within it. He does the Father's 'work' within the individual, and because He is the same Spirit in each one who believes, it is He who builds up the work of the church in us.

Clearly, Jesus presents the Holy Spirit as God's best and greatest gift, and in due time, Luke will present this in the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit on 'all flesh', after Jesus has risen and ascended (Acts 2f.). This passage points us forward to this exciting time that lies ahead of us in the Biblical time-scale.

Discipleship

Application

Unashamed persistence

One of the key themes of this passage is surely that of unashamed persistence in prayer, and although we may be very persistent in some of our personal prayer, persistent collective prayer is difficult. When we pray with others, we may feel that what is said just drifts from one thing to another as different people speak, and the end result is a sense of people's feelings about various issues rather than any effect in heavenly places due to our prayers. Our problem is focus. We must pray to God's agenda and not our own, and then we will stay on a topic until the Spirit moves us on, or we will pray in tongues until we reach a spiritual place to stop, or we will wait on the Lord until He reveals His will. Any number of scenarios are possible, but not just speaking out lists of prayers according to our thoughts and current ideas.

Persistence on prayer

If we want to persist in prayer, collectively, then we must explain ourselves to each other. Instead of imagining that we are holy when we talk to God, we should take time to share with each other what the Spirit is telling us about what we should pray, and then pursue this with vigour, that is, all who pray and not just one. This is like a conversation between ourselves with God included, and includes all forms of conversation and prayer. It can be hard to get out of simple and ineffective patterns of prayer, but it is possible, if we know how we can do this, and are in earnest because of the work of the Spirit within us.

God's love for all?

We must now look more carefully at one of the core themes of this passage of Scripture. This study has already dwelt on the theme of God's gracious love, which is for all people (see review). But we should not be ignorant of the fact that some Christians believe firmly that God does not show His love to everyone. For example, Calvinists believe that God has not called everyone to salvation, and that some are condemned to hell. There may be good reasons for exploring these ideas because of the small number of Biblical texts that directly mention the idea of the 'pre-destination' of those who are saved (Romans 8:29,30, Hebrews 9:27), and the greater number that speak of God's absolute authority over the whole earth and all people (Acts 4:28, Romans 1:18f.). The big danger of such theology is that it can give the impression to some that God's love is not intended for some people, and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are a closed book to large proportions of humanity.

We should be reluctant to reach such conclusions, however, and no theology that limits either God's authority or the infinite extent of His love will fully account for the Gospel story of Jesus and His teaching. This does not mean that I disagree with everything Calvin says about the greatness of God or indeed 'predestination'. However, I think it right to make sure that our opinions about such contentious theological issues do not colour a straightforward reading of Jesus' teaching, such as we find here.

Ideas for what to do

- Think back over the prayers you have said recently, and assess whether you have been truly 'battering heaven's gates' with your prayers about anything, intended or unintended. What are these things, and perhaps more importantly, what things should be a matter of your persistent prayer? Ask God to show you how to pray about these things.
- What church prayer groups are you a part of? How can you go about helping the group become more effective in prayer?

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach you about prayer? How do you think this passage connects with the 'Lord's Prayer (11:1-4)
2. What dangers are there in memorising verses 9 and 10 without understanding the context of this great passage?
3. Share with each other how the Lord has been gracious to you in your life. Give recent examples.

Final Prayer

Create in me, Lord God, a heart that is willing to batter the gates of heaven for justice, for peace, for salvation, and for all the great works of God in this world. I ask You also to create in me a desire to keep so close to You that I can accept Your will, even if I don't fully understand it, and I ask You to give me a yearning to serve you every day of my life. **AMEN**
