

INTRODUCTION

There has never been a greater need for us pray than this day. America is involved in a new kind of war that has already seen over 5,000 American civilians killed. We’ve heard the words “anthrax” and “bio-terrorism” more in the last few weeks than in our entire lifetime. These are difficult, desperate days—but we don’t have to be afraid. God is our help for the present and He is our hope for the future. God’s timing is always impeccable, because as we are studying Luke’s gospel, here we are in the section where Jesus is teaching us *how* to pray. When the disciples of Jesus observed His prayer life they implored, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Is that your desire?

You may feel frustrated in your prayer life because you assume prayer should be natural, but it isn’t. It is something that can be learned. I believe prayer only came natural to three people. Before Adam and Eve sinned they walked and talked with God in the cool of the evening; it was natural. And prayer was natural for the Lord Jesus. For the rest of us, communicating with God doesn’t come naturally; we have to learn how to pray effectively. Some people say the only way to learn to pray is just to pray. I disagree. Suppose you asked me to teach you how to fly an airplane. Would I say, “The only way to learn to fly is just to fly. Go out to the airport and rent an airplane and just do the best you can?” No. Flying is a learned skill. When your teenager gets ready to learn how to drive, you would never toss them the keys to your new car and say, “The only way to learn to drive is by driving, so here, go try it for yourself!”

My parents taught me to pray when I was a child. I can remember starting with the simple prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.” Around the age of six I learned I could pray and ask God for something and He would give it to me. I can clearly remember the first time I asked God for something.

We lived in South Alabama close to Ft. Rucker, where the Army trained helicopter pilots so dozens of helicopters flew over our house each day. I was fascinated with helicopters, so whenever I heard one I ran out and waved my arms for them to land and give me a ride. None ever did, of course, so I decided to try prayer.

So, one night, before I went to bed I got on my knees and I asked God to give me a helicopter. I told him I wanted a real one—not a toy. I went on to describe it in case God had never seen a helicopter. I asked Him to just have it parked in the field behind our house the next morning. I prayed so sincerely, the next morning I got up and got dressed to go flying. I truly expected to find a helicopter behind my house. I ran out back ... and would you believe it? One of the army helicopters made an emergency landing in the field! Not really. I just asked you if you would believe it. When I didn’t find a helicopter I remember thinking, “This praying stuff isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Where’s my helicopter?” Since then, I’ve learned much more about prayer—and I’m still learning. I came to realize the reason I didn’t have a helicopter was not God’s fault; I just needed to learn more about praying.

Let’s let Jesus teach us about prayer that just won’t quit in Luke 11:5-8:

Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’ Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness [persistence, importunity] he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

In this passage, Jesus gives three directives that will help you pray more effectively:

I. PRAY WITH BOLDNESS (5-8)

This is another example of Jesus’ Jewish humor because it depicted an outrageous scene. To appreciate this, you must know in the Jewish culture, hospitality rules were clearly defined and rigidly followed. To open your home to a friend without offering them bread to eat was an egregious breach of etiquette. Evidently, the midnight guest was unexpected, because no preparations had been made. It’s like ladies in the South have said for generations, “If I’d have known you were coming, I would have baked a cake!” This unprepared neighbor takes a bold step. He goes next door and awakens his neighbor to ask for three loaves of bread. What an outlandish request! Three loaves of bread at midnight? At first the sleeping neighbor tells his friend to “forget it!” But eventually, he gets up steps over sleeping kids and gives him the bread. What’s the point?

Jesus was *not* teaching that God is like the reluctant, sleeping neighbor. He is saying that *we* should be like the neighbor who is bold enough to ask for bread at midnight. The key word in verse 8 is translated “persistence” (NIV) and “importunity” (KJV). It’s a word that only appears once in the New Testament (Greek: *anadeia*). It literally means “shamelessness.” It’s an outrageous, bold request.

Notice three lessons:

When you pray

1) Be specific

The needy neighbor didn’t say, “Can I have some food?” He specifically asked for three loaves of bread. Our Father is a God of details—just look at the wings of a butterfly. He doesn’t deal in generalities; He deals in specifics. For instance, almost everyone except the ACLU is displaying “God Bless America” these days. That’s a great start, but make sure it doesn’t just become cliché. Ask God to give victory to Americans in our war against terrorism. Ask God to bring America back to our moral and spiritual roots. Ask God to protect our citizens against further attacks. Get the idea? Be specific.

When you pray

2) Be persistent

On that night, I imagine the needy neighbor didn’t knock once. His neighbor was asleep, so he pounded until his neighbor was awake. He kept on asking without shame until his neighbor granted his request. Have you ever prayed for something, and when you didn’t get the answer right away, you stopped praying? Prayer that just won’t quit is persistent praying.

Write down the word PUSH. It stands for Pray Until Something Happens. God *always* answers prayers. If the request is wrong, God says, “No.” Have you ever stopped and thanked God for the times He said “no” to your prayers? That great theologian Garth Brooks has a song about returning to his high school and seeing his old girlfriend. He looked at his wife and remembered he had once prayed he and his high school flame would be married. That led him to sing, “I thank God for unanswered prayers.” Actually, Garth got it wrong. There are no unanswered prayers: sometimes God’s answer is just “no.” Sometimes the request is right but the *timing* is wrong, God says, “Slow.” In this case, keep on praying until you recognize God’s timing. Sometimes the request is right and the timing is right, but *we* aren’t right with God. That’s when God says, “Grow.”

Norman Vincent Peale wrote about finding a big cigar when he was a child. His dad had forbidden him from smoking, but he slipped into his back yard and lit up anyway. His dad walked out and Norman quickly put the cigar behind his back. Hoping to distract his dad, Norman asked his dad if he would take him to the circus coming to town the next day. His dad’s reply became one of the greatest things Norman Vincent Peale ever learned about prayer. He said, “Son, never ask me for something while at the same time trying to hide smoldering disobedience from me.” Sometimes God delays an answer because we are disobedient and out of fellowship with Him. But when the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says, “Go.” That is, you can start looking for the answer to your prayer. But this only happens when you PUSH—Pray Until Something Happens. Every time I walk through a door that says “PUSH” I’m thinking Pray Until Something Happens.

When you pray

3) Be expectant

One reason the needy neighbor was willing to act shamelessly and make such a bold request was he *expected* to get the bread. Jesus also taught we must pray *expecting* an answer. In Mark 11:24 He said, “Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”

One of the greatest Christians of the 19th century was George Mueller of Bristol, England. He became concerned for the orphans of Britain, so he started an orphanage with only two pence in his pocket. For over 60 years his orphanage cared for thousands of children—and he operated by faith. He recorded over 3,000 pages of answered prayers. Once, he was traveling from England to Boston to speak at a Christian conference. The ship stopped in the North Atlantic because of thick fog. The captain announced the ship would be late reaching Boston so Mueller spoke to the captain. He told him he believed God had ordained this conference in Boston and he couldn’t be late. The captain was a Christian who knew George Mueller, and he respectfully told him he didn’t understand the operation or navigation of the ship and it was impossible for them to proceed in such thick fog. Mueller asked the captain to join him on his knees to pray that God

would lift the fog. The captain explained all reports indicated the fog would last for several days, but he would be willing to pray with George. Mueller prayed a simple prayer asking God to remove the fog so he could make his speaking engagement. After his prayer, the captain asked him if he would like for him to pray as well. Mueller said, "No captain, you don't need to pray for two reasons. First, I don't think you really believe God will lift the fog, and second, I believe that He already has!" Sure enough, when the captain returned to the bridge, the fog was lifting and they arrived in Boston in time for Mueller's conference.

In addition to praying with boldness, Jesus teaches we should

II. PRAY FOR AN ACTION PLAN (9-10)

After telling this story, Jesus explains: So I say to you: Ask and it will be given you; seek and you shall find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Prayer is not a passive experience. These three words, "Ask, Seek, Knock" are all verbs, words of action. They build in intensity. In the original language in which Jesus spoke, these verbs are commands indicating continuous action. Jesus was saying, "Ask and keep on asking; Seek and keep on seeking; Knock and keep on knocking." These three words are sequential steps you must take when you pray.

Step #1: Ask God. Asking is the first step, and it's the most important. In commenting on prayer, James writes, "You do not have because you do not ask God." (James 4:2) Praying in faith is the key that will open a multitude of the blessings of God for you. God knows what you need before you ask, but when you ask it's your way of acknowledging your total dependence on God. Again James writes, "If any of you lack wisdom, he should *ask* God, who gives generously without finding fault, and it will be given to him." (James 1:5) Could it be that any deficiency in your life exists because you haven't asked God?

A Christian once had a dream in which he was in heaven being escorted around by an angel. They passed a huge warehouse with the man's name on it, so he asked the angel what was inside. The angel said, "Oh you don't want to look in there." The man's curiosity was aroused and so he insisted. When the angel opened the door, he saw the warehouse was stacked from floor to ceiling with all kinds of wonderful blessings both spiritual and material. He asked the angel, "What is all this, and why didn't you want me to see it?" The angel said, "Well, I thought this might make you sad. You see, these are the blessings God had ready to supply to you, but you never asked for them." You have not because you asked not.

Asking is step one, and for many folks, that the *only* step they take, but there is:

Step #2: Seek His Answer. To seek means to *search*. Have you ever lost your glasses or car keys? You don't just sit and ask for them to come to you—you search. Now my wife says when I look for something I look once and if I can't find it I ask her. Searching involves the activity of looking and looking and then looking some more. When you have prayed and asked God for something, your next step is to start searching for His answer, His will in that situation. You keep

on praying persistently, but at the same time, you are reading God’s Word, you are listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and you are seeking the Godly advice of trusted believers. Ask, and then start seeking God’s Will in relation to your request.

In college I had a friend who was a gifted young preacher. He had been listening to some of the “health and wealth” teachers about “naming it and claiming it.” He came to me one day and told me he needed a car so He was asking God for a Corvette. He quoted a great verse, Psalm 37:4 that says, “Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.” He told me that the desire of his heart was to have a Corvette, and he was delighting himself in the Lord, so he was certain God would give him a new or late model Chevrolet Corvette! He was specific. He was asking God for a red one. He asked me to agree together with him in this prayer, and I did, because I would have loved to see him driving a corvette, because I’d get to borrow it! But after we prayed I said, “Are you certain that it’s God will for you to have a corvette?” He said, “I believe it is! I’m believing it and claiming it by faith.” Well, he kept on praying, and he kept on delighting himself in the Lord. When he returned after the Christmas vacation, he *was* driving a new car. You should have seen it. It was a slightly-used green Chevrolet Chevette—but it *did* have bucket seats. When I asked him about it, he told me, “You know the more I prayed about it, the more I realized that I really didn’t *need* a Corvette, I just needed a car, so I’m thanking God for this one!”

As you keep on praying and asking for what you want, God can change your prayer to fit His Will. When you delight yourself in the Lord, His desires become your desires!

Step #3: Knock on many doors. In Jesus’ story, what would have happened if the needy neighbor had stayed at home and only asked, “Dear God, please provide bread for my guest!” He probably prayed that first, but then he went out and knocked on a door. Some people ask, and even seek God’s answer, but they never take step three. You don’t just “knock on wood” when you pray, you knock on doors. Why is it then, you often hear Christians say, “I was looking in that direction, but the door seemed to be closed, so I looked elsewhere?” Sometimes, when you approach what seems to be a closed door, you shouldn’t turn away, you should knock and keep on knocking on that door. The doors of opportunity aren’t like those automatic doors that swing open for you when you approach them. The Christian life is not taking the path of least resistance. The door of opportunity always swings on the hinge of opposition. After you act, if you have determined God’s Will, you need to go out and bang on some doors to see that God’s Will is done in relation to your prayer.

Let’s say you need a job. Pray and ask God for a job, but don’t sit at home and wait for someone to come hire you. Seek His Will and plan for your life, and then go out and knock on many doors. That’s why prayer involves an action plan. It’s not about sitting and asking; it’s seeking and knocking.

There’s nothing more important you can do *until* you pray and ask God, but there is plenty you can *do* after you’ve prayed: you can seek and knock. The great theologian Martin Luther once wrote: “Pray as if everything depends on God and then work as if everything depends on you.” You can always remember the order because the first letter in those three words spell ASK.

Finally, Jesus is teaching us to

III. PRAY ACCORDING TO GOD’S GOODNESS (11-13)

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?”

Jesus claims God is not like some sleepy, reluctant neighbor who complains about the bother of answering our prayers. Instead, God is a loving Father who is full of compassion and goodness toward His children. In the model prayer, Jesus taught us to address God as, “Our Father, who is in heaven ...” Your concept of God will determine how you pray.

It was years before I understood the term “father” isn’t necessarily a positive concept to some people. My dad wasn’t perfect, but he was a great dad who coached my little league teams, took me fishing and never missed a ball game I played in. We didn’t have a lot of money but I didn’t know it, because my dad tried to be sure we had a good Christmas, even if it meant he and my mom didn’t exchange gifts. So when I read that Jesus says God is like a perfect father, I have a pretty good frame of reference. I’ve met some people who were abused or abandoned by their earthly fathers and they have trouble imagining God is like a father. But whether you had a good father or not, we’ve all read about, seen movies about, or known good dads. If you will imagine the most *ideal* earthly dad possible, then multiply that concept by infinity and you can begin to understand just how much God cares for you. God is a good God and He wants to answer your prayers. One of the greatest prayer promises in the Bible is found in Romans 8:32 “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” God is such a loving, caring Father that He has already given you the most valuable asset in heaven: God sent His precious, only Son in the world to die for your sins. Since God has already done that, do you think He has any trouble giving you anything else?

You and I are bundles of needs from the cradle to the grave and Jesus mentions two of our basic needs.

1. He wants to meet your physical needs

Jesus mentions a child asking for food, a fish or an egg. Those are basic needs. They aren’t luxuries. That’s why Jesus taught us to pray, “give us this day our daily bread.” Jesus is moving from the natural to the supernatural to make His point. If a child asks his dad for a fish, or for an egg, a normal earthly father will *not* give him a snake or a scorpion—Why? Because a good father only wants that which is beneficial to his child. Snakes and scorpions are harmful. Jesus said compared to God, the best of fathers are “evil.” “How much more” will a perfect father meet the physical needs of His children? Ask Him for the things you need to sustain you physically. But also note Jesus taught that

2. He wants to meet your spiritual needs

Jesus is talking about children asking their earthly fathers for bread and fish. You’d expect Jesus to say God will provide bread and fish to those who ask Him, but Jesus says something unexpected. He says, “How much more will your father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” If you would like to become a follower of Jesus Christ, the instructions are simple. When Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost the people were convicted they were sinners and cried out, “What shall we do?” His answer is still valid:

“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

To repent means to admit you are sinner and to be willing to turn from your sins and trust Jesus. You are baptized to publicly identify with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. What are the first benefits of salvation? First, your sins are forgiven: past, present, and future. But you also receive the *gift* of the Holy Spirit. Don’t confuse that with what we call spiritual gifts. The gift of the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit Himself. He comes to live in your heart to inhabit your personality.

You may be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but you may not be employing the power of the Holy Spirit that is available to you.

Another one of my spiritual heroes is Oswald Chambers. For many years I have been blessed by his daily devotional book, *My Utmost For His Highest*. For the first few years of Chambers’ life, even after he was a Christian, he struggled and lived in defeat much of the time. While serving as a philosophy tutor at Dunoon College in England, his despair came to a climax. At this time a wonderful pastor by the name of F.B. Meyer came to the college to lecture. Meyer preached on the words of Jesus, “But you shall receive power after the Holy Spirit comes upon you.” Chambers’ heart was stirred as he realized this power was absent from his life, but he didn’t know how to “get it.” One night F. B. Meyer spoke on Luke 11:13. Chambers later wrote:

“I said, ‘Lord, alright, I ask you now for the Holy Spirit and I receive Him now from you by faith.’ The result was nothing emotional. There was no feeling there was no sense of vision, there was no deeper realization of God—nothing! Yet I had the realization like a flash that it was not a power I could hold in my hand and see. God intended me, having asked to simply take it by faith and the power would be there. I might see it only in the backward look, but I was to believe that God would be with me to do what He asked me to do.”

Five years later, he recorded the difference: “If the previous four years of my life had been nothing but hell on earth, the last five have been heaven on earth. Every aching abyss of my heart has been filled with the overflowing love of God. Love is the beginning, the middle, and the end.”

In 1917, Oswald Chambers died at the age 43 in North Africa while serving as a British chaplain during WWI. Before his death, he never published a single booklet. But in the years since, he has blessed millions by his insight into the Word of God. You may be indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but you can simply ASK God to let you realize the power of the Holy Spirit to live.

CONCLUSION

What is prayer? It is simply communicating with God. So pray with boldness, pray for an action plan and pray according to God’s goodness. A pastor tells the true story of being new in a community. He learned from a church member she was caring for her terminally ill father at home. He went to visit and said, “I guess you were expecting me, because you have an empty chair.” The man smiled and said, “Preacher, close the door so my daughter doesn’t hear this and I’ll tell you about that chair. I’ve always wanted to pray, but didn’t know how. A few years ago, my best friend said, ‘Joe, prayer is just talking to God. Here’s what I suggest. Put an empty chair in front of you and just imagine that Jesus is sitting in that chair. It’s not spooky because Jesus promised He would be with us. Then just speak to him like you are speaking to me right now.’ I took my friend’s advice, and since then, whenever I pray, I just talk to Jesus as if He’s sittin’ right there in that chair. I’m careful because my daughter doesn’t know about it and if she found out I’m afraid she’d ship me off to the funny farm for sure.”

The young pastor was so blessed that he encouraged the man to keep on talking to Jesus in the empty chair. After they had prayed together, the pastor left. Two days later, the man’s daughter called to report her dad had died that afternoon. She said, “When I left the house around two o’clock,” she said, “he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store and hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. Before dad died, he leaned over and rested his head on the chair that was beside his bed. And that’s how I found him—resting his head on that empty chair.”

The young pastor knew the chair wasn’t empty; it was full of meaning. The old gentleman had been welcomed into the embrace of His Savior he knew well enough to talk with as if He was sitting in a chair in front of him. That’s what prayer really is—don’t you want to have that kind of personal relationship with Jesus? You can.

OUTLINE

I. PRAY WITH BOLDNESS (5-8)

1. Be specific
2. Be persistent
3. Be expectant

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer; believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." *Mark 11:24*

II. PRAY FOR AN ACTION PLAN (9-10)

- Step #1: **Ask God**
Step #2: **Seek His answer**
Step #3: **Knock on many doors**

III. PRAY ACCORDING TO GOD'S GOODNESS (11-13)

Like a perfect father, He wants to meet:

1. Your physical needs
2. Your spiritual needs

"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." *Acts 2:8*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes