

## ***You Get What You Need***

Luke 11:1-11

July 29, 2007

### **I.**

As Christians we are called to live spiritual lives in a secular world. Prayer is the foundation of spiritual life, and in today's Gospel we heard what Jesus taught his disciples about prayer.

Those teachings instruct us today. Our faith is sustained through prayer, it undergirds our worship, and perhaps is the most important thing we do as Christians after we believe in and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

There certainly is more to prayer than I can discuss in one sermon. We probably could have a two month Christian Education program on the subject and still not cover everything. But there are some essentials that we might consider.

### **II.**

The reading we just heard has four parts. It began with Jesus teaching the disciples what has become known as the Lord's Prayer. The prayer we use today is closer to the version in Matthew's Gospel rather than Luke's, but its substance is similar. This prayer is a theologically complete expression of a prayer of petition.

And there are several other categories of prayer, in addition to petition. They are described in the church's Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, and are prayers of intercession, praise, thanksgiving, adoration, penitence, and oblation, all of which are mostly self explanatory.

The second part is the parable of the sleepy father who didn't want to get out of bed to get his neighbor some bread, but did so anyway because of the neighbor's persistence. The message here is that persistence in prayer is essential. And persistence here means doing something in a continual and regular way. That's what Paul meant in 1 Thessalonians when he said to "pray without ceasing" (5:17). We heard another example in today's Old Testament reading about Abraham's discourse with God over the fate of Sodom.

Part three consists of the well-known words, "ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened." These are not three different steps to be completed, nor are they elements of a formula. Rather, they are metaphors for God's promise that our prayers will be answered.

And the answers that we, as God's children, receive from God are what God considers best for us, which can be different from what we expect. The same is true for our own children. They might make some ill-advised requests, but we give them those things we think are in their best interests.

The fourth part of the Gospel is Jesus' point that if our own earthly fathers will give us good gifts, then certainly our heavenly Father will do even more through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As we think about this reading I can identify some aspects of prayer I would like to discuss in the limited time that we have. The first concerns the nature and purpose of prayer. The next can be the question of to whom we address our prayers. Now, these two questions might seem pretty basic, but there are some things that can be said about them.

The third question is: How do we pray and what does it look like? The fourth addresses what can we pray for, and whether there are things for which we ought not pray. The final question perhaps is one of the most important of all, and explores how God answers our prayers.

### III.

Let's look at the first question. What is prayer and its purpose? At its most basic level prayer is God's gift of the divine presence to us, and its purpose is to help us be transformed into the people we were created to be.

Through this gift God tells us he wants to have a relationship with us. He makes this known through creation, words of Scripture, through other people, and most importantly through the Holy Spirit. Then, when we pray as part of a discipline of prayer, we are responding to what God is causing us to feel through this gift of himself and his attentiveness to us.

Now, you will note that I just referred to a "discipline of prayer." Sometimes, however, there is no discipline to it. A few weeks ago I described 911 prayers, which are "Lord help me out of this mess," and 411 prayers, which are "Lord I need some information." While 911 prayers certainly are important, they hopefully are not a regular pattern for us. Today I'm going to focus on prayers of the 411 type that are more likely to be part of what we describe as our prayer lives.

Billy Graham once said that "prayer is the rope that pulls God and people together. But it doesn't pull God down to us; it pulls us up to him." The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer says that "prayer is responding to God, by thought and by deed, with and without words," and also that it is "our response to God the Father, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit."

Note that this statement from the Catechism refers to God in several different ways. This leads to the second question. To whom do we address our prayers? Do we pray to God, or to the Father as the Lord's Prayer says, or to Jesus Christ, or to the Lord? And who is the Lord, anyway? Is Jesus the Lord, or is the Father the Lord? And what about the Holy Spirit? We all probably have heard prayers that begin with the words "Come, Holy Spirit."

The answer is it makes no difference. Your prayers will be heard. We covered this in our Christian Education series on the Trinity earlier this year. And to summarize here the longer discussion we had there, I can say that even though we frequently hear God referred to colloquially in what might seem to be the singular, our Christian doctrine understands God as three separate but undivided persons, being the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. As a result, no matter to which of the divine persons you pray, those prayers always get to the right place.

In the Episcopal Church our Collects normally are directed to God, meaning the three divine persons, although some Collects, as well as prayers in the Prayer Book, call upon the Lord or the Father. There is no pattern to these variations. As Christians we understand that God is revealed through Jesus Christ, and therefore praying to Jesus is effective, as is praying to the Lord. And Jesus in a New Testament context is generally considered to be our Lord. However, "Lord" is used more frequently than "God" in the Old Testament. The Psalms are a good example. Finally, to ask the Holy Spirit to enter your life certainly is a holy prayer. So don't worry about the address. The content and circumstances of those prayers are more important.

The third question relates to how we pray, and what prayer looks like. Recall the earlier quote from our catechism. It said prayer "is responding to God, by thought and by deeds, with and without words." Certainly, the idea of assuming a kneeling posture with hands clasped together is a traditional image of a person in prayer. And that approach can be important for meditation or contemplative prayer.

Beyond that, however, there are no rules or formulas. Through the Holy Spirit God knows our hearts anyway, and knows what we want and need even before we ask. But he wants us to tell him and interact with him anyway so that we can know him and be transformed. So, we can pray anytime, and those around us might or might not realize that we are in touch with God. We can pray while we are driving, or stopped at a traffic light, or just relaxing in a chair.

We also can pray while reading. Certainly the study of Scripture is a form of prayer. The same can be true for devotional material. And effective prayer also calls us to listen. The prophet Samuel, as a young boy when called by God, said "Speak Lord, for your servant listens." To often, we are tempted to do just the opposite and say "Listen Lord, for your servant speaks."

Finally, prayer should be approached reverently no matter how we do it. There is a temptation to treat our prayers as "shopping lists" or as "boxes to be checked," or in a mechanical or routine way. And as we pray we can get distracted, which could be another sermon unto itself. These temptations and distractions are typical. It is one of the ways that the enemy tries to draw us away from our faith. But if we treat prayer for what it really is, we will be able to develop an attitude of dependence on God, and we will know the riches of God's love for us.

The next question is the content of our prayers. What should we leave in and what should we leave out? You might remember the lyrics from the 1971 hit song by Janis Joplin, "O Lord won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz." There's nothing inherently wrong with driving a Mercedes, but that kind of prayer probably would not be well received. At the other end of the spectrum God hears prayers for health and healing. But how about a prayer in the gray area like asking God to let the Saints win the Super Bowl? Or how about praying for a raise?

The key distinction is between selfish prayer and unselfish prayer. Prayer for a Mercedes Benz probably is selfish. Asking for good health is not. I might be able to argue that recovery of the City of New Orleans from the ravages of Katrina is an unselfish goal that would be furthered by the Saints going all the way, but it would be hard to disregard my own desires. And a prayer for a raise could be selfish if its goal is acquisition of material goods. On the other hand it could be appropriate if grounded in a sincere belief that it is deserved and is treated as God's blessing.

In the Book of James the disciple proclaimed, "you do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures." (4:2-3). What counts in prayer is what's in your heart. God will know if you are praying for the right reasons.

The final question asks how we know if our prayers are answered. God always answers prayer. Someone once said that the answers are "yes," "no," or "wait." And it probably is the "wait" that causes the most anxiety. But whatever the answer is, it will be God's will for us.

This question brings to mind the 1969 Rolling Stones song with lyrics that said "you can't always get what you want, but you get what you need." I don't think the Stones were singing about prayer, but the point is the same.

So, we go back to today's Gospel. Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find. What we receive and find is God's will for us. It is God's ideal response to our prayers. And even though God's will might not be our will, our faith tells us that his purposes can be larger than we might understand. He is bringing his kingdom into the world, and sometimes we are tempted to just see through the lens of our own needs and not in the context of God's plan.

#### **IV.**

The bottom line is that when we pray out of our deepest needs we can trust God to know what is best for us. Through prayer we can experience God, and through prayer both ourselves and our circumstances can be changed.

Prayer is our pipeline to God, and if we approach our prayer lives in honest, reverent, and unselfish ways, being aware of our motives, then we can know that God hears us, that God loves us, and that he will take care of us. *Amen.*