

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

Lesson Eight

Prayer

Focal Text

Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8

Background

Luke 11:1-13; 18:1-8

Main Idea

Disciples persistently offer faithful prayers to God.

Question to Explore

Do I persistently offer faithful prayers to God?

Quick Read

Jesus taught his disciples a model prayer which included worship, intercession, and petition. Jesus also emphasized the power of persistence in prayer to a loving God.

Introduction

Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, “More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.”¹ Have we given up on prayer? When did it happen? Larry Crabb says:

When I was 10, I first heard Matthew 21:22, where Jesus, who never lies, said, ‘If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.’ It was the “whatever” model of prayer—believe, ask for whatever you want, and it’s yours. I remember running outside, standing on our driveway, closing my eyes real tight, and praying: *God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it. So I’ll jump, and you take it from there.* I jumped four times—and each time landed half

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a second later and half a foot farther down the driveway. I had believed and I had asked, just like Jesus said. But I didn't receive. Thus began my 50-year journey of confusion about prayer.²

For all the Sunday School lessons we have heard, how often do we really pray? Our goal is not to make ourselves feel guilty for our failures in this area, but to encourage and empower all of us to pray today.

The disciples knew so much about Jesus, and of one thing they were certain: he prayed. He prayed in the morning and in the evening. He prayed before he ate and before he slept. Sometimes, Jesus woke up early to pray. When we place Jesus' practice of prayer beside our own practice, immediately we know we need to learn more about prayer. The good news is Jesus has not left us without lessons on prayer.

Commentary

What exactly do disciples do? We pray. Why do we pray? Because like Jesus' earliest disciples, when we follow Jesus we learn about him and we live like him. Luke especially tells us about Jesus' practice of prayer. Prayer defined Jesus' ministry at his baptism (3:21), when he withdrew to lonely places and prayed (5:16), as he spent the night praying to God (6:12), when he was trying to discern God's plan (9:18), and on the Mount of Transfiguration – as he was praying the appearance of his face changed (9:28-29).

John the Baptist had taught his disciples to pray, and Jesus' disciples had watched him pray, so they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. And he did. In fact he taught them in the Sermon on the Plain a shorter, simpler version of the Disciples' prayer, or "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:5-13).

Luke tells us Jesus continued his teaching about prayer with analogies to a friend, a father, and a judge. In each instance Jesus taught about relationship and trust. Persistence and boldness characterize true prayer. In Luke's second volume (Acts) we discover that after Jesus left, his disciples did what he did: they prayed (Acts 1; 3; 5). It makes sense doesn't it? If you are becoming like your master, and he prays, then you pray. So we come from a long line of disciples who prayed.

Are we willing to ask Jesus to teach us to pray? Part of growing as a community of Jesus' disciples is learning to commune with God and communicate with him persistently and powerfully. We can learn a lot by watching the way Jesus prayed.

Jesus also teaches us through these stories. Why is nearly every parable about prayer centered in a relationship? Surely it is because prayer is primarily relational. God is better than any friend we have ever had, more loving than our fathers, and more willing than any judge. So we ask, seek, and knock. Perhaps one reason we stop praying is because we don't know him as we should. George MacDonald said, "A God that should fail to hear

the feeblest or worst prayer I cannot believe in; but a God that would grant every request would be an evil God that is no God but a demon.”³

Disciples Follow the Pattern Which Jesus Taught (Luke 11:1-4)

This prayer looks like the “Lord’s Prayer” from Matthew 6, but it differs slightly. So why two different prayers? In context, it appears that Jesus taught his disciples to pray on multiple occasions. The prayer in Matthew 6:9-13 is longer. This prayer is shorter and simpler. In both cases, the prayer begins with God as Father.

Relationship with God our Father is the starting point for Christian prayer. As his children, we ask differently than others might. We begin by honoring the name of God the Father. So his name is to be revered and held as holy. Much like the Ten Commandments which begin with the name of the Lord representing his character, this prayer reminds us that God’s name is higher and holier than any other name.

Not only is God a father but he is also a king who possesses a kingdom. This kingdom is not just a place in the skies, but the rule of God on the earth as well. Wherever God is acknowledged as king, his kingdom has already come. Like the disciple’s prayer in Matthew 6, this prayer addresses physical and spiritual needs.

In prayer we ask God to give us the gift of bread for each day. So our God is also the great giver. As he gave manna to the children of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 16:1-36), God gives us bread each day for that day. This request almost certainly speaks about spiritual nourishment as well. Remember Jesus said, “Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

Just as we need bread to live, so we need to be forgiven and to forgive others. Luke uses *aphiemi* which speaks of release from sins. Christians are always confessing, agreeing with God that we have sinned and need forgiveness. Our giving God is also a *forgiving* God. At the same time we need to forgive others. This prayer includes a commitment to live life forgiving others who sin against us.

Finally, in this prayer, Jesus taught his disciples to pray for God not to lead them into temptation. We know that God does not want us to sin. When we bring our potential for sin into the presence of the all-powerful God, we find strength to stand against the forces of sin. Later, Jesus’ brother James reminds us that God does not tempt us (James 1:13-15). This prayer rightly aligns us with God in standing against sin even before the temptation comes.

Disciples Ask Shamelessly (Luke 11:5-11)

Who is your best friend? What would you not ask of him or her? Is there any time you could not call them or anything you would not ask of them? Jesus’ first story is about friendship.

In the ancient world hospitality was a sacred duty and a high responsibility. People helped their friends. On the other hand, when they closed the doors to their homes this was a signal to the world like a “do not disturb” sign on a door.

Jesus tells a story about a man who was caught unaware by a friend coming into town late. Perhaps like college kids, he didn't leave on the journey until late. Or given the climate, he wanted to travel at the coolest time of day. I remember when I was a child my uncle and his family coming down from Washington state unannounced and awakening the whole house. Culturally, the man who receives the visitor is obligated to feed the friend.

In Jesus' story, unfortunately the surprised host had no food to serve. Do you ever look in your cupboard and realize: we have nothing to eat! Thankfully he had another friend who could help him.

I am curious, how many of us ever go and borrow food from a neighbor? This used to happen all of the time. Someone would knock on our door asking, “May we borrow an egg?” In my sixteen years in Houston I don't remember anybody ever borrowing anything.

Unfortunately, we often don't even know our neighbor's names. (If our neighbors never ask us for an egg or for sugar or flour, what makes us think they would feel free to ask us for information about our relationship with God?)

The man in the parable doesn't just have a neighbor: he has a friend. He has a friend who comes to him for help, and he has a friend to whom he can go. Unfortunately, it is late and the friend has closed his door. Now this is a problem: because the whole family sleeps on a raised platform at one end of the same room. If he gets up, he will wake up the kids.

With audacity “Jude” goes to his friend “Jacob” because he trusts their relationship. His need and the potential embarrassment of being unable to provide for his guest outweighed his concern about inconveniencing his friend. Just so, Jesus implies that we will not pray rightly until our desperation outweighs our fear of rejection.

This story is so true to life. The sleeping friend is annoyed to be awakened. He is not sitting on his doorstep waiting in case one of his friends might be inconvenienced. This man has kids and they are asleep. Certainly, families with young kids do not want to wake them up once they are asleep. (In our house you can substitute dogs. We don't start washing clothes in the laundry room once they are in that room resting in their cages for the night.) Still after explaining that he is being inconvenienced, he gets up and helps his friend with loaves of bread because of his friend's shameless persistence or boldness.

The friend who is already resting for the night openly says you are bothering me (11:7). So God is just like that friend, grouching about the inconvenience of our request but finally acquiescing? No. God is better than the best friend we have ever had. So if we persist and ask boldly, he is willing to give to us. We cannot inconvenience God.

Sixteen years ago we were preparing to move to Houston and begin our ministry at Tallowood Baptist Church. I realized that Interim Pastor Randall O'Brien was preaching his last sermon at Tallowood on Mother's Day, so I wanted to take the opportunity to go and see my mom. Unfortunately, she was going to be in Chicago visiting relatives. So I thought: what if we surprised her in Chicago?

On such short notice, it would have cost a lot of money to fly to Chicago. So I asked a friend in Cedar Park if he had any air miles he could give us. He gladly did it and I have never forgotten his gift. I think of him every Mother's Day because of it.

But it was hard for me. In hindsight it was shameless. I had just told him I was leaving the church as his pastor. But he willingly shared with us anyway. This story teaches us not to worry about bothering God. In fact in Isaiah 62:6-7, we hear God say through the prophet, "I appointed watchmen on the walls. You who remind me take no rest for yourself and give me no rest." In other words, "Go ahead and 'bother' me."

E. M. Bounds wrote, "What the church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but people whom the Holy Spirit can use—people of prayer, mighty in prayer. The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through people. He does not come on machinery, but on people. He does not anoint plans, but people—persons of prayer."⁴

Disciples Ask Strongly and Securely (Luke 11:11-13)

God is a father who loves to give good gifts to his children. Prayer was about relationship for Jesus. In fact, Joachim Jeremias, the most noted New Testament scholar of his generation, argues that Jesus always prayed with the Aramaic word "Abba." Every time Jesus prays he uses the word "Father," except when on the cross he quotes, Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).

In the end he prays, "Father into your hands I commit my Spirit" (Luke 23:46). Not only was this Jesus' practice but it was also his teaching: so he taught his disciples in Luke 11:2 to say, "Father," simple and unembellished. It is true he is our Father and he is in heaven. Some of Jesus' disciples had children. Jesus knew human fathers well enough to know that they are not typically capricious or mean-spirited.

We hear Jesus' question, "What if your child asks you for a fish?" Jesus is speaking about food, by the way. We should not envision a child with her parent walking through PetSmart and saying, "Can I have a goldfish?" The parent would then say, "No. But I'm going to give you a Boa Constrictor."

In Jesus' example, the child is pleading, "I am hungry." One of our kids used to contract three words into one, "Mungry." Like Rolley the chubby puppy in *101 Dalmatians* he would whine with a British accent, "But I am hungry mother." As normal parents approached by our hungry kids, we don't try to harm them with a snake.

Nor for that matter, Jesus explains, if the child asks for an egg, will the father give him a scorpion. Scorpions are scary. Once I was stung by a scorpion. Not fun. The prophet Ezekiel talks about ministering among the scorpions (Ezekiel 2:6). His words came true at a little church called Williams Creek outside of Waco.

We had scorpions in the baptistery. They would come out of the attic at night as we rested. Often they fell on the ceiling fan which would inconveniently sling them across the room. Scorpions make an ominous ping as they hit the wall.

On one occasion, I was lying on the floor and a scorpion came up the back of my pants leg. The multiple stings felt like fire. Imagine a dad who has been stung by a scorpion saying, "I want you to try this son – it will make you tough." Most dads do not wake up in the morning and say, "How can I harm my kids today?" We may joke and tease but we do not try to hurt our children.

Jesus reminded, "You are not perfect parents. By nature you are sinners. You are descendants of the sinner Adam and you have chosen to sin. Nevertheless, even sinners like you know how to give good gifts to your children." Then he adds, "How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" (Luke 11:13).

This differs from the wording, "good gifts," in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:11). Isn't the Holy Spirit a better promise than mere "good gifts?" What if God cannot give us things without first giving us himself? The reward for prayer is the gift of God's presence. As we invoke his favor, we enter his presence. He wants us to stay with him. Consequently, when we pray, we ask fearlessly – confidently – boldly.

The writer of Hebrews elucidates God's kindness, knowing we have a great high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16). Our greatest needs in life are spiritual and God is the only answer. We come to him as a king who sits on a throne, because we have his unmerited favor and no-matter-what love; we come because he gives mercy and grace to help us.

So what are we asking God for? Well, honestly we may want more money, or a bigger house, or a better car. In our consumerist world we have even made our relationship with God about the acquisition of stuff. Some sermons imply that people who have a lot of stuff must be loved by God a lot. But Jesus flips this on its head and says, "You give your kids food . . . but God wants to give you himself!" Because he knows we do not live by bread alone . . . but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4).

Do we want more of God's presence and power in our lives? Do we want to be filled with him and bear the fruit which only the Holy Spirit can produce in us? Or are we happy with what we have?

What were the disciples doing when the Holy Spirit came? Acts 1:14 says they were all together, constantly in prayer. Acts 2:1 tells us while they were together in one place, the Holy Spirit came. When they were staying together and praying together, God came. This is why in our congregation we want to dedicate time to praying together, praying for each other, and learning about prayer.

Phillips Brooks wrote, "Pray the largest prayers. You cannot think a prayer so large that God in answering it, will not wish you had made it larger. Pray not for crutches but for wings!"⁵ The very best that God can give us is himself. And he wants the very best for us – like a friend would; even better, like a father would. God wants the best for all of us all the time. Do we believe that? Then we should pray. We need to pray.

Disciples Ask Persistently Because God is Greater and Kinder than any Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

Jesus later told another parable about prayer. When the Pharisees asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus told them that the kingdom was already in their midst. Then he taught about his second coming. In this context he taught a parable about not losing heart in prayer.

The story goes that a persistent widow refused to relent asking a judge for relief. In this case, again, the judge is not like God. In the story, he does not fear God or respect man. But Luke 18:5 tells us he knows the widow will not quit asking, so finally he relents. Literally he doesn't want her "to give him a black eye" so he gives in reluctantly.

The point of the parable is not comparison but contrast. It is an *a fortiori* argument from lesser to greater. If even a wicked judge will relent, how much more will God give you justice? God is nothing like the wicked judge except he is able to vindicate or justify his children. And then Jesus asks, "...When the Son of Man comes will he find faith . . .?"

In my teens, our church youth group prayed for a fellow eighth grader named Phyllis Beasley. She was diagnosed with cancer and God healed her. Recently I shared her story in a devotional sent out to the church. Another of our members received word that very day that a nephew had been diagnosed with the same kind of cancer as Phyllis. Joanelle shared the devotional with them.

A few weeks later tests revealed the cancer had not penetrated deeply into his bone but had rested on his bone. Her nephew's body is responding to treatment. We rejoice in this answer to prayer! Do we really trust our heavenly Father? Prayer is about the relationship of telling God what we need and trusting him to provide.

Conclusion

How do we pray as a child asks a father? Gordon Atkinson, who grew up at Tallowood and was my classmate at Baylor, tells the story about how his young daughter raised her hand in a weekly prayer meeting and asked the church for prayer for her sick hermit crab. Pastor Gordon thought about the other needs in the congregation: a man whose father had just died; a woman whose family member abused her for years while she prayed God would make it stop; and the family of a little girl who died painfully of cancer when she was five.

All the heads were bowed except Gordon's. He was left standing at the front, wondering how he would pray for a hermit crab in the presence of a man who prayed seemingly in vain that his daddy would live. How would one pray for a hermit crab while looking at the bowed head of a woman who prayed for the abuse to stop?

“And what about Julie, God?” Gordon wondered. Exactly what was going on with that little girl? He thought that maybe God had complex reasons for taking a hands-off approach. But what grand scheme would have been derailed if God had let her die without pain? If letting Julie die in peace was outside of God's self-imposed limits, what would he do for a hermit crab that was feeling a little bit under the weather?

Gordon confessed that he started praying when he saw the bowed heads of his church members. “Roy's head and Chris's head. All of them. Rows and rows of bowed heads, waiting expectantly. Here were people who would pray for a crab. They loved this little girl that much and she felt comfortable enough to share the concerns of her heart. Even in the midst of their own pain when God did not answer the way they hoped, they were big enough and small enough to pray with their young friend.”

Gordon confessed, “I am a man who has become a child again and I tell you I will pray for just about anything.”⁶

So we pray...not childishly, but with childlike faith.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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¹ Alfred Tennyson, "Morte D'Arthur," *Poems*, 4th edition (London: Moxon, 1845), 73.

² Larry Crabb. "Great Expectations," *Pray!* (November/December 2006): 34.

³ George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, Second Series (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885), 164.

⁴ Edward M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2005), 10.

⁵ Phillips Brooks. This quote is widely attributed to Phillips Brooks. The original attribution could not be located in print, but several attributions of this quote to Brooks can be found on the Internet.

⁶ Gordon Atkinson, *Realivepreacher.com* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 19-21.