

PRAYER, AN AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Luke 11:1-13

July 27, 2025

What an opportunity and a challenge for us to take a hard look at Christian prayer.

We know from each of the gospel writers that Jesus was a man of prayer. In Luke's gospel we read that Jesus went away or apart to pray regularly—Luke mentions this no less than five times in his gospel before we read our text for today. (Luke 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, and 9:28) So it is really important for us to see the disciples' request in that light. Jesus both answers their question, and yet doesn't.

The disciples know that John taught his disciples to pray. So they ask Jesus: how about you and us?

We don't have a record of what John taught about prayer. But we do know clearly what his mission was: repentance and preparation for the coming Messiah. John's prayer life likely centered on repentance, fasting, and calling his followers to moral and spiritual renewal. At the risk of oversimplifying the difference, let me say that John's prayer likely emphasized repentance, urgency, and moral readiness, rooted in Jewish tradition and prophetic severity. I hear in the disciples' request for a Christian formation exercise, how should I pray and for what shall I pray that would make me a better person. As is so often the case, Jesus challenges the disciples' assumption that prayer will help us do that. We humans still want the pragmatic answer. But Jesus answers their question on a wholly different level. The disciples want a clear-cut credo by which to live their lives and a list of biddings in prayer that will do that. Sound familiar?

Jesus' prayer emphasizes God as a loving Father, invites intimacy, trust, forgiveness, and participation in the kingdom—not just preparation for it. Christian prayer is a relationship with God, and nothing less. Jesus answers the disciples' request by saying:

- acknowledge that the One Holy God is their heavenly father
- know that your needs are known and already met
- thanksgiving for the relationship that you already have with God

I'd say that the Lord's Prayer is an **affirmation of faith**, and not a how-to manual for Christian living. I'd say that this is precisely why the early church added the doxology or hymn of praise to Jesus' Prayer: "... for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever."

I could not say it any better than one of the commentaries I read this week by Jennifer Wyant: "Jesus does not present this prayer as a magical formula or as the only acceptable prayer. Instead he offers it as a framework, one that's rooted in trust and dependence on the father. It is simple, accessible, and theologically rich. This is not just a prayer to recite, it is also **a way to live** before God.

Luke then tries to explain what this really means with two parables: the persistent neighbor and the good earthly father—or I like to call them:

- the sleeping father and
- the loving father.

Both are stories about God as father.

I would suggest that the story of the sleeping father is not so much about the persistence of the petitioner—but this seems to get most of the hermeneutical attention: be persistent in prayer and you will get the answer—as it is about the limitless outpouring of God's grace. Or as one of my go-to commentators on the parables of Jesus, Robert Farrar Capon, puts it: it is a matter of giving up on the idea that any and all reasons that you might deserve the provisions by who you are or by what you do to deserve help. The persistent friend tries so hard to convince the sleeping father that he is worthy of being helped, until he finally gives up on the notion that he can earn the father's assistance. The sleeping father is the subject of the story. Ask, seek, and find sound like conditions for praying. Rather, they are affirmations of faith: ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened—it is God the Father's nature that you receive, find, and experience the welcome that is yours already.

The good earthly father story is a bit easier to understand. If you know your father and know he wants to provide good things for you—of course, we know that that is not every child's experience—how much more will your heavenly father shower you with everything you need.

Allow me to use again the words of Jennifer Wyant to summarize my thoughts:

“This passage reminds us that prayer is not primarily about results, but about trust. Not about saying the right words, but about staying in relationship with the One who loves us. We knock because we believe someone is listening. We ask because we believe that the father loves us as children and that the good gift of the Holy Spirit is ours.”

I can't help but share with you two of the questions I still ask myself about Christian prayer—both really deserve a sermon of their own some time:

Why then do we offer bidding prayers in our corporate worship and in our private devotions?
and

What about this request to “lead us not into temptation”?

What is a bidding prayer? What is it not?

Let's look at the negative first.

It is not a prayer begging God to do something that you want for yourself—take away my pain, make my sister well, bring an end to all wars—and surely not make me rich so I can do anything I want, or let the Red Sox beat the Yankees. And we could go on.

A bidding prayer is:

rooted in a relationship with your heavenly father

participation in the life of God's kingdom

showing confidence in God's goodness

expressing dependence on God and acknowledging our needs—physically, emotionally, and spiritually

Jesus ends this section with the parable showing God's generous character. Bidding prayers, even when they seem unanswered, are based on confidence, not desperation. They are acts of holy persistence, grounded in believing that God's will will be done.

We will be using a form of a bidding prayers—as we always do—for our Prayers of the People, a copy of which you have to read along.

As to this temptation bit ...

Let me sum it up here by saying that the temptation to avoid here —and you and I both know how difficult this is—is the temptation to live life on our own terms and not in accordance with God's will. We need to offer this bidding just as regularly as we need to confess our sins. Both are affirmations of our being a child of God, and yet not able to do this as completely as God wills us to do.

Praying, as taught by Jesus, then is participating in a relationship with God, our father, and it is an affirmation of faith just as much as are the creeds we repeat most every Sunday.