

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 10 -- July 25th and 28th, 2013

Luke 11:1-13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." 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 he will get up and give him as much as he needs. "So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will 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. "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!" (NIV – 1984)

Dear children of God,

Problems will arise as we live our lives as Christians. It isn't a matter of if they'll come, but when. The problems will come. Trouble will arise. Issues will most certainly come into the picture. And we should expect them, because many of them are directly tied to the cross we've been called to carry. Struggling with sin, wavering in faith, balancing time between God and everything else, coping with loss or hardship—these challenges and many others will continue to pop up periodically as we're called to serve the our Lord and Savior.

Wouldn't it be helpful if we just had one of those trouble-shooting guides that are often found in the back pages of electronic manuals? You, know, the ones that have a list of problems you might encounter with your device, and you just look down the table until you find the problem you're having, and then you look at the possible solutions. For example, if your device won't power on, the trouble-shooting guide might suggest plugging it in or making sure the battery is charged, or pushing on the power button. OK, so some solutions are more helpful than others, but nonetheless, wouldn't it be great if we had a spiritual trouble-shooting guide?

Well, we'd never want to minimize God's Word to nothing more than a guide book; it gives us much more important information than just what to do, for it tells us what He did for us. Yet it does also provide much guidance in our walk with Jesus. It does address many problems we have or will have as we seek to carry out our callings faithfully. For that reason we do well to turn to the Bible when we're going through the rough patches. In fact, it should be the "default" resource we go to whenever we're trouble-shooting. But it isn't the only resource we've been given, is it? In fact, it goes hand-in-hand with another immensely valuable resource which is:

Sermon Theme: Prayer – A Powerful Tool from God

- 1. Jesus teaches us what prayer is**
- 2. Jesus teaches us how do we pray**
- 3. Jesus teaches us how God answer our prayers**

Through prayer God allows us the privilege of going directly to him with our problems. That can make a huge difference. Consider the problems that might arise at work. You might find a trouble-shooting manual to be a very helpful thing many times, but how much more valuable is it when you have an actual person who can walk you right through the problem step by step? Think of computer problems you've had. What is easier, for the IT representative to direct you to a manual where it explains the steps you need to take to address the issue, or for him to hear you describe it and then walk you right through it?

For guidance in our Christian living God directs us to his Word, where he speaks directly to us; but he also opens up a direct line where we can go right to him in prayer with any and every concern. And, because we serve the Lord wearing so many hats — as parents, children, employees, church members, citizens, etc., that means there's virtually no end to all the opportunities we have for prayer. We've always got something for which to pray, don't we?

Quite a valuable toolset we have in prayer, isn't it? And so you can see why some followers of Jesus came to him and wanted to maximize the power of prayer by having Jesus teach them how best to do it. Note that he started out by giving them such a fine example of prayer that Christians have and will continue to repeat that prayer every time they gather for worship throughout the ages. The Lord's Prayer is a fine prayer for us to pray anytime, and we do well to repeat it during times when we are drawn to pray, but perhaps aren't quite confident in the words or content of our own personal prayers. The Lord's Prayer will serve us well at such times.

2. Jesus teaches us how to pray

Jesus' instruction on prayer continued with a story he told to illustrate from the lesser to the greater how the practice of prayer might work in our lives. To provide an example, Jesus told of a man who went to his neighbor when in need, and his neighbor ultimately answered his request. As we consider the obvious parallels to our going to our Heavenly Father in prayer when we have need, we'll reflect on a few of the significant details involved in the process.

If we modernize this story a little, it might go something like this. Late one evening a car pulls in your driveway and it's an old friend whom you haven't seen for ages. He tells you he's been driving all day and, since he was in the area, thought he'd stop by to say hi. He didn't want to impose, but you insist that he stay for dinner and spend the night. But your fridge is empty, your cupboards are bare, and you don't get paid until next week. While your friend is getting settled in his room you run next door to ask your neighbor for some help. He comes to the door in his pajamas and a baby is crying in the background. You explain your situation and he is really annoyed. Here he thought it was some emergency and all you want is some food! "Can't you see we're all getting ready for bed? Go home and leave me alone!" After he shuts the door you start ringing the doorbell again. When he doesn't answer, you start pounding on the door. "C'mon, I need your help. Just give me some food and I'll go away." Finally he comes to the door with a grocery bag full of food and a gallon of milk and sends you on your way.

The friend in Jesus' story made it quite clear that he wasn't thrilled to have a visitor at midnight, saying, **"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"** (v.7). Yet no matter how horrible the timing was, the man eventually gave in and helped out his neighbor, even in the middle of the night. If such a man, under such circumstances, was able to address the request, how much more so with our Heavenly Father, who says there's never a bad time to speak to him in prayer. Instead of "Don't bother me," our loving Father says, **"Call upon me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you, and you will honor me"** (Psalm 50:15). God doesn't have limited office hours. He isn't available only from 9-5 on Mondays through Fridays. He says to call on him whenever we're in trouble. In prayer God says we have his attention 24 hours a day. We can address him anytime.

And notice the one to whom the request is brought—a friend. Now friends are a tremendous blessing. But even friends can let us down on occasion, can't they? Even friends sometimes fail to deliver

on promises they've made. And yes, in our first hymn we sang about the friendship we have in Jesus, but to refer to our Savior-God as just a friend misses a lot of the picture, don't you think? We aren't taking our prayers just to some sympathetic friend who is willing to bend his ear to our problems for a bit; we're taking them to the God who loves us so deeply he gave his own Son on our behalf. We're bringing our prayer requests before the One who gave up everything to give us everything. The One who saved us is willing not only to hear our every request, but he also promises to answer every one. Surely he is much more than just a friend—he's our Father!

When a request of some sort is brought to us, what do we often ask? "Who's asking?" We want to know who it is we're being asked to help. Sadly, sometimes this is based on our own sinful nature that prefers to pick and choose those we'd prefer to help. Depending on the person, we may make up an excuse or just plain refuse to help. The person in Jesus' story was asking a favor on behalf of a stranger that his friend had probably never even met, and still he ended up granting the request. But when we come before our Lord in prayer, we don't do so as strangers; rather, we come as children, known and loved by our gracious Father. No one knows us better than our God, and no one finds greater delight in having us approach him with our requests.

And the request of the man in Jesus' story was quite a meager one, wasn't it? **"Friend, lend me three loaves of bread"** (v.5b). Three loaves of bread isn't a huge request. God though promises to provide not only for the meager requests, but for the weightiest issues we might ever face. No request is too big that God will ever turn us away when we come to him in prayer. Jesus at other times told his disciples to ask for anything in his name, and it would be granted them. Ask for bread, sure, but don't stop there. The sky's the limit when making a request before God. Just as a loving earthly father delights in being able to provide for his children everything he can, so also our Heavenly Father promises he will provide for our every need. If you need it, ask him and it's yours.

While in Jesus' scenario the friend answered the request because of his neighbor's pesky persistence, God answers our requests for another reason. God answers our requests not because he wants to put an end to our pestering, but because he is bound—his hands are tied—by grace. The love that God has for us that completely ignores what we are on our own and loves us in spite of it—that is what moves him to answer our prayers. Grace drives God to do all that he has done and will do for us. There are no conditions on our part that need to be met in order for God to come to our aid and provide for our needs. He met all the conditions in Jesus and granted us the privilege to come to him. That is grace.

Here's Jesus' point: If we expect sinners to give in and help us, shouldn't we much more expect God to hear and answer us? God wants us to be persistent. Don't give up. Expect an answer. And realize how different God is from your grumpy, annoyed neighbor! God *wants* be bothered. Remember, God has commanded us to pray to him. To say, "*I don't want to bother God with my problems*" is a pious-sounding insult and flagrant sin against God. He is not your next door neighbor or a distant deity that we address as "to whom it may concern". He is your Father who loved you and gave his own Son to redeem you, make you holy in his sight, and call you personally by name.

3. Jesus teaches us how God answer our prayers

Jesus says, **"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will 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."** But what if you are persistent and nothing happens? There was an article in a number of years ago in the *Forward in Christ* in which one reader asks, "*Jesus repeatedly promises that our prayers will be answered, but I've prayed for a loved one unsuccessfully for many years. My faith is severely shaken. What am I doing wrong?*" I suspect that many others have asked the same question. I know I have.

Jesus gives us an answer with another example. When you're eating a meal with your children and one of them says, "Please pass the fish" you don't put a poisonous snake on his plate. Or if he asks for one of mom's delicious deviled eggs you don't toss him a stinging scorpion. Even a bad parent has

enough compassion and common sense not to do that. The point is this: if we know how to give what is good for our children – and we are self-centered, sinful people – don't you think God, who is holy and full of compassion and love, give only what is good for his children? If he knew what needed to be done with our sin before we asked, can't we trust him to know how and when to fill our needs when we ask him? If he delays or says "no" to a specific request he is not saying "no" to our prayer. He is saying "yes" to something better.

Let us also take note of the final illustration Jesus used to underscore that God will come to our aid in time of need. He pointed out that any worthwhile father on earth will give a child what he needs, even though every earthly father is inherently evil, corrupted and tainted by sin. **"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"** (v.13)! Dad's, he's talking about you and me. Even though we demonstrate quite well that sin is still very much a part of our lives, that does not keep us from providing for our children. How much more then will our righteous God, who knows no sin, give what we need! And look at what he promises—the Holy Spirit. That is like a teenager asking for a couple bucks to go out with friends, and the father giving him his check card without any limitations.

We often ask for what we think we need in times of trouble, and our Father gives us what we always need—the Holy Spirit. For he supplies, sustains, and strengthens our faith. And many times, to be quite honest, that is what is lacking in our spiritual trouble-shooting, isn't it? So God promises to provide, trumping even what we think we need with what he *knows* we need in the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who makes sure we've always got a strong signal when it comes to being connected to Jesus, our lifeline. So God's troubleshooting guide has essentially one solution to all our problems, and he promises to provide it—the gift of the Holy Spirit—to all who ask. Do you have struggles? Problems? Challenges? What are you waiting for? Start praying. Amen.