

## Let Us Pray

Ps 138, Lk 11: 1-13

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### *Psalm 138*

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and  
your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.  
On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.  
All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth.  
They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.  
For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.  
Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you  
stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.  
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not  
forsake the work of your hands.

### Lk 11: 1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him,  
“Lord, teach us to pray, 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. And  
forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the  
time of trial.” And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at  
midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived,  
and I have nothing to set before him.’ And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door  
has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you  
anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his  
friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. “So I  
say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be  
opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for  
everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child  
asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a  
scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much  
more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

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Two men were shipwrecked on a deserted island. Frustrated by their ongoing situation one man began to pray, “Dear God, I know that I haven’t been a very good person. In the past I have lied, cheated, and hurt people with my behavior. I drink, smoke, swear and gamble. But God, if you get us out of this mess, you’ll see a changed man. I’ll...” At this point his friend shouted, “Hold it. Don’t say another word. I see a boat and it is coming in our direction.”

Whether the friend wanted to stop an impossible promise from being made to God as an insecure, insincere prayer, or he was skeptical that his friend could keep such promises, or maybe

he even didn't want his friend to stop living that lifestyle; he placed more faith in himself and other human beings to get them out of their mess than he did in God.

Isn't it interesting how some people view prayer? That prayer is not the first resort, or even second or third, but the last resort. Only when the shipwrecked man believed that he could not get out of this situation himself did he turn to God for help. The heart of his prayer reveals that he is praying to God in a conditional way—he is bargaining---if God will rescue them from the mess they're in, then he is about to promise God certain things and make changes in his life. He is in a foxhole and he is no longer an atheist.

This view of prayer, this misunderstanding of what prayer is and does, goes beyond a little sermon illustration and all the way to the front page of the Boston Globe. On the eve of Operation Desert Storm in 1991 there was a front page photo of Saddam Hussein and the caption below was a quote from President George Bush, "All that's left to do is to pray." With years of instability between the United States and Iran, and then the 5 month preparation of troops known as Operation Desert Shield, why was it only then that prayer was publicly considered an option and an appropriate response?

To be sure, over that time there were many private, personal, prayers, but only now in the final moments before a war was there a national acknowledgment for prayer as a last resort. Government and military leaders had exhausted all attempts at diplomacy, and they had placed more faith in themselves and other human beings to get them out of the situation than they did in God.

Part of that thinking is that while all prayers are answered, sometimes the answer is 'no.' We want God to answer our prayers in such a way that we will be confident and assured just as the psalmist was to sing, "On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. "We trust the security of human efforts rather than risk being told 'no.'

But that is not what prayer is.

A few years ago Marvin Hinten published a book whose title sums up how prayer's purpose and relationship with God is horribly misunderstood. The title of the book is 'God is Not a Vending Machine So Why Do We Pray Like He Is?' Or as Christian blogger Tim Stevens writes, "We treat prayer like a power that binds the hands of God and makes him do our bidding."

We hear, we hope, we expect, that the biblical words, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened,' will always be true and immediate for us. And it is a painful struggle when it is not. Prayers for healing illnesses and relationships, prayers for long awaited dreams to come true, prayers for a negative medical test, prayers for justice to triumph, prayers for the success of a new opportunity, are sometimes answered 'no', or at least 'not yet.' Prayer then seems to have no meaning, no purpose, and they feel hollow and empty. We feel abandoned, punished, neglected.

The sad yet real truth is that it just is not always possible for prayers to be answered as we would like them to be, whether we can see that at the time or not.

Our gospel lesson today takes us back to the very basics of prayer as Jesus taught. And while he did teach the very words that we want to always have trust and solace in, 'Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For

everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened,' there is much that precedes that.

Jesus' disciples had seen him often take time to pray, and they saw how it spiritually renewed and refreshed him with strength, peace and reassurance for his life and work. They saw the persistence that Jesus had for prayer, they saw that this was an ongoing relationship with God, with Abba. Jesus modeled prayer as an intimate conversation with God, teaching us that we should talk with God as we would to a loving parent, a parent who listens to us, cares for us, forgives us, provides for us, protects us. They asked to be taught how to pray, and the lessons that they were taught, the pattern for prayer, is what we have come to know as a prayer itself, as the Lord's Prayer. Words that are simple yet profound, words that are the basis for all our prayers and assurance through Jesus that we are heard. Whether we pray in words, sighs or silence, we follow the pattern and mindset of prayer that Jesus taught us.

For Jesus, prayer begins with truly acknowledging who the prayer is to, that praise and honor opens the way to prayer, as well as the recognition that this is God's will and not our own. There is humble deference to God in which we awaken to the wonder of God's presence with gratitude. One of Jesus' favorite images throughout his ministry was the kingdom of God, a place where God, justice, love and equality prevailed. 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.' Not a script, but a mindset for now and for a future hope. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard described this as, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays."

"Give us each day our daily bread." Jesus taught that prayer is for the daily basics that sustain life, which of course flies in the face of the current wave of belief in the prosperity gospel. That's the vending machine god, not the God Jesus prayed to. We come to God for sustenance, mindful of those who struggle for even the most essentials needs, as we pray with the recognition of 'our bread,' not 'my bread.'

"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." Can we come to God not burdened by something that we need to forgive someone—or forgive ourselves—for? Can we come to God with an open spirit? Forgiveness, true forgiveness, can be a long journey, and getting there requires prayers for encouragement, but Jesus named the need for an openness and willingness to forgive just as we fall short and seek God's forgiveness. We must have a forgiving heart in order to be forgiven.

"And do not bring us to the time of trial." This is what we pray in the more familiar words, "and lead us not into temptation." This acknowledges our dependence upon God for strength of all kinds. We cannot do all things on our own and we are reliant upon God's grace and guidance. This is not a prayer to be spared from what is hard, painful, difficult; even Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was not spared from suffering, but is the seeking of the courage, grace, stamina, perseverance and ability for life's darkest times.

As Jesus taught his disciples, his followers, us, to pray, the profound yet simple lesson was not just having a humble mindset but also with an attitude that is bold, courageous and expectant. And, finally, we are to remember that God loves us more than we are capable of loving; that we who love our children so much can barely begin to imagine what God's love is like.

Jesus, teach us to pray so we might love you with our whole hearts, and love our neighbors as ourselves, that we may give thanks to God and sing your praise. Amen.

