

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller

SERMON: **God Doesn't Read Junk Mail: Parable of the Midnight Caller**

SCRIPTURE: Luke 11:1-13

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I remember some of the strangest things about my childhood. One clear recollection has to do with my duty of taking out the trash and burning it in the fifty gallon barrel in the back yard of our home in St. Louis. In those days the garbage man only picked up garbage; everything else was burned. On this particular day as I was emptying a wastebasket I noticed four or five unopened letters addressed to my father. Excitedly I rescued them from the incinerator, ran into the house, and proudly deposited them in my dad's lap.

I expected some words of praise, but instead my dad said, "Son, that's junk. I threw those away on purpose." "Junk?" I responded, "How do you know it's junk? You haven't even opened them!" "I just know," was his answer. For a child who only received a couple of letters a year addressed to him, I couldn't comprehend throwing away letters without opening them.

Today I understand better. Nearly all the snail mail I get is third class. Some of it is addressed to me; some is addressed to the previous residents of our house; some is addressed to the neighbors and is put in the wrong box; some is even addressed to "occupant." Most of this 3rd class mail is junk—someone trying to make a fast buck by selling me something I don't need or getting me to accept a new credit card with 1.9% interest (the fine print reveals that the rate goes up to 49.9% after 30 days).

Success in the junk mail business is based upon bulk. There is no expectation that everyone will purchase the item being advertised, but experience has shown that a certain percentage will. So, if even 2% will fall for the gimmick, the more mail sent out, the more product will be sold. It has been interesting to see how some of these shifty operators have caught on to increasing public skepticism toward junk mail. They have learned to use a plain envelope and to type the address directly on the envelope instead of using a mailing label. Sometimes they employ a window envelope and what you see inside looks like a check until you open it and find "canceled" written across it. Sometimes they even use a first-class postage stamp instead of a pre-paid envelope so you'll think it's a personal letter. And then, of course, once you open the letter, you're likely to find that a computer has printed your name several times in the letter at strategic places to make you think it's personal. But it's still the same old junk.

Friends, too often we send our prayers third class. We go bulk rate. We don't really expect all of our prayers to be answered, but surely 2-3% will be, so we bombard God with oodles of requests, counting on the percentages to operate in our favor. Occasionally we even dress up our prayers a little. We take extra care where we pray, what words we use, and we may even stick the Lord's name in frequently to make Him think it's personal. But it's still the same old junk.

Isn't there something wrong when we take prayer so lightly that we can't remember what to pray

for, when we rarely pray for the same thing twice in a row, and when five minutes spent in prayer seems like an eternity? Isn't something wrong when we assume that mentioning something to God once is enough and then we lose faith if God doesn't answer immediately?

I am operating on the assumption this morning that all of us believe that prayer is important. I'm not even going to try to prove that. After all Jesus both practiced it and taught it. In addition, every one of the prophets and apostles was a man of prayer. Extensive prayers are recorded for us in Scripture, and many passages are devoted to teaching on prayer. So we're going to start with the assumption that prayer is an essential part of the believer's life. However, believing that intellectually or theologically is not equivalent to practicing it. A great many Christians confess that prayer is perhaps their greatest area of spiritual failure.

I think there are many different reasons for this. Some of us just lack the personal discipline to pray. Many of us fail to fulfill the requirements God lays on prayer (it must be in faith; unselfish; in accordance with His will; etc.). Some of us put more emphasis upon phraseology than we do on communicating with God. And some may be harboring sin in our hearts, and the Psalmist says, "If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me."

I want to turn your attention this morning to Luke 11, a passage in which Jesus teaches us some very important truths about prayer. He does so by giving us a model prayer, then a curious parable, some direct promises, and finally a pertinent analogy—all on the subject of prayer. Let's read 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!"*

**Jesus teaches about effective prayer by means of a model prayer. (1-4)**

We know this prayer as the Lord's Prayer, but it is perhaps more properly called "the Disciples' Prayer." It was given to Jesus' disciples as a model or a pattern in response to their request for instruction on how to pray. The Disciples' Prayer is found in two NT passages—here and in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6. You undoubtedly noticed that Luke's version is not as long as the more familiar version in Matthew. If you have a Bible that has the longer version in Luke, that is because early scribes attempted to reconcile the two versions.

We shouldn't worry about these differences. Matthew's version was offered early in Christ's ministry when He gave the Sermon on the Mount. Luke's version was offered very late in His ministry. There's no contradiction between the two accounts. In fact, variation is what we'd expect if Jesus was interested in a pattern for prayer rather than a rigid insistence on one form of words.

Entire sermon series have been preached on the Disciple's Prayer, but this morning I want us to take a very brief and simple look at it. We are instructed to pray to the Father about the Father, and then to pray to the Father about the Family.

**Pray to the Father about the Father.** The major concerns relative to the Father are His name and His reign.

**1. His name** is "Father," which indicates that this is not a prayer for everyone to pray, but only for those who are God's children. Jesus said to some of the religious leaders of His day, "You are of your father the devil." They certainly had no right to pray to God as their Father. This is a prayer for those who have become God's children, not by birth but by rebirth, by faith in Christ. The name "Father" here is "abba" in the original. It is a term of endearment, almost equivalent to "daddy."

Familiarity, however, must not lead to contempt. We are to hallow God's name, i.e. to hold it in reverence, to honor, glorify, and exalt it. The Psalmist wrote, "O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt His name together." In my estimation believers should never refer to God as "the man upstairs" or the "big guy in the sky." That is not treating His name as hallowed, and is, in fact, violating the Third Commandment against taking God's name in vain.

**2. His reign** is the other principal concern for the disciple. Jesus is going to return to this earth some day and set up his kingdom, and it's appropriate for us to pray for that day to come. Life is lived more effectively when one appreciates where history is headed. But Jesus also said that "The kingdom of God is *within* you." We should be seeking His rule and reign in our everyday lives. It's our human tendency to think, "*My* kingdom come." Jesus wants us to pray instead, "*Thy* kingdom come."

By the way the Disciple's Prayer is principally a corporate prayer, not an individual one. All the pronouns in it are plural. In fact, I found a poem about the Prayer that goes like this:

*What gives this prayer its power?*

*It never says mine but our.*

*Why does it grip me thus?  
 It never says me but us.  
 What may its beauty be?  
 It never says I but we.  
 It humbles me, but why?  
 It never says my but thy.*

Well, if it's a corporate prayer, then why don't we say it corporately more often? I don't really have a good answer for you. I think we should say it more than we do. Like a lot of the things we do (or don't do) tradition sometimes has more influence on us than Scripture, and our tradition in the Free Church has been to avoid memorized prayers. This is one, however, that Jesus Himself gave us, and it's fine to say it or to sing it.

**We are to pray to the Father about the Family.** In praying for our spiritual family, the Church, prayer focuses on three concerns:

**1. Concern about basic needs.** "Give us each day our daily bread." This speaks of moderation. Our prayers should be for the necessities of life, not the luxuries. It also speaks of trust and dependence. We are not to ask for a year's supply but for one day's supply.

**2. Concern about sins.** "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." We all sin, and forgiveness is the only solution. Forgiveness comes from God alone as we repent and confess. It is wrong, however, to ask from God what we are not willing to give to others; thus the reference to our forgiveness of others.

**3. Concern about temptation.** This has troubled some people, because they don't see God as the source of temptation in the first place. And that is true; James denies that God ever tempts us. But we must understand that the term "temptation" in the NT means any testing situation. It includes more than mere solicitation to sin; it covers every situation which is a challenge to our integrity, fidelity, or well-being. So the petition here is a request for spiritual protection from the trials of life. We know that left to ourselves we will wander into temptation and trouble constantly. We must lean on God to help us.

The whole prayer is a reflection of the disciple's total reliance on God.

**Jesus teaches about effective prayer by means of the Parable of the Midnight Caller. (3-8)**

**A friend goes to a friend for a friend.** I don't know about you, but midnight is not my best time. I like to go to bed early—usually by 10:30—and the first two hours generally provide the deepest sleep. When I get a call at midnight or when the dog barks, it's actually painful to have to get up. Jesus asks us to suppose that we have a guest drop in on us late one night, we discover that we have no food to offer him, and so we go to a neighbor to borrow some food. Further we are asked to suppose that the neighbor yells out his bedroom window, "Get lost! I've already locked the door and the children are sleeping. I can't help you at this ungodly hour."

This little vignette seems a bit strange to us. We can hardly imagine anyone going to a neighbor's house at midnight to borrow anything. Many of us don't even know our neighbors and might not borrow anything in broad daylight, much less at midnight. In fact, from the average American's perspective the whole problem started with this traveler dropping in unannounced; he should have called ahead. But Jesus' listeners didn't come to the story with such a selfish mind-set.

The middle easterner saw hospitality as an absolute obligation. There were no motels and very few inns, and what there were, generally were not places a moral person would want to inhabit. Since it was so hot during the day people often traveled at night, so stopping at a friend's house at midnight would not be all that unusual. Furthermore, one would never allow a guest to go to bed hungry, so food *had* to be obtained. It was too late to buy any, so the only solution was to go next door and borrow some.

The focus of the story seems to be on the second neighbor, who receives the midnight knock on his door. The excuses this man offers for not meeting the request seem rather lame. He doesn't plead that he is out of bread, but rather that the door has already been shut, apparently bolted with a wooden bar. Well, it would be no great trouble to unbolt it. The mention of his sleeping children sounds more serious, but it too is a rather poor excuse, for even if they wake up, children are known to go back to sleep readily.

**The request is rejected on the level of friendship, but it is granted due to his boldness and persistence.** The whole point that Jesus seems to be making to His first-century audience is that even if someone was such a lousy neighbor that he just gave excuses and wouldn't offer the necessary help out of a motive of friendship, still he would undoubtedly grant the request if the petitioner were *bold and persistent*. The term for boldness also means "shamelessness." This guy has nerve. He apparently refuses to take "no" for an answer and continues to knock on the door, knowing that his cause is just and that the law of hospitality demands that the sleeping man give him bread.

The message seems to be that we are too timid in prayer and we give up too easily. Now we have to be careful here. We must not think of God as One who responds only to pressure and persistence. Nor does He unwillingly grant petitions just so He can get us off His back and go back to sleep. But on the other hand, if we do not want what we are seeking enough to be bold and persistent, maybe we do not want it very much. Someone has said, "God is determined not to hear what we are not determined that He shall hear." In other words, God won't read third class mail. He is sales resistant to the random request.

Actually the message of this parable might be better understood as a contrast than as an analogy. If even a grouchy old sleepyhead, notwithstanding the inconvenience to which he is put, will arise at midnight to give a bold and shameless petitioner what he needs, how much more will God, our heavenly Father, listen to the sincere and persistent supplications of His children who are really in need? After all, with God it is never midnight; He never lacks anything; He is never

taken by surprise; and He is never “bothered” when any humble child approaches Him.

How do our prayer lives stack up? How often have we prayed about something every day for two weeks? I am aware that the Scriptures warn us against vain repetition such as the heathen practice, but the point there in Matt. 6:8 seems to be that God doesn't want *mindless* repetition, such as is sometimes done with memorized prayers and prayer beads. (A friend of mine who went through parochial school for 12 years told me that when he acted up in school the nun would make him say 100 “our Fathers” as punishment). That sounds like mindless repetition to me.

I also think that when God has clearly said "no" to a request, it would be wrong to persist in asking Him to say "yes." But there are many times when God has not yet said "no," but we show such a spirit of apathy in our prayer life that He may say “no” until we show we mean business.

**Jesus teaches about effective prayer by means of some direct promises. (9, 10)**

Look again at verse 9: “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.” The verbs here are present tense and can be translated, “Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.” But the focus now is on results.

**He promises results when prayer is pursued rightly.** Prayer works; it *does* make a difference. Now this is extremely important, because there are a lot of theological problems surrounding prayer, and there is a lot of heretical teaching out there concerning prayer. Some will say, "Why beg God when He can hear the first time?" Jesus answers, "I say to you, keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking." Others will say, "If God knows what you need before you ask, why pray?" Jesus answers, "I say to you, keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking." Still others may respond, "If God is truly sovereign and has foreordained everything that comes to pass, then how can prayer change anything?" To which Jesus answers, "I say to you, keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking."

Jesus is the Creator of the universe, He is the sustainer of the universe, and He was personally involved in establishing God's blueprint for the universe. He knows the decree of God forward and backward, He knows who the elect are, He knows the number of hairs on your head and the number of days that have been allotted to you. And *He* says, "I say unto you, 'Seek and you shall find.'" I think the point is this:

**Theological problems with prayer should not undermine our confidence.** Whether or not you can solve all the problems surrounding prayer, Jesus gives His word that prayer makes a difference. He tells us in effect that there is nothing in the decree of God that is inconsistent with our prayers being heard and answered.

But perhaps someone will say, "I've tried praying and I just can't do it." Can't what? Can't ask, or

seek, or knock? Friends, this isn't rocket science. You don't need intellectual brilliance or training or talent or wit for prayer. Just ask, seek, knock. You say, "But I can't say fine prayers." Praise God! Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said, "God abhors fine prayers." The simpler the better. The plainest, humblest language is best.

The outcome, by the way, is certain. "*Everyone* who asks receives . . ." Of those who obey this command, not a single one will be denied. Jesus does not say and does not mean that when we pray we shall always get exactly what we ask for. After all, "No" is just as definite an answer as "Yes." He is saying that true prayer is neither unheard nor unheeded. It is always answered in the way God sees is best for His children.

**Jesus teaches about effective prayer by means of an analogy between human fathers and the Heavenly Father. (11-13)**

Yes, it is certain that persevering prayer accompanied by the activity of faith will be rewarded, and proof can be seen in the ordinary interaction between a father and his son. "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?"

**The goodness of sinful men to their children is indisputable.** The child who asks his father for food is not going to be given something harmful and poisonous. Fathers may tease their children, and fathers at times may refuse to give the children things they want, and sometimes fathers may fail to understand the needs of their children, but no decent father will give his child something harmful in place of the basic necessities of life. We deem the rare exception as the lowest form of criminal and worthy of the strongest punishment society can offer. The point?

**The goodness of a holy God to His children is infinitely greater.** If even an earthly father, though by nature a sinner, tries to provide his children with nothing but good things, how much more will the heavenly Father, who is free from all evil and is, if fact, the source of all good, give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? We are a little surprised to find the Holy Spirit mentioned here, for the context would cause us to expect Jesus to promise "all good things" instead of the Holy Spirit. In fact, in a parallel passage in Matthew, 7:11, that is exactly what we find. There it reads, "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 good gifts to those who ask him!" But these two promises are not contradictory, for the Holy Spirit, being God, is the source of all that is good.

**Conclusion:** Now there are a few things I would like to say by way of conclusion. First, do you have something you'd really like to see God do, either for yourself or for a friend? Have you prayed about it? How often? How long? Have you prayed for thirty days in a row for at least ten minutes a day? Why not try it?

I preached on this passage almost 20 years ago. Our baby church in St. Louis was meeting at Sanford Brown Business College, a very inadequate, and by that time, very crowded facility. I

want to read to you a few paragraphs from that sermon:

*We have many needs as a congregation, but one I'd like to mention in particular is a permanent facility. I wonder if God senses from the level of our prayer about that matter that it is really important to us. The Search Committee has been looking at several pieces of property, but no clear direction has been sensed yet. I know in my heart that God is able to give us a perfect piece of property at a price we can afford, but He may wait until we really get serious in prayer.*

*I wonder what would happen if even 50 of us would commit to taking this matter to the Lord in prayer every day for the next 30 days. And I don't mean a passing comment, like, "Lord, bless the land search committee." I mean an intelligent wrestling with God about what we need, asking Him even now to prepare the heart of some land owner. It's too easy to make such commitments in a large group by raising hands, so instead I'm going to ask that you take the effort to write a little note (perhaps on a visitor's slip), sign your name, and get it to me or the chairman of our Land Search Committee, if you will commit yourself to that. I think it would be in complete harmony with what the Scriptures have said to us today.*

You know something? A significant number of our people responded that morning and committed to pray regularly about our need for a permanent home. Within a very short time a white house on four acres in a nice residential area went up for sale. Those original four acres grew into a campus of over 17 acres in a perfect location.

I told you several weeks ago about an even more amazing example of persistent prayer—42 years' worth—that ended in the salvation of my brother-in-law and the return of my sister to the faith of her childhood.

What is the need of your heart today? Is it for physical healing? Is it for the salvation of a loved one? Is it for reconciliation with a spouse or a close friend? Is it the need of a job? Is it regarding an antagonist who is making your life miserable at work or at school? Take it to the Lord in prayer. But send it first class.

There's a verse in the book of Hebrews, 4:16, that seems to summarize our text for today very well: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence (boldness, shamelessness), so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." To fail to do so is to show a lack of faith in the character of God, and is to be satisfied with little when God has much that He would like to give us.