

“The Secret to Successful Prayer”

Rev. Dr. Brewster H. Gere
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Kirkwood, Missouri

July 25, 2004

Readings from Scripture: Luke 11:1-14

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 had 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!’

Luke 11:1-13

Point #1: Jesus took prayer seriously.

Point #2: We, as Christ’s disciples, should do the same.

Both of these points are made in the first verse of this morning's scripture reading. From the first verse of the eleventh chapter of Luke, we read that Jesus was praying in a certain place. This suggests that Jesus was intentional in setting aside times and places appropriate for prayer. Next, we learn that one of his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

We know that Jesus answered in very helpful ways. First, he taught his disciples to pray a specific prayer. It was the Lord's Prayer as recorded by Luke. While the version of the Lord's Prayer we usually pray is the one found in Matthew's gospel, what we find in Luke is very similar. "*When you pray,*" Jesus said, "*say: Father, Hallowed by 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.*"

Next, Jesus was most helpful to hearers of his words then and now by revealing the secret to successful prayer. That secret is persistence. We all know that persistence often pays off. As the Tour de France is scheduled to end today, I am reminded how the persistence of training—most obviously for now six time winner Lance Armstrong, but also all who compete at such a high level—is necessary for world class athletes. The same kind of persistence is necessary for any of us to do anything really well, and prayer is no exception.

The story Jesus told is one all of us can relate to in some form. It had to do with being awakened and being asked to do something for someone else. The specifics of Jesus' story center around a neighbor who has a friend drop by unexpectedly. The neighbor has no food to serve his visitor. So, he goes next door to borrow some bread, even though the neighbor's lights are off and the door is locked. As we seek to understand the context of the story, remember that the people of Jesus' time lived close together in one-room dwellings with humans and animals all huddled together. That meant when the door was shut, then everyone was in bed for the evening. It also meant that any disturbance awakened everyone.

Undeterred by the hour and the circumstances, the man with the visitor wakes his neighbor. We can imagine the personalities and the dynamics involved. The neighbors probably are friends. But perhaps the one who finds himself with the unexpected visitor might always be a day late and a dollar short, while the one awakened an orderly fellow who was always prepared for such eventualities. Therefore, the man awakened from sleep might not always be very patient with his carefree neighbor, especially at midnight.

With this as the backdrop to the story Jesus told, the neighbor who was awakened, upon hearing his neighbor's plight, at first says, "Go away." But the neighbor is insistent. Continuing to knock and waking everyone up, he shouts, "Open up! I need something to feed to my visitor!" So, finally, the neighbor shares his bread, not out of friendship at that

hour, but because the man was persistent and because gracious hospitality was a given in the society.

After telling the story, Jesus drew an application for his hearers. He told them to ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. To hammer home his point and to show the disciples that God is our friend at midnight, he asked his hearers what if their child asked for a fish? Would they give the child a snake? Or if their child asked for an egg, would they give the child a scorpion?

We can just hear the disciples, saying, “Of course not.” After that answer, we can hear Jesus saying in return, “Well, if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask, seek and knock?”

From the example of Jesus, we learn that prayer is a learned behavior, not simply a release of feelings. That means persistence is part of the discipline of prayer.

What might such discipline look like in our lives? As a way of getting started, I like the following suggestion: “Do not wait for great strength before setting out, for immobility will weaken you further. Do not wait to see clearly before starting; one has to walk toward the light. When you take that first step, accomplish that tiny little act, the necessity of which may only be apparent to you, you will be astonished to feel that the effort, rather than exhausting your strength, has doubled it—and that you already see more clearly what you have to do next.”¹

Often our prayers are halting and misdirected. Perhaps you can relate to the following. Someone has recounted:

“I asked God to take away my pride. God said, “No. It is not for me to take away, but for you to give it up.”

I asked God to give me happiness. God said, “No. Suffering is a part of every life, and it brings you closer to me.”

I asked God to make my spirit grow. God said, “No. You must grow on your own, but I will prune you to make you fruitful.”

I asked God for all things that I might enjoy in life. God said, “No. I give you life that you might enjoy all things.”

I asked God to help me love others as much as Christ loved me. God said, “Aha! Now you’ve got the idea!”

Specifically, here are some suggestions for helping you get the idea of how to become persistent in prayer. They are offered by church consultant Herb Miller:

- 1) Set aside fifteen minutes in a location where there is little likelihood of interruption. Read a chapter or two from the Bible, listening for what God may be saying to you.
- 2) Give God thanks for three personal blessings. This helps move toward God by moving away from your own self-sufficiency.
- 3) To move away from self-centeredness, ask God to help three other persons.
- 4) Ask God to forgive your sins and give you strength to forgive others.
- 5) Ask God to help one person whom you find it hard to like. Ask God to give that person insights into his or her personal problems, and for the power of God's love to flow through you to that person.
- 6) Ask that you will be sensitive to the needs of one person today.
- 7) Ask for insights into your own personal struggles.
- 8) Ask for help in achieving your personal goals.
- 9) Ask God to tell you the most important thing you need to do today to "seek first His kingdom."
- 10) Conclude by listening intently for three minutes to what God may say to you.

If we are faithful in a life of prayer, we will learn that the secret to successful prayer is persistence—persistence in asking, seeking, knocking—confident that God will reveal the Holy Spirit.

A little boy prayed and prayed for a new pair of cowboy boots. One night, he refused to say his prayers. His mother asked him, “Why don’t you say your prayers?”

The little boy answered, “Art doesn’t listen!”

“Art who?,” his mother asked?

“Art in heaven.”

The truth is that our Father, who art in heaven, does listen, and offers the Holy Spirit to all who are persistent in prayer. What the Holy Spirit brings into our lives might not be what we think we want or what we think we need at a particular time. But over time, we will discover that when we are persistent in prayer, our prayers will be put into action. For at the same time we are being loved, healed, fed, comforted and made one with our enemies, we will find that we are being welcomed by our “friend at midnight” and given bread for life’s journey, even as we are offered that bread at the Lord’s Table this morning. Amen.

¹ Phillippe Vernier, Context, Ed. Martin Marty, May 1, 1993