

FAMOUS WORDS WE STUMBLE OVER

When You Pray

Luke 11: 1-13

September 2022



The eleventh chapter of the Gospel of Luke has some famous words in it. This not a story, just important famous words, with illustrations, spoken by Jesus which, are full of pitfalls to stumble into. Read the following verses and then I will explain why.

Luke 11: 1-13

Jesus 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 to 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!’

Have you spotted the pitfalls?

"Ask, and it will be given you, search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you." (v9)

"Everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." (v10)

The pitfalls are in the interpretations of these famous words. We can easily read these words in the wrong way. We can come to believe Jesus's teaching on prayer renders prayer transactional. We go on to see God as a cosmic chocolate vending machine where we put in a shiny coin and receive for our payment our chosen chocolate bar. Many Christians see God as a vending machine where we put into that machine fervent, persistent prayer and in return diseases are healed, car crashes are prevented, hungry children are fed, broken relationships are saved and all the bad people are stopped from doing bad things. But I've lived long

enough to know diseases do not always get better, car accidents happen, babies starve, relationships disintegrate and bad people thrive. When you ask other Christians to explain this they usually say: 'You need to pray harder, longer and with more faith, or, God did answer your prayers - and God said no.

And, with those sorts of answers you can only come to this conclusion: **'Why bother with prayer at all?'**

How then should we react to these famous words on prayer spoken by Jesus. Here are a few possibilities:

"Lord, teach us." Today's reading begins with a disciple approaching Jesus and asking for instruction. "Lord, teach us to pray." The disciples are all Jews, so they are not totally inexperienced nor ignorant when it comes to prayer. But, I would like to suggest that they have all seen Jesus pray. What do they observe when they look at Jesus praying? Here, I am guessing - intimacy, belonging; trust; peace. A closeness to God that is transformative and nourishing. Fresh vision, renewed perspective, greater strength, and deeper empathy. The disciples long for this in their lives and so should we!

"When you pray," Jesus says to his disciples, as if prayer is a given. A matter of course. A practice so natural and so intrinsic. Jesus might as well say, "when

you breathe,” or, “when you blink,” or, “when your heart beats.” Prayer is not supposed to be just a special activity reserved for special times, places or people. Prayer is not the private property of a pious few; prayer is ordinary. Prayer is what we’re wired for. Prayer is what God’s children do. What Jesus offers is an invitation to enter into prayer gently, with quiet confidence; to trust it as we trust oxygen, food or water.

Ask, seek, knock. Yes, back to the pitfalls. But I see these words a little differently. What about “yearn” or “hunger” or “want.” What if these are lessons in permission from Jesus. Permission to name our longings? To acknowledge the desires which drive and haunt us. To state without reservation or embarrassment that all is not okay and we are in need and in want and we are going to keep pounding on the door of prayer because we require our daily bread right now. Jesus seems to be saying to us - you have longings so keep naming them and name them over and over again. Do not be embarrassed that you have a holy yearning and that your yearning is ferocious. God can more than handle our ferocity.

How much more. Read the lesson carefully, and you’ll find another surprise. There is only one promise in it. Jesus concludes his teaching on prayer with this sentence: “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!” What Jesus promises us in answer to our prayers is the Holy Spirit. That’s it. That’s all. There is no other promise or guarantee. Here’s the actual promise: When we pray, when we persist in prayer, when we name our longings in prayer, without fear or compromise, God will never fail to give us God’s own, abundant, indwelling and overflowing self as the answer we actually need. God will not withhold God’s loving, consoling, healing, transforming and empowering Spirit from us. When it comes to no-holds-barred, absolutely self-giving generosity, God’s answer to all our prayers will always be yes. Maybe this yes is what the disciples sense in Jesus when they watch him pray. Maybe the presence of the Spirit radiating through Jesus is what compels them to go deeper into their own prayer lives.

I know this is hard. Many of you may reject this as it is very hard to persist in prayer and not get the answers we were hoping for. It is hard to accept the Holy Spirit as God’s perfect gift when we would much rather receive physical healing, or an end to the toxicity in British politics, or lasting freedom from anxiety, or realistic hope when it comes to climate change. But it is hard because, deep down, we really want the easy option. It is much easier to want God to sweep in and fix everything. It is much harder to want God’s Spirit to fill and accompany us so that we can do our part in healing the world.

So we pray. We pray because Jesus wants us to. We pray because it is what God's children do. We pray because we yearn and our yearning is precious to God. We pray with words, without words, through laughter, through tears, in hope and in despair, our prayers usher in God's Spirit and remind us that we are not alone in this broken, aching world. God's Spirit is our guarantee. Accept this gift and life will change.

Bibliography: The Gospel of Luke - William Barclay

Into the Mess and other Jesus Stories - Debie Thomas



