

July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## **Luke 11:1-13 “Why Should I Pray?”**

Last week I chose an obscure text from the lectionary because I felt bad that I'd been avoiding it as long as I've been here. I had the opposite problem this week because the gospel reading is Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which seems almost too familiar. This passage has come up six times in the lectionary in the past 18 years—but I've only preached on it once, back in 2013. I'd say we're about due to visit this text again.

Here's a fun fact for you – This is the only place in the gospels where the disciples ask Jesus to teach them something. There's a parallel to this text in Matthew's gospel, but Jesus just kind of blurts it out in the middle of the sermon on the mount. This is the only place in all four gospels where Jesus did not initiate a teaching moment, and this is the very reason that I prefer Luke's version over Matthew's. Prayer is something that we're not always comfortable with. In fact, sometimes we feel inadequate when it comes to the subject. In three decades of ministry, I've seen perfectly qualified church members turn down a chance to be an elder because they “don't feel comfortable” praying out loud. Sure, they'll give a communion meditation or something like that, but to pray in front of people? No thanks. Even when it comes to the discipline of prayer in our personal practice, we're not sure we're up for the task. So the disciples, speaking for most of us, came to Jesus and said, “Lord, teach us to pray.” And Jesus responded with an example of a prayer, a parable about prayer, and some thoughts about prayer in general. Let's save the Lord's prayer for last and take a look at some of his teachings about prayer first.

Jesus said, “If you ask for an egg, you're not going to get a scorpion. Ask, and it will be given; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened.” I think what Jesus is saying here is, “Lighten up. Don't get so worked up and worried when you pray!” God is good, and God loves you. God is going to receive your prayer with delight. Don't get so

anxious about whether or not you get the words right. Jesus says that even evil people know how to give good things to their children so how much more will God respond lovingly to you? But sometimes we get so caught up in worrying about whether we're using the right words or rituals in our prayers that we end up *stifling* them. It's like Victorian etiquette. The elite class in England would pay for etiquette classes so you knew how to behave in case you ever met royalty. Because you've got to be prepared, right? You had to memorize all the proper gestures and correct phrases. We sometimes treat prayer like that don't we? The church over the centuries has gone overboard in its "God is King" imagery. And don't get me wrong, it's there in the Bible. I'm not going to pretend it's not. God *is* sovereign. God *is* the ruler of creation. The reign of God is what's in the queue for when earth's kingdoms inevitably crash. But we get so caught up in all these royal images of God that we end up projecting our anxiety about how we come to God in prayer. We start speaking in King James English and use "thees and thous" and flowery language to the point of absurdity. We think that if we goof up or slip up, then we've lost our chance to be heard by God. Then we end up being afraid to say or do *anything* because we don't want God to turn away from us.

But here Jesus is saying don't worry about all that. Instead of the image of a loyal subject bending the knee before the almighty monarch, Jesus gives the image of a little child running up to their parent saying, "Daddy, Mommy, I want an egg." *That's* how Jesus says it should be when we pray. It should be a spontaneous outpouring of love and affection where God, in return, responds with delight. Small children who are just learning to talk are so fun. We live for the little video clips that our son and daughter-in-law send us of our granddaughter Nani. She speaks her own little language. I know she thinks she's being clear as day when she's talking to us, but it is total gibberish. We understand how she's feeling though. She doesn't need words to communicate that. Nani will come to us and hold out her stuffed squid, Jeremiah, she'll smack him a couple of times and launch into a wave of animated jibber-jabber—complete with hand gestures and raised eyebrows. We don't

know what she's saying, but we get it because it's the connection, not the clarity, that matters. So I'll say, "I don't know why you think Jeremiah is being insubordinate. Honestly, I think he's doing the best he can with what he's got. Maybe you could show a little grace." And she'll answer right back with even more gestures and facial expressions. I didn't understand the words she was saying, nor did she really understand what I was saying. But we still managed to have a good conversation because it's the bond of communication that's important. What kind of grandparents would we be if we withheld our response because she doesn't get words right? With little ones who are just learning to talk, you celebrate every little sign of progress. Jesus is saying this is how God feels about us. God is not the stern authority figure waiting till you get the words right before God responds. But that's how we feel sometimes.

Now that being said, here's something that might sound contradictory to what I just said. I think prayer is something we need to develop and refine. In the same way we develop ways to communicate with each other, we need to develop ways to communicate with God too. I believe God receives whatever we're capable of giving at our present stage of development. However, I believe God *does* want us to progress. If Nani is still speaking to us in jibber-jabber when she's 13, I'd be concerned. And if she's 30 and still speaking to us like she's 13 I'd worry too. Our relationship with God would become stagnant if we didn't develop or grow in the way we communicate with God.

That's why it's important to learn creative new ways of communicating with God. For many of my early years as a Christian, the instruction I received concerning prayer was, "Have quiet time every day." Ok. What do I do during that quiet time? "Devotions - read your Bible and pray." Ok. "*And* you can only do this early in the morning too!" Really? "Yes, and the earlier the better. In fact, the earlier you get up and the longer you have devotions, the more spiritual and holy you are." See, I try to tell folks that it's more important to grow in *how* you read your Bible and pray creatively. If the only progress we can lay claim to is, "I get up

at 4:00 now instead of 6:00 devotions,” we’re missing the point. I think it’s more important to invest time and energy into finding new ways of spending time with God rather than just sitting at a table getting jacked up on caffeine while trying to wade through Leviticus.

Before we dig into the Lord’s Prayer, let me give you an example of an unconventional prayer practice. Craig Springs, the Virginia Region’s church camp that I managed for 9 years is about 600 acres. Fourteen of those acres needed to be mowed. Even though I had an able-bodied staff at my disposal, I typically mowed a 4-acre field at the edge of our property with a 1948 Ford 8N tractor. My boss, the Regional Minister, dropped by camp one day and I was out mowing the field. He said, “You’ve got a staff to do this. You have better things to do with your time. I don’t want you to be the highest paid lawn mower in the region.” I said, “I’m not mowing. This is my prayer time, and this field is a labyrinth. There are places on this field that represent different people and when I pass by on the tractor I lift them up in prayer. You’re that stump over there by the club house.” My boss said, “Carry on then.”

Now, back to the Lord’s prayer. Jesus’ disciples came to him and said, “Teach us to pray.” Jesus provided an example. He said,

“Father, holy is your name. Your kingdom come. Give us this day’s bread. And forgive us our sin, for we ourselves forgive those indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.”

It’s noticeably shorter than the version of the Lord’s Prayer we usually recite, isn’t it? That’s because we use Matthew’s version. Personally, I appreciate the simplicity of Luke’s. A good rule of thumb with differing Gospel accounts is this: when there are two versions, the shorter one is usually closer to the original source.

This prayer starts out with acknowledging the goodness and holiness of God. As I said before, Jesus wants us to come to God like little kids running to their parents. So it makes sense to start the prayer that

addresses God with a term of intimacy and love. The Greek word used here is, “πατήρ” or Father. Some people get hung up on ascribing gender to a God who transcends gender. I get that. But I’m also fine with it here in the scriptures. You might be saying, “Congratulations, you probably had a good father,” to which I’ll say, “Yes, I did.” I just think the image the gospel writers are wanting to convey here is one of intimacy, secure love and tender care, and “Father, Holy is your name” is such a joyous and appropriate expression of praise.

Here’s where the heart of the prayer begins—with recognizing who we’re praying to. We start by acknowledging God's goodness, which is what allows us to come to God in the first place. It’s a moment to celebrate who God is and what God means to us. We give praise not only because God deserves it, but also because it reminds us that, as Jesus said, we are speaking to a God who is eager to listen and respond.

Let’s move on. “Your Kingdom come.” May the day come when you, loving God, reign over everything. Sometimes that’s all we can come up with when it seems like the atrocities of the world are too numerous to name. Rather than a specific request, this is an expression of a general longing. We’re ready God. Any time now. Your kingdom come.

Now that we’re re-oriented, the next phrase is, “As a part of your coming reign, give us each day’s bread. Not yesterday’s bread. Not tomorrow’s bread. *This* day’s. As a part of your coming reign, forgive us our sins. As a part of your coming reign, keep us from the time of trial.” These address some of the most basic human needs and desires. The need for basic nourishment; the need for forgiveness when we know we’ve done wrong; and the need to be safe from things we can’t handle.

This is Jesus’s basic lesson in prayer. Acknowledge the goodness of the God to whom you pray. Orientate yourself to what God is about in the world. And in that context the communication can begin.

One final thing to consider before we wrap this up – Prayer doesn't have to be all about words. The first two parts at least can be done in silence, if that's your style, or even in drawing or singing or dancing. Use the best way for you to express love and reorient yourself.

So why *should* we pray? Not because we're supposed to get the words right. Not because we're trying to impress God with eloquence or effort. Not because we're checking off a spiritual to-do list. We pray because it's how we stay connected to the One who loves us more than we can imagine. We pray because Jesus taught us to come to God not as frightened subjects, but as beloved children—messy, honest, growing children. We pray because it shapes us. It opens us to the kingdom. It helps us forgive and be forgiven. It gives us strength for today and hope for tomorrow as the old hymn says. So maybe the question isn't, "*Why should I pray?*" Maybe the better question is, "*Why wouldn't I want to?*" No matter where you are in your spiritual life—whether you're fluent in faith or still figuring out how to hold the conversation—God is listening. God is delighted just to hear your voice. And like a child learning to speak, every step you take in prayer is received with joy. So go ahead. Speak. Whisper. Sing. Bake. Walk. Mow. Crochet. Cry. Laugh. Sit in silence. However you do it, just begin. And remember: The door is open. You just need to knock.