

Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ

Lecture 14

Jesus' Teaching concerning Prayer

Introduction

One of the most vital parts of our relationship with God is prayer. We can expect to find the same truth visible in the life and the ministry of Jesus, the Son of Man.

At its very roots prayer is an expression of a believer's relationship with God as Father. It is not even just about asking and receiving our petitions though such should not be seen as a lower form of prayer. Essentially prayer is the God-given means to make it possible for us to relate with God. Communicating with Him in the face of life's battles. Sharing our deepest joys and trials with Him. Partnering with Him in the work that He is doing in and through us. These and other parts of daily life are the ingredients of a mutually enriching relationship between two persons involving communicating and listening. Listening and responding. Speaking from the heart and hiding nothing.

The God-Man, Jesus, enjoyed perfect, unbroken fellowship with His Father while He was on earth. No sin obstructed His relationship with His Father except the sin of the world that He carried when He offered Himself up on the altar of Calvary as the sinless Substitute for the sin of the whole world. For Jesus, prayer enabled Him to maintain an intimate relationship with His Father.

The aim of this lecture is to study Jesus' teaching concerning prayer. This study will consist of two parts:

1. Jesus' teaching His followers by His example, and
2. Jesus' instructions concerning prayer.

We will refer to all the main references in the Gospel of Luke to prayer. (There are other references to prayer in Jesus' teaching and life in the other Gospels which should also be perused and studied.)

1. Jesus' teaching by example

a) Jesus prays as He is being baptised: Luke 3:21-22

Jesus is just about to begin His years of ministry. In obedience to the Father's will, He has gone to the Jordan River to be baptised. At that moment the Spirit descended upon Jesus as God's anointing and empowering for His coming ministry. We note that the activity and coming of the Spirit is here closely linked with prayer.

The Greek verb used in this verse for Jesus' praying (*proseuchomai*) is a word that incorporates or includes all aspects of prayer including praise, adoration, worship, thanksgiving as well as petition, intercession and commitment. Thus we may say that at this moment in the presence of many people, Jesus is standing before His Father lifting up holy hands in worship, praise and adoration to His Father as well as asking God to watch over Him and guide Him in all His forthcoming ministries.

The fact that prayer is a two-way communication process can be seen in how God responded to Jesus' prayer with His voice from heaven: "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" (Luke 3:22). Jesus would have known in His heart that the Father thought this way. But it was the Father's choice and delight to reassure His Son of His love following the Son's words of prayer spoken to the Father.

b) Jesus prays amid the busyness of His ministry: Luke 5:16

This Scripture is preceded by passages describing Jesus' busyness in ministry – see Luke 4:31-44; 5:12-14. He was facing unlimited opportunities to minister to needy people. Luke 5:15 paints a picture of how many were attracted to Jesus because of the miracles He was performing.

In the face of these growing ministry demands, Jesus retreats to a lonely place in order to be alone with His Father in prayer. This fact highlights the divine rhythm in Jesus' life: going out into ministry and going in to the presence of His Father, or in the other order – going first into God's presence in preparation for going out into ministry.

The following points are highlighted in this passage:

Firstly, how Jesus responded to the situation of busyness – He "withdrew". (NASB ""But He Himself would quietly slip away....") Even the Son of God needed these "time-outs" from people even including His closest friends. But above all else, this Scripture shows Jesus' priority in life and ministry: His relationship with His Father in prayer was a higher priority than His relationship with anyone else and also than His ministries to people. It was the *sine qua non* of all that He did and said.

Secondly, note the frequency of Jesus' withdrawing – "often". It is interesting to note that this word is not found in the original text but is necessitated by the tense of the verb which indicates repeated action. This word "often" implies that Jesus' withdrawing to lonely places to pray wasn't just an occasional impromptu arrangement as if an afterthought or when He was facing some extreme trial. It was regular and frequent.

Thirdly, note where He went – "to lonely places" (lit. "to the desert", i.e. a place where He was far removed from contact with anyone). Cf. Mark 1:35 where the same Greek word for "desert" is used. It is likely that "the desert" was the place or specific location Jesus chose to spend many hours in quiet prayer and fellowship with His Father away from the noise and needs of people.

Fourthly, note what Jesus did in the desert – He "prayed". Once again Luke uses the same Greek verb "to pray" as used in Luke 3:21 – the word that encompasses all aspects of prayer. Jesus did not allow Himself to become caught up in continually meeting the ever-present human or spiritual needs of man, though many came seeking after His help. Spending time alone in prayer with His Father was not an activity that He slipped into His life if and when He could find some peace and quiet. Rather it was an activity of choice. For Him withdrawing to pray to His Father was a most fundamental and important ingredient in His daily life as serving the needs of people.

c) Jesus prays before calling the Twelve: Luke 6:12-13

"One of those days..." -- lit. "in these days".

“Those days” included both continued ministry and also opposition from the Pharisees. Both before and after Jesus’ time away for prayer, He faced spiritual opposition from the Pharisees. See Luke 6:13ff; also Luke 5:33-39; 6:1ff. Opposition is spiritually draining and so maybe Jesus withdrew amid the heat of the spiritual conflicts in order to enjoy a period of quietness and rest in His Father’s presence.

“... Jesus went out ...” -- or “went off”.

Once again Jesus went off alone. Yet in another sense, He was NEVER alone because He lived in the presence of God (*coram Deo*). Jesus did not just pray when He went off to such lonely places because praying is communing with God which Jesus experienced wherever He was.

“... to a mountainside ...” -- lit. “to the mountain”.

Palestine is hilly so finding a mountain to retreat to would not have been difficult.

“Mountains” are often mentioned in Scripture and on occasions were the places where God revealed Himself in special ways to His chosen ones, e.g. Mt. Sinai (to Moses with the 10 Commandments) & Mt. Horeb (to Elijah and all the people of Israel). In the life of Jesus, “mountains” were places where significant events took place, e.g. He taught His disciples on a mount, He was “transfigured” on a mountain and He ascended back to the Father from a mountain. He also loved to pray on mountains – see Luke 6:12; 22:39.

The significance of the “mountain” in Jesus’ life was most likely connected with His desire to be alone with His Father. Intense times of prayer require an aloneness so that one can give one’s attention wholeheartedly to God.

“... to pray” .

Here again Luke uses the all-encompassing word for “prayer” (*proseuthomai*) that includes both prayer that exalts God (praise, adoration, thanksgiving) as well as prayer that lifts up the heavenly throne of grace the various desires and needs of man’s heart in order to receive help, renewed strength and guidance. The latter aspect of prayer should not be regarded as a lower form of prayer as if man’s temporal and human needs (which Jesus had just as much as we do) was a sign of weakness.

“... and spent the night praying to God” -- lit. “in the prayer of/to God” (focussing on the Object of prayer -- “to God”).

What was the significance of Jesus praying through the night at this particular moment? The following verses tell us about a momentous decision that Jesus was facing – a decision of far-reaching significance in God’s great plan of salvation which He was bringing to pass in human history. He is about to choose the Twelve, i.e. those men who would become His closest companions, His disciples and who would carry on His ministry after He returned to heaven. God’s Spirit through Luke underscored the fact that Jesus faced such crucial moments spending longer periods of time in prayer with His Father.

We are not told what Jesus actually prayed throughout the night or for whom. However, we can imagine the focus of some of His prayers, eg asking the Father to confirm the men whom He should call to follow Him; praying God’s blessings upon His future helpers and disciples; praying for strength to endure the anticipation of Judas’ betrayal remembering that Jesus also called Judas Iscariot to follow Him. It could also have been that rejoicing may have been a dominant note of Jesus’ prayer as He anticipated the joy (as well as the challenges) of sharing life with them.

“When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them”.

Note how Jesus did not delay in following through with the action step of calling the group of men to Himself once the evening had passed.

d) Jesus prays and then responds to a request from one of His disciples: Luke 11:1a

Verse 1a: *“One day Jesus was praying in a certain place.”*

Again we find Jesus at prayer. He had gone off by Himself but His disciples knew where He was and what He was doing. Perhaps Jesus had even instructed them: “Wait here for Me. I’ll be back soon. I am going away to spend some time with My Father in prayer.”

We also note that though Jesus went off by Himself to pray, He was not secretive about His praying. Rather as with everything else in His life, He lived a life of openness or transparency before His disciples. And this included His prayer life.

Jesus' example in praying stirred His disciples to ask Him to teach them to pray. (See other notes on this passage in Section 2 below.)

e) Jesus prays for Peter: Jesus 22:31-32

Jesus clearly forewarned His disciples of His forthcoming sufferings and especially of Satan's evil designs against them. He spoke of Satan's request to sift them like wheat – like “shaking them in a sieve” that separates the wheat from the husks – Satan's intention was destructive whereas God's was their refining, cf. 1 Peter 1:6-7. He also comforted Peter telling him that He had been interceding for him, reassuring him that he would turn back and shepherd his brethren.

The focus of Jesus' prayer was the strengthening of Peter's faith: “...*that your faith will not fail*” – that He would continue to trust in Jesus and not give up in the face of extreme danger or fear, cf. John 14:1-2; 17:9-17. Jesus' prayer was full of power causing God to touch Peter's mind and heart leading Him to immediate repentance and then to a fresh, new love for his beloved Lord.

f) Jesus prays before His capture: Luke 22:39-45

Jesus now faces His darkest night of suffering. So together with the intimate circle of His friends, He agonises before His Father in prayer. Jesus retreats to a favourite quiet place (v.39 “the Mount of Olivet” not too far removed from the Temple where He had been teaching in this final week) with His disciples in anticipation of the spiritual and physical onslaught that was about to befall Him. Jesus once again travels along the pathway of prayer surrendering Himself into the hands of His loving Father so that the Father's purposes would be fulfilled through His death.

Before He prays, Jesus exhorts His followers to pray so that they will not fall into temptation (see verse 40, cf. Matt.6:13; 26:41 “*Watch and pray....*”). Notice that Jesus repeats this warning, thus emphasising the great importance of what He was telling them – see verses 40 & 46. It is clear that Jesus takes such testing times with utmost seriousness and seeks to urge the same awareness on His disciples – emphasising that prayer is God’s way to face and withstand the fires of sufferings and temptations.

Yet once again Jesus retreats from people (yet still within eye-shot of His disciples) in order to pray in the face of the threatening, dark clouds. There He cries out to God in deepest agony of spirit (see Heb.5:7).

In His prayer He addresses God as “Father” (“Abba” being a familiar Aramaic word for “father”). This common, familial word reveals the intimacy in Jesus’ relationship with His father. Jesus then prays a prayer consisting of two main parts: asking and surrendering. In the first part, we see the humanity of Jesus as He cries out to have this cup of suffering removed from Him. In the second part, Jesus surrenders His will to the Father, asking that He would fulfil His perfect purposes through Jesus’ suffering and death. The first prayer is the “natural” or human prayer, whereas the second is the “supernatural” or divine prayer that is rooted in Jesus’ perfect understanding of the Father’s higher purposes both for Himself as well as for His disciples and many others.

The Father responds to Jesus’ prayer by sending an angel to strengthen Him (see verse 43). The disciples witnessed all these things, learning for themselves and their future trials how God supports and helps those who cry out to Him in their hour of trial.

After Jesus had finished praying, He returned to His sleeping disciples (verse 45-46), awakening them as He knew that His hour (*kairos*) had finally come. With divine strength and resolve, Jesus now goes out to meet His foes with serenity having prayed that God would receive glory through Jesus’ completing His work (see John 17: 4-5).

g) Jesus prays on the cross: Luke 23:34,46

The prayers that Jesus prayed while hanging on the cross are prayers that teach us not only how to pray but even more importantly, *the heart of God*. Praying effectually is inseparably linked with knowing God in truth. Thus the same Jesus who taught His disciples to pray for their enemies (Matt.5:44) now prays for those who are Satan's agents standing around the cross (see Luke 23:34). His prayer is not focused on His own pain though it would have been indescribable at that moment. Rather they were focused on the need that these people had for God's forgiveness.

Was this prayer just an expression of Jesus' perfect, unforgiving heart? Or was it in very truth a sincere prayer asking for the Father to forgive the sins of those who stood around His cross totally unaware of what they were participating in? At least one of the bystanders, a Roman soldier, had his eyes opened to the hidden glory of the One who had just breathed His last before his eyes, confessing: "Surely this was the Son of God" – see Matt.27:54; Mark 15:39. Probably there were others who also tasted new life as the fruit of Jesus' prayer.

The final prayer that Jesus prayed was His prayer of committal. Having completed the work that the Father had given to Him, He could now give Himself over into His Father's loving hands. In this prayer we learn that as death approaches, we may look upon the passage from this world into the world to come as a passage through which Jesus Himself will lead us, bringing us safely home in the presence of God. How blessed the man who departs this life as Jesus did with such a prayer of surrender, hope and anticipation on his lips.

2. Jesus' teaching by instruction

a) Jesus' teaching on the fundamentals of Christian prayer: Luke 11:1b-4

Jesus had been praying "*in a certain place.*" Seeing Jesus at prayer, His disciples asked Him to teach them to pray. Formerly some of His disciples had learnt to pray the prayers that John the Baptist taught his disciples. (See John 1:35-37.) Now Jesus' disciples want to learn their Rabbi's prayer. Jesus responds to their request by teaching

them what is commonly known as the Lord's prayer. (Note that Jesus taught this same prayer to His disciples on a different occasion. See Matt.6:9-13.)

Take note of the following elements of Jesus' prayer:

"Father" (v. 2)

The word, *Father*, is the most revolutionary truth in all Jesus' teaching concerning prayer. Through it, Jesus opens the eyes of His disciples to the glorious relationship they may enjoy with the infinite, eternal God. In the OT, the Jews addressed God with such words as: "O LORD, God of Israel" (1 Kings 8:23), or in this manner: "Praise be to you, O LORD, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting" (1 Chron.29:10). Only in Isaiah do we find a brief allusion to God as "Father" in the context of prayer. See Isaiah 63:16; 64:8. However, the understanding of "Father" in these verses relates to God's choosing and saving His people, Israel, when He "fathered" them and rescued them from their harsh slave-masters in Egypt.

In the OT, God's transcendence as the great, majestic and holy God is at the core of God's self-revelation. For Jesus' followers like Peter, Matthew and all the other disciples (all of them being Jews), Jesus' addressing God, His Father, as "ABBA" spoke of a very intimate relationship, almost too familiar for them as ordinary people to use.

What then was Jesus teaching His disciples when He taught them to address His Father as *Father*? Certainly He is not inferring some form of physical relationship (cf. the views of some religious groups who imply that God's Fatherhood involved Him in a sexual relationship with Mary with Jesus as the fruit of that relationship). Jesus is revealing the uniqueness, wonder and intimacy of the relationship between God and those who become His children through faith in His Son, Jesus – a relationship marked by love, obedience and submission.

After His resurrection, His disciples understood more about their sonship and God's Fatherhood. So when they addressed God as "our Father", they understood Him to be:

- * their Redeemer (who gave them life)
- * their Provider (who provided their daily bread and needs)
- * their Protector (who watched over their going out and coming in)

- * their Helper (who was able to help them in every need and problem)
- * their Counsellor, Encourager & Comforter (who guided and instructed His children in the way they should go)
- * their Lover (who loved them with a deep and passionate love and affection)

Following His teaching how they should now address God, Jesus then mentions two prayer requests that are centred upon God's desires and purposes. Only then He mentions prayer requests which focus upon our needs as human beings. Both are equally legitimate prayer requests though the order is of no small importance: first, God's interests, then man's.

"Hallowed by your name" (v.2)

In this phrase, Jesus teaches His disciples to acknowledge their Father in heaven as *the holy One*. (The English word "hallowed" comes from the root word "holy.") Thus Jesus instructs His followers to pray that God would lift high or exalt His name (i.e. His holy character and reputation), so that people on earth would reverence this Name as glorious and honourable, delighting in and regarding it with awe and above all other names that can be named in heaven or on earth, above all the names of gods or men. Jesus teaches that through our praying this prayer, God brings honour to His name and spreads His glorious reputation among believers and unbelievers.

"Your kingdom come" (v.2)

Jesus' teaching is rooted in the biblical truth that God is *King* (see Ps.24:7-10; 47). Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, as they submit to their Father's rule over them and over all His world, that He would bring to pass His righteous and just rule of peace on earth. While God as King has the power to accomplish whatever He pleases without needing any human assistance, nevertheless He has chosen to use the prayers of His people to bring His reign to fulfilment. We may ask the Father to cause His kingdom rule to enter the lives of individuals, families, churches, people groups, cities and nations. In this request God's mission to the nations is most evident.

As we move from the requests that focus on God's interests to those that focus on man's needs, we encounter the personal pronouns "*us*" and "*ours*". These pronouns underscore a very important truth in Jesus' teaching, viz. that Christian praying is both

for personal as well as for community needs, that we pray not just as individual believers but as members of a community or family. It is offering up prayers for oneself but also for others both those known to an individual believer as well as the many fellow-believers outside the individual's immediate family or church circle. For example, praying the prayer: "*Give us each day our daily bread*" as a member of God's worldwide family will mean that this prayer isn't just focused on the individual's personal need (though this is the obvious starting point) but also reaches out to encircle fellow-believers in other lands suffering severe deprivation from famine or poverty, unsure of where their next meal will come from. Jesus' teaching about prayer is rooted in God's love and compassion for all people. This dimension needs also to be taken seriously as we examine the wider implications in Jesus' teaching on prayer.

"Give us each day our daily bread" (v.3)

In this request, Jesus' teaching is rooted in God as the great *Shepherd* and Provider of all the needs of His creation and His people. He teaches His disciples to pray to God so that He might bless them with all that they need for life and sustenance.

Jesus teaches His disciples to ask in a very ordinary, everyday fashion: "Give us...." just like a child would make a request of his father or mother. God is not irritated by such basic requests but delights to hear the petitions of His children. See Prov.15:8b. Jesus also uses the words "each day" implying that His disciples should make requests to their loving, heavenly Father daily and continually, day after day. By using the words "our daily bread," Jesus teaches more than just a form for prayer but even more importantly that we are to trust God for our very basic human needs such as the food we eat as well as all our other needs. See also Matt.6:25-34. While the Scriptures teach us that we are to be diligent in working for a living to support ourselves and our families, praying this prayer is a repeated acknowledgement of our fundamental trust in the God who is both rich, generous and compassionate and who knows more than we do ourselves what our basic, human needs are. Cf. Phil.4:6, 19.

"Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us" (v.4)

In teaching His disciples to offer up this request, Jesus teaches them that God is their *Saviour*. We are sinners who turn from God's way in order to please ourselves, and so bring upon ourselves God's judgment and punishment. However, through this prayer,

Jesus invites His disciples to approach the Father asking for their sins to be forgiven. Cf. Heb.4:16 *“Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*

The word “forgive” would have been understood by Jesus’ disciples according to the many OT passages that speak about God’s forgiving the sinner. Note a few of the images used: wiping the record clean, burying sin in the deepest sea, the disappearance of the sin as mist disappears – see Psalm 103:8-12; Isaiah 43:25; Micah 7:19 etc. All such imagery indicates a total disappearance of the entire record of sin from God’s sight. But it did not stop there as Jesus’ disciples came to know their Lord as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

“Forgive” (a present, imperative verb form) indicates that Jesus teaches His disciples to pray this prayer continually, each day, whenever the Spirit convicts them of their sins, knowing that God is always willing to forgive them for all their sins and wrongdoings.

“Our sins” includes all forms of sins: both those that His disciples knowingly or unknowingly commit, both what they *do* as well as what they *say*, both what they do and also what they fail to do (sometimes referred to as “sins of commission and omission”), both sins of the heart and of the mind as well as sinful deeds. Jesus’ teaching covers praying for all forms of sin but not just in a general, vague sense but specifically. No matter what the sin may be, Jesus’ teaching assures His followers that as they make this request, the Father will forgive them all their sin.

However, in Jesus’ teaching about prayer, one condition is stated – the pray-er must be willing to forgive others who sin against them. Cf. Matt.6:12 *“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”* cf. Mark 11:25; Eph.4:32; Col.3:13. Jesus made clear that when a person refuses to forgive the one who has sinned against him, this shows that he is not yet aware of the hopeless state of his sinful heart in God’s sight. Thus a person’s unwillingness to forgive another removes the covering of God’s grace and leaves him exposed to His judgment instead of His mercy. See Matt.18: 21-35.

Jesus taught His disciples that whenever they pray asking God to forgive them his sins, they should examine their hearts and relationships to make sure that they are not

holding any grudges or resentments against any (i.e. loving them instead of withholding forgiveness – 1 Cor.3:5 “... *it keeps no record of wrongs*”) but have forgiven others for all their offences, sins and shortcomings against him.

“Lead us not into temptation” (v.4)

In this request, Jesus teaches His disciples to pray to their Father in heaven as their *Shield and Protector*. (Luke’s prayer does not include the second part of this request as found in Matthew’s Gospel, ch.6, v.13 = “... but deliver us from the evil one.”) Once again Jesus’ teaching is deeply rooted in the OT revelation of God as the One who watches over and guards His people. See Ps.121; also Pss.18; 46; 91 et al.

“Lead us....” refers to the fact that God the Shepherd leads His flock. This leading implies two directions: “away from” and “to” – away from evil and towards good. In this request, Jesus teaches His disciples to pray that their Father would rescue or deliver them from all temptation to do evil. Cf. James 1:13-17.

In some situations of life and ministry, Jesus’ followers face temptations of a different kind – the temptation to unbelief, discouragement, fear etc. Such situations may be related to sufferings and extreme trials. However, Jesus’ prayer: “Lead us not into temptation” is just as relevant in such adversities as Satan will always seek for an opportunity to use any tests against them, eg using persecution and suffering for the faith to break their will to keep persevering in the faith. See Mark 4:16-17.

b) Jesus’ teaching about bold, shameless praying: Luke 11:5-13

Following on immediately after His teaching on the Lord’s prayer, Jesus teaches another fundamental lesson about prayer. As with all of His parables, this parable highlights and focuses our attention on one principle teaching. It is, therefore, important to find this major focus in this parable concerning prayer and not to become side-tracked on the incidental details in the story.

Jesus' story would have been easily understood by His disciples as it connects very closely with everyday life in a Jewish home at that time. The essential details in the story are as follows:

- A householder/man is visited by his friend in the middle of the night after he and his children are all sound asleep. (V.5)
- This friend urgently needs bread to provide a meal for a friend (a traveller) who has unexpectedly arrived on his doorstep – he finds himself in the most embarrassing situation without any bread left in the house. So he pleads with his householder friend to lend him some bread. (V.6)
- The householder's immediate response was negative. He bluntly told this friend that it was already very late; what's more, he didn't want to get up and disturb his children who were already asleep. (V.7)
- Nevertheless after this initial negative response, the householder gets up and finds some bread for his friend, primarily because his friend had not be ashamed to ask for bread. (V.8)

The central word in this parable is “boldness” or “shamelessness” in v.8. This friend who came with the need did so unashamedly knowing that his request could not be turned down by his friend.

With this Jesus teaches His followers that they may bring their requests and needs to their Father in heaven (see v.2), boldly and unashamedly. If and when they do so, God will give them as much as they need (cf. “as much as he needs” – end of v.8).

This teaching then leads into Jesus' well-known exhortations on prayer: *“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.”* (vs.9-10) One point that cannot be missed in this context is that Jesus' disciples never need to feel hesitant about bringing all their needs to the Father, at any time of day or night, no matter how frequently. Jesus also underlines the promise that just as with the householder, so with the Father – He will graciously respond to their need – *“... and it will be given to you.”*

However, it should also be noted that Jesus' teaching concerning the Father's response in this context is a teaching "by contrast." Jesus is not comparing the householder's response to His Father's response to our pleadings – as if God's reaction at times to our requests is: "Please don't bother me. This is not the time to come with such needs!" Rather in stark *contrast* to this householder's response, the Father is never upset or bothered by our many requests, nor is He ever caught napping (see Psalm 121:3-4)! His ear is always open and attentive to the cries and prayers of His people (see Psalm 34:15,17; 145:18-19).

This truth becomes even clearer in Jesus' following words where He identifies the way that a human father will respond to the needs of his children. See vs.11-12. Jesus continues on with His teaching method "by contrast": "If you sinful fathers wouldn't think of giving a stone to a child who is asking for a fish, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to His children, in fact, the very best gift of all – His Holy Spirit. (V.13; cf. Matt.7:11 *"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!"*) It is not difficult to imagine that these statements of Jesus could even have elicited some laughter from His listeners. Certainly His message would never have been forgotten.

In Luke's account of this incident, he continues his focus upon the person and work of the Holy Spirit. It is important to allow Luke's account to speak for itself and not play down his emphasis upon the Holy Spirit by harmonising it with Matthew 7:11. Jesus teaches that the Father will give "good gifts" and "the Holy Spirit" to those who ask Him. With this teaching, Jesus encourages His followers to ask the Father to give them the Holy Spirit.

Points to note about Jesus' teaching about asking the Father for the Spirit:

- The verbs in the immediate teaching context in v.9 are present (continuous) tense verbs: continual asking and receiving, not one-off making requests and then receiving. This fact should indicate to us that Jesus' teaching about asking the Father for the Spirit cannot be identified with His later teaching regarding the Day of Pentecost when at that moment of time, they would be baptised with His Spirit. (see Acts 1:4-5)

- The context in which this verse occurs demands that we interpret this verse in relation to some special “need” that God’s people would have, which need would then be mediated to them through the help of the Spirit of God – such needs might include wisdom, love, courage, power, grace, discernment etc. All such needs arise in the everyday experience of God’s people, all of which they may ask for and receive through the Spirit’s help.
- Jesus’ teaching in v.13 and also His teaching in the immediate preceding verses underscores one central truth: If we ask, we receive; if we act independently or arrogantly and do not care to ask, then God may leave us to fend for ourselves. Applying this truth to asking for the Spirit of God both for ministry as well as personal needs, it then becomes clear that the more Jesus’ disciples ask God for the Spirit of wisdom or the Spirit of love or the Spirit of power et al, the more God’s blessings will be heaped upon them and those whom they have been called to serve.

c) Jesus’ teaching about persistence in prayer: Luke 18:1-8

Once again Jesus uses His story-telling method in teaching another important lesson about prayer. And as in the Luke 11 parable, so also with this parable – Jesus’ teaching contrasts the Father with a sinful human being, in this passage, with an unjust judge.

In v.1, Luke leaves these first century Gentile believers and readers in no doubt as to Jesus’ main point: *“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”* In a word: persistence or perseverance in prayer.

The main details in Jesus’ parable (vs.2-5):

- The two main players in this parable are: 1) An unjust and corrupt judge well known in the community for his evil ways – a man without fear for God or any other human being; and 2) a helpless, poor widow experiencing many heartaches and troubles from an opponent who kept threatening her survival. Here again those listening to Jesus’ teaching that day would have easily identified with such

situations – both a judge who could be easily “bought” by bribes and a poor widow lady totally powerless in the face of such an adversary.

- This widow brought her problem to this local judge but without any success. He ignored her, either because she would not nor could not offer him any bribes. However, she had one “weapon” that she used to get the judge’s attention and help – her persistence. She kept coming back to the judge until he relented and paid attention to her need, giving her the justice that she was seeking.

In this story and His application, Jesus highlights the needs of the poor, the powerless, the outcasts in society who have no human means to win the favour of corrupt rulers or judges. They have no recourse but to cry out to God since no one else is prepared to listen to their cries for help. (See v.7.) One can imagine that among His listeners that day there would have been many poor and lowly people. (Remember also that Luke’s Gospel expresses a particular concern for the little people of society.)

Jesus’ teaching then offers to such little people genuine hope. They may come to the Father in heaven with any burden assured that He will always turn His ear to listen to their cries.

Furthermore, Jesus makes vividly clear to His hearers that they should not give up when they do not experience immediate help for the troubles they encounter within an unjust society. While man may not listen to their cries, God will and in His time, they will receive justice (as well as the judge who has dealt with them unjustly!).

From v. 8, Jesus’ reference to His future coming underscores the fact that sometimes little people will only receive final justice then. (Cf. the teaching on faith in Hebrews 11 that one does not necessarily receive what he has believed for in this life but if he continues to wait patiently, he will certainly receive his reward when Jesus comes.)

However, Jesus’ teaching may be applied on a wider scale, not just to the so-called needy, little people in society. Certainly Jesus’ use of the parable “by contrast” needs to be noted, viz. that God stands “in contrast” to the evil, unjust judge who would only pay attention to the widow’s request after she had badgered him until he was worn out with her persistence. To imagine that Jesus teaches us that His people need to keep

persisting with their prayers because He only listens after they have kept knocking long enough for Him to listen to them. This view of God is certainly far from the revelation of the Father that Jesus taught or that is found throughout Scripture.

Jesus' teaching about persistence cannot be related to a deafness or unwillingness on *His* part to hear us the first time we bring a request to Him. Rather the persistence has to do with *us* and our need to keep asking as an act of faith. If praying was little more than firing requests heavenwards with an expectation (a demand?) that God will jump to attention and give instantly and exactly what is being asked, then praying would be totally focused on "me"/"us", not on Him. Whereas the revelation of Scripture is that God is God. In Jesus' teaching, prayer is never taught as a form of manipulation of the Divine by man but rather as an expression of the beautiful relationship a child of God may enjoy with his/her heavenly Father.

It is ultimately God's prerogative to answer prayer when and how He chooses. Yet in making such a statement, it would also be far off the mark to teach that persistence in praying about certain matters is little more than a long, extended pleading with God in order to "twist His arm!" God as Father is revealed as a most loving, gracious, compassionate and caring Father who gives generously from His storehouse of blessings. Man's persistence in prayer is rather a sign of seriousness and earnestness in desiring and longing after the very thing that is being asking for, eg the salvation of a parent or close friend.

While we may believe according to God's promise in 1 John 5:14-15 that He has already heard our prayers and will give us what we have asked according to His will, nevertheless we will grow and mature in character through waiting for the answer to our requests. Of one thing we can be sure from the wider teaching of Scripture, apart from God's desire to show us how faithfully He is in answering our prayers, an even greater desire of His heart is to mature us in our faith and trust in Him. For this reason, we are to persevere in our praying, learning to grow in our love for and trust in our gracious, heavenly Father's perfect knowledge and wisdom to do for us in answer to our prayers whatever is for our good and for His glory.

d) Jesus' teaching about praying in the face of the coming trials: Luke 21:36

This brief teaching reference to prayer in Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God is given in the final hours before He was taken away to be crucified. (See Luke 22:1ff.) In Luke 21 Jesus addresses some very serious issues about the future trials and tribulations that His followers would face. (See Luke 21:5-28.) He then adds His words of promise, encouragement and warning – see vs.31-35.

Jesus' teaching or focus on prayer in this passage falls within this context of encouragement. It is significant to note that Jesus connects prayer to the coming trials and sufferings of His people before His second coming. His teaching in v.36 is to the point: *“Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”*

Special emphases:

- Jesus links praying with watchfulness – *“Be always on the watch....”* This link is also found in other NT passages (eg 1 Peter 5:8-9; Rom.13:12-14). Biblical praying is powerful but praying is not the only thing that Christians are taught to do. Jesus teaches His disciples to pray *and* to keep vigilant lest their faith grow cold or they will lose heart whenever they encounter trials and sufferings. (Cf. Matt.13:20-21; 24:12; 26:41.)
- Jesus teaches that through praying certain troubles and sufferings are prevented from touching the believer's life – *“...and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen....”* Certainly praying *in the midst of* and *through* sufferings is an integral part of Jesus' teaching on prayer. So this Scripture must be kept in balance with those Scriptures that remind the believer that he is to pray as Jesus did – in the face of and throughout His sufferings. Cf. Matt.5:10-12. But in this particular Scripture, Jesus teaches that there are times when through the prayers of His people God saves them from harsh and bitter sufferings.
- Jesus links praying with the moment the believer will stand before the Lord Jesus as his/her Judge – *“and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”* (Cf. 2 Cor.5:10.) “Stand” in this verse does not refer to the great and terrible Day of God's wrath when evil-doers will be cast into outer darkness forever. Rather this prayer goes hand in hand with the need to live a godly, holy life in this world

as we wait for the coming of our Lord Jesus. In other passages, we read Jesus' warnings to His listeners who take it for granted that because they belong to God's holy nation (i.e. Israel), they will be saved. See Matt.7:21-27. They see no need to be concerned about how they live in this world. For the true believer, praying to remain standing at the coming judgement is related to his staying alert to God's ways, in contrast to the person who falls into spiritual indifference and negligence. (Cf. Heb.2:1; 3:12-13.)

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