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How to Get Your Prayers Answered

Luke 11:1-13

I want to start with a riddle this morning. See if you can tell me what a vending machine, a vegetable garden, and prayer have in common? That's fairly easy, isn't it? The answer is: Each one is something we do expecting a return on our investment! If I put my quarters in a vending machine, I expect to get a candy bar or soda in return, and if I don't, how likely will I be to put another quarter in that machine? I won't unless I'm extremely hungry or thirsty, and then I might try one more time, but if I still don't get anything for my money, you can forget it. I'm not going to trust that machine again. And the same thing is true of a vegetable garden. If I take the time to till the ground, plant the seeds, and keep it weeded and well watered, I expect to enjoy fresh strawberries, green beans, and tomatoes when the time for harvesting comes. Am I right? Otherwise, how likely is it I'll plant another garden next year? Chances are I won't because it takes an enormous amount of time and energy to plant a vegetable garden, which means I do these things not for the thrill of doing them—hearing my quarters rattle around in the vending machine or getting down on my hands and knees to weed the garden. We do them expecting a return on our investment.

That's also the point of our study this morning—what motivates a child of God to pray is the expectation that something will happen as a result of it and if it does not, if I keep praying and praying with no effect, then gradually like a tire with a slow leak, my enthusiasm begins to fade and my commitment to prayer starts to falter. Don't misunderstand! I enjoy sitting at the feet of Jesus and studying His Word, but if I invest part of that time in prayer, pouring out my heart to Him, and there's no evidence that He hears me, then how likely am I to keep at it? Not likely at all because one of the primary purposes of prayer is to see things change—ourselves, our circumstances, those we love. But if nothing happens as a result, I start to wonder, "Why bother?" And the same thing is true of us as a whole! For example, one of my dreams for our church family is that we'll one day be a true house of prayer, where we not only believe in prayer and have ministries devoted to prayer but where prayer is such an integral part of our life as a church that everything we do is saturated with and empowered by prayer. But the point is: We'll never make the effort to do so if we aren't convinced that prayer will make a difference, which brings us to our passage for this morning, if you'll open your Bible with me to Luke chapter 11. Our passage opens with Jesus praying in a certain place, and when He finishes, one of His disciples says to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."

Jesus was a man of prayer, and His disciple knew it and wanted to be like Him, not just for the sake of being like their Master, but because of the incredible things that happened whenever He prayed. He prayed at His baptism and they saw heaven open and the Spirit of God descending on Him like a dove. He prayed before dividing the 5 loaves and two fishes and they saw Him feed 20,000 people with the results. He prayed at the tomb of Lazarus and they saw Him bring a man back to life who'd been dead 4 days! The reason they wanted a seminar on prayer was because of the amazing things that happened

when Jesus prayed, and they wanted to experience the same thing themselves. Don't you? So He takes them aside in this passage and shares several guidelines to make their prayers more effective and I believe, as we listen in on their conversation, we can learn the same things ourselves. The passage begins with Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer, which is a little shorter than Matthew's version and is followed by a parable about the importance of persisting in prayer, which Jesus encourages us to do reminding us that the reason God answers our prayer is because He's a good father who takes joy in meeting His children's needs. So, for those who like to follow an outline, let me suggest 3 guidelines, based on what He teaches them, for getting our prayers answered, and the first guideline is to—

1. Be Childlike in Your Praying.

"He said to them," verse 2, "When you pray, say, 'Father.'" I don't know if you realize it, but that one word introduced a revolutionary, new way of praying, based on our relationship with God, not as His creatures or servants, but as His children which is something no other religion in the world offers. Hinduism and Buddhism believe in an impersonal god who cannot be known, like the concept of the Force introduced by George Lucas in "Star Wars." Judaism, which is true in as much as it teaches, but it denies that God has a Son or that we can approach Him as Father. Islam agrees. God has no Son, nor is there any way to know where you stand with Him unless you're willing to die as a martyr. Only Jesus gives us the right to call God our Father. John writes, "He came to His own people, and they did not receive Him, but to whoever did receive Him, He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name." So we come boldly into His presence knowing that He loves us and asking Him for grace to help in time of need.

All of the requests that follow are childlike petitions intended to deepen our relationship with our Heavenly Father. Say, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come," and some versions add, "your will be done on earth as in heaven." This is an expression of our new desires as God's children. Those of you who love Jesus, but are still thinking of yourselves and other believers as hopelessly depraved sinners who can't be trusted to do what's right without somebody looking over your shoulder ready to pounce on you if you make a mistake, don't yet appreciate who we are in Christ. The Bible says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature." Old things have passed away; all things are becoming new, which includes a new desire to do what we never could before, and that's to please our Heavenly Father in everything we do. You don't have to beat that into a child of God. That's something we're born again with. Jesus is simply encouraging us to make that the motive for our praying from now on. Pray for God's name to be glorified and His will to be done because if that's your motive in praying, 1 John 5:14 promises, "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." We pray with a new desire and dependence on God, saying, "Give us each day our daily bread." This is the principle taught to those going through recovery which, I might add, includes us all! We're all enrolled in a recovery program from sin and the first lesson is: "One day at a time." That's how God gives us life. So that's how we need to live it—depending on Him one day at a time for everything we need. Let me ask you. How many of you have ever seen a sparrow pushing a plow, planting a garden, or building a barn to store his crops? No one has, Jesus said. And yet, your Heavenly Father feeds them, and aren't you worth much more than they, o ye of little faith?" Of course you are! You're a person made in the image of God for whom Christ died! So we don't worry anymore. We pray trusting Him to care for us one day at a time.

And we pray with a new love, quick to seek forgiveness when we hurt others and even quicker to grant it to them, remembering how much God has forgiven us!

One of the great Christian gentlemen of American history was General Robert E. Lee who, following the Civil War, worked hard to bring unity to a bitterly divided nation. Did you know, for example, that Arlington National Cemetery was built on his family's property, which was confiscated from him during the war? But he never became bitter about it, nor did he try to reclaim it after the war. Instead, he urged his fellow Southerners to forget the past and work for peace. On one occasion, he was approached by a Southern belle who hoped to gain his sympathy by pointing to an oak tree that had stood in her yard for several generations, but whose branches had all been blown off by the union artillery. His advice to her: "My dear Madam, cut it down and forget it." Don't you love it? That's what we need to do with any bitterness that's grown up in our hearts. We need to cut it down and forget it forever!

We have a new desire, a new dependence, a new love, and a new humility that makes us pray, "And do not lead us into temptation," because we know we could give in to it, but as some versions add, "deliver us from the evil one." It's the prayer of a child crying out to her father for protection in a time of fear. Or as one of my professors used to warn us cocky young seminary students, "Little ships should stay close to the shore." The Lord's Prayer is a simple, yet very profound prayer, expressing all the basic needs of a child of God. And what Jesus is teaching us through it is to be childlike in our praying, because that's what we are—children of the Most High God! That's the first secret to answered prayer, and the second guideline follows in verse 4, where Jesus says we should also—

2. Be Persistent in Your Praying.

"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.'"" The Greek word for "boldness" is stronger than our English word. A better translation is "shamelessness or "audacity." It's the picture of a person who, like a child pestering his mother, doesn't feel even a twinge of guilt asking for what he wants. In many ways, we Americans are a very polite people who would never think of waking somebody up in the middle of the night to ask for something as trivial as a loaf of bread. And that's probably wise if you want to have any friends! In fact, most of us are so polite that, unless it's a life-or-death emergency, we don't even call people on the phone after 9:00 or 10:00 o'clock at night for fear that they've gone to bed and we'll wake them. We would rather send our guest to bed hungry than risk offending someone that way.

But not every culture thinks like that. That was one of the first things we had to get used to about living in Romania—the fact that Romanians stay up later than we do and never think twice about dropping by or calling you on the phone at 11 o'clock at night. We didn't like that at all! But after trying to break 23 million people of their bad habits, we finally decided that we were the ones who'd have to change, not them!

But you say, "Doesn't it irritate God to be pestered like that?" No. That's one way the culture of heaven differs from that of earth. Our Father in Heaven actually likes us to pester Him with our

prayers. If you doubt that, notice the moral of the story in verse 9. This is from the New Living Translation which is actually the best translation of this verse because, as it indicates, each one of these verbs is in the present tense calling for ongoing, persistent action. “And so I tell you,” Jesus says, “Keep on asking and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep on knocking and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” But you say, “If He’s such a good father, why make us wait? Why not answer us right away? And I have two good answers to that question. First, as you’ll soon see in verse 11, sometimes what we’re foolishly asking for is a scorpion, when what we need is an egg, and we need to figure that out. So instead of resenting it when we have to wait, what we ought to do is trust His judgment and ask Him what He is trying to teach us. And the second reason He makes us keep asking Him is to make us develop our relationship with Him. Most of us, if we’re honest, will admit that if we didn’t have needs, we might not spend any time in prayer. So He makes us persist in our praying, so that we don’t miss out on the greatest gift of all, and that’s spending time in the presence of the God who loves us.

Dee Duke shared a terrific example in his prayer seminar when he was with us a few years ago. He told about the time his Uncle John visited their family when he was just a boy. He was the kind of uncle every kid loves—funny, friendly, willing to take time to play catch or go fishing with him. But it wasn’t long before he noticed something unusual about his Uncle John. He jingled when he walked because his pockets were full of nickels. Why his pockets were full of nickels, Dee didn’t know. But he figured with that many nickels, he wouldn’t mind sharing one. So he asked him, “Uncle John, can I have a nickel?” “Sure,” he said and handed him a shiny new nickel. “Well, that worked,” he figured. So it wasn’t long before he was back asking for another one. And at first, he felt sheepish about it, but his uncle seemed so happy to oblige him, he soon found himself asking him for nickels all day long.

But then he got to thinking, “Why does Uncle John carry all those nickels around in his pocket?” So he asked him, and his answer was, “Well, I know how boys are—busy doing lots of things, and I was afraid when I came to visit, you wouldn’t have time for your uncle. So I thought, “Maybe if I fill my pockets with nickels and give you one every once in awhile, maybe you’d have a little more time for me.” “Well, I hate to keep asking you,” Dee said. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you give me all the nickels right now? Then I won’t have to bother you anymore.” “No,” his uncle said. “I kind of like it the way it is right now. Besides, if I gave you all the nickels right now, you might forget about your old uncle, and I wouldn’t like that at all. So let’s just keep what we’re doing. Whenever you want a nickel, all you have to do is ask me for it, and I’ll be glad to give you another one.”

So it is with our Heavenly Father. Sometimes He makes us wait because what we’re asking for isn’t healthy for us. And there are also times when He makes us keep asking, so we don’t neglect our relationship with Him. He wants us to be childlike in our praying. He wants us to be persistent in our praying. And finally, in verse 11, Jesus shifts from the picture of a grumpy friend to the image of a loving Father, urging us to—

3. Be Confident in Your Praying.

Because God is not the grumpy friend or neighbor in our parable! He’s more caring than any father you’ve ever met. Jesus continues, “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?” In the deserts of Israel, there were

scorpions light yellow in color that would roll up in a ball when attacked and look something like an egg. So the question is: If your son said to you, “Daddy, I’m hungry. Can I have an egg?” would you play a trick on him by handing him a scorpion rolled up in a ball? Of course not! No one in his right mind would do anything that evil! Jesus concludes, “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?” Our children asked me for a lot of things growing up. What about yours? They asked me for food and clothes, birthday parties and toys, help buying a car, money for their weddings, and the reason they asked me, as imperfect as I am, is because they trust me, that when they ask for something good, I’ll do my best to give it to them. That brings us full circle to where we began this morning, the need for childlike confidence in our Heavenly Father who answers our prayers, and why? There’s only one reason, Jesus says, and it’s very simple. He answers our prayers because He is good!

But did you notice the twist here at the end of Luke’s version of this story? In Matthew’s version, Jesus finishes by saying, “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 here in Luke, He switches things up and says, “But if you 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?” And at first, you wonder, “Why does He say it like that?” But once you stop and realize what He’s actually saying, you realize what a tremendous promise this is! Instead of gifts, He’s promising us the Giver! And instead of resources, He’s promising the Infinite Source of everything good and beautiful! It’d be like asking for a drink and being given a whole spring of cool, refreshing water or asking for a fish and being given a whole trout farm instead! That’s how good God is and why we can be confident when we pray to Him—because He not only gives us what we need, He gives us Himself in the Person of the Holy Spirit, who’s the source of every good gift that you and I have ever been given. Not only has He given us everything we need for life and godliness but do you realize that He’s also the source of every good thing that’s happened to you since the moment you met Christ? He gave you new life, indwelt you, gave you spiritual gifts, sealed you in Christ for all of eternity, and now empowers you, prays for you and gives you the faith to keep asking, seeking, and knocking until the door is opened and you get what you need.

So let’s pray—confidently and persistently as children of the Most High King! Last week I made these little books available to those who want to develop a daily habit of spending time in God’s presence. It’s called 7 Minutes with God because what it offers is a simple and doable plan for spending a few minutes every day in Bible reading and prayer. If you didn’t get one last week, you can find a copy in the back of the seat in front of you, and I encourage you to take one home with you today as a tool to help you develop a consistent and persistent daily time of prayer. And in weeks to come you’re going to hear a lot more about how we hope to make prayer a more powerful part of our church life. But before I finish, I want to take a moment to share something that’s been heavy on my heart the last few months, not only because of the difficulty it presents for our ministries, but in hopes that it doesn’t represent a loss of passion and love for our church. You’ll remember Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” and I’m concerned because ever since the beginning of the year, we’ve been falling farther and farther behind in our giving. That isn’t something we talk a lot about here at FBC, but I want to share it with you this morning as a matter of prayer. Thanks to good money management on the part of our leadership team, we’ve been able to cut back on expenditures and only borrow a little bit from our saving account. But as of last Sunday, we were \$72,000 (that’s 11%) behind our budget for the year. The national average is 11%. And with 6 weeks left until the end of the

fiscal year, we can't afford to fall any farther behind. Because at this point, all that is left to cut is staff or missions, which make up 80% of our budget, and nobody wants to do that. I should add that like many of you, our staff is going without increases in salaries for the second year in a row. So it isn't that we're being extravagant in our spending.

And I know that many of you are facing similar shortfalls yourselves. Some of you are out of work. Others of you aren't getting the hours you need or have had to take a cut in pay. And the last thing I want to do is add to your stress load. Instead, what we hope to do is offer some relief from the pressure you you're feeling. One thing we're beginning this coming Wednesday evening is another session of "Financial Peace University" with Dave Ramsey, which is intended to help you make the most of the money you have—how to budget wisely, find better deals when making expenditures, and how to plan for the future. That's one thing, and I hope several of you will take advantage of it. If there's ever a time when it's important to get out of debt and stay out of debt, it's when the economy is hurting, like it is right now. And the second thing I plan to do, starting two weeks from today, is to present a two-part series on Sunday morning called "How to Survive a Money Crunch." The first message focuses on "Contentment and Confidence in Crisis," and the second message is "God's Plan for Financial Freedom." Both of them are going to be very practical and encouraging, and I hope you'll join us for both of them.

But there are also two things you can do to help us get through this time as a church family: 1) For those of you with the ability to give a little more than you are right now, would you consider increasing your giving a percent or two in the months ahead? I read the other day that the average amount given by churchgoers in America is 2.2% of their income, which is more than people in other parts of the world tend to give. For example, if you give 2% of your income right now, would you consider giving 3% this next year? Or if you usually give 5%, would you consider giving 6% this next year? Our practice has always been to give a tithe or 10% of our income, but over the last few years, God has blessed us and we've been able to give 12% of our income, and we're hoping in the year ahead to be able to increase that to 13% of our income. But if you're able to do that and you're willing to share it with our leadership team—anonously, if you prefer—we want to ask you to fill out a commitment card like this again this year to give us an idea of what our contributions will be in the year ahead. And the other way you can help us, and I want to invite you to do so right now as we come to the end of our service, is to ask God to open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing on us all.