

*The Big Ask*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*Psalm 61, Colossians 4:2-6, Luke 11:1-13*

Our third Scripture reading is from Luke 11:1-13. Listen now for God's Word. "One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just 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. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation." 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. So I say to you: 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. 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? 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!"

My good friend and Old Testament professor Dr. Stone recently took a trip to Israel. He talked about how the streets in Jerusalem are incredibly narrow, and how in various parts of the city Jews and Christians and Muslims freely intermingle. On the first day of his trip, he and his fellow travelers went down one particular street that was swarming right at "rush hour." There were no cars, but the crowding was enough to give you claustrophobia. And in the midst of this was loud, obnoxious yelling back and forth in Hebrew and Arabic. He was scared that they'd gotten somehow into the middle of a riot. They got back to their hotel, relieved. But each day, they had to go down this same road to get to the school for classes. Same time, same place, same people, shouting this and that and the other thing. They pushed through their fear. Gradually, Dr. Stone noticed something. These people might be yelling at the top of their lungs, but they weren't angry. He noticed Arabs and Jews nodding at each other, acknowledging each other, in the midst of the ranting. This was simply part of living with three very different cultures in a tiny, tiny space. From then on, every time he went down this road he smiled and nodded too. He had learned that in the midst of the animosity of the Middle East, there was still dialogue...there was still conversation and relationship amongst supposed enemies in the most unlikely of places. He just had to learn how to communicate in a culture that was foreign to Him.

Last week, we learned that when we rest in God, we come closer to Him and can do the things He asks of us. One way we can rest in Him is through prayer. But for most of us, it's easier to take on another culture than to communicate with God. Prayer is something we have a hard time doing. It feels like a foreign language, and often, we say prayers that we learned as children. They haven't grown up along with us. But Jesus prayed all the time, and He taught His disciples to pray too. What we can learn from Jesus can make the difference between feeling like we're talking to the ceiling and knowing we've had a real conversation with God.

The disciples felt the same way we do. Clearly, some of them wanted to get closer to God the Father just like Jesus did, but they weren't sure how. It wasn't that people in their culture didn't pray; in fact, they prayed all the time, but it didn't get them closer to God. Yet they saw Jesus really praying and really communicating with God. So they asked Him about it. And that's incredibly cool, because that's really the whole point of the passage...God wants us to talk to Him and ask Him things in prayer! Jesus' disciple asked, and he received!

Before we even get into the heart of the prayer, we learn two things from the prayer's style and form. The first thing we learn is that prayer is not rote. At first, it's easy to think that Jesus is giving us a specific prayer to pray because he says, "When you pray, say this." But he's developing a concept, a way to pray rather than an exact prayer that must be followed. How do we know this? It's because it's not the Lord's Prayer, not as we know it! Matthew has some lines that Luke doesn't have, and neither one has the ending we now use. Mark and John never mention it at all. Jesus probably taught His disciples how to pray numerous times, which explains the differences. But Jesus taught it as an example rather than as an absolute; it's not intended to be a substitute for genuine conversation with God.

The problem with rote prayers is that they become subconscious. We don't think about them any more. Many of us are familiar with the rosary that Catholics pray by memory, but in our own saying of the Lord's Prayer, it's easy for us to not actually think about it. We could say it in our sleep. The only time we really think about it is when we're in somebody else's church and we listen for whether we're supposed to say "debts" or "trespasses" so we don't embarrass ourselves. But when we say any prayer, whether at grace over a meal or here when we say the Lord's Prayer, and don't think about it, it's not building a relationship. If I came up to you after service and said, "Hello hi how are you glad to see you don't you look great today gotta go see ya," that's not a relationship builder, is it? And I'd be dumb to think it was!

So why do we say it every week? Part of it is tradition; most Christian churches have done it for centuries. But beyond that, Jesus taught this prayer to the community. When Jesus said, "When you pray," in the Greek, the "you" is plural...as we said down in Kentucky, "ya'll." God wants us to pray together. In the early church, that's what they did...they met and prayed together in a personal way, and hopefully in the next few months we'll start doing this together in small groups. This prayer is also something that binds us with all Christians around the world. When we pray, we don't pray for ourselves alone, but for and with other Christians. So when we do pray this or any other prayer in a service together, let it be real. If you start praying it and something strikes you and you need to be quiet before God, do it. It's not a magic formula. It's a way to bring us closer to God and to each other as a church. Let it be that for you.

What else does the form teach us? It teaches that simplicity and directness and honesty matter. In Jesus' day, Jewish prayers were long. Jewish men learned the 18 Benedictions, which were 18 individual prayers they said three times a day. They aren't bad prayers, but they were longwinded. It would take the average person 10-15 minutes to say them. But God doesn't demand long prayers from us. Sometimes we are in a prayer session and we bring many requests to God as we remember people and situations that need God's intervention. Praying for a long time isn't a problem. But when it's just words upon words, that's not relationship either.

Have you ever been with somebody who just didn't know when to shut up? Sometimes you just want to scream, "Get to the point!" You might just think that on Sunday mornings! God wants us to talk to Him like we would a friend. Like we talked about last week, when God knows you personally, there's nothing to hide any more. There's no reason to hide behind big words or long speeches. When you are a true Christian, you can approach Him with your requests without shame because God knows every sin you've committed, and yet He has chosen instead to see you as pure and sinless because of the sacrifice His son Jesus made on the cross.

So what should we learn from the example Jesus taught? First, we have the privilege to call God "Father." In Jewish tradition, God was occasionally called Father, but only as the Father of the nation of Israel. He wasn't someone you could address like your own dad. But Jesus knew the Father personally, and when we become God's children through repentance and faith in Jesus, He becomes our own Father too. He's not distant, He's not some pie-in-the-sky figure, He's real and He's relational. This is a huge change in the way we think about God. As hard as it might be to imagine, the Almighty God, the creator of the universe, the perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God, is our Dad! And if our Dad is all those things, we can rely on Him, we can find comfort in Him, and we can tell others that he wants to be their Father too.

That said, while we call God Father or even Dad, His name is something that we honor. The prayer says that God's name is to be hallowed. His name is holy; it's set apart. Nobody else can be called God. And God's name means something important. We honor God's name because it stands for His personal identity. If you went around saying, "Pastor Jason is this great guy who serves the poor and gives great sermons and feeds baby kittens," you'd be honoring my name! So when we pray, Jesus is directing us to show God's person, His name, honor in the same way. We might tell Him what we are thankful about, the ways we have seen His goodness at work. It might be as simply as thanking Him for giving us another day to worship Him. It's what you can say that honors Him. And when we ask for God's name to be hallowed, we say that we intend to use it properly...we honor it. We don't use it lightly or flippantly, not any possible name, not God, not Jesus. The Bible teaches us that we will be held liable for every careless word we utter, including the profaning of God's name. We want God's name to be honored and set above every other name! So when we pray this, we claim this for our lives too, that we will honor God and make His name known above all others.

The next phrase is simple: "your kingdom come." This means we should pray for God to be on the move so that His plans and His goals happen! Whatever else we ask, whatever else we say to God, it's ultimately His will that should dominate. A lot of the time when I pray, I have no clue what I should be asking for. A lot of you have expressed your sympathies to my family about my grandmother's death this week, which was very thoughtful. She was 101, and for the last few months she rarely got out of bed. I prayed for her salvation, I prayed for God's comfort...but could I legitimately pray for God's healing? I had no idea if her living longer would have just prolonged her suffering. But when pray first for God's desires, then even when we pray for things we don't understand, we have acknowledged that God is the only One who really knows the very best way to answer our prayers.

And what's more, Jesus is showing us in this simple phrase that our first prayers probably shouldn't be about healing or personal issues at all. They're important, but not as important as what God wants to accomplish in the world. God's desire is to bring every last person who would come to Him to eternal salvation! There are six billion plus people in the world God desires to save! So as we see His plans unfolding, our first prayers should be for His Kingdom unfolding, for missionaries spreading the Gospel, for pastors leading God's people, for ourselves to be faithful witnesses and evangelists so that more people might enter into God's Kingdom! When we pray first for God's Kingdom to come, it puts everything else in the right perspective.

The next phrase is, "give us each day our daily bread." This is the first big ask in the prayer about our need, our basics. There are two parts to it. First, it means that when we pray, we're praying that we would be given what we need to live, not everything we'd love to have. Some Christians believe that God will just pour down material riches if you ask Him...and while God might be pleased to bless you with wealth to use towards building His Kingdom, there is no biblical mandate for it. But God does want us to ask Him for the things we truly need. The second part is that we're asking for God to do it for us each day. God wants us to plan wisely for the future, but He wants to make it clear that *our* long-term plans aren't what's important – *He* is our long-term plan. In this prayer, we acknowledge that all our plans and hopes and dreams for the future are wrapped up in God's providence and His provision.

The next to last phrase in the prayer is "forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." This is the only section in the prayer that makes a specific claim about those of us who are praying. We know that Jesus came to forgive sin and to offer eternal life to us, and that eternal life begins now in the transformation of our hearts and lives. A clear sign of that transformation is the willingness and power to forgive others. If we can't make this claim, if we harbor unforgiveness against others, we need to look honestly at ourselves and see if we truly believe or not. That's not to say that it's easy to forgive. Some of us have been deeply scarred by the things other people have done to us. For someone who's been victimized, it might take a lifetime of growth in Christ to be able to forgive honestly. But frankly, many of us don't forgive others for casual slights, let alone major sins. Our faith in Christ is proven when we are willing to repent of the sin of unforgiveness. When we pray, Jesus tells us to ask for forgiveness and to ask God to clean out the corners of our lives where unforgiveness hides so we can forgive others.

The prayer ends with "lead us not into temptation." Now can God, who hates sin and doesn't want anyone to sin, lead someone into temptation? I believe the answer is no. This is a phrase that has been misunderstood for a long time. While this is a valid translation, it can also be translated, "don't bring us to a time of trial." It's true that we want to avoid temptations to sin and should stay as far away from sin as possible, and it's good to pray to God that we might not fall into temptations. Deciding we love a sin more than we love God can wreck our faith. But most of the time, Christians don't lose faith over sins; we lose faith through trials. When we lose our job and can't find the money to pay the bills or when we have a prolonged illness or when we face the anger of our friends or family because of our faith, we start to question if God does exist or that He cares. Trials can strengthen our faith, but if we are unprepared for them, they can break us.

Think about Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times because he wasn't ready for the persecution that knowing Christ can bring. Jesus tells us to pray that God would not bring us to a point of trial, not because God can't see us through it, but because we are weak and frail. Even those of us who are strong in faith tremble at the thought of true persecution like what believers around the world face. Jesus tells us to ask God to spare us any trial more difficult than we can handle and to see us through the trials that will make us stronger in our faith.

So why do we pray? If God knows everything about us, all our needs and our desires and our hopes and fears, why do we have to say anything? It's because God wants to talk with us. We know that our children need food and clothing and shelter; that's no surprise. But we talk with our children all the time so that they know we love them and so we can build a true relationship with them. God is the same way, and God wants to give His children good gifts when we ask Him! The truth is, when we ask Him for the basics, He often does give us far more than what we ever ask! In the parable this morning, this guy gets out of bed and wakes up his children in the middle of the night to help his pal, not because he's a great friend himself but because of his friend's boldness and persistence. If that's the case, then God, the perfect friend and perfect father, is going to give us everything we need and more when we ask! We pray because it builds relationship, and we pray because God will supply us with everything we need.

This also shows us that we need to pray boldly for the things we believe will build God's Kingdom. God is ready to pour out His mercies on us if we will trust in Him. Jesus taught in Matthew and Mark that some things are humanly impossible, but that with God all things are possible. With that kind of power behind us, we can be confident that God can and will do whatever it takes to bring about His Kingdom. Many years ago now, a man by the name of George Dantzig was in graduate school at Berkeley. He got to his statistics class late one day and his professor had written two problems on the board. Assuming they were homework, George wrote them down to do later. He found them really difficult, but he figured that he had missed some key to them in the earlier part of the class. He turned them in several days later, expecting he'd be marked down for getting them in late. But in a few weeks, his professor came to him in a tizzy. It turned out that the problems weren't homework; they were two famous unsolved problems in statistics. George didn't know that it was supposedly impossible to find the answers, so he found them! Over the years the story has been changed and exaggerated and even transformed into the early plot of the film **Good Will Hunting**. If *we* can find solutions to the seemingly impossible, then we can rely on *God* to solve the genuinely impossible. Jesus teaches us to pray with conviction and courage. God wants to answer us. Sometimes, if our prayers are not what we genuinely need, He says "no" or "wait." But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't ask with expectation, because God wants to give us the blessings of His Kingdom.

So this week, I challenge you: pray. Pray with all you've got. Use this passage as a guide. I've printed copies of the things we've talked about for you that will be outside the doors as you go to the Fellowship Hall or the greeting area. Make the time to really talk to Him. God wants to reveal Himself to you in prayer, that you might really know Him as your Father, and know that He hears, He listens, and He wants to respond. So ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened for you. Let's pray.