

WPC  
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Shameless in Prayer  
Luke 11:1-13; Luke 18:1-8

*[Show clip from Bruce Almighty – getting everything we pray for]*

Prayer is a problem for many people. I know there are seasons in my life when I struggle to pray consistently. Does God really hear my prayer? Why does God answer some prayers for healing and not others? What's the right way to pray? When's the right time to pray?

Earl Palmer says that there are two right times to pray: when we feel like it, and when we don't feel like it. As Christians, prayer is a fundamental part of the life of faith.

The problem, says Tom Long, is not only that we're uncertain about prayer, but we have the good sense to know that, when we pray, we're really putting our faith on the line. Is there a God or not? If there is a God, does God listen? Does God care enough to hear and respond?

Is it any wonder the disciples approach Jesus and ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (11:1)

“Lord, teach us to pray.” That’s a request I think most of us can relate to. I know I’m right there with the disciples, saying, “Lord, this is something I have to learn, too.”

And Jesus responds, “Everyone who asks receives, the one who seeks finds, and the one who knocks gets in the door.”

What?!? Is Jesus serious? Does Jesus really expect anyone to believe those words?

Jana Childers wonders, “Ask, and it shall be given you??” How could Jesus have said such a thing? How could those words be on the pages of Holy Scripture? “Ask, and it shall be given you?” Could there be anything that’s less true? Could there be anything that flies in the face of our experience? “Ask, and it shall be given to you?”

“If it were true, of course, all 8 year old girls would be braiding pink satin ribbons into the tails of their very own ponies.” If it were true, all children would be going to bed at night in a safe place with full tummies and a loving hug. If it were true, all cancer patients would go into immediate remission.

“Ask, and it shall be given you...” can be a mean thing, perhaps even an obscene thing, to say to a world whose recent history includes the Holocaust, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and earthquakes this year in Haiti,

Chile, China. Why then is it here? What could Jesus have possibly meant when he said, “Ask, and it shall be given you?”

Some people believe Jesus is only talking about the spiritually elite, those Christians who have attained a level of spiritual maturity after many long years of discipleship, but the disciples Jesus is addressing are anything but the spiritually elite. How can you be considered to be spiritually elite when you have to ask how to pray?

Others believe maybe Jesus is talking about the end of time, when God’s kingdom has fully come into being, but again it’s difficult to make that case from this passage. Notice v. 11: “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? If your child asks for an egg, will you give a scorpion?” That’s not an end of time statement. That’s a here and now statement.

And there are those who think maybe Jesus means if you ask for something according to God’s will, you will get what you ask for. That makes some sense. After all, didn’t Jesus pray “Not my will, but thy will be done,” in the Garden of Gethsemene? But it’s harder to make that case from this particular passage. Notice, the friend at midnight doesn’t want to get up to help his neighbor; he gets up because of the neighbor’s persistence.

What then can it possibly mean?

The good news is that, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, every time you poke the Bible, it pokes you back. When you press against the text, it yields some interesting answers.

The first thing to notice when we press the text is that it does NOT say, “Ask, and you will get what you ask for.” What Jesus is really saying in this passage is, “Ask, and you will get something good. Ask, and you will get the Holy Spirit (v. 13).” It does not say, “Ask, and you will get what you ask for.”

The second thing to notice is that the Greek does not say, “Ask, and you will receive...Seek and you will find...Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” I love the way Jana Childers puts it: the Greek actually says, “Aaaask, and keep on asking; seeeeek, and keep on seeking, knooooock, and keep on knocking.”

The Greek implies ongoing action. The verb tense (present imperative) implies continuing, ongoing, never-stopping action. That’s what Jesus means when he talks about the persistent neighbor. The New English Bible translates the same word as shamelessness - Be shamelessly persistent in prayer. That’s the main theme from our two passages from Luke this morning: persistence and dogged determination in prayer.

Often, it's not easy to be persistent, to be shameless in prayer. It's not easy to keep believing, to keep praying. I hope you have known some prayer warriors in your life, as I have. In all the lives of the prayer warriors I have known there are many unanswered prayers, or at least prayers that have been answered with a resounding "No." There is heartbreak and loss, but for the most part, they display "a willingness to throw oneself headlong into a situation of need." (Childers) They're not afraid to keep asking God.

And what do we get from all of our asking, from all of our prayers? At the church I served in Maryland before coming to WPC, a member named Bob came down with Multiple Myeloma in the prime of his life. Despite the desperate prayers of family, friends, and church, he died, leaving behind his wife and 4 children. We have all known far too many situations like this one, haven't we?

What did Bob get for all those prayers? Did he get remission? Did he avoid pain? Did he see an angel? No, far from it. But what he got was what we all get. Ultimately, he got God. God's own presence is the answer to every prayer, the answer that surpasses anything that we could ask for.

"Ask," Jesus says, "and the Holy Spirit shall be given you."

My prayer for each of you this day – perhaps it will be your prayer for me as well – is that we will each of us in our lifetimes have occasion to

witness some glorious answers to prayer. A moment, or situation, in which our desperate prayers are rewarded the way we always wish they would be with a clear and resounding YES. Yes – the job is yours! Yes, he will be healed! Yes – she will come home safe and sound! But, if you’ve seen the movie “Bruce Almighty,” you know it would be a complete disaster if God answered all prayers with a “Yes.”

And when the answer to our prayers is “No,” for all the pain it may entail, I pray that you will never mistake a disappointing outcome for either absence or apathy on God’s part. For it’s true – what we are promised is nothing short of 100% return on every genuine prayer we lift up to God – and every prayer lifted up on our behalf. But let’s be clear about what we’re promised. That return is nothing less than God’s own Spirit, with us every step of the way. Amen.