

Persistence in Prayer

Luke 11:1-13
2019

South Yarra Baptist Church 28th July

A little boy was saying his prayers with his mother at bedtime. *"Dear Lord, please bless Mummy and Daddy, and DEAR GOD, PLEASE GIVE ME A NEW BICYCLE!!"* Said his mother, a little taken aback, *"Darling, God's not deaf."*

The little boy replied, *"I know, Mum, but Grandma's in the lounge room, and you know she can't hear very well!"*

We're going to talk about prayer this afternoon. And right up front, before we go any further, I confess that I approach this subject as one who struggles with prayer.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, suggesting that praying is a learned discipline. Now Jesus might have said, *"There's nothing particular to learn, fellas, just open your heart and express your feelings to God."*

Perhaps you're one who has an overwhelming experience of a sunrise, birth of a child, or some other amazing event, and you're naturally drawn to express your wonder at the greatness of God. And yes, that is a form of praying.

But here in this passage it seems to suggest that prayer is not a natural thing, or perhaps praying in the name of Jesus, or in the Spirit of Jesus is not a natural thing. Instead, it's something to be learned. "Lord, teach us to pray."

My employment over the past nine years has taken me to many churches around the country. And I've found it interesting, as I visit churches, to hear that the focus of so much of the prayers that are offered are about ourselves.

In particular, prayers for so-and-so who is sick. Now of course, there's nothing wrong with that at all. As a pastor I do, and have done that myself.

But it makes me wonder, is that all we're to pray for, as if physical health for ourselves and our loved ones is the only thing that's important for us as disciples of Jesus?

There's nothing in Jesus' model prayer about praying for people to get well from illness.

So, like the little boy at bedtime, is prayer really just all about having our wish list fulfilled?

Is prayer a form of personal auto-suggestion – *"Lord, make me kind, make me sensitive, make me friendly, make me a good public speaker,"* as if saying it often enough will make it happen?

Or is prayer the proverbial last resort, to be tried when all else has failed?

Is it simply one-way traffic, nothing more than a transaction – we ask and God does?

Now I need to say that I don't believe that South Yarra falls into those categories in your praying.

But what I want to say is that this prayer is an invitation to relationship. It's not simply transactional but relational – an interchange of persons committed one to the other – God and me being present to each other.

Relationship in prayer also assumes connection – a real life connection between me and the infinite, almighty God through God's word made flesh, Jesus.

But of course, it also means that prayer is not one-way – if prayer is relationship and how I express myself to God, then God can also use my prayer to express God's words to me.

Within that idea of relationship, I think prayer is an expression of dependence – it's an acknowledgement that I need God's help to make sense of this life I'm living. If I didn't have a sense that I needed God, then neither would I feel the need to pray.

Again, within the relationship that prayer expresses, I am confident that God is committed to me, that God only wants good for me, and that God responds to my desire to live my life as truthfully and as authentically as I can – that is, to live life the way God wants for me.

In relationship it means my life and my thinking are oriented towards God, and God toward me. Therefore my prayer doesn't always have to be centred on me, and becomes less about what I want, and more about what does God want for me, and how does God want me to be?

And I think this is where prayer as Jesus teaches us is something we must learn – to learn that my praying takes me beyond myself and my perceived needs.

Having given his disciples a form of prayer, Jesus then goes on to tell a story about prayer – this story of a persistent individual knocking on his neighbour's door in the middle of the night wanting bread with which to entertain his own visitor who has arrived late.

Clearly, Seven Eleven had not made it to Galilee in the first century!

Hospitality is very important in Eastern countries. To have someone visit you and not offer them something to eat and drink was, and still is in many places, considered rude and insulting.

And so, being able to feed his visitor who has inconveniently arrived late is so important to the host that he dares to go next door at midnight and knock and to keep on knocking, disturbing his neighbour until he gets what he wants in order to bless his guest.

And, I would suggest that while this sort of request generally would not be uncommon in these communities, to go next door making such a request at midnight, disturbing one's neighbour when most people would have probably gone to bed not long after sundown, would be something quite out of the ordinary.

I mean, things have to be serious to disturb our neighbours at midnight!

It's almost as if Jesus says, "*Who among would dare to go to your neighbour at midnight...!*"

And so, Jesus says, even if the neighbour won't get up because he wants to, or because the person at the door is a friend, he'll get up just to stop the knocking and disturbance and be able to go back to bed.

Anyway Jesus tells this story as a parable about prayer, and in particular, to be persistent in prayer. V9 – "*keep on asking..., keep on seeking..., and keep on knocking, because you will receive, you'll find, and the door will be opened to you.*" I've always struggled a bit with this.

Isn't God eager to answer our prayers?

Isn't God waiting to hear us pray so we can be given what we pray for? At first glance with this parable it would seem that God is the neighbour in bed with his family, with the door locked for the night. And we are the pray-ers who annoyingly knock and knock on the door at midnight wanting bread to feed our visitor.

"... even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need." NIV

It's as though we have to persist in prayer to the point of pestering God so God can't get any rest until we get what we ask for.

But that's not the point. We learn that God is not like us. This is not a parable about God and how God responds to us when we pray. God is not that neighbour.

The key is the last couple of verses – if we frail human parents, weak and self-centred as we are, know how to give good things to our children when they ask, how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?

But I have a little difficulty with this. How many times have I prayed for good things, things that I'm sure God would want, and yet God does not answer?

What about those occasions when we pray for something eminently desirable, for example, when we pray for badly needed rain, or for a tumour to be healed, and it seems that God either cannot or will not answer our prayer in the way we want? Why is that?

I don't know the answer.

What I do know is, within that relationship we share with God that I talked about before, our prayer does give us the faith to live on – that we can trust God despite the lack of answers.

Yes, Jesus is right – we need to persist. However, not just in asking God to give us what we pray for, but also to ask God to help us know what to ask for in our prayers.

The bottom line is that God is not like that neighbour who only responds in order to get peace and be able to get back to sleep. God's desire is to answer our praying, in particular, to give us the Holy Spirit to live right, to trust right, and to pray right.

God may not always give us what we want in answer to our prayers, but we learn that God can be trusted to always give us what we need – even if that's nothing more than the assurance that God is with us through the Spirit to help us face whatever it is that life puts before us.

Jesus says, If we can persuade our next door neighbour to get up out of bed to give us what we've asked for how much more can we expect that God, who loves us, will give us..... not what it is that we want(!) ... give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.

May God enable us to trust God in our praying, and to bless us in our praying in the confidence that God is trustworthy.