

How Do We Pray?

Luke 11:1-13

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Prayer of Illumination: *Loving God, your Word is our comfort in distress. It holds your promises that give us life. Give us ears to hear your hope and call. In the name of Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, we pray. Amen.*

Who taught you to pray? Who influenced your understanding of prayer? For me, it was my mother at bedtime. And my Sunday School teachers. And the pastors in that small UCC church in the Philippines, where I grew up.

Most of us learn prayer not through formal instruction, but by watching others pray, listening as they pray, and eventually... trying it for ourselves. Maybe we were asked to pray during meals as children, in church meetings as adults, or at other church functions.

Now, whether we're praying in private or in public, prayer is deeply personal. Uniquely intimate. And learning how to pray isn't quite like learning to drive a car, play the piano, or even preach a sermon.

It's more like learning how to cook. Or how to play a sport. Or some social skills like communication or showing empathy, like comforting a friend. Some might even say—it's like learning how to kiss.

Now, I know that last example sounds odd in a sermon. But I'm not making that up—that's how biblical scholar Matt Skinner puts it in his commentary on this passage from Luke.¹ I quote him not to be funny, but because there's truth in it. Prayer, like kissing, isn't really something you master through a manual—you learn it through relationship. You can pick up some things by observing people pray, though it matters who you're watching. You'll probably make some mistakes and wonder if you're doing it right.

¹ Matthew Skinner, "Who Taught You How to Pray?" Working Preacher, July 21, 2019, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/who-taught-you-how-to-pray>

And you wouldn't be the first to ask, "*How do I do this?*" In fact, one of Jesus' disciples asked him the very same thing: "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

It's a fair question. They had seen Jesus pray all the time. Luke's gospel emphasizes Jesus' prayer life more than the other gospels.² In the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus praying constantly. At turning points in his ministry, in quiet times, even in crowds, when he's facing pressures, going into deserted places to commune with God, where angels would minister to him.

In the first century, Jewish prayers often involved pre-written, memorized prayers repeated during formal worship or other religious rituals, rather than spontaneous prayers. Devout Jews would typically recite these *set prayers* both in the morning and evening as part of rituals and worship.³

So it's at this point that the disciples, having observed Jesus' prayer practices and knowing that John the Baptist had taught his followers to pray, ask Jesus for similar guidance. "Lord, teach us to pray."

And Jesus answers. Not with a lecture. Not with a list of prayer techniques. His answer comes in two parts: first, he gives them the prayer itself, what we call the *Lord's Prayer*, and then he shares stories or parables to illustrate his points.

But first—he gives them *a prayer*. A short one. Shorter than Matthew's version. That's because Luke chooses the simplicity and directness of the petitions.⁴ It begins with a word of relationship: "Father." In Aramaic, the word is *Abba*—a term of endearment. Personal. Tender. Intimate. More like "Dad" or "Papa," emphasizing our connection with God.

Jesus says that when you pray to God, you're not speaking to a distant power or an impersonal God. Or a *Force*, to borrow a term from the movie *Star Wars*, a metaphysical power in the universe. Instead, you're talking to

² See Luke 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28, 10:21-22, 11:1, 22:41-4, 23:46.

³ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Leander E. Keck, et al, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 233.

⁴Ibid.

a loving parent. You are not just a voice in the crowd—you are a child of God, a beloved child, if you will.

And then he lays out four simple requests: (1) for God's kingdom to come, (2) for daily bread, (3) for forgiveness, and (4) for deliverance.

That's it. Just four things.

But they cover what we need most: God's presence. Our physical and material needs. Forgiveness. And protection and deliverance from evil. That's the prayer.

Then Jesus shifts from the *how* of prayer... to the *why*. And he does what he often does—tell short stories or parables.

He says: Imagine you go to a friend's house at midnight asking for bread because a guest has arrived unexpectedly. It's late. It's inconvenient. But you knock anyway. Your friend gets up and gives you the bread not because of your friendship, but because of your persistence.

And then he tells another: What kind of parent, if your child asked for a fish, would give them a snake? Or hand them a scorpion instead of an egg? Jesus says the heavenly Father can do better.

Jesus uses these images not to focus on our skill in prayer—but to tell us something about the *one who hears our prayers*. In other words, Jesus is teaching us about who God is. He's not necessarily teaching the techniques of prayer—balancing praise, confession, thanksgiving and petition. Or better known as ACTS. Have you heard about this acronym? ACTS: *adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication*. It's an excellent guide on how to pray. Instead of giving the mechanics of prayer, Jesus instead shares with them the nature of God: God listens. God provides. God forgives. God protects.

In other words, Jesus goes deeper. He's emphasizing the reason for praying. The *why*

He says: God is better than your friend who opens the door just to shut you up. And God is better—so much better—than the best parent you've ever known.

So, he says: ask... and keep asking.
Seek... and keep seeking.
Knock... and keep knocking.

The legendary criminal lawyer Edward Bennet Williams, known for representing figures like Richard Nixon, once received an unusual call. Mother Teresa wanted to visit his Washington D.C. office. She was seeking a donation for her AIDS hospice in India from the Knights of Malta, a Catholic charity organization Williams presided over.

Not accustomed to meeting saintly figures, Williams confided in his legal partner, Paul Dietrich. "Paul, AIDS isn't my favorite disease," he admitted. "I don't really want to contribute. But a Catholic saint is coming, and I don't know what to do."

They came up with a strategy. They would be polite, hear her out, but then say *no*.

When Mother Teresa arrived, she sat opposite Williams and Dietrich at his large mahogany desk, her small frame barely visible above it. She made her appeal for the hospice.

Williams responded, "We're touched by your appeal, but all our funds are earmarked for the next two years. We can't give you any money."

Mother Teresa said, "Mr. Williams, give me your hand, and let us pray."

Williams looked at Dietrich, rolled his eyes, but he gave his hand, and they bowed their heads while she prayed.

After the prayer, Mother Teresa made exactly the same appeal. Word for word. At the end, Williams, somewhat puzzled at this point, politely said, "I appreciate your concern, but the answer is no."

Mother Teresa said, "Gentlemen, let us pray again." She prayed and then made her pitch for the third time.

At this point, Williams threw his hands up, looked at the ceiling, and said, "All right, all right, Paul, get me my checkbook!"⁵

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZABemB-snc>

Persistence. Mother Teresa showed persistence. And she got what she asked for.

Here's an interesting note: according to some bible interpreters, the word often translated as "persistence" in the parable may be better translated as "*shamelessness*."⁶

In other words, Jesus encourages us to pray with *bold confidence*—not out of desperation, but **out of trust**. The kind of trust that comes from a relationship. As New Testament scholar Jennifer Wyant puts it, prayer isn't primarily about results—it's about *trust*. Not about saying the right words, not a magic formula, but about being in relationship with the One who loves us like a loving parent. We knock because we believe someone is listening. We ask because we believe that God, as a loving parent, loves us as children and promises us the Holy Spirit.⁷

So, who taught you to pray?

Maybe it was someone you knew. Or perhaps it was Jesus himself—who gives us words, gives us stories, and shows us the heart of a God who listens. Who provides. Who forgives. Who protects.

So go ahead—ask, seek, knock. You're not bothering God. You're a beloved child, in a relationship with the One who loves and cares for you deeply. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ David Lose, "Commentary on Luke 11:1-13," Working Preacher, July 25, 2010. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-3/commentary-on-luke-111-13>

⁷ Jennifer S. Wyant, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-17-3/commentary-on-luke-111-13-6>