

**Genesis 18:20-32**

18:20 Then the LORD said, "How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin!

18:21 I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know."

18:22 So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

18:23 Then Abraham came near and said, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

18:24 Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?

18:25 Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"

18:26 And the LORD said, "If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake."

18:27 Abraham answered, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.

18:28 Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?" And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there."

18:29 Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it."

18:30 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there."

18:31 He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it."

18:32 Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it."

**Luke 11:1-13**

11:1 He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."

11:2 He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

11:3 Give us each day our daily bread.

11:4 And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

11:5 And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread;

11:6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.'

11:7 And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'

11:8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

11:9 "So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

11:10 For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

11:11 Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish?

11:12 Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?

11:13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Have you ever wondered what our praying must sound like to God?

Is it a cacophony of noise, voices raised in all languages, running like a ticker tape? or a continual text message notification "ding!" until it sounds like one big hum in the universe?

Or does God hear each in each small, distinctive voice, one at a time, but yet simultaneously?

Do you remember the opening scene in the old Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, about George Bailey? Scott Hoezee describes it this way:

*The camera careens in and around the streets of Bedford Falls and from every single house on just about every single block of the city we hear people praying for George Bailey. With voices tumbling on top of one another, you hear over and again, "Dear Lord, be with George, with George, bless George, O God, be with George, George Bailey, bless George." Of course, those people were all praying for the same thing but in reality exactly such a chorus of prayer takes place at every moment except that most of the time the requests and petitions are all different from one another. At the same moment you are praying for your child to recover from the flu, your neighbor next door may be praying for her son in [Afghanistan]. Meanwhile, the folks in the house across the street are begging God to help them make ends meet even as the people in the house next to that one are praying for rain to fall over in Iowa so their brother-in-law's corn crop won't fail. In the wider cosmic scheme of things, prayer is a universal constant, the sheer volume of which staggers the imagination.<sup>i</sup>*

Prayer- we think of it as saying words, or at least the disciples did that day when they asked Jesus.

Lord, teach us to pray, like John taught his disciples. All the other bands of disciples have a signature

prayer their teacher has given them. They sound to me a little like a teenager begging their parents to let them drive himself to school saying, "Everyone else drives himself to school. Nobody gets dropped off by his mom anymore." Jesus, what is our special prayer?

So Jesus gives. Ok, ok, here is the pattern of prayer. Pray this way.

*When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

That's it. Short and sweet, not flowery. Begin by blessing God, Jesus says. God is the focus of our prayers, praying that God's intention and will be done, that God's kingdom may come. Then ask for what you need. The disciples are asking less about a formula, a list of words to say correctly, and more about imitating their beloved teacher and Lord. This prayer is about living, about a way of life- a kingdom shaped life. In praying this prayer, we are turning our whole lives over to God, and asking that we, like Jesus, may be a living prayer. Focused on God and God's beloved kingdom, we become what we pray for. We pray without ceasing as we live in God's presence.

What I notice in both of these passages of Scripture, more than the content of prayer, is the persistence of praying. Abraham is talking to God, praying to God, but it sounds much more like negotiating with God, like a skilled auctioneer, driving the price in an upward direction, except that Abraham is going the other direction. He is seeking to save a whole city of Sodom based on the fewest possible number of faithful people. LORD, you are the -Judge of the earth, I am just dust and ashes, but it seems you might be merciful. What if 50 are righteous? 45? 40? Abraham negotiates all the way down to 10 righteous people to save the city of Sodom.

Content aside, what stands out to me is Abraham's persistence. Much like Jesus tells his disciples, his students, there was a man whose friend showed up at his house. He had nothing to feed him so he goes next door to get some bread. He is persistent and asks multiple times until the man changes and helps him. The man is too rude for my southern woman tastes. But perhaps Jesus is showing us that prayer is not always polite, just like Abraham negotiating with the "Judge of the earth" for the whole city of Sodom.

Jesus says, I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

It is because of his persistence that the owner of the house responds. In fact, the word written here for "persist" is more like "shameless" (*anaideia*, 11:8). Pray shamelessly, openly, honestly as you would speak to an intimate friend, or trusted family member. Maybe Jesus was teaching his disciples that prayer is more than the words you repeat, it is about a persistent conversation or even communion without words with a trusted helper, friend who like a Father cares deeply for his own. Persist in prayer.

I heard that a great ethicist went to visit Mother Teresa at the house of the dying in Calcutta, India. Mother Teresa operated a sort-of Hospice house for the poorest of the poor. The ethicist came to seek guidance and direction for how he might best spend the rest of his life. He came seeking clarity. When she asked what she could do for him, he asked her to pray for him. Pray that I might have clarity. She replied, "No, I will not do that — clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." The ethicist was shocked. Mother Teresa seemed to always display clarity about her calling and life direction. She laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."<sup>ii</sup>

That is the bottom line- TRUST. We entrust our fears, our hopes, our loved ones, our lives to God. That is what we are doing when we pray. Anne Lamott, in her book, *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*, talks about the dailiness of prayer. "Saint Augustine said that you have to start your relationship with God all over from the beginning, every day. Yesterday's faith does not wait for you like a dog with your slippers and the morning paper in its mouth. You seek it, and in seeking it, you find it."

We hand ourselves, our intentions and wills over to God, again and again. We trust.

But even more than that in prayer, we are directing our hearts, minds, and wills to the Creator, redeemer and sustainer of the universe. We are praying, as Jesus taught for the kingdom of God to come on earth as it is in heaven, and in doing so, we are making a commitment to shape our own lives that way. We are children of the Father, who is holy, and we are praying that our lives may be kingdom shaped.

Scholar N.T. Wright wrote,

"We are praying, as Jesus was praying and acting, for the redemption of the world; for the radical defeat and uprooting of evil; and for heaven and earth to be married at last, for God to be all in all. And if we pray this way, we must of course be prepared to live this way."<sup>iii</sup>

Persist in prayer. Pray this way. Act this way.

*Lord, may we be the answers to the prayers we make this day, for your glory. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Scott Hoezee, "The Lectionary Gospel, Proper 12C" at the Center for Excellence in Preaching.

<http://cep.calvinseminary.edu>

<sup>ii</sup> Kathryn Samuels, "Sermon Seeds," at [http://www.ucc.org/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_july\\_24\\_2016](http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_july_24_2016)

<sup>iii</sup> N.T. Wright, "Thy Kingdom Come: Living the Lord's Prayer," in *The Christian Century* (March 12, 1997) 269.