

The World Upside-Down, #7

“How Can I Keep Praying When God Doesn’t Seem to be Answering?” Luke 11:1–9

We are *all* asking the question, “When are we getting back together?” As you know, Governor Cooper has extended the stay-at-home order until this Friday, May 8. After that, there is a process of easing restrictions involving three phases--and we fall into phase three--*which means we’re not back together for at least several more weeks.*

All that to say, we simply don’t know. But here’s what I can assure you: our directional elders and our staff team are working hard to make sure that *when* we come back, we’re ready. We will be taking extra precautions for sanitation and the appropriate social distancing measures to make sure we keep our congregation and our larger community safe, but also to make a Summit gathering feel like a Summit gathering.

You’ll hear more about this in the weeks to come, but for now, just know that we’re anxious to gather together in person again as soon as it is safe to do so. Until then, we’ll do church like this, every week. As the Apostle Paul said, “Hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; locked down but not knocked out.” Amen?

Next week we begin a study through the book of 1 Peter, Peter’s first letter to the church, called **Together We Endure.**

For this extraordinary moment we are in, the goal of those of us who have been teaching on the weekend is to help you think correctly about what God is up to--how to respond faithfully as a follower of Jesus when it feels like the world has been turned upside down.

- In **Week 1**, as we were dealing with the initial shock of it all, we looked in Matthew 24 at what Jesus prophesied about events like these in the last day, and we asked, “What should our first response be?”
- In Week 2, we used Jesus’ famous teaching on worry in Matthew 6 to answer the question, “What should we do with our anxiety?”
- In Week 3, Pastor Curtis walked us through the Lord’s prayer to answer the question, “How should we pray during a time like this?” and he gave us 5 really helpful resolutions to build our prayer lives around.
- Week 4 was Easter, so from Matthew 28 we asked, “What good news do we have during this time?” He’s bringing some good news...
- In Week 5 I gave you a **5-part biblical overview** of what God is doing in the world during a time of crisis like this, to help us understand what God is up to and how we can participate with him in it;
- Last week, week 6, Pastor Ricky showed us how our identity in Christ is the rock-solid foundation that gives us security during a time of uncertainty, trial, or temptation
- And this week, I am going to bring our series to an end by returning to the subject of prayer.

And I know you say, “Wait. Another week on prayer? Do you not think Pastor Curtis didn’t do a good enough job, and now you gotta do it again?” No. I mean ‘Yes, he did do a good enough job.’ But I want to return to this subject because prayer is arguably THE primary thing God calls the church to during a time like this. We can do

other things after we pray, but we should never do anything before we pray, and prayer should be the first, middle and end of all that we do.

We see this in Acts:

- In Acts 4, when persecution really broke out against the church, and they felt overwhelmed and unsure what to do, they gathered themselves to pray and God answered from heaven by shaking the room they were in and the whole world through them.
- In Acts 12, when Peter, the leader of the early church, had been put in prison, the church in Jerusalem gathered together to pray all night and God released him.
- In Acts 13 it was during one of their all-church prayer meetings that God raised up Paul and Barnabas and set them apart for the worldwide expansion of the gospel.
- In Acts 6, the Apostles described their primary ministries as “prayer and the ministry of the word.” At most churches like ours we understand the importance of the ministry of the Word, but not as much the ministry of prayer.
- Summit: As much as we are known for our preaching and our worship, we should be known for our prayer.

In the OT, the center of Israel’s worship, the Temple, was called “a house of prayer for all nations.” In fact, when Solomon dedicated the Temple, he prayed this: God, 29 May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place...37 “When famine or plague comes to the land... or when an enemy besieges them in any of their cities, whatever disaster or disease may come, 38 when a prayer or plea is made by anyone among your people Israel... Forgive and act.” (1 Kings 8:29–39)

And God promised Israel that that is exactly what he would do. He said, 2 Chronicles 7:13–14, “When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command locusts to devour the land or send a plague among my people, 14 if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land. And vs. 15 My eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place. (the Temple) 16 I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my Name, my eyes and my heart will be there forever. (2 Chronicles 7:13–14)

Now, we are not the nation of Israel, and we don’t have the Temple anymore, but we, the church, have been given the NAME of Jesus, and all these promises for us are fulfilled in him. And Jesus told us that if we would pray in his name, he would hear our prayers on the world’s behalf just like he heard Israel’s prayers at the Temple.

So, conviction #1 is that one of our primary roles in this moment is to pray. BTW, we are going to apply this message this week on Thursday night with a united, all-church online prayer meeting. This Thursday, mark it down, put it in your calendar, pull out lipstick and write it on your wall, w/e--kids, just kidding--Thursday, May 7 is National Day of Prayer and Fasting (we have a guide for you) and then we’ll have an All Church Digital Prayer Gathering Thursday night. (We’re going to call out to God for healing, for salvation for our family and friends, for our government officials, for awakening in our nation). So that’s conviction 1.

But conviction #2 behind the need for this additional message on prayer is an honest one: some of us are just not sure how effective our prayers are. Some of you, if you are honest, you really started praying when the Coronavirus crisis began. But after a few days, you stopped. Why? It's not that you stopped caring about the crisis. But in your heart of hearts, you aren't actually convinced that praying about it was changing things. Don't stare at me like that. I know you've felt that. And if I can be candid, I've felt that, too. *I saw one guy online say, 'Keep your thoughts and prayers. We need masks and ventilators.'* And of course [Gov. Cuomo of](#)

[NY, talking about the flattening of the curve in NYC](#), famously said, *God didn't do this. Faith and prayer didn't do it. We did it.*

The point is: Because we don't always see direct, immediate answers to prayer, some of us struggle to maintain the motivation to do it.

Am I talking to anyone out there? Don't try to hide and act all spiritual in your homes. Be honest. If you're at home, look at someone close by and say, "He's describing me." If you are by yourself, testify in the comments. "I struggle to believe in prayer."

Jesus taught a lot about prayer, and he taught that there were 4 things that were supposed to characterize our prayer lives. These 4 words show you not only how to pray, but they teach you what to expect from God when you pray, and help you keep up the motivation to pray when you are not seeing instantaneous results.

Luke 11:1 "Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray," First, can I say, isn't it interesting that **after everything the disciples had seen**, what they want Jesus to teach them is *how to pray*. Not, "teach us to preach" or "teach us to do miracles," but "teach us to pray. That's where the power is."

So, **vs. 5, as an answer to their request**, Jesus tells them **this parable: Luke 11:5-11** ⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'?"

A few details about this story to make it make sense:

- First, in a country w/o electricity, "**midnight**" is really the "middle of the night." They weren't like us, staying up till 11:30 every night binging on Netflix. They went to bed right at sundown, so by midnight this guy has been asleep for about 4 hours. He's **well into REM**.
- Then, notice, it says that he's **in bed with his children**. In those days, people lived in one-room houses with one big bed area. So, he's literally in bed with his family and children, and what that means is that in order to get this guy bread, he's going to have to get everyone up in his house. It's massively inconvenient. They're all going to be irritated. How's your family react when you wake them all up in the middle of the night? Yeah, go ahead and put in that little anger emoji in the comments.
- Thirdly, notice that the man making the request here **doesn't have an emergency**. He's not like, "My wife is fallen, and she's bleeding out the ears!" Or, "My guest has a peanut allergy and we need an Epi-pen" or even, "We're out of toilet paper!" He's like, "I'm out of bread!" I mean, can't this request wait until morning? They are not going to starve to death in the middle of the night for lack of Pop-tarts.
- Finally, the **request he makes is exorbitant**. In those days, **bread loaves were huge**. One loaf would have been sufficient for the night; but this guy asks for 3, enough to feed a family for 3 days!

⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet **BECAUSE OF his impudence** (some translations say 'boldness;' 'shamelessness;') **he will rise and give him whatever he needs.**

The man honors the request not because he is his friend (in fact, after this event, he's probably not even his friend anymore); he gives this man the bread he asks for **because of his boldness and persistence in asking**.

⁹ And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.

The whole **analogy of knocking reinforces this idea of persistence**: When you knock, you don't just walk up to the door and bang it once. **If Veronica and I hear one single, solitary thud** in the middle of the night, we don't assume that someone is knocking, but that **one of our kids has fallen off** their bunk bed. **When you knock**, you rap repeatedly.

Jesus goes on... **11** (And) **What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;** (Do you ever do that—your kid asks you for a chicken nugget and you're like, "No, but here's a cobra..."?) **12** or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? **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!"

This parable teaches us that **4 things should characterize our prayer lives**. Here are the first two:

1. Persistence

- Jesus' parable shows us that some things come only through persistent, bold prayer. 11:8: "Because of his impudence;"¹
- Impudence is a great word. It means a persistence and forthrightness in asking that borders on rudeness.
- BECAUSE this man demonstrated a dogged persistence in asking, he got what he asked for. Sometimes God grants your request only through your persistence in asking.
- You ask, "Well, if it was God's will to give it, why doesn't he just say "yes" the first time we ask? If he loves us so much, why not give it to us immediately?" Honestly, I don't know the full answer to that--I have a few ideas below--but it's clear from this parable that God grants some things only through persistence.
- There's an idea popular among some Christians that "prayer doesn't change God's mind on anything, it only changes us." I've even seen that on little plaques you can buy at the Christian book store: "Prayer doesn't change the situation; it changes me." That's quaint, but it's not ultimately true. Yes, prayer does change you, for sure; but parables like this one show you that prayer also changes the situation.
- Luke 11:9 does not say, "Ask, and you will be changed for the asking; seek, and the journey will make you different; knock, and your heart will be transformed by asking the question." He says, "Knock. And if no one answers, knock louder. Keep banging; don't let God pretend like he's asleep. Keep hammering on the door until he gets up."
- The early church got this. Acts 12 says they prayed all night for the release of Peter. They didn't just mention it once and resign themselves to the sovereignty of God.
- Paul got this; he asked for relief from one of his burdens so often that eventually God sent him down a message from heaven, 2 Cor 12:9, saying, "Paul, let this one go. God has a greater plan."
- Or, one of my favorite scenes in the OT. Exodus 17:12--13. As Israel went into battle, God told Moses to go out on the mountaintop overlooking the battle and raise his hand (symbolic, of course, of being in prayer. When Moses' hands were UP, Israel would start winning. Kind of like at a Duke basketball game when during a foul shot everybody puts their hands up? I doubt all those students are praying at that point, but you get the idea. And if he put them down, they'd start to lose. Makes you wonder what would have happened if Moses had started doing jumping jacks—that would have been traumatic for the army. But could the picture be any clearer? As the church's hands are raised in prayer, God gives the victory. When they cease, so does the victory.

¹ John Calvin, Commentary on the Synoptics. We do not gain victory over God through prayer; rather, "the actual facts do not all at once make it evident that he graciously listens to our prayers." Further, Calvin claims that God chooses to be wearied by our prayers, as the parable of the widow illustrates. This is consistent with the idea of the judge as a contrast. "If they do not desist from the uninterrupted exercise of prayer, he will at length regard them and relieve their necessities."

- John Wesley, one of our nation's greatest evangelists, was so convinced of prayer's agency in bringing the power of God that he said, "I am convinced God does nothing on earth except in answer to prayer." Persistent prayer.
- Now, again, you wonder, "Well, if God wants to give us these things, why doesn't he just do it immediately, the first time we ask?" I'm not sure, honestly. I have learned that there are things God does in us during times of waiting. In Lamentations 3:25, Jeremiah, a prophet who was broken, in prison, and had lost everything, said, "It is good for a man to wait quietly to see the salvation of the Lord." He'd called out on God multiple times for his deliverance and God had him wait!
- Times of waiting can have a purifying effect on us. I know from experience that waiting on God in silence can help us see all the false places we trust. Waiting on God can help shake us of our self-confidence. Waiting is how God tests our faith in his goodness. Martin Luther said it's "Like a child trying to push against the hand of a parent, the parent gives only enough resistance to test the resolve of the child, so God resists us in prayer, to see our resolve in his goodness."
- Looking back on my life now I can see how some of God's greatest times of blessing in my life happened during seasons of waiting, when it seemed like he wasn't even listening. He was, but there were some things he wanted to do in me before he did those things for me.
- I love how the popular praise song puts it, "God, if you're not done working, I'm not done waiting." And until he comes back or I'm dead, he's not done.
- I feel like at this point I'd want you to say something to your neighbor, but since we're all under lockdown, everybody put your hand on your chest and say, "You. He's not done working on YOU."

The 1st word that should characterize our prayer lives is persistence. The second word is:

2. Desperation

One thing we do know about the man in Jesus' parable is that he is out of options. All the stores were closed that time of night. Amazon doesn't deliver until the morning and even they are on a 7–10 day delay. If the neighbor doesn't provide the bread, he's out of options.

One of the things that keeps us from praying is the subtle belief we still have other options besides God's provision, that we are not absolutely dependent on the mercy of God to get things done. This is especially true for us as Americans. We are the 'can do' people: It's right there in our name--we are AmeriCANS, not AmeriCANTS. We assume that with enough time and energy we can figure out the solution to anything. And that's mostly good. That innovative, can-do spirit has led us to great success in many areas. But listen: that spirit is DEADLY when you are dealing with a God who says regarding eternal matters, 'Apart from me you can do nothing.'

I've been dealing with this personally in regards to parenting. I've read just about every possible book on Christian parenting because, like most parents, I assume, "If I can just figure out this parenting thing, I'll be able to guarantee my kids turn out right." When PDT was here, he said that one of the problems with Christian books on parenting is that they try to give you a formula and tell you that if you follow it it will guarantee success in parenting. Yet, Tripp points out, God was a perfect father and 1/3 of angels and the only two humans he directly created rebelled. Tripp says, "So, you think you can out-technique God?" As if God had read this book on parenting things would have gone differently in the Garden of Eden?

And the really dangerous problem with thinking there is a foolproof way of parenting, he says, is that it keeps us from the one thing we most need to do: to cast ourselves down at the feet of Jesus, looking to him for his mercy in our kids' lives. In 1 Peter, Peter tells us to "Humble yourself (in prayer), under the mighty hand of

God so that at the proper time HE may lift you up, casting all your anxieties on him for he cares for you.” Who does the lifting up? He does. So hope in him. My hope for my kids is not in my parenting skill but in the grace of God toward them. So, I’ve learned to pray like a desperate man.

In a pandemic like this we should see that at the most fundamental level, the solutions we are looking for are not going to be found in our ingenuity. Our country’s hope is not in Dr. Fauci, or Dr. Gupta, the Republicans or the Democrats. This pandemic is to shake us up to show us our ultimate and only hope is in God’s mercy. If my people, God says, will humble themselves and pray. Humble means, “Admit that apart from his grace we can’t survive as a race. Any fix we come up with will be temporary. We’re unable to overcome the curses of death and even unable to guarantee the necessities of life without him.

As a church, we’re unable to wake our families and communities up to their spiritual needs. Only God can do that.

Knowing that, we pray with desperation.

Summit: We are desperate for God to awaken people to the reality of their sin and to the living hope that can be theirs only in the gospel. Let’s take a moment and sing together, remembering how desperate we were for God to save us, and rejoicing in how great our hope is in Jesus. Let’s sing, so that God would give us a heart for our neighbors and the nations to come to know this living hope as well.

LIVING HOPE

3. Boldness

When you think about this story, there’s one troubling detail. The parable is supposed to represent our relationship to God, right? So, is Jesus comparing God to a detached, indifferent, sleeping neighbor? I’m glad Jesus made that comparison, not me.

And wouldn’t this contradict the other pictures Jesus gave of the Father in the Gospels--a Father who knows how many hairs we have on our head and know what we need before we even ask it?

Ah, now you’re asking the right question! You see, Jesus in this parable is not trying to compare God to this sleeping, annoyed neighbor, but to contrast God with him. And his point is: If even an indifferent neighbor responds to this kind of persistence, won’t our Heavenly Father respond to us through ours?

Listen: Prayer doesn’t produce compassion in the heart of God. It just releases it. God has hardwired the universe to run on prayer. His power is released into the world through faith. So pray boldly, knowing that he cares. Pray boldly, knowing how many times he promised he’ll answer. When you read your Bible, make a list of the promises of God and recite them back to him in prayer. That’s what I do when I read. Pray, boldly, knowing that he has commanded you to cast your cares upon him, to be anxious for nothing, and lean on him for repose.

You know who naturally makes requestboldly like this? Our children. My youngest is now 10 and my oldest is 17, so this doesn’t happen a lot anymore, but it used to be quite often that I’d open my eyes at 3 a.m. and there would be two eyes staring at me beside the bed. All they’d say was, “I need some water.” No “excuse me” or “so sorry to bother you,” or even an introduction about who they are. Just, “Here’s my need. Take care

of it.” Who else but them could get away with that kind of impudence?” If you do that in my house, I’m calling the police.

Even if it were my wife--I wouldn’t call the police--at least probably not--but I’d say, “You got 2 legs, momma. Get it yo’self.”

But when it is one of my kids with this kind of request, I do what any good dad would do. I say, “Your mom is right on the other side of this bed.” No, seriously, I get up and help them. My kids approach me with undaunted confidence in my goodness toward them.

That’s how the Heavenly Father wants us to approach him. We are like children who are welcome right in their Daddy’s bedroom at whatever hour of the night with whatever need we have. In fact, look how Jesus drives this home in vs. 13. He says, “If you, who are evil, love to give gifts to your children...” Luke 11:13. Now, EVIL is a big ol’ word, isn’t it? Why is Jesus using that in this context? Is it just a gratuitous insult? “You filthy animals.” No. It’s because most of us are at our MOST loving when we are dealing with our kids--yet even in that moment, compared to the goodness of God, we’re still evil! Think about it. Even if we’re generally not very generous people, we tend to be at our most generous with our kids. Yet, Jesus says, compared to God’s love for his children, even the best parent, on the best day, would still be categorized as “evil.”

I want you to think about the incredible promises God gives us about prayer:

- 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people will pray, then I will... hear from heaven, and heal their land.”
- Phil 4:7, “Let your requests and supplications be made known unto God.”
- James 5:16, “The prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”
- 1 John 5:14–15, And this is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.
- Or here in Luke 11: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.”

Ask boldly, friend! For the salvation of lost people. For an end to this. For healing. For medical workers and scientists. For repentance among our national leaders and wisdom to lead. For a national Great Awakening. For a worldwide mission movement. Ask boldly, and give God glory when he answers.

Here’s what I want you to do. I’m going to put on the screen and I want you to fill in the blank. Out loud. Right there in your living room or wherever. **“God, I ask you to give me _____.”** Or write it right there in the comments. (Now, don’t attempt to turn God into a genie here. Ask for what you think is in accordance with his will. But ask boldly. Out loud. Go ahead.)

PRAYER TIME: 1 MINUTE COUNTDOWN

Now, write this in your notes/journal/phone, and whatever you fill in that blank, come back to it each week and see if God has granted it yet. Believe he will. Don't just throw the prayer into heaven and be done with it...be persistent with it and be bold enough to keep asking.

OK. Lastly, your prayer should be characterized by:

4. Trust

Luke 11:11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; **12** or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?

You parents: Again, if **your kid asks** for a chicken nugget, you're not going to give him a scorpion. But **let's reverse that**: If your child asks you for a scorpion, will you give them a scorpion? No. If your child asks for a scorpion to eat, you're probably still going to give them a chicken nugget.

As a parent, sometimes you tell your kids no not *in spite* of the fact that you love them, but *because* you love them. God is no different. And sometimes what looks to us like bread is a scorpion; and what looks like a scorpion is bread. **Think of the cross**. It seemed like the worst situation ever, but turned out to be the greatest blessing God ever gave us. And that's the pattern for a lot of things in the Christian life. What looks like disaster often turns out to be blessing.

Write this down: Sometimes God answers our prayers by giving us what we would have asked for if we knew what he knew. Psalm 84:11 says No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. And when we come to him, we come with that confidence. And if he says no to us, or wait, as sometimes he does, we trust that in that answer he is NOT withholding goodness from us.

His goodness to us is guaranteed, if we trust him. The ONE THING you should NEVER doubt is the goodness of God toward you. After all, the one who told us this parable is the one who offered up his own flesh to save us from our sin. **He is telling us that in light of what he did for us at the cross, surely we can trust him! When we came to him for bread, he didn't give us Pop-Tarts from his pantry but the eternally-satisfying bread of his own torn flesh!**

The gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us to pray. It shows us how desperate we are for the mercy of God and how willing our God is to give it to us! **So, Summit, yes let's ask God for miracles**. Remember, prayer doesn't produce compassion in the heart of God. It just releases it. It's like the electric wire that connects the electricity in your wall outlet to the appliance that needs it. Your prayer connects our community to the power of God. Let's release it into this generation at this moment.

Let it never be said of us what was said of Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth when he returned there as an adult: **Matthew 13:58. IN NAZARETH! Of all places, Nazareth** was a likely place for Jesus to do miracles! Let that not be said of our city, our family, or nation, or our generation. If they are going to miss God, let them not do it because they are simply unprayed for.

You say, "Well, I'm praying but nothing is happening!" This parable says to **keep praying and don't give up!** God has ordained that some things, sometimes the greatest things, happen only through bold, obedient, persistent prayer. So, let's keep going.

I certainly want you to apply this by praying more on your own, but I also want us as a church to put this into practice...On Thursday of this week, we are going to an all-church online prayer meeting that me and a few of our worship leaders will be leading. That's the National Day of Prayer, so we're going to call you to fast that day, and we'll give you a guide for that, and all join us online Thursday night an All Church Night of Worship and Prayer. I assure you 'twill be awesome.

Let's celebrate the confidence we have in God, expressed in these 4 words, by declaring, "It is well with my soul!" and then pray this week out of that boldness!

Worship: IT IS WELL