

“Surprised by God’s Willingness to Listen”

Luke 11:1–5; 18:1–8//Kingdom Come

This weekend is your chance to commit to the Believe Project. Summit Church, I see this as two things:

- First, it’s our responsibility:
 - We are in the middle of a truly special work of God. I get letters week after week describing how God is working and moving in people’s lives.
 - Some of you sit in your seats week after week and just receive it. But there’s a time when you have been blessed to give so that others can be blessed.
 - This is our responsibility. God has brought you into what’s going on here and blessed you through it. Now it’s time for you to contribute in a way that helps keep it going for others.
- Second, it’s our joy:
 - You experience great joy in leveraging what God has given you for others.

Today I’d like to get right to the heart of an issue. It is the issue of why most of us don’t pray, at least in any meaningful or real way.

- If you really want to embarrass the average Christian, ask them to describe their prayer life. Sure, most of you may go to small group, give some money to the church, and read your daily Bible devotion; but you do not pray.
- A recent survey of a respected, high-level seminary reported that only 6 out of 100 of students preparing for overseas missions work had anything close to a vibrant prayer life. Keep in mind, the survey defined as praying consistently for more than 5 min a day. Only 6%!
 - Most of us consider seminary students as ‘varsity-level’ Christians; and people preparing for overseas work are like the special ops group or elite forces within in that group. So, if that is the condition of their prayer lives, what about the rest of us average, ‘normal’, JV Christians?

So, what’s the problem? Why don’t we pray?

- In response to their difficulty with prayer, most Christians probably first point to a problem with their self-discipline. You think it is for the same reason you don’t work out like you should, or read as many books as you’d like, or eat too many desserts and not enough alfalfa sprouts. You blame it on a lack of self-discipline.
- Other people really struggle to make their prayer times meaningful. You think it’s supposed to be some sweet communion with Jesus where you get swept up in His arms and He pours Holy Ghost oil on your head and you get goose bumps. You close your eyes and start to pray, and then 20 minutes later you come to and realize that you’re thinking about the CSI episode you watched last week. And you’re not even sure the stream of consciousness that led you there.
 - Turns out you were praying for your kids; which reminded you that you needed to work out a ride home from soccer practice for them; which reminded you of how you know your kid has been hiding from you the fact he’s not doing well in school; which reminds you of what a good detective you think you would have been; which reminds you of CSI.
 - In other words, your prayer is not the *sweet hour of prayer* you think you should have.
- Others of you, if you are honest, would admit that you’re just not totally sure how effective prayer is.
 - Sometimes you pray and things happen. But although nobody wants to admit this in small group, there are also times that you pray and things don’t happen. Other times, you don’t pray and the thing you forgot to pray for happens anyway.
 - We’re not always the reason for why things do or don’t happen. We’re not sure of the source.

- For example, an older friend of mine complimented two of my daughters on how smart they are. She then asked them where they got their brains from. My 5 year-old says God made her smart. My 8 year-old answered that cable television made her smart.
- So, there is this question of how much prayer actually changes things.

Too many of you are looking at me like what I just said doesn't reflect your experience! Come on. Be real. Most of you don't have a substantial prayer time, besides at dinner and the occasional Hail Mary. You can sit there, smiling, nodding your head, saying amen, and writing things down to pretend you have this all together. But what's the point in that?

What is the real reason why we don't pray?

I want to suggest to you that prayerlessness is – at its core – a Gospel problem. Prayerlessness comes from not understanding what the Gospel says about you or what it says about God.

One of the things I've noticed in studying Luke this is how repeatedly you get this picture of Jesus who is so tender, so willing to be interrupted, and so willing to help. And mixed throughout these characteristics of Jesus are repeated instructions about prayer.

Luke teaches more about prayer than any other book of the Bible. There are nine prayers in Luke. Seven of those nine prayers are only found in the book of Luke.

So, we see two themes working together: Jesus' willingness to help, and his instruction about prayer. The two always go together. Prayer is the natural result when you understand how willing Jesus is to help those in need. Prayer then becomes as natural as breathing. You don't consciously tell your body to breathe, it just does it. Our prayer lives can be the same.

Prayer is the natural result of humility (knowing you need God's help) and faith (knowing that God is willing to help).

The Gospel alone produces humility and faith in us. When the Gospel has cultivated humility and faith in us, we will "pray continuously" instinctively.¹

Now, before I jump into this: I realize that at the Summit Church we have people all over the faith spectrum. Some of you are not sure how much you believe in God. You may be tempted to write this off and say, "Well, I'm not sure how relevant this is to me."

- I would suggest to you that prayer is a window into the origin of your soul. The human instinct to pray is hardwired into us.
- One of the cattiest things that Christians say is, "There are no atheists in foxholes." While it is catty, it's true.
 - Famous skeptics have admitted that they prayed in a time of great fear and danger. Mark Twain, a strident unbeliever, said that when his wife was deathly ill he prayed and prayed, like a dog.
- You might respond "Well, that's because people are in an unnatural situation and they're desperate, but when they get their right mind back, that's when they know this is all fake."
- I would suggest the opposite to you: that it is during those moments, when you see how fragile life really is, that the real you comes out.

¹ Inspired by Paul Miller, *A Praying Life*.

- C. S. Lewis had a great explanation for this: if you want to see what's really in your basement, surprise your basement. If you sneak down into it and then flip on the light, you'll find the rats and spiders in the middle of the floor. If you don't surprise it, and walk gradually down into it, making lots of noise and flipping on the lights, then you'll never see what is really there. Everything goes into hiding. But when you surprise it, you'll see what's really there.
- When you surprise the human heart, like in a moment of deep desperation, and you see how quick it is to pray, you see what it's made of and who it's made for.
- So, let me explain to you why that is.

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,"

- I find it very interesting that of all the things to ask Jesus about, the disciples asked Him about His prayer life. This is the guy that created the universe, designed the atom, and invented the sun, but there is something about His prayer life that he disciples say, "We want to know more about *that*. We want to be able to connect with God like that."
- Clearly they saw it as a key to His strength and power.

The first thing Jesus does is teach the disciples the Lord's Prayer. We're going to mostly skip it because it is "over - rated" [March Madness basketball reference]. I'm just kidding. But instead of the prayer, we're going to mostly focus on the parable after it.

But I do want you to notice the very first word of the prayer: "Father." That was revolutionary. No religion had ever taught us to relate to God this way. The Greek word is "Abba" which means "Daddy." Father almost sounds too formal in English. When you approach God, call him your Daddy.

And then He told 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'?" Few details:

- First, in a country without electricity, "midnight" is really the "middle of the night". It's not like in college when midnight is 2 hours before you go to bed. Rather, this guy has been in bed for about 4 hours. He's been in REM for a while.
- 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 all of his family and children. The point is, to get this guy the bread he's asking for, he'd have to get everyone up in his house.
- Finally, notice that the man knocking here doesn't have an emergency. He's not like, "My wife is fallen... and she can't get up. She's bleeding out the ears!" He's like, "Hey I had some guests come and I don't have any pop-tarts and I'm embarrassed. You got any of those, or a toaster strudel or something?"

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 for "impudence" say 'boldness;' 'shamelessness'. Some scholars could say it could be translated as 'annoyingness'. ...he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

- Here's the point: Jesus says is not because they are friends that the man gives the bread to the other man. In fact, after this event, they're probably not friends anymore. But he gives the bread to him because of his boldness and his persistence.

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. You don't knock just once. You don't go up to someone's door and just hit it. If Veronica and I hear that we'd think one of our kids fell off the bunk bed. You hit the door repeatedly.

¹¹What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹²or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If 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!"

There's some really important stuff in here that we'll come back to. Before we dive into it, flip over to Luke 18. Luke records essentially this same teaching twice, and that's really good, because otherwise I might be tempted to write that previous parable off as a fluke. Because this stuff He's teaching about prayer is so counter-intuitive. It goes against what every religion; indeed, even what in many ways common sense teaches you about prayer.

Luke 18:1 And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. [2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. [3] And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' [4] For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, [5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

Then he says, unbelievably, "This is like praying to God."

I'm sure glad Jesus told this parable, not me.

- First, comparing God to a cranky, old, unjust judge? Who but Jesus could get away with that analogy?
- Then suggesting wearing God down through persistent, annoying asking?

The point, of course, is that God is *not* like an unjust judge. He's a tender Father, which Jesus has already established. So if even an unrighteous, selfish judge will grant answers because of persistent asking, won't God, who cares about us as a tender Father, give us what we ask if we come to Him?

- Jesus' stories are parables, not allegories. Allegories are stories that correspond at about every point; parables have only point.

The one point being made here is that we should approach God with our needs persistently, shamelessly, almost rudely – like children approach their parents with requests.

- Who else but a child could get away with the kind of impudence shown in these parables? Think of the President of the USA, President Obama. Now, one of his daughters shows up at his bedside at 3 am and says "Daddy, get me something to drink." Nobody in the country could get away with that. His wife, Michelle, couldn't even do that. Michelle wakes him up at 4 a.m. and says, "Get me something to drink," Barack would be like, "You sick? Get it yourself." Only a child can get away with this kind of asking.

And that's what we are to God. We are his children, and He is our tender Father.

This is the opposite of every religion:

- Many religions teach people to pray. Many teach that God answers prayer. But none teach us to approach God with the shamelessness with which children approach their daddy.
- Islam is an example. Would Islam ever teach this kind of familiarity with God as a Father? The answer is definitely not.

This was surprising, counter-intuitive, and it turned every religious teaching about prayer on its head.

Let me make several important observations from these parables about prayer in your life.

1. Prayer actually changes things.

- A lot of people say, “Prayer doesn’t change situations; it changes us.” C. S. Lewis, one of my heroes, unfortunately bought into this understanding of prayer. In his work, *Shadowlands*, Lewis describes his marriage to Joy Davidman. He says that on his wedding night before going to sleep, he knelt down to pray. His newly-wed wife questioned why he was. She asked, “What are you doing? You believe prayer changes things?” Lewis replied to her, “It doesn’t change things, it changes me.”
 - I hope you understand how difficult it is for me to read that and tell you Lewis said. But he did, and he was wrong.
- Passages like this one in Luke show you that prayer does change situations.
 - In this story, this woman asked, and asks again, and again.
 - Question: If it was God’s will, why not just say “yes” the first time?
 - I don’t know; but this passage shows you that some outcomes are dependent on our prayers—and not just prayer, but persistent, bold prayer.
 - Did you catch that? “Because of impudence,” “because of his persistence,” God gives something.
- 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.” No, it tells you that if no one answers, bang louder.
- The apostle Paul understood this. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, He had to be told to stop asking.
- One of my favorite scenes in the Old Testament is Exodus 17:12–13.
 - When Moses’ hands were held up, Israel prevailed. If he lowered them, Amalek prevailed. By the way, I always wonder what would have happened if Moses had started doing jumping jacks. Anyway...the point is Moses’ prayers changed the outcome right before his eyes.
- I’ve heard the analogy that prayer is like a laser beam wave. Lasers work through more waves being added to existing waves. When you get enough waves concentrated together and flowing in the same direction, they can intensify and create a laser beam.
 - With prayer, God has already declared his will. Now his people can add their faith to his predetermined and preexisting will. So the waves of our faith are added to the waves of God’s will to release His power. That’s why we pray, “Your will be done on earth”
 - John Wesley explained it, “God does nothing on earth except in answer to prayer.” I do think that’s an overstatement; but I think there’s something true in it.
- The exact way this all works together with God’s sovereignty over all things I don’t quite know. But it does.
 - Isaiah 46:10, “God knows the end from the beginning.” It’s not like He is surprised by our prayers or He didn’t know we were going to pray them.
 - The Psalms say before we even form a word in our hearts, He knows it altogether.
 - Philippians 2:12–13 says that it is God Himself who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure. This means that when we are asking good things from God, somehow God is the one doing that in and through us.
- *How* all this works together, I’m not totally sure. But what I do know is that God has sovereignly chosen to enact His will on earth through our prayer, and there will be things that happen if we pray that won’t happen if we don’t.

- It is foolishness, rebellion, and pride that sits around and speculates on questions about the sovereignty of God when simple obedience is what is commanded.
 - A.A. Hodge: *“Does God know the day you’ll die? Yes. Has he appointed that day? Yes. Can you do anything to change that day? No. Then why do you eat? To live. What happens if you don’t eat? You die. Then if you don’t eat, and die, then would that be the day that God had appointed for you to die?”*
 - My paraphrasing here: *“...Quit asking stupid questions and just eat. Eating is the pre-ordained way God has appointed for living.”²*
 - Prayer is the pre-ordained way that God gets His work done on earth.

The second thing this passage teaches us:

2. We desperately need the mercy of God, and it is abundant.

- Both characters in this story are desperate. The man in the story has no food. The woman realizes that there is something she cannot do that this Judge must do.
- One of the things that keeps us from praying is the subtle belief that we are not absolutely dependent on the mercy of God to get things done.
- If there is one thing that is core to American culture, it is our attraction to techniques and best practices. There is a *‘Book for Dummies’* on everything.
 - Elyse Fitzpatrick, one of my new favorite authors, has a book *Give them Grace*. In it she discusses how many Christian books on parenting guarantee success in parenting if you just follow a list of certain Biblical points.
 - Fitzpatrick points out that God was a perfect father, yet 1/3 of the angels left, and Adam and Eve. Do you really think you’ll be able to out-technique God?
 - She says the problem with thinking there is a foolproof way of parenting is it keeps us from casting ourselves down at the feet of Jesus looking to Him for His mercy in our kid’s life. But that is where our hope really needs to lie.
 - She brings up the passage of 1 Peter 5:6–10, “Humble yourself (in prayer), under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him for he cares for you.” Peter goes on to talk about the trials they will go through and adds, “but don’t lose heart, because the God of all grace, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you.” God, himself, will. Peter tells them not to put their hope to endure in persecution in their techniques, their Scripture memorization, their doctrinal mastery, their fellowship, their Bible knowledge, etc.; but to throw themselves simply upon the tender, gracious care of God.
 - My hope for my kids is not in my parenting skill. It’s not even in the skills I’ve learned from the Bible. It is in the grace of God, who will HIMSELF raise my children up.
 - Yes, God uses and works through means. But at the end of the day, I hope in God’s mercy, not in my skill.
 - I thought about this recently when I started thinking about the possibility of my own death. I told my wife, Veronica, that by 6 months after my death I wanted to her to have remarried. I told her to do whatever it takes, like signing-up for eHarmony immediately after my funeral. I felt like I needed her to marry a godly guy, and quickly. I want my kids to have a daddy, even if it’s not me.

² Adapted from Charles Ryrie, who stole it from A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* (1890), 92–93.

- As I was thinking about this, I felt the Holy Spirit rebuke me: “You are sitting around worrying about this like you are their only hope. Put them in my hands. I can be a better father than you can be. They are better off in my hands than they are even in yours.”
 - So, yes, as long as I am with my children, I want to be God’s instrument. I play an important role; but at the end of the day I’m hoping in the tender mercy of God, not in my skill in parenting. I will hope in God, not in myself.
 - Besides, it’s not like Veronica could ever find another guy like me. Just kidding.
- No technique or skill in any area of life is sufficient for us to lean our weight upon.
 - Seminary students: your intelligence and your godliness are not enough to ensure you develop right theology.
 - Dating couples: You can’t guarantee your dating life will be solid no matter how many accountability partners you have and how many Joshua Harris books you read.
 - Married couples: You can’t guarantee your marriage will be good based on how well suited you are for each other or how many marriage books you have read.
 - The same applies to the building, growth, and apparent success of our church.
 - No skill – even biblical skill – is sufficient. You need the mercy of God.
 - Ironically, I’ve found that the two things that most keep me from *real* prayer are my Reformed theology and my skill in church ministry – two of the most valuable things that I have!
- Real prayer arises out of a heart that realizes its only hope is the mercy of God. These stories Jesus tell us in Luke show you that God’s mercy is abundant! The love of God is deeper and wider and richer than we ever realized. It flows all around us and over us like a river.
 - This story in Luke 18 is comedic for its hyperbole: God is not like an unjust judge, and we are not like an annoying old widow to Him.
 - Remember, in the Lord’s Prayer we refer to God as “Father.”
 - The man in this story was an unjust judge; our God is a tender father.
 - She is in court of law; we are in court of grace (Hebrews 4:12).
 - She was a stranger; we are beloved children (Matthew 11:13).
 - She had no access; we have a way made open by the very blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19–22).
 - She had no friend in court; we have as our advocate JC the righteous (1 John 2:1).
 - She had no promise or guarantee; we have the promise of the Gospel, (John 14:13; Isaiah 49:15).
 - The Judge we approach is not one who doesn’t fear God or respect justice, but one who stripped Himself of His place and position and died in our place (Romans 8:31–38).
 - The Gospels, like the story we studied last week, show us time and time again that there seems to be no limit to the tenderness of God for His people.
 - He is interruptible. He cannot pass someone in pain.
 - In this passage, He is a daddy, who loves to give gifts. Verse 13 says, “If you, who are evil...” Evil is a big word. It doesn’t say ‘unkind’ or ‘inconsiderate’. It says ‘evil’. Compared to God, we are evil. I love to give my kids gift! If we evil people love to give good gifts to and delight our children, how much more will a good, loving God?
 - Do you approach God like that?
 - In Charles Spurgeon’s biography he talks about the goodness of God and His willingness and desire to bless us. Now Spurgeon is not a silly name-and-claim-it guy. I know there are times

when God says 'no;' but do you personally perceive how tender and loving God is when you approach Him? Do you feel the warmth of that love as you pray?

- I think about how I see my kids. Do I feel more tenderly toward them than God does to you?
- The other night my 5 year old daughter, Allie, began to suddenly cry in bed. I asked her what was wrong, and she replied, "How do I know Jesus won't forget about us when we die?" I was taken aback by the question. I replied to her, "I'm your daddy, and do you think I would ever forget you?" For some reason she hesitated longer than she should have. But she did finally answer 'no'.
- Jesus is the ultimate daddy. Isaiah 49:15–16. We're more similar to my 5 year-old than we admit. We may not let anyone hear us cry, but we all think wonder and question God's love for us. Yet it is absurd when we think God doesn't feel our need with tender compassion.
- What would our prayers for our city, our friends, and our family members look like if we really believed in His compassion for sinners?
 - Isaiah 59:1–2. Wouldn't your prayers be bold?
 - Once I was standing on the beaches in Southeast Asia looking at the populated city of lost people. I realized that if I believed God cares for them like the Gospel says He does, and I believe He will release that through prayer, how can I not cry out to God day and night?
- We know God is willing. We know He gives some things only through persistent prayer.
 - God releases His power through normal people who pray. James 5: "a man just like you." I have the hardest time relating to all these heroes in the Bible. As a kid, their stories were all told to me on flannel graph. But these men and women of God like Elijah and David had same struggles, same temptations, and same weaknesses. They put on their loincloths each morning just like you and me. And God worked through their prayers in mighty ways.
 - They had a sense of how big and powerful and tender God is.
- How guilty will we be if God's power would have come, but we just never asked for it?

3. We pray trustingly, like children

- The whole point of this is that we relate to God as a father.
- **Luke 11:11** "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹²or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?"
- Any of you ever do that? Your kid asks you for something to eat and you say, "Here's a scorpion?" How about if your child asks you for some fish, will you give them a serpent? No.
 - As a father, you sometimes tell your child "no" because you can see some things they can't see.
 - God is a father and sometimes He overrules our request because of a greater plan.
 - God is not a genie waiting to fulfill all your wishes.
 - Just like parents aren't meant to give everything to their child that they ask for. If my kids got ahold of Aladdin's genie lamp, I suggest we all run as far away as possible. In 5 seconds the ocean will be orange soda and the clouds will be cotton candy. That cannot be good for the ecosystem.
 - **God sometimes answers our prayers by giving to us what we would have asked for had we known what He knows.**
 - Sometimes it may look like He's not answering our prayers but He's actually answering them like a Father, not like a genie.

- To pray like a child also means that we don't base our understanding of His feelings toward us on whether or not He answers like we think He should.
 - Little kids, when they come to their parents, don't question their parents' love for them.
 - Some of you came from great backgrounds; some mediocre; some of you pretty bad; but instinctively, a kid assumes that their parent loves them.
 - Children have an implicit trust in their parents. In addition, kids are used to being overruled by a wise, loving parent. But being overruled doesn't make them completely doubt the love of their parents towards them.
 - There are some people who base how God feels about them on whether or not He answers their prayers according to how they think they should have been answered. If God doesn't answer according to their expectations they start to feel insecure before God.
 - Again, children aren't like that. Kids assume their parents' love and assume that their parents will give them what they need because their parents love them.
 - Becoming a Christian means re-learning to be a child again. You may have been burned by your parents. Terrible things may have been done to you. Yet as followers of Jesus we are adopted as his children and we relearn to be a child through the mercy and love of God. It's the only way. Jesus said, "Become like a little child..." He's not asking you to become a child again to an abusive, unloving, imperfect parent; but to a tender, perfectly loving daddy.
- Some people say to God, "Because you answer my prayers, I feel accepted." Christians say, "Because I know you accept me, I know you'll answer my prayers." There is a world of difference between those two.
 - The first leads to anxiety, fear, and bitterness. The second leads to peace, trust, and rest.
 - *Again, to become a Christian means that you learn to be like a child with God again, who trusts Him like that.*

4. Our greatest petition is for more of the Holy Spirit

- Luke 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!"
- Don't miss that this is depicted as the ultimate gift. God's greatest gift is the Holy Spirit.
- Some of you won't get what you ask, but you'll get more of God.
- God is not a piñata and faith is not a hitting stick. It doesn't that you 'pray in faith' and Bentleys will fall out of the sky. I don't believe that at all. We're learning this from a homeless guy named Jesus, who is exceedingly poor but felt like God was His greatest possession.
- God is the only answer to some requests. "God, I need a marriage partner." No, you need me. "God, I need more money." No, you need me. "God, I need..." No, you need me.
- Lastly, Psalm 27:4. Look at the one thing David asks of the Lord, and seeks after.
 - If we looked over a transcript of your prayers in the past 6 months, what one thing is the most common request you ask from God?
 - This is one of the reasons we are fasting weekly as a church. We want to want Him more than food and want Him more than our own praise.

Prayer shows you how you're made.

Got a problem with praying? Go to Gospel. Get a sense of tenderness of Jesus.

What's on your heart? Where are you in pain? Trust Him when He says no.

Put this into practice this Tuesday as our church gathers to pray together.