

PRAYER'S CERTAINTIES

by Ray C. Stedman

In Luke the eleventh chapter occurs the familiar parable called, *The Importunate Friend*. This little story arises out of the request of one of our Lord's disciples who observed him praying and said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray," {Luke 11:1}.

I would like to make a study of some of the exclamatory requests that were addressed to Jesus. Men frequently brought him questions, frequently questions that were elaborately contrived, carefully prepared and phrased and designed to trap him. However, here and there in the Gospel records some individual comes who simply blurts out an urgent cry, rising from the depths of his nature, which has been awakened by a glimpse of glory in Jesus, some awareness of a great possibility which his soul desperately and immediately covets.

You have such a request in the rich young ruler who, though he had everything -- wealth, youth, fame, money, all that it takes, yet, as he watched Jesus, he saw that here was one that had something he did not have, and he came to him, and blurted it out, "Lord, what must I do to have eternal life?" {cf, Luke 18:18}. Philip, as he was listening to those amazing words of Jesus as he was taking leave of his disciples in the Upper Room, unable to keep the words in, cries out, "Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us," {John 14:8}. And supremely, of course, in this connection, is the remark of the thief on the cross who, hanging in a haze of blood and pain and agony, somehow watching Jesus as he is there on that central cross, sees that all this mockery about this so called kingship is no mockery at all, that here indeed is a King, and there seems to burst out of his heart that cry, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom," {cf, Luke 23:42}.

All of these men had seen something in Christ, and the glory of it is still shining in their eyes as they blurt out these words. This is the basis of our Lord's teaching on prayer, this cry of his disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray."

They saw in Jesus something of the mighty glory of prayer. I am convinced that if we could learn the secrets of prayer and master its simple arts (I am not talking about the mechanics now; I am talking about the basic, underlying, foundational principles of prayer), if we could master them, I am confident that it would be worth far more to us than a Ph.D. from Stanford; I do not intend any slur on the work of Stanford University in saying that. If we can give three or four years to the study of a Doctor of Philosophy degree, we ought to give ourselves as readily to mastering the arts of prayer.

In answering this cry, Jesus told the story of *The Importunate Friend*. We have the introduction to it in Luke 11, Verses 5-7:

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; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer him 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?'" {Luke 11:5-7 RSV}

The link with prayer in this story is very evident. Obviously, true prayer never occurs apart from a sense of need, and the first note in the story Jesus tells is one of dire, pressing necessity. Here is a friend who comes after midnight and announces that another friend has arrived on a journey unexpectedly and he simply has nothing in the house to give him. Often others' needs seem more demanding to us than our own needs. I rather suspect that this man would never have gone over in the middle of the night to his friend's house in order to borrow bread to meet his own hunger. He would rather have endured his hunger throughout the night. But when a friend comes on a journey, there is a deep sense of necessity and it is seen in his willingness to go to his neighbor after he knows he has gone to bed and ask him for bread after midnight.

Some have suggested that there is a note almost of audacity here. Someone has said, "He may not have any bread, but he certainly has plenty of crust, coming after midnight and waking this fellow up out of a sound sleep to get bread!" But it is obvious, as our Lord tells the story with this touch of humor in it (and I think it was intentional), that this man is driven by a deep sense of concern. He simply has nothing to give and this is what brings him over. Is there anything that is quite so apt to bring us to our knees in prayer as the request of another person for our help and the shattering awareness that comes to us that we simply have nothing to give?

The other night after ten o'clock my phone rang. I picked it up and recognized the voice of a relatively new Christian, a young man who has been growing wonderfully in Christian love and grace. There was a note of urgent desperation in his voice as he told me that his wife had just phoned and told him that she was bringing over a friend to talk to him. His wife is not yet a Christian, in fact, she has been somewhat resistant to the gospel and has given him a good deal of difficulty over it. But she had run across an old school friend, an unmarried schoolteacher, who had come to the place of utter loneliness and desperation in her life and was threatening suicide. Though the wife was not yet a Christian herself, she knew that there was something in the Christian message that could help the unfortunate and the despairing, and she was bringing her friend over to talk to her husband. In the interim he was calling me to ask what to say. There was a desperate note in his voice, "What shall I tell her?" he said.

Perhaps you well know that strange, sinking sensation when someone asks for help and you have not known what to say. Immediately there is a sense of pressure, almost terror. "What shall I say?" Perhaps a neighbor comes for coffee and out of it a question arises or a problem is laid bare; perhaps a school friend stammers out a question as you are walking to school, or a letter arrives with an urgent plea. Perhaps a friend invites you out to lunch and over the dessert pours out a pitiful tale, or your child brings home a problem from school and stands expectantly, waiting for an answer and you ask yourself, "What can I say?" The best you can do is stall and hope for a quiet moment when you can rush to your Great Neighbor and cry out to him, "A friend has come, and I have nothing to set before him." This happens often, doesn't it? It is out of such moments of deep necessity that true prayer is born. Our Lord begins on that note.

He moves on immediately to sound a note of absolute and profound certainty.

"I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is a friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs." {Luke 11:8 RSV}

Now don't stop there!

"And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." {Luke 11:9-10 RSV}

That is an amazing declaration. There are staggering implications here. Some interpret Verse 8 as though our Lord is saying that we must belabor God with our prayers; the only way we can expect to get anything from God is to be importunate, to persist in prayer, hound him, picket the throne of grace, until he gives in and gives us our request. But I am absolutely sure that Jesus is teaching the exact opposite to that. Both in the parable of *The Importunate Widow* and in this parable of *The Importunate Friend*, he is simply using a vivid contrast to set before us the truth he wants. He goes on to say clearly unmistakably, that God is not like that sleepy, reluctant neighbor who does not want to get up out of bed.

Sometimes we ascribe the reason for our failure in prayer to this supposition that we have not been persistent enough. We find prayer irksome, difficult, and unpleasant and we simply say, "I know I should pray more, I know if I would pray more, more things would happen," for we are obsessed with this idea that God is a reluctant God who must be wheedled out of things. Now Jesus says this is not the case. The only possible meaning that we can give to Verses 9 and 10 is that God gives willingly, freely, without fail, to every child who comes. "Ask, and it shall be given; Seek, and you shall find; Knock, and it shall be opened."

And Verses 11 and 12 can only mean that he does not tantalize us by holding out false hopes in prayer:

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

He is saying God does not hold out false hopes in prayer; he does not give capriciously, vindictively. He means what he says. You, as an earthly father, would not give in such a manner, neither does God. That is what he is saying.

Take careful note of what he does say, for he suggests in Verse 9 that there are three levels of prayer: ask, seek, and knock. You can remember them, incidentally, if you will take note of the fact that the initial letters spell the word "ask,"

- "a" ask,
- "s" seek,
- "k" knock.

There you have a little formula for prayer. Now mark these three different levels. The circumstances of each are vastly different, but the answer is always the same. That is what Jesus is saying.

The simplest and easiest level, of course, is ask. What he means is that there are certain needs which require a mere asking to be immediately and invariably met, and the range of these needs is far wider than we usually give credit for. For instance, reading through the New Testament, it becomes clear that our need for Christ-like attributes lies in this category. If we need love, courage, wisdom, power, patience, they all lie in this realm. Simply ask, that is all, ask, and immediately the answer is given. Is that not what James says, "If any man lack wisdom." What? "Let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not," {cf, Jas 1:5 KJV}. And what? "It shall be given." That is all, it shall be given. Let him ask and it shall be given.

But someone protests, "I have tried this. Not long ago I was in a situation to which I felt I did not know the answer, so I shot up a prayer, Lord, help me, give me wisdom, and nothing happened. I went on to say the most inane and foolish things. It doesn't work." Now, stop a minute. Is God a liar? Does he say he will give and he does not give? Is he like a father, a wicked, cruel and vicious father who, when we ask for an egg gives us a scorpion, or for a fish, gives us a snake? No, the question is not, "Did he give?" but, "Did you receive?" Did you ask in faith, did you believe God when you asked? Did you take? Remember James goes on and says,

"But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord." {Jas 1:6-8 RSV}

All of God's gifts are given on the basis of faith, not to unbelief. The problem here is, what do you do after you have asked. What were you expecting when you asked God for wisdom? How did you think he would give it? Were you waiting for a sense of wisdom, some kind of clarifying of the brain, or increased mental power, so that you now see clearly all the answers? Were you expecting a feeling of power, some tingling stream that ran down your backbone and out to the end of your nerves? Is that what you were waiting for? No, faith takes the answer for granted. God is faithful. God gives. When we ask, we take it for granted that he has given, and go on to do the thing, to say the word that comes, counting on the fact that it is the word of wisdom or the word of power or the word of patience, or whatever we need. God loves to be trusted, but only faith can lay hold of what he gives, and when faith is there it is invariably met. That is what Jesus is saying. Ask, and it shall be given. He does not say it will be accompanied by any feelings, or signs, or emotions. Just take it for granted, thank God, step out on it, and the answer is there.

A second level of prayer is denoted by this word "seek." Ask, seek. You cannot think of what it means to seek without seeing that our Lord injects here an element of time. Seeking is not a simple act, it is a process, a series of acts. Every mother here knows that husbands and children conceive of seeking or searching as a single act. They will stand in the middle of a room and cast one sweeping glance around it, looking for a lost object, and then call for help. "Mom, where is so-and-so?" And mother comes and opens the drawer or moves the bottle

or lifts the paper and there is the thing. (I am convinced that my wife is a master of sleight-of-hand, for I cannot understand how an object will suddenly appear right in the place where she is looking and I had just looked there and had not seen it.)

Searching involves a process. And Jesus says there are areas of life that require more than asking; there must be seeking, searching. Something is lost, hidden from us, and prayer then becomes a search, a plea for insight, for understanding, for an unraveling of the mystery with which we are confronted. Again, the answer is absolutely certain. Seek, and you will find!

We have an example of this in that well-known incident in the life of the Apostle Paul when he was suffering from that excruciating, painful thing that he called "a thorn in the flesh" {2 Cor 12:7 KJV} -- some physical disability which hounded and buffeted and limited him. At least he felt it did. Three times he asked to have this taken away. He asked, but it was left; there was no answer. So the apostle, evidently instructed in these things of God, realized that this was not the kind of thing that is removed by asking, that is requires a search, and the wording that he gives to us in Chapter 12 of Second Corinthians implies that the answer came to him as he waited. As he meditated, and searched out this thing, waiting upon God, the answer came to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee," {2 Cor 13:9 KJV}. In other words, "It is better this way, Paul. I have allowed this deliberately to come into your life and I will not remove it, for my grace is sufficient for you. I can give you all that it takes to stand this thing, for what it is doing to you is of far more value than anything that would come by its removal." So Paul says, "I have learned, therefore, to glory in my infirmities, my weaknesses, because then the power of Christ rests upon me," {2 Cor 12:9}.

Now what had prayer done? Prayer had broken through the mysterious barrier, the seeming wall of silence that met the apostle when asked to have this thing removed. As he prayed about it his mind was illuminated, he began to see something more in this, he saw behind it God's purposes, and they were of such tremendous value he cried, "Gladly, Lord, will I endure the physical infirmity that the great and abiding values of this suffering may not be lost upon me in Jesus Christ." So, the searching prayer was answered. We need not go on in confusion and uncertainty in these perplexing areas of life: these sticky circumstances, these difficult situations, where the final solution is long delayed. For that kind of problem the word is, seek: "Seek, and ye shall find." The answer is absolutely certain.

There is still a third level which involves knocking. Here, both time and repetition are involved. A knock is not a single rap, it is a series of raps. It is a request for admittance, repeated if necessary, and it suggests situations where we seek an entrance, or an opportunity. Someone has perhaps erected a barrier against our witness or against our friendship and we are seeking to surmount that, to get behind the wall of resistance and to have an opportunity freely and openly to speak, or to share, or to enter into a life. That requires knocking. Perhaps we have an unshakable desire to begin a certain type of work or ministry from which we are now excluded. We long to move into that area, we feel God leading us, calling us, to be this or do that. That requires knocking. We hunger, perhaps, after knowledge or friendship or as the Word of God says, "Hungering and thirsting after righteousness," {cf, Matt 5:6}. We are looking for an opportunity, seeking an entrance into an area that is now restricted from us. This requires knocking. We come before God and boldly and repeatedly ask, each time making an endeavor to enter in, for we are resting on the solid assurance that what Jesus says here is true, "Knock, and it shall be opened."

There is a remarkable and clear-cut example of this in Paul's letter to the Romans, the first chapter. As he writes to these dear friends, many of whom he had never met but knew by reputation only, he says in Verses 9 and 10:

"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, [Without ceasing! As he knocks that this door might be opened to him, he knocks without ceasing] asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." {Rom 1:9-10 RSV}

Here is an area that he wished to enter into, but he was frustrated again and again. But he kept trying, knowing

that to him who knocks, it shall be opened. "Without ceasing," he says, "I kept mentioning this in my prayers, asking that somehow I may at last succeed in coming to you." And the book of Acts tells us that he did finally come, one day a prisoner in chains. He had not thought he would come that way but he did come. God brought him to Rome, and from this prison cell in Rome there came the greatest letters the apostle ever wrote, which we call his "Prison Epistles." Prayer is not simply asking. Prayer is also seeking and knocking. But the answer is invariably the same. "For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."

Now if prayer begins with necessity and moves on to certainty, then assuredly it ends on a note of ability, Verse 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!" {Luke 11:13 RSV}

This is one of the greatly misunderstood passages of Scripture, and it is often taken to refer to the initial indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. Some people have been led by this passage to feel that it is possible to be a Christian and not have the Holy Spirit, and perhaps years after conversion they must ask God for the Spirit to be given to them. But that is not the meaning of the passage at all. Both John and Paul make it very clear, explicitly clear, that the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, is received the moment we believe in Jesus Christ. It is recorded in John's gospel that Jesus stood at the last day of the feast and cried,

"If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" {John 7:37b-38 RSV}

And John immediately adds,

But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive. {John 7:39 KJV}

And Paul, in First Corinthians 12, says that

by one Spirit we were all [all believers] baptized into one body [the Body of Christ]. {1 Cor 12:13 RSV}

The Spirit of God does not come by invitation initially. This word about the asking for Spirit is not addressed to unbelievers, but to believers who already have the Holy Spirit! This is the paradox of Christianity: though it is true that all Christians have the indwelling Holy Spirit it is also true, and we are not speaking nonsense when we say this, that we need continually to be filled with the Holy Spirit. That is, not to have him come in again, but to give ourselves over to his occupancy and his mastery in our lives. All fulfillment of need is then an activity of the Holy Spirit. This is why Jesus ends this enlightening passage on prayer by reminding us that every Christian is continually to be asking for and receiving that flow of the Spirit's power that alone makes him able to do anything in God's sight.

For an illustration of this, I refer to the life of Oswald Chambers. Many of you have his great devotional book, *My Utmost for His Highest*, and other books that he has written. Oswald Chambers was a philosophy tutor at Dunoon College in England. He was a genuine Christian; there is no question about it. His faith in Christ as his Savior was sincere and unshakable. But, as he lived on as a Christian, there came to him a very deep conviction that, though he knew he was a Christian, he also knew that he was an appallingly dull, often defeated, sadly disillusioned Christian. This despair and defeat went on until it came to a climax. The climax came at the time of a visit to the college by Dr. F. B. Meyer, mightily used of God in the proclaiming of the Spirit-filled life. During Dr. Meyer's visit, preaching as he did upon the Holy Spirit, there was awakened in Oswald Chamber's heart, a realization that his life, though he was a Christian, was very defeated. He records it in these words: "If this is all there is to Christianity, if I have got all there is, then the thing's a fraud." He became very hungry after something more of God.

On one occasion Dr. Meyer spoke on this very verse, Luke 11:13, and Oswald Chambers says it came home to his heart with gripping power. "How much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" There was a brief but fierce battle in his thinking and at last he simply responded to the verse and said, "Lord, all right. I ask you now for the Holy Spirit and I take him. I receive him from you now by faith." The result was nothing emotional. There was no feeling of power, there was no sense of vision, there was no deeper realization of God -- nothing! The next step was to talk it all out with a friend, and, in the talk, the friend reminded him that Jesus said, "Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you," and that this is simply a gift from the Lord to be taken, to be accepted, that's all. Oswald Chambers said there came to him like a flash the sudden realization that what he was asking was that God would give him a sense of power so that he could hold it in his hand, as it were, and say, "Look, this is what I got by laying my all on the altar." And he said, "I simply came to realize that God intended me, having asked, to simply take it by faith, and that power would be there. I might see it only by the backward look, but I was to reckon on the fact that God would be with me to do." Five years later he recorded the results. He wrote,

If the previous four years of my life had been nothing but hell on earth, the last five have been heaven on earth. Every aching abyss of my heart has been filled with the overflowing love of God. Love is the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Now did that mean that the Holy Spirit was not present in Oswald Chamber's heart before he had this experience? Of course not. How else was he a Christian? How else did he realize that Jesus Christ was his, except as the Spirit bore witness with his spirit that he was a child of God? What happened was that he gave over the willing consent of his life to the Holy Spirit to direct his activities, and accepted the Word of God as sufficient proof that it would all happen as he walked out on that promise. As Samuel Shoemaker would say, he stepped out of the marginal realms of the Spirit-life into the full, flowing stream of the Holy Spirit.

Now this is what this verse means. It takes power to live a Christian life. You know that, don't you? It takes power to knock all the self-conceit and the self-centeredness out of our lives, and power to keep Christ central in everything. This power does not come by the earnest gritting of our teeth and striving to achieve it. It comes by a continual asking and taking, by a continual praying by faith, "Lord, take me, truly take me, Lord," and then expecting that he has done it. When we do, God writes upon us the marks of power and sends us out as living epistles to be read and known of all men.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, in this moment, we ask that these words may come with fresh and vital meaning to our heart; that we may see that there is a vast and great experience of thy blessing and power lying before us, waiting for us to step out upon the basis of they word alone; that there are things we need to ask for and take immediately from thy hand, others that we need to seek for, still others for which we need to knock and wait, and knock again, knowing that in every case without exception your word is sure, your answer is true. It shall be given, we shall find, it shall be opened. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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