

RUF Large Group Bible Study
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Parables on Prayer (Luke 11 and 18)²

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, as John taught his disciples." 2 And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

3 Give us each day our daily bread,

4 and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation."

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'? 8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. 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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 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? 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!"

We look now at two parables about prayer. The first, Luke 11 comes right after what we call The Lord's Prayer, and so obviously joins together the parable and the question the disciples ask, "Lord teach us to pray." Jesus gives them a model prayer, and then tells a parable that further explains prayer itself.

In the second parable in Luke 18 comes on the heels of Jesus' discussion of the coming of the future Kingdom of God. This parable then, takes prayer and puts it in the context of praying for justice and peace – things that are promised when Christ returns.

Both show us that we are to be persistent in prayer and, shall we say, shameless in coming before the one who can grant our requests. Both operate on a "how much more" approach to teaching. If this widow and host need help and can't get it any other way, how much more helpless and needy are we? If an unjust judge and a half-asleep neighbor are willing to answer these requests, then how much more will our just and awake Heavenly Father grant what we ask?!

To bring these points home, we'll refer back to these parables, but I'm going to take us to Hebrews 4:16: "***Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.***"³

When we pray, we have to realize we are engaged in a profound spiritual transaction – we, mere mortals, flesh and blood, bound by time and space, ignorant, incredibly foul and sinful are talking to and in relationship with the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, just, perfect, wise, righteous and gracious God. How can that happen? Surely it is not just a matter of words and posture, but it is only with the work and aid of the Holy Spirit, and the intercession of Jesus Christ. Yet, it does happen. We can talk to our God and Father.

We're going to see from this text that we have a throne of grace, and then we'll draw out the implications of that for us.

The Throne

In our Luke 11 text, we read, "Hallowed be your name." This is kingly language, as we are to come before our regal monarch humbly. We are to picture him on a throne, high and mighty. The mercy seat is this throne, and thus when we come before God in prayer, we come into the courts of the royalty of heaven.

Lowly reverence

This image should cause us to come, first, in *lowly reverence*. We come before the king to pay him honor and homage. We should not do it with pride and arrogance, thinking that we belong in any way, but with gratefulness to even be allowed there in the first place. Think of the greatness of our king. He is the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords. Any other king pales in comparison to him. He holds all other kings in the palm of his hand and they owe their very existence to him. His throne has sway over all the worlds. Heaven obeys him cheerfully, hell trembles at his frown and earth is constrained to worship him, willingly or unwillingly. You are standing before such a person. Your shoes should be off, to show your lowliest humility.

Do you do so with anything but reverence? Do you prostrate yourself before him? Do you put a hand over your mouth?

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² My sources are: *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at desiringgod.org; *The Gospel According to John*, DA Carson; *The Gospel According to John*, L Morris; *Exposition of The Gospel According to John*; A. Pink; *John*, Hughes; *Getting to Know John's Gospel*; R Peterson; Kistemaker, Blomberg, Wenham, and Boice from their books on Jesus' parables; Blomberg, Carson and Calvin on Matthew; Luther's sermons on these passages.

³ What follows is practically pure Spurgeon from Robert Hall's editing of his sermons, found in *The Power of Prayer in a Believer's Life*.

You may be familiar with him, but do not be unholy and un-awed by him. You may be bold with him, but do not be impertinent. You must always remember that he is the creator and you are the worm, that he created all things and stands apart from them and you are dust.

Let us ask that as we approach our God that the Spirit would put us in the right frame of mind so we do not tread lightly into the throne room of our Lord.

Devout joyfulness

We also come to the throne with *devout joyfulness*. Why? Because we are in the throne room at all. We should remember that we really do not deserve to be here, but deserve to be in the dungeon. Instead, we are permitted into his very presence, into his royal chamber, into his audience. Shouldn't that provoke in our hearts an attitude of thankfulness and joy, that we are the recipients of great favors beyond our comprehension?

Is your countenance that of joy when you pray, when you come to the throne? He stretches out his arms to bring you to himself so he can hear your struggles and hurts. The very fact that you can tell him is grace to you.

Complete submission

In this posture, we should approach his throne with *complete submission*. We don't pray in order to instruct God what he should do, nor should we even for a minute presume to dictate the method of his divine working. It is okay to say to God, "This is what I think should happen," but as soon as we say that, we are constrained to add, "But, knowing that I may be very much mistaken since I am such an idiot, don't do what I want, but what you want, O Lord."

We come to him as children. Thus we shouldn't seek to climb up on the throne ourselves and start to hand down judgments and rulings. We come to him and listen and do what he says, trusting that he knows what is best and directs the world as he pleases.

This is what we pray when we say, "Your kingdom comes, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We mean, "Your will be done. If I ask anything that is out of accordance with your will, what I really want is for you to deny me what I ask. That would be kindness to me. I will take it as a true answer if you refuse me what does not seem good in your sight."

In addition, we may be praying for things we don't really want if we knew the true nature of things. CS Lewis wrote, "If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where should I be now?"⁴

Do you remember this submission to his will and his answers? If so, you may be less inclined to push certain concerns before the throne. Or you may ask them in a different way. We may take note if our prayers are seeking our own comfort or ease or advantage or anything that might bring dishonor to God. And ask him to have his will be done.

Do you submit to his word? Practically speaking, Christ's words and Christ are identical. Some speak about God being their master, but as to doctrine they don't care a lick about what his word declares. As long as their hearts are right toward his person, they claim liberty of thought. But that cannot be so. We cannot separate Christ from his word. He is the Word. And how could we call him Master, Prophet, Priest and King and not do things he says, rejecting the truth that he teaches, treating it as non-important and not worth our time and brain energy? Not only doctrine, but in obeying his commands for purity, love, sacrifice, repentance, and forgiveness. If you will not have Christ and his words, neither will he have you or your words.

We must come to him with complete submission.

Enlarged expectations

If we truly are approaching a throne, then we should have *enlarged expectations*. This taps into the "how much more" aspect of the parables. We aren't coming to the back door of the neighbor asking for bread at midnight or sugar for the sweet tea. We aren't going to the advisor asking to sign our drop slip. We aren't standing at the backdoor of McDonald's asking for the food they're throwing out every hour. Though to get any of those things would be in reality more than we would deserve.

But when we pray, we are standing in the palace of the great King's own reception room. We stand where angels bow with veiled faces. This is the throne where every petition in the world has been requested. This is a King who has everything at his disposal. In light of where we are in prayer and with whom we're dealing with in prayer, let us ask big things, glorious things. He says, ask and it will be given to you. What are you asking for?

Dawson Trotman said he was tired of asking for peanuts when God said he would give the whole world to those who asked. Let's enlarge our expectations and ask for great and grand things to our King.

Unstaggering confidence

Our spirit in approaching God with these large requests should be that of *unstaggering confidence*. Do you doubt the King? Do you question the Imperial Monarch? Do you think that God, Yahweh, Elohim, The Great I Am would lie to you? That he would trick and deceive you? That he will not keep his promises? That he should be mistrusted.

We should banish those thoughts from our minds when we come to him, for they hold no place in Biblical Christianity. Surely you have those thoughts at times, and you should be working on them. But in prayer, when you are in the presence of God himself talking to him, you should be beholding him in all the glory of his throne of grace, as a child is trusting his father, as a subject trusting his king.

⁴ Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, p. 28

Deepest sincerity

We must also conduct our prayers with *deepest sincerity* and in the spirit that makes everything real. If you are disloyal enough to despise the King, for your own sake, don't mock him to his face and when he is on the throne. If you have asked for an audience with the royal king, then don't get before him and say, "I don't know why I've come or that I have anything to ask." Have something to say, even if it is mean-spirited and accusatory. It must be sincere. Joking isn't appreciated, though laughter is. When we approach our great King, let us have a purpose there. Let us beware of playing at praying; it is an insolence toward God.

When we pray in public, let us do so with sincerity. Too often we can get caught up in our words and how we think that others are hearing them. We wish to sound eloquent, theological and profound. And we are not sincere. In our private prayers, let us not merely chant certain words, but let those words form our hearts, lest we waste our time thinking we have prayed when we have not done so.

Prayer is an eminent and elevated act, a high and wondrous privilege. Imagine you had the chance to speak with your greatest hero. Let's say it's a president. You get the call that you've been invited to the White House because the President wants to talk to you. Would you not dress up? Would you not put on deodorant and shave? Would you not make sure your clothes matched and were pressed so you would look your best? Wouldn't you be a bit nervous, wondering what the President had to say? Would you think carefully about your words so that you didn't say too much or too little? Do you think you might be in a bit of wonder at the greatness of it all, the power of that room, that chair, that office?

In many old empires, the highest privilege someone could have was to be invited into the presence of the king. We have been given permission to enter the presence of the king *at any time*. We are so used to this we either ignore it and don't pray at all, or else we take it lightly and think we are playing cards with God on the porch. This is the throne room of God!

***Ps 95:6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!
7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.***

Ps 96:9 Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!

Of Grace

But just as the brilliance and majesty of the throne is in our eyes, we have to remember something else. If we only concentrate on the throne, we miss out on what else God is telling us about himself and about prayer. For with the throne only we have holiness and justice. We have the law. We have Mt. Sinai covered in mist with lightening and thunder scaring us away. I cannot come to throne with perfect reverence, joyfulness, submission, confidence, expectations and sincerity. Can you?

That is why it is the throne of grace. The king dispenses grace to his vassals, because Christ has paid for what they deserve. He has exacted justice to be sure, but through the cross, we are allowed into his presence, and thus in prayer we see his grace all the more fully.

But we must remember something else before we begin. Our prayers ultimately play into what we already said our life purpose is – to glorify God. John 14:13 says, "Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son." This means that God will glorify himself and his son through answering our prayers. Why is this? Because we are so helpless. Some of you have heard of the Hoyts, or Team Hoyt. Here Dick and Rick Hoyt are described from their website:

"Rick was born in 1962 as a spastic quadriplegic, cerebral palsy, non-speaking person. The ability of his mind and person have always been strong, and his family have been hearty supporters of his quest for independence and inclusion in community activities, sports, school and the workplace. Rick is a graduate of Boston University.

Dick has recently retired as a lieutenant colonel in the air nation guard. He has served his country for over thirty-five years. Dick is a friend of the Presidents Council on Fitness." (from www.teamhoyt.com)

Rick wanted to "run" in a race, so his father agreed to push him in a wheelchair. They began to run more and more races, built a special chair to help them run better and then moved on to marathons. After four years of those, they started on triathalons – that would be 26.2 miles of running, 112 miles of biking and 2.4 miles of swimming.

When they cross the finish line, it is an amazing thing to see Rick smile – his neediness glorifies his father, the one who is doing EVERYTHING to finish the race for him.

In the same way, we glorify our father and Jesus when we go to him in prayer, when we ask for his help and rely on him to do it for us. John 15:5 says, "***I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.***" Apart from him you can do nothing. We are Rick trying to walk on our own, much less run a marathon. But with Christ, he says this: "***If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.***" It will be done for you.

This glorifies God.

The faults of our prayers will be overlooked

When we come to this throne of grace, *the faults of our prayers will be overlooked*. When you begin to pray, you may feel like you haven't prayed at all. Your words may be all wrong. Your heart wrong. Your motives wrong. You may pray for all the wrong things. But you haven't come to the throne of justice. God doesn't say, "Ooops! You made a mistake. Out with you!" Your broken

words, gaspings and stammerings come before a throne of grace. Even our best prayers would be laughable if we saw them as God sees them.

Instead, Jesus intercedes for us. He takes our prayers and presents them to his father. He makes the prayer perfect with his own merits. God looks on the prayer that has been presented by Christ and looks over its inherent faults. This should encourage us that we can keep coming to him, never giving up, because we don't approach the throne of criticism but of grace.

The faults of the petitioner shall not prevent the success of the prayer

Likewise, since it is a throne of grace, *the faults of the petitioner shall not prevent the success of the prayer*. If our faults were to keep our prayers from being effective, then we would have no hope at all. We have far too many to even be there, much less to expect to receive what we have asked. This, of course, is the whole gospel. That we are approaching the mercy seat at all is evidence of the propitiation of Jesus Christ.

Without this, I couldn't say to you "pray" even if you were a Christian. But I wouldn't have to, because people who keep away from Jesus don't pray anyway. "There is a direct correlation between not knowing Jesus well and not asking much from him. A failure in our prayer life is generally a failure to know Jesus."⁵

We betray our hearts when we say, "It is time for us to get to the task of prayer." Or even worse perhaps, "At this time I ought to be in prayer, but I don't feel like it. What a dread and weariness this is! Okay, but if we have to, we have to."

That can be our attitude at times, but we need to know that that is not the life of grace. Jesus will even see through that of course, since it is a fault that he has paid for if we are his. But we need to come.

Since it is a throne of grace, and we come to it through the meritorious life and death of Jesus, I can tell you to pray. Even if you are the worst sinner who ever lived, I can say to you, cry to the Lord and seek him while he may be found. You need to go to the Savior, for he is the throne of grace.

When we realize this, our hearts are changed. We come and pray as wise people eat – when the desire for it is upon them. Instead of dreading it, it is a joy and happiness, a glad errand that we get to do in rejoicing.

The desires of the pleader will be interpreted

Because this is the throne of grace, *the desires of the pleader will be interpreted*. Not only will God not throw you out if you mess up, he isn't like the Sphinx who will make you stand there until you say the riddle in just the right way. He interprets what you really are saying. If he were not gracious at all, he wouldn't even trouble himself with our petitions, and he would make us state them exactly right. But it is a throne of grace, and he understands our fumbblings, even our groanings as prayers.

If you come over to our house, you'll probably talk with Anna. She may say something like this, "I go see AbbySmally. Day habing ballie. But I habing blankie. I see Genna and Grammie. We go swimming. I by myself. Dat your juwie?"

You can probably make out some of that, but without a lot of context, you wouldn't know what she is talking about. Let me interpret, as Anna tells you about her day and flits from topic to topic. "I went to see Abby and Molly today (the Stuarts dogs). They were playing ball. But I have my blanket. I want to see Genna and Grammie (they're in Missouri, however). [If they were here], we'd go swimming and I'd go by myself. Is that your cell phone ringing?"

The Spirit, from the throne of grace, helps us and teaches us words, even writes on our hearts the desires themselves. Our petitions are presented to the throne of grace by the Spirit and Jesus. They teach us what our desires should be, what we ought to seek for. They teach us our real needs. They suggest to us God's promises that we might pray them.

When we are abiding in Christ, and searching out his will in his word, we see that our purpose in life is to bring forth fruit to the glory of God. This puts certain requests in perspective. What can I pray that will bring God the most glory? What could happen in my life that I might glorify God the most? This may be the exact opposite of what may bring us the most pleasure and fun if we aren't thinking of that question.

All the needs of those who come will be supplied

If indeed this is the throne of grace, and God's Word is to be trusted, then we can know that *all the needs of those who come will be supplied*. The King isn't going to say, "Well, okay, but before I do what you want, I need you to bring me ten thousand dollars and fifty five good deeds." This isn't a throne for receiving tribute, but for dispensing gifts. This isn't a throne of majesty that supports itself by the taxation of its subjects, but a throne that glorifies itself by flooding its subjects with good things. "***Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.***" (Isaiah 55:1)

You will receive mercy here. God is not stingy. We saw this in our Luke 11 parable when we read, "***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? 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!***" God delights in giving good gifts to his children, more than I like buying books for my tookies.

All the petitioner's miseries shall find compassion

We come to the throne of grace as a broken people, saved by grace but still in the throes of our neediness. Remember that when we come to the throne heavy under the burden of our sins, that there sits there the one who felt the burden of sin long ago and has not yet forgotten its weight. When you come with your sorrow, you are approaching the Man of Sorrows.

Are you distressed and depressed? Do you fear that God has forsaken you? Remember that you are kneeling before one who said, "***My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?***"

⁵ John Piper, *Desiring God*, p. 162

It is the throne of grace that delights to look upon your miseries with a tender eye and relieve them. Come then, you who are poor and wretched, whose miseries make you long for death, you captive ones, those of you in the chains of bondage to sin, you slaves, if you have irons on your souls, if you sit in darkness, if you are blindfolded. Come! Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched, weak and wounded, sick and sore. The throne of grace will not look on you if you cannot look on it. It will give to you, though you have nothing in return to give to it, and it will deliver you, though you cannot raise a finger to deliver yourself.

Remember though, that there is also pruning. It is not hard to hear someone say, "Since I became a Christian, my life has gotten harder and worse, not better." Abiding in Christ, going to him in prayer and trusting in him means that you realize that his ways are not your ways and that you will love Christ even if he is cutting everything away (for your good). Don't think something strange is happening to you if you are feeling the pruning. It is natural, and it is good for you. Don't rebel because you have had something close to your heart be stripped away. Perhaps it was too close. Cling to Jesus all the more closely. Pray, "Cut, Lord, cut if you must. I will cling to you. To whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life!"

This is the throne of grace set out before us. How much greater is it than the neighbor's door where the man received a day's worth of bread? How much greater is it than the widow who received justice from the hands of an exasperated judge?!

We have such a privilege to come before such a throne.

Spurgeon writes, "I usually feel more dissatisfied with my prayers than I do with anything else." This is from a man who loved prayer. He has over 100 sermons about prayer. He prayed. Yet he still never quite felt like he was there. I certainly don't. I think my prayer life is pretty much pathetic. But I keep starting. And I am seeing answers. And God is faithful. And we have the opportunity to pray. And God is so good to us.

We do not come to God in prayer because we are so very good at it. But precisely because we are weak. That is the point of Christianity, and is not different in prayer.

"The difference between Uncle Sam and Jesus Christ is that Uncle Sam won't enlist you in his service unless you are healthy [and strong] and Jesus won't enlist you unless you are sick [and weak]."⁶ Do you see your weaknesses, your neediness?

I don't understand how it all works.⁷ I know that it is relational and gracious. And I also know that God never lets up on his sovereignty. Without grace, sovereignty is a pretty terrible thing. But with grace, we know that every soul that comes to Jesus in faith, to the true mercy seat, that divine sovereignty doesn't wear a dark and terrible mask, but is instead full of love. To a believer, the sovereignty of God is always exercised in pure grace. God will do as he wills, but on the mercy seat, he has bound himself because of the covenant with Christ, to be gracious to his people.

He says, "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. 10 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." If he hadn't said it, I'm not sure I would have believed it. But he has said it.

Prayer comes spontaneously from those who abide in Jesus. Prayer is the natural outflowing of a soul in communion with Jesus.

Let us pray.

O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!
- Joseph Scriven

⁶ Piper, p. 171

⁷ "The efficacy of prayer, is, at any rate, no *more* of a problem than the efficacy of *all* human acts. i.e., if you say, "It is useless to pray because Providence already knows what is best and will certainly do it," then why is it not equally useless (and for the same reason) to try to alter the course of events in any way whatever?" CS Lewis, *Letters of CS Lewis* (21 February 1932), p. 149.