

*Revealed Through Prayer*

**Luke 11:1-13**

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We're still following our GPS back home to the generous people we're meant to be. We've seen how God loves and gives and that we were made in the image of the loving and generous God, so we're born to be generous. But we fail to live in that image, so God comes to rescue and restore us.

Speaking of restoration: Yesterday I did the funeral for Dennis Starbuck. One of his favorite things was restoring old cars. Picture a car coming off the assembly line. It's shiny. It runs great. But then there's a wreck and the car is damaged. Or it's not maintained and it loses its shine and the engine starts knocking. Or it's left somewhere and not used for years and it deteriorates.

Now picture someone like Dennis taking that car and restoring it. The engine is rebuilt or replaced. The dents are fixed and it's repainted. Everything is put back the way it's supposed to be so it runs like new, maybe even better than new.

Now, think of our lives being like that car. God made us in God's image, to run a certain way. But we find lots of ways to wreck our lives or let them get run down. Then God comes in Jesus to restore us, to fix us up, to remake us into what God intends. If we'll trust the Lord and let him do his work on us, our lives will take on a new shine, a new direction. God will give us power for living that we don't have on our own.

The study we're using gives us a "GPS" to get back to being the loving and generous people God wants us to be.

- **G**rounded in Gratitude
- Revealed Through **P**ray
- **S**ealed by Faith

We've seen that gratitude is vital. It's the beginning of our journey to living generously. We're thankful for all that God does and all that God

gives. Gratitude reminds us that life is a gift, everything we are and have is a gift. We're grateful for the people in our lives. We show gratitude to the people in our lives.

Today, we're looking at prayer as part of our journey with God that takes us where we need to be. Prayer moves us from acknowledging our blessings to offering them back to God. If in gratitude we gratefully receive what God gives, in prayer we seek to return to God. How does prayer connect us with God's restoring grace? How does prayer help us be loving and generous? What's the "prayerful willingness" we need to practice? Are you willing to ask God, "How do you want me to live? What do you want me to do?"

Most of our praying tends to focus on ourselves and the people closest to us. The study guide cites statistics from research on how Americans pray. Most people's prayers include gratitude or thanksgiving and the needs of family and community. The top ten categories include prayer for personal guidance, health, and safety; prayers for forgiveness and peace. Thirty-seven percent of people who pray say a blessing at mealtime (*The Generosity Challenge* 46-47).

All of those are good things. I do find it interesting how much we tend to pray for physical health and provision. Our church prayer list and most prayer requests we get are for physical healing and strength. Again, there's nothing wrong with that. I believe we should pray for those things. But maybe we could broaden our prayer concern. I remember one time in another church when we were sharing joys and concerns—and there people in the congregation spoke them out. A woman asked for prayer for her unsaved friend. That kind of request stood out because it was so rare. Let's pray for the spiritual well-being of ourselves and our family and friends. Let's pray for God to touch people and draw them to himself. Let's believe God for people to get converted and become followers of Jesus.

One thing our study points out is that in that list of things people pray for there's no mention of *listening to God*. But prayer is really meant to be a conversation. We talk *with* God, not just *to* God. Do you expect to hear from God when you pray? I'm not talking about a voice out of the sky. God communicates with us mainly through our thinking. One friend says that

God speaks to him by “giving me insights that are bigger than I am.” If you tell God you want to hear from him and you get quiet enough to listen, thoughts and ideas will be there that you realize you didn’t come up with on your own.

Another key to hearing from God, being guided by God, is the willingness to do what God tells us to do. We trust God’s goodness, so we commit to doing God’s will—whatever it is—even before we know it clearly. There’s plenty that God has already made known that we can get started on. As we’re doing what we already know, God will guide us further into doing his will. It’s easier to steer a car that’s going forward rather than sitting still. It’s easier for us to receive God’s guidance when we’re moving, doing something. We already know God wants us to have a generous spirit and a thankful heart. God wants us to love and give, to be grateful. And, God wants us to pray.

The study guide points out that God uses, God works through, people who are *prayerfully willing*. Not people who are perfect or sinless or have it all together, but people who are open to God in prayer and are willing to listen to God, receive from God, and obey God.

For example, Abraham and Sarah messed up plenty. They lied, they schemed to get what God had promised instead of waiting for God. They laughed at God’s promises. Still, God made those promises to Abraham and Sarah. God spoke to Abraham and told him to go to an unknown land. And Abraham and Sarah went where God told them to go.

Moses was in exile after committing murder. In the desert, he saw a bush that was on fire but didn’t burn up. Then he heard from God. The Lord was calling him to go to his people who were slaves in Egypt and lead them out. Moses came up with excuse after excuse of why he couldn’t do what God wanted. Finally, he gave in. He went and he did what God told him to do.

Have you ever had the feeling God was telling you to do something, to give something, to venture out? What did you do? I’ve sometimes rationalized and explained away that sense of direction. But sometimes I’ve gone with it and discovered that God was leading, God was giving courage and strength and everything needed to do his will.

So if God's calling us to pray and to give him our prayerful willingness, how do we get started?

You may or may not know who Oral Roberts was. Those of you who know he was, probably have varying opinions about him. For those who don't know, Oral Roberts was an evangelist who had a healing ministry. He was a pioneer in putting services on TV. He founded a university in Tulsa, which is where I went to college. Bob Tuttle taught there for several years and he says Oral was about half crazy, but he knew how to believe God and to trust God.

When Oral Roberts was seventeen, he was playing basketball and collapsed on the court, coughing up blood. He had tuberculosis. At one point, his mother told him, "You must give your life to God. Only God can help you now. And you must pray."

"I don't know how to pray," he said.

"You don't have to know how to pray. Just talk to God out of your heart. Tell him what you feel inside. That's what it takes to pray."

Oral was eventually healed and went into ministry. Years later he said he couldn't improve on his mother's advice. Just talk to God out of your heart. He simply added: Talk to God as a person. Don't think of God as being hundreds of miles away, even though you know God is everywhere at once. Think of Jesus and see him in your mind, in your imagination. Picture Jesus walking the hills or standing beside the Sea of Galilee. See him preaching to the people on a hillside. See him laying hands on sick people and healing them. See him blessing little children. See him on the cross. See him alive again and coming out of the tomb. See him ascending to heaven. Picture him at the right hand of God. As we enter the world of the Bible, our imagination can be inspired and we can see the Lord and talk to him as a person (Robert Morgan, *Preacher's Sourcebook of Creative Sermon Illustrations* 624).

In the section from Luke's Gospel we've read, we can see and hear Jesus teaching about prayer. Jesus has been praying and his disciples have been listening. Now they ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." The disciples long to pray like Jesus does. So he responds to their request and teaches them about praying and how to pray. He also shows them who God is and what

God is like. He wants to teach us and show us who God is and how we can communicate with God through prayer.

In this section, Jesus describes God as Father and Friend. Fatherhood and friendship can teach us something about God and prayer. Now, this doesn't mean we imagine God as an earthly father, only bigger and stronger. Instead, we see that the best qualities in earthly parents come from God. And we don't just look at earthly friends and then figure that's what God is like. We reflect on God as a friend and let God's character inform the kind of friends we are (N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*).

We have here Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer. It's shorter than the version in Matthew's Gospel. But it gives us the same outline and model for prayer. We start with God, get our attention on God and seek for him to be honored. We seek God's kingdom, God's reign, God's way of doing things. Then we ask for God to supply our basic needs for food, forgiveness, and protection. This is a prayer for the community of Jesus' followers. It's how we pray when we're following Jesus on the journey of God's kingdom. As we're following our GPS and walking with God to where he wants to take us, we pray this prayer and this kind of prayer.

Then Jesus illustrates what prayer is like. He says to imagine having a friend show up at your house and you don't have any food to serve him. The laws of hospitality in the ancient Middle East were strict, and if a traveler arrived needing food and shelter you had an obligation to provide it. So you go to another friend's house and ask him for some bread to feed your guest. He tells you he and his family are already in bed. He can't get up to give you anything. But you keep knocking and calling out. And Jesus says, "Let me tell you, even if he can't get up and give you anything just because he's your friend, because of your shameless persistence he will get up and give you whatever you need" (Wright).

Then Jesus tells us to keep asking and we'll receive, keep searching and we'll find, keep knocking and the door will be opened. Persistence is a key ingredient in prayer. If we ask God, "What do you want me to do? How do you want me to live?" we keep asking until God tells us.

And God is greater than the sleepy friend. That's another point Jesus makes. If the friend will finally get up and give you the bread so you'll go

away and let him sleep, if he'll give you food for your guest in order to maintain a good reputation, how much more will God give us what we need. In prayer we're not trying to overcome God's reluctance, but we're receiving God's willingness. God wants to guide us. God wants to teach us. God wants to get through to us. God wants to provide for us.

A couple of the devotions in the readings for this week talk about this. One of the writers tells about a family that kept praying for their daughter and grandchildren for a decade. Then he says, "Because I am one who has trouble remembering to pray for things for more than about a week, I can't even wrap my head around 'praying it through' for almost ten years" (*A Generous Life* 61).

Who have you been praying for for years? Keep at it. God hears and God is at work.

Another reading comments on this passage in Luke:

Seeking God's will is much more work than simply asking; seeking takes time, attention, listening, looking, searching. That journey of prayer will lead us far past asking, deep into new paths of seeking God's way for our lives. Along those paths we will discover doorways—places where choices and decisions must be made. Do we have the courage and commitment to knock on those doors? And when those new doorways are opened, will we step into a new way of life? (63)

Where is seeking God's will taking you? What doors is God inviting you to enter? What new paths of life is God leading you to walk?

When Jesus talks about God like a father, he says, "If your child asks for a fish, would you give a snake instead? If your child asks for an egg, you wouldn't give a scorpion, would you?" Charlie Brown goes trick-or-treating and everybody gives him a rock. But surely his parents would give him a treat and not a rock. Then Jesus says, "If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God, the heavenly Father, give good gifts to you!" In fact, God gives the very best gift. Jesus says, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

In giving the Holy Spirit, God gives himself, his own powerful, loving, generous presence to live in God's people. That's the gift that restores God's image in us and enables us to be loving and generous like God. We can surely be grateful for such a gift.

When Jesus talks about God being greater than a friend and greater than parents, he's showing how much God wants to give the kingdom and give the Holy Spirit. If we ask God to set up his kingdom in and among us, he'll do it. If we ask God for the Holy Spirit, we will receive the Holy Spirit.

All of this reveals the giving nature of God. If we've listened and discerned what God wants to give, we can pray confidently. When Jesus is our one thing, God will give us whatever we need to know him better, to follow him, and to hear and do his word.

If we ask God how he wants us to live, what he wants us to do, what he wants us to give, he'll tell us. Then the question is, will we live God's way, do God's will, give what God asks?