

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 28, 2011**

**THE MEANS OF GRACE:
3. MORE THOUGHTS ON PRAYER**

Luke 11:1-13

Last Sunday, before we were jolted by an earthquake with a 5.8 magnitude, and then subject to high winds and heavy rain from Hurricane Irene, I began to talk about prayer as one of the means God uses to help us grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We began to think together about the fact that God Himself invites us to draw near to Him in prayer. He urges us to come to Him with all of our cares and concerns, all of our needs and requests. In His great love, He welcomes us to bring them all to the throne of grace, where we will find mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Grace and mercy from the throne of God flow to us when we pray. God also uses our prayers of intercession – the prayers we pray for others – to touch the lives of those “others” with His grace.

I said that we should not think of prayer merely as a spiritual duty, as something we know we *should* do, something we *ought* to do more often or more consistently than we do, and consequently we constantly feel guilty about the deficiencies of our prayer life. Our mistake, I think, is in focusing on the *duty* of prayer instead of the *privilege* it is to talk with God. Instead of viewing prayer as something we *ought* to do, it is better to see it as something we *get* to do. Think about it. We *get* to talk with God. We *get* to have a personal audience with the King of the universe. We *get* to bring our cares and requests to a loving heavenly Father who always has time for us and always welcomes us with open arms as His redeemed and beloved sons and daughters in Christ. Prayer is a spiritual discipline, it is true. But it is also a gift. It is a gift of God’s grace. It is one of the ways we receive and experience God’s grace. It is one of the ways we grow in grace, and one of the ways God gets His grace into the lives of others.

I told you the amazing story of Tony Campolo and Charlie Stoltzfus, which is something only God in His sovereign grace and power could have orchestrated. If you weren’t here last Sunday, if you don’t know about Charlie Stoltzfus, ask someone who *was* here last week to tell you the story. You can also read last Sunday’s sermon online, or pick up a printed copy just outside the Multi-Purpose Room.

One more thing left over from last Sunday: I asked if you would agree with me that prayer is not a peripheral matter in the Bible. It is a pretty bold statement, I know ☺. (Just kidding – not about prayer not being peripheral, but about it being some kind of bold or radical statement.) Far from being peripheral or inconsequential, prayer is woven into the fabric of the Bible from beginning to end. It is integral to the life of faith. It is a normal part of the life of fellowship with God for which we were made. It is a central component of the Christian life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Take a tour of the Bible, and (among other things) this is what you will find:

- Abraham prayed. In fact, on one occasion (Genesis 18), Abraham repeatedly appealed to God in prayer to spare the city of Sodom from destruction, despite the pervasive wickedness of the city, because Sodom was where Abraham's nephew Lot and Lot's family lived. In the end, God's judgment fell on Sodom. The Lord rained down burning sulfur on both Sodom and Gomorrah, and only Lot and his two daughters escaped with their lives (Genesis 19).
- Abraham's chief servant – his chief of staff, if you will – prayed (Genesis 24), when Abraham sent him on a mission to find a wife for his son Isaac. The servant asked the Lord to give him success. And God did, by leading him to Rebekah, who became Isaac's wife.
- When Rebekah was unable to bear any children, Isaac prayed for her (Genesis 25). In His grace, the Lord answered his prayer, Rebekah became pregnant, and gave birth to twins, Esau and Jacob.
- Jacob prayed, too (Genesis 32). When he and Esau were grown men, after Esau had sold his birthright to Jacob, after Jacob had deceived their father into giving him the blessing which Isaac had intended for Esau, when Jacob was about to have a reunion with his long-estranged brother, he prayed to God with a sense of urgency, asking God to save and protect him and his family from his brother's understandable wrath. When he didn't know what else to do, when he realized he couldn't wiggle out of this situation, Jacob did what lots of people do when they are desperate. He prayed. As John Ortberg points out, it is not bad to pray in a time of crises (*The Life You've Always Wanted*, p. 92). In fact, it is a *good* thing to do. It is the *right* thing to do. If an earthquake or a hurricane or some other crisis event drives people who don't normally pray to their knees and causes them to cry out to God in prayer, that is a good thing. "Desperate prayers," Ortberg says, "have been the beginning of spiritual life for many people" (p. 92). By themselves, however, these prayers of desperation are not enough to sustain a vital, healthy spiritual life. Not for Jacob. Not for you or me. It is not enough to pray only when you face a crisis or experience pain of some kind that you are not prepared to handle.

Now, back to the Bible:

- Moses prayed. He was almost constantly talking with God in prayer, it seems, and the relationship between Moses and God was so extraordinary that "the LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exodus 33:11).
- Joshua, Moses' successor as the leader of Israel, prayed for guidance and understanding when Israel suffered a stunning defeat, because there was sin in the camp (Joshua 7).
- In her great anguish and longing to bear a son, Hannah poured out her heart to the Lord in prayer (1 Samuel 1). God heard her prayer and blessed her with a son, Samuel, whom she then dedicated to the Lord, to serve God all the days of his life (1 Samuel 2).
- Samuel prayed, too (1 Samuel 8:6). He took prayer so seriously that he told the assembled people of Israel: "Far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23). Prayer matters so much that we sin against God, we miss out on God's best, and we fail to properly love one another, when we neglect or refuse to pray for each other.

- David prayed. Many of his prayers are preserved for us in the Book of Psalms, which is filled with the prayers and worship songs of the people of Israel.
- Solomon prayed. He asked God to give him wisdom to govern the nation (1 Kings 3). He prayed a magnificent prayer at the dedication of the temple he built in Jerusalem for the worship of God (1 Kings 8).
- Elijah prayed (1 Kings 18). In fact, as it says in James 5, his prayers were so powerful and effective that in response to Elijah's prayers, God withheld rain from Israel for 3 ½ years. Then Elijah prayed again, and God sent rain (James 5:17-18). The prayers of men and women who are rightly-related to God *are* powerful and effective (5:16).
- Hezekiah prayed (2 Kings 19:15 and 20:2; 2 Chronicles 30:18 and 32:24).
- Jehoshaphat prayed. When threatened with invasion by an enemy army, the king cried out to God for help and deliverance: "We have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us," he said. "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You" (2 Chronicles 20:12). Jehoshaphat did the right thing. When you don't know what to do, turn your eyes heavenward. Look up. Cry out to God for help. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him [as Lord], and He will direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes..." (Proverbs 3:5-7). That is what Jehoshaphat did. And God, in His mercy, rescued the nation of Judah from their enemies in response to his prayers.
- Ezra prayed. Nehemiah prayed. Job prayed. The prophets prayed. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel prayed.
- Daniel prayed and got in trouble for it. He ended up in the lions' den (Daniel 6) because he continued to pray to God after it was declared unconstitutional in the kingdom of Persia. But God in His providence protected Daniel and restored him to a place of high honor and great authority in the kingdom.
- Jonah prayed. Habakkuk prayed. Prayer was anything but peripheral in the lives of the saints in the Old Testament.

Turn to the New Testament, and what do you find?

- Jesus prayed. Did He ever! We'll come back to Him shortly.
- The apostles prayed (Acts 1-2).
- Peter prayed (Acts 9-10).
- Cornelius, a Roman soldier stationed in Caesarea, prayed (Acts 10).
- The whole church in Jerusalem prayed for Peter after Herod threw him in prison (Acts 12).
- Paul and Silas prayed while behind bars in Philippi (Acts 16).
- Later on, Paul prayed with the elders from the church at Ephesus (Acts 20).
- In several of his letters, Paul included prayers for the believers in the churches to whom he was writing, or assured them of his unceasing prayers for them (including Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians).
- In addition, Paul's letters often contain exhortations or instructions to Christ's followers to pray. Just a few examples:

*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions
with all kinds of prayers and requests.*
(Ephesians 6:18)

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.
(Colossians 4:2)

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything,
by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving,
present your requests to God.*
(Philippians 4:6)

Pray continually.
(1 Thessalonians 5:17)

*I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers,
intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone.*
(1 Timothy 2:1)

And what about Jesus? No way was prayer a peripheral matter to Him. No way was it merely incidental in His life and teaching. Perhaps the most persuasive argument for the importance of prayer in our lives, in fact, is the undisputable truth that Jesus was a man of prayer. The Bible says that Jesus routinely went off by Himself to pray (Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35). He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5:16). On at least one occasion, He spent the entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12). On another occasion, He took Peter, John and James with Him, and went up on a mountain to pray (Luke 9:28), where He was transfigured and the disciples caught a glimpse of His true glory (Luke 9:29-33). He prayed for Himself, for His disciples, and for all of us who would come to believe in Him – including you and me – the night before He was crucified (John 17). He agonized in prayer in Gethsemane the same night (Matthew 26:36ff; Mark 14:32ff; Luke 22:39ff). He even prayed on the cross, asking the Father to forgive those responsible for His death (Luke 23:34).

He taught about prayer, too. He taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, where He also introduced the Lord's Prayer as a pattern or model for the prayers of His followers. He taught about prayer in parables. In Luke 18 He told the story of the persistent widow and the judge who really didn't care a lick about justice. He told this story, Luke says, "to show (His disciples) that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1). That goes for us, too. God is not like this jaded, unjust judge. The point of the parable is that if even a corrupt judge will give a powerless widow justice – just to get her off his back – "how much more" will God, who is loving and just, full of mercy and compassion, gracious and righteous, do what is right and meet the needs of His people! So Jesus does not want us to give up in our praying. He wants us to keep on praying, trusting God to do what is best in His perfect time.

Jesus told another story about prayer, too – a story about a self-righteous Pharisee who took pride in his moral and spiritual superiority over others, and a tax collector, one of the most despised persons in Jewish society (because he worked for Rome), who knew he had no righteousness of his own, and prayed for God’s mercy (Luke 18:9-14). Only one of these men “went home justified before God,” Jesus said (Luke 18:14). It was not the Pharisee. There is no place in God’s kingdom for people who are proud of their own righteousness.

Then there is the teaching of Jesus on prayer in the passage we read from Luke 11. Knowing Jesus was a man of prayer, having seen how important prayer was in the life of Jesus, one of His disciples went to Him with this simple request: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). In response, Jesus gave the disciples the model of the Lord’s Prayer in an abbreviated form (11:2-4). The prayer in Luke doesn’t include every petition and phrase in the Lord’s Prayer found in Matthew 6. We’re not going to dissect the prayer word by word or phrase by phrase. That will have to wait until some other time. But it is wise to think through the focus and priorities of this model prayer, and to pattern our priorities and petitions in prayer after it. As Leon Morris has said, it is a prayer to be prayed by ordinary Christians as we seek God’s help in ordinary daily life. It reminds us of our need for God and His help in the ordinary as well as the extraordinary things of life.

Jesus went on to tell His disciples another story. In some ways it is similar to the parable of the persistent widow. But it is not the same. A friend on a trip shows up unexpectedly at midnight. In a culture in which hospitality was seen as a sacred duty (Morris), visitors were to be welcomed and warmly cared for, regardless of the hour when they arrived. The man at whose house the traveler stops faces a dilemma: It is late at night, and there is no food in the house to offer the guest. There is no 7-11 or any other 24-hour convenience store on the corner. So the host goes to a neighbor to ask for some break he can offer to his guest. In the typical home of Jesus’ day, the whole family usually slept in one room. They didn’t all have separate bedrooms of their own. In fact, for many families, the house consisted of just one room. Depending on the size of the family, it was not unusual for everyone to sleep in the same bed (or on the same mat). So, the neighbor on whose door the host knocks can’t get up and go to the door without disturbing his whole family. (Not that they would not likely be disturbed by the pleading of the host (aka “the asker”) and the neighbor’s response, telling the asker to just go way and leave him alone.) Eventually, though, the neighbor gives in, gets out of bed, and gives the asker the bread he needs. He does it not out of friendship and not because he is such a great guy. He does it because the asker is so persistent in his request, so open and honest about his need.

Again, the point of the parable is not that God is like this neighbor who doesn’t want to be bothered, but eventually responds so we will stop bothering him. No. God is not some kind of “cosmic grouch” (Darrell Bock). He is not like this friend who is reluctant to help, who doesn’t want to be bothered, who doesn’t want to get involved, who has to be continually bugged and begged in order to get him to do something. God is not like that, dear friends. He is our loving heavenly Father who cares for us, who desires what is best for us, who is working out His good and gracious purposes in our lives. If an earthly father knows how to give good gifts to his children, just imagine, Jesus says, how much more you can trust God to meet your needs at any hour of the day or night, *and* give you the gift of the Holy Spirit to be

your counselor and guide, and to give you power from heaven itself to do God's work and to live for His glory and praise.

God invites us to bring our cares and concerns, our requests and needs, to the throne of grace. When Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9), He is literally saying (this is what the tense of the Greek verbs mean): "Keep on asking... Keep on seeking... Keep on knocking.. " Don't be shy about coming to the Father with your requests. Don't be timid. Don't hesitate to cast your cares on Him, because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Don't think that you are bothering God. Don't wait until you're facing a midnight emergency before you pray. Do pray if you've got an emergency at midnight or 2 AM or any time of the day or night. But don't pray only in a time of emergency. Weave prayer into the spiritual fabric of your life. Pray with a spirit of trust and dependence on God, with both humility and holy boldness, and to keep on until you receive an answer from God. God is not reluctant to help. He is always available 24/7/365. He is ready, able, and willing to give us the mercy and grace we need for every situation. Because He loves us. Because He loves *you*.

Prayer is a means of grace. It is an avenue on which grace flows. If you feel like you're not very good at praying, welcome to the club! You don't need to be an expert. You just need to get to it. Listen to Peter Kreeft, from his book *Prayer for Beginners*: "Prayer is easier than we think. We want to think it is too hard or too high and holy for us, because that gives us an excuse for not doing it. This is false humility. We can all do it, even the most sinful, shallow, silly and stupid of us." That pretty well covers all of us, doesn't it? "You do not have to master some mystical method. You do not have to master a method at all. Can you talk to a friend? Then you can talk to God, for He is your friend. And that is what prayer is. The single most important piece of advice about prayer is one word: Begin! God makes it easy."

It may seem hard or daunting to pray, but I think that is because we make it harder than it is. Prayer, particularly persistence in prayer, brings blessing. It is a means God uses to help us grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So, just as Jesus Himself was a man of prayer, let us be people of prayer – men and women of prayer – trusting Him every moment and in every situation for the mercy and grace we need.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.