

Persevering in prayer
Luke 11:5-8, Luke 18:1-8

A few weeks ago I said that I had a church leader once who decided to pray for at least an hour each day before he would preach on the subject of prayer. I have never really spoken on prayer before because I wanted to do the same, but it dawned on me that I might never be able to preach on prayer if I waited to be able to do the same.

So here I am as a man who has no integrity, but is a learner like many of us here. For the record, I want to say that although I love to pray, I am not someone who prays for hours and hours.

But over the last year it seems like God has been inviting us to pray and teaching us as a church to pray – especially as we’ve come through and are going through some difficult situations together.

My guess is that when someone preaches about prayer, most people expect to be told “you’re not praying enough! Pray more” Get some discipline in your life! Get up early! Get to the prayer meetings!!!”

But wonderfully, the Bible never tells us we ought to pray.

Although other religions talk about duty or warn us that if we don’t pray, or pray in the wrong way, we will be punished; the Bible never does.

The Bible never talks about us bargaining with God – “If you answer this prayer, then I’ll give money or try to be nice or start going to church”

The fact is that we can’t bargain with God, because we don’t have anything He needs!

But what the Bible does say about prayer is amazing.

One day, some of Jesus’ followers watched Him praying – maybe early in the morning, and as He came back, they asked Him “Will you teach us to pray?”

There were lots of religions around at the time that had come with the invading Roman armies, and even in Judaism, there were lots of Rabbis and holy people who had different ideas; so it was a good question for the Disciples to ask.

But Jesus' answer was amazing!

He said "When you pray, say 'Father'"

The basis for all Christian prayer is this; not that we need to pray to make God happy or keep Him happy, but that He already delights in us as our Father!

And not that we need to be good enough or say the right things or be religious enough; God is already waiting and He wants to hear us; We don't need to persuade Him to listen - He already is.

Then Jesus went on to tell His followers the Lord's Prayer – not a dry, religious chant, but a list of headings for us to base our prayer relationship on:

"Father, Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.

And lead us not into temptation. '" (Luke 11:1-4)

This part many of us are probably familiar with, but then Jesus goes on to tell a story to make what He is saying even stronger.

Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. (Luke 11:5-8)

If you have grown up in Britain, the full strength of this story is probably lost.

Because the Middle East is such a hot place, people would often travel at night in order to keep cool.

So this traveller arrived unexpectedly at a home of his friend in a village.

It is difficult to explain exactly how important hospitality was and is in the Middle East, but it was essential that the person – and the village, offered hospitality properly to the visitor.

And whatever else the person had to offer, bread was essential.

We have friends who live in Central Asia; where they are, bread is so important that you are not allowed to throw any of it away; if it is not all eaten, you need to bury the left-overs. If someone came to your house and you gave them meat and vegetables – a whole roast dinner, and beautiful puddings, but no bread, then they would go away saying that you hadn't offered them food.

So the neighbour needed bread. And, being a village, they would have known who had baked that day, and who would have bread to spare.

So despite the late hour, they knocked on their neighbour's door – not asking for themselves, but asking for the visitor – and asking because the whole village would be responsible for the hospitality.

The excuse that the neighbour comes back with – 'I'm in bed' is completely feeble excuse compared to the responsibility for hospitality

But because of the need to keep the honour of the village, the person keeps knocking, and, because of their persistence and boldness – even more than the friendship, the man gets up and gives his neighbour as much as he needs.

To the people listening to this, it would have been an unthinkable thing for the man not to grant this request; if the neighbour had continued to refuse, probably all the rest of the village would have crowded round and shouted "You are bringing shame on the village!"

It was an unthinkable thing for the neighbour not to answer this request.

A bit later in the Bible, Jesus told another, similar story...to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. This meant that there was no way to sway him; he didn't care what people thought about him – he had position and power and honour; and he didn't care what God thought of him. In other words, he didn't have a conscience and there was no way of bargaining with him.

And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

Widows would have been the poorest, weakest, lowest - standing people in society. The fact that this widow went to the judge meant that she didn't have any sons or brothers or nephews who could go on her behalf.

Everyone listening would have understood that this picture was about the biggest mis-match of power possible.

For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'

What's the point of these two stories?

Not that God needs to be nagged into doing things, but that if it was worthwhile for the neighbour and the widow to keep asking, how much more is it for us?

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. (Luke 18:1-8)

And then Jesus went on to reinforce the point by saying even if someone would dare to ignore a request like this, God isn't like us.

God invites us to ask Him and keep on asking – and even if we were capable of refusing, God is not like us!

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, 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!" (Luke 11:9-13)

Even if we were bad at answering our children's' requests: – even if John could refuse Ruth! God is not like that.

Jesus is inviting us – Ask God, and keep on asking, because God is The perfect Father.

The way you would make a point stronger in Bible times was by repeating it in a slightly different way; that happens fairly often in the Bible.

Here, Jesus repeats Himself 6 times! This is, I think, the most strongly stressed thing Jesus ever says.

Remember that the Disciples asked Jesus "Teach us to pray". Jesus could have said anything. The picture He wanted us to have in our heads is this; God is our Father and He **loves** to answer us

It's got nothing to do with duty; it's got nothing to do with being good enough; it has everything to do with relationship and knowing God as our Father

And even if an earthly father could wish his children harm, our Heavenly Father is perfect, and He will always send the Holy Spirit to bless when His children ask

And more than that, He invites us – ask and keep on asking!

Seeking God – keep on going

Given up – keep on going