“ASK, SEEK, KNOCK”

Luke 11:5–13

Key Verse: 11:9

“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.”

How do you pray? Some people are shy and quiet, and very private. In fact they never really talk about their inner struggles with anyone. Other people are noisy and say way too much. But if prayer is our way of talking with God, how do we do it? In today’s passage our Lord Jesus teaches us how (8,9). He adds a promise about prayer (10). And finally, he tells us maybe the best thing we should be asking for (13). As we meditate on today’s passage, may God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words.

First off, in verses 5–8 Jesus tells a parable that’s found only in Luke’s Gospel. As usual with his parables, it’s a situation taken from ordinary life to illustrate a spiritual point. This one’s a story of three friends. One of them, the main guy, has a friend who shows up at his house after making a long journey. The problem is, this host doesn’t have any food to give his tired and hungry friend. In their culture, showing hospitality was important. It’s especially important to the author, Luke. In his Gospel and in Acts he repeats the word “welcome” seven times. Luke is telling us that welcoming someone at any time is not just a matter of honor; it’s key to the Christian faith and lifestyle.

In those days people ate mainly bread. Also, they didn’t have evening shops where you could go out to buy food. Even if you were starving, you had to wait till morning to go buy food in the local market. So, at the end of the day, without expecting any visitor, it could easily happen that even a generous man would have no bread in his house, not even for himself, not to mention a guest.

So this host, even though it’s midnight, goes to a third friend’s house. It looks like he’s talking through the door, asking for three loaves of bread. He explains his embarrassing situation. And this is where we have to pay close attention. It looks like the third friend is telling him, “Don’t bother me; the door is shut, and my kids are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.” It sounds like a “no.” But that’s not what he’s saying. Notice the question mark. Jesus is saying, “He would *not* say that, would he?” And why not? Jesus says, “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” (8). This friend in bed doesn’t want his friend at his door making any more noise. Not even close friendship is enough to get him to move. Jesus says the key to making things happen is the “impudence” of the friend at the door.

So what does “impudence” mean? The Greek word is hard to translate. Literally it’s our English word “shamelessness.” Why does Jesus use such a word as “shamelessness”? It makes us think, no matter how desperate we are, there are certain times we should not bother others. We all need to be mindful. We all need boundaries, some idea of what’s proper, some self-awareness that we might be burdening others. We certainly shouldn’t be going around without a filter thinking only of our own problems and needs and annoying everybody. But this isn’t Jesus’ point. He’s using this vivid example to teach us how to pray. So when we pray, we should be shameless? Not necessarily. There are three points here.

**First**, prayer is related to our actions. Of course prayer can be contemplative and quiet. Through prayer we can withdraw from our demanding lives, come to God and spend quality time reflecting on who he is and on his life-giving words. But prayer is also related to real life, real problems, real needs. Sometimes, it can all be so overwhelming that we just do nothing. And indeed, as we saw last week, prayer is sometimes just waiting on the Lord for as long as he leads. The famous 19th century Boston physician and writer Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. coined the phrase, “He’s so heavenly minded that he’s no earthly good.” Evidently it was commonplace for certain individuals in the elite Boston bubble to take spirituality to mean avoiding the cold, harsh realities of life. But prayer is definitely not about ignoring reality, burying our head in the sand like an ostrich. Prayer is not about being passive, checking out, or hiding from the evils of this world. Prayer is about getting up, going out and engaging life in all its challenges and messiness.

**Second**, prayer can be done anytime, anywhere, for any need. In Jesus’ parable, it’s midnight. There’s nothing to eat, and everyone’s sound asleep in bed. It’s kind of an impossible situation. But it didn’t mean there was nothing that could be done. When the main friend got active and sought help, it was a metaphor for prayer. He could have laid in his bed, pondering what a mess he was in with his needy friend, and spent a sleepless night feeling horrible. But he didn’t do that. He sought a solution, even at that hour of the night. For us, often it’s at night that all of life’s problems and struggles come to our minds. We shouldn’t just try to escape them; in the middle of the night, when we’re all alone, God isn’t going to be bothered if we start talking to him. In fact, it’s a great time to bring our problems and struggles to him in prayer. Philippians 4:5b–7 reads, “The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Often when we pray, life’s problems don’t change or go away; *we* change. God takes away our anxieties, calms all our emotions, gives us a godly perspective, and the peace of God comes to our souls.

**Third**, prayer is bold. The word “impudence” or “shamelessness” can also be translated this way. It’s almost like a rude interruption, like this man bugging his friend in the middle of the night. Of course the Lord’s Prayer taught us to honor God as our Father and to come to him with reverence as someone whose name should be hallowed. But our Lord Jesus encourages us through this parable to bring all our needs to God boldly.

So how can we be so bold? First of all, it comes back to calling God “Father.” If God is like our dad, he’s someone we can come to at any time. Because of our faith in Jesus, he won’t reject us; he loves us as his own dear children. Who we are and what we’re going through really matter to him, because he made us in his own image. Still, when our problems and struggles seem to just keep on going, we may start thinking, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God” (Isa40:27b). We may think God can’t understand what we’re going through. But he does. He’s the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. “He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable” (Isa40:28). It’s this God who loves us so much and who invites us to come to him boldly in prayer.

But the other issue about boldness in prayer is our sins. When we sin we think God definitely doesn’t want to hear from us. He’s got to be disappointed, and frankly, mad. But he’s not. The great news about the gospel is that, no matter who we are or what we’ve done, our Lord Jesus has opened the way for us through his death on the cross to come to God boldly. When he died, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, symbolizing opening the way to the Most Holy Place. Through his shed blood, even though we’ve sinned and wandered far away, we can draw near to God. Ephesians 3:12 tells us that in Jesus our Lord “we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him” (Eph3:12). The author of Hebrews also wrote, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb4:16). And later he wrote: we “have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus…[so] let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (Heb10:19,22). In brief, we can come to God boldly, not because of our human character, but simply because of our sincere faith in Jesus. So, no matter what our problem or need is, why not come to God boldly?

Jesus draws his own conclusion about his parable. Let’s read verse 9. The verbs in this verse are active: ask, seek, knock. They’re also all interconnected and progressive. When we ask, we start seeking; when we start seeking, we’re willing to knock. These three verbs summarize what the host friend in the parable did; he came and asked his friend, he sought help, he knocked. There’s also an element of persistence in these three verbs.

But the main idea is summed up in the first verb: “ask.” Ask! In verses 9–13 the word “ask” is repeated five times. We shouldn’t just sit there with our problems and needs all bottled up. During the Great Depression some people were too proud to ask help and died of starvation. Whatever we may be going through, we should ask God’s help. In its many teachings on prayer the Book of James repeats the word “ask” as well (Jas1:5,6; 4:2,3). James first says we should ask God for wisdom. And when we ask, we should do so in faith, not doubt. Instead of just struggling with our desires or with people, again, we should ask God. If we’re suffering, we should pray (Jas5:13). If anybody is sick or in sin, we should gather together and pray (Jas5:14,15). We should be confessing our sins to each other and praying for each other’s healing (Jas5:16). James tells us that even the great prophet Elijah was just human like us, but he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and then he prayed that it would, and both times, when he asked, God answered (Jas5:17,18). We shouldn’t just be praying for the weather; we should be praying fervently for people who have wandered from the truth, to bring them back to Jesus and save their souls from death (Jas5:19,20).

Read verse 9 again. Jesus says prayer should also be “seeking.” To seek is more than something casual; it means to devote serious effort, to strive. Strive for what? We human beings seek many things. Honestly in our sinful nature we’re self-seeking. If it’s not related to us, we’re not sure what we should seek. Firstly, our Lord Jesus taught us not to be seeking miraculous signs (Mk8:11,12) or seeking some kind of proof (2Co13:3). He taught us to seek God’s kingdom (Lk12:31). In other words, it all begins with seeking God himself, God’s own presence. The prophet Isaiah wrote: “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” (Isa55:6,7). The prophet Jeremiah gave us God’s own words: “You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer29:13). Sometimes God puts us in a hard situation due to our sins. But even then, we can seek God. Deuteronomy 4:29 famously says, “But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.” When we pray, we have to put our whole heart into seeking God.

The word “knock” is also important. Sometimes we might stand at a door that won’t open. We might struggle with the doorknob briefly or wonder why this door isn’t working. But we shouldn’t just stand there thinking this and that. We should knock. This is where the word “shamelessness” or “boldness” comes in again. Knocking means asking God to open not just any door but the right door for us. The Apostle Paul was a man knocking on God’s door. But which door? Paul was earnestly praying for God to open the door of faith to the Gentiles (Ac14:27). He told the Corinthians that God had opened a door for effective work for him in Ephesus (1Co16:9). He asked the Colossians to pray that God would “open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ” (Col4:3). We should be knocking on God’s door, not to just get what we want, but so that God would lead us to such open doors and would open people’s hearts to the gospel.

To help us ask, seek and knock, Jesus gives us a promise. Read verse 10. Basically he’s saying that if you don’t ask, or seek, or knock, nothing is likely to happen. Sometimes God gives us his blessings without us asking for or seek them, usually to show us his grace. But then he wants us to get active in praying to him. Why? When we ask and receive, seek and find, knock and find the opening, we realize that it’s God who’s answering, God who’s responding, God who’s working even in our lives. It gives us such joy. In John’s Gospel our Lord Jesus repeatedly encourages his disciples to ask the Father in prayer “in my name,” meaning, because of Jesus and for his sake, and he repeatedly promises God will answer (Jn14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26). The Apostle John later wrote, “And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him” (1Jn5:14, 15). It’s not about twisting God’s arm; it’s about asking according to his will. And God’s hearing and answering us give us such great joy.

To help us ask God in prayer, Jesus give us two more real-life illustrations. Read verses 11,12. These verses lead us to think again about God as our loving heavenly Father. He’s not going to ignore us or hurt us. As our Father he’s eager to bless us. Read verse 13. God our Father loves it when we come to him as his children in simple faith, bringing our problems, needs and wants to him. And as our heavenly Father, he knows what’s best for us. He’s not always going to be giving us the cotton candy we’re demanding. He’s going to be giving us the best gift. What is it? Jesus says here that it’s the Holy Spirit. When’s the last time you really asked God to give you the Holy Spirit? According to our Lord Jesus it’s something we should be asking for all the time. Whenever we pray, we should ask for the Holy Spirit. Whenever we study the Bible, we should ask for the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s truth to us and help us remember and obey what God says. Whenever we have decisions to make, we should ask for the Holy Spirit to guide us. Whenever we’re discouraged or confused or lonely, we should ask for the Holy Spirit to be our Counselor and Comforter.

Read verse 9 again. Whatever our life situation, may God help us come to him boldly in prayer, asking, seeking and knocking. And may he help us be asking for the right things, especially for the Holy Spirit.