

Jesus on Prayer: God Never Does Nothing

Luke 5:15–16; 11:1–13

Turn to Luke 11 please. Forty-five years ago Richard Foster wrote an important book on the Christian disciplines. He has a chapter each on 12 disciplines that believers have found useful over the years. There's good in all of them, and I do a few regularly, but in the Bible one of these that towers over the rest. The one essential discipline is prayer. (Though I'm not sure it should be called a discipline.)

People, never give up on prayer. "Pray without ceasing" means "never give up on prayer." There are many reasons for this, but here's today's answer: God never does nothing. He always responds quickly with some kind of good help, and we need the help he gives.

Let's read our Scripture, Luke 11:1–13

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, your holy name be honoured, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone who sins against us. And don't lead us into temptation."

Then Jesus said to them, "Which of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him,' and the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'?"

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. "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; the one who seeks finds; and to the one 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!"

Jesus, Tell us What you Pray (Luke 11:1–2)

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

John the Baptist also prayed. When John’s disciples asked him how they should pray, they wanted John to tell them how he prayed, so they could pray as John prayed. John would of course have taught his disciples the kind of praying that he thought was important.

So Jesus’ disciples wanted him to teach them about praying, they meant, “Tell us what you were praying over there, so we can pray as you pray.” We should assume that this prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, was the normal way Jesus himself prayed.

Pray Like This (Luke 11:2–4)

For brevity, I will shorten this to the basics of the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, your name not mine, your kingdom not mine, your will not mine. To live this way, I need food, I need forgiveness, I need help forgiving others, and I need rescue from evil.”

The prayer starts with remarkable submission. When Ed Neufeld prays, he says, “Father, my name is in trouble, my kingdom is in trouble, so would you please do my will?” Jesus said we should begin prayer the way he prayed: “Father, your name, your kingdom, your will, not mine but yours.”

How much of Jesus’ praying, do you think, was Jesus working to submit again, deliberately steering his mind to make his life about his Father, not himself? Jesus prayed this prayer to sort that out again. Remember, he was made in every way as we are, and tempted in every way as we are, and he was weak in temptation. He didn’t just feel weak, he was weak, and also sinless. We should assume that it was often hard for Jesus to say, “Father, your name, your kingdom not mine, your will not mine.

I grew up being taught so steadily that Jesus was God that Jesus praying made no sense to me. Why would God pray? My preachers and teachers meant well, but I came away without any sense of the Lord’s weak humanity. Jesus always obeyed because he always prayed and God always helped him. That’s why he always obeyed. And there were some close calls.

In the first part of the prayer we submit. Then, “To serve you, Father, I need food, I need forgiveness (which Jesus did not need), I need help forgiving others (which Jesus did need), rescue me from evil (which Jesus needed).

Friend at Midnight – Not Persistence (Luke 11:5–8)

Jesus said to his disciples, “Which of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him,’ and the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’?”

That’s all one question. Jesus is asking, “does any of you have a friend who would say ‘no’ like that?” And the right answer is “no, of course not, of course the friend inside will get up even if he’s grumpy.” Jesus explains this obvious answer:

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity [your lack of respect for your friend in bed], he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

This story assumes that the man in bed would never say “no.” Jesus begins the story “who of you?” In short, the parable goes like this: “Which of you would go ask your friend for bread in the middle of the night, and the friend in bed would say ‘no’?” The answer, “No friend would ever do that.”

This story has been used to teach persistence in prayer. If we keep asking God we will get what we want. That is not what this parable teaches. The Greek word translated “persistence” rarely if ever means that. It is always a negative word, it means shameless, rude, disrespectful.

In this parable of Jesus, the friend outside does not knock on the door at all, he just calls out, and he only calls once. Nothing in the story teaches persistence. The man outside is rude and impudent by coming in the middle of the night to wake his sleeping friend and get him out of bed to help him.

Here’s what Jesus means: If a human will get up in the middle of the night to grant the request even of a rude friend, how much more will God answer your requests?” Even if your friend was grumpy, he’d of course get up and give you what you need.” “Well then,” says Jesus, “if your friend in bed would give you bread in the middle of the night, how much more will *God* give you what you need!” Because God is not like that friend, God is nothing like that friend.

Persistence in Prayer: Be Careful

Let’s talk a moment about the parable of the persistent widow in Luke 18, the widow who had to pester the daylights out of a corrupt judge to get him to act for her. Both of these stories, the friend at midnight and the persistent widow, are used to teach that God rewards persistent prayer. And in both cases that is the wrong teaching.

Jesus taught this about prayer: *When you pray, don't keep on babbling like the pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask.* Matthew 6:7–8. There is nothing at all about persistence in the friend at midnight, as we've just seen.

In Luke 18, that widow truly is persistent, but when Jesus applies the parable, his point is that God is NOT like that judge, so we will NOT need that kind of persistence. Jesus says, “will God not answer his chosen ones? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.” God is not like that judge, God will not put his people off or make them wait.

Pagan thinking says we can wear God down if we keep on asking for the same thing, or that God will respond if he hears our request enough times. Jesus said that that's a pagan understanding of prayer, because it is a pagan understanding of God. What we don't understand how carefully he listens to our prayers and how eager God is to give. That's what Jesus is teaching us. If you're not getting what you want, people, don't assume it's because you've not asked enough times.

God Never says “No” (Luke 11:9–10)

“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. This is what the “Friend at Midnight” story taught about God, as far as Jesus is concerned. Jesus gives us three challenges here: Ask! Seek! Knock! Ask and it will be given, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened.

The first three were challenges, actually commands: ask, seek, knock. Then Jesus gives three matching promises: For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

It sounds like we can ask for and seek anything we want. But we haven't moved very far from the Lord's Prayer, people. Prayer is the essential Christian discipline, and the Lord's Prayer is the essential Christian prayer, don't leave the Lord's Prayer behind. But in vv. 9–10 you can feel Jesus trying to correct scepticism and doubt about God's willingness to respond.

It was pondering these two verses that persuaded me that when we pray, God never does nothing. Often enough he does not do what I'm asking, but he never does nothing. He gives us something good right away, some kind of bread for the soul, some kind of help from his Spirit, never nothing. He might be saying “wait for what you want,” but that is never the whole story. There will be help when we need it. That's why we must never give up on prayer.

Fathers, What Would You Do? (Luke 11:11–13)

In the friend at midnight story, Jesus put us in the position of the one asking. He told us to imagine ourselves going to our friend at midnight and waking up our friend next door to ask for bread. In that story, he told us to imagine that we were the one asking, like praying.

In this story, Jesus puts us in the position of the one listening and giving. We put ourselves in the place of a father whose son asks for food, or in the place of God, hearing our requests.

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!

If we see ourselves as parents whose child is hungry and asks for food, this is a no-brainer. Of course we will give the child good food not something nasty. So, says Jesus, you're evil yet you would always give good food to your child, how much more will God? If you evil ones would act like this to your children, how much better will your Father in heaven act when you ask him?

I'll come back to the Holy Spirit in a minute, but I'd like to mention something else here. I don't think prayer is a discipline. The friend at midnight asks his friend for food because he needs food. The son asks his father for food because he's hungry and needs food. No discipline there.

We organize our times for eating and for sleeping, and there's nothing wrong with organizing our times for prayer as well. But we eat because we're hungry and we need food, we sleep because we're tired and we need rest. When we pray, God responds, and we need that. That's why we never give up on prayer, not because we're disciplined but because we need what God supplies every time we pray.

The Holy Spirit

How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

For Jesus the greatest and most generous gift God could give anyone was to put his Spirit on them. Jesus ends this with the Holy Spirit to show how incredibly lavish God is when we pray. If you being evil will give good food to your child, how much more will your Father give the greatest gift, the Holy Spirit, to those who ask?

This section on prayer began with the Lord's Prayer: "Father in heaven, your name, your kingdom, your will." When I'm in a difficult place, it is hard for me to pray that prayer. In other words, it takes a lot of help from the Holy Spirit just for me to be able to pray that prayer.

And once I have prayed it, what will it take for me to bring honour to God's name and his kingdom and to do his will? Again, it will take a lot of help from the Spirit if my life will actually accomplish what I've asked for. We need the Spirit's help to pray that prayer, and we need the Spirit's help for God to answer it.

When I ask God for something that he's not giving, this is what he is doing, right away: he sends his Spirit to help me line up with the Lord's Prayer. God is immediately giving me strength to move in the right direction. That's not what I'm asking for, but that's what he's doing.

What we absolutely must not do is quit praying. Being in prayer is how we keep our faith and keep serving God. Often in Luke, what we pray for exactly seems not to be the crucial thing. Jesus prayed much, but usually we are not told what he prayed, only that he was praying.

So, people, be in prayer. Don't give up on prayer. How that will look exactly for each of us does not matter to Jesus. Few rules are given. If I want to keep my faith and live faithfully, I will find a way to pray. We usually don't know what Jesus prayed, but the result was always that he served God in some way, he kept being faithful to God. Don't stray too far from the Lord's prayer.

When we pray, God never does nothing. He may not give us what we ask, but he never just says "no." I believe that in many cases, when we are not getting what we asked for, God is giving the Holy Spirit to encourage and comfort us, to strengthen us and give us endurance to stay faithful. God thinks that's the best thing He could give children he loves. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, you have taught us to see God as an amazingly generous Father. Give us eyes of faith to see our God this way. What if our Father was being generous when we did not think he was doing anything at all? Thank you that the one everyone who asks receives. Keep teaching us, Lord. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace as we trust in him, so that we may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.