

Luke 11:1-13      And You Shall Receive - Luke's Prayer

One cannot read the Gospel of Luke without noticing the differences between its presentation and Matthew's. The model prayer is a case in point

Matthew's prayer is longer.

It begins with "our father" rather than just "father."

And it ends with, "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever," absent in Luke.

And in Matthew the prayer asks for the doing of the divine will

It asks for the forgiveness of debts while in Luke it is "sins."

Matthew includes the prayer to be delivered from evil while Luke leaves off at, "lead us not into temptation."

And the context in each gospel is a little different. In Matthew, the prayer comes in the Sermon on the Mount in the context of authentic, religion; prayer, fasting, the giving of alms. In Luke it is the context of asking and receiving.

These differences are not profound and not too much should be made of them. The main ideas are the same; that God listens to us when we pray; that we are right to pray for the meeting of our everyday needs, food, clothing, and shelter; and that we are right to acknowledge our sinfulness and ask forgiveness; and we are also right to ask protection.

The exception is the context. The nuanced difference between asking and receiving on the one hand, and authentic faith on the other, is helpful.

Christmas

When I think of asking and receiving, I think also of Christmas. And since it is the middle of July, it seems like a good way to begin by speaking of that wonderful winter holiday. For some people, Christmas is the favorite day of the year. There are many reasons; the decorations, the music, the beautiful birth stories. Everyone seems happy and people get together and send messages to those they ordinarily don't see. And then there is the opening of gifts. At our worst, we are being selfish and spending money we don't have on things we don't need. At our best, we are honoring the gift of God given to the human race in the birth of Jesus. We are acknowledging that life is a gift. It is the will of God that we open it.

I am always very careful to frame the gospel message in the context of the pain and sorrow that make up so much of human experience. I do this not to be negative but realistic. Christmas comes in winter. The conviction that “life is a gift God wants us to open” is not a naive wish made possible only by denying the existence of pain and sorrow. To say such a thing would reveal a pathology in us. But the conviction of the goodness of life is based on the sober reflection of those who with their eyes open have seen the news, both the bad and the good.

### Thoughts About Asking and Receiving

One popular notion is that people pray in order to somehow convince God to do what they want, the implication being that we will not receive anything unless we ask. If that is a mistaken idea, then so is the opposite inference, that God intends to do evil unless we pray. It is a mistake to believe that God doesn't care or wills our harm.

The model prayer does not allow for excess or selfishness in prayer, nor show a lack of concern for others. It is not healthy to pursue our own pleasure and gain and to believe that God will obediently help us on our way.

Somewhere deep inside us there is an authentic self that really does what God's kingdom to come, that really cares about others as well as the self, and that is open-hearted and grateful and willing to be molded and shaped. We might say that we are referring to what the bible calls, “the image of God.” Prayer is one of the tools God uses to nourish that part of ourselves.

### Change

Prayer has great transforming power. Through it God manages to help us do his will rather than the other way around. I am reminded of the words of C.S. Lewis when he was asked whether his prayers had been answered in the tragic death of his wife, as depicted in the movie “Shadowlands.”

“That's not why I pray. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time, waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God, it changes me.”

Prayer as an agent of change has been true in my own experience. I have kept a journal for years now but for most of my life I found it a hard habit to keep from breaking. I remember going through a time once when I decided to keep a prayer journal and wrote down daily prayers to give them structure and reduce the rambling.

When I began I prayed for myself and things in my life that were a concern to me. Then I felt guilty because I was turned inward so I made a point of praying also for others I knew who were struggling with this or that in their lives. Then I felt bad because I was leaving out too many people so I just prayed for all my friends and family. After a few weeks I began to realize that I don't have wide circles of friends and was leaving out most of the people in the world, so I began to pray for the world.

I looked back over the notes after a few months and was struck that I had started out praying for myself and ended up praying for everyone. It may seem like a small thing, I did not change the world, but to me it was a small miracle because I was opened up. I was changed.

## Relationship

The discovery the bible makes about God is that after all is said and done and the nation has declined and the enemies have conquered and the savior has been killed and all hope is lost and one can muster up no expectations, *it is* Christmas after all and there are gifts to open, and it is the will of God that we open them. That is unspeakably good news and it gives needed perspective to our asking. If we ask for a relationship with God, we will surely receive one, and that a

relationship with God *is* the great gift. It may not turn out like we expect, or like we think we want, but only better, because God knows how to give good gifts to his children.

Jesus is telling us to pray; to speak and to listen because God speaks and listens. That is a big part of what having a relationship means.

So let us set aside anger  
Let us set aside fear  
Let us set aside selfishness

Be open to the transformation of the heart and the renewal of the mind. Let us pray consistently with no strings attached or conditions or limits; that we be given courage beyond our fears, strength beyond our ability, compassion where there was none, peace that no one understands, and joy that rises above life's pain.

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