

DOES GOD OUR FATHER REALLY HEAR AND ANSWER OUR PRAYERS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

My teenage years were spent in an orphanage called Christ's Home located in a farming district some 30 miles north of Philadelphia. This home was run by some faithful German Christians who were greatly influenced by George Müller, a 19th century Christian who maintained an orphanage in Bristol, England. He lived by faith in God and taught others how to live their lives by totally trusting in the Lord for all their needs. So my life was surrounded by men and women who were always having private or public prayer meetings in which they would ask God in faith for every need, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual, and then expect him to answer their prayers. They loved to tell all of us kids from time to time the story of how one dark snowy winter day several years earlier at our orphanage, they gathered all the children and workers together in the dining hall for prayer because they had no food. As they were praying to the Lord to provide food for the children, they heard the sound of sleigh bells, which were normally worn on horses that pulled large snow sleds. The ringing of the bells stopped for a few moments, then started up again and slowly drifted away. Finally the prayer session was finished, and one of the curious workers slipped out of the dining hall to look out on the front lawn. Suddenly there was a great cry of joy, and all the others quickly joined him to see sitting on the steps in the snow enough food for all of them. And the only sign of the giver was the tracks the horses and sled had left in the newly fallen snow.

For many years after that Christ's Home experience I was an observer of prayer, but as the years passed I discovered, as so many of you have, the need to become a participant in prayer. Why? Because I have been learning from the Lord the same spiritual principle he taught his disciples in Luke 18:1: "...that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart." I am finding that there are so many stresses and perplexing problems in my life and the lives of those around me, and that if I am not praying to our gracious and loving heavenly Father, I find myself fainting, simply losing heart.

It was this same kind of pressure that prompted the disciples to come to Jesus one day and ask, "Lord, teach us to pray as John also taught his disciples." The disciples knew that the prophets of old were men of prayer. They also knew that John the Baptist was a man of prayer. They had been surrounded all their lives by the Pharisees, who appeared to be men of prayer, but the Lord had already warned them not to pray like the Pharisees (Matthew 6). But it appears from the following passage that they were not asking so much for the mechanics of how to pray but the secret of our Lord's prayer life, for when the Lord prayed to his Father about his various needs, the Father answered his prayers. His disciples wanted to have the same effective prayer life that he was enjoying. So he began by teaching them about his relationship with his loving heavenly Father, a relationship that they also had because they had placed their faith in Jesus as the Christ of God. And then our Lord went on to teach the disciples a model of prayer which included five important realities: (1) Father, hallowed be thy name, (2) thy kingdom come, (3) give us each day our daily bread, (4) forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us, and (5) lead us not into temptation.

In light of this wonderful model of prayer, the question remains for the modern 20th century Christian: Does God the Father really hear and answer our prayers?

I. Yes! But not based on our persistence

Luke 11:5-8

And He said to them, "Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at

midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he shall answer and say, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs."

Many of us have been taught that the spiritual principle in this story is that the secret of prayer is to come to the God of the universe and persist at his heavenly door until he is forced to get out of bed and give you what you need. I submit to you that in light of the character of our wonderful loving heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus began to teach his disciples the secret of his prayer life by using a story of contrast. There is a right way to pray and a wrong way to pray. He was telling them that his Father is not a sleepy, selfish, angry, grumbling friend with a locked door at which one has to persist in order to get an answer to one's prayers. He was also telling his disciples that the heavenly Father is one who does recognize not only our own many needs here on earth, but also those of others we want to help.

In order to teach them the wrong way to approach our loving heavenly Father, our Lord used as an illustration a problem between two good friends rather than between a loving Father and a beloved son. He told a story about a common problem in the Middle East. Since before the days of Abraham the peoples of the Middle East have placed a high value on the social obligations of hospitality (they were lovers of strangers). He brought his disciples in the story in order to make it very personal.

"Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.'" The Lord apparently was picking out one of the principles in his model of prayer, "Give us each day our daily bread." In this story two things came into play: (1) One of your friends thought it wise to travel later in the day to avoid the heat, and (2) unfortunately, by the time he arrived in town it was close to midnight and everyone in the village had gone to bed except you and your household. It soon became obvious that your guest had not eaten, so as his host you immediately began to set up a table and to prepare some food. However, when you went to the bread basket, you found that the basket was empty. Now, there were no 7-Eleven stores open where you could drive down and pick up a quick meal. Every shop had been closed for hours, and in that culture you were in no position to say, "I'm sorry, we have nothing to offer you." So thinking quickly, you excused yourself and went to a nearby friend's house at midnight—a very unusual situation. You knocked on the door, awoken him from a sound sleep, and told him of your dilemma.

But his response was, "Don't bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children and I are in bed; I can't get up and give you anything." What he was saying was, it's true that we're friends, but isn't this friendship being pushed a little too far? It's midnight, my family is in bed, and if I get up I'll also awaken them, and then we'll never get back to sleep. I have bread, but it isn't worth getting up and causing my whole family to suffer the loss of a night's sleep over the needs of a stranger.

The Lord then brought out the spiritual principle for his disciples so that they would learn to pray effectively. "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence [that is, shamelessness] he will get up and give him as much as he needs." But notice that the motive of the friend seemed to be, "I'll give you the bread; now get out of my life and let me go back to sleep before you wake up the whole household." But Jesus' unspoken message to his disciples was, in contrast to this man and his friend, you have a spiritual relationship with your loving heavenly Father because you have placed your faith in me as your Lord. Your heavenly Father is not like a friend that can't be bothered because he is already tucked in for the night when you have a need. Also, you do not need to become persistent in your prayers so as to hound and irritate your loving Father until he gives in and gives you your "three loaves." Your relationship with the Father (Abba) as his beloved child is much closer than that of two friends.

Recently Anne Marie and I were praying to the Father to remove some stress from the life of one of the members of our family. After so many months of what appeared to be unanswered prayer, my wife asked me, with tongue in cheek, if I was sure we couldn't beg God to remove the stress. I reminded her of this scripture

and the reality that we had never had an experience with our own sons or daughters-in-law in which any of them had ever had to beg me as the father for anything I was able to provide to meet their needs. Sometimes I could provide for them immediately; at other times a few days or weeks would have to pass before I could provide. But never did I find myself providing their needs because they persisted, but because as beloved children they asked. And I responded to the best of my ability with a heart filled with love for them. Last Tuesday our loving heavenly Father removed the stress from our family and provided this need.

Does God the Father really hear and answer our prayers?

II. Yes! Based on our relationship

Luke 11:9-13

"And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

The Lord has moved from an illustration of how not to pray to the secret of his prayer life. (Similar words are found in Matthew 7: 7-11.) Our Lord exhorted his disciples to approach their loving heavenly Father in prayer in three different ways, depending on the circumstances, with faith that God would keep his promise and answer each and every prayer in his time and according to his will, to their joy and amazement. Keep in mind now that the Lord was encouraging his disciples to come to the Father in prayer as his spiritual children on any subject in their lives. Sometimes we need to come to him because we want to worship him, or because of some kingdom business, at other times because of our sin, our daily needs, or the needs of others, or the need to be guarded against some temptation that could ruin our lives and the lives of others around us.

"Ask, and it shall be given to you." (The verb ask is in the present tense, so the idea is to continue to ask.) It is interesting to note how this verse is interpreted in the minds of different Christians. The minds of the young in the faith are set on asking our heavenly Father for material things-housing, jobs, furnishings, cars, etc. I remember those days when Anne Marie and I would be asking our Father for certain things, and within that day or shortly afterward he would delight our hearts not only with that for which we asked, but also in our favorite color! Now we find ourselves asking our Father to continue developing our character so that it will reflect our Lord's life in us among the people he brings across our path each day. We have also found that we are asking for wisdom and courage, love and patience, grace and mercy as we seek to help others within this fallen world. We find ourselves praying more for others than we ever have before, and the content of our prayers is that our Father would provide a mix of material and spiritual needs for the many younger people who are part of our lives. "Everyone who asks receives."

In John 11 we find Martha approaching Jesus to tell him of her brother Lazarus' death: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. Even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." The Lord went down to the cave where his friend Lazarus had recently been buried, and after the servants removed the stone over the cave he prayed, "'Father, I thank Thee that Thou heardest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always; but because of the people standing around I said it, that they may believe that Thou didst send Me.' And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth.' He who had died came forth..." Here our Lord as well as Mary and Martha received an immediate answer.

Last week at our staff meeting Dorman Followwill introduced us to a wonderful Trinidad pastor named Caesar Paul. When it was time to pray I turned to this young pastor and asked him what we could pray with him about. He paused for a moment and then said, "I suppose I could ask for many things, but what I would really like you to ask God is to so fill me with his Holy Spirit that I would be readily available to be used of him to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the people of my island." I have no doubt that our loving Father will answer

his heart's desire quickly!

"Seek, and you shall find." (Again, the verb seek is in the present tense, so the idea is to continue to seek.) The Lord had taught his disciples earlier in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not be anxious then, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'With what shall we clothe ourselves?' For all these things the Gentiles eagerly seek; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." In other words, as beloved children of our loving heavenly Father we should be seeking to find out the secrets of the kingdom of God as well as how to live a life of wholesomeness. We should be seeking to develop Christlike character as well as seeking to discover our spiritual gifts so we can be used within the redemptive plan of Jesus Christ. As we spend time seeking to become more like Jesus Christ, we will soon find out that we are losing out on time to gather food, drink and clothing, so our Lord promised that if we seek him first, he will fulfill our material needs. "He who seeks finds."

Last week I had a delightful surprise during what I thought was going to be a counseling session. A recent college grad and now business woman who had started coming to our church wanted to see a pastor. I was available, so we met on Wednesday afternoon. I was prepared to help with some personal problem that needed to be worked out, but it soon became clear that this young Christian woman's "problem" was a desire to continue to serve the Lord on a mission project this summer in Canada. She shared with me how the Lord had led her to serve him in England and Romania. She was interested in our missions program as well as how she could use her spiritual gifts among us. After she left I just stood on the patio and thought, what a pleasant hour...a young woman seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness!

"Knock, and it shall be opened to you." (Again, continue to knock.) Some needs are deeper than others, and we are to come in faith and knock with the confidence that our Father hears our knocking and will come to the door at the right time in his redemptive plan. Many of us are praying for the salvation of members of our families as well as our good friends within this community. Keep knocking, because the apostle John tells that our risen Lord is already involved in their lives: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20.)

Many of you who are acquainted with Dudley and Janet Wiener know how from his earlier days here as an intern Dudley felt God wanted him to minister in Paris. In order to get to Paris he had to serve in Holland for awhile, and then all the doors shut for Paris through the mission he was in. But he continued to knock on the doors of mission groups in Paris until finally the Lord opened one. He and his family have been serving the Lord in France for the last three years. His goal is to spend the rest of his life ministering in France. "To him who knocks, it shall be opened."

All three of these principles are imperatives: keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking; for the Lord encouraged his disciples that the heavenly Father not only will hear our prayers but he promises to answer each and every prayer request in his time, to his honor and glory and to our joy and amazement. Now let me remind you of a warning: James encourages us and warns us at the same time about what to ask for and in what frame of mind and heart to ask. "...if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." (James 1:5-8.)

Now, to show the disciples the certainty of the fulfilled promises of their prayers offered in faith to their heavenly Father, our Lord offered them two assurances taken from the daily experiences between a loving father and his beloved son.

"Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he?" One of your little boys comes to you, tells you that he is hungry, and asks you if you could give him a tuna fish sandwich to meet his physical need. Can any one of you loving fathers even think of handing him a snake that could cause his death? The obvious answer is Never! If my loving son needs a tuna sandwich because he is hungry, he can have two if necessary, and mark my words, as long as I have breath, my son will

not go hungry!

"Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he?" Again if one of your sons were in need of some eggs for breakfast would you tell him, "No sweat, Son, let me prepare them for you," and then take his plate and plop onto it a live scorpion that could kill him?

The spiritual principle is, "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" In the two unheard of actions in these illustrations, our Lord reminded his disciples of their fallen nature in Adam, and even so, they have not forgotten how as earthly fathers to give good gifts to their children. Therefore, how much more will our holy and perfect, loving and merciful heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11.) Or as it says here in Luke, how much more will he give the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

Now, why did the Lord add that he would give the gift of the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? In the time before the cross and the coming of the Holy Spirit on every believer on the Day of Pentecost, the Jews were quite familiar with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of many of the Old Testament saints. At that time in the history of redemption before the cross of Christ, the Holy Spirit was sent upon individuals to empower them for certain tasks, and then once the task was accomplished the Holy Spirit would leave those individuals. They also understood that the prophets were told by the Lord God that one day he would send them the person and power of the Holy Spirit to effect a mighty regeneration of his people Israel: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes...so you will be My people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:26-27.) In the upper room our Lord promised the disciples that he would send them "... another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth....He abides with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17.)

Now, keep in mind that the Lord is teaching his disciples the secrets of prayer. Once they have placed their prayer request before their loving heavenly Father, he will give the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to comfort, strengthen and encourage them when they receive an answer, and his peace while they are waiting for an answer.

On this side of the cross we now know that as we place our faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit immediately begins to play a big part in our new life in Christ: (1) We have been convicted by the Holy Spirit of our sin against God in rejecting Jesus as the Son of God and Savior of mankind (John 16:8-11). (2) We have been born again by the Spirit and have been given a new life in the Spirit (John 3:3-7). (3) We are eternally indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). (4) We have been baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). (5) The Father sealed our salvation and the Holy Spirit is that seal (Ephesians 1:13). (6) We are asked by the Lord to continually choose to be filled or controlled by the Holy Spirit moment by moment in our new life in Christ (Ephesians 5:18).

So we do not need to pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon us, baptize us, indwell us, or seal us, for all that was completed the moment we invited Jesus to become our Lord and Savior. But today we are encouraged to "be filled with the Spirit," that is, to pray that the Holy Spirit will have complete control of our lives each and every day, in each and every situation and relationship. We can see this reality when we read Paul's prayer on behalf of the Ephesian Christians: "Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory. For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man; so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fulness of God." (Ephesians 3:13-19.)

Does God the Father really hear and then answer our prayers? Yes! And not based on our persistence but on our relationship as beloved children coming to a gracious, loving, and perfect heavenly Father (Abba).

"Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; and whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do the things that are

pleasing in His sight." (1 John 3:21-22.)

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