

# “Jesus . . . on Prayer, Part 2”

Luke 11:5-13; Mark 11:20-25 <sup>1</sup>

I don't remember how I got in the building or what the occasion was. But I do remember sitting alone in the dark in the sanctuary of the church in which I grew up in Atlanta at some point during my teenage years. I imagine that there were events going on elsewhere in the building, and that I quietly left the group to make my way to the sanctuary to meet with God. It was also during the tumult of my teenage years that I began the practice of talking aloud with God as I walked alone under the stars in our neighborhood.

I've continued both practices throughout the nearly fifty years since. I have many images of being in sanctuaries in solitary darkness to talk with God. That's been easier in those churches where I've been a member of the staff and had keys to the building, but I've managed it in other churches as well. One significant recent experience was at Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas about ten years ago.

Jill and I were members at Broadway during our last years in Ft. Worth, and I was ordained there. I was in Ft. Worth for the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and I made a special trip over to Broadway and got permission to spend time in the vast, cathedral-like sanctuary—rose windows and all. More important, though, was the time I spent in the dark, musty, chapel downstairs. The chapel seemed to have fallen into disuse, but as I knelt in the darkness in the place where I was ordained to the ministry of the Gospel thirty-five years ago, I felt the presence of God, and my spirit was renewed.

My storehouses of memory also contain many images of being alone with God on various beaches, on mountaintops, in forests, in academic buildings, and on the decks of destroyers looking out over the open sea. I expect that many of you could tell similar stories. So could Jesus.

Last week we looked at two principles of prayer that we learn from Jesus: **Pray in the awareness of your constant need for forgiveness**, and **Pray for persons who create stress in your life**. Today we look at five more prayer principles that we learn by watching and listening to Jesus. The Principle I've just been talking about is **Principle Three: Make time to be alone with God in places that uplift your spirit**.

The Gospels record many occasions when Jesus took pains to be alone with His Father. As we saw last week, Jesus was returning from one such time of solitary prayer when the disciples asked Him to teach them to pray in the way that He prayed. Luke 6:12 tells of a time when Jesus prayed to God all night on a mountainside. In Matthew 6:5-6, Jesus told us that, while there is certainly a place for public prayer, most of our conversation with God is to be solitary: “*But when you pray,*” Jesus said, “*go away by yourself, shut the door behind you, and pray to your Father secretly.*”

In *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby points out that “**God is more interested in a love relationship with you than He is in what you can do for Him.**”<sup>2</sup> Most of us have a hard time believing that, because most of us struggle with the idea that God could really love us, cherish us, and want to be with us . . . but it's true, nevertheless. Principle Three offers blessing on your desire to protect time to be alone with God in places that are holy for you.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 8, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: LifeWay, 1990), p. 75.

**Principle Four tells us to “pray constantly and persistently.”** The two passages in Luke that you see on the screen, 11:5-13 and 18:1-8, are illustrations Jesus gave about being persistent in prayer. The stories are similar, and perhaps a little confusing, as well.

The first story has to do with a person who receives unexpected company and who is embarrassed that there's very little in the refrigerator. Worse still, it's late, and all the markets are closed. As most of us have done, the host runs next door to borrow a few things, but the neighbor is tired, and doesn't want to get up to help. Persistent knocking pays off, though, and the story has a happy ending. The second story is about a widow who came to small-claims court with a problem. The judge didn't want to hear her case, but again, persistence paid off, and she received the help she needed.

The confusing thing is that both the neighbor and the judge seem to represent God in these stories, and we're perplexed that Jesus would describe God as reluctant to help us. If we stick with Jesus to the end of His examples, though, we can see the point. Jesus was saying that if persistence will secure what we need even from reluctant and contrary people who don't really want to help us, *how much more* will persistence cause us to receive what we need from God, who loves us!

Some tension remains unresolved, though, because even at the end we wonder why we have to be persistent with God. If God *wants* to help us, why doesn't the help come at once? *Yesterday* would be good, right?

The reason that God's help sometimes doesn't come on our timetable is that God's purpose is to move in our lives with great spiritual power, and you and I have to be prepared to receive this power. That preparation takes time.

Do you remember the story of Lazarus in John 11? Lazarus was deathly ill, and Mary and Martha wanted Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus didn't come right away, and Lazarus died. When Jesus did show up, Martha reproached Him, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask*” (vv. 21-22). And what happened? Jesus raised Lazarus back to life, even after he had been dead for four days. Martha wanted victory over bacteria. Jesus gave her victory over death itself!

The fact of the matter is that prayer doesn't generally change God's intent. For the most part, *prayer changes us*, so that we can become partners in God's purposes, both in time and in eternity. Like Martha, you and I frequently ask for less than God intends to give us. But as persistence in prayer changes our hearts and improves our vision, we're able to see that “*by his mighty power at work within us, [God] is able to accomplish infinitely more than we would ever dare to ask or hope*” (Ephesians 3:20). That's why Jesus told us to “*Keep on asking, and you will be given what you ask for. Keep on looking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened*” (Luke 11:9).

Coming to this understanding also brings us to **Principle Five: Pray for God's will to become your will.** Like Mary and Martha, our limited understanding of what God is doing and our limited perspective on the real nature of things frequently cause us to ask for things that, while perhaps not wrong in themselves, are less than what God wants to give us. When we or our loved ones fall ill, we pray for victory over bacteria, cancer, or blocked arteries. It's certainly not wrong to do this. But what God wants to give us is victory over the fear of death and over death itself.

God wants us to experience the freedom, the peace, and the spiritual power that come from having an eternal perspective on our lives. I'm certainly not going to sign up to get some dread disease or to be robbed or to be in a car wreck, and I'm going to do everything in my power

to keep the people I love from experiencing these things. But I can sleep well at night, because I know that when all is said and done, we who are in Christ are secure.

As Paul put it, *“I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can’t, and life can’t. The angels can’t, and the demons can’t. Our fears for today, our worries about tomorrow, and even the powers of hell can’t keep God’s love away. Whether we are high above the sky or in the deepest ocean, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord”* (Romans 8:38-39).

This security is what Paul was referring to when he wrote, *“Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is”* (Romans 12:2).

“*Good, pleasing, and perfect*” is how God’s will is all the time, of course, and that’s how we experience it most of the time. Sometimes, though, when God’s will takes us into harm’s way, we’re strongly tempted to head in another direction, as Jonah did. Because Jesus faced all the same temptations that we do (Heb. 4:15), Jesus knows what it’s like to want to be somewhere—anywhere—besides where we are: *“My Father!”* He cried in Gethsemani, *“if it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. . . . Yet I want your will, not mine”* (Matthew 26:39).

Jesus knew that His own death would set you and me free from death’s power forever. He was fully aware of the good that would come, *but He was still afraid*. Such times come to us as well, and in those times, because we know that our vision is limited, and because we know that in the deepest places we are safe, we can say, “Lord whatever I know to be your will, I will do it. Regardless of the cost and regardless of the adjustment, as best I know my heart, I commit myself to follow your will ahead of time. Lord, no matter what that will looks like, I will do it!”<sup>3</sup>

**Principle Six** offers another perspective on this same idea: **Make prayer your first response to temptation and to crisis.** Rolfe Dorsey is a retired pastor, a retired denominational worker, and my second cousin by marriage. Rolfe is one of a few persons I’ve known who has the spiritual gift of prayer.

Some years ago, I asked Rolfe to teach me more about prayer, and Rolfe lent me an old and well-worn book by S. D. Gordon called *Quiet Talks on Prayer*,<sup>4</sup> saying that this book had transformed his own understanding of prayer. In that book, Gordon talks about the prayer of Jesus:

How much prayer meant to Jesus! It was not only his regular habit, but his resort in every emergency, however slight or serious. When perplexed, he prayed. When hard pressed by work, he prayed. When hungry for fellowship, he found it in prayer. He chose his associates and received his messages upon his knees. If tempted, he prayed. If criticized, he prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit, he had recourse to his one un failing habit of prayer. Prayer brought him unmeasured power at the beginning, and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer.

My friends, if you and I are going to pray like Jesus prayed, that’s what we’ll do, too: **pray first, pray second, pray last, pray always.** When we’re tempted to make choices that take us away from God, prayer is like an astronaut’s umbilical cord, keeping us anchored, giving us life, bringing us home.

<sup>3</sup> Blackaby, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> S. D. Gordon, *Quiet Talks on Prayer* (Revell, 1904).

Finally, **Principle Seven** tells us to **Learn what it means to pray in faith**. A relevant text here is Mark 11:22-26, and it's somewhat difficult at first reading. I want to focus on the second part of the passage:

Then Jesus said to the disciples, *“Have faith in God. Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”*

What in the world did Jesus mean by *that*? I'll bet you've wondered that, just as I have. One thing is perfectly clear, and that is that Jesus told us that our prayer will be effective only if we have released all resentment, all bitterness, and all grudges—that we have a clear spirit with others in every respect. Jesus made that point a number of times, and that's part of what we looked at in Principle One last week. What else might Jesus have meant?

We can be sure that Jesus wouldn't ask us to do something that isn't possible, nor would He ask us to do something that makes no sense or has no value. Trying to move a literal mountain by prayer makes no sense and has no value in ordinary life as we live it. If, however, we understand this to be a figure of speech to make an important point, two things quickly become clear. First, a figurative “mountain” would be something that's “in our way,” something that prevents us from accomplishing or from experiencing God's will. The situations of which we've been speaking—temptation, fear, discouragement, illness, and death—are such “mountains,” and there are many more.

Understanding this, we immediately realize what Jesus meant: If we make time to be alone with God, if we live in an attitude of prayer so that God can transform us into persons capable of being channels of God's power, if prayer becomes our first response to every situation, if we pray persistently so that God's will does in fact become our own will, then, when we pray for something, we're praying to facilitate what God already intends, and of course it will happen!

When we take all of Jesus' teaching together, we see that Jesus didn't tell us how to use prayer to get what we want. Jesus didn't encourage us to treat God like a cosmic vending machine or as a magician who does our bidding. The core of Jesus' teaching about prayer is that if we see our situation and our circumstance as God sees it, then we'll want what God wants.

And so, my friend, what mountains are in front of you this morning? What have you heard from God as you've prayed alone, persistently, with a clear spirit, for God's will to become your will? As Henry Blackaby put it, “If you start asking God for one thing and something different happens . . . then respond to what begins happening. . . . You can't even *imagine* a prayer that comes close to what God wants to give you!”<sup>5</sup>

If we watch and listen to Jesus' practice and teaching about prayer, what we learn is this: **pray first, pray second, pray last, pray always.** *Pray, and watch for what happens next!*

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<sup>5</sup> Blackaby, p. 92.