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Luke 11:1-13

Dr. Richard L. Baker

Sung version of "The Lord's Prayer" (Malotte), David Mannell, tenor

Bold Obedience

Just in case you should seek an audience with the Queen of England this week, let me give you her official title as well as the proper form of address. By the 1953 Royal Titles Act, she is: Elizabeth the Second by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of Her other Realms and Territories, Queen, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith, Her Royal Majesty.

Just in case you should seek an audience with God this week, just say this: "Father."

For a very short period of time, on our little planet, in our small portion of the universe, the sun never set on the British Empire.

For all time, forever and ever, not just our sun and moon, but every sun and moon, every planet and galaxy, every quark and quasar, everything that was, is, and will be - all of it belongs to God.

And all we need say is what Jesus himself said: "Father."

At issue, of course, is not the gender of God. Jesus' disciples, like we ourselves, knew better than that. No, at issue is the amazing claim to intimacy. And the prayer itself - what follows the "Father," speaks the truth both about God and ourselves.

Listen for a moment to a slightly expanded version of those familiar words:

God is our Father: God brought us into existence and keeps us and loves us there still. We are his beloved children.

God is God: Holy, set apart, majestic, supreme; and thus we must keep his very name holy.

We live for God and God's kingdom - that day when God will be all in all and we will see God face to face.

And yet, God is not removed from our daily lives. Even our most mundane needs - food for our bodies - matter to God... and he provides.

Still, we turn away from the love of our Father. We sin and are held by sin - sin that separates us from God, ourselves and one another. So, we need forgiveness from God and we must also, in that forgiveness, forgive one another.

If God were to leave us to our sin - to be tried and tested by that sin - we would be found wanting. But God is God and so we ask God not to leave us, but to be with us and to save us.

Thirty-eight words...coincidentally the same number in Luke's Greek and our English translation. However, don't get hung up on the precise words or the exact word count.

As we know, Matthew's version of the prayer is a little longer than Luke's and when it comes to translations - well, you know, sometimes it's been "trespasses," other times, "debts" and still other times, "sins."

But, it is the earthly monarchs and potentates who insist on the exact wording and verbal precision in titles and address... not God.

Whatever the minor variations in wording or translation, the prayer speaks the truth, the truth about us and about God.

And Jesus teaches his disciples - teaches us - these words, the right words, not so that God can hear them - he already knows them - but so that we may speak them...so that we may speak our hearts to God and speak the truth to God. Because we need to pray.

As important as it is to have the right words; it is not enough. Because without the will to pray, the words are of no use. So, Jesus now continues, unbidden by the disciples, to urge persistence in prayer. Listen now for God's Word:

(Luke 11:5-8) 5. And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6. for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7. And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8. I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs."

A Story:

Back when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas, I attended University Presbyterian Church, a church that was a real blessing to Kim and me: we met there.

They asked me to teach an adult Sunday School class and I said yes. One Saturday . . . well, I had a paper to write and a pile of papers to grade . . . and, well, anyway, I wasn't quite prepared to teach Sunday School. I thought it was OK; I was expecting about 15 people and I figured we'd just kick around the topic of prayer for 50 minutes. The teacher for one of the other adult classes was sick, so they decided to wander down to my class, and when another class saw them out in the hall, they decided to follow along. Every time I'd get ready to start class, another clump of people would come in, smiling, waving, grabbing folding chairs to set up around the edges of the room.

The delay was OK with me, because, having nothing to say, I wasn't particularly eager for class to begin. Finally, I had no choice, and to make matters worse, there, sitting over to my right, was Alan Lewis.

Alan Lewis was a professor at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, a learned and a much-admired and much-loved man, both at the seminary and in the church. In fact, I was taking one of his classes. He was Scottish, slight of stature and charming, but a little dour as the Scots can be. In particular, he always seemed mildly disappointed that American students weren't better prepared. He was also battling cancer. He had already had one lung removed and he was bravely going on - teaching a full load and teaching it very, very well.

After I had gone on some minutes, he raised his hand and said:

"You know, Richard, I never pray for God to cure my cancer. I pray that he will give me the spiritual strength to endure it, and I pray that he will give that same strength to my wife and family, but I never pray for physical healing, God's will is God's will."

When you lead a discussion, it helps to divide your brain in half. With the front half, you need to listen closely, intently and appreciatively to what the person is saying. With the back half, you need to be thinking about the next step in the discussion: whether to ask a follow-up question, or to connect to what someone else said, or to compare to the text. As I was listening to Alan with the front half of my brain, I was thinking in the back half, "This is beautiful, this is profound, this is important - and I have absolutely nothing to say in response."

After Alan finished, there was a moment of appreciative silence, then a voice came ringing from the other side of the room:

“You’re just wrong about that, Alan, just wrong!”

I knew that voice. It belonged to Jane Spragens, another beloved figure at University Presbyterian Church. She had taught at the University and was the widow of a seminary professor.

If Alan’s voice was mist over the rolling green Scottish countryside, Jane’s was spring sunshine on the Texas hill country.

And Jane was going on: “If God can affect you spiritually, I sure don’t see why God can’t affect you physically, as well. And, Alan, I want you to know that, although you may not be praying for God to cure your cancer, I sure am. And I know a lot of other folks here are too.”

I have to tell you that, at this point, the back half of my brain had reverted to the desperate prayer mode:

“Please God, if you get me out of this, I will never, ever be unprepared again.”

You know God answers prayers, even the desperate prayers of the unprepared.

The fact that I had absolutely nothing to say allowed a conversation to happen between Alan and Jane - who were friends. In the course of that conversation, it became clear that they were both trying to get to the same point; they were just coming at it from opposite directions.

It’s the same point Jesus is making in this passage.

You see, Alan wanted to emphasize obedience in prayer; that prayer is not about getting what we want, but seeking to know and obey God’s will.

Jane wanted to emphasize boldness in prayer; that Jesus commanded us to ask, and if we limited ourselves in our asking, we were - in effect - limiting God.

Of course, they were both right. The proper posture in prayer is bold obedience. We should ask, and ask boldly, when we pray. We should also listen for - and seek to obey God’s will when we pray.

If you think about it, persistence in prayer requires both. If we are all and only boldness, we’re likely to quit as soon as we don’t get what we ask for.

But if we’re all and only obedience, why bother to pray?

Persistence in prayer requires bold obedience.

Prayer is not just about us asking of God; it is also about our listening to God and, even more than that, prayer is about opening ourselves to God, about coming into God’s presence, about knowing God and ourselves. We are promised that - when we get down on our knees in bold obedience, we will be lifted up, lifted up into God’s redeeming love. In prayer, we will arise.

Choir: “I Will Arise” (arranged by Alice Parker and Robert Shaw)

(Luke 11:9-13) 9. “So I say to you, ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be

opened for you. 10. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. 11. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? 12. Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 13. If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

When I read these words - ask, seek, knock - I wonder: what happened when Jesus asked, sought, and knocked? What answer did he get?

Go forward. Jesus is praying again. It is the night of his arrest. Luke tells us that he withdrew, knelt down, and prayed.

"Father. Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done."

If there ever was a picture of bold obedience, here it is. Jesus boldly asks for the cup of his crucifixion to be removed; but he seeks only to obey the Father's will.

The answer he gets, at least the first answer, is "No." No, I will not remove this cup; you must drink it to the dregs.

Because when Jesus gets up, he finds the disciples asleep, and in words that echo the last line of the prayer he taught them, he says, "Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." Then the crowd comes and Judas is at the front of it, ready to kiss him.

It is, as Jesus says, the hour of darkness.

If the first answer is "No," the final answer, the ultimate answer, the true answer, is "Yes." God's great cosmic "Yes," in and through Jesus Christ. The light of Easter morning shines in that darkness and the darkness will never, ever overcome - all praise and glory be to God. Yet through the darkness, Jesus prayed. As he hung on the cross, he prayed for those who put him there: "Father. Father forgive them for they know not what they do." His last words, as Luke records them, were a prayer. "Father. Father into your hands I commend my Spirit."

What are we to say to a God like this...to a God who not only teaches us how to pray, but knows what it is like to pray in the midst of darkness, in the face of death and who prays for us and with us so that we are not alone in that darkness?

What are we to say to a God like this...to a God who not only sends the Holy Spirit to move us to pray; but whose Holy Spirit prays for us when we are too weak, too discouraged, or just too self-absorbed to pray as we should; who prays for us when we don't even know our own hearts or own lives to pray for what we should, the Holy Spirit who is at work with us here and now, as we pray and pray for one another?

What are we to say to a God like this?

1. "Father, hallowed be your name. 2. Your kingdom come. 3. Give us each day our daily bread. 4. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. 5. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

May this be our prayer as well as our Lord's. Amen.