

## WHY MUST WE KEEP ASKING?

Scripture: Luke 11:5-13; Luke 11:1-4

Early in the novel *Huckleberry Finn* there is a scene where Huck learns about prayer. He has been adopted by the kindly widow Douglas and her stern sister Miss Watson, who wants to civilize him. But Huck isn't ready for civilizing, so he sneaks out of the house in the middle of the night and goes on some adventures with Tom Sawyer where he gets his new clothes greased up and muddied. Huck Finn says,

Well, I got a good going-over in the morning from old Miss Watson on account of my clothes; but the widow didn't scold, but only cleaned off the grease and clay, and looked so sorry that I thought I would behave awhile if I could. Then Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed, but nothing came of it. She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't any good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way.

I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I says to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff-box that was stole? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it. (*Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Collier and Son, 1912, 15.)

I wonder what Huck Finn would think of today's scripture lesson. In Luke 11 Jesus says, "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." I suspect Huck Finn would say, "There ain't nothing in it." We all know that there are things we pray for and don't get, things we search for and don't find; times we knock and the door is not opened; in fact it is slammed in our face.

It can be argued that sometimes we don't get what we pray for because we pray for the wrong thing. Maybe prayer is not about getting fish hooks or promotions or a win for the Seahawks. Maybe we are supposed to pray for bigger things than that. But do we even get the bigger things we pray for? How many times have we sat in this room and prayed "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"? How many times have we prayed for daily bread for those who are hungry or deliverance from evil for those who are oppressed? It cannot be wrong to pray for things like that. Jesus himself taught us to do it in the Lord's Prayer. So why doesn't it happen?

There is a wonderful story in Annie Dillard's book *Holy the Firm*. She lives on an island, and she writes,

There is one church here, so I go to it. ... On a big Sunday there might be twenty of us there; often I am the only person under sixty.... The minister is a Congregationalist, and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world—for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God’s grace to all—in the middle of this he stopped and burst out, “Lord, we bring you these same petitions every week.” After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer. Because of this, I like him very much (quoted in Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, 183-184).

If it is true that those who ask receive and those who seek find, then why must we keep asking, why must we keep seeking, why must we wait so long for things to change?

Let’s go back and take another look at this scripture. Jesus begins by telling a parable about a man who wakes up his neighbor at midnight to borrow some bread. As some of you know, my next door neighbors are Tom and Marge Cusworth. I like them a lot. But if they knocked on my door and woke me up in the middle of the night to borrow a few slices of bread, it might strain our relationship. But I would get up and give it to them just because they asked, and because I would not want to appear stingy. In effect Jesus says, “Look, if a person like Ken, self-centered as he is, would get up in the middle of the night to help a neighbor who knocked on his door, how much more will a loving God respond to your needs when you ask.”

The promise here is that God will respond. When you knock, when you call, when you pray, God will answer.

But now look at the next section of our scripture reading and notice the ambiguity—the open-endedness. In verse 9 Jesus says, “Ask, and you will receive,” but he does not say exactly what you will receive. He says, “Search, and you will find,” but he does not specify exactly what you will find. He says, “Knock, and the door will be opened,” but he does not say what will be behind the door. God will certainly respond, Jesus says, but there is a noticeable lack of specifics in exactly how God will respond.

Then Jesus tells another parable in verses 11-12. He says, “Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?” The point here is that a father would not give to his child something bad or destructive. No father would give to his child a snake or a scorpion, and neither would God. But that does not mean that the child who asks for a fish will get a fish. She might have to settle for Spam. But at least it won’t be a snake.

The ultimate point is made in verse 13. Jesus says, “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!” You may want a fish. You may want a job. You may want your health problems or economic problems or relationship problems to be solved, but what you will get when you pray is the Holy Spirit, God’s own presence in your life.

There is a striking parallel to this scripture passage at the beginning of the book of Acts. In Acts chapter 1, after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the disciples come to him and say,

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Remember in the Lord’s Prayer how Jesus taught the disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come.” Well, here they are asking Jesus, “When will God’s kingdom come?”

Jesus replies, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses ....” Notice what happens here. The disciples ask for the kingdom, and Jesus gives them the Holy Spirit. Sometimes when we pray, we don’t get what we ask, at least not yet. But we do get a relationship to God. We get the Holy Spirit who prays with us and for us in sighs too deep for words. And that is no small gift.

There is an interesting conclusion to the story of Huck Finn’s experience with prayer. Right after deciding that prayer doesn’t work, Huck makes this observation about God’s providence, God’s care for people. He says,

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body’s mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow’s Providence, but if Miss Watson’s got him there warn’t no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and reckoned I would belong to the widow’s if he want me, though I couldn’t make out how he was a-going to be any better off then than he was before, seeing I was so ignorant, and so kind of low-down and ornery (p. 16).

Why must we keep praying? Because the thing for which you are praying is not the most important thing. It is the God to whom you pray. The relationship is more important than the request.

So keep on praying. Keep asking for healing; keep asking for help with your job or your children or your schoolwork or your relationships. Keep praying for God’s kingdom to come and God’s will to be done. Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking on God’s door. Because on the path of those prayers God will come into your life, and that more than anything else is what we need most.

- Ken Onstot