

“The Opportunity of Prayer”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, August 13, 2006

Text: Luke 11:1-13

Philippians 4:4-9

NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our eyes and make us alert to the opportunity we have for a relationship with you in your Word for us today. In Jesus’ name, we pray.
Amen.

THE POWER OF PRAYER

Dr. Helen Roseveare was a missionary to Zaire. She told about a tragedy and a prayer request: A mother at their mission station died after giving birth to a premature baby. They tried to improvise an incubator to keep the infant alive, but the only hot water bottle they had was beyond repair. So they asked the children to pray for the baby and for her sister. One of the girls responded. “Dear God, please send a hot water bottle today. Tomorrow will be too late because by then the baby will be dead. And dear Lord, send a doll for the sister, so she won't feel so lonely.”

That afternoon a large package arrived from England. The children watched eagerly as they opened it. Much to their surprise, under some clothing was a hot water bottle! Immediately the girl who had prayed so earnestly started to dig deeper, exclaiming, “If God sent that, I'm sure He also sent a doll!” And she was right!

Almighty God knew in advance of that child's sincere requests, and five months earlier God had led a ladies' group in England to include both of those specific articles.

God, our heavenly Father, cares about his children. That includes you and me.
The Lord wants us to talk with him about the joys and problems of our lives.

God wants us to be in relationship with him. As any loving parent does, he wants to help us. God's help for us can be beyond our wildest dreams because as Jesus said, "With God, all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26) God has wonderful, marvelous power to help us, and the gateway to that kind of power is prayer.

I had the privilege of serving as an exchange pastor of Lymington United Reformed Church in Lymington, England, for six weeks in 1996. During that summer, I learned again about the importance of prayer. Every Wednesday morning a small group of 5 to 10 people would gather at the church and pray for 45 minutes. Every Sunday morning before the worship service, the elders would gather in the vestry for 15 minutes of prayer. We would pray for the people in the church and the community. We would ask God's blessing and direction for the worship service. It was a moving experience for me to have the leaders of the church praying for me and the service.

On the Sunday of a healing service, we had two 15-minute sessions of prayer before the service began, asking the Lord to send his healing power and to meet the needs of the congregation. It was a very powerful service. I learned again that there is a direct correlation between the commitment to pray and a meaningful worship experience.

Every Sunday at 9:15 a.m. at our church a group of people gathers in the Lullabye Room to pray for our church, the Sunday School classes meeting that Sunday and the worship service. We pray for each person who enters the doors of our church that Sunday. We pray for you. We pray that God would use the Sunday School classes and the worship service to meet spiritual, emotional and physical needs. This is the most important preparation for worship.

Dr. Wilbur Chapman was a young man when he went to become pastor of a church in Philadelphia. After his first sermon, an old gentleman said to him, "You're pretty young to be pastor of this church. But you preach the Gospel, and I'm going to help you all I can." Dr. Chapman thought to himself, "This man is a crank." But the man continued: "I'm going to pray for you that you may have the Holy Spirit's power upon you. Two others have covenanted to join with me in prayer for you."

Dr. Chapman said, "I didn't feel so bad when I learned he was going to pray for me." The 3 became 10, the 10 became 20, and 20 became 50, the 50 became 200 who met before every service to pray that the Holy Spirit might come upon him. Chapman always went into the pulpit feeling that he would have God's anointing in answer to the prayers of those who had faithfully prayed for him. It was a joy to preach! The result was that they received 1,100 people into their church by conversion in three years, 600 of whom were men. It was the fruit of the Holy spirit in answer to prayer!"

Next Sunday morning we will gather at 9:15 a.m. to pray for 15 minutes in the Lullabye Room. We will ask God's blessings on this service and on all of the

participants. Think of the spiritual power that will release! Would you be one of those pray-ers?

Dr. Myron Augsburger once said, “Prayer gives God the moral authority to act in our lives.”

Prayer is an important part of our worship. We share prayer concerns every Sunday, and then lift up these concerns to the Lord. Our Prayer Ministry Committee now facilitates a process of prayer for specific needs. There are salmon-colored prayer request cards in the pew racks. Anyone who has a prayer request may complete one of these cards and place it in the offering plate. A number of people pray for these needs for 60 days. One group gathers immediately following worship in the Lullaby Room to pray for these needs. Would you become one of these pray-ers?

We have resources to assist you in your daily prayer time. A yellow prayer card gives suggestions of ministries and programs of our church for which to pray. These are in the attendance notebooks and on a table in the lobby of the Center Building. We also have prayer guide cards, titled, “The Secret to Abundant Living.” This leads you through a 15-minute experience of “Ten Steps to God.” These are available on a table in the lobby of the Center Building.

SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND

The Lord wants us to talk with him about the joys and problems of our lives.
Jesus told his disciples, “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock,

and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.” (Matthew 11:9-10)

The missionary Oswald Chambers once said, “There is nothing more difficult than to ask. We will long and desire and crave and suffer, but not until we are at the extreme limit will we ask. We complain before God. We are apologetic or apathetic, but we ask very few things.”

Prayer at its most basic level is asking. We take Jesus at his word that God is really our Father. We come as his child, telling him our need in the most simple, direct way. We ask for his help.

James, in his letter, tells us, “You miss what you want because you do not ask God for it.” (James 4:2) Jesus frequently told his disciples, “Talk to me. Ask me.” The importance of expressing our needs to our heavenly Father was a point Jesus emphasized over and over in his teaching: “How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?” (Matthew 7:11) “Ask and the gift will be yours . . . for everyone who asks receives.” (Luke 11:9,10) “Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full.” (John 16:24)

Jesus went on to teach that when we ask for bread, we won’t get a stone. If we ask for an egg, God won’t give us a scorpion any more than an earthly father would. When we knock on the door, the door will swing open before us.

God hears and answers our sincere prayers – whether we are strong or weak, healthy or sick, calm or anxious. Catherine Marshall writes, “I believe that the old cliché,

‘God helps those who help themselves,’ is not only misleading but often dead wrong. My most spectacular answers to prayers have come when I was so helpless, so out of control as to be able to do nothing at all for myself.”

I am told that the 911 emergency system in some areas is the state of the art. All you need to do is punch those numbers, and you will almost instantly be connected to a dispatcher. In front of the dispatcher will be a read-out that lists your telephone number, your address, and the name by which that telephone is listed at that address. Also listening in are the police, the fire department, and the paramedics.

Someone might not be able to say what the problem is. Or perhaps a woman’s husband has just suffered a heart attack, and she is so out of control that all she can do is scream hysterically into the telephone. The dispatcher doesn’t need for her to say anything. He knows where the call is coming from. Help is already on the way.

There are times in our lives when in our desperation and pain we dial 911 prayers. Sometimes we’re hysterical. Sometimes we don’t know the words to speak. But God hears. He knows our name, and he knows our circumstance. Help is on the way. God has already begun to bring the remedy. Such is the power of even unspoken prayer.

A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The Lord seeks to give us good gifts. Jesus said, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11) God wants to provide

us with an abundant life – a life of love, joy and peace. That kind of life can be ours. One of the fundamentals of that life is prayer.

The apostle Paul wrote the church at Philippi, “Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7) This is a wonderful promise! When we thank God, when we share our requests and needs with God, we receive peace from God.

Dr. William Barclay has written this about prayer: “When we pray, remember: (1) the love of God that wants the best for us, (2) the wisdom of God that knows what is best for us, and (3) the power of God that can accomplish it.”

When we decide to ask God to help us with some small, immediate need, our asking is like stepping into a tiny anteroom. Taking a hesitant step forward, we discover that the anteroom leads into the King’s spacious reception hall. To our astonishment, the King himself comes forward to meet us, offering a gift so momentous as to be worthy only of the King: a lifetime of friendship with the Lord of glory.

He smiles, “You asked me for money for this month’s food bill. Sit here at my feet and we’ll talk about the groceries, but also of other matters, too. I have much to say to you. If you accept my friendship, you and I have years of joyous conversation ahead. I have so much to teach you that it is going to take eternity to handle all of it.”

Prayer at its most basic level is asking. The greatest result of prayer is not receiving things, but developing a relationship with God. Prayer allows us to get to know God.

To pray, to enter this relationship with God, enables God to handle not only our immediate material and physical needs, but also deeper needs – the hidden ones involving right attitudes and healthy emotions, proper motivation and how to solve our relationship problems. The foundation of all of this is prayer.

There are few parts of the Bible that are boring to me. However one of those sections is the first part of I Chronicles. There the genealogies of the twelve tribes of Israel are given. It is full of long lists of names. But there in I Chronicles 4:10, one descendant is singled out. His name is Jabez. “Jabez prayed to the God of Israel, ‘Bless me, God, and give me much land. Be with me and keep me from anything evil that might cause me pain.’ And God gave him what he prayed for.”

Out of all the hundreds of names in I Chronicles, Jabez is singled out. Why? Because he prayed to God. Prayer is important.

God desires for us to talk to him. You and I have the opportunity to pray every day . Let’s take it.

Closing prayer: Thank you, Lord, that You are ever more ready to listen than we are to pray. Teach us the importance of prayer, and keep us fervent and thankful even when we are tempted to give up. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.