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WHEN YOUR PRAYERS ONLY HIT THE CEILING

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~ Scripture: Luke 11:1-13 ~

INTRODUCTION

We have experienced many blessings as a church. Sitting around the table at **Ad Council** the other night, the cell leaders of our church were enumerating many positive, affirmative, forward-moving things:

- Youth building + prospect of the Atrium-Connector being started soon
- Many new people coming on board (e.g.: attending and getting involved)
- Growth of our children's and youth ministries + about to hire a part-time CM Director
- The many missions opportunities (e.g.: CROP Hunger Walk)
- I'm excited about the small group leader training and the prospect of launching many new small groups this fall
- Health of our finances (we're ahead of last year in giving)
- Babies being born + people getting married + folks being baptized + new members joining
- Watching so many people grow in (and into) faith. . .and being disciplined as "followers of Jesus Christ"
- So many stories of people "taking a walk" (from Matt's message last week)

There is much to celebrate. Yet, we've come through quite a season (as a church), haven't we?

- Tragedies & disasters
- Losses of many loved ones
- Many diagnosed with serious medical conditions
- Relationships that are struggling

I'm guessing that many of you are still reeling from the shock of how life has hit you these past few days-weeks-months. Maybe you're growing a bit weary—with all the grieving, the struggling, the wondering about the future, the exhaustion of closing out estates and finding a way to move on. And maybe you're wondering if God is as much "there" as you've always thought or been told. **Your prayers seem to be hitting the ceiling lately**, and you're wondering:

Is He a prayer-answering God? Or is prayer merely an exercise in self-talk?

What is your belief about prayer this morning? Do you believe God hears us when we talk to Him. . .and that He speaks to us in response? Is He really interested in our daily lives and the challenges that confront us every step of the way? Is it really true that the all-knowing and all-powerful God of the universe actually desires fellowship and communion with us "mere mortals"?

Many of us would give (or, would like to give) an affirmative to those questions. But because of our personal experience—sometimes painfully disappointing—we're not always able to be certain.

It's hard to pray when you've felt disappointed or let down by God. . .when things didn't happen like you asked, hoped, expected or prayed. . .when you've felt God didn't do His part somehow. And you wonder: "How come it's going like that? How come You're not involved like I thought You would be?"

We get disappointed with God. . .

1. WHEN GOD DOESN'T DO WHAT WE THINK HE SHOULD

Think how Mary & Martha felt when Lazarus died. *"If you had been here, our brother wouldn't have died."* That is, *"You didn't do what we thought you would or should do."*

So why pray? When **C. S. Lewis** lost his wife "JOY" to cancer, his friends asked him: *"How can you pray?"* His response: *"I cannot help but pray....."*

2. WHEN GOD SEEMS A LONG WAY OFF

When we are in the wilderness. . .and the fog is all around us. . .and we can't see beyond our nose. . .and everything seems uphill. We're alone, bogged down, lost. God seems distant and indifferent. Where is He anyway? With the Psalmist, we say: *"How long will you let this go on? How long will you turn your ears from me?"*

Elizabeth Elliott, wife of martyred missionary Jim Elliott, said: *"This is where faith begins . . .in the wilderness when you're all alone and afraid. . .when things don't make any sense."*

Proverbs 3:5 – *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."* **But I wonder, can you trust God (His heart) when you cannot trace His hand?** Can you?

3. WHEN THE OLD ISSUES STILL AFFECT OUR LIVES

Maybe you've walked with the Lord for years, yet some of the old "stuff" keeps popping up. You'll go along for awhile thinking something's behind you. Then "it" rears its ugly head. Maybe an old scar, hurt or pain. Maybe something that was inflicted upon you. . .maybe something that you inflicted upon yourself (by your own choices). You thought it was mastered, but NO.

In Christ there is new life, but sometimes there are old wounds. They're like scars—reminders of a hurt that may have taken place a long time ago. They never quite go away. BUT, they don't have to keep hurting you. There may even be some value in them.

Remember THOMAS? He was not about to believe anything about Jesus coming out of the tomb if he couldn't put his hands in Jesus' side and his finger in the holes in Jesus' hands. So it's because of those old wounds that Thomas came to faith. There may be some in your life who come to faith in Christ because they have watched you move beyond some past issues. . . because they have seen you move forward in spite of old wounds—even if they do keep popping back up from time to time (like a Jack-in-the-Box).

SO, when you're disappointed with God. . .**when your prayers don't seem to go any further than the ceiling.** . .when your prayers are not answered (or are answered with a "NO")—should you keep praying? Should you stay on your knees? OR hang it up?

SCRIPTURE

Let's let the Scriptures answer that this morning. I'd like to take you to **Luke 11:1-13** –

¹*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."* ²*He said to them, "When you pray, say:*

'Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.' "

⁵*Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' "Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'* ⁸*I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness (persistence) he will get up and give*

him as much as he needs.

⁹"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹²Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

There are three aspects of prayer brought out in these verses.

I. IT'S CONTENT [vv. 2-4]

We have a summary version of The Lord's Prayer here—a model of what to pray.

II. OUR PERSEVERENCE [vv. 5-10]

Should we ever stop asking God for healing and favors?

NO! God is always pleased to have His children come to Him with requests and petitions.

Note in v. 8 that the guy gets up and gives his neighbor the three loaves of bread he asks for—NOT because they are friends, BUT because of the man's "boldness" / "persistence".

Charles Spurgeon wrote: "*Prayer pulls the rope below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others give only an occasional jerk at the rope. But he who communicates with heaven is the one who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might.*"

Can you overdo it? Can you pull too hard too many times? I doubt it.

ILLUS> But we may be like a child who brings his broken toy (with tears in his eyes) for us to mend. We bring our broken dreams to God to mend. But then we hang around and keep tinkering with all that we've supposedly given Him. At last, we snatch them back and cry, "How can You be so slow?" He says, "My child, what could I do? You never did let go."

Prayer is NOT like a pop machine: in which you in your dollar in. . . press the button that has what you want. . .voila, there it is!

And yet, the more we give ourselves to prayer, the stronger and more confident in it we become. As in any relationship that's healthy and growing, we become less demanding.

Not that we lower our expectations. But perhaps we trust more. . .we surrender more. . .we turn more over. . .we seek to have Him in control rather than to control Him with our prayers.

Ask all you want. We should. God wants us to. Just remember, He's in control. He has the last say—even if it's "NO".

III. GOD'S FAITHFULNESS / TRUSTWORTHINESS [vv. 11-13]

Notice how God will match the answers to the questions and the outcomes to the requests.

By that I mean He won't give a *snake* (something harmful and out of character) when a *fish* has been asked for. After all, what kind of father would give a *scorpion* to his child who has asked for a simple, harmless *egg*?

But, you say, what about the times God doesn't answer my prayers. . .doesn't give me what I have asked for? What about the times He allows "*continued suffering*" instead of "*healing*"?

It is true that God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we would like Him to. But, His ways are higher than our ways; His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God is sovereign! The specifics and the timing are in His hands. Don't limit God to our finite way of thinking and our finite world—because in reality God's Kingdom extends way beyond what we experience in the "here & now". We only see a little piece of a much larger picture.

His Word promises: “*Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs everything. Do not lose heart! Do not fix your eyes on what is seen, but on what is unseen—for what is seen is temporary, what is unseen is eternal.*” [II Cor. 4:16-18]

It comes down to this: **CAN YOU TRUST THAT GOD KNOWS WHAT HE IS UP TO EVEN IF WE DON'T? CAN YOU TRUST HIS HEART WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE HIS HAND?**

Notice in v. 13 that Paul talks about how willing God is to give us the Holy Spirit. [He doesn't say, “How willing God is to give us what we ask?”] If we have His H.S., then we've got everything we need—in sickness & in health, in wealth & in poverty, in good times & bad.

CONCLUSION

Again, let me ask you this morning, what do you believe about prayer? DO YOU BELIEVE:

- As **James 5:16** says that “*the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective*”?
- As **Luke 11:9** says that you can “*Ask and it will be given to you. . . seek and you will find . . . knock and the door will be opened*”?
- As **I Chronicles 16:11** instructs, that you should “*look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always*”?
- That we should do what Jesus told his disciples in **Luke 18:1**, when He said they “*should always pray and not give up*”?
- As **Romans 8:26** says that “*the Spirit helps us in our weakness. . . so that even when we do not know what we ought to pray for, the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express*”?
- As Paul does in **I Thessalonians 5:17-18** that you should “*pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*”?
- On the broader scale, what **II Chronicles 7:14** says, that “*If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land*”?

It is obvious that God not only honors prayer, but commands us to enter into this personal communion with Him. And what a privilege it is!

You don't have to make an appointment to get His attention. There are no checkpoints, no guards, no secretaries to go through. You are simply invited to walk boldly into His presence at any moment, day or night. He hears the faintest utterance of the sick, the lonely, the despised. Every-one of us is known and loved by Him, despite our imperfection or our sin. Truly, the invitation to prayer is a precious gift—an expression of His incomparable love and compassion for His created ones (us).

SO: Keep praying—even when your prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling.
 Keep asking-seeking-knocking.
 Even if you don't receive. . . or find. . . and a door doesn't open
 Even if your prayers aren't answered. . .
 Still, will you follow Him? Will you believe Him? Will you trust Him?
 Will you trust His heart when you can't trace His hand?

I hope you will join in staking your life on the promises + principles of prayer.
The Word of God guarantees that ultimately you won't be disappointed!