

"Three P's of Proficiency in Prayer"

Luke 11:1-13, Proper 11

July 24, 2016

"Proficiency" is an interesting word isn't it? It's a word that comes to us from Latin and means most basically: "To make progress," or "to improve" in **any type of endeavor** that may ever be undertaken. --- Why just think of those 10,500 contestants who will all be competing in the Summer Olympics next month in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; men and women going there from many other nations all throughout the world only because they have each achieved a high degree of "proficiency" in their particular sporting event.

Did you hear that the American contestant Michael Phelps, now 31 years old, will be competing in the aquatic events once again—entering as a contestant into the Summer Olympic now for the fifth time, having already won 18 gold medals for the USA as a world-class swimmer?

There are millions of people all around the globe who enjoy playing a good round of golf; be it 9 holes or 18 holes out there on the course, but the vast majority are always "amateurs" at best! Very few ever reach that level of proficiency we see being exhibited by the "pros" every year in their participation with the Masters Tournament or the U.S. Open.

Millions of people have learned to play the piano, but very few ever reach that level of "proficiency" as did Johann Strauss, Ludwig van Beethoven or Frederic Chopin. Many people have excelled in learning to speak a foreign language very proficiently – but how many of us as the disciples of Jesus Christ alive in the world today – would classify ourselves as highly proficient people when it comes to the spiritual discipline of prayer?

The words of our Gospel lesson today all came as our Savior's personal response one day when one of his twelve disciples said to him: "***Lord, teach us to pray, as John the Baptist taught his disciples***" (Luke 11:1)!

The disciples of Jesus must have surely noted that no matter how busy our Lord ever was, he always took out time for prayer, and perhaps they could even sense that a "profound difference" had come over Jesus when he would return to them from those times spent away from them in prayer—as One who came back with his spiritual batteries recharged.

It is St. Luke--more than any other Gospel writer who is constantly bringing to our attention the great frequency and profound sense of commitment that Jesus always devoted to prayer. It's Luke who tells us in Luke 3:21 that it was while our Lord Jesus was standing there in the Jordan River praying that the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove—at the very hour when he was baptized by John.

In Luke 5:16 we read: "*Jesus often withdrew to a lonely place to pray!*" And in Luke 6:12, we read that *Jesus went to a mountainside and spent the whole night in prayer there, before he would awaken the next morning to choose 12 men who would be numbered among his first disciples!*

And it's again Dr. Luke, the physician, who tells us that when Jesus had fallen on his face and was praying so earnestly in the Garden of Gethsemane as the hour of his suffering and passion were fast approaching that *"Jesus sweat, as it were, great drops of blood"* (Luke 22:44)! Only two verses before this we learn of Jesus praying: *"Father, if it be possible take this cup from me, but not my will but your will be done"* (Luke 22:42)!

Jesus does not dodge the questioning disciple's request, but proceeds immediately to give his disciples an introductory lesson on prayer. As I studied the words of this text this past week, I could help but notice that Jesus actually shares with us "Three P's of Proficiency in Prayer."

I. FIRST OF ALL – JESUS GIVES US A "PATTERN" FOR PRAYER.

A pattern can be a very useful thing, can't it—because in almost any undertaking a pattern gives us a model or a form for imitation!?! A pattern provides to us a "regular" or "repeated" way in which many important things are often done!

People who enjoy sewing clothes for themselves often go to the fabric store to buy material or fabric! But even before they make that selection they have to choose a "pattern" for that dress or that pair of pants that will be sown. It's a package that contains several pieces of large paper that the various pieces of material to be used sketched out upon them. The pattern then is affixed with straight pins to the fabric—just so! When the material is cut out in just this fashion, it's much easier then to sew that proposed garment together!

Jesus gives us the Lord's Prayer as a prayer that we can memorize and pray many times throughout our lives—but it also give us a model, or a pattern for the way we pray!

Did you know that every one of the prayers that Jesus prays that are recorded for us in the New Testament Gospels—all begin with that word **"Father,"** with only one exception being that ominous prayer Jesus prays from the cross as he quotes **Psalm 22:** *"Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani"*? *It's Aramic: for: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"* (Matthew 27:46)?

Jesus uses this word "ABBA" because it not only expresses the close familial relationship that he always enjoyed with his Heavenly Father, but because he wanted to give each of us that same kind of close familial relationship—**THROUGH HIS DYING ON THE CROSS IN PAYMENT OF OUR SINS—AND THEN IN HIS BEING RAISED TO NEW LIFE AGAIN!** We get this very insight when we listen to the words that our Risen Savior spoke to Mary Magdalene there outside of Joseph of Arimathea's tomb that he had loaned to Jesus for those three days! When our Savior called her by name, *"Mary!"* and she then turned around and recognizing Jesus wanted to hug him something furiously Jesus, Jesus put the kibosh temporarily on Mary's enthusiasm saying: *"Don't cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father but go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to My Father and your Father—to my God and to your God"* (John 20:17)!

Jesus also proceeds to give us a pattern to make us more proficient in our prayer lives by teaching us that (1) Our first need is that we always seek to honor God's name in our worshiping him and praising him and that we should never to use God's name as a tool for swearing or cursing others in God's name. (2) Secondly we are to pray that God would always extend his good gracious rule over each of us in our lives—so that we could always live in this world with a very liberating and profound sense of freedom. (3) We thirdly, need to not only pray but to trust God to meet all of our daily needs of food, clothing and shelter with our daily lives: *"Give us each day our daily bread"* (v. 3). (4) Fourthly, we need to pray every day to God for his forgiveness and for his forgiveness in a way that we need to joyfully allow it to flow through us to other people all around us! (5) Fifthly, our great need for the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives should be that we are daily delivered from the power of Satan who always does his best to entice us into sin so that he may gravely harm us and gravely harm others!

II. THE SECOND "P" OF PROFICIENCY IN PRAYER IS OUR NEED TO BE "PERSISTENT" IN OUR PRAYER LIVES.

You know the parables of Jesus have sometimes suffered a great deal of injustice as various theologians have sought to interpret them at times—throughout the history of the church, but the parables of Jesus were never meant to be dissected with a theological scalpel! **Rather, the parables of Jesus are all very intent on making one point that outshines all others.**

In this parable about the Unexpected Friend at midnight—the major emphasis is being placed upon this man's persistence. Yes, he must have been completely surprised when he receives unexpected visitors to his house one night—after all the lights had been turned out and the children had all been put to bed. The commentator **William Barclay tells us many of those Palestinian people living in that first century lived in homes that were for the most part—little more than one big room.** Sometimes the livestock that spent their days outside of the house, at nightfall were brought into the house too!

The man who knocks on the door was a friend but he comes at the most inopportune time as was humanly possible—at MIDNIGHT! The owner of the home his tries his best to turn the aggressive man's unwelcome intrusion away—but there's no success in that endeavor. Finally he receives those three loaves of bread he was requesting—but he only receives them **BEGRUDINGLY.**

So you can see that in this particular parable—the point of comparison is a point of contrast! Why do we human beings who are so persistent, at times, in making our requests for help known to other people—who are sinful and rather selfish and self-centered like ourselves **give up so easily in bringing our deepest needs to God—who is the SOURCE OF ALL MERCY AND COMPASSION.** Nowhere does Jesus ever say we **should keep pounding at God's door with a request that we are never willing to change.** Again he also taught us to pray, according to Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer—*"Thy will be done"* (Matthew 6:10)!

But in our conversations with God, we may want to change the nature of our requests when it seems that the answer God is giving to us to our initial requests is obviously a

“no” or a “not yet, but maybe later” kind of answer. Nowhere does the Bible teach us that we should approach our God in prayer the way that an Aladdin approaches a “genie in a bottle” in ancient Arabian and Persian mythology. Nowhere does the Bible teach us to approach God like the **Eternal Bellhop** who is always on standby and ready to respond in any way that we would direct him at our ever beck and call. After all, he is God! He is the Creator! He is the Sovereign One! -- The truth of the matter is that our God always welcomes our prayers. He is not put off or bothered because we come to him at any **inopportune time**. **He loves to hear from us and gladly is willing to respond to our own great—and sometimes—perhaps—not so great of a need!**

Maybe you heard that story about those four seasoned fishermen who were out fishing on Lake Superior one night when there was a horrendous storm that came upon the sea. The waters were choppy. The wind was blowing. If the wind and the rain did not stop pretty soon, that whole fishing vessel would have been swamped even as the fishermen would certainly have lost their lives! **Now unfortunately, none of these men were all that “spiritual” and none of them were very proficient at prayer. One, however, seemed to have some knowledge of prayer, so he prayed out loud on behalf of them all: “Lord, I haven’t come to you prayer now with a request for your help for fifteen years, and I promise you that if you would save us, our boat, and deliver us from this storm—I won’t bother you with anymore prayers for the next fifteen years!”**

III. THE THIRD “P” OF PROFICIENCY IN PRAYER IS PROMISE.

Jesus promises us here that the time we spend with our Heavenly Father in prayer will never be a waste of time because the Heavenly Father will always answer our prayers—maybe not in giving us the answer that we were hoping for—because what we were hoping for would possibly not be in our best interest at all!

Nevertheless: *“Ask, and it will be given to you! Seek, and you will find! Knock and it will be opened to you! For everyone who asks receives and the one who seeks finds and to the one who knocks it will be opened”* (Vv. 9-10). What I hear Jesus saying here is that even though we may come upon those extremely challenging times in our lives when we find no hope for the future, **when we can’t imagine how in the world we will ever step into the future**—Christ has promised to provide us with his own light to show us the way. Remember that’s what he said to that blind man to whom Jesus had given his sight; sight to a man who had been born blind. *“I am the light of the world and the one who follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life”* (John 8:12)!

And in his own unique way here Jesus is promising us that God will not only always answer our prayers, but that he will only answer our prayers in ways that are good for us! This is why Jesus says: “What father among you if his son asks for a fish will instead of a fish give him a snake instead! Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11:13)!

Why is the gift of the Holy Spirit such a vital gift to our Christian lives always? Because it is only the Holy Spirit who takes the things of Christ and makes them ours! It is only the Holy Spirit who convinces us that our truest home will never be found by us upon this earth, but when we one day will joyfully be welcomed into heaven!

There are times when we as Christians may yearn, deeply yearn for the HOPE OF HEAVEN. I love what St. Paul writes to the Corinthians when he says: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the

things that are seen but that are unseen. For the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)!

Here Paul is teaching us that God’s gift of the Holy Spirit that he has given to us in somewhat like “earnest money” that prospective buyers may put down on a home—to assure the realtors, the present home owners, and those preparing the mortgage—that they really are earnest, truthfully committed and seriously wanting to purchase that home! So it is with the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives!

One day a woman invited her pastor to come over to her new place of residence and to bless her new home, but it really wasn’t her home at all. It was a small yellow brick bungalow with a “**For Sale**” sign in the yard, a house that was actually being loaned to her by the owner of that little house while she was in between jobs. Besides, the real estate agent thought that the **house would show better with someone actually living in it if they brought a small amount of their furniture with them in that new home!** This woman was, however, unsure about how long she would be able to live there—and even less certain about where she would go next when that little house she was living in currently actually was sold. In between jobs, she was also very uncertain about when she would become employed again. Nevertheless she moved some of her things into that house and invited some of her closest friends over to supper. She also invited the pastor to come. **Everyone brought a dish, or maybe a fistful full of flowers they had picked from their own gardens, or a small house-warming gift!** After all who were present enjoy a very delicious meal, then all the guests convened together in the living room to begin the prayerful celebration of this woman’s new house. Even this woman was home, she knew deep down inside of herself, just as everyone else that was there that evening knew it too—**she wasn’t really home yet!** So when the pastor chose one of those Bible readings to read that was suggested for this occasion, he chose those wonderful words from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body; what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25)*

As the pastor read these words, it seemed as if they fell like stones into some very deep water!

These words were a powerful reminder to that hostess that evening, and to all of her guests, that though she was living in a safe place, she was not really home yet! -- And to be honest with ourselves— isn’t the very same thing true for all of us? **None of us is home yet! Paul writes: “For now we know that if the tent which is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 5:1-5)!** *“Sure goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever!” (Psalm 23:6)*

“Three P’s of Proficiency in Prayer”: Pattern, Persistence and Promise! AMEN