

Belligerent Prayer

Jonathan K. Dodson | Luke 11:5-13 | June 22, 2020

Screen writer and director, Miranda July, was on her way to return a book to the library when suddenly the man in front of her collapsed onto her, unresponsive. She shouted for help until a security guard showed up and called EMS. She waited as the man's face began to turn gray-blue; his friend started to lose it whimpering: *What do we do, What do we do?* So she said, Let's pray. She had no idea how to pray, so she did what she'd seen in the movies: laid her hands on the man's shoulders, bowed her head, and *begged with all her heart for the man to live*. When is the last time you begged God on behalf someone? Often we don't pray for others *until we're forced to*, until circumstances demand it, til death is at our door. But what if we prayed with desperation now? *How should we pray?* Like a Friend, an Unequal, and a Child.

Beg Like a Friend

After instructing his disciples in devotional prayer (11:1-4), Jesus turns to teach his disciples about *intercessory* prayer. Don't be intimidated by the word. There are no praying elites in the kingdom of God. Intercessory prayer, Rachel Vanhover says, is talking to God on behalf of others. Anyone can do it. The question is *how*. So Jesus tells a story of a man who receives a traveler at midnight after a long journey. The traveler had no drive-thrus to grab a bite on the way so arrives famished. With nothing to offer him, his host goes next door to his friend's house and asks for three loaves. What's the point? Two observations. The first is embedded in Jesus' opening question: **Which of you who has a friend will go to him?** Who wouldn't **go to a friend** at midnight when you're in a real pinch? One evening our infant daughter started struggling to breathe. It got worse and worse, so we needed to rush her to the ER. *But* our other toddler was asleep. So even though it was late, I called my friend: *How soon can you get here?!* When things are urgent we go to a friend, no matter how inconvenient it is. When people are in need, we shouldn't hesitate go to God in prayer, our Great Friend. Now interesting thing is the friend in the story objects. Jesus says, **I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs** (8). The second observation is that though his friend can't be roused because of their friendship, he will be roused by his



impudence. The Greek word means to be rude, shameless, belligerent. Who cares what time it is! Lend me three loaves! It's an imperative. This is **belligerent petition**, prayer with fire in its belly: Belligerent prayer doesn't whisper the request; it demands it: *How soon can you get here?!* After the murder of George Floyd, we had an impromptu prayer vigil. During that prayer time people cried out for justice for African-Americans who endure racism: *profiling, police brutality, overcriminalization, disproportionate incarceration rates, and murder*. Don't give up. If you're not praying, start interceding. In an article entitled, "Prayer is Activism" Eugene Park reminds us: *When we pray in times of injustice, we are protesting to the highest authority in the universe, the perfect arbiter of all justice*. We should pray belligerently for justice *and* for eternal salvation. The gospel compels us to pray not only for people's physical needs but for their eternal needs. We're reminded, *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him* (3:36). Pray your family, friends, neighbors would not suffer the eternal wrath of God but see eternal life! It doesn't get any more urgent than that! I confess this kind of praying rises and falls in my life. There are seasons when I walk my neighborhood and beg God for the salvation of my neighbors and days I flat out forget. Times I'm impassioned to pray for justice and times I'm not. Jesus' story reminds all of us to pray *belligerently*. Beg like a friend at the midnight hour.

Pray Like an Unequal

Will God really answer our prayers? Jesus says, *For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened* (10). It *will* be opened. God answers every, single prayer. James says, You have not because you ask not. And yet, Jesus also teaches us to pray, *Hallow be your name; Your kingdom come, your will be done* (Mt 6:10), to pray in **reverent submission**. A tension emerges between our will, belligerent petition, and his will, reverent submission. Beg God or trust God? The key is to not dissolve the tension. If prayer was all belligerent petition, our preferred answer to prayer would always be granted. And that could be a *terrible* thing. In my early twenties, weighed down by shame, I asked God to take my life. I'm grateful he didn't. I've also asked for *unwise* things: that another woman would marry me. I'm so glad God didn't answer that prayer. We pray in reverent submission to God's will because God is wiser and kinder than

ourselves. But if we pray all submission, then we won't be belligerent, we might not even pray. That puts us *out of touch with God*. CSL *And what is more natural, if you know God, than to address him?* If we can speak with the most powerful, most loving being in the universe, it would be fools not to. All submission also puts us out of touch with God's *power*. We don't get to see him work in powerful ways like the scores of people baptized in Barton Springs or our friends who couldn't get pregnant have twins. So we pray in the tension, belligerently and reverently. But not as though they're equals. Jesus instructs us to pray not *My will be done, but Thy will be done*. Emphasis on *reverently*. As we give voice to our needs and the needs of others, it's important to recognize God has what NT scholar Gordon Smith calls a "privileged voice"—that *the final objective of prayer is not in our speaking so much as in allowing God to speak, for him to have the final word that speaks into our lives*. So while prayer is two-way communication, it is not communication between *peers* but unequals. We speak to an omniscient and omnipotent *King*. And like a king, God often seeks to conquer and occupy rebellious territory in our hearts (Starke). He may expose false beliefs, convict us of sin, redirect our decisions. A friend of mine was praying and felt like God told him to pull weeds. He didn't know what it meant, so he kept asking until it became clear God was asking him to pull up specific sins in his heart. As he pulled the weeds, God joyfully occupied more of his heart. When we pray in reverent submission we avoid the terrible and unwise self but also get God *himself*. Pray as *an unequal*.

Trust Like a Child

My children ask for the craziest things. Can we have a house with a pool? Can we stay in a hotel (during coronavirus)? And sometimes they get them! We stayed at an Air BNB with a pool during COVID! Jesus says, *What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a snake; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?* What's his point? Trust me. Like a child trusts his father. Even a stubborn child eventually gives in and trust their parent. Trust like a child. Generally speaking parents are trustworthy; want to give their children good things not bad things. So, if a child asks for something good, an edible fish or egg, we don't give them something bad or harmful, that bites or stings in return. However, we might not give good gift right away. I've denied my kids requests for an iPhone for *years*. Why? Because I'm a tyrant? No, because I know they're not ready. How

much more does our Father know when we are ready for his good gifts? So ask but ask like a child, knowing good things don't need to be given at once. That's true of justice and salvation. It's not always prudent for us to know why. We probably can't handle the explanation of God's supremely complex, sovereign plan to work all things together for good. But we can trust him, like a child, like an unequal. And he's given us every reason we to do so. The cross reminds us God took the greatest punishment to give us the greatest Gift—the **Spirit** and the Son! *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!* (13). Now why is the Spirit the greatest gift? 1. The Spirit is *God with us*; we don't have to climb a mountain, go to a temple, to hear his voice. 2. The Spirit *prays with us* nudging us to enjoy the Father's love, intercede for a friend, pull weeds, or plead for justice. 3. And the Spirit gives us more excellent gifts: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*. And doesn't the world need those gifts right now? So let's pray! Beg like a friend, *belligerently*; pray an unequal, *reverently*, and like a child, *trustingly*.