

Learning to Pray
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A couple of dads have received 15 minutes of fame in two different viral videos. While both dad's are doing different things, both of the father's have been praised for being great fathers to their kids. I want to show you portions of both of these videos; I want you to see them in action. Notice how they are exercising different parenting functions or roles and how their children respond. The first video shows a dad instilling some confidence in his little girl and pay attention to both the father's words and the little girl's smile (VID1).

Now, watch this video, but notice how different the situation is. Again, notice the dad's words and how different his little girl is in comparison to the girl in the first video (VID2).

I'm in agreement with most people; I think these two men did a great parenting job (though, I would have preferred a little more God-centered affirmation from Dad #1). I think these two men are good examples; I'm hoping a lot of us dads here at FBC are like them in our affirmation and in our discipline. But I'm struck by the fact that while we call Dad #2 a good dad who did a good job, his little girl was crying. She wasn't all smiles, was she? While the first girl was lifted up, but the second, whiney girl was humbled. But we still call Dad #2 a good dad. Why is that? He made his little girl sad. If I told you that I saw a dad in the city park make his little girl cry, wouldn't your initial thought be that he must have done something wrong?

We all can see that Dad #2 is a good dad, a loving dad, because he's giving his daughter what she *needs*. She needs to learn that disrespectful behavior is not ok. She needs to learn that whining won't get you what you want in life. She needs to see and understand what is appropriate behavior in public. And this good father, in spite of seeing his little girl upset, in spite of the stares from other people, even though it might be easier just to give in to the demands of a 3 year old, does the most loving and helpful thing in that moment for his little girl. And that act of love makes her cry.

Remembering this hard, challenging side of love is really important, I think, when we talk about the love of God for us, his adopted sons and daughters. Our world has been brainwashed by the schemes of the Evil One to think that if God loves us he would give us what we want when we want it just like a 3 year old girl wanting candy as she walks through Wal-Mart with her mom and dad. And if God doesn't give us what we really, really want or even what we think we need then he must not be very loving.

Today, we finish Jesus' teaching on prayer. He's taught us what the content of our prayers should be like. He's also given us the instruction that our prayers should be bold; we push through reasons and excuses not to pray with faith in Jesus' words and teachings to pray with importunity. Today, we look at Jesus' words that speak to the character of God. It's meant

to encourage us to pray; it's meant to inspire us to pray with confidence. Let's see what Jesus teaches and apply this to our lives (READ Luke 11:11-13).

It's important, I believe, to see the connection here in vs. 11 to how Jesus told us to pray in vs. 2. In vs. 2 Jesus says, "When you pray go to him as your father." Now in vs. 11 he circles back to that picture. "What father among you," Jesus begins, later saying, "If you earthly fathers will treat your children a certain way, how much better will you heavenly Father treat you!" God wants us to see him as a loving, kind, gracious father. That's what he's like.

Let's look at vs. 11, "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent." That would be a pretty bad father, wouldn't it? And sadly, friends, there are some out there like that. If you go online and type *absent father epidemic* in a search engine, you will find scores of articles, resources, and information about the sad reality that far too many men are abandoning their role of father. Sometimes they leave. Other times they are emotionally unavailable. Too many dads are cruel and disinterested. Or even just selfish. Think of it, my good brothers and sisters. The God of the universe has picked one primary image, one primary relationship, to identify himself as to us and it is the picture of a *father*. Don't you think the Evil One wants to put his best resources to work in tainting the image of father? He wants to confuse us and lie to us about what a father is like so we don't trust our God. He does that by tempting men and fathers to abandon their responsibilities, to be selfish with their time, to refuse to sacrifice for their children, to abuse and abandon children like they are not the gift God made them to be. Because if Satan, the Evil One in this world, can tempt many fathers to be unloving, unkind, cruel, and selfish then that's how we will see the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And if that's how we see God, then we certainly won't trust him with our lives.

In light of that, first of all, to all you dads out there, make your fathering a priority in your life. Consider your fathering as one of the most significant roles and responsibilities God will ever give you. The impact your fathering will make goes far beyond the 18 years your children may live in your home; your impact will echo in eternity. You're going to make mistakes; we all do. So, be quick to admit them, be quick to say you're sorry. Be humble about your failures; God will use those when you submit them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But also, to all of you who suffered at the hands of your father, I'm hear to tell you the your God is not like that. I'm sorry your experience with your father was so hard and ugly, but our God in heaven is different. He is always good and kind and caring and compassionate. He would never hurt you out of selfishness or malice; God does not willingly grieve or afflict the children of men. God might just make us cry, but it's like Dad #2 with our very best in mind. It's going to take some discipline on your part to see the difference.

Good fathers do give good gifts to their children; we know that and Jesus is using what we know to teach us something about God and prayer. Look at vs. 11 & 12, "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" That's what we know a good father would do; Good dads give good

gifts to their children. What's Jesus' point? The point is if you know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more does God know how to give good gifts to his children. Jesus even says, "And you're evil! And being evil you still know how to do that." Is God evil? Oh no, God is good.

- Ps. 100:5 ~ For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.
- Ps. 34:8 ~ Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!
- Ps. 86:5 ~ For you, O Lord are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

Oftentimes in the Bible, as you could see in some of those verses, God's goodness is displayed in his love for us. And, of course, God's rich and perfect display of love is when he sent Jesus Christ to die on the cross for your sins and my sins. (Rom. 5:8) God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were sinners Christ died for us. We know how to give good gifts to our children, but nobody knows how to do good and to give good gifts like our kind Father in heaven.

Jesus is showing us in Luke 11 that when we remember the goodness, kindness, and love of our God, we will be motivated to pray. He just got done telling us to ask, right? In vs. 9 Jesus says, "And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." But why would I ask, seek, and knock? What confidence do I have that I will receive a good gift from God? That he will hear me? That he will respond to me? He's a good father, that's how you can know. That's how you can have confidence, he loves you. And if you're wondering if he loves you: look at the cross and how Jesus was sent to save you from your sins.

Now, notice though how Jesus says it: Jesus doesn't say, "If you know how to give good gifts, how much more will your heavenly Father give you good gifts." That's not what he says, is it? He says, "If you know how to give good gifts, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Is Jesus promising to give us any old good gift? No, he's not, is he? He's promising to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. This is really important to understand: like I mentioned before and just like Dad #2, God's goodness to us is not displayed in giving us whatever we ask in prayer, his goodness is displayed when he gives us the good that we need (REPEAT).

A good father doesn't just give us whatever we want or ask for. A good father doesn't make us a blanket promise to give us whatever we ask for in the name of Jesus. Like a toddler in Walmart, we don't know what we need; we don't know what's good for us. That means when we pray we always have to take a posture of humility recognizing our limitations and God's providence in our lives. I think Jesus is presuming that when we do have the sense to ask for the right thing we'll ask for God's Holy Spirit before we ask for anything else. Just like he taught us to pray in vs. 1-4, our first request will be *your kingdom come*.

Think how you can incorporate this into your life. Imagine, you've been told you have cancer. What do you want? Healing, of course. But what do you *need*? God's Holy Spirit in the midst of cancer. When you're struggling in your marriage and filled with anger, pray, "God, send you Holy Spirit to help me and my wife." When you're scared out of your mind for your kids, "Father, would you give to me, would you give to my daughter your Holy Spirit?" In all circumstances, my good friends, you need the power of God's Spirit, you need the presence of Jesus Christ (and that's what God's Holy Spirit brings you - when he dwells inside of you he ushers into your life the very presence of Jesus) more than anything else. You need God's kingdom to come and the reign of Jesus Christ to pour over you before you need anything else.

I think this is where Jesus' example from Luke 22 comes into play. When Jesus is praying to his Father in anticipation of his horrific suffering on the cross for the sins of the world (pretty intense, right?) he says (vs. 42), "Father, (so he's praying just like he taught us to pray), if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." Notice the humility on Jesus' part. "Father, not what I want, but what you want." Why would he pray that way? I think it's because he trusts his father so deeply that he knows whatever the father is going to give him is good for him and good for the plan of God.

I've heard people say that praying to God for the things that you are hopeful for, but then saying, "But your will be done" is a cop out. It's what you do when you really don't have faith that God will answer your prayers; saying, "but your will be done" is what you do when you really don't believe God will fulfill his promises and it's what you do when you don't believe God will move mountains for you. Friends, that's not true. Urgently praying to God and bringing your requests before him is a good thing. But then, with a trembling heart and confidence in the absolute wisdom and mercy of God, saying, "But, father, your will be done in my life" is not lack of faith; it's deep, abiding, resolute faith in the goodness and sovereignty of your God. It's what Jesus did; he prayed, "Father, this is what I want, but not my will, but yours be done." Did he lack faith in the goodness and plan of his Father? Of course not. His faith was displayed by submitting himself to the will of his Father because he knew his Father knew what was best for him.

Does it seem strange to you that you wouldn't know what's best for you? It offends our pride, of course, but it's exactly true. We just need the humility to admit that sometimes we don't even know what we need or what is good for us. That's why it's such good news that we have a Father in heaven who is wiser than we could ever be and kinder than we could ever imagine. Do you believe that?

As we wrap up Jesus' teaching on prayer, can I give you a few more pieces of advice. First of all, we pray because God is pleased with us in Christ, we don't pray to make God pleased with us. We're always so tempted to get this backward. I know I'm tempted this way with prayer. When I'm struggling to pray or not praying at all when I should, I start thinking, "God must not be very happy with me right now" as if my religious performance is what makes God happy or unhappy. Friends, that is wrong. Remember the gospel: God is pleased with Christ.

That's who he is pleased with. And when we are covered and clothed in Christ's perfection and righteousness, that's when God is pleased with us. Not our religious performance.

Secondly, sometimes we just don't know what to pray. Maybe it's because the stresses and pressures of life are so overwhelming we are loss for words. Friends, written or prepared prayers might serve you really well. Now, I know that seems strange to some of us in this tradition. We're used to praying right off the cuff with little preparation. But honestly, that's actually the abnormal way of prayer. Historically speaking, the church has relied on the prepared prayers of its members more than just praying spontaneously. There are many resources out there that I would recommend to you if you'd like to try incorporating prepared prayers into your communication with God. You could also write your own out. Spending time where you think hard about what you want to say and then writing it out might help you. I know some might think that making prepared remarks takes away from the authenticity of communication, but honestly, that's what I'm doing right now. All the words that I have shared with you today were prepared. But I mean every one. I meant them when I prepared them and I mean them now as I share them to you. Just because you prepare your prayers or use one's written by others doesn't mean it's not genuine.

Finally, don't stop being a learner of prayer. We talked about this 2 weeks ago; we need to be taught to pray. There's more for you and I to learn primarily from the scriptures, but also from our experiences and the experiences of others. Don't stop being a learner.

Key vs: Luke 11:13

Questions for the week

- Do you have positive or negative connotations with the idea of God being our father? How so?
- What you are tempted to think when you don't receive specifically what you pray for?
- What do you need to see more of to trust that God is always working for your good?