

Are You Agnostic?

Praying to Victory:

Luke 11:1-13

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I meet weekly with Rochester pastors and ministry leaders. We pray for one another, our families, churches, the city and other needs. During our time, we often share answers to prayer.

One pastor, whose church experienced financial distress, felt he was suppose to pray for a large gift, a specific amount. This happened three times within the past few years. His congregation is smaller than ours, and each time he asked for gifts that were \$10,000 or greater. God brought the exact gift in each time. One morning he prayed that way, and before the day was over, a person walked into his office with a check.

About a week ago, I heard how God met a pressing need in church about our size. A somewhat private, single woman started visiting the church. She did not participate in its ministries or contribute much financially. She lived on a meager income; and though she was eccentric, she experienced love and care from some congregational members. When she died, she blessed the church in a way she never imagined. The family she served as a nanny donated a half-million dollars in her name to the congregation, and consequently, the church paid off its mortgage. The church had no program to get them out of debt and financial distress. God reached out and blessed them. They showed that God is key to victory.

Over the next 6 weeks I invite you to join me in an adventure. I believe that you and I, both individually and corporately, can pray to victory. I'm convinced that God is calling us,

prompting us, even provoking us, so that we grow into the intimate and fruitful prayer life of Jesus. The Bible lays out this vision for Bethany. It sees us working together until:

We all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
(Ephesians 4:13, NIV)

We are to attain the fullness of Christ, including his prayer life. We won't grow into the full measure of Jesus' prayer life by just listening to me. We have to do some things.

First, each week we will hear from one another an answer to prayer or favorite prayer promise. We already did that this morning. *Second, we will enter into a corporate prayer project.* We provided a tear off sheet (in the back of the bulletin) for you to post at home. We'd like you to stop at 12 noon (or as close to it as possible) Monday through Friday, take one minute and pray for Bethany's provision and fruitfulness in ministry. We'd also like you to fast one meal a week and tell the Lord your hunger is for the blessing of your church family. We need provision. We've had to borrow to make payroll and we have slipped further this summer. We also need God to bless the work of our hands. As Paul wrote the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." It is God who saves souls, heals bodies, changes hearts and reconciles people. Jesus told his disciples, "I will build my church." Therefore, over the centuries prayer was, has been and continues to be the central activity of churches that reach their communities. The good news is **what God does when people actually believe**. God intends that your and my lives reveal what he does when people believe.

I grew up in a home where prayer was important. I heard and saw answers to prayer. However, as I grew older, many of my prayers were not answered. I prayed for changes and they wouldn't come. I prayed for people and their situations deteriorated. I prayed for marriages and they broke up. I prayed for sick people and they died. I heard teaching that God always

answers prayers: yes, no, or wait. That was comforting for a while, but I never heard from God the words, “yes,” “no” or “wait.” I just interpreted the circumstances as “yes,” “no,” or “wait,” and I couldn’t see that my prayers made a difference. My prayers became something like lottery tickets. Hopefully, I’d send enough up that a few would pay off. Does that sound like Jesus’ prayer life? Have you examined Jesus’ prayer life? He acted like his prayers would bring changes. He seemed to grasp God’s specific will for situations, and he spent a great deal of time in prayer. In contrast, I found myself working more and praying less. You could not look at my life and see what Jesus’ prayer life was like. You still can’t. That is why I want us to grow in this area, and why I believe God is leading us to grow in praying to victory.

I see three things moving people to pray. *First, people pray when they see that it actually works.* When we share our answers to prayer, we give God the credit he deserves and we help others see God responding to us. *Second, people pray when they hear the prayer promises.* Those promises give us hope that our prayers will make a difference. *Third, people pray when they are desperate.* When we are not desperate, we deceptively think we are in control; and we misidentify gifts of God as human achievements. Often, when we go inside an achievement, we find many factors aligning just right for the fruit to come – it is the hand of God.

In Luke 11, Jesus taught his disciples how to pray. He gave them what we call *The Lord’s Prayer*. In that prayer, we affirm that we are God’s family. We call God *Father*. We pray for our Father’s name to *hallowed*, honored. We pray for his rule on earth and his will to be implemented on earth. We pray for forgiveness, provision, relief and deliverance.

Jesus also in Luke 11 calls on his disciples to really go after things in prayer. He tells the story of a man waking his friend with persistent knocking. The man persists until the friend reverses his initial answer, does the difficult thing, and fulfills the man’s entire request.

In view of that, Jesus says:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10, NIV)

Jesus makes it clear that all of us are promised answers. Furthermore, Jesus' story and the language of his promise imply that the main reason why we don't see answers to prayer is that we give up and stop praying. Jesus says that everyone who *keeps asking* will receive.

There is a wider context, however, for this promise. It applies to needs. Some requests are destructive. Sometimes, children ask their parents to make their playmates do what they want: "Make him do what I want!" We should expect our Father to respond to our requests with wisdom. Indeed, we need to consult our Father about his will.

It is exactly here where I question whether we have become agnostics. Agnostics think we can't know God's will. I'm aware that the Bible teaches in 1 Corinthians 13 that we know in part. When Jesus walked this earth, he only knew in part. He didn't know a fig tree lacked figs, he asked for information from those he healed, and he confessed that he didn't know the time and dates that the Father had set regarding the end of all things. However, he either knew or discovered the will of God as he prayed. He had a counselor, the Holy Spirit who informed him. Similarly, he assured that our good Father would give us the Holy Spirit when we ask.

Ask the Father to counsel and empower you with his Spirit. Ask the Father how he wants to provide, how he wants to heal, how he wants to reconcile and how he wants to implement his will through you. Don't be an agnostic. Don't stop praying until you know the will of God and until you know that your full request, every crumb of it, has been granted in accord with God's wisdom and will.