

Creekside Community Church: "Imitating Jesus"
"Praying Like Jesus V: Keep Praying!"
November 4, 2012
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I want to talk with you about why God wants you and I to increase the amount of time we spend praying. This fall we're talking about imitating Christ. That's the reason Creekside exists; to help people to become fully devoted disciples of Jesus and a disciple is fundamentally an imitator, someone who comes to Jesus to learn to walk as He walked, to think as He thought and to do what He did. And this fall our focus is on imitating Jesus' relationship with His Father. How did the Perfect Man walk with God? Last month we looked at Jesus and the Scriptures, how Jesus viewed the Scriptures, how He used the Scriptures, the place the Scriptures played in His life. This month we're looking at how Jesus prayed. The disciples only asked Jesus to teach them one thing; "Lord, teach us to pray." They could see how large a role prayer played in His life, how God answered His prayers and how the power of His Father was evident in His life. And so they asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." That's what I want to do this month; come to Jesus to learn how to pray like He prayed. So far we've seen the importance Jesus places on our motives for praying, the importance of expecting God to answer when we pray and the impact the way we treat people has on the way God answers our prayers. This morning, I want to look at some more instructions Jesus gives His disciples about how to pray, praying persistently; why God answers when we keep on praying. Jesus talks about praying persistently twice; once in Luke 11 and the other in Luke 18

"Then (immediately following Jesus' instructions about how to pray and the Lord's prayer which Jeff explained last Sunday) He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you, ask, (keep asking) and it will be given to you; seek, (keep seeking) and you will find; knock, (keep knocking) and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened. Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" (Luke 11:5-13) In the two passages we'll look at this morning, Jesus gives two examples of the power of persistence. Here in Luke 11, it is the power of the persistent neighbor. Jesus says to His disciples, "Suppose you have to wake up your friend in the middle of the night to borrow some bread because an unexpected guest has shown up and you have nothing to feed him. Now even though he's your friend, he yells, "We're trying to sleep here. Can't it wait until the morning?" And yet you know that if you keep knocking, he'll get up and give you everything you need." And all the disciples nod their heads. "Well," continues Jesus, "that's why you need to be persistent in praying. Because those who keep on asking, receive and those who keep on seeking, find and those who keep on knocking have the door opened for them." And to encourage His disciples to persist in prayer, Jesus reminds them of the character of their heavenly Father. "You wouldn't give your child a snake if he asked for a fish, or a scorpion if he asked for an egg would you? If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Heavenly Father give to those who ask Him?" That's the first time Jesus tells His disciples about the importance of persistence in prayer.

The second time occurs in Luke 18. *"Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (Why is Jesus telling this parable? So that His disciples won't stop praying.) "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. Historians tell us that the judges in Jerusalem of this time were called "The Robber Judges." If you wanted justice, you had to pay for it. So Jesus is describing a familiar scene in first century Israel. The judge in this parable doesn't respect God or man and in that culture, the phrase meant that this judge was thoroughly corrupt and incapable of shame or feeling bad for things he ought to feel bad about. He doesn't care about justice, only in lining his pockets through bribery. "There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' This particular widow is asking for legal protection, so apparently someone is trying to take her property from her or defraud her out of the payment of debt or of an inheritance and she has no one to protect her. Ordinarily women in Israel seldom went to court, and when they did, they never went alone, since the courts were the province of men. But this woman has no male family members to represent her, no protector to influence the judge, nor does she have money to bribe him. She is clearly in the right, but the judge isn't interested because there's no profit for him in the case. The widow is unable to bribe the judge but she can nag him. Because Jesus says, "she kept coming to him, saying give me legal protection from my opponent." For a while the judge was unwilling to hear her case but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'*

What do both parables have in common? Both are about someone who is unwilling to help and yet who is eventually persuaded by the persistence of the one who needs their help. Is Jesus saying that God is like that judge or like that neighbor, that we have to wear Him out with our prayers before He'll answer? Not at all. Jesus is using a favorite argument of the rabbis of his day, arguing from lesser to greater. If this is true, how much more then is this true? "If you being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give what is good to those who ask Him?" "If you would pull an ox or your son out of a well even though it is the Sabbath, how much more should I heal a man on the Sabbath? And so in the case of these two parables, "If even a corrupt and amoral judge or a sleepy neighbor can be persuaded by persistence, how much more a loving and perfect father?" Jesus' point; if this woman got what she wanted through persistence, how much more will we receive what we need through persistent prayer to a loving heavenly Father? But if God is a loving, heavenly Father who delights in giving what is good to His children, why do we need keep on praying? Why isn't asking once enough? If God is generous and knows what we need before we even ask, why do we need to keep on praying? Three reasons: 1. Evil never sleeps. 2. Faith grows through persistence. 3. The goal of prayer is to get God, not to get stuff.

The first reason Jesus calls us to be persistent in prayer and not lose hope is because evil never sleeps. We are in a war in which there are no truces or cease fires. Evil is always on the attack. It never takes a day off. And our primary weapon in this war is prayer. Last Sunday Jeff reminded us how in the Lord's prayer, we're to pray for protection. "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil - or from the evil one." Prayer puts a guard around us and protects us from temptation and evil. That's why in the story of Job, the devil complains to God that God has put a hedge of protection around Job, his family

and all his possessions. Why? Because Job prayed for his family every day. So one reason we need to keep on praying is because we live behind enemy lines and we constantly need protection. Look at Mark 14:32-38 and the familiar scene of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane right before He is arrested for crucifixion. *They came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, "Sit here until I have prayed." And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch." And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will."* Tonight Jesus has come to the end of His journey, to His greatest task and to His greatest test. To regain what Adam lost, Jesus must die the death we deserve to die. It's not just death on a cross that awaits Him, as horrible as that is. He will bear God's righteous wrath against every sin ever committed. He will be punished in our place so that God can forgive us and clothe us with Christ's righteousness. And the prospect of enduring all of God's wrath against sin terrifies even Jesus. He feels His resolve slipping. He knows He can pull the plug at any time. He can walk away. He doesn't have to go to the cross. So He prays. Even though He has known His entire life that this moment would come, now that it is here, He prays that if it is possible, if there is any other way to save humanity from evil and death, let this hour pass Him by. Yet he adds, "Not what I will but what You will." And God answers His prayer. God did not take the cup away. Jesus did go to the cross. But God gave Jesus the strength to do His will. And that's what Jesus prayed, "not what I will but what You will." Jesus stops praying momentarily to check on the kids. *"And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."* The disciples had the best of intentions. They promised Jesus that if He was arrested, they wouldn't desert Him. But they slept while He prayed. Because He prayed, Jesus was able to do God's will in the hours that followed. Through His trial, His torture and His crucifixion, He is calm and resolute. He is clearly in charge of His own execution. The disciples on the other hand, in spite of all their good intentions, fold under pressure. They desert Jesus. Peter denies he even knows him - to a little girl. The spirit is willing. We have the best of intentions. But the flesh is weak. And our flesh will betray us in times of temptation unless we are prayed up. "Keep watching and praying SO THAT you will not enter into temptation." Persistent prayer is where we find the daily strength to do God's will and the help to overcome evil. If Jesus needed to pray in order to conquer evil and to obey His Father, how much more do we need to keep on praying. Because evil never sleeps or takes time off. Evil never ceases from plotting our destruction, the destruction of our family, the destruction of the church.

Think about how different our praying would be if we could observe the next satanic strategy session when you're their agenda; if we knew the world, the flesh and the devil's plan of attack for the next few days. "OK, Monday we'll make sure her child forgets his class project so that she has to leave work, go home and take it to school for him so he doesn't flunk. That will make her irritated. Then on the way back to work and her 2:00 appointment, we'll give her a flat tire. Now she's really frustrated. She's late for her appointment and we'll make sure her boss has some choice words for her. Now she's not only angry but she's scared. For the rest of the day, we'll remind her about how much she needs this job and what will happen to her family if she loses it. By the time she gets home, she will be depressed and hopeless. This is where we play the old, "If I was a better Christian, I wouldn't feel this way" card. Then we keep her up all night, tossing and turning, worried and depressed. If she tries to pray, we can always start her husband snoring to distract her. OK, that takes care of Monday. Who has some ideas for Tuesday?" If we knew how we would be attacked, and that God is ready to protect us from the evil one if we only ask, we would be praying all the time. Of course, we don't know the specific ways the world, the flesh and the devil will come after us this week. But we know they will. And they'll come after our

kids, our family, our church, our neighborhood, our job, our city - because we live in enemy territory and they hate humans and are seeking to dominate and to destroy at every opportunity. That's why Jesus said, "Keep watching and praying that you may not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." For years, I have daily prayed a warfare prayer based upon the Lord's prayer, asking God to put His hedge of protection around my wife, my children, my grandchildren, the leadership of Creekside, the Creekside congregation, my brother and his wife, my brothers and sisters in law and their families and my mother in law. And I have seen God answer that prayer over and over because of what hasn't happened, because He has made our way straight and smooth and through miraculous escapes and rescues. Keep praying because evil never sleeps and prayer is the key to victory. Think about all the tough things that happen to you and to your family. If it is possible to avoid any of those things, wouldn't you want to? That's why Jesus commands His disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

But if God is a loving God, why do I need to pray for His protection? Why doesn't He just protect me as His child. That brings us to the second reason Christ tells us to pray persistently: our faith grows through persistence. Faith is like a muscle. It only grows through exercise. Remember why Jesus tells the Luke 18 parable; to show His disciples that at all times they should pray and not lose heart. Then He tells about a woman who refused to give up until she got what she wanted. And then, the punch line: "When I come back, will I find faith on the earth?" Refusing to give up until we receive what we've asked for is what faith is all about. The widow could easily have given up. She couldn't bribe the judge. She couldn't influence the judge. She didn't have a man to represent her before the judge. Her situation was hopeless. But she kept on asking. And Jesus says, "That's what real faith looks like." That's why the old saints talked about wrestling with God in prayer. And why faith almost always involves waiting, persisting, keeping on believing. Because if God gave us everything we asked for as soon as we asked for it, our faith could never grow. It's only as we have to exercise our faith day after day that our faith becomes strong.

When our son Jeff married Kshelle, I performed the ceremony and wasn't able to soak it all in at the time. But early the following morning, I went for a walk to think about all that happened the night before. And for some reason, I remembered about a little Danish film, "Babette's Feast" which is one of the greatest films for foodies ever made. It's the story of a small, insulated community of Christians living on the rugged coast of Denmark mid-1800s. They are narrow, self-righteous folks who view any simple pleasure as a sinful accommodation with the world. One couple in the group worries constantly about whether God will forgive the sin they committed years before in their youth. Another man stubbornly refuses to forgive the man who cheated him in business even though it happened long ago. Into this guilty, joyless little community enters Babette, a French woman, fleeing from political persecution in Paris who goes to work for two elderly sisters and when she unexpectedly wins the Paris lottery, she uses all that money to prepare a once in a lifetime feast for the sisters and the people of their small church. It's fascinating how the people respond to Babette's generosity. As they watch great quantities of exotic foods arriving for the preparation of the feast, the little community become increasingly apprehensive. Everyone is afraid that all this rich French food will lead them into sin and worldliness. Maybe they shouldn't attend. But on the night of the feast, everyone shows up out of loyalty to the two elderly sisters. They decide, "We'll eat but we'll make sure not to enjoy it!" Which turns out to be impossible. Babette's Feast is the greatest dinner ever filmed. And as the people begin to eat the rich, gourmet cuisine Babette has prepared, for the first time in the film, you watch them actually relax and begin to enjoy themselves. For the first time, we see smiles and laughter. There's fellowship, reconciliation and peace. The two businessmen apologize to one another for all their years of bitterness and suspicion. The old couple finally experiences God's forgiveness. There is one outsider

invited to the feast, a famous elderly general who was once in love with one of the sisters. At the end of the meal, he begins to talk about the goodness of God - as pictured by Babette's Feast. Even though he wasn't able to marry the woman he loved and always will love, he says that as he looks back on his life, he realizes how greatly God has blessed him, that God is so much better than he ever dared to believe. I remembered that scene the day after Jeff's wedding. I remembered all the prayers I have prayed for my son since he was born; for the woman he would marry, for the friends he would make, for the ministry God would lead him into, for the heart for Christ God would give to him, and I realized that God had answered all of my prayers. And that God is so much more generous, so much better than I ever dared believe. He will not give His children a stone when they ask for bread. When you see God answer prayers you have been praying for long time, it strengthens your faith like nothing else can. The longer we have to exercise faith, the stronger our faith becomes.

We need to be persistent in prayer first, because evil never sleeps and second, to develop our faith. But there's an even more important reason for persistence. The goal of prayer is to get God, not to get stuff. And the more time we spend in prayer, the more of God we get. Let's look at John 4:19-24. Jesus is talking to a Samaritan woman about her relationship with God but when He gets a little personal, she changes the subject. *"The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."* The woman brings up an old argument about the proper place to worship God. The Law simply said that God would designate that spot. The Jews said it was Jerusalem and the Samaritans said it was Mount Gerizzim. The woman asks Jesus, "Which is it?". *Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* Jesus tells this woman that the issue isn't where we worship, it's who we worship and how we worship Him. Notice that Jesus says there are three kinds of worship or prayer or communication with God. First, there is ignorant prayer. *You worship what you do not know;* The Samaritans - like many people - prayed to a God they did not know much about. They only accepted the first 5 books of the OT - the books of Moses - and rejected the rest. And so God was a great mystery to them. Second Jesus says, there is intelligent worship or prayer. *"You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we (Jews) worship what we know for salvation is from the Jews."* God revealed Himself to Israel so that Israel could reveal God to the world. He had revealed Himself in their history as recorded in the Scriptures. So the Jews knew about the God they worshiped. But notice, Jesus says there is a third kind of worship, of prayer or communication with God which became available with the coming of Christ. *"But an hour is coming and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* In contrast to ignorant worship and intelligent worship, Jesus says that now people can worship spiritually. So what does worshipping or praying in spirit and truth mean? It has to mean more than being sincere or heartfelt. The prayers of the Samaritans and Jews were sincere and heartfelt. And it has to mean more than having the correct view of God. The Jews knew or at least knew about the God they worshiped. The key to understanding what worshipping in spirit and in truth means is found in vs. 24. *"God is spirit* - Just like the Bible teaches that God is love and God is light, it teaches that God is spirit. He is not physical but spiritual. He dwells in the realm of the spiritual and for that reason, Jesus says *"and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* Because God dwells in the realm of the spirit, He is seeking those who also dwell in that realm to be His worshipers. Which means that we have to be made alive spiritually in order to truly worship and fellowship with God. Which is why Jesus came. One chapter before this, Jesus talked with a very religious man named Nicodemus whom He told

that unless he was born again, he would not see the kingdom of God. When Nicodemus asked Jesus what he meant but born again, Jesus replied, *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."* (John 3:6) Before we're born again, the Bible says we're alive physically but dead spiritually. There is a great separation between God and us. We may or may not believe in God but we don't know for sure if there is a God because we don't know Him personally. But when we put our faith in Jesus and ask Him to come into our lives and forgive our sins, we're born again, and come alive spiritually as God creates a human spirit within us by His Spirit. We become His child, living in two realms simultaneously, the physical and the spiritual. And because we are now spiritual creatures, we can now fellowship with God who is spirit. That's why Jesus says that the true worshipers now worship the Father in spirit and truth for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. Prayer and worship is the way we draw near to God in that spiritual realm and so the more time we spend praying, the more we experience the presence of God in our spirit. Prayer is the way we fellowship with God in the spiritual realm. For me, it's like breathing. I've noticed in swimming that if I don't breathe often enough, I quickly run out of steam. So lately I've been concentrating on keeping my breathing relaxed and regular and my endurance and energy in the water has really increased. Prayer is like that. The more consistent we are in spending time in God's presence, the more power and spiritual energy we have. That's why Isa. 40 says that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. And why Jesus says to keep praying. Because the goal of prayer is getting God Himself, not stuff.

And that's why Luke 18:1 says that Jesus wants His disciples to pray at all times and not lose heart. The more we pray, the more we're protected from evil, the more our faith grows, and most importantly, the closer to God we get. That's why I think God wants us to increase the time we spend in prayer each day and so that's my challenge to you. However much you pray each day, try increasing it for the next couple of weeks and see the difference it makes. You probably will need to give it a couple of weeks but if you do, I know you'll be convinced. Now I want to talk with you a little more about this matter of being born again. Attending church doesn't make you a Christian. Being raised as a Christian doesn't make you a Christian. A Christian is someone who has been spiritually reborn. You know, even though we can't see it, there is a strong wifi signal in this building. Anybody can get on the web here - if you have a smart phone or a tablet or some other device that connects you to the signal. In the same way, the realm of the spirit is just as real as the physical realm - if you're connected to it. When we're born again and become spiritually alive, we're connected to the spiritual realm with access to the presence of God. That's why Christians talk about a personal relationship with Christ, about knowing God personally. We're born again when we put our faith in Jesus. And if that's something you've never done before, you can do it now.

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