

Sermon for Sunday, September 22, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GOD AND THE SEARS CATALOG"

St. Luke 11:1-13

Text: "He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples
said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'" St. Luke 11:1a

Recently someone referred a friend to me who was having domestic problems. As I counseled with the man, he made a statement that was honest to say the least, but it gave me pause for thought. He said, "You know, the only time in my life that I've ever prayed was when I wanted something or was scared." His prayer life reflected a totally selfish attitude. And what he said gave me a key to his personality--to his life style--because the problem with his marriage was total selfishness.

Back during the depression years of the 30's most of us had very little. In the little rural Mississippi town in which I was raised, poverty was a daily companion. And you may laugh if you like, but one of the biggest events of the year was the arrival of the annual Sears catalog. As a child I can remember sitting for hours looking through the catalog and dreaming of all the things that I would like to have. But I was no different from our neighbors because the catalog was known as "Mr. Sear's Wish Book." And I suppose all of the families sat around looking over the new catalog when it came, saying, "I wish I had this..." or, "I wish I had that..."

Now, this morning I want to talk about prayer. One of the problems in talking about prayer is that so many people think of God as a sort of giant Sears catalog in the sky. And what so many of us are guilty of is the thing the man I mentioned earlier is guilty of--the guilt of thinking of prayer in a totally selfish way, the guilt of thinking of prayer as filling out a Sears order blank for all the things we wish for. I do not mean to imply that we should not go to God with our personal problems, with our hopes and dreams and aspirations. As a matter of fact, the Bible encourages us to do exactly that. But there is another element to prayer that the Bible talks about and that is the element of intercession. So I want to talk about intercessory prayer this morning--about praying for others.

The Bible is full of examples of intercessory prayer. There is Abraham agonizing with God on behalf of the wicked city of Sodom. There is Moses down on his knees pouring out his heart on behalf of his people. There is the apostle Paul, praying with all of his being for his fellow Christians across Europe, Greece, Asia Minor and Palestine. He prayed for the Christians that they might "lead a life worthy of the Lord (Col. 1:10) he prayed for new converts to Christianity that God would establish their hearts "unblamable in holiness before our God and Father." (I Thess. 3:13) And he prayed for his own people, the Jews, that they would be saved. As he put it, "My hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." (Romans 10:1)

Actually, when you stop to think about it, almost every prayer of Jesus that is noted in the New Testament is an intercessory prayer. We find him praying for the little children (Matt. 19:13); for those desperately ill, (Mark 7:34); he prayed for his disciples and for those who would one day believe on him (John 17) and I don't know if you ever thought of it, but if you are a believer this morning, Jesus prayed for you! Yes, Jesus himself prayed for you because he spoke in intercession to God about those of us who would believe on him, and Jesus prayed for his enemies--even when he had reached the end and hung on the cross, his prayers of intercession reached up to God as he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34).

Let me tell you why I want to talk with you this morning about intercessory prayer. In the latter part of October our congregation is going to have what we are calling a Celebration of Faith. And we have a lot to celebrate! Some of you may not be aware of it, but Central Presbyterian was organized in 1844 and this year marks our 130th anniversary. Now, that is an age worthy of celebration! And we can celebrate the accomplishments and achievements of this church across those years for Central has been a congregation marked by service and witness. Today in St. Louis and indeed across the denomination, Central is recognized as one of the great conservative and evangelical churches among Presbyterians. Yet, in one sense of the word, the past is always prelude. We can never rest on our laurels. We can never take pride in the past without taking care for the present. So our Session is putting on a Celebration of Faith not only to celebrate our past, but to equip us for the future. It is the prayer of the Session that the Celebration of Faith will be a time of spiritual renewal for each of us individually; it is their prayer that it will be a time of spiritual revitalization for families; it is their prayer that it will be a time of resurgence, of renewal, of revitalization for us as a congregation. In a time when so many have turned from the Lord, in a time when so many congregations are failing to preach Jesus and Him crucified, in a time when interest in and commitment to the Church is in serious decline, in a time when public and private morality is in a desperate state of deterioration, our Session is praying that we will be a congregation that is spiritually alive. They are praying that God will make us a light shining in the darkness of this world.

Now, I assure you that those things will never happen to us without prayer. Without intercessory prayer the Celebration of Faith will simply be another program. Do you realize that before every great event in the New Testament, it was preceded by prayer? Before Jesus began his ministry, he spent forty days in prayer. Before he fed the five thousand, the Bible tells us he was in prayer. Before the crucifixion and the resurrection Jesus and his disciples were in the Garden of Gethsemane in prayer. Before the Holy Spirit fell on the day of Pentecost, the Bible tells us that the believers were gathered together in prayer. When the early church was persecuted the Bible tells us they began to pray and the Christian religion swept the world. When the church at Antioch began to pray as a direct result of that prayer they sent out Paul and Barnabas as the first missionaries. When the Philippian jailer was converted, the Bible says that beforehand Paul and Silas, in prison, were praying and singing hymns to God.

Yes, we are going to have a Celebration of Faith. But unless that Celebration is preceded by thousands of intercessory prayers for this church and for members of this congregation, nothing is going to happen. But if you and I covenant together this morning to pray for each other, for our officers, for our Sunday School Teachers, for the people who are coming to lead us in Celebration, for the people in our community whose lives need to be touched by the hand of Jesus through this Celebration, then God is going to open the windows of heaven, he is going to shower us with blessings, he is going to pour out his Holy Spirit on us.

For a moment put yourselves in the place of the disciples. Imagine that you have direct access to Jesus himself. Suppose that you have the privilege of asking him personally for whatever gift you might like in order that you could change the world. Now, what would you ask him for? Well, the disciples of Jesus had exactly that opportunity. They were with Jesus; they had direct access to him to ask him for whatever they felt they needed to do the job of evangelizing the world. And what did they ask him for? What gift, what ability, what talent did they feel they needed the most? They did not ask him for wealth to pay for the job. They did not ask to be made great

preachers. They did not ask to be given a great organization. They did not ask to be taught how to perform miracles. They did not ask to be made wise. No, they came to Jesus with one supreme request. That request is our text for this morning. The Bible tells us that his disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Now, isn't that incredible? Would you have thought to ask for that? Yet, when Jesus taught them to pray, they had access to every gift God had. Moses prayed and God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Gideon prayed, and thousands of the enemy fled before his three hundred. Daniel prayed and the mouths of the lions were closed. Elijah prayed, and the fire of God came down from heaven. David prayed and Goliath was defeated on the Philistine battleground. The disciples prayed and three thousand were converted. Paul prayed and hundreds of churches were born in Asia Minor and Europe.

What will happen if you and I begin to pray for one another and for this congregation? Sometimes we can't help people as we might like to. We can't walk uninvited into their lives and offer help or make suggestions. They might resent us if we tried. But we can get on our knees in their behalf. May I suggest to you that to fail to pray for one another is a sin--a sin of omission. Over in the old Testament, Samuel once said, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you." (I Sam. 12:23) So it is a sin not to pray for others because people need our intercession, just as we need theirs. Human needs, broken hearts, shattered dreams, dashed hopes, are all about us and the needs that some of us have are quite desperate. And if we fail to pray for one another it is a sin. Solomon Cleaver once went so far as to say, "Our failure to use this Divine gift, so priceless, for helping others, is a betrayal of our greatest and most sacred trust, and before heaven's court is the crime of crimes." Yes, to fail to pray for each other is the crime of crimes.

In this modern age, we have learned to harness power. We have taken the mighty Niagara and turned its forces to our good. We have learned to hold steam captive in boilers and release its tremendous power to turn our machines and pull our trains. We have learned to vaporize gasoline and explode it at the proper moment to move our automobiles along the highway. We have even learned the secret of releasing the power in the atom which is capable of building up a civilization or destroying it. But we have yet to fully learn the secret of harnessing the greatest power in the universe--the power of prayer. You see, in the long run, the most powerful man in the world is the man who is praying.

Dr. William Elliott tells the story of the little Scottish servant girl who sought to join a Presbyterian church in Edinburgh. It was many years ago when domestic servants were required to work all day and often into the night. The minister asked her what she could do for her church and for the work of Jesus. "I haven't much time to do things," the girl replied, "But at night when I go to bed, I take the newspaper with me. I read the birth notices and I pray for the little babies who have just come into the world. I read the marriage notices and I pray that God will give these people happiness. I read the death notices and I pray that God will comfort those who are sad." Can anyone guess what spiritual power went out from her little attic room to touch the lives of others?

In late October we will have our Celebration of Faith. What happens then is being determined right now. It is being determined by how we pray for one another. Alexander Whyte once wrote, "A friend of any kind...is something to have in this cold and lonely world. But to have a friend who has the ear of God, and who fills God's ear from time to time with our name and our case,--oh, where shall I find such a friend?" There are so many lives in our church and in our community that need the touch of the hand of God. They need a friend who fills God's ear with their case. Will you be such a friend?