

Dependence

The Everyday Disciple: Following Jesus One Step at a Time Sermon 4

Luke 11:1-13

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Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.³ Give us each day our daily bread,⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves,⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him';⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ 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!" (Luke 11:1-13, ESV)

The pastor and writer John Stott was to many a picture of strength and competence. Born into an upper-class British family in 1921, in both temperament and manner he was the quintessential British gentlemen, never one to show too much emotion nor give an inch to self-pity. Those who knew him say his fifty-plus books, global travel schedule, and constancy were due, in part, to iron self-discipline and self-control. Stott was, in many ways, a picture of a steady, sturdy and strong disciple. This is what makes an experience he had and wrote about in his eighties so touching.

Stott awoke early Sunday morning in August 2006 in his apartment in London where he lived alone. He was slated to preach that morning at his beloved All Souls Church—a church world-renowned due to the influence of his ministry. During a morning routine he'd breezed through thousands of times, the now eighty-five-year-old stumbled and fell between his bed and bookcase. He sensed he'd broken or dislocated his hip, for he could not move. Thankfully, he wore a panic button he could push. Soon friends came to his aid, and while he was rushed to the hospital a fellow minister took Stott's notes and preached the sermon.

What is most moving about the story is that Stott shares not only about physical helplessness, but recounts something more vulnerable—he lost control of his emotions and found himself weeping.¹ Here was a man, typically the picture of calm, control and competence, now helpless and crying.

Later Stott would recall that his sermon text for that day was on the Lord's Prayer—where he planned to emphasize our *dependence* on God—dependence for daily bread, for grace and for protection. While he lay helpless in a hospital bed, his sermon was ministering to the people without his presence or voice. He would write in reflection on that morning, while “the sermon on dependence was being preached, it was at least being partially illustrated.”²

John Stott's story calls attention to an aspect of life we work hard to ignore: *dependence*. God's good gifts afford us degrees of strength and ability, but in a very real sense, to be human is to know weakness and limitation—and therefore, to be dependent.

We are not all-knowing, so never fully certain; not all-powerful, so never fully able. And we live in this unimaginable tension of being eternal beings bound up in mortal, aging, dying bodies.³ Even the most competent among us is, in a far deeper sense, weak.⁴

Our weakness, however, is not only a disadvantage. Rather, if by our weakness we learn dependence on God—how to lean on Him for strength and help—, then weakness can be our advantage. Stott saw this as the lesson emerging from the Lord's teaching on prayer—which is also our passage today. When Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, He's teaching them how to follow their weakness and limitations to the source of all power and strength. Turning to Jesus' instructions on prayer in Luke 11:1-13, we will consider the fourth mark of a disciple today: dependence.

A disciple depends upon God through prayer and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' teaching highlights two ways a disciple depends on God: by prayer and the Holy Spirit. From verses 1-12 Jesus focuses on prayer, then in vs. 13 He introduces the Holy Spirit as God's great gift: “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” (Luke 11:13).

I want to work through our passage backwards, from bottom to top, and point out three ways a disciple depends upon God: A disciple depends on God by the Spirit, through persistent prayer, and by the Father's strengthening presence.

I. Depend by the Spirit

Jesus' introduction of the Holy Spirit in verse 13 seems to come out of nowhere, but it's crucial. The Spirit's presence reminds us of the depths of our dependence as well as the personal way God attends to it.

The life of a disciple depends on the Spirit from first to last: the Spirit acts at conversion, awakening a heart so it can exercise faith: "one must be born of water and Spirit" to enter the Kingdom of heaven (John 3:5). The Spirit is integral at the resurrection, "giving life to our mortal bodies" (Romans 8:11). The Spirit has an *ongoing* role and is at work throughout the disciple's life.

There are two pitfalls to avoid when understanding the Spirit's ongoing work: we can neglect the Spirit, assuming He has no role in our lives. Or we can over-dramatize the work of the Spirit, assuming He's only at work in extravagant or emotional feats.

But Scripture teaches that the Spirit is the "giver of life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), and this life-giving work is constant. The Spirit's work ranges from the imperceptible awakening of dead hearts to the subtle nurturing of fruits of character, to the extravagant manifesting of the Kingdom of God through miracles or healings. Whether by His leading, sanctifying or gifting, the Spirit is always aiming at pointing people to Jesus, connecting people to Jesus, and shaping people to be like Jesus. The disciple's life *depends* on the Holy Spirit. To return to John Stott:

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.⁵

The Bible speaks of "walking by the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:4) and "being led by the Spirit" (Romans 8:14). It is not always easy to know how this works. The experiences of the earliest Christians assure us life in the Spirit does not mean life is easy or free of disease or sickness. The same Jesus

who promises the Spirit also promises we'll have "tribulation in the world" (John 16:33). It might be helpful to consider one practical way we depend on the Spirit, even as we navigate the ups and downs of following Christ in a fallen world. I want to consider how the Spirit guides.

Paul says disciples of Jesus are "led by the Spirit" (Romans 8:14), which suggests guidance. Some people focus here on the Spirit giving us spontaneous words or ideas. The Spirit is the Spirit of God, and surely is able to do this. However, it's risky to focus too much on spontaneous words from the Spirit. *How do we know what's really from God when it pops into our head?* Humans are easily deceived and can be mistaken. We need some guardrails here. A safer and surer approach seems to be this:

The Holy Spirit speaks to us, primarily, by illumining God's word.

Paul says "all scripture is God-breathed" (2 Timothy 3:16), where the breath of God is synonymous with the Spirit of God.⁶ The Spirit working through the Word makes the Word dynamically powerful: "For the word of God is living and active; shaper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

But people without the Holy Spirit can still read the Bible. *So how does having the Spirit at work in you, change the way the Word of God impacts you?* The Spirit softens the heart, then pierces it with a sense of the authority and truthfulness of the Word; and the Spirit does this in strategic moments when we need guidance. Let me give you an example of how this worked in my own life this past week.

On Tuesday evening before I went to bed, I prayed and asked the Holy Spirit to guide me and shape me. *Now, how could I know if that prayer would be answered? What would it look like if the Holy Spirit were working in me and shaping me?* I can know the tracks of the Spirit through the Word. So, I recalled Galatians 5:22, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, *kindness*, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). I prayed this and went to bed.

The next day I was heading towards work, and something happened that irritated me (perhaps it involved driving). My immediate heart reflex was agitation that would soon turn to a critical attitude. However, before this attitude could take root, a single word lit up in my brain like a lightbulb, "*kindness*." I thought of the previous night's prayer and knew the Spirit was guiding me—the Spirit was producing *kindness* through a process: implant the word, bring it to Sam's mind, and convict Sam to follow.

A disciple depends on God by the Spirit. One way this happens is when the Spirit guides us by illuminating the Words of God to lead us.

II. Depend by Prayer

A second way a disciple depends on God is through prayer. Enabled by the Spirit to connect with God, we can pray, bringing to God specific needs and requests. Jesus' teaching on prayer gives us some specifics on how we depend on God in prayer. I want to highlight one aspect of this:

We depend on God in prayer as our personal burdens are aligned with God's Kingdom purposes.

The ease with which Jesus moves from praying for God's "kingdom to come" in 11:2 and "daily bread" in 11:3 is instructive. It means we are to pray about the greatest of things as well as the seemingly small things. We can pray for a nation to be aligned with God's will and for a package to arrive on time. What I want to highlight is how these matters intersect—*what does God's kingdom have to do with our daily bread?*

Start with small things

As we learn to depend on God in prayer, we take small steps in asking Him to help with things. We might pray for a job interview to go well. We might pray that God would help us be loving to a friend or spouse or parent. We might pray that God would help us pay for our car repairs.

Build trust

God delights when we bring these specific requests to Him. And when He works in these areas of our lives, He does so not just to provide for practical needs, but to build up our trust in Him. When we see Him work in small areas, it gives us faith in bigger areas.

Connect to the Kingdom

But as we grow in depending on God in prayer, we do so by praying our personal needs into alignment with God's Kingdom purposes. If we pray that God will not just bless our efforts at work, but bless others by them, and glorify His name by them, we are slowly submitting our will and aims to His. The closer our personal desires are to God's Kingdom purposes, the harder we can lean on God in prayer.

Writer Flannery O’Conner kept a prayer journal while she was in graduate school. In it she gives us a window into her desire to learn how to pray and to bring her personal desires into alignment with God’s plans. She vulnerably prays over a tension she’d worried about between her desire to be a great writer and whether this desire aligned with God’s purposes for her. Watch how in this prayer she prays that these things would become one:

I want very much to succeed in the work with what I want to do. I have prayed to You about this with my mind and my nerves on it and strung my nerves into a tension over it and said, ‘oh God please,’ and ‘I must, and ‘please, please.’ I have not asked You, I feel, in the right way. Let me henceforth ask you with resignation—that not being or meant to be a slacking up in prayer but a less frenzied kind—realizing that the frenzy is caused by an eagerness for what I want and not a spiritual trust. I do not wish to presume. I want to love. Oh God please make my mind clear.⁷

She is bringing her desire to be a great writer into the larger purposes of God—asking that He align it with His calling on her to trust Him and live according to love. But this does not mean she stops praying about her desire to be a writer—she just connects that personal burden with God’s Kingdom purposes:

Oh God please make my mind clear... Please help me to get down under things and find where You are.... My intellect is so limited, Lord, that I can only trust in You to preserve me as I should be.... My mind is in a little box, dear God.... There is very little air in my box.... please give me as much air as it is not presumptuous to ask for. Please let some light shine out of all the things around... Help me to get what is more than natural into my work—help me to love & bear with my work on that account. If I have to sweat for it, dear God, let it be as in Your service. I would like to be intelligently holy.⁸

“I would like to be *intelligently holy*.” She has aligned her desire for intelligence with a Kingdom purpose, holiness. As you pray for personal needs, pray them into alignment with God’s Kingdom purposes.

As another example, if you pray for financial well-being, pray for it in a way that aligns with God’s calling on you to be a person of who loves and trust Him more than money: “give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹ lest I be full and deny you and say, “Who is the LORD?” or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God” (Proverbs 30:8-9).⁹

Pray about everything. Watch to see how God works in your life. Remember that when we pray for God’s Kingdom to come, we are not bringing our blueprints for life to God and asking Him to get busy building.

Rather, we are asking God to show us His blueprints for life and asking that we could be part of these. The key in depending through prayer is bringing our specific needs into alignment with God's Kingdom, and asking Him to guide, provide, and protect us.

I want to close with a third way we depend on God. A disciple depends on the strengthening presence of the Father.

III. Depend by The Father's Strengthening Presence

Anyone who has been a disciple for some time knows that depending on God by the Spirit and prayer does not mean everything goes well in life. Hard things happen. Jesus never promised us easy earthly life; He promised us eternal and fullness of life.¹⁰ We need to see how we depend on God for strengthening, even when life is hard.

What strengthens a heart when life is hard and worldly hope grows dim?

At times like this we depend, not on human optimism, but on God. The way God strengthens the heart here is through His presence. There is an important connection between how Jesus opens this teaching with the word "Father" in v.2, and how He closes it focused on the Spirit in v.13. We pray to our Father, and His presence fills our life with deep security and hope. And His presence is brought deeper into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul tells us God the Holy Spirit brings the Presence of God the Father into the human heart:

"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6)¹¹

The Holy Spirit reminds our hearts that God is with us—and not as an angry overlord, but as our Father. Friends, the discovery that we are loved—and loved by God our Father—has a power which strengthens the heart like no outer circumstance can.

Martin Lloyd-Jones shares a story that helps us see how this strengthens our hearts. There once was a father and his little son walking in the park. They walk along for some time, the father holding the son's hand. Then, for no apparent reason, the father picks up the boy, squeezes him in his arms, and tells him how much he loves him. He then puts him down, and the two keep walking. *Now, was the boy*

anymore a son when he was walking hand in hand then when he was being embraced? No. He was just as much a son before the father picked him up. But, in being picked up and held, the boy *experienced* his sonship deeply in his heart. The boy was overwhelmed with the sense and strength and goodness of his father. The boy's heart surged, and he felt secure, safe, and strong in the father's embrace.

A disciple depends on God by praying that the Spirit makes the presence of God the Father more and more real to their heart.

This week take a step in depending on God. Do this by practicing prayer. Do this by asking the Holy Spirit to be at work in your life. Do this by reading scripture and asking the Holy Spirit to encourage and guide you by it. And do this by asking the Spirit to strengthen your heart, by the presence of your Heavenly Father.

Endnotes

1. John Stott, *The Radical Disciple*, 102, reflects on that day, "There is another aspect of dependence that I experience which was new to me, which I am tempted to gloss over.... It is the emotional weakness that physical infirmity sometimes brings to the surface, and which finds expression in weeping."
2. *Ibid.*, 101-02.
3. There is an agonizing tension between immortality and mortality in the current human experience. For example, God "has put eternity into man's heart," wrote Solomon (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Yet, as Saint Paul wrote, "death has come into the world through sin," and "death has spread to all men because all men sin" (Romans 5:12).
4. Paul categorizes all human beings as weak, it is part of our fundamental reality and we depend on God for help: "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6).
5. John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church & the World: The Book of Acts Today*, 60.
6. The parallelism in Job 33:4 makes the connection between God's Spirit and breath clear: "*The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life*" (Job 33:4; see also Genesis 2:7).

7. Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013) 3-4.
8. Ibid., 17-18
9. It is also the case that praying does not lead to passivity: we “let go and get going.” Flannery’s prayer journal models this too: Help me to get what is more than natural into my work—help me to love & bear with my work on that account. If I have to sweat for it, dear God, let it be as in Your service. I would like to be intelligently holy.” O’Conner, *Prayer Journal*, 17-18.
10. John 10:10; John 3:16
11. See the similar passage in Romans 8, “... you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:15b-16). Yet another passage about the Spirit strengthening our hearts comes in Paul’s prayer in Ephesians, “I bow my knees before the Father ... that he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Ephesians 3:15).