

About six months ago one of you asked me if I had read The Secret, which apparently has received much publicity and promotion from Oprah Winfrey and has sold millions of copies. I had not, although I am now familiar with it and in fact will be leading whomever comes thru a discussion of its premises and practices this coming Wednesday at 7 p.m. in the final session of our summer series on “Challenges to the Gospel.”

The Secret collects and presents the thoughts of a number of disciples of W. Clement Stone, Maxwell Maltz, Napoleon Hill, Earl Nightingale, and assorted other overcomers, consultants, and prosperity preachers. (By the way: I think they have something valuable to teach most of us.) It seems the people who buy this book are essentially crying out, “Teach us to become wealthy! Teach us how to control our own lives! Teach us to accomplish our dreams! Teach us to become successful, as you have! Teach us what you know best and what we need most!”

Isn’t this about what the followers of Jesus were asking Him—the backdrop [v 1] behind His prayer, His two mini-parables, His explanation, and His summary? Maybe you noticed they’ve insulted Jesus in the process, but fortunately Jesus is accustomed to His followers asking far too little of Him, then and now. He seems to take little offense, thank God. (They’ve inadvertently insulted Him by asking Him to please tell Him how to pray, because John the Baptist apparently taught his followers how to pray, and they’d at least like as much guidance as John’s followers received.)

His followers were satisfied with so little from Jesus. They were happy—and are happy—to be filled with a fraction of what Jesus had for them, then and now—and especially when it comes to prayer.

Fortunately Jesus has no ego problem. He forgives the slight—then and now—and answers their request. “You’ve asked a simple question, so here’s My simple answer: pray like this: “Father, Reveal who You are. Set the world right. Keep us alive with three square meals. Keep us forgiven with You and forgiving others. Keep us safe from ourselves and the devil.” [translation from “The Message.”]

To show there were no hard feelings from the insult, Jesus continues. “I’ve told you what kind of words to use, but now I’ll tell you the more important part: the attitude, the spirit, in which to pray so that you also can access the presence and power of Almighty God!”

Why in the world do you suppose they didn’t want to hear it? (Oh, they were interested. They had just asked Him. But I mean they didn’t want to *keep doing* what He told them once they did hear Him, which comes to about the same thing.)

Why do you and I not want to hear it, or at least not want to keep practicing what Jesus has taught us about how to pray?

Why are you and I reluctant to practice what Jesus is teaching us about prayer? His promise applies equally to each one of us, rich or poor. Educated or not. Successful or not. Busy or idle. Young or old. Almost no internal obstacle disqualifies us from exercising the divine power which powered Jesus. Then what is He actually promising, and how does He want us to pray?

Let's start with this simple parable Jesus preaches to supplement Luke's elementary version of the more well-known "Lord's Prayer" preserved in Matthew. He has told them the words or at least the kinds of thoughts they can use in their praying; now He tells them this little story to illustrate the attitude behind the words which will make them effective. Everyone in your village has gone to bed. In the middle of the night comes an old friend of yours to your home. The custom of hospitality requires that you feed him. You would be glad to do so except that your cupboard is bare. It's unthinkable that you do not extend this basic courtesy of feeding a guest, so you go to your neighbor's house and start knocking. Naturally when he comes to the door he's irate: "Have you lost your mind? It's midnight. We're all asleep, including the kids. If the baby wakes up I can't even begin to tell you how annoyed I will become with you. Now go home and leave me alone."

You know the entire family, maybe the dog, are all sleep on a little platform in the one room. No separate bedrooms in Israel back then. Then it dawns on you: the diabolical truth begins to run thru your mind at the same time it runs thru the mind of your increasingly distressed neighbor. Finally you realize it and you get a mischievous grin on your face, standing in the dark after he's quietly shut the door in your face.

You have all the leverage! You have all the power in this transaction at midnight.

You knock again. You start quietly, but you are not worried... You realize the more scared your neighbor is that you will knock more loudly and wake up the kids and ruin his whole night—and maybe even get his wife (rudely awakened from her sound sleep) irritated at him since you're his friend—the more vulnerable he is, the more he needs to honor your way-out-of-line request.

You start out whispering. "I was just wondering if you had three little loaves of bread I could feed my guest who just arrived..." You can afford to whisper because if that doesn't work you can always raise your voice, or knock a little louder. Your neighbor, quickly assessing his own self-interest, sadly realizes he has no real choice but to cave in to your demand. He's not happy about it, but he's no dummy, either. You stick to it, and eventually you get your bread to feed your guest. Then everybody can get some sleep.

Have you realized what this means when you pray?

Jesus is telling you that *you have all the leverage* when you pray. He is saying you have the power from God (I hesitate to say "the power over God," but that conclusion He draws for us.) Jesus Himself compares for us this neighbor who answers the door with God: if the neighbor who doesn't care much one way or another about your welfare will open his door to your knocking and give the bread when you have asked, how much more will God who is not inclined to seek first His own self-interest, who is not inclined to keep first and to give later. This is why Jesus can be so sure as to promise that if you ask, you *will* receive; if you seek, you *will* find; if you knock, the door *will* be opened. (This passive voice means if you ask, God will give it to you; if you seek, God will be sure you find; if you knock, God will open the door.)

His Church mostly acts as if we do not understand or believe this promise. We continue to insult Jesus, every time we fail to ask, to seek, to knock as He teaches us and directs us and urges us to do, but still He keeps promising: the life of prayer for His followers is almost this simple. God has given us all the leverage when we pray.

What Jesus teaches us about prayer is simple, but not easy, and not without a few underlying principles. Let's look at three:

1) If we want to pray with power, pray so as to please God, we need to be interested enough to ask how. Being out of other options seems to help. (By this time in His ministry, His followers had already been sent out in pairs to proclaim and invite others into His kingdom; already they had cured the sick and healed the broken.) But evidently only now have they gotten around to asking Jesus how He prays. So only now does He tell them.

Jesus waits until we ask; waits until we are hungry; waits until we are desperate. Waits until there's a reasonable chance we will do what He says. As long as their gods are serving our needs pretty well, why would most people trade up to the One God? (As long as people continue to believe that more wealth and making their own dreams come true will lead to greater fulfillment, they will remain disciples of the "positive thinker" coaches. Jesus' goal is to transform us until we dream and pursue and achieve new dreams, God's dreams.) Why did Jesus spend more time with the lepers and the losers than with the Pharisees, the ones who thought they had it together? He loved them all, but why would He spend His time giving His answers to people who weren't asking Him questions? That makes no sense. No good teacher explains more than a student is willing and able to hear.

In fact here's one good translation of how He describes this attitude: "Even if the neighbor will not get up and give you the bread you need for the sake of your friendship, he will because of your *'shamelessness.'*" [v 8]

Persistence and shamelessness are not the same thing. Someone in desperate need is apt to be shameless. A leper is apt to be shameless: he has little to lose. The woman who'd been hemorrhaging blood for 12 years: she was shameless. She'd been locked in her room and declared "unclean," unfit even to touch anyone, for all that time. She had little to lose. Jesus rewarded her shameless behavior, her courageous approach—He healed her.

(Our family learned to be a bit shameless when we first moved to Michigan. Trish and I had one car between us for several years. The church was two doors down from our home, so I could easily enough walk and most days that worked out fine. But if she had the car at work or was taking the kids to the dentist and I got a call to get to the hospital, we had nowhere to turn. I'm afraid I learned to become shameless in asking people to borrow their car. (Being followers of Jesus, several were extremely generous in helping out in these situations and I literally was given my own set of keys to more than one backup automobile. But had I not felt desperate, I would never have asked.) Same with God: if I never ask in prayer, I will never receive. And if I'm not desperate, shameless, I will try to take care of it myself. Then many things, things for God, I will never ask.

[Another time I felt a bit shameless was one Saturday night 5 or 6 years ago when I called Wendell about 10:00 on his cell phone. If I'd had other options, I would not have... "Hey, Wendell, it's Chip." "Chip, Barbara and I are at a party." "Wendell, I understand. I can wait. I'm having a computer problem and tomorrow's sermon seems to be locked inside the bloody thing and I can't figure out how to get it out." "Wendell, I can wait..."

If you know Wendell, you already know Wendell came right over to rescue me. He did not wait for me to continue to bug him. And he did solve the computer problem (sorry, Barbara, about interrupting your party!) I would not have bothered Wendell except that I was desperate and I had no better option. I did not want to show up empty-handed here in front of all of you. [And I should add both Kip and Jamie are also always quick to drop what they're doing to come help out with my computer problems.] But the point is I shamelessly asked for help only when I felt desperate—and I got the help.

Most people don't want to feel "out of control," desperate, out of good options, shameless; you don't want to any more than I do. But when we do, and turn shamelessly to God, God answers our prayer.

2) Our prayers are effective when we pray shamelessly, according to the will and the timing of God. Jesus is not handing out "wild cards" here to allow us to work God like a genie. (My kids can ask me for all sorts of things, but naturally they're on their own if I think what they are requesting is not good for them. They may achieve them, but with no help from me. In fact they would be acting contrary to my desires for them.)

Part of the drama in the parable comes from the fact that the man who knocks on the door discovers that the interest of his neighbor corresponds to his own. When my goal in prayer corresponds to the will and the timing of God, we have a match and I have my leverage!

It bears remembering that God loves us even more than we love ourselves, and God has higher eternal goals for us than we normally have for ourselves. God is interested in our character and in our growth; often we are interested in our comfort and our ease. (Those who flock to read *The Secret* to look for secrets to success in love, in career, in personal success may not yet feel they want to associate any too closely with this Rabbi, this original Teacher whose idea of success in love (for example) was to hang around with 12 sweaty men and who remained a bachelor all His life. They may not be interested in following a Guru whose personal career success consisted of getting nailed to the Roman cross without a shekel to His name.)

When we start out with Jesus we do not naturally pray that God's will be done—the kind of prayer God is bound to answer within us. When we start out, we usually ask that God see to it that our will be done. God loves us too much to answer this prayer, although many accomplish their own will by applying the resources and skills God has given them. The fact that God leaves us "on our own" does not mean we are helpless; it simply means we have no supernatural power, no help from God's side, to draw on.

3) Another of the rules, or principles about effective prayer Jesus spells out has to do with persistence, perseverance. Staying at it. Max DuPree observes it is no compliment to call someone a champion at the 90-yard dash. No prize is won at 90 yards! No prize is won in prayer until God's will is accomplished.

In our instant culture with instant gratification and 30-second attention spans this is extremely difficult. Once we are clear as to what God is calling us to pray for, it's hard to keep praying when we may or may not see any progress toward the goal. For some reason I remember the combination to my first locker in Jr. High. (Or maybe it was for my bicycle lock). I remember it was 28-6-16. You remember how those worked: all the way around clockwise at least twice then stop at the first number; around counterclockwise all the way past the first number to the second, then directly clockwise

to the third. But you have no indication you are getting close until the lock opens. You could do everything right, but stop just one tick short of the final number and the lock would be just as locked shut as if you were nowhere near the right combination. You have no way of knowing you're getting "warmer" until the lock opens and you're done! Opening a padlock is all or nothing.

So is praying for God's will to be done in or thru me. The man in the parable got a fairly instant result, but Jesus clarifies the principle and the verb tense when He continues "Live your life in such a way that you keep on asking; live your life in such a way that you keep on seeking; live your life in such a way that you keep on knocking." [v 9] These are not simple command forms—they are ongoing, continuous.

Jesus kept on praying all night long before He chose His 12 apostles. How often do we pray like that? Jesus had been praying for those 40 days and nights (literally or symbolically) at the beginning of His public ministry to be prepared to discern and to seek and do the Father's will. He kept asking; He kept seeking; He kept knocking. Much was given to Him; many doors were opened to Him.

Some of you know I am fascinated by the life and example of a Welshman named Rees Howells (who was born around 1890 and died in the middle of the last century.) He was one willing to pay the price to keep praying as God asked him to pray; then, having prayed, He was willing to obey. He knew what it meant to "keep on knocking—" and this made him a very effective servant of God.

I was just reading earlier this week how, a result of much prayer, Howells clearly understood God called him to establish a Bible College in Wales. This was fine except that Howells had no experience with higher education or business or real estate or fundraising, and he clearly understood from his praying that he was not to ask for donations. He did not. He and his wife did have 18 shillings to their name (I'm guessing that was something like about \$7) but he had no job or income at the start of the project. He did know how to pray. Howells spent each day from 6 a.m. til 5 p.m. praying about God's Bible College, then at 5 p.m. he would take his one meal and after supper one of his friends would come over and they would pray together about the college. They kept this up non-stop for 10 months until finally they understood from the Holy Spirit that they could go on to the next phase of the work. The money came; they kept on praying until they knew from God it was time to move on to the next phase of the project. It's hard to calculate how much money came in to establish that college—during the depths of the Depression—but around here today I figure that Bible College would cost the equivalent of \$300-400 million.

It's not just in Jesus' day, or in Wales a century ago that God answers shameless, persistent prayer. Many of you know this church enjoys a valuable asset—a manse—and we Fishers live in it. In 1996 the people of this church were giving less than \$120,000 annually to support the church. As a result of a lot more prayer according to the will and the timing of God than any of us probably still understands, this church was transformed. Many of you were attracted to join. Not only did your giving increase to where it became possible (because necessary to carry out the mission God had for us) to call a second pastor, but we, this church, in the year 2000 also began to pray and to give in order to buy a manse in the area. By any human logic, that was not financially feasible—but the prayer persevered and our gifts accumulated until someone could no longer resist the Holy Spirit of God and stepped forward to offer the church a very generous loan. This

phase took over two years, but this church purchased the manse in 2002, from which we Fishers are benefiting every day and every night.

Why, then, do we not want to “hear it”, not want to pray as Jesus so clearly taught us to do? We don’t easily want to put ourselves in the position to pray desperately, shamelessly. We don’t always want to align our will with the will of God. We tend to get discouraged and give up and quit praying far too soon.

One final attempt to tie up loose ends, which I’m afraid is going to start out sounding like an altogether unrelated point...

Don’t you love it when you’re reading along and you catch Jesus in a “non sequitur,” that is when you catch Him saying or doing something whose logic has “jumped the rails?” I do, because it means my own comprehension, my own logic, is incomplete and I need to keep asking some more focused questions, and keep praying, until I understand.

As I was reading and re-reading this lesson I noticed one. Did you? Jesus is telling His followers about prayer, illustrating His own practice of prayer first with the guy knocking on his neighbor’s door at midnight, then contrasting the generosity of a good God, eager to answer our prayer, with a normal human parent. Then, to sum up all this—as if out of nowhere—we end up with “the heavenly Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” Where did the Holy Spirit come from? What does the Holy Spirit have to do with all this, with this parable about praying? [And where does our “leverage” come from; where does our power in praying come from?]

It comes down to this. God needs us. God has a world to change, and now 6 billion+ human beings and countless nations and communities and institutions and systems to transform. God has big plans, big dreams—but in this lifetime, on this earth, He is limited to working thru those who will obey Him respecting His plans, His dreams. (Unfortunately the highest loyalty of every human being is *not* to offer our lives back in service to God, the Lord and Giver of life, to be used as He sees fit. Our favorite pastime is *not* to pray in obedience to the will of God until His mission is accomplished thru our prayer and our persistent followup and focus.)

So it turns out God is the One who is desperate. God needs each one of us terribly. His world is in big trouble. God has sent the Holy Spirit of the risen Christ to be with us, to empower us, to keep us motivated, to keep us worshiping together every Sunday, to keep us inspired, to keep us praying and responding. As we do so, we have all the leverage. God is willing, waiting invest unimagined supernatural powers in us. God’s only source of power in this world is His Holy Spirit, working thru willing accomplices.

God’s greatest gift to each of us in this lifetime is the Holy Spirit within us, unleashed at Pentecost and received by us at Baptism, in Holy Communion, in obedient prayer, whenever we truly keep asking God to renew this Gift within us.

Our greatest gift back to God is for us not to quench His Spirit, not to ignore the Spirit—but to keep asking, seeking, knocking for more and more of His presence and His power.

Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking.

Luke 11:1-13

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me 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, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? 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!"