Why Pray?

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Date: 15 November 2026

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0:00] Thanks so much, Hazel. Well, folks, you're going to need to have that passage open in front of you if you have it there. So let me just encourage you to make every effort possible to have Luke 11 open in front of you, because the number one rule in preaching is just you always let the text do the talking.

And so what God has to say in his word is way more important than anything that I have to say. So please do have that open in front of you. As we step into the subject of why pray, we've been thinking over the last number of weeks about the things that we do as a church.
So why do we do them? We hope this is a great reminder for us, because sometimes we can go into autopilot when we come in here on a Sunday. Perhaps you may be new to the faith as well, and you think, actually, a lot of this stuff is brand new to me.
So why do we do the things we do? So I really hope it's been helpful for you. We're going to step inside this subject of why pray today. You might notice we didn't do the corporate prayer up top. That's because we're going to do it after the sermon as a way of just responding to what God has challenged us on through his words. But why pray? Folks, if you were around 100 years ago, here's a saying that you'd be familiar with.
[1:04] It's a saying that was, I think, birthed in the trenches in World War I. And it goes something like this. Apparently, there's no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole.

Now, a foxhole is just a slang term for a bunker or a place that you'd hide from the enemy fire. And here's what the phrase means.
It really means that everybody prays in a crisis. Everybody prays when they're up against it. Everybody prays when they're out of their depth. And I wonder if you can relate to that this morning, whoever you are here today.
The last time that you felt out your depth. I wonder, do you pray? When was the last time that you ever prayed? It's really interesting to know that the stats would tell us in our spiritually open culture today that apparently it's not just in a crisis now that people are praying.
Get this, according to a recent survey, 51% of people in our country admit to praying regularly. And I was going to say surprisingly, but I think this is not surprising, actually, that a younger generation are more likely to pray than an older one.
[2:17] Fascinating times in which we live. The spiritual openness which people in our world seem to have. I can talk to you lots about the reasons for that afterwards, if you like. But just to say there is a massive opportunity that we have just now as people are open to things.

But of course, what is the problem with being open to things is that you're open to anything. And so really that's what we're going to be thinking about this morning. Why pray? The thing is, it's not just a Christian thing, is it?
Our friends of other faiths would pray as well. And so the question is, what is Christian about prayer? Or if I could put it like this, we're going to think this morning about how Jesus talks about prayer.
Which we're going to see is both totally unique and refreshingly different to anything out there. And so here's where we need to step into Luke chapter 11 and what we need to appreciate.
Is that it's not just us who are, if you like, living in an atmosphere filled with prayer. Back in the first century, Jesus' disciples are also living at a time and an atmosphere filled with prayer.
[3:28] So two types of prayer in particular, if you want to think about it like this. The religious prayers of their peers, if you like, called the Pharisees, these religious leaders of the day, who are known for their prayers.

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Their prayers are very public. Their prayers are full of many long and impressive words. So the disciples understand religious prayer. But they also understand, if you like, worldly prayer.
Because their lives are, they'd be aware of the peoples of the nations round about them, who pray to all sorts of gods in all sorts of ways. And if the religious prayers were full of long and impressive words, pagan prayers, as it were, are full of noise and lots of actions.
And so in this world where the disciples are living, Jesus is aware that they understand the concept of prayer.
Now, notice what Luke, the first century doctor-cum historian, is telling us at verse 1 of chapter 11. Do you see it there? Come with me to the text. Jesus has been praying.
[4:41] Now, in Luke's gospel, because we've just kind of parachuted in here to the, almost the middle of Luke's gospel. So far in Luke's gospel, Jesus has prayed three times already.

So this is, this is not the first time that he's prayed in Luke chapter 11. So this isn't Jesus taking a spur of the moment inclination to go to, to Facebook and post his thoughts in prayer.
This isn't him just kind of making a decision that he's going to take some quiet time for himself. This is something that Jesus has been living and that his disciples notice.
And they look at Jesus and they think, well, we get religious prayer. And do you know what? We get Gentile prayer. But Jesus, with you, we look at you, we look at how you pray, and we see something that's not that, not that, is something that's completely different.
Because they all pray for the praise of people. They long for the Instagram snap. They long for the likes on Facebook. But we look at you, and you retreat to where no one sees.
[5:48] So we look at you, and we see that you live for something different. You don't want people's praise. You don't want likes. You don't want camera snaps.

You want God. You commune with God in a way that we've never seen before. And so they come to Jesus.
Do you see it? And what do they say? Teach us. Teach us. Teach us, 12 rough and ready disciples, how to pray.
Friends, you notice, I think it's one of the most endearing things about Jesus, is just how unstrategic he is when it comes to the people that he uses, and he teaches, and he loves.
And these 12 men come to him and say, Jesus, teach us. Do you notice, not teach us how to pray. They don't want a method.
[6:50] They don't want a technique. They say, teach us to pray. In other words, Jesus, we want what you've got. And so, friends, at verse 9 then, as Jesus says, ask, seek, knock.

What is that but Jesus saying? I want you in on it as well. And so, what Jesus gives him, firstly, verses 1 to 4, is really just a pattern to follow.
Notice the first three words that Jesus says there. And I'm going to make a pitch that this is the most important thing when it comes to prayer. Do you see it?
How does Jesus start? Three words. Father, in heaven. You see that? So let's break that down just a little bit. Who is this God?
Where is this God? He is in heaven. So, friends, our God does not get tired. He does not sleep.
[8:01] He does not slumber. Our God does not change. Our God is not taken by surprise. But flip it around. Our God is the all-powerful one.

He is the all-knowing one. He is the ever-present one. And he is in heaven, and we are on earth. So Jesus is getting the access right, if you like, for prayer.
He will forever be the creator, and we will forever be the creatures. And Jesus is saying that it's only as we come face-to-face with who he is, as we find ourselves on our knees before him in awe and wonder, it's only then that we'll begin to think about prayer rightly.
And if that's where he is, notice who he is. What is his relationship to his people? Distant spectator? No. Ruthless dictator?
No. Heavenly Father. Now, surely the point that Jesus is making is that the relationship between God and his people is one that's marked by intimacy and access.
[9:28] He is not a cold and distant God. He is a gracious and good Father. Now, one of the most famous photos from American history, one of you have ever seen this one before, it's of John Kennedy Jr.

having the time of his life playing in the Oval Office while his dad rules the free world. And it's one of the most famous pictures in American history, really just because of that beautiful juxtaposition.

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So, two things that just we think cannot go together, but they do. who dares waltz into arguably the most powerful room in the world and waltzes up to the person with the most power, as it were, in the world and behaves just like a child.
Who does that? Only the child of the president. Or if I could put it like in the words of Tim Keller, the only person who dares wake up a king at three in the morning for a glass of water is a child.
We have that kind of access. Friends, one amazing mystery, just sit in it for a little bit, that the almighty God of heaven, the creator of all things, the sustainer of all things would look on us.
[10:54] And because of his son, Jesus Christ, and because of his shed blood on the cross for us, because of our faith in him as we become united to him, because he's made a way for us to be justified and made right with the God of the cosmos, we are adopted into his family and called sons and daughters.

So, before we think this is cheap sentimentalism, actually, this is a blood-bought privilege of every single believer in Jesus Christ. No matter how you're doing here this morning, that privilege is yours.
That privilege is mine because of Jesus. And so God says, pour out your heart. Yeah, I just love that at the beginning of 1 Samuel.
you get that scene where Eli looks at Hannah who's praying in the temple. And I love the description of it. Eli looks at Hannah and presumably she's just kind of talking to herself.
That's what it looks like. He looks at her and he assumes that she's had too much wine. And so he asks her, what are you doing, Hannah? If I could paraphrase it. And what is Hannah replying? That I'm pouring out my soul before the Lord.
[12:16] And friends, that is Christian prayer. Another person that I heard once put it like this, and I found this so helpful. You know, my kids every night when we do dinner, when they can't slash won't finish what's on their plate, what they do is they come over to me and they just get their plate, they get their fork and they just scoop it onto my plate.

And it's their way of saying, I can't handle this. And they scoop it onto mine because we think we know that you can. That's why I refer to myself as the human dustbin. You just stamp it and my mouth opens.
But is that a wonderful description of prayer? My worries, my burdens, my concerns, it is too much for me, God. So the only place I can go with it is onto you.
And do you see how God has made it clear that that's okay for us to do? Is this not a wonderful privilege that we have as his people?
So Jesus rightly draws the disciples' attention to the glory of God and says, understand who this God is in relation to you. He is your Father in heaven.
[13:32] And it's just a wonderful lesson that it starts with him and not with us. It starts with knowing that he is the glorious triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

He is the orbit in which we are operating, not the other way around. And can I suggest if you're here today and you're thinking, all this stuff is new to me, I'm not sure what I make of it, that it's only as we come to know God rightly that we come to know ourselves truly.
It was John Calvin that said that in the opening of his Institutes, that the two great things that he strives for are knowledge of God and knowledge of self. Of course, it's only knowledge of God that leads to true knowledge of self.
knowing God rightly who he is. His heart fuels worship. Knowing God rightly for who he is, the triune God, the God who since the beginning has been a God of overflowing grace and love.
He creates the world not out of something that's lacking in him. He's not bored. What does he do but create the world out of an overflow of who he is? Knowing God rightly fuels mission.
[14:46] And also, friends, can I suggest that knowing God rightly, knowing God as our heavenly father is the key to getting started in prayer. It starts with him not with us.

Mission starts with him not with us. And so Jesus moves in this passage to outline five things to ask of our father. We did this not so long ago in Matthew so I don't want to repeat the things that we thought about then.
You can check that out on the website afterwards but just see this. Do you see what Jesus is praying or telling his disciples to pray? First, that his name will be honoured. Second, that his kingdom will come.

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Third, that he will provide what we need. Fourth, that he will forgive our sins. Just love the fact that Simon led us in three songs up top that talked about how his mercy is more but the forgiveness on offer for us because of Christ.
I need to hear that all the time. And then you see fifth, that he will deliver us from temptation. So, five things Jesus says that you can ask of your heavenly father. And when you think about it, friends, all that we could ever ask, all that we could ever need comes under one of those five headings.
[15:57] things. And what struck me this week is that Jesus could have easily just left it there and said, there's your pattern. Go and do it.

And I don't know about you, but I've sat in church long enough in my life to know that. See, Nike sermons? Just do it. They don't get me very far. It's as if Jesus wants his disciples.
He takes them, having given them the pattern and seeks to press them deeper into the character of the one that they're praying to. And again, why do we need that repetition? Why did they not just get our father in heaven from that?
I take it it's just that we are prone to forget. We're prone to wonder. And this God is so much better than our feeble comprehension of him.
So, come with me and see that Jesus moves from a pattern to follow. Verses 5 to 13, Jesus then gives them a reason to seek. And Jesus gets them, come with me to this story, and notice that Jesus gets them to picture themselves in a story.
[17:09] Do you see it? If you look at it really carefully there, Jesus gets them to picture themselves in a story. Now, I love that about Jesus. I love that's what he does. I love that he takes us out of our story and puts us into his.

And so, Jesus says, imagine that you have a friend that turns up at your door unannounced at midnight. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm freaking out at the very mention of that. If my doorbell goes at midnight, I've got my phone in hand and 999 is ready to be called.
Who turns up at midnight? I've not heard of the travel lodge down the road. Who turns up at midnight? But we've got to understand that we're coming at this from a 21st century lens.
First century hearers, this would make perfect sense. Because in this culture, not of sprawling city suburbs, but remember of small rural villages, a desperate friend finding themselves in your neighbourhood in darkness has nowhere else to go.
And so, you would rub your eyes, put on your slippers and dressing gown and go and open the door for them. And here's the thing, because if you failed to do that in the first century honour and shame culture, if you refused to open the door, if you couldn't be bothered to get up to answer it, you would actually bring shame on your family name and on your village.
[18:43] But given the hour of the day back in the story, in the days before fridge freezers and stockpiling, your bread for the day would likely be gone. So you'd have no other choice but to chap up another person in your village and ask them to help you in this pickle that you found yourself in.

So just picture how it goes. Can you help? And the way Jesus tells the story is that you don't get the impression that the neighbour who you've just chapped up is all too impressed.
See it? It's not, way, good to see you Dave, how's the family? No, when you have knocked on the door, the door is bolted, the kids are off to bed, the hollocks has been drunk, the jammies are on, this neighbour hears the knock and thinks, you've got to be kidding me.
And yet, because he too does not want to bring shame on his family, on his village, he will put on his dressing gown, rummage through the cupboards and see what he can find.
See the phrase there at verse 8, shameless audacity. Do you see how there's a little asterisk maybe if you've got an NIV there that says, or yet to preserve his good name.
[20:07] And I think that's probably going to help us when we understand the honour shame thing that's going on here. You would do this despite your reluctance, despite that, oh, he's knocked on the door, you would do this in this honour and shame culture.

Now, what is Jesus' point? If they'd be willing to help you despite their reluctance, then how much more is your Father who loves you and is for you in Christ willing to listen and answer in his perfect way your cries and petitions whenever you come to him.
So the contrast is between lack of desire yet still willing and a Father who is always willing, always listening.

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That's the contrast. So Jesus is helping the disciples see here the Father's wonderful willingness. If you're a note taker, just take that down, write it in the margin next to it.
Our Father's wonderful willingness. is that not amazing that God when I come to him in prayer does not respond by saying it's him again.
[21:22] God does not respond like the guy who works at the call centre and you phone and you get that answer.

You are number 128 in the queue. Your call is really important to us. Just keep on hanging on. And while you wait we're going to put some really annoying background music on in the background.
Friends, in Christ we have his ear no matter what the hour, no matter what the petition, no matter what the state we're in. And what complements the story so well is what I think is a little bit of first century humour.
Jesus tells the story about an earthly father. And if you're a parent here you'll get this because we feel our weakness, we know the mistakes that we make and yet deep down despite our failings we will only ever give our children good things.
And again it's a how much more argument. So again picture the scene, it's dinner time, we don't do this anymore but some parents and audience might do it, we'll be on this stage. Just imagine you're doing the whole choo-choo-choo train with the fork or the spoon or whatever, choo-choo-choo, here comes the train.
[22:36] You wouldn't at the last minute just kind of get your child to open their mouth and you would stick in a life hand grenade. That's what Jesus is saying here.

You would not entice your child to open their mouth and then give something really bad. So you wouldn't at the last minute, says Jesus, offer them something good and then do a quick switcheroo. It's not a fish or egg, it's a scorpion or a snake that you're putting in their mouth instead. again, what's the logic? If that's the heart of an imperfect yet loving father towards his children, how much greater then is the heart of the perfect father towards his children?
It's a how much more argument. So what does this celebrate? Again, if you're note-taking or just want to write it in the margins here, this celebrates the father's perfect ability to give us what is good for us.
And I guess like two pieces of a best friend's necklace, these two things come together so wonderfully complementary.
[23:46] Do you see the father's wonderful willingness and his perfect ability? Friends, if we come to God in prayer with those two things in mind, game changer, and what's surprising in this passage though is the what that Jesus is talking about here.

Do you see it isn't stuff? Jesus names the good thing in this passage, do you see? And the good thing is a person. The good thing is the person of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead sent into the hearts of every single believer.
Godhead sent the heart of the Spirit to do but I take it loop the heart of the child of God round back to the start of the Lord's prayer.
The Spirit pushes us deeper into an understanding of our Father in heaven. The Spirit helps us to know that He is our Father.
The Spirit helps us to know the forgiveness that we can know in Christ. The Spirit helps us to have a heart for the glory of God in the world. The Spirit brings that assurance of our adoption as children of God.
[25:07] No matter how wrong we've gone, no matter how low we feel, looping us back round into that wonderful truth. And we've got to understand that the Spirit is the greatest gift that Father could have possibly given His children.

But friends, there's something else we've got to see here before we move on to four quick things of application. Do you see how what Jesus is saying here?
He's got so much to teach us in terms of our own individual prayer lives. But as true as that is, do you see how the emphasis all the way through this prayer is corporate?
our Father, do you see the language here? Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us as we forgive those who sin against us.
So Jesus wants us to pray, not primarily or solely as isolated Christians, but He wants us to pray together as His people journeying as pilgrims together through this world to our home.

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[26:15] And so as we think about that, this whole why pray thing, it is corporate, thinking about this morning. Here's four quick fire challenges, and these will be like two minutes each, that this passage I think offers us when it comes to our prayer life together as a local church.

Ready for these? Here is number one. What's this passage going to do? Friends, let it reveal our inabilities. You know, what was the big headline?
If you're wondering where that is, that's in Blackheath down in London. We've got family who live down there. Here's why that's pictures on the screen. Do you remember the big headline that was all across Europe?
But the big headline that was all over the UK during the summer? Drought. And I find it amazing that despite all the advances in technology that we have, I mean, the guy across the road from our house was just flogging air conditioning units like there's no tomorrow, despite all the advances in technology that we have, despite all the gizmos and gadgets, friends, at the end of the day, we can't make it rain.
We cannot make it rain. You know, my biggest fear for us as a local church is that we get really good, really good at running events, and we have slick services, we have happy people, it's a fun place to be, but we lose sight of the fact that if we are to see any spiritual fruit in our communities, in our workplaces, in our streets, if we're to see anyone come to faith in Jesus, only God can make it rain.
[28:06] And so do you see how this passage searches us, and for me, I found myself this week saying, Lord, would you rid me, would you rid us, forgive us of our complacency? That so often we just run around doing things, and so often we think that makes up for our lack of prayerfulness, our busyness.

And so I think this prayer re-centers us and says, you cannot make it rain. You are forever the creature, and he is forever the creator.
Friends, let's let this passage reveal our inabilities. Secondly, let's allow this passage to impact our diaries. So will we prioritize meeting together to pray?
Having seen our father's perfect ability, having seen his wonderful willingness, think about more in a minute, will we meet together to pray? Some of us in this room have never been to a prayer meeting here at church.
It's not me trying to make you feel bad. It's to say we're missing out on the wonderful blessing that it is to seek our perfect father in prayer. We have two regular meetings, prayer meetings as a church.
[29:26] One that happens every single Monday night at eight o'clock on Zoom. You will find the link in the newsletter. That actually started during COVID, that we met every night on Zoom to pray.

Because do you know what? We don't have a clue what we're doing. So out of our depth. Not a clue what tomorrow holds, but you do, father. And I wonder, friends, in my own life, I'd extend the challenge to you, whether my lack of prayerfulness, if that was a time when I felt out of my depth, I wonder if my lack of prayer, it just highlights the fact that so often I think that I'm in my depth.
So we've got that Zoom prayer meeting, eight o'clock every Monday, and an in-person one that happens on the first Sunday of the month. We even throw in pizza as well, you can have your dinner if you come.
Just the dates of the next couple are on the screen, the first Sunday of the month. Friends, let's meet together to pray. Let's prioritize seeking this God in prayer. And do you know what? Let's pray big prayers for our world, for our friends, for our city, for our community, for each other, all sorts of prayers, all sorts of people, all sorts of places.
Friends, thirdly, will we let this transform our culture? And by culture, I mean the atmosphere in here, how we live our lives together, wouldn't it be great to create a culture where asking how we can pray for each other was the norm?
[31:04] So can I just say my experience, if we want to up the spiritual temperature as a church family, do you know a really easy way to do it, is before we get involved in the small chat of everyday life, asking each other how we can pray.

Here's the challenge, the person next to you, someone this morning, ask them, how can you pray for them this week? And if you're feeling really brave, just do it on the spot. It should be just such a natural thing that we do together as a church family, praying together.
And here's the fourth thing, and we'll land with this. Friends, let's let this stretch our ambitions. Because he is the God who is able to do way more than we ask or even imagine.

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Our ambitions, I think my ambitions are way too much often us-sized ambitions, what we can comprehend, what we think God is capable of, rather than accepting the invitation to embrace God-sized ambitions.
And this is where we'll begin to wrap it up this morning. I just want to tell you about my friend Gordon, who leads a church called Centrepoint that meets over in Bathgate.
[32:26] And what they've done over the past year is that they've embarked on this really ambitious building project. They've basically bought a derelict church building in the area and they're seeking to transform it.

I've journeyed with Gordon over the last year or so as they've been through this project and here's what I find fascinating. Here's what he told me recently. He said, the most encouraging thing that's happened in this whole project is the witness that it's been to the non-Christian building contractors that they've employed to do the work.
Here's what I mean. Every so often, Gordon and his friends will have to have that awkward conversation where they've gone to the building contractors and they've kind of gone with the whole we're kind of running low in the bank on the funds.
We might need to mothball this. How do you feel about that? Now to begin with that was a bit awkward and they managed to get through it but here's what they've learned. They've just thrown themselves in prayer before the Lord.
This is above us, it's you. And all of a sudden what's happened is this journey has gone on. A gift has come from a church member. We can go on a bit more. There's a grant from a trust that we've applied to that just came out of the blue.
[33:42] We can keep going. They get a gift from a partner church over the other side of the world who gives this five-figure donation to keep the project going and they go back to the contractors and they say, yeah, we can keep going.

Here's what he tells me though, the witness to the building contractor. Now they go and they ask for extensions and the building contractor says, I don't know how you do it. I don't know how it keeps coming through for you, but whoever your God is, he keeps on meeting your bill.
And Gordon has this phrase that he keeps on saying to me every time I ask him about it, as he's learned through this project. Him and the church have this phrase, and I love it.
It's just God, your will, your bill. Your will, your bill. Oh, friends, do you see how awesome Jesus is in answering that question?
Teach us to pray. as he lifts us out of ourselves, out of our world of self absorption, and he throws us back into the Father's world.
[34:52] Your Father in heaven, know his wonderful willingness, know his perfect ability, and know that you can know him and come to him any time as your wonderful heavenly Father who's able to provide all of your needs.

Some of you will know that old hymn, and we'll finish with this. Listen to it again this week. Praise to the Lord who will prosper your work and defend you.
Surely his goodness and mercy shall daily attend you. Ponder anew what the Almighty can do if with his love he befriends you.
What an awesome God that we have. Thank you.
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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