

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 7  
July 27, 2025  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***All we can do is pray***

—Luke 11:1-13

“All we can do is pray.” Have you said those words? Have you heard someone else use that phrase? Usually when we say or hear those words it’s in the context of desperation. Times are difficult, the chips are down, and prayer is the last available option we turn to, our last desperate hope. In basketball we might say, “Just before the buzzer he launched a prayer from half-court.” In football a last-ditch desperate pass to the end-zone is called a “Hail, Mary!”—a reference to prayers to the mother of Jesus (whom we shouldn’t be praying to, anyway). The underlying idea is that a prayer is a desperate effort with only a remote possibility of success, something that we’ll try when all else has failed. Then, when it looks like there’s nothing else we can do, we say, “All we can do is pray.”

I’d like to encourage you to think differently about your prayers. Instead of thinking of prayer as a last resort, think of it as a first priority and a powerful privilege. Whether you’re confronted with mundane, daily tasks or scary, seemingly insurmountable challenges, think, “What we can do is pray!”

Several years ago, my mother came down with the flu. She became dehydrated and was admitted to the hospital. The flu settled in her lungs, and the physician in the hospital described her condition as acute respiratory failure. Hour by hour we watched as her oxygen saturation went down and down. Let me tell you, I prayed like never before. I prayed that the Lord would spare her life and give her recovery and healing. I prayed that the Lord would give us more time with her. I promised that I would give up all my vices, turn over a new leaf, and be a better person. On the third day her condition started to improve. Her numbers turned around. She recovered completely, and the Lord gave us many more years with her here on earth before he finally took her home to heaven on Easter Sunday of this year. Often God does that, doesn’t he? He answers our prayers! He gives us what we ask for. He says, “Call on me in the day of distress. I will deliver you, and you will honor me” (Psalm 50:15). God says “Yes,” answers our prayers, and gives us the desire of our hearts—and we praise him for it!

Then there are those prayers where a “Yes” answer is slow in coming. I have other things that I pray for—that I’ve been praying years for—where I still haven’t received the answer I want. Maybe God’s answer to my prayers is “No.” Maybe his answer to my prayers is, “Be patient! Wait a little longer.” That’s hard for me, because I want the answer on my timeline, and patience is difficult. But I keep praying. I know God hears me. He promises to listen to our prayers because of Jesus. But so far the answer is still “No” or “Wait.” What do I do? Keep praying!

The disciples watched Jesus pray. They saw Jesus pray a lot. It was only natural that they should ask him, “*Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.*” It’s an interesting request. On the one hand, we might think, “Prayer is just talking to God. What’s so hard about that? If you want to talk to God, just talk!” On the other hand, we often feel, “But I don’t know what to say. I don’t know how to approach God; I don’t know where to begin. I don’t know what to ask for.”

So Jesus taught them the prayer that we call the Lord’s Prayer—the model prayer—and from the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples we learn so many things about prayer. For instance, what should we pray for? Good health, healing from illness, good government, a good job, help me pay my bills, keep me safe on the highway, relief from the heat, rain in Arizona, success, blessing, prosperity. Those are good things to pray for, but in the Lord’s Prayer they’re all summarized in one petition: “Give us today our daily bread.” Think about that—all the physical, earthly, material things that we often spend so much time praying for are summed up in just two words: daily bread. Why? Aren’t those things important? Of course, they’re important, and our heavenly Father knows that we need them, and he provides them for us in abundance even without our asking. But they’re not the *most* important things.

Everything else in the Lord’s Prayer is about spiritual things. Think about how Jesus starts: “Our Father in heaven.” We’re not praying to a god who is distant and aloof or a god who is vindictive and terrifying; we’re praying to our dear Father. “Hallowed be your name” – Father, help me honor you and uphold the honor of your name in everything I do. “Your kingdom come” – Father, let people everywhere be taught to know you and be brought into your kingdom, so that everyone can experience your kingdom of grace here on earth and your kingdom of glory in heaven. “Your will be done on earth as in heaven” – Father, curb the forces of evil in this world and restrain everything that would hinder your will from being done. Help us to carry out your will in our daily lives. “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us” – Father, we need to be washed and cleansed of the sins we have committed. Take away our sins, reconcile us to you through the blood of Jesus, and since we have received so much forgiveness, help us forgive others when they sin against us. “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” – Father, keep us from falling

into sin, so that we don't bring guilt and shame and disgrace upon ourselves. Rescue us from all evil in this world, and finally deliver us from this world of tears and take us to heaven."

When Jesus teaches us to pray, he keeps things in perspective. Important things—spiritual things—are first and foremost, and material/physical things are secondary.

The Apostle James tells us that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16). Why? Not because we are so virtuous and deserving but because the one we are praying to is powerful and can do all things he chooses. When we pray, we are worshiping God, who is the source of all good things. When we pray, we acknowledge his grace and his kindness, we acknowledge his power, his sovereignty, and his supremacy. When we pray, we come without preconditions. We pray humbly, placing ourselves completely in God's hands. We pray, "Not my will but your will be done."

Here's an area of confusion: A church member comes up to the pastor and says, "Pastor, I want you to pray for me. God's more likely to listen to you because you're closer to the Big Guy upstairs." What's wrong with this picture? It's based on the wrong idea that our prayers are acceptable to God based on how connected we are in the church and how well we've behaved lately, and that's completely wrong. When you pray, you pray confidently, boldly, with certainty that God welcomes you and receives your prayers. How can we be so confident? Because your access to God doesn't depend on how well you've behaved recently; it depends on how perfectly Jesus, your Savior, removed all the barriers to your prayers. Jesus Christ tore down the barrier wall of hostility that stood between us and God when he washed away our sins on the cross. The doors to God's throne room stand wide open. God invites us to come to him in prayer. God in Christ has made it so that we can enter the presence of our heavenly Father, and we can climb onto the lap of the omnipotent God of the universe because he is our dear Father, and we are his dear children. Your access to God is through Jesus Christ. You pray in *Jesus'* name, and *Jesus* has opened the way for you to approach God.

Another area of confusion: Prayers to the Virgin Mary or to the saints. The idea in the Roman Catholic Church is that since we sinners aren't good enough to go to God directly, we need someone else to be our go-between. So prayers are said to different saints or to the Virgin Mary (kind of like when a baseball goes through the front plate-glass window, and the kid begs Mom to break the news to Dad). But as we heard in our reading from 1 Timothy today, there is *one* mediator between God and man, and that is Christ Jesus himself. *Jesus* is our go-between. *Jesus'* blood and righteousness intercede for us before the Father.

Or here's another misunderstanding: The idea that the more people we can get to pray the more likely we are to get results from God. So we have prayer chains and prayer warriors. (This is not inherently a bad thing; we have a beautiful example in Acts 12 where the whole Church was praying for Peter in prison.) But let's be careful that we don't think of group prayers like a union protest or a political demonstration, as if we're going to get as many people as possible to wave picket signs and storm the courts of heaven, and somehow there's strength in numbers to persuade God to see things our way. Scripture doesn't tell us that if we get enough people together then God will listen to us. No, God hears every believer's prayer, even the prayers of those who are lonely and friendless and forgotten. We are never alone and forgotten when Christ is with us, and the least and the insignificant are precious to God.

God doesn't tell us we have to pray in a big group to be heard, but he does tell us to pray persistently. *Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and tell him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine who is on a journey has come to me, and I do not have anything to set before him.' And the one inside replies, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give it to you.' I tell you, even if he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his bold persistence, he will get up and give him as much as he needs. "I tell you, keep asking, and it will be given to you. Keep seeking, and you will find. Keep knocking, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. And to the one who knocks, it will be opened. Why pray boldly? Why pray persistently? Because persistence is confidence, and confidence flows from faith. When we pray persistently, as Abraham did in our Old Testament reading today, we give God the honor and glory he deserves, and we recognize that he alone can answer our prayers as he pleases.*

So you prayed for the promotion, and it went to your coworker in the next cubicle. You prayed to do well on the test, but you bombed. You prayed for recovery and healing, but the illness ended in death. And you ask, "Why?" Well, I don't know "why." All I know is that God sees you as his dear child, forgiven by the blood of his Son Jesus, dressed in the perfection of Christ, and he loves you and cherishes you more than you can comprehend or imagine. And he will always and *only* give you what is best for you. Listen again to Jesus: *"What father among you, if your son asks for bread, would give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, would give him a snake instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, would give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are 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?"* You and I think we know exactly what we need from God, but God knows better.

Pray boldly, pray confidently, pray joyfully. Put yourself completely into God's hands, trusting entirely in him and saying, "Your will be done!" And wait patiently for God's answer—whenever it comes and whatever it might be. Because for us as Christians, prayer is a glorious privilege, and all we can do is pray. Amen.