



## POWER & RESPONSIBILITY

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Luke 11:1-13, 1 Tim 2:1-4

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Power. In the race for the White House, all the candidates are talking about it, because people in our country feel so deprived of it. The candidates say that our government is no longer “by the people, for the people,” because the levers of power now rest in the hands of career politicians, the wealthy elite, and big corporations. This is the year, we’re told, that we as citizens can reclaim our lost power. How? By voting for one of the many career politicians, wealthy elites, or corporate executives running for President. Makes perfect sense, right?

In truth, everyone feels deprived of power, even those political leaders whom we perceive to be the most powerful. John Boehner and Nancy Pelosi certainly feel it. Ask them who holds the levers of power. President Obama feels it. Though sometimes he has been criticized for abusing his executive powers, he nevertheless is far from omnipotent. Last month, we saw his anguish over another mass shooting that he was powerless to prevent, as he wept during a press conference. Ask him if he holds the levers of power.

Of course it would be absurd to say that our president isn't powerful, but what's so surprising is how often even he feels powerless. Many other modern presidents before him have acknowledged the same thing. Even our country, “the most powerful nation on earth,” often feels weak and vulnerable. We all feel it, and anyone who campaigns on promises of ending our powerlessness is either a liar, a lunatic, or...

The Lord. Jesus Christ had an entirely different way of addressing our powerlessness, an utterly unique approach to political power. That's what we'll be looking at in this message, as we wrap up a series on the *Politics* of the Messiah.

## THE SOURCE OF POWER IN JESUS' KINGDOM

Jesus was tremendously powerful, as the introduction to the Gospel of John makes abundantly clear: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:1-4).

If Jesus was so powerful, then why do we find him praying so often throughout Luke's Gospel (including today's reading beginning in Luke 11:1)? If Jesus could create the universe and give life to all humanity, then why in the world would he ever need to pray?

Politics. In the beginning, God made us in his image and gave us political responsibility. He appointed us as his governors over all that he had made. But then we rebelled against God. And we, together with all creation, became subject to sin and death. So God, in his tender mercy, sent Jesus into our fallen world with a dual vocation as both Savior and King. In order for Jesus to accomplish this mission, he had to relinquish his own power, and voluntarily submit to his Father. Throughout his ministry, Jesus remained completely obedient and utterly dependent upon His Father. Though he could have snuffed out the lives of all his enemies with a single word, Jesus kept silent in order to fulfill his mission. As Savior, he suffered death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin. Then God the Father raised Jesus to new life, and enthroned him as King, to pick up our original political responsibility of governing all creation. As King, Jesus leads all his subjects in this role. Every Christian now shares this responsibility under Jesus' authority.

The deep sense of powerlessness that we all feel—from the voters out in the hinterlands to the President in the White House—is nothing new. It's part and parcel of the human condition, both a consequence of how God made us and also a consequence of sin. From the beginning, we were made to be empowered. We were created as governors under God, in a way that makes us completely dependent upon God for power. But then we turned away from God and fell into sin. Ever since then, no matter who you are or how high up the chain of command, we've all felt the anguish of a political responsibility that is disconnected from its true source of power. The current epidemic of political discontent in our country, resulting from everyone feeling powerless, is just a microcosm of the human condition everywhere. We all have work to do for the life of the world, and all of us, to one degree or another, feel powerless to do it.

Jesus came as the new Adam, modeling life as God intended. What was Jesus' power source? Where did he find the power to accomplish his mission? On his knees, kneeling before his Father.

The Father is Jesus' source of power. The Father gave his Son a mission, and the Son depended upon his Father to provide the resources he needed for that mission. Jesus didn't look elsewhere.

If your boss assigns you a project to manage, would you go look for funding and personnel for that project at a different company? Of course not. You would go to the source. And if your boss, being evil, knows how to resource your project, then how much more will your heavenly Father?

That's one of the main arguments Jesus is making throughout Luke 11:1-13, in which he says a number of different things about prayer. What ties all of these verses together is God's fatherly character, whether in the "Our Father" in v 2, or the parable of the father at night in v 5, or the talk about earthly fathers in v 11. Jesus wants to impress upon us the intimate, loving trustworthiness of his Father, the source of his power.

We'll talk about the Lord's Prayer in a moment. Let's touch on the other two passages first. Here's how to understand Jesus' parable: Imagine a peasant family in ancient Palestine, living together in a one-roomed house. There's no room in the house for beds, so every evening when it's time to sleep they get out their pallets and unroll them on the floor, where the whole family then sleeps together. When a friend comes asking for help in the middle of the night, there's no easy way to get up and help. It would mean waking everyone up, to roll up the pallets and open the door. The little ones wouldn't be too happy. But they aren't very happy about the incessant

racket outside either. When the good father realizes that his noisy friend just won't go away, he gets everybody up, helps the guy outside, and then does his best to comfort his own. Jesus' argument is that if a peasant father does this, then how much more will God the Father find a way to provide for those who ask him?

Jesus made a similar point in his remarks about fathers in vv 11-13. If an earthly father knows to give his children the good things they ask for, like fish and eggs rather than snakes and scorpions, then how much more, Jesus argues, will God the Father pour out his good Holy Spirit on those who ask of him. In other words, no matter how good an earthly father may be, God is infinitely better, infinitely wiser, infinitely more generous.

So, for Jesus, his source of power is not the majority of the electorate, or the aristocracy, or the Roman empire, or any other fickle possibility. Jesus turns only to his Father to find the power he needs for governing his kingdom.

## THE PROVISION OF POWER IN JESUS' KINGDOM

Now let's think about the provision of power in Jesus' kingdom, which once again is unlike anything you'll see in contemporary politics, since Jesus is eager to share power and to distribute it to all his followers. In fact, from this passage and others, it's clear that Jesus believes that there is no other way for us to participate in his kingdom except by receiving the very same power that Jesus received. The same infinitely wise and generous and loving Father who raised Jesus from the dead and crowned him king is ready and willing to empower Jesus' followers as well. When Jesus' original disciples asked him in v 1 to teach them to pray, Jesus was eager to do so, and that's how he gave us the Lord's Prayer.<sup>1</sup>

There are five essential elements in the Lord's Prayer:

**Praise.** "Father, hallowed be your name." Luke 11:2a. Jesus first honors and praises his Father, reverencing God's holy name. This is more than a simple formality, more than convention. It is the necessary posture of humility which we must always assume before God. No matter how closely we feel his fatherly love and protection, he always remains worthy of our greatest esteem.

**Purpose.** "Your kingdom come." Luke 11:2b. Jesus next aligns his prayer with the mission that God assigned him, namely, establishing God's heavenly reign here on earth. This is what we're here for, and therefore it's the only reason for our prayers. Aligning our prayers with God's

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<sup>1</sup> Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is slightly different from the one recorded in Matthew's Gospel. This shouldn't surprise us, since Matthew was Jewish and his first language was Aramaic, while Luke was Gentile and his first language was probably Greek. This explains why Matthew's version sounds more like the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms, with parallel lines saying the same thing two different ways: E.g. "your kingdom come, your will be done" and "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Luke's version is more efficient, lacking the poetic repetition, which is just what one would expect from someone translating the original Aramaic poetry into Greek. There are also a few other small differences in Luke's version. For further reading, see Tim LeCroy's "Why Do We Say the Long Ending of the Lord's Prayer?" at <https://pastortimlecroy.wordpress.com/2012/09/06/long-ending-lords-prayer/>

purpose helps keep our prayers on track with the mission of the kingdom, rather than our various appetites and whims.

**Provision.** “Give us each day our daily bread.” Luke 11:3. Jesus prays for God’s provision in the mission, asking for daily bread, which describes much more than physical nutrition. As Martin Luther wrote in his Small Catechism, Jesus asks for “everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious employees, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.” In other words, Jesus prays for the provision of whatever we may need to fulfill our mission as ambassadors of the kingdom. Again, if our earthly bosses, being evil, can somehow compensate us adequately, then how much more will our heavenly Father give generously to meet our needs as his governors.

**Promise.** “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.” Luke 11:4a. It’s no accident that this prayer immediately follows Jesus’ teaching on love of God and neighbor in Luke’s Gospel. In response to Jesus’ teaching, we now have the opportunity to pledge our allegiance to the King, by promising to love our neighbors in the same way that God has loved us. As God has forgiven us, so also will we forgive others. In keeping the chain reaction of forgiveness going, God’s kingdom continues to appear and grow.

**Protection.** “Lead us not into temptation.” Luke 11:4b. Jesus invites us to pray for protection against rebellion, the sin that caused the whole problem in the first place. Temptation is both our enemy and God’s enemy, so he loves to protect us against it.

These five elements—Praise, Purpose, Provision, Promise and Protection—constitute Jesus’ model prayer for us. By praying in this way, we’re able to tap into the same power source that Jesus uses.

## THE RESPONSIBILITY OF POWER IN JESUS’ KINGDOM

It was through prayer that Jesus was empowered by his Father to be our Savior and King. And it is through prayer that we too are empowered to serve as ambassadors of Jesus’ Kingdom. Now that we have a way to tap into that power, what are we to do with it? Given that we have precisely the same power source as that of the Lord Jesus Christ, what is our responsibility?

We must use it. Always. Incessantly, as Paul writes in 1 Thess 5:17. We all have been given work to do for the life of the world, yet we’re powerless without the Father. What else can we do but pray?

Think of what God is calling you to do. What resources do you truly need to do it? Are you following Jesus’ example in turning to the Father to resource and empower your life? Asking of our Father is the responsibility of power in Jesus’ kingdom.

Particularly when it comes to politics, we Christians in the USA often have a minimalist view of our responsibility. We think of politics as something we do every time there’s an election. Maybe

we're diligent and we do our homework before going to the polls. Or maybe we don't have the time, so we just show up and vote on election day. But in any case, after the election results are in, we think we're done with politics for awhile. Yet that's not how it should be for those who have the same power source as that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What's our first and foremost political responsibility? In 1 Tim 2:1-2, Paul urges us to make prayer for our leaders part of our daily bread.<sup>2</sup> The kingdom of God can grow in any conditions, and is indeed popping up in some of the most unlikely places around the world. Nevertheless it is God's preference, according to Paul, that his people be able to serve him in the context of a stable and benevolent government. For this reason, the Lord urges us to pray for our leaders.

I'm ashamed to say that I have spoken ill of various political leaders on many occasions during my life. As Christians we aren't forbidden from criticizing our leaders—Jesus himself criticized various religious and political leaders in his day. But Jesus knew what he was talking about, while I often haven't. I've spoken ill of leaders I know very little about, especially in the complexity and challenges of their offices. It's only in recent years that I have begun to glimpse how tough life can be for our political leaders, and I'm sorry now for how hard I've been on them.

I'd like to suggest that we all make every effort not to speak critically of anyone, especially anyone in politics, without having first spoken with the Father on behalf of that person. I fear that we all have heard Christians speaking ill of politicians many more times than we've heard prayers for them. Until we're able to reign in our tongues and make a radical reversal in this regard, we should probably take a break from political commentary.

A good place to begin in learning how to pray for our leaders is by learning from the prayers we've inherited through the Anglican tradition. Praying for our leaders, by name, is deeply ingrained within our tradition.<sup>3</sup> This practice of praying daily for the government and government leaders is something we can take from Sunday worship into our homes and community groups. It is our great privilege and responsibility to pray for them in this way.

But let's go further than simply mentioning leaders by name. Let's lay before the Lord the issues and concerns that contribute to the growing sense of powerlessness here in the USA. For example, what do you think we should do about guns? I have some ideas, but the best idea is one we often forget: to ask our Father to put a stop to the violence. Not that we shouldn't also consider various legislative options, but prayer is our most powerful weapon in this fight. Because we can ask of our Father, we are the most powerful people in Washington. No one has more power than we do. But with great power comes great responsibility, so we must pray for our own government.

“Ask,” Jesus says in v9, and “it will be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther did this when he prayed for "pious and faithful magistrates" and "good government."

<sup>3</sup> We used to pray every Sunday for “Barack” and “Muriel,” but some thought that the informality sounded too patronizing of them. We now include their last names, in order to remove a potential stumbling block, but I regret the lost sense of love and respect that came from the ancient tradition of praying for them on a first name basis.

knocks it will be opened.” Have you done this? Or have you left it to those who, sadly, have absolutely no connection with the Father.

Imagine what our government might be like if we prayed in this way. Imagine what our presidential candidates might become if we prayed for them as Paul said. Imagine what might happen with immigration, and guns, and education, and all the other issues, if we spoke about them on our knees before speaking about them with others. For us, politics begins here, by asking, seeking and knocking at the door of our loving, heavenly Father.