

Have you ever noticed the way things are laid out in a grocery store? The meat and dairy—things people most often need—are in the back. To get there, you have to pass many other items along the way. Along the way, you just might see something else that you discover you need to pick up and buy. Finally, at the end of the shopping run, as you stand in line to check out, you see a nice collection of sweets—candy bars, gum, and junk food of various types. As you stand in line to pay for the things you really need, you are suddenly surrounded by things that you didn't desire before but that now look awfully appealing and attractive. While many grownups will look and decide against these charming collections of chocolate and caramel, children are often restrained **only** by their lack of money. So, they turn to mom and dad and ask for one of those candy bars in the aisle. The parents, in turn, must muse over whether to give in or decline, but in doing so, they are looking out for the child's interest.

At other times, children will ask for larger, more expensive things. There's a joke about a boy who asked his mother for a new bicycle. He asked and asked and asked. After refusing several times, the mother finally tried to divert the boy's demands elsewhere. She suggested, "Why don't just ask Jesus for a new bike?" The boy decided he liked the idea, but he didn't know how to go about asking Jesus for something. He sat down to write a letter. "Dear Jesus," he started, "I've been a good boy and..." The boy stopped writing and tore up the paper, knowing that he had been far from good over the past several months. He started again, "Dear Jesus, I haven't been good lately, but I'm going to try, so can you please give me a bicycle?" The boy again stopped writing and tore up his paper. He realized that he did

not even really want to try to be good. Giving up on the letter, he decided to go to church to see if he could figure out there how to ask Jesus for a bike.

He walked into the church ready to go and pray when he noticed some of the statues near the entrance. He saw a small statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and suddenly had an idea. When no one was looking, he put the statue in his backpack and ran home. When he got home, he got his pencil and paper out once again and wrote, “Jesus, I’ve got your momma. If you ever want to see her again, you’ll give me a new bicycle.”

This boy is certainly not a role model for prayer. Attempting to blackmail the Lord is not the way to receive God’s graces. Jesus, in fact, does teach us how to pray. Today’s Gospel from Luke 11 contains a shorter version of the Lord’s Prayer as well as some instructions from Jesus about prayer in general. When the disciples ask Jesus how they are to pray, he gives them the basic structure of the prayer we know so well by now. He starts by addressing God as ‘Father,’ telling us to do the same. He puts a relational title on God rather than a name. Jesus can then speak of the Father’s name as ‘hallowed’ or ‘holy,’ reminding us of God’s proclamation of His name in Exodus: “I am who am.” Calling God ‘Our Father’ does not limit Him to the level of human fathers; rather, it exalts human fatherhood as a participation in the ultimate fatherhood of God. Some people say that they have trouble relating to God as Father because they have not known good fatherhood in their lives. I understand how this could be difficult, but we must remember that God is the perfection of fatherhood, the ideal and perfect Father, not merely the sum of imperfect human fathers.

Next, Jesus prays, “Your kingdom come.” God’s kingdom is not like an earthly kingdom with territory, armies, and the like. Rather, the desire for God’s kingdom is a desire for God’s order and design, the desire that God rule inside of each one of us. Moving from the spiritual to the tangible, the next petition requests, “Give us each day our daily bread.” Asking for daily bread reflects our constant dependence on God. We need His help every day of our lives. We can’t simply gather enough grace on Sunday and expect that it’s all we need from God for the whole week. Instead, we must turn to prayer and service to God every day of the week throughout our lives. By praying for bread here, Jesus also shows us that prayer is not detached from our earthly lives. Prayer must be part of our search to satisfy our needs—both physical and spiritual.

“Forgive us our sins for we forgive everyone in debt to us.” This sentence illustrates the dual effect of sin. Sin hurts our relationship with God as well as our relationship with other persons on earth. We ask God to forgive us our sins so that we can be restored to right relationship with Him. We also pledge to forgive those who sin against us. We resolve here to do our part in repairing the damage done on earth not only by our own sins but even by others’ sins against us. At the same time, we recognize the wonderful gift from God that is the forgiveness of our sins, and thus we proclaim our purpose to share that gift with others.

Finally, the prayer ends, “Do not subject us to the final test.” The more familiar translation, of course, is “Lead us not into temptation.” We must understand, though, that God is never the source of temptation.

Temptation comes from the Evil One. In asking God to keep us from temptation, we are asking Him to lead us away from our moral weaknesses, to keep us from the possibility of sin, to keep Satan away from us that we may not be tempted. In the Book of Job, God allows Satan to tempt Job up to a point because God knows that Job can withstand many temptations. For us who are weaker than Job, He stops Satan's temptations before they get that far. From another perspective, we can say that we are never forced to choose an evil action. We always have the possibility of avoiding sin and choosing the Good, even if sometimes it's much harder to choose the Good.

After giving his disciples this prayer, Jesus speaks to them about the need to be persistent in prayer. He uses the example of a man knocking at the door late at night, a man whose friend will eventually answer because of the man's persistence if not because of their friendship. Jesus instructs us, "Ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." These instructions are easily misunderstood if we are not careful. As written and proclaimed here, they seem to suggest that every knock will be answered immediately, every search will find something instantly, and every request granted on the spot. We know from our own experience that such is not the case, not even in the realm of prayer. I'm sure every one of us here has prayed for something that ultimately did not come to pass. When Jesus says, "seek...ask...and knock," He does not say do it once and expect results right then and there. No, instead, Jesus instructs us to ask, seek, and knock continuously. In English, when we give a command or instruction, there's nothing in the verb to tell us whether that's one time or many, but in Greek there is such a difference. So, when

Jesus says, “seek ...ask...and knock,” He is saying “ask constantly...keep on seeking”...and yes, we might even say, “knock, knock, knock on heaven’s door.”

This type of continuous asking, this constant knocking and seeking is exemplified in the story of the boy asking for the bicycle. Ultimately, he chose a poor method of seeking that bike, but we can’t say he was not persistent. This persistence is better exemplified in Abraham’s appeal to the Almighty on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah that we heard in Genesis 18. He starts by asking God to spare the cities if even 50 innocent people can be found and eventually works that number down to 10. What is the result of Abraham’s persistence? Does He change God? In reality, no. God was already just and merciful. He had no intention of sweeping away the innocent with the just, but Abraham’s appeals helped Abraham to learn about God.

Similarly, when we pray to God constantly for something, we do not change God. Rather, through our prayer, God changes us. Through prayer, if we do not get what we want, we can still come to understand something about God and His action in our lives. Like a child deprived of that candy bar in the checkout line, we may someday come to appreciate the good things God is doing for us by not giving us everything that we ask for right away. Through our persistence in prayer, God will give us much. It might not be the fish, the egg, or the candy bar that we think we need, but it also will not be a snake, a scorpion or a poison. Through it all, we constantly ask, seek, and knock. We constantly pray to the One who constantly loves and provides.