

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—28Jul19**  
**Lk. 11**

**“The Parking Space Debate”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

There is an ongoing debate among theologians that involves *parking spaces*.

The question at issue is this: Is it ever permissible, when you're driving around in your car and looking for a place to park—is it ever permissible to *pray* that you will find one? Is it proper to ask God for a parking place?

Some Christians will say yes. They believe that God is concerned with every aspect of our lives, and because God is all-powerful, he is able to respond to all our needs, however minor.

But other theologians question this position. While they acknowledge the power of God to do anything that it is possible to do, they think that it's selfish to bother the Lord of the Universe to find us spaces to leave our cars!

I myself don't have a firm opinion either way on this issue. And, because I live in New York City, I don't do much driving—or looking for parking spaces!

Yet *when* we can ask God for things remains an important question for all Christians. Asking is an essential practice of the Christian religion.

Jesus gives some of his teaching about this form of prayer in today's Second Lesson. There, Jesus says quite bluntly, “Ask, and it will be given you.”

Then, after noting how readily people give to children, Christ reinforces the point. He says, “If you then, who are evil, [that is you who are sinful and imperfect, if you] 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!” In other words, we can expect a loving God to be a generous God.

But Jesus recognized that not all petitions for divine help are legitimate. The mother of two of his disciples once came up to him and asked him to guarantee that her sons would be rewarded with prime seats in Heaven.

As Christ remarked at the time, this was asking a bit much! As children of God, we should serve God without caring for any benefits we might get from our service. Heaven is its own reward.

Still, all of us need things. Jesus tells the story in the Lesson of a person who wants food to feed a guest who arrives in the middle of the night. The person bangs on the door of his neighbor and wakes him up in order to borrow something to eat.

Jesus is imagining all the people of the earth banging on God's door and asking him for things that we need! And yet, God answers our prayers.

Much of the Gospels consists of stories of people coming up to Jesus in the hope that he could give them what they needed.

People usually wanted to be healed of their illnesses and disabilities. In most cases, Jesus grants their requests by using the mysterious healing power that God had given him. But, as Jesus taught, it was important for people to ask first. “Ask, and you shall receive.”

Why was that important? Well, the requests we make to God establish a *relationship*. That's how our prayers are supposed to work.

Prayers for our personal needs are technically called, “petitionary” prayers. During the Middle Ages, for example, kings reigned with absolute power, and the only way to get political favors was to submit petitions to the king.

These were specific formal requests. Of course, if the petitioner was a friend of the king to start with, he would be more likely to have his request granted.

So, we “petitioners” make our requests to God for what we need, and God responds in the context of the relationship we have with him as his “children.”

Notice that, in the Christian philosophy, human beings aren’t *naturally* “children of God.” Yes, all human beings are born *creatures* of God; all are part of his natural creation. All of us are loved by God.

But it is only when we are “in Christ”—that is, when we share Christ’s spirit—that we become “children of God” in the theological sense of the term. More than mere creatures, we become part of God’s family.

What is the practical value of this theology? Well, if you have a day-to-day relationship with God, you might find yourself praying for a parking spot. That might be a natural part of your relationship. While the request is undoubtedly trivial, the relationship isn’t.

Still, we are sometimes afraid to pray for things because our asking seems self-indulgent. Surely, God has more important concerns to worry about than mine!

The answer to that is that asking should be a regular part of our prayer life. In today’s Second Lesson, the disciples of Christ ask him to teach them how to pray. Jesus responds by giving them an example. He gives them the most famous prayer in the Christian religion!

This Lord’s Prayer is a series of petitions. In the short version we have in St. Luke’s Gospel, we are taught to ask for our daily bread—which is to say, to pray for the things that we need on a regular basis. We also ask for forgiveness, for tolerance of our enemies, and for deliverance from times of temptation. The Lord’s Prayer is a perfect example of how to make our needs known to God.

Of course, it is selfish to ask for things for ourselves. But that’s why we see this practice as part of our general relationship with God. And in that relationship, we include unselfish prayers for other people, praise of God, and thanksgiving for God’s blessings.

In other words, if we feel we are being too self-centered in our prayers, we can always spend some time praying for others!

Admittedly, there is a *nagging* aspect of petitionary prayer. As Jesus notes in the story he tells in today’s Gospel Lesson, the neighbor keeps knocking on the door. He knocks so long that he gets annoying!

So, Christ observes, “because of his persistence [the neighbor] will get up and give him whatever he needs.” Nagging is by definition repetitive—we need to keep doing it. Often, in asking prayer, we have to do a lot of asking!

And we also need to find our own style of asking God for things—which may or may not include parking places.

I find it useful to keep a prayer list in my head of people to remember each day. For years, my personal list began with *Jaye Shorter*’s name; Jaye was a long-time parishioner who died recently.

Finally, whatever style we adopt, we need keep the prayer relationship going. That way, when we need to ask for important things, we’re ready!

*Amen.*