

Open Door
[Luke 11:1-13](#)
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July 27, 2025

In the Fellowship of the Ring, the first book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, a group of nine heroes set out on a grand quest, travelling across the world to destroy a powerful weapon before it can be used by the forces of evil. On their journey they are pursued and harassed and attacked constantly by their enemies; every step they take feels like a struggle, with the burden of knowing that if they fail in their quest, the entire world will be plunged into darkness. At one point they need to cross a mountain range, and they decide to travel under the mountains through the Mines of Moria. But when they reach the Mines, the doors into the underground passages are shut, and there is no one there to open them; all they see is an inscription on the door, that says “Speak, Friend, and Enter.” And the heroes reason that there must be a password, some secret message known only to friendly travellers, some magic set of words or incantations that will open these doors to let them in. So they try everything they can think of - they spend hours sitting on the doorstep, puzzling over the riddle of those words ‘Speak, Friend, and Enter’ - trying every code they can think of, using all their cleverness to try and think their way in, using all their strength to force their way in, but nothing works. The doors remain shut. Until finally, after all of them are exhausted and ready to give up, one of them asks, well, if it says “Speak, Friend, and Enter” - what’s the word in their language for friend? And sure enough, as soon as one of them speaks the word ‘Friend’, the door opens. The inscription wasn’t a riddle, or a

challenge, it was telling them exactly what they needed to do to open the door - speak friend, and enter. The Fellowship had spent so long going through dangerous territory, encountering enemies under every rock and bush, having to fight for every step that they took, that they just assumed this door would be another obstacle that needed to be solved, another riddle to be deciphered, that the only way to get what they wanted was through their own strength and wisdom. They couldn't see that all they needed to do to open the door was just ask - Speak, friend, and enter.

And the disciples in our reading from the gospel of Luke were probably feeling the same way when they asked Jesus to teach them to pray. These disciples know their history – the history of God's people stretching back all the way to their distant ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They remember Moses, leading the people out of slavery in Egypt, bringing them God's law from Mount Sinai. They remember David and Solomon, establishing a kingdom and building the temple in Jerusalem so that God could dwell among the people. And they remember all the prophets like Elijah and Elisha who spoke the word of the Lord to the people so they could follow. All throughout that long history of following the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the people had learned that their God was a God who loved them passionately; the Lord their God was gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. And they also knew that God was a Holy God, so utterly different from creation and from human beings that they couldn't stand in God's presence in safety without being overwhelmed. When God gave Moses the Law on Mount Sinai, the mountain quaked and shook, and the people were

terrified, pleading with Moses to speak to God on their behalf so they wouldn't be destroyed. Solomon's Temple was so Holy that only the high priest could enter its holiest place only on the holiest day of atonement, to intercede for the people and bring their sins before God. Speaking to God, coming into God's presence, hearing God's voice, this wasn't something to take lightly. This wasn't a casual conversation. Coming face to face with the Almighty Creator of the Universe, expecting the power behind every power to listen to your requests, that was a big step to take. So it's no wonder that the disciples want Jesus to tell them the right way to pray. There must be some kind of secret, some formula to follow, some magic incantation you can speak that will ensure that God will listen. I mean, if you go see King Charles, there are all sorts of rules you need to follow – bowing at the right time, always face forward, call him Your Majesty the first time, and then Sir after that – and if you get something wrong, who knows what he might do? And if you have to be that careful with King Charles, who to my knowledge hasn't created any universes at all, speaking to God must be far more of a challenge, there must be infinitely more rules to follow, decorum to observe, if you want your requests to be heard, and maybe, if you're lucky, granted. The disciples want to know the right way to pray, so that when they speak to God, God will listen, God will hear.

And Jesus teaches them how to pray. But it isn't exactly what you might expect. The prayer he teaches his disciples, which is essentially the same prayer we still pray every Sunday, it isn't filled with formalities or decorum. There's no buttering up God with long statements of praise and gratitude, no lofty titles, no complicated formulas. Jesus just calls God Father, and then lists all the things that we should

ask God to give us, all the things we want God to do for us. Make your name holy. Make your kingdom come. Give us food and forgiveness and protection from testing. That's it. If the disciples were expecting to get a complicated set of instructions on exactly how they were supposed to approach the throne of almighty God, they don't get it from Jesus. Jesus just tells them to ask God for what they need, and to keep asking, never stop asking, keep coming to God over and over again and ask for what you need. Speaking to God, the creator of the Universe should be no more difficult, no more unusual, than asking a neighbour to lend you some bread – which in this culture would've been an entirely reasonable, normal request to make, an accepted part of basic social relationships between friends. When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, there is no formality, there is no pomp and circumstance, there are no magic words to say, no formulas to follow, when the disciples pray, they just need to speak, friend, and enter – just say the word, and the door will be opened for them, the way forward will be made clear.

And Jesus also makes it very clear to the disciples that this way of praying shouldn't come as a surprise to them. When the disciples are praying to God, it is true that they are praying to the creator of the universe, the God who thundered on Mount Sinai and spoke to the people through prophets and priests and kings, but Jesus reminds them first and foremost that before all of that, before everything else, God is their Father. The God they pray to isn't like King Charles, waiting to punish them for getting the words wrong, saying Your Highness instead of Your Majesty. God isn't even a mildly inconvenienced neighbour, roused in the middle of the night, grumbling and reluctant. Their God is a God who loves them

passionately; the Lord their God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That's the God they worship. That's the God they're praying to. And the thing about prayer is that HOW you pray is infinitely less important than WHO you're praying to. The most important thing about prayer isn't anything We do or say – the most important thing about prayer is the character of God, the identity of the one we are speaking to. God is our Father, who loves us, who wants us to have good things, who wants to bless us with good things. Even human fathers, who all too often fail and fall short of providing good things for our children, even we know that fathers are supposed to give our children good things, what they need – we wouldn't give them snakes or scorpions instead of food. And our Heavenly Father is infinitely more loving and generous and caring than the very best examples of human fatherhood we can come up with. That's who we are praying to – a Father who loves us, who wants us to thrive, and when you are speaking to someone like that, the words you say just aren't as important as the fact that you are speaking to someone so good, so loving, so generous, someone who wants you to be blessed. Karl Barth said that when we pray, "we may doubt the sincerity of our prayer and the worth of our request, but one thing is beyond doubt; it is the answer that God gives. Our prayers are weak and poor. Nevertheless, what matters is not that our prayers be forceful, but that God listens to them. That is why we pray."

And that is still why we pray today, when we gather as God's people and when we pray alone in the quiet of our hearts. We know that God loves us, but we still sometimes get that idea that there is some secret we're not in on, some technique

we need to follow, that if we could just pray more eloquently or if our lives were more holy or if our hearts were more sincere, then finally God would back up the heavenly truck full of blessings and we would finally have everything we want. We can still find prayer intimidating; we don't want to act too greedy, treating God like some kind of vending machine who will spit out our favourite treats if we punch in the right code, so we pull back and try not to ask for too much, we act as if God helps those who help themselves, so we better get to work and try harder to do it all on our own. And yet when Jesus teaches us to pray, Jesus tells us to ask – to ask boldly for what we need, and to trust in the one we're praying to, trust that even when our prayers are weak and poor, our God is strong, rich in blessings, ready to give good things to all his children. The thing that makes our prayers work isn't anything that we do – prayer works because we are praying to someone who wants to know us, wants to speak to us, wants to bless us with the things we need, with food and forgiveness and protection, with the presence of the kingdom and the power of his name. God wants to give us all these things, and all we need to do is just ask, keep asking, and when we ask, remember who we're talking to. Remember what God has already done – how far God was willing to go to show us just how gracious and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love our God truly is, that Jesus Christ went to the cross for our sake. Remember that the God we pray to considers us precious children worth dying for. And then ask for what we need. Ask, and it shall be given. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened. Speak, friend, and enter. Amen.