

“The Second Petition: Parables of the Kingdom and Prayer” (Matthew 13) May 22, 2011
Pastor John Bronson

Order of Worship for May 22, 2011,

Pre-service Song
Welcome and Announcements

Ministry Moment

Call to Worship: Psalm 97:1-12 and Prayer

Songs of Worship:

“Micah 6”

“All Heaven Declares”

“I Will Call upon the Lord”

“Unto Thee, O Lord”

“O Lord, You’re Beautiful”

Overhead

Overhead

Song # 530

Song # 531

Song # 641

Offering and Offertory

Special Music:

Message: “Parables of the Kingdom and Prayer” (Matthew 13)
By Pastor Bronson

Closing Song: “Lord, Be Glorified” Song # 186

Parting Word of Grace

Vespers
A study in Hebrews 10
5:30 pm to 7:00 pm in the Library

“The Prayer Closet”

May 15, 2011

“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.”
(Colossians 4:2a)

This week let us be united in praying for:

1. **Vance and Carol Johnson, Evangelical Theological college of the Philippines:** that staff & faculty will remain wholly committed to the Word of God & the gospel; that the Spirit will empower the message of God’s grace and truth for the conversion of many; that the Johnson family in the Philippines and the States will remain united in the faith
2. **President Obama:** God will enable him to discern and prefer wise counselors with the truth for effective governance over all others; the Spirit will persuade him to love righteousness, justice and mercy; he will be inspired by the Spirit to further the kingdom of God in the lives of all
3. **Children’s Ministries and Vacation Bible School:** the Lord will raise up dedicated volunteers to fill all their needs and will protect them from diseases and distractions; there will be a strong and joyful unity of purpose in the ministries; the Spirit will carry the effectiveness of the ministries deep into the Oroville community
4. **Military Personnel of the Week: SSG Matthew Basner** (son of Randy and Lou):
5. **Young Adult of the Week: Lottie Conley at Butte College** (daughter of Dave and Barbara Conley):

Today we are continuing our study of the Lord’s Prayer, the Second Petition. The Subtitle for today’s message is “Parables of the Kingdom and Prayer.”

What we are looking at when we look at prayer in this way, what I have called “deliberate prayer” but you could also call it preparatory prayer, is the prayer we engage in order that we would be ready to engage in the issues of life. We desire, when we pray this way, to pray according to the Word of God. Consequently this kind of prayer is a discipline; it goes along with the other disciplines of the Christian life. Why do we have disciplines? [We do so] because, particularly as you walk down the road a little while, you realize left to our own spontaneous preferences we will lose the battle against the flesh. Even as saved Christians if we do not exercise forethought, if we don’t make a plan to meet the eventualities of the day, then it is a certainty that at some point the demands of life are going to sweep up, grab us, twist us around and under the impulse of those sudden necessities we will fall back into the patterns of the flesh instead of staking our ground on the certainties of God’s Word. We must be disciplined. The prayer that I am talking about, I think the prayer that Jesus intended, would be built upon the model of this brief Lord’s Prayer. It is preparatory prayer. It is getting ready for each day.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray we are told in Luke 11 – you might want to turn to Luke 11, we are told there that Jesus said this: “Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’ And he said to them, ‘When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.’” We instantly recognize, of course, that is a little bit different than the version we are studying in Matthew. They were given on two separate occasions, and this is a clue to us that Jesus himself did not expect that we would simply memorize a set of words and repeat that set of words. I do that, probably most you do that one time or another. It is not amiss, it is not wrong to memorize the prayer and use it in that manner. But it would be wrong to only use it as a memorize prayer instead of using it as a model for all of the praying that we do, for that was Jesus’ intention.

This is more than a formality, this matter of how we respond to the prayer and the degree to which we let Jesus’ prayer talk to us, like a teacher does. Did you ever have a teacher who said “Johnny, would you please answer question #4?” Then Johnny answers, and the teacher says, “Now Johnny, I want you to look at the question again; I want you to think about the things we learned. I want you to organize your thoughts a bit better, speak a bit more clearly, and be sure you cover the whole subject.” Whereupon Johnny collapses on the floor! But that is what teachers do, and that is what the Lord’s Prayer does to us: it talks to us.

Notice what Jesus goes on to say – we are still in Luke, 11:5-13 – notice, “And he said to them, ‘Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, “‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’”; and he will answer from within, “‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.’” I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence [meaning the one who is asking for help] he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, 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 knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, 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 that

passage we are given four statements about our heavenly Father which we need to remember at all times when we are engaging in prayer. Here they are:

1. God our Father is more responsive to us than our friends.
2. Secondly, God our Father will answer. Notice this is not a conditional promise. This is not “if, maybe, sort of, kind of”; He will answer.
3. Thirdly, God our Father is more to be trusted to give us what is good than any earthly father. Those three are terrific, right? I mean if we actually, honestly right down to the core of our being had complete and unquestioned confidence in those three statements I think we would be much more ready to pray and much more ready to act on our prayers, being assured that in fact God heard us and would give the good answer that we needed. But it is the fourth that needs to capture your attention.
4. God gives His Holy Spirit to those who ask.

In my notes I wrote down, “That is a game changer.” What it means is that when I come before God in honesty and humility seeking to know His will and to do it, when I come with all of the knowledge I have managed to gain over time from His Word, when I come and I humbly submit myself before Him and I seek His face and I cry out to Him “Please, I need...” He not only answers all the particulars that are on my mind, but also says, “Here, I give you the fellowship and the companionship of My Holy Spirit to walk [with you] through the challenges you are about to face.” Oh! None of us need to engage the enemy on our own: in fact, don’t! None of us need to take up the issues of life as if we had to rely on our own wisdom. This is not necessary. Indeed, you need to not do that, you need to go and submit yourself to the Spirit of God and receive God’s guidance and wisdom. This is remarkable, those four statements about our God and the relationship He has with us; they are remarkable, and certainly address us in the conduct of our Christian lives.

As I said at the end of the sermon last week, God gives us two essential gifts for understanding and applying the parables, and today we are going to add a third. The two gifts that are necessary if you are going to understand and apply the parables – this simply comes from reflection upon the teaching of the Word of God – the first one is the gift of faith. You can look it up in Ephesians 2:8-9. The second one is the gift of love. When you take up the parables, that is when you engage in the Christian life, you say you want to walk as one of God’s warrior-servants in the world, it must be true of you that you are motivated by a faith in God, a confidence in God, and secondly that you are motivated by a love that comes from God and through you loves the world. Those two things need to be in place. Many of our prayers are not answered as we expect because we don’t come in faith and we don’t come in love. Consequently, when that happens to us, God says, “Oh my goodness, in order to give this person the good thing he wants, first I have got to change this person, because this person is not presently in any condition to receive what they have asked for.” Think about that! Recently we had a stunning episode in the life of our nation. We had a group of men flown by helicopter into a hostile environment in Pakistan, and they dropped into a compound and they went and took care of bin Laden. How many of us are ready to go and do that? Ah! How many of us have prayed, “Lord, enable agents from the United States of America to do something about bin Laden and to take him out so that he does not continue to be the master mind of continued depredation and destruction and discouragement and all manner of trouble to American citizens around the world? I have prayed that prayer, but I’m certainly glad God did not look at me and say, “Great, I’m going to make you a SEAL and drop you into the compound!” Whew, that would have been exciting.

Now let me take you then to an understanding of this matter of how God works on us to prepare us to receive the answer that we need to have. Turn with me please to Romans 5. This is speaking about the third gift, which is the Holy Spirit. Notice how Paul puts it here. In Romans 5 I am reading verses 1-5. Now as I prepare to read this I want you to think not in terms of dropping pastor Bronson into the

compound in Pakistan, that is a bad image; what I want you to think about is either when you were seven, or if you were raising a child who was about seven and the child said, “I want to go to Disneyland!” Under what conditions would you allow the child to go? This is what Paul says: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Let me go back to the seven year old. What I didn’t mention is that the seven year old had already failed to do any of his chores for two weeks. Consequently the seven year old is under a cloud of disapproval. But you, being a gracious parent, have said, “It is well; I forgive you. You are young. I will not hold this against you. Let’s start over and see if we can master the discipline.” Then the kid says, “By the way, I would like to go to Disneyland.” And you say, “Really? Under what conditions?” You see, by grace you have accepted this child and there is now peace between you and the child. He trusts in your forgiveness and now he takes a stand in that forgiveness and he says, “Trusting in that forgiveness, I am going to ask of you something wonderful: can I go to Disneyland?” What God does not say is, “Sure!” For God does not raise spoiled children. Instead, God says, “You need to be ready to carry the burden of My love to those who need it.”

So now we have an introduction, you see, to what needs to be [the case] if you are going to understand and apply the parables of the kingdom. Turn if you would please to Matthew 13. The question that needs to be on our minds at this point is this: “Have I asked for the Holy Spirit?” I am not talking about what some denominational groups call the “Second Blessing”. What I am talking about is the readiness to submit in obedience to the leading presence of God through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to empower us with His wisdom and strength to enable us to be His servants in loving the lost.

In Matthew we have seven parables. I am not going to go over all the ground I went over before. We begin with the parable of The Sower and the Seed or the parable of the Four Soils. We established last week that the essential statement of this particular parable is that the kingdom of heaven is operative as fruitfulness by God’s Word. You should write across this parable, “fruitful”. This is what Jesus says in this parable. He says there are some hearts so hard they have no response to the Word of God at all. And He says there are some hearts so shallow that what begins to grow quickly withers, almost immediately, especially if it runs into hostile territory. Thirdly, there are some who not only receive the Word, but they receive everything else as well, until finally there are so many worldly weeds growing in that particular ground that there is no fruit. The key thing to understand is that the only kind of soil that receives any compliment or commendation or assurance is the soil in which the kingdom of God is planted and grows and bears fruit. When we pray the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer we are asking God that we might be fruitful, a “place” of grace through faith and of hope and love and fellowship with the Holy Spirit. So when you are praying the Lord’s Prayer and you say, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come. . .” what I am saying is you add, “I want to be fruitful for Your purposes in bringing the truth and love of God into my world.” If you don’t want to do that, don’t pray the prayer, because if you don’t want to do that, you are saying, “I am not willing to be part of the kingdom”, and there is no point in asking for the kingdom to come if you are not willing to be part of the kingdom. That is how this works.

The second of the parables is the parable of the Weeds and the Wheat. This is an interesting contrast; you have to think carefully about this, you have to compare these two with each other because it is very curious what Jesus does here. In the parable of the Four Soils, the soil with weeds had no fruit. Notice that? But

here, you have a field sown with weeds, and the Lord says, let it come to full harvest. Now you know that tells us we are not dealing with the same thing. It is very important to take notice of that. You see the tares, the weeds, the particular weeds that Jesus talks about in the second parable don't represent worldliness like the weeds do in the four soils. Instead the weeds represent false spirituality. Remember what is of key importance about these tares? A tare looks exactly like the real thing. That is what Jesus says. A tare looks exactly like the corn plant or the wheat plant if you go rummaging around trying to figure out which one is the weed. When can you find out which one is the weed? Only when they go to seed, because they have a very different kind of seed head. Oh! False spirituality, hypocrisy, people who look like the real thing but aren't: this is what Jesus is telling us. The visible church, this one amongst the rest, will have spiritually dead people in it until the end of the age. Notice who puts the seeds there? [It is] the evil one. The effect of such weeds is to compromise the fruitfulness of the real plants. Bad news, especially if you are hungry. We are tempted, are we not, to weed out the weeds; but Jesus says, don't. It is not cost effective. The kingdom of heaven is operative here as perseverance despite resistance and even negative drag from the faithless in the body. When we pray the second petition of the Lord's Prayer we are asking the Father both that we might be counted amongst the true seed and be fruitful and that we will not be distracted by and waste a lot of time trying to get rid of fruitless plants. If you know anything about the history of the church you know that at times the church has expended huge amounts of effort trying to find out who are all the true believers and who are all the phonies. The product of that attempt is to rip apart churches, to destroy local bodies, to make people afraid, backing off, walling themselves off from the judgment of other men. Waste of time, destructive: don't do it. But at the same time, if you wonder about the people who don't show up, if you wonder about the people who don't give, if you wonder about the people whose testimony seems hollow, and you start becoming bitter and angry and frustrated and want to punch them in the nose: don't! You're losing. You are called to bare fruit; you are called to do the things that you know are pleasing to God. Focus on the positive; focus on those things that advance the kingdom and don't worry about the negative drag. That is not the end of the story, but it is an important part of it.

Third: the Mustard Seed. The third and the fourth parables serve to balance and kind of correct – which is what balancing means – the second. There is a possible misapplication of the second parable. That misapplication is when indifference, or the ability to work around and not become trapped in the weaknesses, deficiency and disobedience of some – don't get trapped there – is to withdraw into yourself and concentrate only on yourself and to concentrate on the purity and goodness of your own walk and to make sure you are faithful in your study and being increasingly untroubled by anybody outside of you and your most immediate friends and family. Did you ever notice anybody like that? As a defense against the painfulness of putting up with people who are hypocrites and faithless in the body and are therefore a drag, and you just struggle and agonize because they don't respond and you don't know what is going on, or you think you do and you realize you ought not to be that way; so as a response to that, you build a shell around yourself, a shell of personal righteousness and holiness. But then you have forgotten the purpose of the kingdom. What we are told here about the mustard seed? The mustard seed emphasizes the kingdom of God is something that grows. And how big does it grow? Enormous! The kingdom of God is supposed to be a vitally growing plant, big enough so that the birds of the air can come and build their nests. You see, the question that the person asked was the right question: why is my local church not growing. It is the right question for us to ask. Why isn't this [church] growing? We should be a mustard plant; we should be growing till we have branches stretching out all over this city: Yes? Why not? The eye of the soul is not supposed to be turned and focused inwardly in an intense introspective concern for personal purity; it is instead supposed to be focused upon the Lord Jesus Christ, saying, “I trust You to cover my sins; I trust you to cover my errors; I trust You to put me on the right path; I trust You, and because I trust you I will give my life to live for You for others. So my concern is others. How can I love others so that they will

know Your love?” That is not the whole, for we have the next parable also. What you have in the parable of the Mustard Seed is a foretaste of Matthew 28:18-20. Who can recite that? “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations. . .” How big a tree is that? [It is] world encompassing! So my question is, how many people have walked up recently to Dennis Hurt recently, who is in charge of our Missions Committee, and said, “Dennis, how are we doing for a worldwide mission? It is a burden on my heart. I want to know. Am I in a church that is actively engaged in extending the gospel around the world? That is the growth of the kingdom. How many have gone to Joel Cook, [our regional AWANA missionary], and said, “How’s it going? How many new AWANA clubs have you planted in Northern California, because I want to know how many churches that don’t have the gospel are now having the gospel (did you hear what I just said? How many churches that don’t have the gospel in it are now getting the gospel because AWANA has come through the door?). Growing. There’s more. I also include a reference to Acts 1:8.

The Leaven: The parable of the Leaven presents a parallel truth to that of the Mustard seed. It is a different kind of growth. Just as leaven transforms the environment in which it is placed, so the kingdom of heaven is manifested as an ambition to change one’s environment according to the Word of God. The handful of leaven permeates the entire lump of dough. It is designed to transform everything around us, having the power to transform the world in which we lived according to the truths revealed in God’s Word, that is, the whole counsel of God.

When we pray “Thy kingdom come”, we are praying, “I desire and commit myself to being an agent of change, seeking to see the righteousness, truth, justice, as well as the compassions and material assistance to the needy in my community. You do see here, don’t you, how these two parables that Jesus put back to back, the Mustard Seed and the Leaven, how they bridge the ungodly gap between liberal and conservative churches? Do you see that? For a long time the liberal churches said, “We’ll transform society with God’s truth,” and the Fundamentalist and evangelical churches said, “No, we’ll just save souls, and let the world go to hell.” But God says, “That is not what I want. What I want is saved souls to live in a transformed world.” What we say is what Mr. Camping has said: “No, we’ll do nothing; wait for the rapture; the Lord will take care of it.” God says, “I don’t want you waiting around for the rapture; I want you working now, transforming the world according to My truth” as the mustard seed grows into a plant and gathers all of the nations into its branches.” Earlier on I said, quoting a man in the fifties, we tend to have gods that are too small. We take pieces of the gospel and leave the whole to one side.

Before continuing with the last three parables I want to pause for just a moment and take up a question which I suspect has crossed at least someone’s mind in our assembly. The question is this: Could Jesus possibly have meant all this when He gave the few words of the Lord’s Prayer. I can see someone thinking, “Good grief, John, we’ve been going for weeks, yackity, yackity, yack!” Hey, I’ve sat in the pews. I know what its like to have these guys go on talking forever. That’s why I like being up here! There are a couple of things you must remember about Jesus. Jesus was fully human, wasn’t he? But He was the most extraordinary human being who ever lived on the face of the earth. What is He doing at this time? He is preparing His men to take over the charge that He received from His Father. How long do you think Jesus expected this prayer to be prayed? Until He returns. Consequently is it not reasonable to expect that He expected the prayer was capable of carrying the whole sum of all the issues that people would face over the time until He came back again? Yes. That’s why it is a model, a template. Jesus anticipated that this brief prayer would be the introductory model and guide for the prayer life of His people until He returned. We neglect it to our peril. Meditation on and prayer guided by this prayer will open our minds to the whole counsel of God’s Word and train our hearts in God’s love. That is what I am doing. I can’t do it of course;

the Spirit of God has to do it. In all honesty I could preach on this prayer until next December and I would not be done. But hopefully we will be done with the parables this morning.

Continuing with the parables, for the man who has meditated deeply and soberly on Jesus' words, whether in the Lord's Prayer or the parables of the kingdom recorded in Matthew 13, by the time you arrive at the next two, five and six, the Buried Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price, the valuation that Jesus puts on the kingdom begins to make sense in at least a couple of different ways. The practical reality is that there is virtually nothing this valuable to us, is there? I mean in all honesty, what or for what would you sell off all of your possessions? Furthermore, what would you think of me if I did that? You would think I was profoundly irresponsible to my dependent wife! See how easy it is: “Oh, I'm going to sacrifice everything for Jesus...especially my wife and four children!” Well, that is not what is intended here, and you have to be clear when you take up these words and take them in their context so that they mean what Jesus intended them to mean. Let me make a comment: Could being faithful to the gospel cost me my life? Absolutely! There have always been and there will always be martyrs for the Word. Some of you know this: there are more people dying [today] for their faith in Jesus Christ than anytime in the history of man. Jesus' words in Matthew 10:21-23 and Luke 12:49-54 are not theoretical. This is what Jesus said, “Brother will deliver brother over to death (how many Chinese do you think that has happened to?), the father his child (how many Chinese do you think that has happened to?), “children will rise against parents (do you think that ever happened in Muslim lands?) and have them put to death...” And He makes the statement, “. . .you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” As the following [narrative in the gospel] makes clear, Jesus' immediate warning had to do with the impending persecution between believers in Israel and the Jews: when you look at the context you realize that is what he is warning them about. But the same conflict and division has continued in every generation. Every Muslim who converts to Christianity faces the potentiality of death.

But what of us who live in less perilous places? We don't face that. What do we face? My contention is that we face something more difficult. When does the church thrive? When threatened with death! When does the church collapse? When bathed in prosperity. Consequently, the commitment that Jesus is talking about here is something like this: Am I willing to die for what I believe, that is, am I willing and prepared to surrender and get rid of with whatever conflicts with and compromises my devotion? Will we sacrifice our desires in order to stay true to our convictions? That is the issue.

Jesus' point in these parables first of all concerns the obvious fact of what it takes to effectively live the Christian life and therefore what God necessarily demands of those who sign up. Did you hear what I said? What God demands! I can hear it now: “Salvation is free.” That's right, it is; it is also costly. It cost Jesus His life. Besides, God never said it was easy to be saved, just that it would be free. By the way, who could argue with John Piper? Here is a book: “What Jesus Demands of the World”. I recommend that you read it if you are not certain about what I have to say. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. When we receive that Spirit, He takes us on a journey, and the end point of the journey is total commitment. So the question is: where are we on the journey? When we pray the second petition of the Lord's Prayer we are asking the Father to enable us to become citizens of that kingdom as well as to see the extension of His rule over all the kingdoms, and nations and peoples of the world. The kingdom of heaven is gained by those who sacrifice all else to obtain it.

Now the last of the parables: the Net. To think clearly here we need to recall that there are two commandments which are in themselves the whole of the Law. They are these: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all your heart, with all your might, with all [your] mind, with all thy strength (sic).” There is

the second: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It is the application of that second commandment which Jesus has in view in this parable. It is the readiness of those who have committed to follow Him to welcome all whom the wide sweep of the gospel brings into the fellowship of the local church. Beloved, anyone who walks through that door is to be welcomed by us – unless they have a gun. In which case you take the gun away and welcome them! The kingdom of heaven is operative as love to all, trusting God’s future judgment to separate the saved from the lost.

Along with the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, we again face, however, some serious questions, and I must clarify the questions. On a practical basis, how can a local church preserve its health and unity as a congregation if it is to be non-discriminatory [to all who come]? Let me ask you a question: how many of you know people who, if they were allowed to come into this church and were allowed to stay here for very long would cause trouble, division and all manner of grief in the body? I know some. Well, is what the parable of the net saying [that] you welcome them in and you say, here you are, you are part of the party and we are hanging out together until the end of the age? No. There are a couple of things to be aware of. The categories that scripture gives to us that we are to discipline people [are]: if they are false teachers, people who sow dissension, people who cause factions, sinful leaders who fall into immorality, as well as offending individuals who are unrepentant, people who live openly in ways contrary to Biblical morality. Two points of clarification should help: first, remember that the net is neither spiritually nor morally neutral. Recall that [last week] I talked about throwing the net out over [Olive] highway? The problem with that analogy, that picture, is that the net was non-discriminatory in its nature; but the people who are to be brought to the door [of the church] are to be brought to the door on the basis of the gospel: First point. Second point: the preaching of the Word sets the standards and expectations [for] life in the church. There is a great difference between being open and welcoming all who enter on the one hand, and tolerating disruptive, divisive, disrespectful, immoral, heretical and other such opinions and behaviors later on. “Father, when I pray this portion of the prayer I commit myself and I desire that the church will discipline unruly people.” How we pick and choose what we choose to believe, don’t we. What kind of kingdom is it that has no imposition and execution of its laws? What kind of kingdom is it that exercises no discipline or direction over its people? It is a kingdom dissolving! It is a kingdom losing its definition. It is a kingdom that is in collapse. It is a kingdom that is in disgrace. Do you want to read about that kingdom? Read Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And that is the condition of the churches in this land. But by the grace of God it is not the condition of this congregation.

It is essential for us to recall that the identity of a local church is founded in its convictions, and its convictions are displayed in its actions. “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come...” That is what I want. The kingdom is found wherever the Word of God rules in the hearts and minds of believers. Let the King rule.

Please stand with me: Gracious Father in heaven, You are very good. You are very patient. And oh how we tremble to think that we have fallen into the condition of Israel in her disobedience. Like the Prodigal Son, bring us to our right minds, and may we, by the prompting of Your Holy Spirit take up the words of this remarkable prayer given to us by Your Son, and may it through Your Spirit write the truth across our hearts and minds, that we indeed, by Your grace, Father, would be the people of God. It is in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Questions for understanding and application:

1. In Luke 11:5-13 Jesus gave four assertions regarding the Father’s response to our prayers: 1) that He is more responsive than a friend; 2) that He will certainly answer; 3) that He is more trustworthy than a father for giving what is good; and 4) that He gives the Spirit to all who ask. Do these match your experience, expectation and practice in prayer?

2. In what ways are you a fruitful soil for the Word?

3. Are you often disturbed by apparently either uninvolved or even resistant people in the church? What are some helpful ways of responding to such people?

4. What evidence is there that our congregation is growing and dynamic? Would you say our church is eager to reach our community and the world for Christ? How have we organized our church life to welcome newcomers?

5. Does it seem to you that Christians do or could have answers for our community’s and social issues? Do you see Christians from our congregation as change agents in our community?

6. Few are asked to die for the faith, but to be faithful requires some things be put aside and others “eliminated”. What changes in your life indicate you are totally committed to Christ?

7. “...the Spirit...takes us on a journey from spiritual infancy to total commitment.” Are you finding this to be true?

8. Which is harder, to welcome the unlovely stranger or to challenge and discipline the one long familiar?

9. “As long as all in the church willing support and participate in the life and ministries of the church, it is well. The unity of a local church is found in and built upon shared convictions regarding the Word of God.” Do you agree?