

When my sister in law was about sixteen or seventeen, she bought three cute, fluffy, yellow ducklings for my mother in law for mother's day. I think she happened to be somewhere that was selling ducks, and they probably cost less than ten dollars together or something, so she thought: Yeah, there's a GIFT!!

Because okay: Ducklings are the CUTEST. They're adorable. They have fluff, they squeak, they're yellow. You can put them in the bath and they float and swim. Like toys. They'll actually snuggle on you in a cute little duck pile if you're holding them. So cute.

But there's a reason why people usually buy their moms flowers for mother's day and not ducks: they are very high maintenance. They're livestock. So those cute ducklings went from being cute gifts to adult ducks that require space, food, protection from raccoons. They're nature's bandits and also, apparently, nature's decapitators.

Ducks are also not super-bright. One of them, Gus Gus, got himself tangled up in a soccer net once. And he was going crazy and flipping and flapping and quacking, because he was afraid, and after everyone freaked out and tried to get him out without hurting him, and finally, they got him untangled, and then set it down, facing away from the net, safe and sound, and what do you know: it's first action it did with its newly found freedom? It immediately turned around, and ran back right into the net again.

My mother in law never asked for these ducks, and when she had them she wasn't so crazy about them. In fact, they were an expensive headache. She got a gift she didn't want. A gift she didn't ask for.

So you might be listening, thinking: What do ducks as mother's day gifts have to do with prayer?

We're nearing the end of our current sermon series we're calling 40 Days of Prayer. Traditionally, in the church, the 40 days before Easter is called Lent, and we want to use these 40 Days to focus on prayer as a community. Because we need to be taught to pray. We're not so good at it: we rush through it, we don't make time for it, we don't know how to do it - all kinds of things get in the way of prayer. But we NEED it. We need prayer because it's our lifeline to God; it's how we get to know Him, how we hear from Him, how we refocus our life and our attention on Him.

And this passage here, in Luke 11:11-14, is at the tail-end of this passage where Jesus is teaching his disciples how they can pray. So here we get at how we ask God to give us good gifts.

And I'd like to wager that when it comes to gifts, we're not so good at it. We're not good at asking for good gifts from God. We don't know what's good for us. We ask for things that are about as practical and convenient as three ducklings. So we're going to unpack that, try and see what Jesus says good gifts actually are.

So let's look at this passage together, closely:

11 "You fathers—if your children ask^[e] for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? 12 Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not! 13 So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

So over this series, we've talked about prayer, and what happens in prayer and how we become connected to God when we pray. When John preached on "May your name be kept holy" Hallowed be your name, he focused on how huge God is, how great and worthy of our worship he is. But I'm going to take that truth and add to it a second truth:

We are very, very tiny compared to God. When we pray to him, we are coming to him as itty, bitty, teeny tiny. If God is bigger than the sun, and thousands of earths could fit into the sun, then what does that make us?

Well, it makes us microscopic. But He doesn't see us that way. How does God see us? Well, if we're to believe Jesus' words, scripture, what we have here, He sees us as children. The metaphor Jesus uses to describe the way God sees us is the way fathers, human fathers, provide for their children.

Well, that changes things.

Even though God is huge, and we're microscopic, he is like a father to us.

In verse 11, Jesus says: "You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? 12 Or if they ask for an egg, do you give them a scorpion? Of course not!"

Okay, so when we pray, even though we're praying to the ruler and maker of the universe, even though we're talking about a being that is infinitely larger, wiser, more important than we are, this metaphor tells us we can compare God to our earthly fathers.

Even though God is bigger than us, he still loves us the way fathers love their children. In fact, he loves us even better than human fathers do. Because when we pray, when we ask for things from Him, even persistently, as John taught us last week, God gives to us. When we seek Him, we will find Him. We knock, and the door is opened to us.

And God's gifts are good gifts. Not ducklings. When we ask for good gifts from God, something the way children ask for an egg or fish, when we ask for these good things, God gives them to us the same way an earthly father will give food to his children when they ask. If a child asks for an egg or fish, it would be cruel to give that child a scorpion, stone.

The verses that follow point this out: ¹³ So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

Have any of you ever given someone a really good gift. A "perfect gift?" Are you able to really answer that? I'd like to say: YEAH. I've totally done that. There was one birthday gift I got Jeff a few years ago that was just so awesome, like, I knocked it out of the park with that one. I couldn't wait to give it to him. It was perfect. He was so surprised, he thought it was amazing, like he couldn't believe I got it for him... I won the best wife of the year award. Seriously. But I CAN'T FOR THE LIFE OF ME REMEMBER WHAT IT WAS. And when I asked him, he was like: "Yeah, it was great!..." But he couldn't remember what it was, either. So yeah, not exactly the "perfect" gift, since we can't even remember it.

What is this good and perfect gift God wants to give to us? and here's the second question: **is it something we actually want or need?** Is it something we asked for? Is it going to make our lives better, or is it going to be something that makes life harder?

If we look at these verses, we start to get some answers. So let's start here: The good gift God wants to give us is His Holy Spirit.

Okay. Let's pause here for a second. What is the Holy Spirit? Well, it's one of the Trinity, it is God. Father, Son, Holy Spirit. God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This is one of those hard-to-grasp things. I'm not going to be able to explain the Holy Spirit in this short amount of time, because this is God we're talking about, and He cannot be explained - he is infinitely knowable and unknowable at the same time. But here's the reader's digest version: the Holy Spirit is God's presence in us.

Jesus said in John 15, starting in verse 25: 25 I am telling you these things now while I am still with you.²⁶ But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit—he will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you. 27 “I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don’t be troubled or afraid.” So Jesus said that the Holy spirit is a liaison, a go-between, something that speaks to us about Jesus, tells us he is true. That sense of God with you: that’s the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is our fuel, our power that changes us; it’s how God works in our hearts.

This might be freaking you out a little bit. That’s okay. We don’t really talk about “spirit” in this specific way these days, unless we’re talking about Miss Cleo or Sylvia Brown and some kind of weird séance stuff. But that isn’t what I’m talking about. The Holy Spirit is God.

The Holy Spirit is God’s presence with us. When we ask for God to speak to us, when we ask for God to heal, when we ask to feel God’s peace, that’s the Holy Spirit we’re asking. We may feel a little weird about it, but it’s not when we realize we are already asking the Holy Spirit to be with us without realizing it.

And if we’re going to keep looking at the metaphor of it all, the Holy Spirit is a gift from God, and the Holy Spirit is something as basic for us as eggs or fish are for children - as basic as food. The Holy Spirit is God’s good gift to us and it is His PERFECT gift.

When we come to God with our requests for the best he has to offer, for His good gift, we are asking God to send us His Holy Spirit, and he will always give it to us.

How many of you heard me say that and kind of felt like: “God’s perfect gift is.... PSYCH! The Holy Spirit!” I may not think that consciously, but when it comes to asking God to give me good gifts, that’s actually what I think. Because I don’t usually think of God’s good gifts as being the Holy Spirit, the gift God wants to give us.

I have a different idea of what a good gift looks like:

So at one point in my life it was: God, give me your good gift: An awesome boyfriend! (And yeah, that gift came along - and now he’s my husband). But that wasn’t God’s perfect gift because while Jeff is like Mary Poppins in that he is

“practically perfect in every way” he is not perfect. He couldn’t even remember what I got him for the perfect birthday present.

Okay, so then at another point in my life, my prayer was: God, give me your good gift: A career in academia where I can study English literature! It’s perfect! And as it turned out: that was not the perfect gift. Getting my master’s in English was actually a tough time in my life. And I didn’t end up getting my PhD.

Okay, maybe it was the wrong career: writing! I’ve always loved writing so much! So that’s God’s good gift -a career in writing, that’ll be my purpose. God give me that perfect gift! But here’s a bit surprise: it’s hard to make a career out of writing, actually!

Right, so maybe I was just wrong about the perfect gift that time. But then I prayed: God, give me your good gift: A job in ministry! That’s the perfect gift! At the time I was at a different church and I was ready to just pour my heart and soul into it, give my whole life for it, and I was like: yeah, this is what God wants, this is God’s gift because it’s for Him right? So that’s His perfect gift.

Well, I’ll let you in on a secret: church is not God’s good gift. Things at that church kind of crumbled, and actually, that crumbling is what brought me to Harbor, so that was good, but even now, I realize that church, while essential, while extremely important, is not PERFECT.

Okay. So that wasn’t God’s good gift. But let’s get away from career. What about babies? We always say children and babies are God’s perfect gifts to us. I got that gift this year, and it was a pretty awesome gift! So maybe it’s babies - babies are the perfect gift. Nope. Sorry. Babies are not God’s good and perfect gifts because they are human. They’re pretty awesome, and I love my daughter more than almost anything else, but she’s not what Jesus was talking about when he was talking about God’s good gift..

So the God’s good gift isn’t people, it isn’t a job, it isn’t a direction, self-help, and it can’t be bought at the mall or online. That’s just the way it is. We don’t know what perfect gifts are and we cannot give perfect gifts and we can’t even ASK for perfect gifts because we are sinners.

People don’t like that word. Sinner. Sin. It makes us kind of go: “Ugh, not a churchy word made up to make me feel bad about myself.” But sin is a reality. We are sinners because we’re human. Sin is not so much a *thing* we do wrong; it’s a state of being.

While I was saying how earthly fathers give us good gifts, some of you were probably thinking: "Not my father. He was not a good guy. I would've preferred a stone or a scorpion, actually. He gave me a lot of baggage - no good gifts."

True enough: as Jesus reminds us, we are sinners, sinful people. Sinful fathers, mothers, daughters, sons, children, cousins, friends, all that. We are sinful, and so we are not good anything. Only God is the true, good Father, and only God is able to give perfect gifts.

You know how just have that thing inside of you that makes you want to do things your way, all other people be hanged? That's sin.

You know how you want to lash out when someone points out something you feel ashamed about? That's sin.

You know how you try to prove your value to other people by doing lots of nice things for them? That's sin.

You know how you try to control other people, and then get angry when they don't let you? That's sin.

You know how you let fear dictate your decisions and your relationships? That's sin.

You know how you let anxiety overrun your thoughts and keep you up at night? That's sin?

You know how you care more about things that hurt and affect you and don't care much about the things that hurt and affect other people you don't know? That's sin.

Sin goes hand-in-hand with human existence. And hear me out: I'm not saying this to make any of you feel bad or guilty or sad. I want to be crystal clear: This is not about shame - Shame NEVER comes from God. But I'm saying this because it's reality: We don't know what good gifts are and we can't give good gifts because we have this sinful nature in us.

So what does this have to do with prayer? If we've got this sinful nature and don't know what good gifts are, and God wants to give us good gifts, how does this all tie back to prayer?

I'll tell you:

It's all about prayer because prayer is when we choose to align ourselves with God.

Prayer is about alignment.

God doesn't need our prayers - But He wants us to pray because when we pray, we are lining ourselves up with Him, we're focusing our hearts and minds on Him, and we're allowing Him to speak to us as we speak to Him.

And how do we become aligned with God? When we allow him to fill us up, from head to toe. We connect with God in prayer and ask Him to give us His good gift: Himself. His Holy Spirit.

And because he is our good father, he gives that to us.

But here's the thing: When we pray, we need to know what we're asking for. We need to ask for the right thing. We need to ask for Good gifts. And God tells us what it is we ultimately need to be asking for when we pray. His Holy Spirit. His perfect gift for us.

So if you're like me, you're kind of skeptical. You might be thinking: Hey, isn't this kind of like going out to dinner with some controlling person who orders for you without asking what it is you want to eat?

Wait, let's go back to the kid metaphor: Let's do an exercise. Go back to being your 5 year old self. We're going to take a multiple choice test and I want you to answer the way you would have if you were a little kid:

Pick the best career option:

- a.) Extreme stuntman/woman (you get to jump a motorcycle over a flaming 18 wheeler that's about to explode! Whoa!)
- b.) Ice-cream scooper (Minimum wage pay... but you get free ice cream every day!)
- c.) Professional Dog-petter (You get to pet dogs for eight whole hours... for free!)
- d.) An accountant. (great salary... but you have to sit at a desk and wear a suit and you have to do math. And it's not even for school).

Okay, so some of you were serious and boring kids, and you picked "d", but probably most of your kid selves would have picked one of those other options... ignoring the fact that the career is dangerous, fattening, or won't really pay the bills.

So while most of us are in the adult age range, we struggle with something that prevents us from aligning with God. So earlier, I listed off sins and struggles that many of us have. You may have other sins in your life, too. You may not be

following Jesus, or you may be someone who never skips a week of church: we're all in the same boat. Sin still dogs us.

But the Holy Spirit is here to help. Jesus said the spirit is an advocate, a comforter, a bringer of peace.

So when we wrestle with sin, we can ask for the Holy Spirit's help. But even more importantly, the Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin (as we see in John 16). Have you ever been going through life feeling kind of like something is weighing you down, and then you stop and you're like: "Ugh, when was the last time I prayed? When was the last time I came to God and talked with Him?"

That nudging, that prodding, that's the Holy Spirit. I feel that prodding. I'll be feeling uneasy, and suddenly I'm like: Oh my goodness, I'm living my everyday life like God doesn't even exist, which is BAD because I work in a church, so that should be pretty obvious! A few months ago, I was just sitting in my bed with my phone (which is a terrible habit) and I'm scrolling through Facebook, looking at news stories about war, about political unrest, about political tension and disagreements, about people's individual lives and struggles, with little kids who are sick, or families that are breaking up, and I find myself becoming more and more worried and anxious and sad, and then I realize:

The Holy Spirit, which lives in me, is a spirit of peace. I need to be praying for that Spirit of peace.

Or I find myself being super critical of other people's choices, or unable to understand their choices: are any of you like that? I have a couple of siblings with some issues in their lives, and I'm trying to help them. Give them good, common sense advice. And instead of taking that advice, they make some weird decisions (or don't make any decisions), and I see things on Facebook, and I'm like: WHAT THE HECK??? What are they doing??? Why can't they change? Why don't people change??? And then the Holy Spirit, which lives in me, does this little twist around my heart, like: "Well, wait a second: Does God want you to CHANGE people or LOVE people?" And I realize, ugh, that's right. It isn't my job to hand out advice - advice doesn't change people's lives. Jesus does. I just need to love and pray without ceasing. Lord forgive me for being critical of people instead of loving them unconditionally."

The Holy Spirit, which lives in me, is a spirit that convicts us of sin. And I need to remember that I should ask for forgiveness when I do wrong, and pray for the good of others, rather than trying to change them.

Like a good parent, God wants to meet our true needs: we need His help so we're not limited by our sinful nature. And only He can break the chains of sin, only he can free us from that limited sin nature through His spirit, through His work in our lives.

So how does this happen?

Do we just pray once and say: God, give me your Holy Spirit?

And then move on?

No. This is an infusion, this is something that like daily food, our daily bread, we ask for daily. We pray for this persistently. We need a constant refill from God, we need to realign, we need to want what God wants and ask for God to give us His perfect gift.

And here's what this verse tells us: God will give us MORE. More than what our earthly fathers can. More than what we think we need. We may not think the Holy spirit is a great gift, but it is.

The gift of God's Spirit is bigger than you can imagine. It's the gift of God Himself. He doesn't want to give us gifts that we can't use, or don't last. He wants to give himself, He wants to give us the gift of the Holy Spirit - Himself.

And that's what we really need. We need to pray for that Advocate that Jesus mentions in the book of John. Because we need peace in our lives.

So we're going to pray together to close, and I want you to consider how you can ask for God's good gift today.

One way you can pray for God's good gift: pray that His Spirit will be with you. Maybe this is all new to you. Or maybe you've been going to church all your life. But you just haven't felt like God's been with you. Take this time to pray and ask for His Holy Spirit, God's good gift. Ask God to allow you to feel Him beside you, with you always. That's the promise that God gave to those who believe: nothing can separate you from His presence. He's not far away: he will be beside you, with you always. So take some time to pray for Him to fill you with his presence, with His spirit

Another thing you can pray for from God's spirit: Pray that God's spirit and presence will be with other people in your life. This whole series, we've been asking you to pray for three people on these cards we handed out. And next week is

Easter Sunday, where we celebrate Jesus' resurrection, the reason why our church exists is because of what happened on Easter weekend. It's a great day to invite friends and family to church. So pray that these three people would feel God's spirit in their lives, that God would lead them back to Him. Pray that God would move in the lives of those three people, and if you feel led, invite them to our Easter service (or any Easter service!) We still have those seed packet invites, or shoot them a text (if you feel led, just do it as you pray!) One of our former pastors, Jed, used to say: "Never underestimate the power of a simple invitation." Because that simple invitation is only a little step; the real work is the work of the Holy Spirit, of God, in that person's life, bringing them back to Him. So pray for those three people, that God would Help them Come back to Him.

Let's pray.