

The Parables of Jesus

“The Midnight Knock”

“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

Luke 11:9

Sunday, August 2nd
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Please, do not write to me to tell me what a horrible person I am, but there are few things worse than when you are finally settled into a deep sleep and the cell phone charging on your night table begins to scream at you at a pitch fitting only a banshee. If you are unsure of what a banshee is, in Irish legend it is a female spirit who shrieks the announcement of impending death. Never a good thing—and at midnight, particularly terrifying. Especially for an Irishman. Again, yes amber alerts are important – but so too are the hearts of those awakened to a panic induced cardiac arrest. In a contemporary setting, most people know that after a certain hour you resist the urge to phone or text someone, and you will certainly refrain from arriving at their door past a certain hour. In ancient Judea too there were also certain social considerations that were commonly observed, which makes this little parable of Jesus so interesting.

We really aren't given all of the information we would like to have, but it appears that Luke records for us an occasion when the disciples came across Jesus as He was praying. This wouldn't have been unusual – for Jesus prayed often;^a and very likely the disciples had heard others praying, whether in the synagogue or on the street, as the Pharisees were wont to do (so as to be seen by men). However, there was something about the way Jesus prayed—a tone, an intimacy, a passion—something that drew them like none other. One of them summoned the courage to ask the question: “Lord, can you teach us to pray like that?” I’m sure the heart of Jesus leapt for joy, “I would love to teach you about prayer!”

Luke records for us a condensed version of the Lord’s prayer, found also in Matthew, but there as taught in the Sermon on the Mount.^b Jesus though didn't just give them a model of prayer, He went even further. There are three parables of Jesus which deal with the issue of prayer, all of them found in Luke, where “they are less about how to pray and more about attitudes to have when praying.”¹ One commentator says of this episode that Jesus “teaches the disciples that when they pray they should pray with a firm faith that their prayers will be answered.”² Often, this story of Jesus is interpreted as being about persistent prayer.

Kyle Snodgrass, in *Stories With Intent*, presents a convincing argument that persistence is not the main point of Jesus, rather it is a weak/strong argument, the interpretation summed up in verse thirteen, “If you then, though you are evil,

^a For instance: Baptism (3:12); before choosing the twelve (6:12); before first prophecy of passion (9:18); transfiguration (9:28);

^b Matthew 6:9-13

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.” The weak is the human response to a request, the strong being the Divine response to a request.

There are two terms that we need to clarify before reflecting on the parable, the first being that verses 5-7 is actually one long question, which begins, not with the “suppose one of you” of the NIV (and others), but rather, “Who of you...(*Tis ex Hymon*)”, to which Jesus expects the answer to be “no one.” In other words, Jesus is proposing that they place themselves in the shoes of the man who has an unexpected visitor, which results in them going out to knock on a friend’s door at midnight, looking for bread. Have you ever done that? Most, if not all, haven’t, the idea being almost ludicrous. In that culture doors were usually opened during the day, however, a closed door at any time signalled “do not disturb”.

The second point to be clarified is found in verse 8, a word that the NIV translates ‘boldness’, but other translations render ‘persistence’. The 2011 NIV has ‘shameless audacity.’ I like the way the Complete Jewish Bible translates “...because of the man’s *hutzpah* he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” Snodgrass provides a detailed examination of the Greek word here (*an-ah'-ee-die-ah'*) that is found in all of Scripture only here, but when used in extra-Biblical Greek literature most often means ‘shamelessness’, rather than *persistence*. In fact, this story is often presented so the man continually knocks to the point that the exasperated friend cannot ignore him. However, a simple reading of Luke’s text does not promote persistence as the main point. Most likely, the persistence is imposed from verse 9, which is again from the Sermon on the Mount.^c

Now with parables, often two thoughts are laid alongside one another, sometimes for comparison (to highlight a difference), sometimes as complement (one adding color to the other), but “the point here is based, not on likeness, but on contrast.”³ One of these things is not like the other. Remember, this parable is offered in response to the request of a disciple for Jesus to teach them to pray, launching Jesus into a story presented in the form of a question.

To summarize, Jesus says:

Hey, have any of you ever had an unexpected guest arrive late at night, and you find your cupboards are bare. Therefore, to avoid the embarrassment of not providing them with the necessary and required hospitality, have

^c Matthew 7:7-11

gone to a friend's house long after they have gone to bed for the night and, waking him and his entire household, ask for bread, and so to save you embarrassment, your friend has given you all you needed?

To put this parable in context, in Jesus' time people sometimes travelled later into the evening to avoid the heat of the day, therefore late arrivals were not uncommon – though midnight may be pushing things. Bread was baked in the home in the mornings, and because ingredients were seldom in great supply, only what was needed for the day was prepared, and rarely would it be kept overnight as it would become stale and possibly moldy. That the friend *had* bread was in itself surprising, and it may have seemed silly to Jesus' audience for the man to even think his friend would have bread. The story also seems to suppose that the home of the friend was a typical one-room house, the floor of which would have been tamped dirt, with a slightly raised platform on one side where the family slept together on blankets for warmth. Often in this type of home, animals were brought in for the night and they too slept under the same roof. Therefore, Jesus presents a scenario where the awakened friend would, in the dark, have to step over family members, skirt passed chickens, sheep and possibly oxen, to get to his door, all while avoiding the inevitable toe stub.

Again, remember this parable is teaching about prayer. It is presenting a picture whereby we who have a need approach the throne of grace to have a need met. Is it not interesting that the concern here is a need for bread, and in the Lord's prayer Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread, and for forgiveness – even when we wake up a friend at midnight looking for a loaf of bread. An old preacher, Clovis Chappell, frames this parable very well. First, the parable shows the reasonableness of prayer.

The Reasonableness of Prayer

Why do we pray? ***We pray when we come face to face with a need for which we have no answer.*** We pray when circumstances are beyond our ability, strength or wisdom. The poor man had an unexpected guest and had no way of providing for that guest. In that culture "hospitality was sacred." He had an obligation that he couldn't meet. It would have been entirely unreasonable for him to merely throw up his arms and neglect his guest, bringing shame not only upon himself and his guest, but also the entire village. But, regardless of the embarrassment, there was another possibility. He could go to a friend and make a request, even at this late hour.

According to Chappell, "the doorway into the secret place of the Most High is always open at the knocking of the hand of need, and at a knocking of that hand only." (157)

The Laodicean church was charged with being needy, yet in their pride did not realize just how needy they had become. Jesus counselled them to come to Him to have their needs met, yet in the scene He describes, they have closed the door to Him so that He has to knock. They had hung out the "Do not disturb" sign, even to their Saviour.

All of us will have needs for which we find ourselves with no answer. Marriage is a minefield for which there is no map; children appear in our homes with no instructions; we are confronted almost daily by circumstances that were not on our calendars.

On Saturday, March 14, Laurie and I were strolling leisurely through Costco with our biggest concern being whether or not they had the Keto snack we were looking for, when out of the blue my dumb smart phone rang and I was told that THQ had issued a decree that all Sunday services were to be suspended until the end of the month. Who could have seen that coming? Never before had I received such a command – "Under no circumstances are you to gather for worship!" Here was something for which, like the man of the parable, I was totally unprepared. However, like the man in the parable, I had a friend.

The man in the parable though knew he had a friend to whom he could go.

We are not told how many closed doors the man bypassed that evening. However, when he left his home he knew to where he was going; he knew upon which door he would knock. There was no sense knocking on random doors, upon the doors of those with whom he had no prior relationship. No, it was upon his friend's door he knocked.

Chappell writes, "Convince me that this amazing universe is only a vast and gorgeously furnished house without an infinite Occupant who is my Friend, and I, for one, will never pray again." (160)

Jesus points out to His disciples, both then and now, that we have a friend—no, more than a friend—to whom we can turn. Paul tells us, "He who did not spare

his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things.” Romans 8:32 (Jn 3:16; Rom 4:25)

The old chorus celebrates:

A never failing friend,
A never failing friend
Is Christ to me, so rich and free,
His favors never end.
A never failing friend,
A never failing friend;
Give up your sin and you shall win
This never failing friend.

Of our relationship though, someone has said, “We have already seen that prayer is based on sonship, “Our Father”, not on friendship.”⁴ It is reasonable for us to pray because we all have needs beyond ourselves, and we have someone to whom we can go with those needs. This parable also teaches us about the approach, or route of prayer.

The Route of Prayer

There *are* times when the intercession or accompaniment of others is needed, but here the man goes directly to his friend. He seeks no intermediary. He doesn’t tell his wife to go, or send a son. He himself goes directly to his friend. Listen, it is always acceptable to ask others for prayer, but make sure when we are asking them to pray along with us, that we are also along.

Years ago, we camped with friends at a particular location in the mountains of British Columbia, and found the accommodations where not as advertised. We were booked for a week, but discovered the pool water was swamp green (with emphasis on the green—and swamp); the shower facilities were dated and coin operated, and the restrooms closed at 11pm (because no one has ever had to use the commode after 11pm). It was decided that we would leave the “resort” (a term I use very lightly) early, and demand a refund. And so, Rob and Les and myself did what husbands do—we sent our wives to make the demand.

Thank the Lord that we can *“approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*^d

When you retreat for prayer, go directly to your friend. And when you get there, state your need clearly.

Stated his clear need

Notice the clarity of the man’s request. He doesn’t make excuses or beat around the bush; he doesn’t try to justify himself or blame the guest for his unexpected arrival; he doesn’t remind his friends of all the times he has been of help to him. He simply and exactly states his need – three loaves of bread. Now, these loaves were not Villagio Italian Style loaves you find at Independent, or sleeves of Wonder Bread. They were more like bread rolls – three being appropriate for a meal. He doesn’t ask for any more or less than what is needed.

In the Sermon, Jesus taught on prayer: *“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”* Mt 6:7-8.

I read once that an exhausted saint, spent after a day of ministry, fell into bed and prayer: “Lord it’s late, and I am tired. Amen.” Prayers do not need to become sagas – that’s only for sermons! Seriously, God knows your needs, and He knows your heart. The Coles notes version is just as, if not more effective, than some puffed up narrative filled with all manner of Christianese. If you have need, just spit it out. You don’t need to worry about giving God the flu.

He went directly to his friend, he stated clearly his need, and he was bold.

He was bold

Obviously, there was a knocking – a knocking bold and firm enough to rouse his friend from sleep. Some will say his knocking was persistent. Regardless, to knock upon a friend’s door at midnight looking for something you really have no right to expect to receive, requires a certain *hutzpuh*. You must really need something desperately to be so brash—so audacious. Many commentators note that only those who are earnest are capable of receiving the Fathers’ best.

^d Hebrews 4:16.

The story is told of a young boy who questioned his teacher about why some prayers are not answered. The teacher responded: Well, suppose you are sitting comfortably in your home one evening enjoying a nice warm fire, when suddenly there is a pounding at your door. Rising to see who is there, you open the door only to hear the distant giggles of a child who knocked, but had no intention of conversation. We must not be as such in our praying to God.

D.L. Moody, in *Prevailing Prayer*, notes: "We ask for blessings, but do not really expect them; we knock, but do not mean to enter; we fear that Jesus will not hear us, will not fulfil His promises, will not admit us; and so we run away."⁵

Blind Bartimaeus is a picture of boldness. Hearing of the approach of Jesus he called out repeatedly and boldly, ignoring the shushing of the crowds, but being determined to grab hold of the attention of the Son of David. His prayer simply, "Lord, want to see."^e He knew his need; knew there was someone who could meet that need; and boldly made his request – and received that for which he asked. You see, there is a reward to prayer.

The Reward of Prayer

Likewise, in the parable, the man received that for which he asked. If he had sulked at home, or thrown up his hands in despair and cried "Oh, woe is me!", he would never have received his loaves. The lesson on prayer offered by Jesus is summed up with the 'how much more' statement in verse 13. The contrast here is that if a disturbed friend will begrudgingly give you what you ask for at a ridiculous hour of the night, when there is every likelihood he doesn't have that for which you are looking, then how much more will a God who loves you, who is attentive to your needs always, and has more than an ample supply at all times, give you when you ask. Paul exclaims that the Lord "...is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us..."^f

Further Lesson for Today

There is also here a lesson that is very relevant to our time. You see, like the unexpected guest, a crisis seldom announces that it is coming. That is the nature of a crisis. An appliance will suddenly stop 'appliancing'; the car tires will

^e Mark 10:46-52

^f Ephesians 3:20

suddenly become too tired; it may be your health, that had always seemed so certain, unexpectedly giving way to a heart attack, or cancer, or a sudden slip leading to broken bones. A business that seemed solid in a moment can become insolvent. The one thing we can say for sure regarding the unexpected is that it will catch us off guard, and it often brings us to the end of our resources.

The current China corona virus that was on the other side of the world affecting one city, quickly hobbled the entire world, and all of us were quickly faced with scenarios that we had never before experienced. On top of everything else, there are calls for a complete overhaul of our society and many are saying we can't go back to the way things were. The scary thing is, no one is saying what will be built in its place; or, who it is that will do the building. What lies ahead for the rights and freedoms that we enjoyed before the crisis? What morals; what ethics; what institutions and systems that have served mankind so well will be thrown out and, who will decide what is thrown out?

One thing is for sure, no one knows. No one alive today has been through this before and the strife blossoming in cities across the globe is a sign that many have come to the end of themselves and they are turning to anything that appears to provide what is needed – however, there is only one thing—one person—to whom we can turn who has what we need, all that we need—and is ready to meet our needs if we only but ask. The old preacher reminds us: Some people think God does not like to be troubled with our constant coming and asking. The only way to trouble God is not to come at all.⁶

Let's not trouble God – let's go to Him and plead for our bread to meet the needs of today, knowing there will be bread for tomorrow, and for the tomorrows after that.

Wisdom of the Saints

“Jesus at prayer is a frequent and very important image in this Gospel...” (153)

Craddock, Fred B.. Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (p. 153). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

“the point is that if our friends answer importunate (shameless, NEB) appeals, how much more will God who desires to give us the kingdom.”

Craddock, Fred B.. Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (p. 154). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

Some people think God does not like to be troubled with our constant coming and asking. The only way to trouble God is not to come at all.

D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 90

The prospect of gaining an object will always affect thus the expression of intense desire.

Dr. Austin Phelps, quoted in D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 97

Easiness of desire is a great enemy to the success of a good man's prayer.

Jeremy Taylor, quoted in D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 97

Sir Walter Raleigh ask a favor of Queen Elizabeth, to which she replied, “Raleigh, when will you leave of begging?” “When your Majesty leaves of giving,” he replied.

D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 99

If a person refused to entertain a guest, he brought disgrace on the whole village and the neighbors would have nothing to do with him.

Warren Wiersbe, Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol I., 215.

Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance; it is laying hold of His highest willingness.

Warren Wiersbe, Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol I., 215.

It is important that we should remember that in the parable there is a friendship existing between the one who asks and the one who rises and gives, and that the request arises out of necessity and not out of selfishness.

Norval Geldenhuys, NICNT: Luke., 324.

Although the NRSV begins with “suppose,” verses 5-7 are actually a long and involved question that begins “who of you...” and expects the answer “no one.”

Robert C. Tannehill, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke., 189.

Interpretation of this term is difficult. In spite of the NRSV, “persistence” is not quite accurate, for *anaideia* really means “shamelessness,” the negative quality of one who offends social standards.

Robert C. Tannehill, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke., 189.

The “faith” commended in healing stories is a boldness that refuses to be stopped by social proprieties...[it] is not only persistent but bold, even impudent.”

Robert C. Tannehill, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke., 190.

These verses (9-10) appear to be addressed to people who are fearful, because they see themselves as unworthy, or passively resigned, because they believe that nothing can change.”

Robert C. Tannehill, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke., 190

“...If we do not want what we are asking for enough to be persistent, we do not want it very much. It is not such tepid prayer that is answered.

Leon Morris, TNTC: Luke, 214

Shameless persistence—that is what the Greek word means

William Barclay, DBS: Luke, 148.

...we can only guarantee the reality and sincerity of our desire by the passion with which we pray.

William Barclay, DBS: Luke, 149.

Several details are debated: the size of the loaves, how many were needed for a meal, how frequently bread was baked,¹¹ and whether a late arriving guest was unusual or common as a result of people traveling at night to avoid the heat of the day. The understanding of the parable does not depend on such questions, nor can they be satisfactorily answered.

Snodgrass, Klyne R.. Stories with Intent . Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

Illustrations:

Mother praying for two prodigals (*Prevailing Prayer*, 93-94) who meet at street corner planning to then go off on a night of debauchery. When one was late, the other was attracted by gathering crowd. Came upon a Moody conference, where he was moved to ask for forgiveness. Other brother, arriving late, waits until attracted by gathering of young men entering a church, where he hears the gospel and gives heart to the Lord. The first son, rushing home to share news of his conversion with his mother, finds her on her knees praying for his soul. Not long after the second arrives, thus providing the reward for prayer—two sons welcomed into the Kingdom.

Women praying for husband every day for twelve months – “Her husband did not allow her to speak to him on the subject; but she could speak to God on his behalf”. After twelve months and nothing, she vowed to prayer six more months, still nothing. Thought of giving up but refused, vowing to pray as long as she had breath. That very day he arrived home and went upstairs instead of the dining room (as was his habit). When he did not come down, she went upstairs and found him on his knees crying out to God. (*Prevailing Prayer*, 94-95)

Endnotes:

¹ Snodgrass, Klyne R.. *Stories with Intent* . Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

² Norval Geldenhuys, *NICNT: Luke.*, 324.

³ William Barclay, *DBS: Luke*, 149.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 215.

⁵ D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 91.

⁶ D.L. Moody, *Prevailing Prayer*, 90