

The Friend at Midnight

Luke 11:5-13

Turn to Luke 11. This is a parable about prayer. The teaching of Jesus is changing my mind about praying to God. God hears our prayers more eagerly than I thought, and he is more ready and willing to give what I asked for than I thought. I am still chewing on these things, but that is where this is heading.

I've been taught and have taught persistence in prayer. Keep asking, God will respond. What does that say about God? Does God wait for us to *earn* his response by asking many times? Do we need to change his mind, has he decided to not give, but over time we change his mind?

Do we wear him out by our asking, like the widow in the parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18), so that he gives us our request just to get some peace from us? Jesus says in Matthew that we should not think we are heard because of our many words. That's a pagan view of prayer.

I am not saying it is wrong to ask the same thing repeatedly. I am saying Jesus did not teach that kind of persistence. Jesus consistently taught that God is eager and willing to answer our prayers.

The parable of the friend and midnight is in Luke 11:5-8. We'll read that, and talk about it, and then we'll look at the next five verses (11:9-13) as well, which help us understand the parable.

*<sup>5</sup> Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup> a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.' <sup>7</sup> And suppose the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' <sup>8</sup> I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.*

The first thing to understand here is that God is *NOT* like the man in bed. That's Jesus's point. Even a grumpy person in bed at night will get up and give you what you need; if humans, being evil, are like that, how much more will God willing care for his children?

As Jesus tells the story, we are the friend who needs bread. Late in the evening travelling a friend of ours shows up at our door. People travelled late because it was cooler. Our friend needs food, but there is nothing in our house, and we know that our neighbour has bread.

So we go in the middle of the night to the neighbour's house and call to him from his door, asking him for bread to give our travelling friend. The man in bed does not want to get up, but does so reluctantly, and gives us what we need. That's the story.

Honour/shame culture, and hospitality – Two matters of ancient eastern culture don't change this, but help us understand it. One is that honour is the most valuable thing a person can have, losing honour and being shamed are the worst things that can happen to anyone, and that society was generally competitive about these things.

The other matter of culture is the importance of hospitality. When someone comes to your home, you treat them well, you take care of them, give them what they need, you show yourself to be a gracious and generous host.

And this is tied to the honour system. You don't just treat them well because you like them, or you are a loving person, you treat your guest well to show that you are a person of quality, you are an honourable person, you can be counted on to do the right thing.

This all means that when our travelling friend comes to us at night, it's important that we treat our travelling friend well. But we have no food! So we go in the middle of the night, which is rude and indecent, but what else are we going to do? We go at night to our neighbour in bed and explain the situation and ask the neighbour for bread.

And now the neighbour in bed is compelled by the same importance of hospitality to get up and give us bread. Even if the neighbour won't give us bread because we are friends, the neighbour will do it because we were shameless enough to come ask in the middle of the night.

Shameless or Persistent? 11:8b reads this way in the newer (2011) NIV: *yet because of your shameless audacity, he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.*

The older NIV reads: *Yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.* Most of your translations will probably translate it as "persistence."

I have taken it that way until I prepared for this sermon. But the new NIV is right on this. The word should be "shamelessness" not "persistence." The Greek word *anaideian* everywhere else means "shameless," someone who does not know the decent way to act, or does not care.

This is the only time the word is used in the NT. But it is a common Greek word outside the NT, and it never means "persistent," it always means "shameless."

Early on the church fathers began to translate this word in this parable as "persistence," perhaps because of asking and seeking and knocking in v9. Even the church fathers did not translate this Greek word as "persistence" except when they were talking about this Luke 11 parable; the rest of the time they used *anaideian* as "shameless."

There is nothing in the parable itself that suggests persistence. The parable does not mention "knocking" at all. As Jesus tells the story, the man just called once from the door, and man in bed responded the first time.

Going to your friend in the middle of the night is rude and indecent, it is shameless, and you would know it very well, but you need to take care of your travelling friend, so you wake your friend in the middle of the night. The friend in bed gives you bread simply because you were shameless enough to come at midnight and disturb him at that indecent hour.

Which of you? 11:5-7 are one question 11:11 begins, “which of you fathers ...?” 11:5 begins the same way, “which of you,” though usually not translated that way. When Jesus begins a line like that, the expected and obvious answer is “none of us.” Verse 11 - *Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?* The obvious answer: “none of us.”

11:5-7 should be translated as one question, expecting the obvious answer “none of us.” In v8 Jesus begins another sentence, “I tell you ...”, which means that the question is over.

Here is the Ed Neufeld abbreviated version: “Which of you, going shamelessly to your friend in the middle of the night to ask for bread, would be turned down because your friend did not want to get up?” [repeat] And the expected obvious answer is: “None of us. They would not do that.”

Jesus explains the obvious “none of us” in verse 8: (Ed Neufeld version) “Even if your friend in bed is grumpy and offended, and does not like you any more, still, because you were shameless enough to come wake him in the middle of the night, he will get up and give you bread.”

In Jesus’s words: *I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.*

The Lesson: And the lesson to learn, my brothers and sisters, is that God is NOT like that. God does NOT get grumpy, and God does NOT help us just because his honour requires it. Verse 13 captures the point of the parable: *If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your Father in heaven?*

In different words: *If your friend, though he was evil, would get up and give you bread in the middle of the night, how much more will your Father in heaven take care of you?*

Review: “Which of you, going shamelessly to your neighbour in the middle of the night to ask for bread, would be turned down because your friend did not want to get up?” And the expected obvious answer is: “None of us would be turned down. Our neighbours would always get up, even if they were unhappy about it.”

The lesson: *If your friend, though he was evil, would get up and give you bread in the middle of the night, how much more will your Father in heaven take care of you?*

The next two verses confirm this: <sup>9</sup> “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. <sup>10</sup> For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

Jesus thinks that the parable teaches us that prayer will be a roaring success! *So I say to you, or, On account of this I say to you: ask and seek and knock.* In v9 Jesus makes clear that asking and seeking and knocking will bring God’s response. And then in v10 he says the very same thing in different words. Ask from God, seek from God, knock at his door. Prayer works!

In vv9-10 Jesus is applying the parable in vv5-8, and that’s the application: ask and seek and knock, because God is NOT like the cranky neighbour in bed who reluctantly gave what you wanted. God is NOT like that. Evil people give reluctantly, God is a quick and cheerful Giver.

The parable and these other verses are all Jesus encouraging lots of prayer because God hears and responds. The parable does not invite us to pray rudely. The parable does not suggest that God is asleep. The parable does not teach that God is a friend. The parable does not teach that God will for sure hear us if we tire him out by ceaselessly asking the same thing.

Rather, the parable is about God and is a deliberate contrast to God. God is not like the friend in bed. God hears and responds warmly and eagerly. The parable is about the character of God.

Of course we should be praying all the time. Unceasing prayer as part of walking with God is a good thing. That kind of persistent prayer is the right kind.

What about unanswered prayer? This is what you are all thinking about, so let’s talk. I do not have a full answer for unanswered prayer. But I am nervous about the snake in these matters.

Long ago in the Garden, the snake said, “Did God really say that? It is not so. God is not as honest as you think, and does not love people as much as you think.” That’s the snake, and that voice is still alive and well in your mind and mine.

Jesus is teaching about God’s warm generous response to our prayers. It is not a blank cheque, but Jesus has a clear picture of God hearing and acting quickly. Jesus himself did not have an easy life, he had many disappointments. Lots of things did not go as he hoped. His prayers had to be a part of this.

He still says that if we being evil can take care of a rude neighbour, and can give good gifts, how much more will our Father in heaven hear us and take care of us?

What should we ask for? Luke 11 begins with the Lord’s Prayer. Jesus then moves straight from the Lord’s Prayer right into the parable of the friend at midnight. In the Lord’s Prayer, the only material thing we ask for ourselves is food for the day.

In the parable of the friend at midnight, the friend goes and asks for bread. Let's read vv11-12 - *Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? <sup>12</sup> Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?* Again, it is food.

Every time we have food, it came from the Father's hand to our plate. It's true for God's people and for the pagans and for the animals. The Bible is consistent. We live in plenty and have lost ground on this one when we eat without acknowledging him. We cannot imagine being without food, so we don't see God in it. Our loss. God supplies food to all he has made.

The Lord's Prayer, aside from bread, asks for spiritual success. "May your holy Name be honoured, Father, may your kingdom come, may your will be done. Forgive us our sins. Don't lead us into testing or temptation." That is not a prayer for an easier life, it is a prayer for spiritual success.

And listen to how Jesus ends this section on prayer (v13): *If you then, though you are evil, 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!* "Holy Spirit"? How did the Holy Spirit get in here?

The Holy Spirit is Jesus's parallel to the Lord's Prayer. The Lord's Prayer asks for the success of God's kingdom, and for our success in God's kingdom. It is a prayer for spiritual success, that we would be faithful to God and bring him honour and do his will. In one word, we are asking for the Holy Spirit. Praying the Lord's Prayer and asking for the Spirit are roughly the same.

What should we ask for? In Luke 11:1-13, two things: food for the day, and spiritual success as defined by the Lord's Prayer and summarized by receiving the Holy Spirit.

This does not mean we don't ask for other things. "Throw all your cares on him, because he cares for you," says Peter. And Paul in Php 4, "don't worry about *anything*, but in *everything*, by prayers and requests, *with thanksgiving*, let God know what you need! And the peace of God will guard you, and the God of peace will be with you."

In everything, let God know what you need. That's pretty much what Jesus is saying, but his words do aim us in two particular directions (1) daily food, and (2) spiritual success or kingdom success, as defined by the Lord's Prayer and made possible by the Spirit.

There are some significant NT stories of unanswered prayer. Jesus prayed three times that the cup of suffering would be taken from him, and it was not taken from him. Paul prayed three times that the Lord would take away his thorn in the flesh, which was most likely a painful physical condition, and the Lord said "no, my grace is enough for you."

I cannot sort all these things out. I do not understand, I cannot put all this together. We do need to pay attention to the kind of requests Jesus has in mind in Luke 11.

What's clear is that Jesus is teaching us about the character of God: we can be confident that God hears and responds.

“Which of you, going shamelessly to your friend in the middle of the night to ask for bread, would be turned down because your friend did not want to get up?” “None of us. They would not do that.”

V8 “Even if he is grumpy and offended, and does not like you, still, because you were shameless enough to come wake him in the middle of the night, he will get up and give you bread.”

What Jesus wants us to hear is that God is NOT like that. God does NOT get grumpy, and God is NOT reluctant to help us, and he is NOT hard to persuade. Verse 13 captures the point of the parable: *If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more your Father in heaven?*

In different words: *If your friend, though he was evil, would get up and give you bread in the middle of the night, how much more will your Father in heaven take care of you?*

Jesus speaks to us today in these words: “So I say to you who are gathered here today, because of what your Father in heaven is like, ask and seek and knock!” Amen.