

Teachings and Parables on Prayer in Luke

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Lk gives us more of Jesus' teachings about prayer—and more about Jesus' own *practice* of prayer—than any other Gospel. The mention of prayer in each of these stories is unique to Lk:

- The heavenly voice which speaks to Jesus after his baptism occurs while he is praying (3:21).
- Jesus prays all night before choosing his disciples (6:12).
- Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah begins with Jesus praying alone (9:18).
- The Transfiguration story begins with Jesus praying. (9:28)
- Lk's version of the model prayer begins with Jesus praying alone; after he finishes, the disciples say, "Teach us to pray." (11:1)
- Two of Jesus' saying from the cross in Lk are prayers (23:34; 46)

Similarly, Lk gives us two parables about prayer which are unique to his Gospel (11:9-13; 18:1-8). The parable in ch 11 is connected, both thematically and linguistically, to what comes before and after it, so those passages merit attention here.

The model prayer in Luke

As noted above, Lk 11 begins with Jesus praying. The disciples respect his need for prayer time, but when he is finished, they request that Jesus teach them to pray. This request occasions Lk's version of the model prayer (in Mt, the model prayer comes in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount). The Lukan version reads:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
May your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."* (Lk 11:2-4).

Largely because of its use in Christian liturgy, the Matthean version is more well known to most Christians. By contrast, Lk's version is briefer, omitting two of the Matthean petitions (*your will be done* and *deliver us from evil*). To me, the two most striking differences otherwise are:

- rather than *debts* in line 4., Lk uses the more theological word *sins*—a fairly literal meaning is, "forgive us for all the ways that we fall short, or miss the mark";
- in the next to last line (unlike in Mt), the prayer actually *asserts* that we always forgive others. (How does that make us feel?!)

The Parable of a Friend at Midnight

Having given them an example, or template, for praying, Jesus turns to the related topic of the one to whom our prayers are directed. The parable is designed to teach something about the character of God, and the teaching is further illuminated by the teaching in vv. 9-13.

As we said in the Bible Love episode in which we introduced Jesus' parables, a parable, by design and nature, is often complex, ambiguous, or open to more than one interpretation. This parable has a very traditional interpretation, but I will also suggest a different view.

Here is the parable in the NRSV:

⁵ *And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*

The traditional view of this parable really comes not so much from the story but from the moral which is pronounced in v. 8. The application to discipleship, then, is that we should be persistent in our prayer lives. While I definitely believe that a consistent prayer life is valuable in a number of ways, there are two problems with this traditional view: (1) the word translated persistence in v. 8 does not have that meaning in any other ancient text (Culpepper, *Luke*, NIBC, p. 236). Instead, it means “shamelessness.” (2) The even larger problem is that this view leads to identifying God with the awakened neighbor, and the lesson becomes *that prayer is a means to harangue God into giving us what we want*, even if God doesn’t want to. This conclusion in no way fits what Jesus teaches about God or prayer!

A better interpretation comes into view when we understand that Jesus lived in an honor/shame culture. That is, certain actions conferred honor on a person, while other actions conferred shame. Reverencing God, respecting parents and elders, care for widows and orphans, not harvesting one’s entire crop so as to leave food for the poor—all of these things conferred honor on a person. Conversely, blasphemy, disrespect, neglect of widows and orphans, greed—these things brought shame upon a person. The key cultural code in this parable is the practice of *hospitality*. (Hospitality is assumed, or expected, throughout the Bible—think about Abraham feeding the three strangers in Gen 18 or the Emmaus travelers feeding the traveler they met on the road in Lk 24; and note that in both cases, a key element of the hospitality was providing food.) In our parable, when the borrower has a friend show up unexpectedly, hospitality demanded that he provide his guest with bread; failing to do so would bring shame upon him. Similarly, honor demanded that the awakened neighbor help the borrower feed his unexpected guest. So the moral of the parable (in v. 8) is: when his friendship with the borrower did not motivate the awakened neighbor to lend some bread, he eventually lends the bread to avoid the shame that would come from his failure to be part of the appropriate hospitality.

Support for this interpretation comes from Jesus’ teaching in the next few verses. Verse 9 begins with “So”—in the sense of “Therefore”—linguistically connecting vv. 9-13 with the parable. Prayer is metaphorically described as a granted request, a successful search, and an opened door. But the most striking part is a pair of rhetorical questions.

- Which of you, if your child asks for a fish, would give the child a snake instead?
- Which of you, if your child asks for an egg, would give the child a scorpion?

Careful students will know that when Jesus begins a question with “which of you,” the answer is always, “No one! It would be unthinkable!” But even if the reader doesn’t know that pattern, an emphatic negative answer is dictated by simple human experience and common sense: no parent would give a snake instead of a fish or a scorpion instead of egg! Jesus’ final question concludes the section and prayer and drives home the undeniable point: if human parents, who are prone to bad judgment and bad motives, can give good gifts to their children, how much more will God “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” This type of lesson is known as a *lesser to greater* argument—if this is true, *how much more* is that true?—and is found frequently both in the teachings of Jesus and in the teachings of the ancient rabbis. The meaning of the parable may be expressed in a similar way. The awakened neighbor proves to be a rather selfish friend; he is motivated not by kindness to his friend but simply by his desire to avoid shame. If that kind of person will eventually give what is asked of him, *how much more* will a loving God respond to our requests in a generous way?

The Parable of the Unjust Judge

Often referred to as the twin parable to the one in ch 11, the parable in Lk 18 reads as follows:

18 Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my accuser.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering

me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’ ”⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Happily, this parable does not provide any of complexities which plague the Parable of the Friend at Midnight. What’s more, working through that parable, particularly coming to understand a lesser to greater argument, proves helpful in understanding the lesson of the Unjust Judge.

The judge is even more selfish than the awakened neighbor in the previous parable. The two great commandments centered on love for God and love others; the judge has no regard for either. The judge’s primary role, moreover, was to enact justice, especially on behalf of those lack the status or resources to advocate for themselves.

The precise nature of the grievance is not stated. Is it a debt or settlement of some sort? The reader doesn’t know. Neither do we know why the judge won’t help her. His character notwithstanding, it would have been simple to decide the case in a fair way—why doesn’t he? Is he hoping for a bribe from the widow? Is he collaborating with the accuser? Again, we don’t know.

When we have heard a story before, it’s almost impossible to experience again the surprise of hearing it for the first time. But the judge’s decision to grant the widow justice is such a surprise—because it is completely out of character for him.

As with the Parable of the Friend at Midnight, Jesus makes a lesser to greater argument: if an unjust judge (with selfish motives!) will grant justice to a widow (in her culture, a “nobody”), how much more will *God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?* Note the contrast in the conclusion is two-fold: (1) an unjust judge v. a loving God and (2) a “nobody” v. God’s chosen ones. Finally, note the qualities, or characteristics, of the widow: she has been treated unfairly, and, because of the cultural codes, she has no status or power. The peasants listening to Jesus would have identified with these qualities and therefore would have taken quite personally the hope in this parable—and because Luke has preserved it for us, it is still a word of hope for those who have been treated unfairly today.

What is clear from Jesus’ teaching on prayer is that it is not reducible to a formula or prescription. There are no magic words. We can’t say, “If we say a prayer this many times—or get this many people to join us in our prayer—we will have guaranteed results.” Instead of prescription, Jesus gives us parable and metaphor. For any who wish to spend some time thinking about or discussing what prayer is and means, let’s return to the three images Jesus offers in chapter 11—and a few thoughts or questions which they might prompt.

9 ‘So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.

The metaphors for prayer are:

- conversation (asking);
- journey (searching);
- access to a new place (going through open door).

Related questions and thoughts:

- What to do each of these metaphors suggest, or teach us, about prayer? Which image(s) relates to your experience of prayer?
- Asking implies we care about the answer and trust the one whom we’ve asked. How is “journey” different from “destination”?
- Where is a new place we need to access in our prayer life or spiritual life?