

THE BOOK OF LUKE: AUDACIOUS PRAYERS

By Andrew Wilson
May 22, 2016

Luke 11: 5-13

Most of Jesus' parables involve fictitious characters. In the one we just read, Jesus puts us in the central role. He wants us to feel the burden of the dilemma. We've just received a late-night visit from a friend and we're out of food. What are we going to do? It would be shameful to send our guest on his way without breakfast. So we head to the next-door neighbor to borrow some bread.

We pound and pound on the door. We tap on the bedroom window. When our neighbor finally appears in her nightgown we say, "Sorry to bug you, but I've got company. Can you give me three loaves of bread?"

"Are you kidding me?" she replies. "The kids and I are already in bed. Come back in the morning!"

"Wait," we say, "this is important!" And we plead and argue our case right there on the doorstep. We make such a scene that our neighbor eventually throws up her hands and goes and gets the loaves – just to get rid of us.

That's exactly the way we should pray when we need something, Jesus says. We should be shamelessly audacious in petitioning God. We should ask, seek and knock on his door until he gives it to us.

Who says there isn't any humor in the Bible?

Some years ago I experienced a real-life version of that parable. In this variation on the story, however, I was the exasperated neighbor. And I had considerably more reason to be exasperated.

It was about 11:45 in the evening and I was getting ready to head home from the church. The phone rang and I reluctantly answered it, thinking it might be my wife. It was a member of our church who was wondering if I could offer some assistance to three young women who were stranded in the parking lot of the Von's near Verdugo Hills Hospital.

I reluctantly agreed to meet them. I figured I could pick them up, maybe get them a room at a local motel, and get home within an hour. When I got to Von's, though, the situation became more complicated.

The threesome – two high school girls and a 29-year-old mom – had been stranded at the soccer field next to the 2 Freeway. A friend had driven them out from San Bernardino and dropped them off, but he never returned to get them. They had walked to the Von's to see if they could find another way home. By the time I arrived they had been in the parking lot six hours. They had a working cell phone and had asked dozens of shoppers for help, but they hadn't made any progress.

I offered to get them a room for the night, but the oldest of the three surprised me. "Look," she said. "We appreciate the offer, but I'm that's just not going to work. These two girls need to be in school tomorrow. And I have a two-year-old and a four-year-old that I need to get to." She was insistent. If I wouldn't help, she'd find some other way to get home.

“You have two little kids?” I asked. “Where are they?”

“They’re with my sister,” she said. “But she doesn’t have a phone so she doesn’t know what’s happening. I have to get to her house. Look, you have a car. Can’t *you* drive us to San Bernardino?”

That’s the question that got me. I wish I could say I was moved by compassion to help them, but I wasn’t. I caved in because I didn’t want to look the mom in the eye and say, “Sure, I *could* help you. But I *won’t*.”

I pulled out my cell phone. “Hi, Mary? Sorry, were you sleeping? Hey, you’re not going to believe this,” I said. “I’m heading to San Bernardino with three young women...”

After explaining the situation, Mary told me I was doing the right thing. (She’s *way* more compassionate than I am. And she has me on a very long leash.) And as it turned out, that young mom *did* have two sleepy kids waiting for her in the decrepit little house where her sister lived. As the high school girls climbed out of the car I made them promise to wake up on time to get to school.

I had to admire that mom for pressing her case and making her kids the top priority. The attitude she took in approaching me was exactly the attitude we all should take, Jesus says, when we pray to God. “Ask and it will be given to you,” Jesus says. “Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be open to you” (Luke 11:9). If boldness and persistence work when we’re pleading with ordinary sinners, he reasons, think how much better they’ll work when we’re pleading with our heavenly Father!

Jesus isn’t suggesting that God is easily manipulated. Nor is he affirming the age-old maxim, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” There are deeper reasons why we should be bold and persistent in our prayers. Those reasons become clear when we read the parable in the wider context of Jesus’ teachings on prayer.

The first reason is because God is a good Father who wants to bless us with good things.

The second reason is because God works through our prayers to establish his plans.

And the third reason is because when our hearts are in tune with God’s heart, he answers even our most audacious prayers.

As we look at those revelations about prayer, I want to challenge you with the same question I asked you last month when we talked about miracles. Are your prayers in line with what you know about God? Are they big enough? Are you praying with grit and determination? If not, what’s holding you back?

God is a good Father who wants to bless us with good things. He’s the kind of Father that can be approached directly, and that isn’t put off by repeated requests.

Many religious people believe it’s selfish and crass to ask God for material goods or anything else that might help us to get along in the world. People who truly love God, they say, will naturally focus their prayers on higher things. The only self-centered prayers that are acceptable are ones that have to do with becoming a more spiritual person. “Lord, help me to know you better”... “Help me to grow in the character of Jesus”... “Forgive me of my sins”... “Help me to let go of my grudges” – prayers like that.

Other than those prayers, the thinking goes, we ought to be praying for other people, or for the church, or for God's work in the world.

All of that sounds very pious. The problem, however, is that it doesn't quite line up with what Jesus has to say about prayer. In the prayer that Jesus uses as the template for all prayer – the one we call the Lord's Prayer – he instructs us to ask God for our daily bread. The parable we're exploring likewise centers on a brazenly self-centered request for bread.

In the conclusion to the teaching on prayer in Luke 11, Jesus uses examples of requests that are equally as mundane and self-regarding. A good father, if his son asks him for a fish, isn't going to give him a snake. Or if the son asks for an egg, he's not going to give him a scorpion. And if we can expect our earthly father to give us good things, Jesus reasons, how much more can we expect our heavenly Father to give us the Holy Spirit when we ask for him?

Jesus is revealing a vital truth about prayer. God's relationship to us is like that of a good dad to his daughter or son. He takes delight in giving us things that will build us up or give pleasure that's innocent and pure-hearted. And he wants us to ask him for those things. He wants us to remember throughout our lives and not just when we're baby Christians that every good and perfect gift comes from him.

So one aspect of prayer – one of many – is the simple request for our daily bread. It's our daily petition for the things that will keep us whole and healthy in a world that's sometimes marked by deprivation and danger.

Some of you feel stuck in your spiritual life. You stopped praying long ago because you never felt like you were doing it quite right. You worry about asking God for things because you don't want to come off as crass or selfish. You treat prayer like something you have to master, like geometry or Microsoft Word.

Every one of us approaches God as a jumbled mass of contradictions. At one and the same time, we're compassionate and selfish, kind and vindictive, generous and grasping. And of course it's true that God sees it all. He sees it far more clearly than we do. He knows we don't have the ability to sort ourselves out and make ourselves right.

But that's precisely why he calls us to himself. That's why the Lord teaches us to seek him in prayer. He knows that we're broken people who can only be healed, and repaired, and made new *by him*.

I love this quote by Richard Foster. It's from his classic book on prayer [PAPER]:

What I have come to see is that God is big enough to receive us with all our [failures and contradictions]. We do not have to be bright, or pure, or filled with faith... That is what grace means, and not only are we saved by grace... we pray by it.

Jesus reminds us that prayer is a little like children coming to their parents. Our children come to us with the craziest requests!... Often we are grieved by the meanness and selfishness in their requests, but we would be all the more grieved if they never came to us even with their meanness and selfishness. We are simply glad that they do come – mixed motives and all.

This is precisely how it is with prayer. We will never have pure enough motives, or be good enough, or know enough in order to pray rightly. We simply must set these things aside and

begin praying... [I]t is in the very act of prayer itself... that these matters are cared for in due time.

- *Prayer*, HarperCollins, page 8

God wants to bless us with good things. There are huge rewards for those who pray audaciously and stick with it. That's the first reason why we should be bold and persistent in our prayers.

The second reason is because God works through our prayers to establish his plans. He loves it when we dare to pray: "May your kingdom come, Lord! May it be established here on earth as it in heaven!" In ways that remain a mystery to us, it actually helps God when we persevere in our prayers, and we don't allow set-backs and disappointments to deter us.

Many Christians don't believe their prayers make any real difference in God's kingdom. They pray with the attitude that, since God created everything and is in charge of everything, he's completely and utterly self-sufficient. He doesn't need our help to get things done. He wants us to pray not because our prayers help *him*, but rather because they help *us*.

It might help to think in terms of an example. Let's think again about the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus instructs us to pray for God's kingdom to come. Many Christians believe that God is going to establish his kingdom whether or not anyone prays for it to happen. They believe, moreover, that sinful, puny humans are powerless to do anything that might add to or subtract from God's efforts. Why then does Jesus tell us to pray for the kingdom to come? It must be because of the changes that such a prayer brings about in us. The Lord wants us to pray so that our hearts will be tuned to God's heart, and we'll grow closer to him and become more like him.

What all of this means, in terms of our walk with Christ, is that our feeble efforts to serve him don't add up to a hill of beans. It means that God could do a lot better job than we ever could in the work that he assigns us, and that he only includes us in his plan because of what personal benefits it brings.

God's relationship with us, then, is like that of a parent to a toddler who want to help with the dinner dishes. He of course could do the work better and faster by himself. But he lets us help because he knows we enjoy helping, and might learn something from the experience.

That view of God is widespread, and deeply compelling. It stands to reason that the creator of the universe is self-sufficient, and that he doesn't need puny human beings to help him. The problem, however, is that Jesus reveals a different reality. He tells us that the Father has actually appointed his children to be partners with him bringing about his kingdom. He has set up the universe so that Jesus followers have a vital part in its renewal.

It's absolutely true that God didn't have to include us in his work. He could have created a world where our efforts on his behalf were unnecessary, and where he and he alone was responsible for bringing about his plan. But he didn't. He chose instead to create us in his own image. He chose to establish a world where our prayers matter, where our faith is determinative, and where we can actually make a difference.

Some of you are skeptical. I understand that. You agree that God has work for us to do. You agree that we show our faith in God by obeying him. But it just doesn't seem right to you to say that God *needs* us. You think he uses us only because of what it does for us.

If that's where you are, ask yourself this: Why does Christ tell his disciples that the fields are ripe, but the workers are few? (Matthew 9:38). Isn't it because God needs more field hands?

Or why does Paul ask the Thessalonians to pray that God's word would spread rapidly? (2 Thessalonians 3:1). Isn't it because the spreading of the Gospel depends, at least in part, on the people that Jesus has commissioned to represent him?

I love this statement by the pastor and author, E. M. Bounds. God's kingdom needs more people who live by these words:

God shapes the world by prayer. The more praying there is in the world the better the world will be, the mightier the forces against evil... The prayers of God's saints are the capital stock of heaven by which God carries on his great work upon earth. God conditions the very life and prosperity of His cause on prayer.

The theologian, Karl Barth, makes the point more succinctly. "To clasp the hands in prayer," Barth says, "is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

For reasons that remain mostly hidden from us, God chooses to include us on his team. He commissions us, as Jesus followers, to complete the work that Jesus began. He gives us the Holy Spirit and he uses our prayers to release the Spirit's power.

Let me ask you again: where do you stand? Do you feel at least some degree of responsibility to share the Good News of God's love? Or do you assume God will get the job done without you? Do you believe prayer is just a form of therapy, and that your prayers don't really matter to God? Or do you pray with the attitude that your prayers make a difference to God, and have consequences that will last forever?

The first reason we should pray with bold and persistent in our prayers is because God is a good Father who wants to bless us with good things. The second reason is because he's a loving Spirit who hears our prayers, and incorporates them in his work of kingdom-building.

And the third reason is because he's a God who can be trusted to answer every prayer that's in line with his purposes. That promise makes us want to know God better. As we grow in our love for him, he inspires us with prayers that are as immense and unstoppable as he is. He sustains us with the hope that even our most daring requests will be granted – in his time and in his way.

We know from experience that we seldom receive from God exactly what we want when we want it. We often have to wait for months, years or even decades for God to respond to our petitions. That's why persistence is so vitally important. Our prayers will only be effective if they're sustained over time. We have to ask, seek and knock with the attitude that we're not going to go away until our petitions are granted.

Of course God doesn't always answer our prayers in the way we want them to be answered. Sometimes the things we're asking for are in conflict with the higher purposes of his kingdom. When that happens

God denies our requests in order to protect us. We can always trust to teach and admonish us when we make the mistake of praying for the wrong things. As Bill Hybels points out in his book, *Too Busy Not To Pray*, God knows what's best for us and always answers us according to our need. Hybels writes [PAPER]:

If the request is wrong, God says, "No."
If the timing is wrong, God says, "Slow."
If you are wrong, God says, "Grow."
But if the request is right, the timing is right and you are right, God says, "Go!"

We understand that our prayers are often misguided. We seldom know exactly how to pray. But still: It's better to ask too much of God than it is to ask for too little. It's far better to seek the wrong things from him than it is to live our lives as though he didn't exist. Because God isn't offended by prayers that miss the mark. He isn't put off by our pettiness, or by the contradictions in our character. His arms are stretched out to receive us. He mourns that we're too distracted, or preoccupied, or intimidated to draw near to him. He's imploring some of you right now to step out of the shadows and into his light.

Many years ago I led a group of youth from my church in Kansas City on a wilderness tour of Wyoming. The first stop on our itinerary was tiny city of Pinedale at the base of the stunning Wind River Range. From Main Street we could see craggy peaks and shining glaciers. We could hear them calling to us. We could hardly wait to explore the canyons, lakes and streams that lay beneath them.

We had trouble finding the Forest Service road that led to our trailhead so I stopped at a convenience store to ask directions. The cashier was a woman looked to be in her early 30s. I explained our problem and she told me she didn't know the road we were looking for.

I said, "Well maybe you can just tell me how to get to Elkhart Park."

She repeated, "I'm sorry, I really don't know those roads."

I couldn't hide my surprise. Elkhart Park is the center of all activity in the Wind River area. I knew it was less than 5 miles away. I said, "You must be new to this area."

"No," she said, "I've lived in Pinedale all my life. But I can't help you because I've never been up to Elkhart Park."

I couldn't let that pass. I said, "You live right next to one of the greatest wilderness areas in North America. We've driven more than a thousand miles to see these mountains. Aren't you curious about what's up there?"

"Not really," she replied. "I'm not into mountains."

So it is with many of us. We live in the closest possible proximity to a land of inexpressible beauty – a land filled with exhilarating peaks and sublime meadows. We have access to those treasures, through prayer, every hour of every day. They call to us every time we look up. But we've never walked those high mountain trails. Worse than that, we've never even visited the trailhead. Maybe it's because we're scared. Maybe it's because we've grown comfortable with our predictable routines. Or maybe we just think of ourselves as flatlanders.

Whatever the reason may be for our failure to pray, the Lord wants us to know that he's waiting for us. He invites us into the vast expanse of his open heart. He knows that, once we get started on the trail, and we begin to drink from the frigid streams, breath the fresh air, and rise above the flatlands, we'll want more and more of him. Our prayers will become bolder and more persistent. They'll be less focused on us and more focused on the people around us. And we'll begin to see that God really does work through our prayers to establish his kingdom.

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when we're speaking about prayer. Just when we think we understand it, we discover another peak to climb. But if we'll keep in mind the basic principles laid down by Jesus, we'll never be truly lost. There summarized for us so beautifully in one magnificent sentence: "Everyone who asks receives; those who seek find; and to those who knock the door will be opened" (Luke 11:9).

Dear Lord, we desperately need to learn to pray. Yet sometimes, honestly, we know that we don't really want to pray. We're distracted. We're intimidated. We're self-centered.

In your mercy, Jesus, change our hearts so we'll long for your presence. Teach us to offer audacious prayers. Motivate us to pray with persistence. Work through our prayers, feeble as they often are, to accomplish your purposes.

In your name and for your sake we pray. Amen.