

Parable of the Friend at Midnight
Persistence in Prayer
Luke 11:1-13
Pastor John E. Dubler



This parable is part of a larger passage in which the Lord gives instructions on prayer. We can imagine the disciples quietly sitting and watching Jesus from a distance as He prayed to His Father. They probably sensed how strengthening such prayer times were to our Lord and found their own appetite piqued for some deeper communication with the Father. Jesus' example in prayer inspired them and now inspires us seek our Father in prayer.

It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples." Luke 11:1¹

Apparently John the Baptist was giving a few lessons on prayer to his disciples. The disciples of Jesus use this fact as a springboard to ask for some instruction for themselves from the Lord. So Jesus introduced to them the model prayer, usually called the "Lord's Prayer," although I prefer to think of it as the "Disciple's Prayer," with "the Lord's Prayer" being that which is recorded in John 17. The model prayer was never meant to be an unthinking rote sort of extended mantra, and indeed Jesus warns us against meaningless repetition when we pray (Matthew 6:7). Rather, this prayer is a good framework for launching into extended communication with the Father, using these phrases as themes for elaboration.

Father, hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into temptation.
Luke 11:2-4

Of course the "Lord's Prayer" of Luke is not the one we use in our Sunday service. The more liturgical and balanced prayer of Matthew 6 is our preference:

Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.

¹ All scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated Version unless otherwise noted.

And do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Yours is the kingdom and the
power and the glory forever. Amen.
Matthew 6:9-12

The model prayer is followed immediately by the Parable of the Friend at Midnight. The model gives us major areas for which to pray daily and the parable teaches us to be persistent in prayer.

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight is one of two major parables on prayer—the other being the Widow and the Unrighteous Judge from Luke 18: 1-8. It is found only the Gospel of Luke.

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight from Luke 11: 5-10



Then He said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him;’ and from inside he answers and says, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

“So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened.”

Meaning of the parable

If persistence can obtain three loaves of bread from a reluctant neighbor at midnight, then certainly our earnest prayers will receive our Father’s complete attention and His answer at the perfect moment. The parable reveals God’s character of a loving Father who hears and answers, and our need of persistence in prayer.

Understanding the Parable

Contrast vs. Comparison. Some parables are meant to compare one figure with another to give us understanding. For example the parable of the treasure hidden in the field, (using the

comparison word “like”) compares the kingdom with a treasure. “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which a man found and hid again. And from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field,” Matthew 13:44. A parable offering contrast is what we have here. God, in His goodness is not like the unwilling neighbor, but infinitely more willing. He is not like the unrighteous judge who is in danger of being worn out by the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8), but completely loving and earnestly attending to our prayers. Therefore, God, in this parable is contrasted to a reluctant neighbor.



The neighbor is reluctant to answer his friend and give him what he’s asking for, but because the neighbor is persistent he will capitulate and give him the bread which he requests. God, by contrast, is far more willing. We do not have to twist His arm; He is ready to answer us when we pray. If even the unwilling neighbor will answer, we can be very certain that God will answer us. Thus, we are to be persistent in prayer.

Elements of the parable

The Jewish home and hospitality of the day. A man has just received a traveler and has no bread to give him. Here is a major problem for the host. The traveler is tired and hungry.

He cannot simply explain away his lack of bread with a shrug or a wave of the hand. He is constrained by the rules of hospitality to move heaven and earth to get some food for his friend. The town is small, and the host would be aware of who had baked that day. He puts that knowledge together with his emergency situation and decides to forego any compunction he may have had and make the midnight call upon his neighbor.

A midnight arrival not unusual. The traveler came at midnight, but we should not think of this as an unusual event, and certainly not attach any eschatological significance to the time given. Because of the heat and its effects on both man and beast, Judean travelers in that day and age would find it very convenient to depart for their destination later in the day, planning on an early evening arrival.

The dark house of the friend. The door is shut and locked and the master of the house is in bed with his children. The house we may envision is a one-room home with the children and parents all on mats or on a raised platform bed. When he says, “My children and I are in bed” he means it literally. To get up would be a major inconvenience disrupting everyone. However his friend has already disrupted everything and probably everyone in the small house is now awake. The hassle factor here is really more than the neighbor should be expected to bear.

Persistence

Even though the reluctant neighbor will not get up and give him what he asks for because he is his friend—yet because of his persistence . . . How powerful is our persistence in any area of endeavor, and how important.

Because of good old-fashioned persistence, much in this world is accomplished. Here are a couple of examples I found while browsing the subject on the internet:

Zig Ziglar tells this interesting story about persistence as we find it in the field of horticulture:

A powerful point about persistence is made in the Chinese Bamboo tree story I tell in my book *Raising Positive Kids in a Negative World*. The Chinese [gardeners] plant the bamboo seed, water and fertilize it, but the first year nothing happens. The second year they water it and fertilize it and still nothing happens. The third year again they water and fertilize [it] and still nothing happens. The fourth year they water and fertilize [it], and yet nothing happens. But in the fifth year, in a period of roughly six weeks, the Chinese bamboo tree grows roughly 90 feet. The question is obvious: Did it grow 90 feet in six weeks or was it 90 feet in five years? A little reflection will make the answer obvious: It was five years, because had there been any year when they did not water and fertilize it, there would have been no Chinese bamboo tree.²



Napoleon Hill quips: “Persistence is to the character of a man as carbon is to steel.”

Ziglar again: This time he tells of Craig Parry, a superb golfer with 10 years on the PGA tour. Parry played in 235 tournaments before he won his first one. “That’s a lot of persistence,” Ziglar concludes. And of course he is right.

Persistence and insanity can look like the same thing to the outside world. We might think ourselves a little on the extreme side if we were to go to our neighbor at midnight and ask for bread. And in our culture, we would not be wrong in thinking so. After all, couldn’t we simply go to the convenience store and find what we need no matter the hour? But not so with the story that Jesus is telling. Persistence is required of the man who would get anything from his neighbor at midnight.

Persistence defined. In the Greek, persistence is ἀναίδεια (anaideia). In the KJV it is rendered “importunity,” while the NIV translates the word as “boldness.” The New English Version brings in the aspect of shamelessness in translating ἀναίδεια as “not ashamed to keep on asking.” The Amplified picks up the same thought in giving us “shameless persistence.”

Importunity, (the rendition of the KJV), is defined in Noah Webster’s dictionary as “Pressing solicitation; urgent request; application for a claim or favor, which is urged with troublesome frequency or pertinacity. Men are sometimes overcome by the importunity of their wives or children.” Whatever version we use, the outcome can be of little debate. Persistent prayers keep on asking.

² The Chinese Bamboo story may be apocryphal.

The power of friendship. Friendship indeed is powerful, but not powerful enough to make this neighbor get up. It is only the man's persistence that does it. Thus, persistence on the part of the one who asks is even more powerful than friendship.

I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Contrary to his own reluctance, and even contrary to his better judgment, the neighbor capitulates and gives his midnight caller as much as he needs.



God is more willing than the neighbor

The point certainly is not that God has to be talked into hearing our prayers. Arm twisting is not required. God is not reluctant, not even a little. Remember that this is a parable of contrasts—God is not like the friend. God's willingness to hear and answer us when we pray is more powerful than the friendship demonstrated by this man.

How is God different from the reluctant neighbor? First and most poignantly obvious from reading this parable of contrast is that God's door is always open when we knock.

For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds;
and to him who knocks, it will be opened. Luke 11:10

Second, God is always awake and never goes to bed. He is always present with us and always has been. He promised—and He keeps His word.

Behold, He who keeps Israel
Will neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121:4

We don't have to pound hard to be heard. He hears a faint cry. Listen for His voice.

Hear my cry, O God;
Give heed to my prayer.
From the end of the earth I call to
You when my heart is faint
Psalm 61:1-2

God is willing rather than reluctant—our part is to ask, seek and knock. He never gives us specious excuses such as: My door is locked or I’m already in bed. When we go to God, even in the midnight hour—the darkest time of our lives—He will be there.

Some questions

If the message is “be persistent in prayer,” as surely it is, then here are some questions for reflection:

1. Do we easily give up on prayer? Are we taking time each day to schedule an “appointment” with the Most High, to seek Him, to draw near to Him? After all, He promises in James 4:8 “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.”

2. Do we forget what we’ve prayed for even before the answer comes? A good way to keep refreshed on His faithfulness to us in prayer is to keep some kind of prayer journal. There is no right or wrong way to do this. Starting a regular journal will provide eye-opening lessons for you on God’s faithfulness to personally answer your prayers.

3. Are we devoted to prayer? Romans 12: 12 tells us to be “devoted to prayer.” *Devotion* means that we will not allow other things to crowd out that which we are devoted to. This will cost some time and effort. The results are worth it. Taking time to pray daily, and especially early in the morning, yields prolific fruit. But taking enough time is key. After all, it takes time to settle one’s heart, to tune out the clutter of life and get on a clear channel with the Lord. Taking the time to do this provides us with a two-way conversation. God hears us, and we hear what He is saying in return. The Word of God often shows us His response in written form, and the Holy Spirit speaks to our hearts as well.

A few cautions



A line of prayer wheels

Persistence does not mean mindless repetition. The idea is not to repeat a matter so many times that we get what we want. If it were thus we could easily automate the process as in the mistaken concept of the Hindu prayer wheel. A written prayer is attached to a wheel, the wheel is spun round and round, and each time the piece of paper containing the prayer passes one rotation the prayer is offered to the gods. We could do an even better job of automated prayer with a computer, programming it to ask God for whatever we desire, thousands of times each second. But persistence is not automation, nor is it a ritual of monotonous asking.

Furthermore we are warned by the Lord that such an approach is displeasing to God:

And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.
Matthew 6:7-8

God is not a machine or a wishing well. God gave us a tremendous opportunity to enter His presence and ask for our needs and for the needs of others. We should not abuse it and we should never neglect it. Let us come into His presence and seek Him face to face. Ask Him how you should pray and what you should ask for. “Lord, teach me to pray,” should be our heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Discuss everything except the absolutely trivial. And be thankful.

Jesus conclusion in the matter

Jesus introduces the conclusion to the Parable of the Friend at Midnight by saying, “So I say to you . . .” Since God is more willing than the friend—He gives a three-fold exhortation with a three-fold promise of fulfillment:

1. Ask (and it will be given to you)
2. Seek (and you will find)
3. Knock (and it will be opened to you)

Everyone who:

1. Asks—receives
2. Seeks—finds
3. Knocks—it will be opened.

Magnificent promises indeed. And since we have received the assurance of God’s attention to our prayers in a major teaching of our Lord Jesus, let us approach His throne with confidence and yes, even persistence.

Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Heb 4:16

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

2 Peter 1:2-4

