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Luke 11:5-13

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ENCOURAGE US TO PRAY

SERIES: GOSPEL OF LUKE

Last week I mentioned how my first impulse to pray came at the age of eleven, as I was watching a movie starring John Wayne. The decision to embark on a life of prayer was not something I formulated in my mind, but rather was an inner impulse that came from the deepest part of my being. Hearing Wayne recite the first words of that childhood prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep” lit a flame in my heart. It was an invitation I could not resist. In response I made up a simple framework of prayer that I recited every night before bedtime. Though I had no Biblical teaching to fan the flame, it stayed lit through my adolescent years into high school.

Then at the beginning of my junior year of high school, something new occurred. For reasons I cannot explain, I suddenly felt free to make personal requests to God. I thought to myself, God must be as generous as my dad, so why not ask for him to bless me? So in fall of 1967 I took my prayers to a new level and shot the moon with several outlandish requests. By the end of my junior year all those requests came true. As a result, I felt that I was the luckiest kid on the planet, and I believed it was entirely due to God’s goodness and generosity. After I became a Christian the following year, I must tell you that there were many times that God did not answer my prayers, even grievously so. But I never lost the sense that God is outrageously generous and is thrilled when we boldly barge into his presence and make our requests known to him.

Having said that, I am also keenly aware that my experience is not the norm. For most people, believing that God is approachable and eager to bless them is difficult. Whether this is caused from an abusive family background, bad theology, or simply having to grow up in our fiercely competitive world, the result is the same. The image of little children running into their daddy’s arms to be embraced with affectionate kisses and joyous laughter doesn’t resonate simply because they have no memories in their psyche to draw from.

Motivation is perhaps the most difficult hurdle to overcome in our prayers, which may explain why, in Luke 11:1-13, Jesus gives the disciples more instruction on “how” to pray, than “what” to pray. Last week we examined verses 1-4, where Jesus gave his disciples a simple, yet profound framework of themes to pray. Today in verses 5-13, Jesus follows his instruction on “what” to pray with a parable designed to break down any barriers that inhibit our prayers to God.

I. Pray with Confidence (Luke 11:5-8)

A. A story about friendship and hospitality

And he said to them, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and he will answer from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend,

yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.” (Luke 11:5-8 ESV)

Jesus tells a story about a man seeking aid from a friend in order to show hospitality to another friend who has unexpectedly arrived at midnight. “Friend” is the operative word of the story (used 4 times). The parable is designed to make God accessible by using language and imagery of friendship (vv. 5, 6, 8) and the values of hospitality, honor and shame (v. 8) that were pivotal in their social world. We often imagine God like a father, but seldom do we cast him in the role as friend. It is almost humorous envisaging God, as a friend, who is trying to get a good night’s sleep with his children gathered around him, and we are placed in the awkward position of having to wake him up in obedience to Jesus’ instruction to ask the him for our “daily bread.”

To place ourselves into the story we need to understand the cultural values that shaped village life in the Middle East. Hospitality was perhaps the highest value in the community. To entertain a guest was a sacred privilege. When an unexpected guest arrived, a host was under obligation to serve a substantial meal, not merely a few leftovers. Quoting Ibrahim Sa’id, Kenneth Bailey writes, “He [the host] has the responsibility of the magnanimous Oriental host to prepare to offer the guest that which is beyond him to provide,”¹ for a guest was considered a guest of the entire village, not just the individual. If a host failed to honor a guest with a proper banquet, he would bring shame to the entire community. Therefore if a host did not have sufficient food for the meal, it became necessary to call on his friends in the village to assist him. Joel Green observes that, according to the Greco-Roman philosophers, “Discussions of ideal friendship foreground the practice of holding ‘all things in common’...to share friendship was to share honor...Hence solely on the basis of friendship, one would simply assume, the householder is expected to assist the would-be host.”²

But in the case of our parable, the host has an additional problem. Not only is he out of bread, but also his friend has arrived at midnight and there are no late-night grocery stores available. The dilemma is, does he now risk the boundaries of friendship and go through his neighborhood waking up, not only his friends, but also their children in order to fulfill his obligation of hospitality? Or does he serve his friend leftovers and bring shame upon his village? The solution is obvious to anyone living the Middle East. The threat of bringing shame to the village trumps any fear he may have of waking his friend up at midnight. To his credit, our host takes care to keep the disturbance to a minimum. Rather than knocking and frightening his neighbor and possibly waking up the entire neighborhood, he calls to neighbor, who knows his voice. Bailey fills out the broader picture for us:

The host starts his rounds. He will gather up the greater portion of the meal from the various neighbors. He will also borrow the best tray, pitcher, cloth, and goblets that the neighborhood has

to offer. That he has a whole list of needs is seen at the end of the parable, where the sleeper gives him “whatever he needs”...In going to his neighbor, the host is asking the sleeper to fulfill his duty to the guest of the village. As long as the request is modest enough, refusal is unthinkable. In this case, the request is the humblest element of the entire meal, namely, the bread that will be dipped into the common dish.³

Perhaps to take the sting out of his nighttime raid, our host offers to pay back his sleepy neighbor for all his trouble. Despite our host's efforts to be sensitive to his friend's situation, the response is what we would expect:

“Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything!” (v. 7)

The typical peasant home in Palestine had one room in which the whole family slept on a floor mat. Hearing the host's request, the man's irritation immediately surfaces (lit. “stop being a bother”). As any parent knows, it takes no little effort to get children through the nighttime rituals of bathing, brushing teeth and story time until they are finally tucked into their beds... finally quiet. It appears that the task of getting his children to sleep that night may have been more laborious than usual; and now that the door is finally shut and bolted, the thought of getting up, unbolting the door, waking the children, climbing into the raised loft for food supplies, and getting the children back to sleep is more than this friend can fathom. If his heart could speak, we would hear him screaming, “I cannot get up and give you anything!” But the punch line comes in verse 8.

“I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his *anaideian* he will rise and give him whatever he needs.” (v. 8)

Despite everything within him that vehemently protests giving anything, there is something else within him that overrides his initial response and transforms his reluctance into a cheerful and generous giving. For he didn't just give him three loaves, he gave him whatever he needed. What changed him? The answer is the Greek word *anaideian*. In Christian literature the term *anaideian* came to have two meanings “shamelessness” and “persistence.” Most translations translate it “persistence.” While it did come to mean “persistence,” Bailey meticulously documents that “the word does not, through the first century, mean persistence, and there is no reference to any persistence in the story.”⁴ Bailey proposes the alternative meaning “avoidance of shame.”

The sleeper knows the borrower must gather up the essentials for the banquet from the various neighbors. If the sleeper refused the request of anything so humble as loaf of bread the host would continue on his rounds cursing the stinginess of the sleeper, who would not get up even to fulfill this trifling request. The story would be all over the village by morning. The sleeper would be met with cries of “shame” everywhere he went. Because of his desire for “avoidance of shame” he will arise and grant whatever the borrower wants...that the host received much more than the bread is evidence that the entire transaction was completed in a spirit of good will.⁵

I am persuaded that Bailey's interpretation is correct, not only because of his research, but because of the larger purpose of the parable. Jesus is attempting to encourage us to pray by helping us understand how outrageously generous our heavenly Father is, not by giving us more requirements to make the Father hear our prayers. Jesus' emphatic “I tell you,” drives the point home. Given

the importance of friendship among neighbors and the value a community placed on hospitality, it is inconceivable that one would refuse his friend's request. Just how inconceivable is it you ask? Jesus' opening interrogative phrase, “Which one of you [would dare do such a thing],” placed the listener in a position of stating the obvious conclusion even before the story even began. The answer is “No one! It is inconceivable anyone would act in such a way.” Or as we might say, “Are you kidding me? It is unthinkable, laughable, absurd!”

Jesus' story picks up on two themes present in the preceding disciples' prayer, namely: (1) our petition for daily bread, and (2) the notion that God's name be hallowed (i.e. that he preserve the honor of his name). Putting both themes together Jesus is showing us that God has a legal obligation to save us (by giving us our “daily bread”) in order preserve the honor of his name. He will always act on our behalf when the reputation of his good name is at stake.

B. Confidence to pray in the Psalms

This truth became the basis for David's bedrock confidence that God would answer his prayers. In the following examples from the Psalms, David gives voice to similar requests that Jesus outlined in the Lord's Prayer. The painful context out of which they are spoken ought to magnify our confidence that God indeed will preserve the honor of his name when we find ourselves in similar situations.

1. *God's name is at stake when the sins of my youth haunt me.*

**Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!
For your name's sake, O LORD,
pardon my guilt, for it is great. (Ps 25:7, 11)**

In Psalm 25 David petitions God to “to remember not the sins of his youth,” for it seems the guilt of his past transgressions is assaulting him. The basis for his request has nothing to do with himself, but is purely the honor of God's name. This is what fortifies him with confidence, even when the guilt from his past sins is great. For David it's not enough to be declared legally “forgiven,” he needs his psyche cleansed of the haunting memories that continue to terrorize him.

2. *God's name is at stake when I've ruined your good name and the damage seems irreparable.*

In Psalm 79, the psalmist raises the ante even more.

**O God, the nations have come into your inheritance;
they have defiled your holy temple;
they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.
Help us, O God of our salvation,
for the glory of your name;
deliver us, and atone for our sins,
for your name's sake! (Ps 79:1, 9)**

This psalm was written after God's temple was overrun by gentile nations and Jerusalem lay in ruins. The prophets were clear that this unspeakable devastation was God's judgment on his people for their persistent idolatry and oppressive injustice upon the poor. Despite the warnings of the prophets, Israel refused to repent and her rebellion continued unchecked with little change for centuries. And yet, even when the nation lies in a ruin of its own making, the psalmist is able to pray with confidence, trusting that God will save them “for the glory of his name.” God's name is at stake to save us even when we think our sins have caused irreparable damage to God's good name.

3. *God's name is at stake when I'm so tired and weary, that I have no strength to pray.*

In green pasture he allows me to rest;
by choice watering places he leads me.
My vitality he restores;
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. (Ps 23:3)

Have there been times in your life when you seemed weary, stuck in the muck and mire of life, and found you didn't have strength left to pray? David discovered that even in those times, God will restore our vitality by leading us to "choice watering places...in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." And because God acts for the honor of his name, he will give us far more than what we ask—it will be "everything we need."

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows. (Ps 23:5)

Our "daily bread" will do more than revitalize us physically, it will "restore the soul" by giving us a foretaste of eternal life that brings us into the very presence of God (Ps 63:5-8).

In summary, Jesus encourages us to pray the themes of the Lord's Prayer with confidence because God's name is at stake. Secondly, he encourages us not to give up, because prayer is a process.

II. Don't Give Up (Luke 11:9-10)

And I tell 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 the one who seeks finds
and to the one who knocks it will be opened. (vv. 9-10)

The biggest challenge Emily and I faced regarding our understanding of prayer came with the death of our firstborn son, David Jonathan. After a wondrous birth and three days of joyous bliss, David became listless and wouldn't nurse. The doctors didn't have a clue what the problem was and transferred him to an infant intensive care unit in San Francisco. For six days Emily and I sat by his side and prayed unceasingly. At night I would lay prostrate, stretched out on floor, fervently pleading for my son's life. While we stayed up in the city, the leaders of our church gathered in our condominium and prayed all night for the life of my son. Despite an army of prayers, my son died. As a young couple we had to wrestle with the question, if prayer doesn't change God's will, why pray at all?

Jesus addresses that dilemma by explaining that the prayer that he has outlined (vv. 1-4) has guaranteed results, but it is a complex process that involves our participation. To drive the point home Jesus uses a Hebrew poetic device scholars identify as "stepped parallelism," whereby parallel lines are "symmetrical" in an A B C—A' B' C' pattern. Bruce Waltke, quoting Jerome Walsh, explains the significance of the pattern:

Walsh writes, "Parallel patterns tend to invite comparison of the parallel sequences and of the individual parallel elements. Comparison often reveals progression, but not necessarily opposition or contrast, between the parallel components."⁶

If we will take the time to analyze and compare the individual elements in each line, we will be able to break through some of the barriers that prevent us from praying.

The **initial verbs** "ask", "seek", "knock" are all present imperatives ("keep on asking, seeking and knocking") denoting continuous actions. This suggests that prayer is a process or better yet, it is life. God is inviting us into a life of prayer.

The **promise** that God will positively respond to our requests cannot be stated more emphatically. In verse 9, every act of prayer—*ask, seek, knock*—is 100% effective; and in verse 10, that success is guaranteed across the board to everyone with no exceptions. The promise, however, cannot be interpreted as a "blank check." Rather the context assumes that our prayers are done within the context of the petitions Jesus previously gave the disciples in verses 2-4.

The **final verbs** of the first and third line in each verse are in the *passive voice* ("will be given", "will be opened", "receives", "will be opened"), while those in the second line are in the *active voice* ("you will find," "finds"). This suggests that prayer is not a one-way conversation, as if we're stuck in a phone booth babbling away in the hopes that someone out there is listening. This interplay of alternating voices is an invitation to a dialogue; better yet, it is a divine dance of perpetual motion through time and space.

Each verb is vested with **theological significance**:

In **asking** there is the invitation to pray from Psalm 2. The invitation was originally addressed to Israel's king, that he might take full advantage of his "Father/son" relationship with God by making all his requests known. In answer to the king's request, God promised to make "the ends of the earth your possession" (Ps 2:8). That invitation is now extended to us, as we share in Christ's reign as his co-regent. In that privileged role we make it our highest aim to pray that God's kingdom comes to the ends of the earth in all its glory and beauty.

In **seeking** we are encouraged to not be passive after we have made our requests known to him. The active voice implies we are to take the initiative and actively pursue God and his will in order to discover what we are seeking. On the one hand, we might pray for healing when we are sick, but on the other, God expects us to take the initiative to follow up on leads he may give us to "find" the right path to healing (whether it be diet, exercise, rest, surgery, medicine, doctors etc.).

In **knocking** there is the image of going through doorways into new realms. After the resurrection, Jesus stunned the disciples by breaking through locked doors (John 20:19). And on three different occasions in the book of Acts prison doors were divinely opened to release the apostles from prison (Acts 5:19; 12:7; 16:26). Paul claims that "a wide door for effective work has opened for me" (1 Cor 16:9); he explains that prayer is vital to open up a "door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ" (Col 4:3). When Jesus opens a doorway of opportunity, no one will be able to shut it (Rev 3:8).

As Jesus opens doors in answer to our prayers and we cross thresholds into new realms, our horizons expand with an ever-increasing awareness of the Lord's presence in our lives. Unlike the other verbs in verse 10 that are in the present tense ("receives," "finds"), this verb—"will be opened"—remains in the future tense,

signifying that the gift is never exhausted. No matter how good it gets, it's always just a foretaste of more to come.

In summary: 1) we pray with confidence because God's name is at stake; and 2) we never quit, because prayer is a process that involves our participation. The third encouragement Jesus gives us to pray is that our heavenly Father knows best.

III. Father Knows Best (Luke 11:9-10)

**“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish,
will instead of a fish give him a serpent;
or if he asks for an egg,
will give him a scorpion?
If you then, who are evil,
know how to give good gifts to your children,
how much more will the heavenly Father
give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”**

Jesus now turns from the absolute “certainty” of God's answer to our prayers, to the quality of gifts he seeks to give. Jesus' question, “Which father among you [would dare do such a thing]”, similar to verse 5, expects an emphatic “No one! It is inconceivable anyone would act in such a way.” Jesus suggests that when children ask for food from their parents, they are not given malevolent alternatives. To understand Jesus' choice of contrasting items, (“fish/serpent,” “egg/scorpion”), Bailey notes that there is a connection between them.

Barbut, a type of fish in the Sea of Galilee that can reach five feet in length, crawl on land, and has the appearance of a snake...The fisherman would regularly catch both edible fish and the eel-like creatures which would be cast back into the sea as unclean and nonedible...And the scorpion all folded up looks like an egg.⁷

Jesus assures us that our heavenly Father knows how to give good gifts to his children, even more than our earthly fathers. The truth is further emphasized by Jesus' half-brother, James, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 1:17).

But just as in the first parable, when Jesus waited until the last verse to deliver his surprise, so now he opens the door to God's greatest gift, the Holy Spirit. To put this gift on the table before Jews in the first century would be like telling a homeless man living in the gutters of a Calcutta that he had just won the lottery. This is the gift that Israel had been waiting centuries for. This was the gift that would open the door to the messianic age, when “the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;” and “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy” (Isa 35:1, 5-6a); “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). The greatest gift God can possibly give us above all others is himself, to “pour out” his Spirit within us without measure, the fullness of his Son, God himself. What more could we ask for?

Though Emily and I were shattered and had to wrestle with “Why continue a life of prayer?” after the death of our son, we didn't give up. We stayed in the dance and kept asking, seeking, and knocking. Looking back over the past thirty-eight years has given us a greater

perspective of how God answered those prayers that we originally thought had been offered in vain for David and, the following year, for our daughter, Jessica. As we continued to seek his will, God gave us gifts, very good gifts. The day after Jessica died (December 5, 1976), the wife of one of our pastors had the courage (or audacity) to pray that God would give us a baby by Christmas. Miraculously, we were able to adopt a little girl, born December 18, one week before Christmas. Emily prayed that doctors would find a cure for our enzyme deficiency. In 1980 they did. Our doctor explained to us that a researcher discovered it by accident without even looking for it. God graciously gave us two more daughters, both the result of nine months of prayer. After thinking we might never be parents, it's hard now to believe that today we are grandparents with five grandchildren. Finally, I must confess that the death of our children has opened doorways of life and ministry that have expanded our horizons and increased our awareness of God's presence in our life like nothing else has. “As for me, the nearness of God is my good” (Ps. 73:28 NASB).

¹ Ibrahim Sa'id, *Sharh Bisharat Luqa* (Beirut: Near East Council of Churches, 1970), 300. Quoted by Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant, A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 122.

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 448.

³ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 122-123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131-132.

⁶ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology, an Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 119.

⁷ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 137.