



**The Parables of Jesus
Parables about Prayer**

The Parable of The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)

The Parable of The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)

The Westminster Shorter Catechism answers the question, "What is prayer?", with these words, "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies." Prayer says much about a man. The way a man prays, or that a man prays, can reveal a dependence upon the Lord God. It can reveal a humble heart submitting to the will of our heavenly Father. Similarly, the way a man prays, or that he does not pray, also is revealing. It reveals a heart that sees no need of God or a heart that puts oneself in the place of God – one who would presume to be His counselor. Indeed, prayer can say much about a man.

The way we pray also can say much about the God to whom we pray. It can reveal what we believe about Him; what we believe He can or cannot do. It reveals whether one believes that God is a God who hears – or that He is God at all. Arthur Pink says this about prayer that captures both a proper humble attitude on the part of man as well as implies the ability of God to deliver, "Prayer is not so much an act as it is an attitude – an attitude of dependency, dependency upon God."

It has been said by many pastors and theologians, "If you want to humble Christians, ask about their prayer lives." It is sad that this is true. It is sad that Christians do not take advantage of the great and wonderful gift and opportunity to come before the God of all creation with our desires, requests, struggles, and cares. Who are we that God is mindful of us? He that can pray, has a precious gift. Alexander Whyte, a late 19th century Scottish preacher, said, "The greatest and

best talent that God gives to any man or woman in this world is the talent of prayer." To have the gift of prayer is a wonderful thing. And yet, though all of us may not be exceptionally strong in the area of prayer, we all have the opportunity. We all, as believers, have every right and privilege of being sons and daughters of God. We can come boldly into the throne room of grace crying, "Abba! Father!" And for those of us who may not be as adept with language, Jesus encourages us, He exhorts us, that it isn't empty words or phrases that our Father desires but a heart humbled before Him. Jesus says in Matthew 6:7, "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words." Words expressed and flowing from a heart longing after God are wonderful; but words separated from faith are useless and empty. C.H. Spurgeon said, "True prayer is measured by weight – not by length. A single groan before God may have more fullness of prayer in it than a fine oration of great length."

The parables found in this lesson are parables about prayer. They are less about the "how-to's" of prayer and more about a believer's attitude in prayer. And as is often the case, not only do we learn about man in these parables, but we learn much about the nature and character of God – the One who answers the prayers of His people.

THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

The Parable of The Friend at Midnight (read Luke 11:13) is an interrogative parable making its point by asking the question, "how much more?" However, the nimshal, or the explanation of the parable is not given as part of the parable itself. I would argue that rather

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than there being no *nimshal* (explanation) at all, that it, in fact, comes after the parable in verse 9-13. These verses shed light on the point of the parable. Apart from these verses there would be a temptation to import many other “lessons” into the parable that Jesus does not intend. It is helpful to remember that parables are meant to be simple. We often complicate them but they are meant to be stories or examples or analogies told to make a simple point. Much confusion comes when we, as the readers, complicate them. It is also helpful, particularly here, to notice the context of *The Friend at Midnight*. Jesus had just taught his disciples to pray by teaching them what we often call, “*The Lord’s Prayer*.” This parable comes as encouragement to come boldly before the Lord.

However, with that being said, this parable still does have difficulties. Much of the difficulty centers around the Greek word, “*ἀναίδεια*” (*anaideia*). This is a word that is used only here in the New Testament. In other ancient literature, it always means, “lack of sensitivity to what is proper.” This is why the ESV translates it as “impudence” and others translate it as “shameless.” Still yet, other translations render it “persistence” though it is never elsewhere used in that way. Certainly, a rude persistence could be said to be shameless or lacks the sensitivity to what is proper. The reason this is important is because the motivation for the homeowner answering the door is not on the basis of their friendship, but because of the impudence of the one knocking! What does this have to do with God’s children coming to Him in prayer? Do we come shamelessly? Do we come lacking an understanding of what is proper? Do we come not on the basis of friendship but simply because we are shameless in our asking? Again, what’s the point?

Critical to our understanding here is the beginning question that Jesus asks. In verse 5 he says, “Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to

him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves?’” And the parable continues then, “which of you would not only ask for the loaves but go there at midnight, waking up this man’s family and disturbing their sleep?” “Which of you would do this to your friend?” And in answer to that, his hearers would respond, “I wouldn’t do this to a friend.” But the point of the parable is that even while this friend answers the door in the face of this shameless request, “how much more” will your heavenly Father answer the request of His child? This is the *nimshal* in verse 13, “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 says this well after the parable and after he asks several other rhetorical questions but the principle is the very same. If a neighbor answers the door at midnight to a rude and shameless request, does God not so much more hear and answer the calls, prayers, and requests of His people!

THE UNJUST JUDGE (PERSISTENT WIDOW)

This parable (Luke 18:1-8) is also a difficult parable. Its difficulty is not focused on one particular word but on a variety of issues, not the least of which is the story itself. It is a double indirect parable that serves as a contrast between the unjust judge in the parable with the just and righteous God. Critical to understanding this parable is the context. Jesus tells this parable on the heels of his teaching concerning eschatology – or the last things. There is certainly a tension of the already/not yet in the previous chapter. But in this parable, he is encouraging his hearers as they live in the “already” but they await the “not yet.” As we remember from previous studies, many in Jesus’ time were asking questions concerning the

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kingdom of God. If the kingdom of God has come, then why are we still suffering? If the kingdom of God has come, why is there still sin? In the same way, here in this parable one of the questions being answered is, “If the kingdom of God has come, why is there not vindication of the elect?” Jesus is cautioning against an over-realized eschatology. That is to say, he is cautioning against the thought that there is nothing yet to come. Jesus is saying, “it’s not all over yet!” And in the meantime, while you wait, you “ought always to pray and not lose heart.” This is his counsel in verse 1 and sets the stage for the parable.

The contrast is between the unjust judge to whom the widow constantly comes and badgers with her demand of justice and with God himself. The widow’s actions certainly teach us that we are to always pray and continue to seek God but the emphasis is on the unjust judge. It is helpful to keep this in context. This parable doesn’t teach us that our repetition in prayer somehow cajoles God into doing something that He didn’t beforehand plan on doing. This isn’t about men or women coaxing God to do their bidding. This is in the context of living in light of the eschaton. God promises to vindicate His people. He promises to give justice to the elect. We are praying in accord with His will when we pray for “His kingdom to come” and “His will to be done.”

This parable speaks more about the character of God than it does the character of the widow or of her request. Again, take note of the proper contrast. Here is this judge who “neither feared God nor respected man” and he responded to this widow to give justice when she asked. She was persistent, but her persistence represented a patience and a willingness to endure; a willingness to “not lose heart” as she waited for justice to be done. This is why Jesus asks the question in verse 8, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” In other words, he is asking, “will there be those when I do come who have endured? Those who have continued to pray and who have not lost heart?”

But again, here is this judge who doesn’t fear God or respect man, and even he responds to this widow’s cries for justice. Here’s the contrast – how much more will the holy, righteous, perfect and just judge – God himself – respond to the cries of His people?

God is merciful, patient, and kind. He is eager to answer the cries of His people and He will vindicate His Name and His people. Are His people staying alert, awake, and faithful, patiently awaiting His return?

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

This parable certainly strikes at the heart of one’s attitude before God. It is in the context of these two men praying, but their attitudes in prayer reveal their hearts - one is a heart of self-righteousness while the other exhibits a heart of humility.

Klyne Snodgrass sees this parable as a single indirect parable comparing opposites by way of juxtaposition. It compares the prayers and the attitudes behind the prayers of a Pharisee and a tax collector and what can be learned from each.

The intent of the parable and the audience to whom it is aimed is revealed in Luke’s introduction to it in verse 9, “He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” Luke raises two main issues in that verse; self-righteousness and contempt for others. Whatever else this parable speaks to, it speaks first to these issues. The story is meant to teach these people that trusting in themselves leads not to exaltation but to humility. If one wishes to be exalted, he must first humble himself. A self-righteous person isn’t a person secure in his own abilities or self, but in fact, is a person attempting to cover his own weakness and failure. A friend of mine quoted Dr. Norman Lamm on his Facebook page this past week.

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The quote read, “You meet a person who is always bragging, always talking about his own achievements, boasting of his attractiveness or intelligence or talent or wealth, and you know intuitively that you have just met a person who despises himself.”

The Pharisee prayed about his own achievements. He elevated himself above all others, and especially this tax collector. He believed that because of what he had done, he had earned a standing before God. And yet, the tax collector, in all humility, “wouldn’t even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” This “sinner”, this tax collector, upon whom others looked down, went away justified. He confessed that he was a sinner before God and had nothing of his own on which he could stand. He called out and depended upon the only One He could, “God, be merciful to me!” And he was justified. The Pharisee, however, depending upon his own work, his own achievements, went away unjustified, lost, and without hope.

How is it that we come before the Lord? Of course, we all, I hope, would want to answer, “like the tax collector!” But in so doing, we are not far from saying in the same breath, “I am not like the Pharisee! Thank God I’m not like the Pharisee!” We often are guilty of doing the very thing with the Pharisee that he had done with the tax collector. This parable teaches us that self-righteousness disqualifies one before God because that person is trusting in his own efforts and achievements rather than in Christ Jesus. It also teaches us that believers do not treat others with contempt. We do not compare ourselves to others as if the standard is the best a sinful person can do rather than the perfect, righteous, standard of the holy God.

We often look down upon others simply because of what they do. We often say things like, “I don’t see how he/she did that! I would never do such a thing.” Beware to those who think they stand, lest they fall! In our culture, it’s also easy to do this very

same thing but to do it piously. That is to say, we often look down upon the “Pharisee” in our culture as if they are beyond the power of the Gospel. As Snodgrass says, “In excluding people we are in danger of excluding ourselves from God.”

Humility – as Spurgeon said, “the first rung of the ladder” when it comes to the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It all starts there – acknowledging our need as sinners; our need to be justified by someone else. And still, a word of caution for us “reformed” folks. We should boast in the cross of Christ for it is the only ground of boasting. May we be careful not to boast that we understand our need; that we even understand our own self-righteousness while others do not. As we minister to those who do not believe – may we understand that apart from the grace of God, we would be in the same situation. May we understand that we, in fact, at one time, were in that same situation. As we encourage other believers, may we be careful as we speak to them – not displaying an attitude of, “I’m the most humble person I know.” May we not display the attitude, “oh you poor non-reformed folks, some day you’ll get it.”

May we have the attitude of Christ Jesus, who humbled himself, even to the point of death on the cross. May we boast only in Him, only in the cross of Christ and may our cry truly be, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

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