



Parables Concerning God & Prayer

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give 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!" (Luke 11:9-13)

Three parables address the subject of prayer, all in Luke's Gospel: the Friend at Midnight, the Unjust Judge, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. As we will see, the parables in this lesson are not so much about prayer as about the God to whom we pray and the attitudes we should have in praying. Indeed our focus in prayer begins with the character of God. And these parables emphasize that God is merciful, eager to hear our prayer, and will one day bring the fullness of his justice into reality.

These specific parables are also parables of encouragement. The people in the parables pray seeking assistance, justice, and forgiveness...and together the parables teach that God is eager to assist, listen, and forgive. By reading these parables together, we are instructed to pray with the *persistence* of the man in need, the *determination* of the widow, and the *humility* of the tax collector.

Finally, in telling these parables, Jesus does not merely call for repetitive prayer, but for a faithful lifestyle that stays *alert* and *ready* by being in *conversation with God*. These parables remind us that prayer is itself the defense against weariness and giving up. It is not the means to acquire what one desires, but the means by which one's desires are made known to God and then brought into conformity with God's will, regardless of our circumstances.

The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8, 9-13)¹

Background:

- We assume there was a strong sense of responsibility for hospitality in the ancient world, which was part of the shame and honor system of that time. Inns were not numerous, so travelers depended on hospitality. The host had a responsibility to care for his guest, and the sleeping man had obligations to help his neighbor.
- **Luke has set this parable in the midst of teachings on prayer**, preceded by his version of the Lord's Prayer and followed by assurances of God's hearing of us. Given that context, it is difficult not to hear this parable as anything but an assurance of "how much more" God will hear us than one who acts only in response to avoid shame. And since Luke alone records this parable, that context looms large in our hearing and interpretation.

Interpretation:

- Problems have arisen with this parable because interpreters have wanted a more direct application to a theology of prayer than the parable seems to offer. We assume that it should be a comparison dealing with prayer, but many parables are not comparisons. We want to know in what way God is like the sleeper and how people who pray are like the petitioner. **The whole point of the parable, however, is that God is *not* like the sleeper.** It is a parable *contrasting* God with the sleeper.
- The parable is made more difficult by the fact that it has no explicit statement showing its purpose and intent. It is a "**how much more**" argument, but the reader must supply the "stronger" element that makes explicit the intent of the parable. A second "how much more" argument is explicit in 11:13 and shows how the parable in 11:5-8 is to be interpreted.
- The parable says in effect: "**If a human will obviously get up in the middle of the night to grant the request even of a rude friend, will not God much more answer your requests?**" If a human will respond to the request of a rude friend for bread, how much more will God provide bread in response to the requests of his people? The parable expresses with reference to prayer precisely the point of Matthew 6:24 & Luke 12:22-34: freedom from anxiety. If God cares about birds and flowers, will God not care about you? If a friend will get up and give a person bread because he needs it, will not your heavenly Father?
- The parable also addresses the implied question: "**Will God respond to prayer?**" And answers as follows: "If among humans a request is granted even when it is rude, how much more will your heavenly Father respond to your requests?" **Indirectly, the parable also encourages boldness in praying.** If we are assured of being heard, and particularly if we think of God as a Father to his children as in Luke 11:11, praying boldly is much easier.

Applying the Parable:

- **Is God of such character that he responds to prayers?** The parable answers, "**Of course!**" Well beyond what a human might do, God will respond. Jesus' conviction is that God is a God who eagerly hears the prayers of his people, works for their good, and can be trusted to respond.
- **The parable also affirms the importance of prayer and is an invitation to see prayer as a core component of communication in our relationship with God**, similar to our everyday conversations with friends and neighbors. Surely if you would ask for and expect help from a neighbor, how much more should you seek and expect the help of God? What's more is that, when seen through the lens of the friend, this parable urges us to bring to God not only the pressing matters of our lives but also the needs of our neighbor.
- "**Suppose one of you has a friend...**" also poses a question related to the unfolding story of Jesus' life. For when it came to the practice of hospitality, how did people welcome Jesus, particularly at the end of his life? Thus the parable's question moves from "**which one of you has a friend**" to "**which one of you will be a friend**" to those cast out and condemned, to those who rely on our words and commitments, to the One who in saving us would save all. God hears us with grace and responds in love. May our lives practice such conversation with others.

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, pp. 442-49.

The Widow and the Judge (Luke 18:1-8)²

Background:

- **Widows** were often left with no means of support. If her husband left an estate, she did not inherit it, although provision for her upkeep would be made. If she remained in her husband's family, she had an inferior, almost servile, position. If she returned to her family, the money exchanged at the wedding had to be given back. Widows were so victimized that they were often sold as slaves for debt.
- Information about how the judicial system functioned in first-century Palestine is sketchy at best. The saying in Matt 5:25-26/Luke 12:57-59 assumes a court with one judge, and it could be that only one judge is mentioned here in keeping with the brevity of parables. The interpretation of the parable does not turn on specific knowledge about the kind of court. **One need only know the desperate situation of many widows and the possibility of unsympathetic and/or corrupt judges.**

Interpretation:

- Luke's introductory comment (18:1) is not an encouragement to persistent prayer *in general* but praying and not becoming weary with respect to future deliverance. The call to pray and not give up gains its significance from the context of the whole discourse, which began in **Luke 17:20**. The disciples will long to see the days of the Son of Man, but will not (17:22), and people will go about their lives and be caught unprepared. Yet the opposite of becoming weary is steadfastness, faithfulness, and readiness.
- **The contrast between the judge and God is *with respect to the hearing each gives the petitioner*.** For the contrast to work, the parable presupposes that people praying are in a much more advantageous relation to a righteous God who loves and hears his people than the widow is to the unrighteous and uncaring judge. Luke's concern is that believers not give up while they are waiting for their vindication, which in this context is tied closely to the coming of the Son of Man. For Luke, faithfulness and praying are necessary ingredients of readiness for present and future deliverance.
- This parable, like 17:22-37, warns that vindication is far enough removed that people will long for it to come. Deliverance will not come immediately, and readiness and faithfulness are required. Such readiness is enabled and accompanied by prayer. The parable assures that God *will* vindicate his people. The concern is not the timing of the event, but the patience of God toward his people, and the certainty of his acting on their behalf, and necessity for them to live in readiness and faithfulness.

Applying the Parable:

- The parable addresses the implied question "**Will God respond to pleas for deliverance from his people?**" to which the answer is "**Certainly,**" but a second question is attached: "**Will his people remain faithful?**" Here and elsewhere the question of God's delay in bringing justice is a major factor of life. This parable offers no answer as to why God moves slowly in bringing final vindication and justice, but it urges prayerful and faithful living in the confidence that God will act.
- Communicating and hearing the parable should concentrate on two primary areas: **(1)** the character of God, who is *not* like the uncaring, unrighteous judge, but is merciful, patient, and eager to assist his people, and **(2)** the necessity of staying alert and ready for God's vindication and judgment. Vindication has begun with the kingdom and the resurrection of Jesus, but it awaits God's future action. **The evidence of faithfulness and a primary path to alertness and faithfulness is *prayer*** — constant involvement with God as we interpret and deal with the world in which we live.

² Snodgrass, pp. 111-17.

The Pharisee & Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)³

Background:

- **Pharisees** were highly respected among most Jews and would have been considered righteous, meticulous in their efforts to obey God. The Pharisee in this parable goes beyond all requirements of the Law. Fasting was required of Jews only on the Day of Atonement. As the Bible attests, people facing crises would also fast, and particularly godly people would fast more frequently. In fasting twice a week, the Pharisee probably viewed himself as fasting to make atonement for all of Israel. And in tithing all he acquired, he would have tithed items he purchased that other people should have already tithed.
- If Pharisees were respected, attitudes toward **tax collectors** were close to the opposite end of the spectrum. Tax collectors bid for and purchased the right to collect taxes for a specific region, and various taxes were levied: poll taxes, land taxes, taxes on travel, sales taxes, and inheritance taxes. What tax collectors raised beyond their contracts was sheer profit. Jewish tax collectors were considered traitors because they had contracted with the ruling powers to collect taxes. Overall, attitudes toward tax collectors were quite negative. Such people were notorious for dishonesty and were classified in the Mishnah with murderers and robbers. Given this context, we who hear this parable today must grasp how surprising and stunning for Jesus' hearers it would have been that the tax collector was the one declared to be in the right. That would contradict everything his audience knew.

Interpretation:

- Two individuals pray at the temple: a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee comes to the temple, not so much imploring God's acceptance as declaring his fitness for it. The prayer of the Pharisee thus becomes not a baring of his soul but a review of his resumé. Grace is not really needed, much less asked for, since the Pharisee mentions ample evidence for his standing with God being obvious to everything—including God.
- **"God I thank you that I am not like other[s]."** This Pharisee is not like the extortioners, the unjust, the adulterers, to use the words of the parable. The prayer of the Pharisee, whether prayed then or today, requires no divine presence. It only needs an audience of those two share the same disdain and the same upright behavior for the sake of self-congratulation.
- The second person in the temple is a tax collector, a traitor who exploits his own people by collecting the taxes of a foreign occupier. He stands back in the corner where he won't upset anyone with his presence. Hardly daring to raise his eyes off the floor and with a gesture of despair, all he can pray is, **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"**
- The parable addresses the implied question **"What counts as righteousness before God?"** Righteous acts without compassion or love are not considered righteous by God. Jesus' decision as to which man was righteous must have sounded paradoxical, surprising, and maybe even unacceptable to his hearers. Jesus called a man righteous who was known to be unrighteous and refused this description for a man whom everyone would recognize as a righteous person, one who had done good things, even beyond what the law expected — that is, unless Jesus' hearers were keyed in to the importance of the love command.
- As Jesus saw the matter, everyone who sets himself or herself up will be taken down a few notches, while those who humble themselves will be exalted. Justification looms large in the parable's close as the distinguishing point between these two individuals. What separates them are not the obvious differences in lifestyle, piety, and social stature. One returns justified; one does not. And the one who does catches us off guard and unprepared for the choices God makes.

Applying the Parable:

- There is a lot going on in this little parable. There are differences between the Pharisee and the tax collector in terms of how they stand, what they pray for, and how they pray. But if we make this parable about how terrible the

³ Snodgrass, pp. 117-42.

Pharisees were, we have totally missed the point. **For the greatest difference between the two praying men is this: one has written off the other, while the other can speak only of his own brokenness.**

- If we imagine Jesus speaking the parable to an original audience, maybe then we can see them experiencing a surprise: the parable upends their expectations when they discover that a respectable religious person does not possess advantages before God over an obvious “sinner.”
- Christians are easily guilty of self-satisfaction as the Pharisee, as the condemnation of the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:17) already shows. Yet the temptation lies at hand to pray, “I thank God I am not like this Pharisee or like unbelievers.” **The parable, therefore, raises the question of how our assessment of people squares with God’s assessment.** All too frequently, like Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:39-40), we secretly judge people as less than ourselves. In doing so we are guilty of the sin of comparison and we reveal how far we are from the mind of God. In excluding people we are in danger of excluding ourselves from God.
- In addition, a question other than who is justified drives this parable and our own encounter with it. And that is: **“Who do you trust?”** The parable tips its hand at the outset: “[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves...” The parable addresses those who seemingly have every right to feel justified. Then and now the parable challenges individuals and communities whose prayers exalt their own standing because they are better than others. For “better” we might substitute richer, more powerful, smarter, more godly. Yet by comparing ourselves to others, our prayers and spiritual posturing may reveal that we trust more in ourselves than in God.
- **A proud prayer is a self-contradictory endeavor. Conversely, humility is an essential aspect of true prayer.** That the tax collector is justified because he pleads for mercy is in accord with Jesus’ focus on forgiveness and mercy elsewhere (Matt 18:21-35; Luke 6:20-21; 7:36-50). The implications this parable has about God are even stronger in that it contains a revelation of God. In fact, the attitudes of the two men reveal two images of God, one presupposed by the Pharisee, which is false, and one hoped for but not presumed by the tax collector, which is right. God is not a God impressed by pious acts and feelings of superiority. God is, rather, a God of mercy who responds to the needs and honest prayers of people.
- Listen to Jesus’ story and ask: **How shall we pray to an abundantly merciful God? And how shall we live in relation to others, having learned of such boundless mercy?**

Discussion

1. How would you describe your experience of God amidst the routines of your everyday life?
2. How confident are you that God listens when you pray? In Luke 11:1-13, what comparison/contrast is Jesus making between the sleepy friend and God? What does the example of God as father in these verses teach us about the character of God and prayer?
3. How does asking God for *what we need* put us in greater touch with *who we are*? How does this transparency and trust move us beyond “going through the motions” of prayer and actually facilitate an honest relationship with God?
4. Think of a friend who has provided for you in a time of need, perhaps at great cost. What impact did that have on you? What, if anything, did it reveal about the character of God? Has that experience moved you to be such a friend for another person, even a stranger?
5. How does the picture of the unjust judge (18:1-8) help us understand what God is actually like instead?
6. After hearing our final parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, consider together the final questions of that section: How should we pray to an abundantly merciful God? And how should we live in relation to others, having learned of (and experienced) such boundless mercy?