

20. The Parable of the Friend at Midnight

Luke 11:5-13

The Parables of Jesus

When we are in prayer, it is passion and desire for the thing sought along with persistence that will obtain results in prayer. Faithful persistence is so important to the Lord that He gave us another parable on prayer, hoping to encourage us to pray through any apparent obstacles. Let's read the Parable of the Friend at Midnight:

⁵Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' ⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs (Luke 11:5-8 Emphasis mine).

In the passage of Scripture above, we have the story of a traveler that arrived at his friend's house in the middle of the night. During the summer months in the Middle East travelers often journeyed late to avoid the heat of the day. The traveler was on a journey and decided to stay the rest of the night with a friend as he passed through a particular town. Having no email or phone in those days, his friend was not expecting him and had no bread to feed him. It was a sacred obligation to give hospitality and to supply the traveler as well as give him a place to sleep. What should the house owner do? No bread to put before his friend was a big embarrassment to him. He did have a friend that he thought might get up and give him some food so off he went to wake up his friend and get some bread. In the time of Jesus, it was common in the Middle East for whole families to sleep together in the same room. Even today, in some countries in Asia, this is a usual occurrence.

In 1976 I traveled overland with a friend across Europe and through the Middle East into Asia. At one particular town, there were no regular hotels that we could find, and upon inquiry, we were invited to stay where many other Asian people were sleeping the night. The time was already about 10:00 P.M., and we were exhausted from our travels on a rickety bus over mountain ranges. It seemed pretty cheap until we saw the room in which we were to stay. It was a large room with about twenty other people sleeping on the floor on a very thick pile carpet or sleeping mat. Naturally, we were shocked to find that we were sleeping in the same room with many others already asleep on the floor. It was a communal sleeping room. There was no furniture in the room, just a wood-fired stove in the middle to keep people warm. It was quite an experience to sleep with about twenty other people in the same place! □

To Westerners, it seems odd that many people would sleep in the same room, but in Asia, it is different. Jesus described the man woken up after midnight as having all his family sleeping together. He had to get up and be very careful not to step on his kids in the dark, find the lamp and try to light it, and then also find the bread, which would probably wake up the whole household. We can imagine him speaking in hushed tones down to his friend, perhaps through a window, hoping that his friend would understand why he could not get up and give him the bread

he needed. His response to his friend was: “My children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything” (Luke 11:7). That sounds like a final answer. However, that was not the end of the story.

William Barclay in his commentary says:

In the east, no one would knock on a shut door unless the need was imperative. In the morning the door was opened and remained open all day, for there was little privacy; but if the door was shut, that was a definite sign that the friend did not wish to be disturbed. But the seeking house owner who had the visitor was not deterred. He knocked and kept on knocking.¹

What do you think Jesus was trying to illustrate by this reluctant man’s actions and the way he responded to his friend?

Andrew Murray, the writer of the book *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, makes an excellent observation regarding this passage: □

What a deep heavenly mystery persevering prayer is! The God who has promised and who longs to give the blessing holds it back. It is a matter of such deep importance to Him that His friends on earth should know and fully trust their rich Friend in heaven! Because of this, He trains them in the school of delayed answer to find out how their perseverance really does prevail. They can wield mighty power in heaven if they simply set themselves to it!²

The emphasis is on the word *boldness* in Luke 18:8 in the New International Version (NIV) or *importunity* in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible “yet *because of the man's boldness.*” The Greek word *Anaideia* means to be without shame. The Key Word Study Bible says it means: “Shamelessness, unabashedness, audacity. The word describes the brazen persistence displayed in the pursuit of something, an insistence characterized by rudeness and a lack of compunction.”³

The King James Version translates *Anaideia* with the English word “importunate.” Webster's New World Dictionary says that the word importunate means: “urgent or persistent in asking or demanding; refusing to be denied; annoyingly urgent or persistent, troublesome.”

Why would Jesus use this word? What does He want us to understand about prayer by approaching God with shamelessness or audacity?

There is a kind of faith and persistence that will not let go of God until one gets what he or she needs. Persistent faith like this is a faith that pleases God. Surely the point of the parable is that the man kept on knocking on the door and would not let his friend fall back asleep until he was given the bread he needed. What the Lord is teaching in this passage is that if a grouchy friend can be persuaded to get up and give his friend some food due to some shameless, brazen

¹ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, Gospel of Luke*, Saint Andrew Press Publishers, Page 145.

² Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Whitaker House Publishers, 1981, Page 64.

³ Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN 37422. Page 1585.

persistence, **how much more** will God, who longs to feed and clothe His people when they ask Him? Surely this story has been given to us to encourage us to prevail in prayer and not give up. If importunity and shameless audacity can be used to bring one's needs before a man who was angry at being inconvenienced, how much more will God do for us? God is infinitely kind, willing and ready to do good to us. Our Father is not angry at our importunity but longs that we persist in prayer.

Jacob illustrated this kind of faith when he needed a breakthrough concerning his brother Esau's hatred of him. More than twenty years previously Jacob had managed to steal Isaac's blessing and birthright away from Esau. The blessing and birthright were supposed to go to the firstborn, who would have been Esau, but through deceptive means, Jacob stole the birthright and blessing from Esau. Now Esau was looking for revenge as Jacob was returning home to Canaan. Esau was on his way with 400 men to do Jacob harm, so Jacob cast himself on God, and the Lord Himself appeared to Jacob in the form of an angel. Many, including this writer, believe that this angel was none other than Jesus in the pre-incarnate form of a man and wrestling with Jacob all night. Jacob's deceitful bent to his character had to be changed for him to be the man of God, the one that would have his name changed to Israel, a name that means, *the Lord prevails*:

²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because **you have struggled with God** and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:24-28).

I don't believe we are told here that we need to twist God's arm behind his back, so to speak, to get Him to give us what we need. This wrestling with God by Jacob is a picture of blessing coming through persistence and overcoming in prayer to God. God is ready and willing to give, but some things do not come without energy, passion, and persistence. Remember that God loves to see faith displayed and surely He is training us for eternity to exercise faith. Faith and trust in God is power in the spiritual realm. Not faith in faith, which will bring us nothing. Faith has to be expressed in the right source—God Himself. The struggle is often against unseen spiritual forces that try to prevent our understanding. Paul, the apostle, wrote, "**For our *struggle* is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms**" (Ephesians 6:12 *Emphasis mine*).

In this passage about Jacob's struggle, it is clear that Jacob was not struggling with demonic forces, but he was struggling with a spiritual being which Scripture says was the Angel of the LORD—Jehovah Himself (Genesis 33:28, 30). It is interesting to note that the Angel of the Lord said that Jacob had struggled with God **and with men** (Verse 28). I take it to mean that Jacob's struggle was a spiritual conflict for God to overcome Esau's anger and hatred; otherwise, why would the Angel say that Jacob had struggled with men? This striving with God was a life or death matter for Jacob. He knew that Esau was intent on destroying him. Even though it was God's will to bring restoration to these two brothers, the process of turning Esau's heart was

contingent upon Jacob's prayer as well as the power of God to perform the miracle in Esau's heart. Jacob's struggle with the Angel of the Lord was physical, but it was also symbolic of wrestling in prayer. There are many things we may have to overcome through prayer and prayer alone. What do we wrestle or struggle with when we pray?

We may have to struggle with our desires. Is what you are asking for under God's will as outlined in Scripture? Does your desire contradict any scriptural principle? We need to be honest to search our own heart. Does this mean all prayers must be self-less, or that we cannot ask for anything for our individual needs or desires? Absolutely not! Our Heavenly Father *longs* to give good gifts to His children. In His wisdom, however, He may withhold an answer to prayer because of our motive or because it may be that the thing we ask for would prove harmful to ourselves or another person. Some things we may ask for are morally neutral, that is to say, they are things that are not harmful in themselves. For example, a person may need financial provision and pray for a financial blessing. If that person was given a significant amount of money, he or she could use it for good, or it could be a stumbling block if they chose to use it in the wrong way, and did not have the spiritual maturity to handle the financial gift. Our motives and desires are under our control, and we are responsible for them. □

We may also have to struggle with opposing forces, such as demonic influences. For example, when we pray for a loved one or a family member to come to faith and knowledge in the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ, we know that we are asking for something that is accordance with the Father's will. However, that person may be willingly giving himself or herself to a sin that is holding them in bondage to the enemy through disobedience. This type of stronghold is one example of a need to struggle and wrestle with God in prayer. Through prayer, we partner with God in bringing His will to pass on earth as it (already) is in heaven.

We may need to struggle with our own physical and emotional weakness. How tired Jacob must have been! Surely he must have been tempted to give up, but he chose to persevere, and God honored that. How close are we to the answer when we sometimes give up? We may never know. Don't let weariness or discouragements batter you emotionally so that you cave in instead of continuing in prayer. Choose to believe that *God wants* to answer you, and hold on as Jacob did until you see the answer.

We are called to persevere and prevail in prayer as Jacob did. Jacob's need was too great to give up. He had to continue to struggle with God over Esau's heart, and I'm sure, his own soul also, for Jacob needed to have a heart change for what God had purposed in his life in the land God had given. Jacob's hip put out of joint was symbolic of him no longer resting on his resources, but on God's power. From that point on, Jacob walked with a limp to remind him not to trust in his natural strength or his deceitful scheming, but to be the progenitor of the nation of Israel, his trust must be in the Lord: **¹⁰His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, ¹¹but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him (Psalm 147:10-11).** Jacob was brought to a new place in God through overcoming prayer and intercession. Prayer was his only recourse. God loves to see us dependent on Him. It is a great lesson to learn how to cast our all on God and depend on Him for our needs. The Father loves to see us exhibit persevering faith in Him. The Lord Jesus carried on in His parable by encouraging his disciples to prevail in overcoming prayer:

⁹And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹²or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³If 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).

The Lord implores us to ask first of all, and then to add action to our asking by seeking, but also to add knocking, which speaks of persevering in our asking. Our English language does not do justice to the Greek words in this passage. The Greek text reads "keep on asking, and it will be given you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you." He is carrying on this thought of persisting in prayer, trusting and believing that you will receive the very thing you are asking. What a promise this is! If we keep on praying, it will be given to us. God is faithful to His Word, and it is impossible for Him to lie (Hebrews 6:18). Do you genuinely believe that God the Father wants to answer you when you pray? □

C. H. Spurgeon once said, “Because God is the Living God, He *can* hear; because He is a loving God, He *will* hear; because He is our covenant God, He has *bound Himself* to hear.”

Prayer: Father, please help us not to give up but to persevere in prayer that we may receive gifts from your hand. Teach us to pray, and not grow weary. Strengthen us through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Keith Thomas

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com