

The Generosity of God

Luke 11:5-13

Last week we began a sermon series on the topic of prayer. We looked at the disciples request of Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” We are taking this request as our foundational request during this series. We don’t merely want Jesus to teach us **about** prayer; we actually want to learn **to** pray. We believe that a deepening of our corporate prayer life is one of the most strategic things that we can do as a church.

We will examine several aspects of prayer in due course, but today we are going to focus on the aspect of prayer known as “petition” – making requests of God. In a few minutes we’re going to read a parable of Jesus in which one person actually wakes up a friend in the middle of the night to ask for something. Jesus had the disciples think about bothering a friend in the middle of the night in order to teach them something about prayer.

Before we look at Jesus’ parable I’d like you to identify need or issue in your life that you care about deeply – so deeply that you’d even be willing to ‘bother’ somebody else about it if you thought they could help. For example, you probably wouldn’t wake up a neighbor in the middle of the night to borrow a cup of sugar, but if your house were on fire, you’d go bang on their door with your fists. Figuratively speaking, what makes you want to bang on the doors of heaven with your fists? What do you want that badly?

Some of you can think of something immediately. You are facing a problem that’s dominating your life: some temptation that threatens everything good in your life, some relationship that is strained or broken, some grief or loss that weighs you down, some uncertainty that hangs over your head. Sometimes we face issues that so dominate our lives that we’re ready to “bother” God and/or anybody else who might be able to help.

Or perhaps it’s not so much a problem to be solved as a longing for more. Maybe you’ve read something in the Scriptures that you want but that you’re not experiencing. For example, maybe you’ve read in Psalm 16 where David said to God, “In Your presence is the fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” You read that and the Spirit stirs up a longing to experience the joys and pleasures that David described. Don’t you ever get tired of reading about things in Scripture and not experiencing them? I do. Maybe there is something that you’ve heard or read about that you’ve come to want so badly that you’re ready to bang on the doors of heaven until God answers.

As we turn to Luke 11 again this week, keep in mind the thing(s) that you **really** want and/or need. If you want to learn how to petition God, you have to want things (sometimes it’s called “holy discontentment”). If you don’t want anything, you will have little motivation to petition God. You may need to learn how to want more – and want more of the right things. In this passage Jesus is going to advocate asking, seeking, and knocking because God is just that generous.

The Generosity of a “bothered” Friend (11:5-10) Jesus tells a parable and asks the hearer to put him/herself in the place of someone who wakes up a friend at midnight to ask for a favor. Here’s the scenario:

5 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; 6 for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him';

In Palestine traveling at night was common to avoid the heat of the day. You have a friend who travels one night and shows up unexpectedly just before midnight. As it turns out, you don’t have any bread to set before your guest. It’s in the middle of the night, but your sense of hospitality compels you to go to another friend and ask for bread. (They obviously didn’t have grocery stores or bakeries open all night in those days, so you really didn’t have any other options.)

And so you knock on your friend’s door and make the request, “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.” You appeal to your friend because you have a need that he is able to meet. The problem was that in that day the whole family commonly slept in one room. To get up and give you the bread would require your friend to disturb his entire family. Here’s what you hear from your friend:

7 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.'

With friends like that, who needs enemies?!? Your friend says, “Do not bother me.” Your friend doesn’t really think that your request is worth the disruption to his family’s sleep. And so he tells you, “I cannot get up and give you anything.” It turns out that your friendship doesn’t carry as much clout as you had hoped. But you’re not going to give up that easily; you persist in asking your friend for three loaves of bread. Notice how Jesus wraps up the parable:

8 "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.

It wasn’t the friendship that secured the bread at midnight; it was “persistence.” The term persistence has been understood in a couple of different ways. The term can definitely mean “persistence,” but some find that understanding problematic if persistence is going to mean bothering God until He gives you what you want.

The term can also refer to “avoidance of shame.” If that is the meaning, the term describes not the person making the request, but the person reluctant to grant the request. The point would be that even though friendship didn’t persuade him to give the three loaves of bread,

he gave them anyway because he wanted to *avoid the shame* of being inhospitable. That meaning is possible, but I still think that the understanding of persistence is preferable. I think persistence is preferable because I think Jesus is making a contrast instead of a comparison. I think Jesus is saying that even though a friend who doesn't want to be bothered will eventually relent and give you what you need, God, by contrast, willingly gives us what we need when we ask. God is neither reluctant nor stingy.

Jesus' follow-up comment in verse 9 reinforces how eager God is to meet our needs:

9 "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.

Unlike the friend who was awakened at midnight, God doesn't say, "Stop bothering Me! I'm up here running the universe . . . plus, the cherubs are sleeping . . ." No, God says, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." All three verbs are present continuous with the sense, "keep on asking . . . keep on seeking . . . keep on knocking."

You probably noticed that Jesus didn't put all sorts of qualifications on asking and receiving. He didn't say, "Ask, and *if* you ask for something in the will of God it will be given to you . . . and *if* you ask in faith believing it will be given to you. . ." No, Jesus was teaching on a much more foundational level. Of course we don't get everything we ask for (sometimes we understand why and sometimes we don't); of course we have to ask in faith instead of unbelief or cynicism or whatever. Those things are a given.

The more foundational issue is the disposition and the generosity of God. We need to understand that God is predisposed to give when we ask; He is predisposed to let us find what we're seeking for; He is predisposed to open the door when we knock. He is that generous. He is that "for us."

As I mentioned last week, you may have all sorts of questions about prayer. But a deepening of our prayer life *doesn't* begin by trying to figure out all the mystery and ambiguity of prayer. A deepening of our prayer life begins with the foundational belief that God loves to give. Jesus was either right or wrong when He reiterated in verse 10:

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

As Jesus pointed out in the parable, this principle is readily apparent even in human relationships. I regularly read a blog by a guy named Pete in Jeffersonville, NY called Chair Notes. He makes all sorts of different chairs (including Windsors). Last September he posted a picture of a rocking chair that he designed and built. I fell in love with it the moment I saw it; it was literally love at first sight. It's made out of white oak and butternut. Eventually I decided that I'd like to try to build that rocker. The problem is that it's not the

type of thing you build from looking at a photo; it's got complicated joints and angles so you'd really have to work off of plans.

I wrestled with whether or not to even ask Pete to share his plans with me. Most furniture makers are very protective of their designs and techniques. But I decided that if I don't ask I *certainly* won't receive; if I do ask I *might* receive. It would all depend upon Pete's generosity. So I composed an email that said, "Pete. . . I love your rocker. Actually I'm interested in building one for myself. I don't know if you'll be offended or honored by my request, but I'm wondering if you'd share your plans with me. . . Steve in Manhattan, KS."

The reply came back the next day, "I'm not offended in the least. I'd be glad to send you plans for the rocker." He hadn't actually recorded the design on paper yet, but he promised me a copy whenever he got them finished. At the end of December a detailed set of plans arrived on my doorstep in a cardboard tube. As Dallas Willard has written, "'Ask and you will receive' is embedded in the fabric of the universe." It really is.

The question relevant for my prayer life is, "Do I believe that God is at least as generous as Pete the chair maker in Jeffersonville, NY?" That really is the issue. The question relevant for your prayer life is, "Do you believe that God is at least as generous as the generous people that you know?" If you are going to learn how to pray, you need to believe that if you ask you will receive, and if you seek you will find, and that if you knock the door will be opened to you.

The Generosity of God (11:11-13)

Jesus anticipated that many people (including many here today) really don't "buy" that God is that generous. We can believe that God is holy and powerful and wise; but we have a harder time believing that God is generous – at least to us. Jesus drives this point home yet more personally in verses 11 through 13. In these verses Jesus singles out fathers and asks:

11 "Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? 12 "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he?"

Of course there are bad fathers, but Jesus was talking to his disciples here. He's assuming a degree of health and normalcy. No normal father would take joy in playing mean tricks on their kids. If his son asked for a fish, he wouldn't give him a snake instead. If the child asks for an egg, no normal father would give him a scorpion (which would look a lot like an egg with claws and tail curled up into a ball). Given this basic tendency of fathers to give good gifts to their children, Jesus makes a comparison with our heavenly Father:

13 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"

Jesus isn't being mean when he says, "If you then, being evil . . ." Anybody with an ounce of self-awareness and honesty would admit, "There is evil within me; I have impulses and tendencies that are best described as evil." Any yet, we still how to give good gifts to our children. "How much more," Jesus says, "will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" Again, Jesus invites us to admit that God is ***much*** more generous than us. Our heavenly Father doesn't merely give "good gifts" to His children; He gives the best gift – ***the Holy Spirit*** – to those who ask Him.

I can't stress how vital it is to believe in the generosity of God if we are going to learn to pray. When the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us to pray," Jesus responded by giving them what we call "the Lord's prayer" and then by stressing the generosity of God. If you don't believe that God is more generous than you and more generous than a friend who will give you what you want because they're tired of you bothering them, you won't learn to bring Him your petitions. In other words, if you believe that God is stingy or unwilling to be moved by your petitions, you won't learn to pray. You'll lose heart and find something better to do.

My question is simply, "Do you believe that God is as generous as Jesus said He is?" If you do, you're poised for Jesus to teach you to pray. If you doubt the generosity of God, I would simply point you back to the cross. The cross tells us that God is so generous that He was willing to send His one and only Son to die for our sins. The cross has demonstrated once and for all that God is more generous than we can fathom.

You may be able to point to a situation in which you thought God should have been more generous to you or to somebody you cared about. You may think that God should have been more generous in healing or restoring or intervening in a situation. Nevertheless I would say that the generosity of the cross trumps any apparent lack of generosity anywhere else. Paul even argued that since God has given the greatest gift, He won't withhold lesser gifts that we need. In Romans 8 Paul wrote that "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

In light of the generosity of God, I would like for you to identify a couple of things that you ***really*** want and/or need God to do. We don't really learn to pray by forcing ourselves to ask God for things that we don't need or care about. We learn to pray by talking with God about the things that dominate our thinking and feeling. People who excel in prayer will tell you that you have to "pray who you are" not "who you think you should be." In other words, prayer is learning to talk with God about the issues of YOUR life, not somebody else's life.

Personally I have a couple of issues that are dominating my prayer life right now. I want them so badly that I'm like the guy in the parable who bothers his friend at midnight. I don't think I have to pester until He gives me what I want. I don't think I need to add up a certain number of prayers until God says, "Now I believe that he's serious." It's just that I want these things so badly that I can't really stop praying at this point. Until the needs are met, I can't really quit praying. Like the guy in the parable, I'm not willing to return home

empty-handed. I am inviting Jesus, “Lord, teach me to pray about these two things. Teach me that my heavenly Father is as generous as You say He is.”

My challenge to you is to identify a couple of things that you really want God to do. If you don't really want anything right now, read the Scriptures with fresh eyes. One of the transformative things about the Bible is that it trains our hearts in what we should want. When you identify *what* you want God to do, simply keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking. Those who ask receive; those who seek find; and those who knock have the door opened to them. God is just that generous. God is that “for us.”