

The Friend at Midnight

Luke 11:5-8

What would you do if you were a very generous person, but somebody thought you were stingy? Let's say you're actually very generous with your time and your money and other resources. But you are generous in ways that most people don't notice. What would you do if you discovered that somebody thought you were stingy? You'd have at least a couple of options.

- You could go to the person and give a list of ways that you've been generous, trying to convince them of your generosity.
- You could resent the person and vow never to let him/her be the recipient of your generosity.

What do you think God would do if He found out that people thought **He** were stingy? What if He discovered that people thought, "There's God who owns everything. He's got all the material and spiritual wealth in the universe, but He's tight-fisted. There's no use asking Him for any of it because He's stingy." How is God going to address that mindset? He's got the same options that you would have.

- He could argue His case.
- He could withhold His generosity out of resentment.

It turns out that God does argue His case throughout Scripture. But He's **so secure** that He invites people who think He's stingy to come to Him and allow Him to demonstrate His generosity. He is **so eager** to prove His generosity that He makes this a standing offer.

This is the basic message of Luke 11:1-13. In this passage we get the distinct impression that Jesus is arguing against the mindset that God is stingy. One of the things Jesus does in this passage is tell a parable that forces us to decide, "Am I going to act as if God is stingy or as if God is generous?" Our praying is what reveals what we really think about God's generosity.

The Argument for God's Generosity (Luke 11:5-8)

Verses 1 through 4 set the context:

1 It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."

2 And He said to them, "When you pray, say:
'Father, hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.

3 'Give us each day our daily bread.

4 'And forgive us our sins,
For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us.
And lead us not into temptation.' "

Jesus tells His disciples to praise God (“Father, hallowed be Your name”) and to ask Him very simply and very directly to extend His kingdom, to meet their needs, to forgive their sins, and keep them from temptation. Beginning in verse 5 Jesus tells a parable which anticipates the possibility that His disciples might not think God would really answer such prayers:

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’;

Jesus has us put ourselves in the position of having unexpected house guests. In Jesus’ day it wasn’t unusual for people to travel at night “in order to avoid the heat of the day” (Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 464). In first-century Palestine, you would be expected to welcome the visitor into your home and give him something to eat. If you didn’t have anything to feed them, you wouldn’t hesitate to ask for food from a neighbor or friend because your visitor was really the guest of the entire community. It would reflect poorly on the entire community if the visitor wasn’t welcomed and fed.

And so you go to a friend and say, “Lend me three loaves of bread.” But, Jesus says, your friend isn’t very eager to bail you out:

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*.’

In that culture (as in many cultures even today) a family typically slept in a single room together. If he got bread for you and unbolted the door, your friend would have probably awakened his entire family. We all know what it’s like to go to bed thinking that your day was over . . . only to have the phone or the doorbell ring. It’s one thing if it’s an emergency involving someone you love. But if it’s a request that could wait until the next day, it can be annoying. Your friend is annoyed that you’ve showed up at midnight and his children are already in bed. And so he tells you, “I cannot get up and give you anything.” He refuses the request.

Jesus brings home His point in verse 8:

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.

In this scenario, the friendship wasn’t what compelled the man to get out of bed. If anything, the friendship allowed him to be honest enough to say, “No, actually it’s not a good time to get up and give you some bread.” What got the man out of bed was his friend’s “persistence.”

The term translated persistence had a couple of different connotations. It eventually had the connotation of persistence - continuing a course of action and not giving up. If that's the meaning here, Jesus is saying that you persistently asking your friend for bread is what eventually persuades him to get out of bed and give you bread. There is certainly a place for persistence in prayer. It's not that we have to badger God in order to wear Him down so that He'll finally relent and give us what we want. Persistence in prayer is more a function of wanting something so badly that we don't ask once and forget about it; we continue to ask because we have a sustained commitment to God's will.

The other meaning of the term involved "shamelessness." If this is the meaning, Jesus is saying that you boldly wake up your friend and ask him for bread without any shame. Since the need is so pressing and since your friend can meet that need, you shamelessly ask him for bread.

Either understanding is possible, although I lean toward the later interpretation (shamelessness). I think Jesus is saying that we should have no shame when it comes to asking God for what we need. We come to Him directly and boldly. This approach to prayer is also taught in numerous places in Scripture (see Hebrews 4:16).

In either case, it's important to point out that Jesus isn't comparing God to the man who's already in bed; Jesus is contrasting God with this man. He's saying that if a tired, reluctant friend will respond to persistence/shameless appeals, **how much more** will your heavenly Father respond you?!?! Your heavenly Father never shuts down His house and climbs in bed for the night. He is never annoyed by your honest requests - especially those that involve His kingdom, His will, our daily bread, and forgiveness.

The glimpse of God we get from this parable is that **God is generous and very willing to answer our prayers**. This is confirmed by the teaching that follows this parable. Look at verses 9 and 10:

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

Again, you get the impression that Jesus is trying to convince His disciples that God isn't stingy and God isn't reluctant to give us what we need. Notice how He continues:

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? 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?"

In about four different ways Jesus is screaming, "Your heavenly Father is not stingy! He is generous and very willing to give you what you need. Just ask, seek, knock."

At one time or another, each of us is like the man in the parable. We need some bread, and we can't go buy any and we can't make any. Therefore, we have two options left: we can go without or we can ask Somebody to give us bread.

Can you think of a situation in your life in which you have those two options - where you can either go without or you can ask God to give you what you need? Sometimes relational problems fall into this category: "I can't fix my marriage or my kids or the conflict I have at work or church." Sometimes our sinful habits fall into this category: "I cannot make myself obedient in certain areas of my life." Sometimes our circumstances fall into this category: "I can't find a job that fits my skills and provides for my needs."

Helplessness makes us just like the man in the parable; the only real solution is for Somebody to give us what we need. Helplessness is not a curse. Helplessness prompts us to remember that we have a heavenly Father who is generous.

A Perspective: We approach God as a child coming to a father. It's significant that Jesus begins his teaching on prayer by telling His disciples to pray, "Father, hallowed be Your name," and ends his teaching by saying that God is a Father who loves giving good gifts to His children (at least as good a Father as any early father). Jesus begins and ends with a relational understanding of prayer. Prayer isn't a business transaction. It's mainly a child asking his/her father for something that's wanted or needed.

This perspective suggests that our prayer life (esp. this area of "asking") reveals what we really think about God ***as a Father***. Our habits of prayer don't merely reveal our theology in some abstract sense; our habits of prayer reveal whether we think our heavenly Father is stingy or generous, whether He's any more generous than a friend we've awakened at midnight. I doubt any of us would come out and say, "I think God is a tight-fisted, stingy Father. . ." But our prayer habits might say as much.

Jesus encourages us to approach God in prayer as a child coming to a good, generous father who loves giving good gifts to his children. I realize that the word "father" doesn't have the connotation of safety and love for everybody. If I'm describing you, please know that God understands this and that He wants to redeem the word father for you. John Piper makes a good point when he says, "Don't limit your experience of your heavenly Father to your experience with your earthly father."

This perspective helps us understand why God doesn't always give us what we ask when we ask for it. No good father gives his children everything for which they ask when they ask it. The promise Jesus makes is that if we ask we will receive good gifts. God is a Father who doesn't give bad gifts to His children. Believing that God is a good heavenly Father radically changes our perspective on prayer.

A Word of Caution: Try to avoid qualifying this "glimpse of God" to death. You probably noticed that Jesus' teaching on prayer is very unqualified. He says, "For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be

opened" (v. 10). This promise seems very straightforward, but we also have to take into account other Scriptures as well as our experience:

- Yes, but we have to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14)
- Yes, but we have to pray in faith without any doubting (James 1).
- Yes, but we have to pray with the right motives (James 4).
- Yes, but what if someone else is praying for the opposite of what I'm asking?

There are many biblical teachings about prayer, and there are many valid, deep questions about prayer. But if we're not careful we'll qualify God's generosity to death; we'll either be paralyzed by the complexity of prayer (and not pray at all) or we'll pray very safe, tepid prayers (which is very unsatisfying - to us or to God).

Eventually we need to believe what Jesus teaches in *this* passage: **God is generous and very willing to answer our prayers.** Instead of being paralyzed by the things we don't know about prayer, we should be motivated by the things we do know about prayer. Of course the death and resurrection of Jesus are the greatest evidence of God's generosity. A God who would give His one and only Son as payment for my sins - that's a God I can trust to be generous toward me when I pray. I don't have to figure out how prayer works; I can simply trust that He's a lot more generous than a grumpy friend who's annoyed at being awakened at midnight.

An Invitation: "Come to Me and experience my generosity." Even if you came here today believing that God is stingy, He invites you to ask, seek, and knock. Even if you've been disappointed by God in the past (you've prayed for something and it hasn't come), He invites you to believe and experience His generosity. Even if you've thought that God is generous to others, but not to you, God invites you to come to Him as a little child comes to her father. Even if you feel so guilty about something you did last week (or last year) and think you are unworthy to come into God's presence, God invites you to draw near. [Remember that Jesus called His disciples "evil" in verse 13 in the context of experiencing God's generosity.]

When Jesus said, "Everyone who asks receives," He included you. And so the invitation stands. God says, "Come to Me and experience my generosity." Earlier I had you consider how you're like the man who didn't have any bread and couldn't buy or make any. I had you consider an area of your life in which you are helpless. What about the possibility of accepting God's invitation in *that* area of your life? Express to Him: "Okay, God, I want to take you up on that offer. I will ask, I will seek, and I will knock. And I will trust that You are a generous heavenly Father who loves giving good gifts to His children."