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## HOW TO APPROACH GOD

Luke 11:5-13

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Luke Lesson 54

## How to Approach God Luke 11:5-13

A messenger at a photo lab was leaving a building one day when his beeper went off. The message instructed him to pick up a package at an unfamiliar company with a 12-syllable, tongue-twisting name. The messenger looked skyward and sighed, "God, where am I supposed to go?" Just then the pager came on again, this time with the client's address.

A man nearby witnessed this scene. Raising his arms to the heavens, he cried, "Why don't you ever answer me?" (From *Reader's Digest* [4/91], p. 127.)

All of us who are Christians have struggled with the problem of unanswered prayer. In fact, that problem can discourage us so much that we start thinking, "What's the use?" and we even quit praying. We hear stories of how God answered prayer for others, but for us it just doesn't seem to work. Sometimes we may try again, but we're like boys who ring the doorbell and run away. We don't stick around long enough to find out if God is home and if He is going to open the door and answer our request.

Jesus is responding to the request of an unnamed disciple, "Lord, teach us to pray" (11:1). In 11:2-4, He gives us the pattern for prayer, that we are to pray to the Father about His concerns and we are to pray about the family's needs. In 11:5-13, Jesus continues His instruction by showing us how we should approach God in prayer.

If you live in a country with a sovereign monarch, you don't just pop in on the king and say, "Hey, how's it going?" If you have an interview with the king, you need some coaching on what to say and do and what *not* to say and do. You need to know what social courtesies are expected in the presence of the king.

When you come before the King of kings, you need some coaching about how to do it. Some may think that because God is sovereign and holy, perhaps we shouldn't bother Him with our petty needs. Or, perhaps we should come apologetically and tim-

idly, afraid to let Him know what is really on our minds. Maybe once we've let our needs be known, we should back off and not bother God again. Jesus shows us here how to approach God to receive the things we need as we seek to do His will:

Approach God with bold persistence, knowing that as a loving Father, He will provide for our spiritual good.

The instruction of 11:5-13 assumes the foundational instruction of 11:2-4. We must be children of God through the new birth before we can address God as Father and approach Him with our needs. We must be committed to seeking first His kingdom and glory, so that our prayers are properly motivated and directed. Our prayers for our needs are not just for the purpose of making us happy, but for the overall aim of seeing the Father's name hallowed and His kingdom brought about on the earth.

In this context, Jesus tells a humorous parable (11:5-8) to teach that we should approach God with boldness as His friend, persisting until we obtain what we need in order to minister to our friends. Then (11:9-10) He applies the parable by telling us to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking in prayer until we obtain the answer we need. Next (11:11-12) Jesus shifts the picture with a ludicrous, but memorable, illustration of a boy asking his father for a fish or an egg. The father would not give his son a snake or a scorpion! Then (11:13) Jesus applies this illustration by saying that if we, being evil, know how to give good gifts to our children, how much more shall the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

The strong emphasis in this whole section is on *receiving answers* to our prayers. The friend at midnight did not go away empty-handed. He got the bread that he came for. The application emphasizes that one who keeps asking, seeking, and knocking will receive what he is after. The story of the father and his son makes the same point: the boy will get what he asks from his father. The final application drives it home again with force: *How much more* will the heavenly Father respond favorably to those who ask Him? John Calvin observes, "Nothing is better adapted to excite us to prayer than a full conviction that we shall be heard" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], Harmony of the Evangelists, 1:351). Our Lord

wants us to come to the Father and keep on coming until He gives us what we need to see His kingdom come.

1. Approach God with boldness as His friend, persisting until you obtain what you need to minister to your friends (11:5-10).

A. The story (11:5-8):

The story gives us a humorous incident from the culture of Jesus' day. A guy has a traveler drop in on him late at night and he has no fresh bread to set before him. You couldn't run to the all-night supermarket and buy a loaf of bread. They didn't have freezers or refrigerators full of food. Cultural hospitality demanded that you give him something to eat. So the guy goes over to his friend's house at midnight. It's dark inside and the door is bolted shut. But, after all, this is his friend, and what are friends for? So he starts banging on the door.

Inside, the family would all be sleeping together in one place. There were probably some domestic animals inside for the night, and the banging on the door would arouse them, too. The guy groggily calls out, "Who is it? What do you want at this hour?" The "friend" cheerily explains his need. The guy inside says, "Stop bothering me! The door is bolted shut, we finally got the kids to go to sleep (every parent knows what that is like!), and I don't want to get up and give you anything!" But the "friend" keeps on knocking and asking! Finally the guy in bed realizes that the quickest route to getting back to sleep is to get up and give him what he's after.

Then Jesus gives an initial application (11:8) before expanding on it (11:9-10): Apart from the friendship issue (which may be a bit strained at this midnight hour!), the host will obtain what he went for because of his persistent boldness. The word translated "persistence" (KJV = importunity) has the idea of shameless boldness. The idea of persistence comes out in the present tense verbs of verses 9 & 10.

Before we look at the direct application, let's consider some things about the story. First, it shows us that *necessity drives bold prayer*. The host had a need to provide for his friend, and he did not have the resources to meet that need. It is an awareness of

great needs and our own lack of resources to meet those needs that will drive us to prayer. All too often we fail to pray because we assume our own sufficiency or competence. We wrongly think that we can get by with just a little boost from God here and there. But the fact is, we are destitute of physical, mental, and spiritual resources unless God graciously provides them. In every situation, we must recognize our desperate need and call on God for help.

Second, the need in this case was not directly personal, but *the need of someone else*. If the man himself had been hungry, no doubt he would have waited until morning to go to his friend's house. But the need was not his; it was the midnight guest's need that drove this man to his friend's house at this unseemly hour. While we should go boldly to God to find help for our own needs, we should keep in mind that the main thrust of prayer is not just to meet our needs, but to further the Father's kingdom. Thus we are to ask for what we need to meet the needs of others in the name of the Father's business.

Third, the man already had an *established friendship* before he went to his neighbor's house at midnight. He wasn't just introducing himself for the first time that night! They had a personal relationship that he was acting upon. While God is often gracious to introduce Himself for the first time in response to a midnight knock on His door, the time to meet Him is *before* the midnight need! If you know Him as a familiar friend, you will feel more comfortable banging on His door at midnight when you have to!

Fourth, we should recognize the *stark contrast between the man in bed and God*. The man in bed was asleep, whereas God never sleeps. The man in bed did not want to be disturbed, whereas our requests do not disturb God. The midnight request probably put a strain on the relationship between these two friends, whereas our midnight requests do not strain our relationship with God. Jesus' point is that we should be boldly persistent in bringing our requests to God at any hour and in any situation. If a cranky friend responds to this kind of bold persistence, how much more will your Friend in heaven respond!

B. The application (11:9-10):

Jesus applies the parable by telling the disciples to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking, with the promise that if they do, they will obtain their requests. The present imperative mood in Greek has the nuance of continuous action, and so I do not understand or agree with some well-known commentators who say that the idea is *not* persistence and that if you have to keep on asking, you are not asking rightly (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord* [Revell], p. 184). I agree that God is not like the neighbor in bed, where you have to keep bugging Him because He is reluctant to give you what you need. But the fact is, God doesn't always answer according to our timetable. He knows when our faith has been sufficiently tried and our submission to His will is sufficiently complete so that the time is right for Him to grant our requests. Andrew Murray (*With Christ in the School of Prayer* [Spire Books], p. 49) explains,

Intercession is part of faith's training-school. There our friendship with men and with God is tested. There it is seen whether my friendship with the needy is so real, that I will take time and sacrifice my rest, will go even at midnight and not cease until I have obtained for them what I need. There it is seen whether my friendship with God is so clear, that I can depend on Him not to turn me away and therefore pray on until He gives.

Also, the idea of persistence is reinforced by the increasing intensity of the words "ask," "seek," and "knock." Seeking is stronger than asking; knocking is stronger than seeking. Although the word isn't used there, the word knocking relates back to the story of the friend at midnight, banging on his neighbor's door until the guy gets out of bed and gives him what he needs. I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones who writes (*The Sermon on the Mount* [Eerdmans], 2:201),

The importance of this element of persistence cannot be exaggerated. You find it not only in biblical teaching, but also in the lives of all the saints. The most fatal thing in the Christian life is to be content with passing desires. If we really want to be men of God, if we really want to know Him, and walk with Him, and experience those boundless blessings which He has to offer us, we must persist in asking Him for them day by

day. We have to feel this hunger and thirst for righteousness, and then we shall be filled. And that does not mean that we are filled once and for ever. We go on hungering and thirsting.

If we come to realize that our request is not in accord with God's will or if we get a distinct sense from God that we should cease praying, then we should not continue to pray for that need. But otherwise, we should keep asking, keep seeking, and keep knocking until God answers. I have one request I have been asking for almost 28 years, another that I've been asking for 25 years, and another that I've been asking for over 10 years without adequate answers. To answer these requests would be for God's glory and the furtherance of His kingdom. They are not selfish requests. So I keep knocking, even though at times I grow weary. For reasons I do not fully understand, God has not seen fit to grant these requests. But, I believe that like the friend at midnight, my job is to keep knocking on behalf of my needy friends until I obtain from God what they need.

2. Approach God with trust as His child, knowing that if it is for your spiritual good, the Father will give it (11:11-13).

Jesus seems to be answering a silent objection: "If God is like the groggy, unwilling neighbor at midnight, then I'm not sure that I want to bug Him." Jesus changes the picture to a loving father who meets the needs of his children and then concludes *how much more* the heavenly Father will meet the needs of His children. His aim is to encourage us to come to God as our loving Father, being assured that He cares for us and that He will meet our needs. As in 11:5-10, Jesus gives an illustration followed by direct application.

A. The illustration (11:11-12):

Some Greek manuscripts add from Matthew the clause that if a son asks for a loaf of bread, the father won't give him a stone (see Matt. 7:9). But probably the original of Luke omitted that illustration and added the other about the egg and the scorpion. There is no need to harmonize the two accounts since Jesus gave the same teaching in two different settings. He just varied His illustrations.

The illustration is effective because it is so ludicrous. No earthly father would be so cruel as to give his hungry child something deceptive and harmful in place of the food the child asked

for. A snake with its silvery scales could be mistaken for a fish and a coiled up scorpion could look like a small egg to a child. But when he takes these trustingly from his father, they harm him rather than feed him and meet his need. Even though we are evil by nature (11:13—note how Jesus assumes that men are evil even when they are acting with love toward their children), we would never treat our children in this manner. The argument is from the lesser to the greater. As Calvin (p. 353) expresses it, “If the little drops produce such an amount of beneficence, what ought we to expect from the inexhaustible ocean?” If sinful men so love their children and provide for their needs, how much more will God?

B. The application (11:13):

Then Jesus drives home the application: “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” In the parallel in Matthew 7:11, Jesus is more general in saying that God will give *what is good* to those who ask Him. But here He specifies the Holy Spirit who, being God, is the greatest good we could imagine. While all who truly believe in Christ receive the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation (Rom. 8:9), we all need to know more and more of the Spirit’s fulness in our daily walk. Whatever our needs, our greatest need is to be filled continually with God’s Spirit. So Jesus instructs us to come as needy children and ask the Father to pour out His Spirit upon us.

Jesus’ specifying the Holy Spirit shows that He is not promising to meet our every whim for material things or for earthly benefits. But He is promising that if something is for our spiritual good and we come as trusting children and ask, the loving Father will give it to us. He may delay the blessing because He knows that I am not ready to receive it yet. He may have purposes of training me in faith and prayer that require His withholding the request for the present time. He may know what I do not know, that my request is not for my ultimate good, and so He will deny my request because He has something better for me. But Jesus is teaching that we should approach God with trust, as a child would come to a loving father, and if my request is for my spiritual good, the Father will give it to me. Andrew Murray (p. 37) puts it, “Fatherlike giving is the Divine response to childlike living.”

So verse 13 brings us back full circle to where Jesus' instruction on prayer began (11:2), that we must come to know God as our heavenly Father. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (p. 202) states,

This is one of our main troubles, is it not? If you should ask me to state in one phrase what I regard as the greatest defect in most Christian lives I would say that it is our failure to know God as our Father as we should know Him.... Ah yes, we say; we do know that and believe it. But do we know it in our daily life and living? Is it something of which we are always conscious? If only we got hold of this, we could smile in the face of every possibility and eventuality that lies ahead of us.

One of Satan's original ploys was to get Eve to doubt that God is good. His commandment was keeping something good from her. He still uses that ploy to cause Christians to fall and to keep unbelievers from God: If your God is good, why does He allow such pain and suffering in the world? Why does a good God allow a little child in a war-torn land to get his legs blown off by a land mine? Why does a good God allow a sweet little toddler to die a slow, painful death from cancer? Why does a good God allow His servants who are dedicated to doing His work to be killed by evil men? The difficult questions could go on forever.

The Bible doesn't gloss over these problems or pretend that they do not exist. The Book of Job shows us that a partial answer centers on our finiteness and sinfulness and God's infinite holiness. We as sinful creatures dare not challenge the Almighty Holy One. He is perfectly just to allow the most righteous man on the earth to suffer terrible things, because not even that man has a claim on God. Furthermore, Scripture shows that the final resolution to the problem of suffering and evil lies in eternity, not in this life, when God will reward the righteous and punish the wicked.

But the existence of pain and evil in this world does not undermine the goodness of God or His fatherly love for His children. Even when we do not understand why God allows the trials we are suffering, we must come to Him in faith and ask for a fuller measure of His Holy Spirit. Keep on asking and seeking and knocking. Jesus promises that we will not be sent away empty-handed. Approach God with bold persistence, knowing that as a loving Father,

He will give you what is for your spiritual good. It is impossible for Him to do anything evil toward us.

### Conclusion

A dad with a three-year-old son had just gone through the bedtime routine of reading a story, listening to his prayers, answering a dozen questions, giving him a hug, and saying good-night four or five times before slipping out of the room. Finally, after a long, hard day, he could relax.

He sat down in his easy chair and it was quiet for about five minutes before he heard, "Daddy, can I have a drink of water?" He said, "No, son, be quiet and go to sleep." It was quiet for a couple of minutes before, louder than before, he heard, "Daddy, can I have a drink of water?" "Son, I said to be quiet and go to sleep!" There was silence again, but it didn't last long. "Daddy, *please* can I have a drink of water?" The dad could see that he wasn't getting anywhere, so he said, "Son, if I hear one more sound out of that room, I'm going to spank you!" You could hear a pin drop. The silence was thick for about one minute. Then he heard, "Daddy, when you come in here to spank me, would you bring me a drink of water?" Now the dad knew that his son really was thirsty! Why? Because he was boldly persistent in his request.

We all have friends who drop in on us at midnight. We don't have in ourselves what they need. But we have a Friend and Father in heaven who has plenty to meet their needs. He invites us to disturb Him at any hour and to keep on knocking until we obtain what our friends need.

### Discussion Questions

1. How do we know when (if at all) to stop persisting in prayer when God doesn't answer?
2. How would you answer a critic who brought up cases of horrible suffering as evidence that God is not good? Why is it crucial to affirm God's goodness even when we suffer?
3. Why does God delay to answer prayers that seemingly would be for His glory to answer now?
4. Is it a cop-out to pray, "If Your will be done?" Can we know God's will for a specific situation in advance?

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