

“Jesus’s Special Parable for the Disciples: Prayer and the Nature of God”
Luke’s Special Parables Luke 11:1-13
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To begin with, this parable is different from the parables I have been teaching. First, it is directed to his disciples. It is directed to an unnamed “a certain” disciple that sparks the rabbi’s conversation with instructions on prayer. Secondly, this parable has at its heart instructions on Prayer. Luke use the adjective “certain” numerous times in his narratives. In the chapter before this one he refers to a certain lawyer, a certain man, a certain village, and a certain woman.

Third, the parable is in response to something Jesus was doing and not what characters among the Pharisees had done. Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he was finished, we are told, “a certain disciple” wanted to know how they should pray. However, the disciple does not want to know how to pray ordinary prayers, but prayers that were after the pattern John the Baptizer had used and now, apparently Jesus. Another difference is that the parable here is what is referred to in theology as a parable with a “single perspective.” Many of Jesus’s parables are divided between two objects, or two people, or two concepts. Here Jesus offers only one perspective. Did you notice that Jesus doesn’t speak to them about fictional characters with which the listeners had choose which was the acceptable action or attitude? He speaks to the disciples in a parable that begins with “suppose you went to a friend’s house at midnight?” Luke’s reporting of this parable then, is tenser, since Luke begins with a certain disciple unnamed, but then says to the disciples collectively, “Suppose among you all something like this were to happen?” The disciples were confronted with a “what would you do” scenario. The question is something like can you imagine that any of you would. It’s a rhetorical question with the answer something like Unthinkable! We would not even consider not providing the bread to the host for his traveling friends.

To get a sense of the setting, do not think of a two- or three-bedroom house with a porch light left on. Think of a one room habitation for all the family to live in. Imagine a room that might be lit by a single small oil lamp with just enough light to make out things in the room. There would be a bolt that secured the door that slid through some iron rings. Thus, to get up, open the door, and do what the friend asked would be to wake up the whole household

On the other hand, this parable is something like the other parables in that the lesson is taken from a hypothetical possibility from the culture of the Galileans.

For this setting also note that the place this happens is when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He has already been to Martha and Mary's home. He has already sent out the seventy. He has had Peter's confession about the rock. He has already foretold his death. He has fed the five thousand. He has commissioned the twelve. So, in this context of the shameless neighbor, fitted into the longer narrative about how to pray, this parable is soon followed by the sign of Jonah and the public shaming of Jewish Pharisees and lawyers.¹

This parable invites the readers to focus on one person—not the insistent friend at midnight, but the neighbor. We know little about either friend. What you don't see in the English translation is that the story is made more dramatic in the Greek text because it is written a little more emphatically—"my friend arrived off a journey to me." It is part of a compound sentence. At the same time I have a guest in my home AND I do not have anything to set before him." In the culture of the day that would have been a huge *faux pas*. Hospitality, especially in the home, was a serious business in those days, that failure to provide for a guest would bring shame on the host. We heard something about this in the parable of the creditors and the two debtors.

So, what we have is a question Jesus asked his disciples that took three verses to ask—5-7. But Luke does not record any response the disciples made. Jesus saying is a bit complicated for us in English because of the use of all the masculine singular pronouns. Jesus jumps right in with the answer in verse 8 as we have it written. "I tell you, even though he [the neighbor] will not get up and give him [the host] anything because he [the host] is his [the neighbor's] friend, at least because of his [the host's] persistence, he [the neighbor] will get up and give the host whatever he needs.

In the new age in Jesus' kingdom, those who pray do not face negative consequences because of their urgent requests. Unfortunately, today's readers miss this because the word that is translated persistence when the construction of the Greek word that we have as persistence is a compound word that means something like shamelessness. The word persistence seems to have been used to indicate that it is the host who avoids shame by going to the neighbor, and thus the title in some versions, "the parable of the shameless neighbor." All of this drama takes place in a culture where there are taboos among friends and neighbors. In

¹ *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, 171; *IBC*, 235, *The Essential Evangelical Parallel Bible*, 2436-2437. Respectively. Some commentators call this the parable of the shameless neighbor. There are other captions. One leaves the parable in "The Model Prayer," another, "The Lord's Prayer," another "Teaching about Prayer," and "Ask for What You Need." The NRSV doesn't have a heading for this parable but blends it in the story of how Jesus answers the certain disciple about how he prayed. So, the broader context is Luke 11:1-13 for the parable.

culture it is referred to as the code of honor/shame. Had the host not had bread for the traveler friend he would have been shamed. Had the neighbor decided not to help the host, he would have been shamed.

What is the lesson, then, that Jesus was teaching his disciples? In a Psalm these words are found, “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep, (Ps. 121:4). “We may pray confidently, therefore, not because we trust in our own persistence, but because we know that in a time of need God is even more trustworthy than a neighbor.”² Under no circumstances would the neighbor say, even with the inconvenience. “No way would I not give the bread to my friend.” Most bible scholars say that the key figure in the parable is not the traveler, or the host, but the neighbor. The parable is not concerned with the insistence of the petitioner but the friend who was roused from sleep. So, if the friend, roused from his sleep in the middle of the night without delay, as in not wait until tomorrow, even though the whole family will have to be roused by the drawing of the bolt, how much more will God rise to answer the requests of the disciples.³

Consequently, Jesus has given the disciples a lesson on the nature of God as Father. “The greatest stimuli to prayer are the awareness of our need and absolute dependence on God and our knowledge and experience of the character of God. . . . Jesus’ teachings assure us that prayer is effective not because of our cajoling, or because we have found the right words, but because God’s nature as a Father who loves his own and wants to give to those in need.”⁴

² *IBC, Vol IX, 237.*

³ *Jeremias*

⁴ *Ibid., 238-239.*

“Jesus’s Special Parable for the Disciples: A Lesson on the Nature of God”
Luke’s Special Parables

- I. This parable is different from the parables I have been teaching.
 - a. First, it is directed to his disciples. Why?
 - b. Secondly, this parable has at its heart instructions on Prayer.
 - c. Third, the parable is in response to something Jesus was doing--not about the Pharisee but for the disciples.
 - d. Disciples do not want to know how to pray ordinary prayers.
 - e. “Suppose among you all something like this were to happen?”
The disciples were confronted with a “what would you do” scenario.
- II. This parable is from a possible situation from the culture of the Galileans.
 - a. The setting for this parable is when Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.
 - b. This parable invites the readers to focus on one person—the importunate friend at midnight.
- III. What does the word “persistence” mean in this text?
 - a. Taboos and honor/codes
 - b. Had the neighbor decided not to help the host, he would have been shamed. And, the absence of hospitality would also be a shame.
- IV. What is the lesson, then, that Jesus was teaching his disciples?
 - a. “He who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep, (Ps. 121:4).
 - b. Consequently, Jesus has given the disciples a lesson on the nature of God as Father.