

Three Parables on Prayer

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Last week, we saw that during His ministry, Jesus taught in easily understandable, easily memorable ways so that His disciples could still recall His teaching in the period between His departure and the advent of the written word. Half of this was through the use of proverbs, short, punchy sound bites that would stick in the minds of His listeners. The other half of the equation, though, was the way that Jesus used parables. Even though these stories with a spiritual moral were longer than the proverbs, Jesus' audience could still remember them easily because of their narrative form, their vivid characters, and often, the humor they found in familiar situations. They were powerful teaching tools.

Even though we are blessed with the record of the four gospels today, the parables are still just as useful to us. For one thing, the same characteristics that helped Jesus' original audience remember them help us remember them too. Even today, Jesus' lively storytelling has a powerful grasp on our imaginations. We may struggle to hold in our minds the logical structure of the book of Romans, but we can easily tell the story of the good Samaritan to anyone who asks.

More importantly than that, though, Jesus' parables are just as relevant to us as they were to His hearers from 2000 years ago. As we continue our focus on prayer, we see that Jesus' first disciples faced the same spiritual struggles we face. They were afraid to be honest and forthright in their prayers. When they didn't receive what they wanted immediately, they often gave up rather than continuing to pray. Some of them even forgot the purpose of prayer entirely and used it as a way to proclaim their goodness to God so that He could appreciate how great they really were.

Human nature hasn't changed any since then, and we still wrestle with those same issues today. As a result, Jesus' teaching can illuminate our lives too. Let's allow it to do its work as we consider three parables on prayer.

Dare to Pray.

The first lesson that we learn from the prayer parables of Jesus is that we must dare to pray. This is apparent from the parable that begins in Luke 11:5-7. I don't know about y'all, but I find this parable quietly hilarious. Here we have some poor guy who's probably spent the whole day working hard, who's gotten his kids off to bed—no small feat, let me tell you!—and who's gone to bed himself, hoping for a restful night's sleep. However, that's not what he gets. At midnight, after he's gotten nice and deeply asleep, there's somebody banging on the door, wham wham wham. He manages to groan out, "What?", and he learns that no, the house isn't on fire, no, there hasn't been a foreign invasion. Instead, it's his obnoxious friend, who wants to borrow some food for *his* friend, who's just showed up unexpectedly.

This is clearly not the problem of the dude in bed. What does he care about some foreign traveler he doesn't even know? So, he tells his buddy off. He says, "Look. I'm in bed, my kids are in bed, and I am not going to get out of my bed just so I can give you some food. Go. Away." He hopes that's the end of it, but of course, that's not the end.

We see the conclusion of the parable in Luke 11:8-10. Basically, the obnoxious friend at the door gets what he wants not because he's so lovable and nice, but simply because he is obnoxious and isn't going to let the guy in bed get back to sleep until he has his food. Don't we all know people like that? I certainly do. They come up to me and they start telling me what they want me to do, and I'm nodding and agreeing, and the whole time, I'm thinking in the back of my mind, "I can't believe you're telling me to do this!" Most of us have in our minds this filter that says, no, I can't ask him for that, it would just be too much, but then, there are people who don't have the filter, who will just ask you for the moon. There's no way to tell people like that no without being rude, so you end up giving them what they want.

Jesus' point is that when we pray, we need to be like those people without the filter. Obviously, we should never pray with sinful or evil motives, but beyond that, everything needs to be on the table. Sometimes, I think we have the idea that we need to hide from God, that we have this imaginary perfect Christian in our minds who will only pray for a list of approved things, and if we only pray for the approved things, God will believe we're the imaginary perfect Christian.

In reality, God already knows who we are, and we aren't fooling Him, whether we are honest in our prayers or not. If we're worried about paying the bills next month or six months down the road, God already knows that about us. We might as well be praying about it. If we're struggling with some embarrassing sin that we don't want anybody to know about, guess what? God already does know. We ought to be praying constantly for His help in overcoming it. Basically, all of those messy corners of our lives that we think reflect badly on us are things that God is already fully aware of. He sees us as we are and loves us anyway. Let's be forthright in our prayers. Let's dare to seek His help in everything.

Be Persistent.

Just as we need to be daring and pray without a filter, we also need to be persistent. Jesus teaches us this in the parable of the unrighteous judge, which begins in Luke 18:1-3. Once again, this is a parable that strikes close to home. We could probably rename it, "The Parable of the Illinois Bureaucracy". I've been living in this state for almost five years

now, and I have yet to hear anyone speak highly of the efficiency and helpfulness of the minions of the state government. I'm sure there are good, hardworking Illinois bureaucrats out there, but an awful lot of them, just like the judge in the parable, neither fear God nor respect man. They exist solely to add misery and complexity to the lives of others. If you want to get something done, but you don't know anybody, you are in trouble. That's what we're dealing with in the parable. The opponent of this proto-Illinois bureaucrat, then, is a widow, one of the poorest, least powerful members of Jewish society, and from this worthless, unrighteous judge, she wants justice. Isn't that a hoot?

However, the parable takes an interesting turn in Luke 18:4-5. The judge here has all the power, all of the advantages, except for one. He can't actually make the widow go away and stop bothering him. And so she doesn't. Every time he turns around, there she is, still with the same tired request. Eventually, he gives in, not because he cares about the right and wrong of it, but just because it's obviously the only way to get her to shut up.

Isn't that the way things work today too? Back when my parents first bought their house, the road out front was limestone gravel. It had giant dump trucks driving up and down it all day, pulverizing the gravel into giant clouds of white dust that covered everything. My dad hated it. He called the county commissioner's office and asked them to pave the road. They didn't. He called again and asked them to pave the road. They didn't. He spent the next five years calling, leaving messages like, "This is my last transmission. The dust on the road outside is choking me to death," and guess what? Eventually, they gave in and paved the road. That sort of thing makes quite an impression. Five years later, my sister was working the county beat for a local newspaper, and the first time she came to the commissioner's office and introduced herself, they asked her, "By any chance, are you related to Ron Bassford?" Persistence works.

Jesus gets to the punch line of the parable in Luke 18:6-8. His point is simple. Even though God is righteous where the judge was unrighteous, persistence is just as important in the requests we make of Him. I don't begin to understand the thought process God goes through when He decides how to answer us, but when we continually bring the same request before Him, that makes a difference to Him. He may answer "No" the first nine times we ask Him for something, but say "Yes" the tenth. He may answer "No" the first ninety-nine times we pray, but say "Yes" the hundredth. Perhaps that's because our persistence shows our faith. Perhaps it's because the process of repeated prayer will help us grow spiritually. Perhaps it's because, as Edwin said in our meeting, He just wants to see how badly we want it. Regardless, the application for us is clear. We need to pray, keep praying, and refuse to lose heart no matter what.

Be Humble.

As we pray, though, we must remember to be humble. Sure, we need to be bold and honest in our prayers. Sure, we need to be persistent, but as we pray, we must never forget that God is in heaven and we are on earth. Our Lord drives this point home with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which begins in Luke 18:9-10. Sadly, just as there were people in Jesus' day who trusted that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt, there are plenty of Christians whose lives reveal that same evil attitude. I fear that we've done so much teaching against the false doctrine of faith-only salvation that many brethren are convinced that it's their good works that will get them to heaven. They keep a mental list of all the things they do that make them a righteous person, and they will sneer at all the people, both inside and outside the church, who don't measure up to their own personal standards of righteousness.

As Jesus makes clear, this kind of proud, self-reliant heart will often reveal itself in prayer. Look at Luke 18:11-13. Let's start by considering the Pharisee's prayer here. This is a man who followed the rules of one of the strictest sects of Judaism. All of his neighbors would probably have looked up to him as a righteous man. However, it's not clear why this "righteous" man is even bothering to pray. He's not actually asking God for anything. Instead, he's bragging about all the things God has already given him, and all of the things he's done for himself.

The tax collector would have had a much different reputation. Tax collectors were the scum of the earth, Roman collaborators who had been cast out of the Jewish community and made their living by preying on their countrymen. His neighbors probably crossed the street to avoid him. And yet, this obviously unrighteous man had something the righteous Pharisee did not. He knew that he was a sinner, he knew that he needed help, and he asked God for the help he needed.

We must ask ourselves which prayer our prayers more closely resemble. When we go to God, are we smugly thankful? Do we ask His help for a few small things, but think to ourselves that by and large, we've got our spiritual lives under control? Or do we come to Him conscious of how helpless we are by ourselves, filled with the recognition of how far our sinful lives are from His perfect righteousness? Do we ask Him to be merciful to us because we are sinners?

Jesus describes the results of these two attitudes in Luke 18:14. When we look down our noses at people who we think are worse than we are, when we puff ourselves up because of our spiritual accomplishments, when we rely on ourselves instead of on the salvation of God, when we pray to boast or just because we're supposed to, rather than because we need help, that's when we're in dreadful spiritual danger. The bottom line is that we need God, whether we think we do or not. We are totally and completely dependent on His help, and we have no right to demand that help. Let's make sure that that humility is evident in our hearts and our prayers, so that we can be made righteous by Him.