

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: The Stunning Priorities of Jesus' Kingdom
(*Studies in the Gospel of Luke*)

A Prayerful Study in Contrasts

(Luke 11:1 -13; 18:1-14)

Study #7

Introduction: Trust me...

You learn over time that there are differences between car parts made by the manufacturer and those made by an after-market fly-by-night company. Some parts live up to their claim to quality; many don't.

The same is true of different brands of tools and washing machines and lawn mowers and clothes. We've all been disappointed by stuff that breaks before its time.

More tragically, we've all been disappointed by unreliable people. They didn't tell the truth, they gave us "spin." They lied.

The result of all this disappointment is that we are tempted to live suspicious of everybody and cynical of everything. Nobody can be trusted. Nobody is really "for" me. Everybody has an angle.

Jesus, who knew all about being disappointed by people,¹ calls us to something higher than cynicism. Don't give in to cynicism. Rise above that. We are to lead lives marked by hope and faith in God.

His calling that we would be marked by hope and faith is what prompts Him to tell the two parables we'll see today. They are both

about prayer, and they tell us that it is only people who hope in God and trust in God who will pray.

Jesus and prayer...

Whatever else is clear, it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus was a Man of prayer. He prayed a lot.² He lived a sinless life and was the Son of God incarnate. And He still sensed the need to pray to His Father.

As we turn to Scripture today, His disciples have caught up to Him right after He had finished a time in prayer "***in a certain place.***"

His disciples paid attention to the fact that He prayed and to how He prayed. There was something so compelling about Jesus' prayer life that it whetted their own appetites for prayer.

One of the twelve apostles asked Him, [***Luke 11:1***] "***Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples.***"

Intro: Jesus, The Model Pray-er, Gives Us A Model Prayer (11:2-4)

So, Jesus gave them a working model of prayer that would help them know how to pray.³

***[11:2] "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 do not lead us into temptation."***

² The Gospel of Luke records Him at prayer about ten times.

³ The prayer is given in slightly different words here than in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6), with which we are more familiar. This slight difference tells us that Jesus gave this model prayer a number of times during His ministry and that He varied His words a bit from time to time.

¹ See John 2:24-25.

That famous prayer is remarkable for its simplicity and completeness. It is a beautiful prayer.

But reading it or even memorizing the Lord's Prayer (or better, "The Disciples' Prayer") doesn't resolve all the mysteries of prayer - and prayer does have its mysteries.

We often have a hard time seeing a direct cause/effect relationship between the prayers that I pray and the answers I receive.

We wonder, "If God is sovereign, why pray?" And, "Why should God care about what I care about?"

Of all the practices Jesus urges us to adopt, more than any other, He designed prayer to free us, to empower us, and to bring us life and joy.

Yet there are few topics that more quickly lead to confusion, frustration, or even feelings of guilt than prayer.

Jesus knew all of this. And to blow away our feelings of confusion, frustration, and guilt, He told this parable.

The Story of the Friend At Midnight (Luke 11:5-10)⁴

The Desperate Request: "Bread, please...!" (vv. 5-6)

It was a dark and hungry night...

He brings us into a neighborly scene that would have been easy for His audience to imagine. It's easy for us to imagine.

Many of us have friendships with neighbors where borrowing back and forth is an everyday thing.

⁴ These are not allegories we are looking at this morning, where elements in the story stand for truths outside the story. They are parables. Remember that a parable is a short story with a puzzling aspect that forces the listeners to think about its implications.

Your neighbors ask if you have bread, milk, or sugar to spare. We ask for the use of a working lawn mower. It's a friendly thing to do.

The setting for Jesus' story was a small village in first century Palestine. It's late at night and there are no shops open. It was expected that neighbors would rely on neighbors to help meet pressing needs.

Well, Neighbor #1 had a pressing need. So, he asked Neighbor #2 for help.

[5] "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight, and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; [6] because a friend of mine has come to me from a journey and I have nothing to serve him'

A midnight knock on the door

In 1st century Palestine, a household would bake its bread early in the morning, making enough so that they would just run out by the end of the day.

All their bread was gone when a long-lost friend stopped in for a surprise, late-night visit. He had been on a long journey and his visit has put Neighbor #1 in a tough situation.

As you may know, hospitality was and still is a sacred duty in the Middle East.

To have not provided the guest with food would have been unconscionable. For that reason, Neighbor #1 wanted to do everything in his power to satisfy his guest's hunger.

Finding his own cupboards bare, he rushed out to Neighbor #2's home just down the street and asked for three loaves of bread, which he could share with his travel-weary friend.

Cultural norms of that day dictated that Neighbor #2 should have given Neighbor #1 what he asked for. But cultural norms or not, Neighbor #2 has his mind made up.

And you and I might have made the same decision given the circumstances. For Neighbor #2 to help Neighbor #1 feed his hungry guest would have been a real pain.

The Resolute Response: “NO Way!” (v. 7)

[7] “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.”

Let me set the scene for you. The sleeping accommodations for families in rural villages in first century Palestine weren’t like those at your house.

The average family slept on a raised platform at one end of a one room house. That raised area was the family’s “bedroom.”

Somewhere in the room, there would have been a kitchen area with stove, utensils, cookware - and a stash of bread.

And then, between the living part of the room and the front door, a sheep or a goat might be sleeping on the floor at night.

Moving from the bed to the kitchen area, and then to the front door in this house meant risking PANDEMONIUM. Neighbor #2 would have awakened animals, kids, wife - everybody (!) if he had gotten up to get bread for Neighbor #1’s late night guest.

The issue is not the bread. It’s the bother. It was way more convenient to stay where he was than to get up to help.

And, frankly, I understand. One of the principles that ruled our lives when our kids were young was, “Let sleeping children sleep!” Never wake up a sleeping child.

Now, put yourself in the shoes of Neighbor #2. What would you have done? At the very least we might have felt torn. Even on a good night, it would have been difficult.

But...we might have said “Yes.”

I know lots of you would have said “Yes” because over the years when there has been an emergency involving helping someone at a very inconvenient time, you’ve helped out.

But the answer from Neighbor #2 is a flat “NO!” He would rather enjoy the comfort of a peaceful home than give away the bread his friend needed, ancient law requiring hospitality or not.

But Jesus’ story is about an immovable object (Neighbor #2) vs an irresistible force (Neighbor #1). Who will win?

The Grudging Response: “Oh, all right!” (v. 8)

Persistence personified...

Before we go on, let me just mention that in our own culture, it is required that if we want to borrow something, we need to be polite.

If I go to my neighbor, and ask to borrow his chain saw, and he says, “No, I am sorry. It is not available.”, I can’t say, “Why not? You haven’t used that saw for years. Just let me use it.”

We would never do that. But, in Jesus’ parable, Neighbor #1 really needs that bread. He’s not giving up and he won’t let his friend go back to sleep. He keeps on banging on the door!

...Leads to grudging consent (v. 8)

So, Jesus tells us, **[8] I tell you, even if he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his shamelessness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”⁵**

⁵ Notice, too, that in the parable, no reference is made to the three loaves which were originally requested. Jesus said that the man gave his neighbor just as much as he needed. Likewise, God will give us as much as we need in response to our prayers. The kind or the amount of the gift given may or may not be exactly what we prayed for - but it will be exactly what we need. God knows what we need.

Now, in reading this story, we are not to think of Neighbor #2's graciousness. We are not to think, *"You know, that neighbor was a pretty great guy for giving his friend the bread he needed."*

No! The point of the parable is to notice how ungracious he was when it came to helping out his friend.

Yes, he did eventually give in. But why? Because of his friend's shamelessness. Persistence was the crowbar that pried open Neighbor #2's grudging generosity.

And...Jesus told this parable to say something encouraging about asking God for things in prayer. Think about that.

Now, we'll turn over to another passage in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is, again, teaching His followers about prayer.

Only here He isn't responding to their request to teach them to pray. He is on the offensive, urging them to pray and to not ***"become discouraged."***

The Story Of The Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1-8)

The Two Main Characters (vv. 1-3a)

The purpose of the parable (v. 1)

[1] Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not become discouraged...⁶

He knew that the person who depends on God will be drawn to pray. He also knew that the person who is drawn to prayer might be tempted to get discouraged in prayer. Hence, this parable.

In this one, just like in the one about the friend at midnight, there are two main characters who live in a small village.

The judge - the person in the position of power (2)

One of the characters in the parable is a judge. In small towns a judge can wield a lot of power.

Jesus' focus is on the character of the judge.

[2] "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect any person."

Reading this about the judge, we might want to make a case for his prudence and impartiality. No! That would miss the point. He's severe and uncaring.

With no fear of God, he had no sense of accountability. He didn't reckon with the fact that he, the judge, would one day stand before God, the JUDGE, to answer for the verdicts he had rendered.

And, without respect for people, he could not have cared less about how his decisions affected those who came to him justice.

Then, there is a second character.

The widow - the person in the position of need (3a)

[3a] "Now there was a widow in that city..."

In most cultures, the widow's plight is hard and can be catastrophic. Widowhood brings with it a loss of financial security, a new role in social life, loneliness, added responsibilities in parenting, and uncertainties about the future.

In Jesus' world, widows were exposed to all kinds of hardship and they usually didn't have access to education, status, power, or wealth.⁷

Hard circumstances brought THIS widow to THIS judge.

The Request of the Widow (v. 3b)

⁷ This explains why the other New Testament writers so frequently mentioned the church's responsibilities toward the support of widows.

⁶ See 1 Thess. 5:17, for a similar thought from the apostle Paul.

[3b] “And she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me justice against my opponent.’”

Maybe her **“opponent”** had a valid gripe about her, and maybe he didn’t. We don’t know. We do know that she had a pressing need.

And, knowing that this judge was the only one who could do anything about her need, she went to him, demanding justice... repeatedly. (v. 3 - **“she kept coming to him...”**)

Likely, this widow had no family or friends in the community who could or would go to bat for her against her legal adversary, whoever he was.

She opted for the *“pester the judge”* strategy, since she didn’t have the money to bribe him.

If you or I had been talking with this widow, we might have said, *“Ma’am, don’t waste your time going to that judge’s court. He’d as soon throw you out on the street as look at you.”*

And, we would have been right, too, because that is exactly what the judge did - at first.

But the story doesn’t end with the case’s dismissal.

The Grudging Assistance from the Bad Judge (vv. 4-5)

[4] “For a while he was unwilling; but later he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect any person, [5] yet because this widow is bothering me, I will give her justice, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’”⁸

When He finally changed his mind, it wasn’t because he had a change of heart.

It wasn’t because, underneath that gruff exterior, he was a soft touch or that he suddenly became concerned for the widow’s plight.

⁸ Literally, the judge says, *“Lest she hit me under the eye.”*

He still didn’t fear God. He still didn’t respect people. He was just fed up with this widow. She simply wore him down.

And you’re thinking, *“How in the world does THAT parable encourage me to pray when I’m discouraged?”*

Maybe that’s what you’re thinking about both of the parables we’ve seen today.

Neither the story of the unrighteous judge nor that of the friend at midnight seems to offer much encouragement to pray, even though that’s why Jesus gave both parables.

So, let’s do what we are supposed to do when we come to hard-to-understand parables.

Let’s ponder and think and mull and reflect and consider.

While we’re thinking, let’s listen as Jesus speaks very helpfully, right after both parables.

The Point Of The Parables (18: 6-8; 11:9-13)

How Much More...

[6] And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unrightness judge said;⁹ [7] Now will not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? [8] I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

The mistake we might make in coming to the parable of the widow and the judge is that we would try to find parallels between him and God.

We might suggest that this judge was really nice, deep down in his heart, even though everything in the parable screams the opposite.

⁹ That is, *“what he teaches us.”*

No, Jesus wants us to meditate on the callousness of someone who had power, position and authority and refused to use those resources to meet the need of a helpless widow.

Then, we are to realize that this parable doesn't give us a comparison between the judge and God. It is a study in contrasts.

First, we are not poor, powerless, and abandoned people who have no relationship to Power.

As children of God through faith in Jesus, we have rich spiritual resources. Jesus has brought us into relationship with God. He has made us a part of a loving family of brothers and sisters in Christ.

And **second**, God is nothing like the unrighteous, unfair, disrespectful, uncaring judge. He is righteous, holy, tender, loving.

The point is that we don't have to figure out a way to wrench a blessing out of God, or to trick Him into doing good for us.

The point is that if this creepy judge will finally give in and lend aid to a helpless widow in giving her what she needs, **HOW MUCH MORE** will God give good things to His children, when we ask Him?

And if a crummy neighbor eventually helps out his friend, **HOW MUCH MORE** will God come to the aid of His children when they ask Him for help!?

In the parable of the friend at midnight people's *selfishness* is set against God's *generosity*.¹⁰ In the parable of the persistent widow, people's *callousness* is set against God's *compassion* and *justice*.¹¹

Now, listen as Jesus bring this teaching on prayer to a close.

Behold, the Goodness of God (Luke 11:9-13)

¹⁰ Here, many have noted that Jesus was urging us to pray for the needs of others.

¹¹ In this case, it has been observed that the Lord was encouraging us to persevere in prayer for our own 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. [10] For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, it will be opened. [11] Now which one of you fathers will his son ask for a fish, and instead of a fish, he will give him a snake?

[12] Or he will even ask for an egg, and his father will give him a scorpion? [13] So if you, despite 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?"

It is NOT that we are to continue to pray with persistence, because the more we pray, the more God responds. Rather, we are to pray persistently because God doesn't respond at all grudgingly to our requests.

He responds to our requests as a loving human father responds to the wishes of his children.

If you are a parent, you'll remember the last time you gave your son or daughter a gift that made their eyes sparkle? It might have been a quick trip to Baskin-Robbins, or it might have been something bigger.

But if your kid smiled, we both know you were even happier than your child - of any age. Nothing thrills the heart of a parent like being able to bring joy into the life of their child.

And if that's true about how we deal with our kids, **HOW MUCH MORE** is God eager to give good gifts to His daughters and sons?

Conclusion:

Temptation to hopeless cynicism...

At the beginning this morning, I mentioned the disappointment and discouragement most of us have experienced with things and people.

Products break or wear out before they are supposed to. As well, people will often prove themselves unreliable. We learn hard lessons about trust. Our trust is violated.

We fear that we can't trust anybody or anything and end up being tempted to live as hopeless cynics.

Then we hear Jesus say, *"Pray!"*

We know that He is inviting us to joy and to life. But we may have to fight off the thoughts, *"One more empty promise. One more claim to be proven false. One more invitation to disappointment."*

And we reveal by these thoughts what we really, in our heart of hearts, think about God.

Thinking about God...

The two parables we've seen today speak to an ugly lie that has destroyed people's lives since the beginning.

It is the lie that says, *"God isn't all that good, and He doesn't care much for you, anyway."*

After listening to the serpent, Adam and Eve believed that God had withheld something good from them when He told them to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The twin beliefs that God is not good and that He doesn't care is behind a lot of prayerlessness. It's behind a lot of discouragement about prayer.

I think it explains why the Lord used the figures He did to represent God in the two parables He told about prayer.

We are tempted to believe that God is like someone who has the bread we need, but refuses to give it to us; that God is like a judge who could rescue us, but won't.

We pray for rescue, for bread. And nothing happens. Or at least what we prayed would happen doesn't happen. What conclusion are we to draw but that God doesn't care?

And standing against our tight logic and tightly drawn conclusion about God's distance and standoffishness...is Jesus. *Jesus' teaching...*

Jesus assures us that God is better than stingy neighbors and bad judges. He is also better than the best parent, boss, leader or friend.

He is the powerful Advocate we have all always longed for - and He invites us to ask Him to do the things that only He can do.

With God, it is never midnight, He is never taken by surprise, He is never bothered by our requests, and He always has a full store of provision for our needs.

Jesus' life...

We just can't get away from Jesus' teaching, and we sure can't escape the message of Jesus' life.

He died on the cross to settle the matter, once and for all. No more doubts. No more question. God is good. God does care for us.

So, pray. Not, *"You really ought to pray,"* but *"Yes, you may pray."*

And about prayer...

As we wrap up today, I'm just going to list three things I've come to deeply believe about prayer, especially in recent years.

- Even God's *"No"* and *"Not yet"* answers are best for us.

God doesn't always say, *"Yes"* to our prayers. Obviously. And I, for one, say, *"Hallelujah!"* for that.

We pray for things that wouldn't be best for us or for His purposes for us or for our friends and family.

Thankfully, prayer isn't magic. We aren't "stuck" with what we pray for. Prayer is making a request of a Father who knows exactly what we need.

For Him to say “Yes” to some of the prayers I’ve prayed would be like a dad giving his four-year-old son a loaded gun. Thank God for His graciousness in saying, “No.”

- Our prayers impact the Father and change us.

I say this with confidence. Our prayers actually make an impact on an all-powerful God.

In Jesus’ parables, had the widow not pestered the judge, she wouldn’t have gotten justice. Had the neighbor not bothered his friend, he wouldn’t have received bread.

God includes us in His plans when we pray, in ways that He wouldn’t have, had we not prayed. By God’s grace, He moves when we pray so that events are altered.

And we change. Through our praying, God builds character in us, helps us get to know Him better, grows our faith, and prompts us - over time - to alter our prayers so that they will become more aligned to His will.

- The surprise tool in kingdom work: Prayer.

I’ve titled this series of studies in Luke’s Gospel, “The stunning priorities of Jesus’ kingdom.”

In recent weeks the focus has been on how surprising it is that Jesus seeks out the least and the last and the lost, how surprising it is that He chose the apostles He did, how surprising it is that He rejects the way of power - and more.

This morning, I’ve wanted to highlight the surprise tool in His toolbox to advance God’s kingdom: Prayer.

It turns out that advancing the kingdom isn’t all about strategy and diligence and our faithfulness to the task - not that I’m knocking any of these.

Central to advancing the kingdom is asking God to do what only He can do - change hearts, save souls, rescue the lost, redeem the broken.

The glorious and UNSurprising thing is that He invites us to participate with Him in the advance of the kingdom by our faithfulness and strategizing and diligence - and prayer.

Friends, let us pray!