

Luke 11:1-13
October 13, 2013
FBC Vancouver
Darrell W. Johnson

The Shameless Father and His Extravagant Answering
(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

"Lord, teach us to pray." It is the only thing any of Jesus' first disciples are recorded to have asked Him to teach them. There is no record of "Lord, teach us to heal," or "Lord, teach us to lead," or "teach us to counsel," or "teach us to cast out demons," or "teach us to evangelize," not even "teach us to preach Your gospel." Just "Lord, teach us to pray."

Why? Because, I think, His first disciples could see that Jesus' healing, leading, counseling, liberating, evangelizing, preaching ministry emerges out of His relationship with the One He calls "Father." And they could see that the key to this relationship is prayer. Jesus is regularly slipping away to pray.

"Lord, teach us to pray." I take the request to mean more than "teach us some new prayer techniques." I take the request to mean "teach us what You know about Your Father that makes You want to pray."

So, Jesus teaches them a shorter form of the prayer He taught them in His Sermon on the Mount; He teaches them a shorter version of the so-called "Lord's Prayer." And He then teaches them a parable, usually called "The Friend at Midnight."

I preached this parable from this pulpit as a guest speaker twelve years ago, in July of 2001. I also preached it for the Family Camp at Keats in September 2010. And, I shared it with the Youth last year. I would love to preach it every year – at least once a year! For one thing, the whole world needs to hear what Jesus reveals in this parable! For another, I long to hear it again and again: I want to keep hearing it until the reason Jesus speaks it is fully realized in my soul. I will say the same thing about the parable in Luke 15 when we focus on it in two weeks.

Clearly, in its original context ("Lord teach us to pray") the parable is intended to encourage the first disciples, and us, to want to pray. Does it? Does this parable make you want to pray? "I tell you, even though he will not give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up...." (Luke 11:8). Does that inspire you to pray?

Traditional Western interpretation and preaching has done two things with this parable. (1) First, it has said that the parable is about the one asking for bread. That is, the parable is about us, we who pray. (2) Second, it has said that the parable calls us to be persistent in prayer. Verse eight again, in the translation we read, "because of his persistence."

It was during the four years my family and I lived in Manila (1985-1989) that I came to see the traditional Western interpretation and preaching of this parable is off the mark; it does not get the wonderful truth Jesus is revealing in His parable. I learned to look at life through the Filipino world-view, which I was discovering is very similar to the Middle-Eastern world-view in which Jesus lived and taught.

And as I, in that Asian context, learned more about the Middle-Eastern world-view through the work of missionary-theologian Kenneth Bailey, who spent 35 years studying and teaching in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Israel, I came to see that, (1) the parable is not about the one asking for bread, and (2) the parable is not about persistence. The parable we will look at next Sunday, the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18) is about persistence in prayer – but not the parable in Luke 11. We now know that “because of his persistence” (Luke 11:8) is not the right way to translate Jesus’ words.

Then, what is the parable about? We need to make five observations about the parable in order to see and hear what Jesus is teaching us.

Observation One: The parable begins with a question. Verses 5-7 are a question in the original text. The only English/Western, version that brings this out that I know is the ESV, published in 2001. The version we read this morning, the NASB, begins with “suppose one of you shall have a friend...” If you have a study Bible of this version, you will notice a little “a” above the “suppose.” It guides you to what are called the marginal readings. When you look in the margin, you see for verse five the words “lit – which one of you?” Lit = literally: Literally, “Which one of you?” Verses 5-7 are a question. *tis ex humin?* “Which of you?”

“Which of you has a friend, and shall go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, for a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him’, and the one inside the house answers, ‘Do not bother me; the door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything’?”

It’s one long question – “Which of you?” – with the nuance, “Can you imagine?” Which of you can imagine Mr. A receiving a traveling guest at midnight? Can you imagine Mr. A going to Mr. B and asking him to help feed his friend? Which of you can imagine Mr. B saying “Go away! My family and I are already in bed, I cannot get up and help you?” Can you imagine that? Which of you can imagine that?

So, observation one: The parable begins with a question.

Observation Two: Culturally, the expected answer is, “none of us!” None of us can imagine that. You would never hear anyone say, “go away, I cannot get up.” In the Middle East, it’s impossible. I had the chance to test this in Lebanon, in Nazareth, in many cities in the Philippines, in Singapore, in Malaysia, in Korea, and in Beijing. I’ve tested it with my Armenian neighbours in Glendale California, and Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese people in this city. And they all say, no – we can’t imagine that, it would be culturally impossible. In the West it’s very possible! In the west, you can imagine Mr. B calling the police because he’s been bothered at midnight. But not in the Middle East.

Observation Three: The cultural dynamics at work in this parable. There are two great cultural values at work in the Middle East: hospitality and the avoidance of shame. They are at work in this story in a number of ways. For example, the host (Mr. A) must place before the guest more food than the guest can possibly eat. That’s how you show hospitality! That’s one reason why people coming from other parts of the world don’t think we’re very hospitable here in Canada – we don’t put enough food on the table.

I learned this in the Philippines. Sharon and I and our two kids (at that time) were invited to a Filipino Home for dinner. We walked into the house, and my goodness, the table was full of food. Are your family members coming? No. Are other members of the church coming? No. But they had to put more food on that table than Sharon and I and our two kids could possibly eat. (The corollary is that as a guest, you must take seconds or you will insult the host.)

Furthermore, the guest of Mr. A is a guest of the whole village – not just of the person/family in whose house he or she is staying. Hospitality is extended by the whole village. I used to love it when Filipinos would say to me, “How do you like *our* country?” They did not say, “my country,” but “our country.” The average Filipino knew that they were extending hospitality on behalf of the whole Philippine islands. Same thing in Jordan and Lebanon. So the guest is a guest of everyone in the village.

Another cultural dynamic, all Mr. A is asking for is the utensils for the meal. In that day, and even now, there was a common meal in a big bowl, like a stew, and a loaf of bread would be passed around, you’d break off a hunk of bread, and dip it in the bowl, and then you eat the stew with the piece of bread. This is why people who come right out of the Middle East and have never been exposed to the West think we are really gross – we put our fork into our meat, and put the fork and meat into our mouth, and then pull the fork out! You never pull anything out of your mouth!

All this is to say that Mr. A. has to go to other houses to get the rest of the meal. After he goes to Mr. B for bread, he goes to Mr. C for carrots, Mr. D for potatoes, Mr. E for onions... He’s got a lot more work to do that night. This is why verse 8 says that he (Mr. B) will give “as much as he needs” – he needs more than bread!

Finally, Mr. B knows everything I’ve just told you about the culture. Mr. B knows that he has a part to play in feeding Mr. A’s guest.

Observation Four: Verse 8: “Because of his *anaideian*.” This word is usually translated “persistence (NASB, RSV) or boldness, or “shameless audacity” (NIV). But the word did not have that meaning until the third century AD. If you had a Greek dictionary of the first century, it wouldn’t give “persistence” or “boldness” or “audacity” as the meaning of this word – but “shamelessness.”

You’ll notice this again if you have a Study Bible. If your bible gives you footnotes or marginal readings, look at verse 8. On “persistence” you’ll see a mark that guides you to a footnote, which will say “lit. shamelessness.” When I was living in the Philippines, I discovered that every single time you have “literally” in the margin, that should have been the reading in the text!

Shame is a negative thing. But the positive aspect is “avoidance of shame.” So, shamelessness means avoidance of shame. Middle-Eastern, Asian, and some Hispanic cultures are shame-based cultures. Roman, Greek, British, German, and Swedish cultures are guilt-based. Yes, in the Middle East there are rules, but life is governed by shame. Not shame as the word is used in the West – not as in feeling badly about yourself, but shame in the sense of losing face or damaging your reputation. This is the central cultural value, and they will do everything possible to avoid bringing shame on themselves or their name.

I began to learn that living in Manila. One was in the “third party reconciliation.” If I had an issue with Judy, I don’t go directly to Judy; I go to Abe, and tell him everything, and Abe goes to Judy and Judy can respond, and reconciliation can happen. When I first heard about that, I thought “that’s a really chicken

way to relate...” It’s not! What it’s doing is saving face. If I was really upset with Judy and went to her, and she sees on my face my upsetness, and I see on her face that she is unsettled... we can’t relate! I can go to Abe, and say what I want, because he will save my face. Abe will go to Judy and say things in a polite way... which saves her face, and my face. Isn’t that beautiful? That’s what’s going on in international politics. With Middle-Eastern and Asian countries you’ve got to listen for that.

The other way I learned this was at birthday parties. Our children didn’t like this! At a birthday party you don’t open a gift in front of people. Why not? Well, you might open the gift and not like what was given, and the giver will see your displeasure, and everyone is shamed. So you open it up at home, and then you have time to come to terms with the gift. Everyone saves face.

If *anaideian* is the avoidance of shame, why do Western Bibles translate it as “persistence,” “boldness,” or “audacity”? Partly because the Greek/Roman mind could not get a hold of the concept of shame – could not get their mind around it. But, primarily it is because the Greek/Roman mind could not see how this quality applies to the one asking for bread. Why do you need shamelessness in asking for what you need? How do you lose face by asking for help?

Well, that leads us to Observation Five: *anaideian* does not apply to the asker, to the guy outside. It refers to the askee, the guy inside the house. It is not a quality of Mr. A, but of Mr. B. Briefly look at verse 8. There are six clauses:

1. Even though he will not get up. [He = guy inside]
2. And (he) give him anything. [He = guy inside]
3. Because he is his friend [He = guy inside]
4. Yet because of his *anaideian* [His = ??]
5. He will get up [He = guy inside]
6. and (he) will give him as much as he needs [He = guy inside]

The subject of number 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 is the one inside. Why do we make the subject of number four the one outside? The quality of *anaideian* applies to the guy inside, the one being asked for bread.

The point is that even if the guy inside hates the one outside, he is going to get up and give him as much as he needs ... because he does not want the story to go around the village the next day that he did not help extend hospitality to a guest. He has *anaideian* – he will avoid shame. There is something that goes beyond friendship, and it is the avoidance of shame. I am not going to damage my reputation. I am not going to lose face. I am not going to hear villagers say in the morning, “Why did you fail to help ... you shamed us.” Mr. B will do it ... even if he hates Mr. A, to avoid shame, save face, and to honour his name and the name of the village.

Now we are ready to hear what Jesus is saying in this parable.

“Lord teach us to pray.” Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer – and this parable. The parable is not about us who ask – but about God who is asked, about Jesus’ Father. “When you pray, say ‘Father... hallowed be your name.’” Honour Your name! And He does! The Father has *anaideian*, avoidance of shame. Or, to put it positively in Biblical terms, the Father will always act in ways that honour His name. The Father will never shame His name.

What is God's name? There are many – El Shaddai, El Rophe, Jehovah-Jireh, etc. But the name above every name is Yahweh – “I AM.” When Moses asked, “What is Your Name,” God answered “Yahweh. I Am Who I Am.” It is not I Am in a philosophical sense, but in a relational sense – I am there with you and for you. Yahweh is the covenant name: “I will be your God.” And Jesus is saying, God will always honour that name. The Father will never shame that name.

God has gone public with His name – “This is Who I am.” God has placed His name on His people. “Yahweh's people.” God said, “I am there with you and for you,” and He does not want the neighbours to hear that someone came asking for help and was told to go away! He will honour this name.

You can now see why this is how they pray in the Old Testament. In Exodus 32, God says to Moses, “I've had it with these people. Ten times I bless them, and all they do is grumble and complain. I've had it!” And Moses prays, “If you wipe them out, what will the Egyptians think?” “You said, ‘I am there with you and for you.’ If You wipe them out, You have shamed your name.” And God changes His mind.

It's how the Psalmists pray. “For Your name's sake, O Yahweh, pardon my iniquity, for it is great” (Psalm 25:11). Not, “pardon my iniquity” because I need it, or because I'll be better, but “for your name's sake – you said”! In Ezekiel 36, God laments the fact that God's people have shamed his name (Ezekiel 36:22-23). We understand that! And God's response? So, I will clean you up! I will give you a new heart. I'm going to put my Spirit in you (Ezekiel 36:24-27). So that my name will be glorified among you.

See how the parable answers the disciple's request? Wonderful assurance in prayer! God will not shame His name. The Father loves us – oh, my! how He loves us! We'll discover this in detail in the parables in Luke 15. The Father loves us! But even if God did not, God loves His name, and He will honour that name.

God's commitment to His name translates into a commitment to His people. “For the sake of His great name, Yahweh will not reject you” (1 Samuel 12:22). John Piper says that

“it was God's good pleasure to join you to Himself in such a way that His name is at stake in your destiny. ... It was God's good pleasure to possess you in such a way that what happens to you affects His name.”

The Father's name is “I am there with you and for you. I give Myself to you!”

This helps us understand the rest of Luke 11:1-13. Verse 9's ask, seek, knock is not a call to persistence, as though we have to wear God down. It's not about persistence – it is an assurance. Ask, seek, knock – because something always happens. Ask, seek, and knock are in the present tense – keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. Why? Verse 10 – receive, find, door open. Receive and find are in the present tense – is receiving, is finding. Jesus is saying that “the one who keeps on asking is receiving, the one who keeps on seeking is finding.” Something always happens!

What is happening? Mother Teresa answers best: We are expanding our capacity to receive! To receive what? God! We are expanding our capacity to receive God! The extravagant gift the Father wants to give is Himself! Wow!

Therefore, verse 13 – “gives the Holy Spirit”: “Will not the Father give the Holy Spirit to those who are asking Him?” African theologian St. Augustine in the fourth century said that the Holy Spirit is the embodiment of the love relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son, the Father delights in the Son. The Son loves the Father, the Son delights in the Father. The Holy Spirit is the embodiment of all that love and delight!

The Father and the Son have declared publically their promise to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask. Jesus calls the Spirit “the promise of the Father” and the Father will not be shamed.

So... can you imagine Mr. A receiving a guest and needing to feed him ... then going to Mr. B and asking for bread ... and being told to go away? No! It is impossible. He will get up and give him as much as he needs.

Can you imagine you or me going to God the Father and asking in the name of God the Son for the power, cleansing, wisdom, joy, of God the Holy Spirit ... and being told to go away? No! The Father of Jesus will get up and give you and me as much of Himself as we need to extend hospitality to the world.

What of God do you need in order to extend hospitality to the world? What of God do you need for yourself, for your family, for your ministry, in order to bring love, hope, and life to the world? What of God do you need? In the asking, you will receive. Something always happens. God always gives more of Himself!

So, let's soak in this extravagant love.