

February 23

Lesson 13 (NIV)

EVER-PERSEVERING PETITIONS

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 13
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 11:1–13

LUKE 11:5–13

⁵ Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ ⁷ And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ ⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.

⁹ “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

¹¹ “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? ¹² Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

KEY VERSE

I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. —Luke 11:9

HONORING GOD

Unit 3: Jesus Teaches About True Worship

LESSONS 10–13

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HOW TO SAY IT

Cornelius *Cor-neel-yus*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Judea *Joo-dee-uh*.

synagogue *sin-uh-gogs*.

Introduction

A. Seeking a Blue Doorknob

A *shaggy-dog story* is a long-winded tale with an underwhelming punch line. The point of such a story is that the joke is on the listener, who has paid attention for far too long and has not been rewarded. One shaggy dog story tells of the search for a magical blue doorknob in the Empire State Building. The storyteller can stretch this joke to include as many of the building's 102 floors as desired (each with dozens of doors with knobs). The story can end with the questioning of a janitor on the top floor who says, "Oh, they took out all the colored knobs years ago."

Have you ever experienced frustrating and fruitless searches, quests that are like the punch line in what turns out to be a shaggy-dog story? Have you ever made repeated requests of someone and not received any kind of response? Have you ever knocked on a door when you knew someone was behind it but did not hear a word?

The fruitless search makes us think, *Give it up!* The ignored requests say, *Don't bother me!* The unopened door says, *Leave me alone!*

Perhaps your prayer life has felt that way at times. Your prayers seem to float to the ceiling and no farther. Earnest petitions yield silence day after day. Lamentations 3:44 seems all too real: “You have covered yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can get through.” What are we to make of these times when God seems slow to answer?

B. Lesson Context

Luke’s two books, Luke and Acts, have repeated mentions of people praying and frequent teachings on prayer. We cannot read these two books without noticing that Jesus was a man of prayer (see Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:40, 41, 44, 46; etc.) and that the first-century church was a community of prayer (see Acts 1:14; 13:3; 21:5; etc.). The Jerusalem church made prayer a priority (2:42). Cornelius, a Gentile, was a God-fearing man before his conversion, partly because he devoted himself to prayer (10:2).

The church inherited this reverence for prayer from its Jewish roots. Ancient Jewish synagogues and the temple itself were ideally houses of prayer (see Isaiah 56:7; Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46), dedicated spaces where people could pray alone or in community.

Prayer by Jesus and first-century Jews was rooted in the Scriptures (Genesis 21:16–18; Exodus 32:11–13; Jeremiah 10:23–25; etc.). The Old Testament shows prayer as addressing the Lord as the God who hears, cares, and is powerful to act (Exodus 2:23–25; Psalm 65:2; Daniel 9:19).

The previous lesson looked at the Lord’s Prayer as found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9–15; see lesson 12); Luke’s parallel for that teaching opportunity (although not his version of the Lord’s Prayer itself) is the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17–49). Between that event and today’s lesson occurs a miraculous healing and a resurrection (7:1–17); interactions with various people (7:18–50); more teaching (8:1–21; 10:38–42); calming a storm (8:22–25); an exorcism, resurrection, and healing (8:26–56); sending of the 12 (9:1–9); a miraculous feeding (9:10–17); private conversations and the transfiguration (9:18–36); another exorcism (9:37–43a); conversations and opposition (9:43b–62); and the sending of the 72 (10:1–24). Only then do we arrive at Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer (also known as the model prayer) and today’s text that follows it.

As Luke 11 opens, Jesus was praying. When he had finished, a disciple asked him to teach them how to pray. Jesus’ response was to offer the prayer of Luke 11:2–4. The text for today’s lesson offers further insights on prayer.

I. Persistent Request

(LUKE 11:5–8)

A. Inconvenience (vv. 5–7)

5, 6. Then Jesus said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’

The setting of this parable is that of the relationship of two friends who are also neighbors. These are people who are likely to have engaged in sharing and borrowing things from each other over many years. Such a relationship is to be assumed as normal and healthy by Jesus’ audience.

Midnight in Judea is truly the middle of the night. Because providing light after dark uses expensive oil for lamps, people rise shortly before sunrise and are in bed an hour or two after sundown. A normal day near the equator might begin about 5:00 a.m., and a household might be

in bed by 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. By midnight, families are sound asleep, having been so for four or more hours.

An unexpected visitor turns one *friend* into a host in this parable. Ancient customs of hospitality differ from ours. A person on a journey might drop in unannounced, leaving a host scrambling to provide food at unusual hours. A host's failure to provide a meal for his visitor is a social error of inhospitality, even without prior notice of arrival (compare Genesis 19:1–3). Yet, we should not accuse the host of poor planning. His family may have eaten every piece of bread at the evening meal, assuming their supply would be replenished the next day. The unanticipated guest has created a crisis, and the rules of hospitality must be honored.

The host needs bread, *three loaves*. His claim to have *no food* may be a way of saying that his food stock is quite inadequate. Bread is baked frequently, even daily. It does not keep long and tastes best when fresh. Friend A is hoping that sleepy Friend B has some bread left over from the previous day.

7. “And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’”

Jesus’ disciples are undoubtedly surprised at the reaction of Friend B. They understand the inconvenience, but they also know that the expectation of village hospitality makes it imperative that the sleeping friend help, even at midnight. He says he *can’t get up*, but the truth is that he lacks the willingness to get up and help. The parable thereby contrasts an ungracious attitude to God’s graciousness as revealed in the model prayer (see Luke 11:3).

B. Yielding (v. 8)

8. “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.”

Friendship alone is not a strong enough motivation for the man to help. Not even social customs of the day move him to action. What finally motivates him to action is his neighbor’s *shameless audacity*.

The Greek word being translated, used only here in the New Testament, normally carries the sense of shamelessness. That sense can fit the context here if “shameless” is in the sense of “boldness.” The idea is that of desperation that overrides shame. The friend pushes past courteous politeness (that might easily take no for an answer) to ask again and again until the request is granted.

The point as it applies to prayer must not be missed: persistence is important. Prayer is a laying bare of the heart before God. If a request is not worth repeating as a daily petition, it may be deemed as whimsical or unimportant. Prayer that is persistent and personal is powerful in God’s eyes. Needs are daily; therefore our practice of prayer must be ongoing, never taking for granted the gracious provision of God.

We should take care here, though. Persistence in prayer is not effective because we somehow wear God down (see last week’s lesson). That’s not how it works with God. Persistence in prayer is a test for us, not for him.

II. Tenacious Prayer

(LUKE 11:9, 10)

A. Asking, Seeking, Knocking (v. 9)

9. “So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

The parable of the two friends gives context to the famous verse before us. It is the application of the parable (compare Matthew 7:7). The host has asked for bread, sought bread, and knocked on his neighbor’s door until it was opened for him. All of these are presented by Jesus as commands of what we are to do: *ask, seek, knock*. All three have a sense of continuation: keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking.

In this chapter, it is unmistakable that the asking, seeking, and knocking are referring to prayer. This persistence is unlike the prayer practices of pagan Gentiles of Jesus’ day. Greek and Roman religions often view prayer as a device to manipulate or cajole a god or goddess to shower fortune on the person praying. For this reason, Jesus previously warned his disciples not to follow these empty practices (Matthew 6:7). Fundamentally, the Gentiles are unsure their gods hear them or will want to help even if they are listening. Jesus’ disciples need have no such fears; unlike the inhospitable neighbor, our God loves to give us what we need when we ask (6:8, 11).

B. Receiving, Finding, Opening (v. 10)

10. “For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.

The potential for misunderstanding here is great. So it bears repeating that we must not see these verses as teaching that we can wear down God by endless, repeated requests until he gives in. Prayer in that case is not a conversation with our Father. Rather, it becomes a tirade that will not cease until demands are met. This danger of misapplication is also a caution for the similar parable of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). The thrust of this parable is that we “should always pray and not give up” (18:1).

The thing to remember is that in both of these parables the persons who grant the requests are not sterling role models for us. Jesus’ listeners do not want to be the inhospitable and insensitive sleeping friend of the two-friends parable. They also abhor the judge who does not care about justice. Does this, then, teach us anything about God? Is God, who hears and grants our requests in prayer, anything like these two men?

The answer is obviously no; God is not like this (Jonah 3:6–10; 4:2). The parables, at one level, set forth a lesser-to-greater comparison: if the lesser one grants the request, how much more is the greater one (God) willing to do so! At another level, these parables teach us about the nature of prayer and how we should practice it. We must be persistent. A prayer life that makes a request once then abandons it is not much of a prayer life.

God is always faithful to respond appropriately to our needs. But let’s be honest: Are we sometimes too proud to ask God (or anyone else) for help? Do we think we always should try to meet our own needs without God’s help? Though asking for what we need goes against cultural expectations of rugged individualism, God expects us to ask him for what we need each day. We do not have access to the decision-making process of God when it comes to our prayer requests. But in all cases, we can remain confident that God is hearing us every time we pray and giving us the answer that best suits his purposes and our needs.

An important point in this and the previous verse is that a specific kind of person is in view here. Today’s lesson text occurs within a long teaching section that deals with how Jesus’ disciples

are to think and behave. Thus when Jesus refers to people who ask, seek, and knock, he is referring to the kind of person who has the sort of relationship with God that Jesus has been describing all along. In other words, these verses are directed to the kind of people who ask, seek, and knock while having godly motives and goals.

III. Faithful Response (LUKE 11:11–13)

A. Imperfect Givers (vv. 11, 12)

11, 12. “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?”

Jesus begins a second illustration about prayer to make a different point. Only a heartless father would ignore the pleas of a hungry child; only the cruelest of fathers would respond to cries of hunger with the substitutions of *a snake* for *a fish* or *a scorpion* for *an egg*. Beyond being not edible by a child, such things are outright dangerous: a snake would bite a child rather than the reverse; a scorpion would sting.

B. The Perfect Father (v. 13)

13. “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jesus drives home his major point: even comparatively *evil* human fathers can and do *give good gifts to their children* (compare Matthew 7:11). This principle is also true of the sleepy friend of the parable just considered and of the unjust judge in Luke 18. Even the worst of humans sometimes do the right thing, the good thing. However grudgingly, they are able to give good gifts to others. This is a bit like saying that even a blind squirrel finds a nut occasionally. An endorsement, but not a glowing one!

Yet even the best of people are evil when compared to the Lord (Romans 3:5, 10–18, 23). Thus, Jesus employs a lesser-to-greater argument: if certain good things about us frail humans are true, then *how much more* will good actions come from our perfect *Father in heaven*, who has no human weaknesses?

Moreover, the Father’s capacity to grant requests far exceeds giving pieces of fish or boiled eggs. Our Father in Heaven gives believers a gift far greater than the most wealthy and generous parent on earth can: his *Holy Spirit*. Our God can fulfill not only our physical needs, he can also satisfy our greater spiritual needs. The gift of the Holy Spirit is one of the greatest blessings of the Christian believer. Luke expands on this in Acts 1:8; 2:38; 5:32; 15:8; etc. Focusing on the gift of the Holy Spirit calls Christians to hope even when in material want.

A caution: Jesus’ teaching is not that God is required to better our lives through material possessions. A popular perception of God says that if you want a better car or a bigger house, all you need to do is ask for it in faith. This theory carries the assumption that God promises us health and wealth; it is a “name it and claim it” view of the gospel. But there is no such promise in the New Testament. Jesus is teaching us how true disciples understand the nature of God; Jesus is not teaching that we can get from God all we want simply by virtue of persistence.

Conclusion

A. How Should I Pray?

There are many misconceptions about prayer among Christians. These erroneous beliefs can become debilitating. Some say that if God knows all, including our needs, we don't need to ask for anything. What can we tell God if he already knows everything? "Nothing!" some say. Therefore, this logic says, prayer is pointless. We don't want to pray wrongly, and we don't want to suffer from prayer paralysis. We also don't want to oversimplify prayer, for it represents a relationship with our heavenly Father.

Jesus used two analogies, images we would not expect, to teach us about our prayers to God. First, he spoke of borrowing loaves of bread. Second, he referred to a father providing wholesome food for his child. Sandwiched between (pun intended!) is one of Jesus' most profound teachings on prayer in all the Bible: his admonition to ask, seek, and knock without giving up. Jesus ends with a reference to the Holy Spirit, presenting this as the ultimate answer to prayer and the gift of the Father.

Just as the unprepared host did not stop knocking or give up his search for bread, so we should not give up on asking God for the things we need. Prayer must be an ongoing conversation with the Lord. Jesus taught the disciples to ask for "daily bread" (Luke 11:3), leaving us to conclude that this request must be done every day. Prayer is a lifetime of activity, not an essay we write and file away forever.

Jesus teaches us that we are not abandoned by God. For this reason, we do not need to devise effective prayer strategies on our own. He has given us examples, and he has given us his Holy Spirit. Paul notes the value of this for us when he teaches that even though we are inadequate in our prayer lives, God's Spirit will intercede for us to make up for our weaknesses (Romans 8:26). God not only hears our prayers, he will help us if we let him.

Jesus' encouragement in Luke 11 is to never give up on prayer, no matter how unfruitful it may seem on any given day. The key is that we keep praying. We keep asking God, seeking his will, and knocking on the doors of Heaven with our requests (using James 4:3 as a caution: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts"). Few of us would count ourselves as giants in the world of prayer, so we can make this same request: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1)! Jesus was both a master teacher and the greatest pray-er of all time. His centuries-old words still guide us in this crucial spiritual matter today. **B. Prayer**

Father God, we do have daily needs, things like food and drink that our bodies require. We have personal needs, to be loved by others and to have others to love. Most of all, we have spiritual needs that will only be satisfied by your Holy Spirit. We knock on your door to ask that you supply all our needs, all that we seek. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who graciously taught us to pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

“The worst sin is prayerlessness.”¹

¹ Krause, M. S., Miller, P. L., Bass, K., & Kendrick, C. M. (2019–2020). [Ever-Persevering Petitions](#). In R. L. Nickelson, J. A. Kenney, M. K. Williams, & J. Gerke (Eds.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2019–2020* (Vol. 26, pp. 217–223). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.