

# Prayer

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Scripture Text: Luke 11:5-10; 18:1-8; 18:9-14

**Lesson Synopsis:** Students will explore Jesus' teaching on prayer by looking at three parables that are found only in Luke. Of special importance will be themes of boldness, perseverance, and humility.

## Digging In

Luke has been called by David Garland "the evangelist of prayer" because he more than any of the other gospel writers presents Jesus as a person and teacher of prayer.<sup>i</sup> Indeed, Jesus himself is described as engaged in prayer in 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18, 9:28-29, 22:39-45, 23:34, and 23:36, and his teachings on prayer are found in 6:28, 11:1-13, 18:9-14, 19:46, 20:47, 22:40, 22:46.<sup>ii</sup> This frequency of these passages lets us know that prayer is a special theme in Luke's gospel and that we would do well to pay attention to what he has to tell us on the topic. This lesson will focus on three parables about prayer that are found only in Luke and that call our attention to three different approaches to prayer in the life of the believer.

### **Luke 11:5-10 – The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor<sup>iii</sup>**

The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor comes directly after Jesus teaches a version of the Lord's Prayer to his disciples. In this parable, a host has been taken by surprise by a friend who has arrived at his house at midnight. Finding himself without food to offer his guest, the host goes to a neighbor's house to ask for bread. While the neighbor is disgruntled by such a late disturbance (his children are already in bed), he eventually does as asked due to "shamelessness," a word that will be explored further below. However, before getting to this crucial part of the parable, it will be helpful to first seek a better understanding of the parable as a whole.

In exploring this parable, it is important to note that the first century culture of Jesus was different from our own. Whereas we identify readily with the grumpy neighbor who has been bothered at midnight (after all, who knocks on a person's door at that time of night!), Jesus' original hearers would have more readily identified with the host who has been caught unaware. Indeed, the grumpy neighbor would have been viewed as more of a villain than as a person with a legitimate complaint. This would have been the case due to the demands of hospitality, which in this culture were viewed

as a must. Thus, offering a meal to a surprise guest was not viewed as a kind pleasantry or even as an option. Instead, hospitality demanded that a host provide for his guest's hunger, and failing to do so would be a matter of great shame for both the host himself and his entire village.<sup>iv</sup> Therefore, the host in the story is not disrespectful or out of line in going to his neighbor after midnight to ask for help in showing hospitality. Rather, he is acting out of urgent need to protect his honor, his neighbor's honor, and the honor of the entire village by providing for his guest.<sup>v</sup>

With all of this in mind, the neighbor's reluctance to offer aid becomes ridiculous. While anyone with children can understand his chagrin – he doesn't want to wake them up! – the demands of hospitality make this into a poor excuse. When a friend's honor is at stake (the neighbor and the host are described as friends), you risk waking up the little ones! To help us better understand this concept, Garland offers what might be described as a contemporary version of this parable:

It would be like a friend who calls in the middle of the night to say that his wife is in labor, and he needs to get her to the hospital right away but his car won't start. Could he borrow your car? Who of you would say, "I'm sorry I left the car keys in the kids' bedroom and I'm afraid I might wake them up"? No one but the worst cad would come up with such weak excuses to put him off and leave his friend in the lurch during such an emergency. The neighbor does need to raise a ruckus and keep ringing the doorbell, and they do not even need to be friends for one to feel the obligation to respond and offer help.<sup>vi</sup>

When expressed in these terms, the host's urgency is understandable, and the neighbor's reluctance is inexcusable, even if the children are asleep!

All of this brings us to the climax of the parable. After offering an impossible scenario, Jesus says, "I tell you, even though [the neighbor] 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" (11:8). According to Jesus, the neighbor's reluctance will be overcome, and most translations, like the NIV above, attribute this change in attitude to the host's persistent asking. This is not, however, the only possible explanation. The word translated variously as "shameless audacity" (NIV), "impudence" (ESV), "persistence" (NASB), and "importunity" (KJV) can also be translated as "avoidance of shame,"<sup>vii</sup> This translation renders the passage something like, "...yet in order to avoid shame he will surely get up and give you as much as you need," and changes the thrust of the parable. According to this view, "The situation is unthinkable not because of the petitioner's persistence but because honor demanded that a neighbor get up, awaken his whole family if necessary, and supply his neighbor's need – if not from friendship, then at least to avoid being shamed."<sup>viii</sup> The onus here is placed not on the host but on the neighbor.

The above discussion of translation proves important in seeking to identify the moral of Jesus' story. If translated in terms of "persistence" or "shameless audacity," the

parable serves as an exhortation to persistent prayer. If translated in terms of “avoidance of shame,” however, the parable teaches us that we can boldly approach God in prayer to ask for our needs. Importantly, in neither of these interpretations can God be equated with the grumpy neighbor. As a number of commentators note, Jesus moves in this parable from lesser to greater, the point being that if even the grumpy neighbor will answer the request, how much more will our good God do so! Taken from the standpoint of persistent prayer, we are to pray persistently, trusting that our good God hears our prayers and will supply our need. Taken from the standpoint of bold prayer, we can boldly take our needs to God, who cares for us and, like the neighbor in the parable, “also has a name and reputation to preserve.”<sup>ix</sup> When we do so, we can trust that “God will always do what is honorable and consistent with his character.”<sup>x</sup>

After offering this parable, Jesus goes on to offer one of the better known sayings in scripture: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (11:9-10). Those who understand the previous parable as referring to persistence prefer the translation, “Keep asking and it will be given to you; keep seeking and you will find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you...” While this is a possible translation of this text, I prefer the simple, “ask, seek, knock.” The reason I prefer this translation is that it does not make the answers to our prayers rest on our persistence, as if God will answer if we only ask something enough times. Instead, Jesus can be understood as letting us know that we can and should approach God in prayer because he will answer. In this, I agree with the interpretation of the parable as teaching us boldness in prayer. Ultimately, though, persistence and boldness need not be at odds with one another. It may be that at times we will be persistent in our requests. This is not, however, because we think that God will answer if we wear him down or hit a magic number of requests. Instead, it is because we believe that we can boldly approach God, trusting him to supply our needs. Of course, distinguishing between needs and wants is a must. After all, the man in the parable didn’t make an outlandish request. No, he requested something that in his culture was a necessity. Whether in persistence or boldness, we can know that God cares deeply for our *needs*.

### **Luke 18:1-8 – The Parable of the Persistent Widow**

If The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor may or may not refer to persistence in prayer, The Parable of the Persistent Widow certainly does. This is seen clearly in Luke’s preface to the parable: “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (18:1). That said, we will again need to be careful as we speak of persistence, for The Parable of the Persistent Widow points us to persistence in a certain kind of prayer. Before exploring this though, however, it will be helpful to seek to gain a better understanding of the parable as a whole.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow revolves around two characters: a widow seeking justice against an adversary and a judge who can grant her that justice. While the parable tells us very little about the widow (we don't know the exact nature of her grievance or her history), the very fact that she is a widow let us know that she was one of the more vulnerable people in her society. As R. Alan Culpepper explains, "Widows were deprived of the support of a husband, yet they could not inherit their husband's estate, which passed on to the deceased man's sons or brothers..."<sup>xi</sup> Thus, widows had neither financial support nor protector<sup>xii</sup> and were especially vulnerable. Receiving justice, then, is probably of paramount importance to the widow's security.

While Jesus tells us little about the widow, he tells us much about the judge, "who neither feared God nor cared what people thought" (18:2). This is a man who lacks the moorings of fearing God and saving face before people. As such, he is free to follow his own agenda without reference to either and in this case refuses to grant justice to the widow. Jesus' original audience would probably have understood the judge as a despicable character who ignored both the commands of God and societal moorings regarding the care of widows.

In the end, the judge does grant the widow justice, but not because he has some kind of conversion experience. Instead, we hear him say, "Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!" (18:4-5). This translation from the NIV is stronger than most others in speaking of an attack. The ESV, NASB, and KJV, while each using different wording, look to the idea of the judge "being worn down" by the widow's persistence rather than to the widow attacking him. Ultimately, either translation is acceptable, as the underlying Greek word is from the boxing world and can mean either literally giving someone a black eye or metaphorically wearing them down.<sup>xiii</sup> Regardless of the translation chosen, the widow is painted as a scrappy woman who refuses to take no for an answer. If the judge is worried that she will "wear him down," then she is persistent in her petitions. If he is worried about her attacking him, then not only is she persistent, but she is also feisty; her "bothering" of him is so vehement that he worries that failure to grant her justice might result in physical blows!

After telling this parable, Jesus goes on to give its application in saying, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (18:6-8). Once again, Jesus moves from lesser to greater, this time meaning that if even an unjust judge will answer a persistent request for justice, how much more will God, who is the just Judge of all? Once again, God cannot be equated with the villain of the story but should instead be understood as greater and therefore acting differently. With this in mind, the lesson of the parable is that God's people should persist in prayer, knowing that God, the just Judge, will eventually grant their requests.

All of this said, it is important now to remember that Jesus is speaking of a particular kind of prayer, and this changes the meaning of the parable. Rather than speaking of prayer in general, Jesus speaks of prayers for justice (18:7), and even this category should also be understood in a more restricted sense. As Garland notes, “In the immediate context, the Pharisees ask Jesus when the reign of God is coming (17:20),” and Jesus has warned his disciples of delay by saying, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it” (17:22).<sup>xiv</sup> Rather than speaking of prayer in general or even general prayers for justice, Jesus speaks here of prayers for the second coming, when God the just Judge will put everything right. The understanding of the parable as referring to prayers for the second coming is further supported in 18:8, where Jesus again speaks of the coming of the Son of Man.

Importantly, the parable implies that God’s “elect” or “chosen ones” (18:7) will have need to cry out to him for justice. Liefeld and Pao capture this point in saying, “The theme [of the parable] is that of the vindication of God’s *misunderstood and suffering people*” (emphasis added).<sup>xv</sup> While it is not stated explicitly here, the gospels have no lack of warnings that following Jesus will not always be easy (see, for instance, 12:11-12, where Jesus speaks of his followers being brought before “synagogues, rulers, and authorities), and times of persecution will certainly arouse in God’s people the desire “to see one of the days of the Son of Man.” Beyond this, our hearts sometimes break when we hear of the great injustices of the world, and we shudder under the weight of those injustices. These are also times when we long for the second coming, for it will be then that all things are put right. Importantly, the sufferings of the church and the evil present in the world are not only occasions for longing; they can also be occasions for despair. Thus, Jesus tells the parable to show his disciples “that they should always pray and not give up” (18:1). In these moments when we hang between hope and despair, Jesus pushes us in the direction of persistent hope. Our persistent prayer in the face of suffering and evil is to be that God’s kingdom come, for we believe that God is not unjust or uncaring and will indeed bring justice both to the world and especially to his people. For an example of this kind of prayer, we can look to another widow in Luke’s gospel, Anna, who for decades had “never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying” as she looked forward to God’s redemption of Jerusalem.<sup>xvi</sup> Here, we see a woman who feels the weight of injustice but who carries that weight to God day and night (2:37-38).

At the end of this parable, after exhorting his disciples to faith and prayer in the face of injustice and despair, Jesus turns the tables and poses a question: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (18:8). The parable, which before took the form of encouragement, now takes on a note of challenge. The thrust is not just that we *should* pray and trust God in times of adversity but now also *will we*?

### **Luke 18:9-14 – The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

After telling The Parable of the Persistent Widow, Jesus goes on to tell another parable about prayer, this one focusing on a Pharisee and a tax collector. Importantly, these characters find themselves at different ends of the societal spectrum. Pharisees were respected for their careful attention to holiness, while tax collectors were despised because of a reputation for dishonesty and complicity with the powers that be, for whom they collected taxes. As we read this parable, we are “to recognize the Pharisee as a devout person and the tax collector as a stereotypical sinner.”<sup>xvii</sup> Yet these categories are soon overturned.

As he prays, the Pharisee displays himself as one who is “confident in [his] own righteousness and look[s] down on everyone else” (18:9) by saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (18:11-12). The tax collector, on the other hand, prays very differently. Of his prayer we are told, “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’” (18:13). Jesus’ commentary on these two prayers then upholds the tax collector over the Pharisee: “I tell you that this man [the tax collector], rather than the other [the Pharisee], went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (18:14). In saying this, Jesus makes it clear that humility is a must in prayer.

Importantly, this parable does not instruct us to neglect holy living, as if fasting and tithing are bad things in and of themselves. For the Pharisee, the problem is not the practices themselves but is instead his view of them. In his prayer, the Pharisee makes it clear that he prides himself on these practices and separates himself from others by them. His “holiness” has become a point of pride and security.

Just as the parable does not negate holy living, neither does it uphold sin. The tax collector is not justified because of his profession or the way he goes about it. Instead, he is justified because he comes to God humbly, asking for mercy and naming himself as a sinner. In all of this, we see God exalting the humble and laying low the proud. Of course, the Pharisee could have displayed humility even in his pursuit of holiness by refusing to exalt himself over others and resting in God rather than in his own accomplishments. It is his lack of humility rather than his lifestyle that makes him the counterpoint of parable. Likewise, it is the humility of the tax collector that makes him a person to be emulated.

## **Application**

As has been seen, each of the above parables teaches us something different about prayer. The lesson of each will be discussed below.

### **Boldness in Prayer**

As stated above, I understand The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor as teaching us to boldly approach God in prayer. Sometimes we can fool ourselves into thinking that God is so big and that we are so insignificant that he could not possibly want to hear of our miniscule needs. Jesus, however, teaches the exact opposite. Rather than being like a grumpy neighbor who can't be bothered, God is like a good father who rejoices in hearing his children's petitions and granting them. Because this is true, we can approach God with confidence to ask for the things that we need. In doing so, we affirm with Jesus that those who ask will receive, those who seek will find, and that the door will be opened to those who knock. With this affirmation, we can begin to inhabit the roles of asker, seeker, and knocker. Of course, we must be careful to distinguish between needs and wants as we approach God in prayer, but we should never shy away from petitioning God for what is needed.

### **Perseverance in Adversity**

As we look to The Parable of the Persistent Widow, we see both an encouragement and a challenge to persevere in prayer and hope in times of suffering and doubt. The call here is to remember that our God is the just Judge who will bring justice to his people and make all things right at the second coming of Christ. Because this is true, we are able to face times of despair with hope and the persevering petition that God's kingdom would come. Importantly, the repeated voicing of such a prayer not only renews our hope in God's future action but also fortifies us for faithful living in the midst of adversity.

### **Humility in Prayer**

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector calls us to an attitude of humility in prayer. Rather than putting stock in our own righteous actions, we are called instead to rest in God's grace that has overcome our sin. Such humility leads us to thank God for *his* action and not our own. More than this, the parable teaches us to be humble in our view of other people as well. Rather than exalting ourselves over others, we are invited to join all the unworthy (that being everyone!) at the foot of the cross as we gather in prayer before our great God.

## **Teaching Helps**

**Icebreaker:** To get people talking, begin with the following question, "If you could be any animal, what would you be and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.<sup>xviii</sup>

**Time for Sharing:** Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of Luke that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

**Lesson Introduction:** Let the class know that today's lesson will come from several texts on prayer that they have encountered over the past couple of weeks. Invite them to open their Bibles to Luke 11:5-10.

### **The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor**

- **Question:** Tell the following story from David Garland and ask participants what they think of the unhelpful friend.
  - A man called a friend in the middle of the night to say that his wife was in labor, and he needed to get her to the hospital right away but his car wouldn't start. Could he borrow his friend's car? But the friend said, "I'm sorry, but I left the car keys in the kids' bedroom and I'm afraid I might wake them up. I can't help you."
- **Explain:** Explain that the class's negative reaction to this story would have been much like the Jesus' audience's reaction to The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor.
- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 11:5-8.
- **Explain:** Explain the importance of hospitality and why the audience would have disliked the neighbor by drawing on the "The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor" section above.
- **Question:** Even though the neighbor in the parable wouldn't help due to friendship, something pushes him to help in the end. What is it?
- **Explain/Question:** Explain that "shameless audacity" or "perseverance" can also be translated as "to avoid shame." Write the following two translations of verse 8 on the board and ask students to explain the difference between them.
  - ...yet because of his persistence he will get up and give...
  - ...yet in order to avoid shame he will get up and give...
- **Question:** How does each translation change the meaning of the parable? (For more on this, see "The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor" section above.)
  - Be ready to explain the "Ask, Seek, Knock" saying according to each translation (see "The Parable of a Shameless Neighbor" section above).
- **Question:** Which translation do you think is better? (Be ready to offer your own thoughts on this.)
- **Explain:** Explain that whether one thinks the parable points to persistence or boldness, both view God as better than the grumpy neighbor. Therefore, whether in persistence or boldness, we approach a good God who hears our requests and responds to them.

- **Question:** Does this mean that God will give us whatever we ask for?
- **Question:** How can we distinguish between our needs and our wants in prayer?
- **Explain:** Explain that this parable teaches us to either be bold or persistent in bringing our needs to God in prayer. Write “bold/persistent” on the board.

### **The Parable of the Persistent Widow**

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 18:1-8.
- **Question:** There are two characters in this story, a judge and a widow. What do we know about the widow? (For more on this, see “The Parable of the Persistent Widow” section above.)
- **Question:** What do we know about the judge?
- **Question:** Why does the judge eventually decide to grant justice to the widow?
  - Be ready here to talk about whether the judge is worried about getting worn down by the widow or getting a black eye (see “The Parable of the Persistent Widow” section above).
- **Question:** What does this parable teach us about prayer?
- **Question:** Does Jesus apply the call to persistence to all types of prayer?
  - **Explain:** Be ready to explain that Jesus is talking about prayers for justice and specifically for justice that will be given at the second coming. (For more on this, see the section on this parable above.)
- **Question:** Why might God’s people cry out to him for justice?
- **Explain:** Explain that we have moments when we face suffering or evil in the world that can turn us either to hope or to despair. Jesus calls us in this passage to move in the direction of hope.
- **Question:** With prayers for the second coming in mind, what does this parable teach us about prayer?
  - **Explain:** Explain that Jesus teaches us here to be persistent and hopeful in prayer in the face of adversity. Write “perseverance in adversity” on the board.

### **The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector**

- **Scripture Reading:** Have someone read Luke 18:9-14.
- **Question:** This parable revolves around two characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector. What do we know about Pharisees?
- **Question:** What do we know about tax collectors?
- **Question:** With all of this in mind, who would we expect to be “justified” at the end of the parable?
- **Question:** After hearing the Pharisee’s prayer, what words would you use to describe him?
- **Question:** After hearing the tax collector’s prayer, what words would you use to describe him?

- **Question:** According to Jesus, which of these men will leave their prayer justified before God? Why is this the case?
- **Question:** What does this parable teach us about prayer?
  - **Explain:** Explain that this parable teaches humility. Write humility on the board.

### Closing Question:

- Which of these teachings on prayer (boldness/persistence, perseverance in adversity, or humility) do you think is most important for us to hear today? Why?

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<sup>i</sup> David E. Garland, *Luke*, vol. 3, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011), ?.

<sup>ii</sup> This concise list taken from: R. Allen Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 337. Garland also names these passages with further description and explanation. See citation above.

<sup>iii</sup> Parable name taken from: *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>iv</sup> For this specific point on the shame of the village, see: Garland, *Luke*, 3:469.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:465–466; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: The NIV Application Commentary from Biblical Text--to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1996), 310–311; Walter L. Liefeld and David W. Pao, "Luke," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Zondervan, 2007), 206. Liefeld and Pao note that the visitor would be the guest of "the whole community."

<sup>vi</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 3:466–467.

<sup>vii</sup> Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 206.

<sup>viii</sup> Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 236.

<sup>ix</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 3:469.

<sup>x</sup> Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 206.

<sup>xi</sup> Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 335–336.

<sup>xii</sup> This terminology from Garland, *Luke*, 3:709.

<sup>xiii</sup> Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 275; Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 338; Garland, *Luke*, 3:710; Bock, *Luke*, 454.

<sup>xiv</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 3:712.

<sup>xv</sup> Liefeld and Pao, "Luke," 275.

<sup>xvi</sup> Garland, *Luke*, 3:711; Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 338.

<sup>xvii</sup> Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," 341.

<sup>xviii</sup> Question taken from: "Funny Icebreaker Questions," *Buzzle*, accessed March 21, 2014, <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/funny-icebreaker-questions.html>.