

The Desperate Man, and “Something For Others” – a Devotional by Rev. Keith Cobb

In this meditation, we will be considering a parable of Jesus that is recorded in Luke 11:5-10, occasionally called “the parable of the friend at midnight.” Then He said to them, *“Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’ Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”*

Now, in fairness to the text, consider the context (Luke 11:1-5): *One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say, ‘Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.’”* And, the verses immediately following: *“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.”*

Obviously, this passage deals with prayer. Jesus was responding to a specific request of His disciples to help them, to teach them, to actually assist them in prayer. It is worth noting that it was the act of Jesus’ praying that precipitated the request... they must have been impressed with the simplicity and fervency of His praying. Or perhaps they were struck with the effectiveness of His praying. Whatever it was the disciples noticed in Jesus’ prayer life made them feel suddenly inadequate and humbled as they witnessed such intimacy between a Son and His Father. And it is to their credit that they sought help.

There is a particular dimension, a particular aspect of prayer being passed on to His disciples in the parable, and it is that which arrests our attention in the meditation. It was into the depths that Jesus led the disciples when He shared with them this parable; and yet, how simple it is – this lesson He teaches about praying!

Preliminary Observations

To reach an understanding of that lesson, let us approach it as might detection would a crime scene, noting little details which will become helpful clues in interpreting the passage...

1. Did you notice the repetition of the word “friend” when you read the text? Interesting. First, there is this imaginary “friend” of the inquiring disciple, who then goes to another “friend” at midnight and asks him for bread to give to yet another “friend” who has dropped in for an unexpected visit.
2. Three of the friends were “needy.” Think about it: 1) the disciple who asked Jesus for help in praying was in need of instruction, 2) the traveling friend was in need of lodging and food, 3) the host was in need of bread. (And we could say that the sleeping friend was in need of rest, which is why he eventually got up and gave the bread!)
3. Three of these characters were “equipped” with some degree of boldness; the one who asked Jesus to help him with praying, the traveler who came boldly, and perhaps presumptuously to stay with this friend, and the host who was brave enough to wake up his neighbor at midnight.
4. But one person got the whole mess started: the unexpected guest. His need touched off a chain of needs starting with the host going out at midnight to awaken his friend, culminating with the need for the neighbor to get up from bed in order to “hush” his friend so he could get back in bed to rest.

5. What about feelings and emotions in the story? Embarrassment, or desperation, for example, on the part of the host; anger and frustration on the part of the sleepy-headed bread man; finally, might there have been at least to some degree, presumptuous expectation from the guest? Consider the thoughts and emotions of the characters; it could provide some insight into their actions, and ultimately help us understand what Jesus was saying...
6. Now here is an important observation; everyone in the story got what they needed. The traveler got food and lodging; the needy host got bread from his neighbor; the sleepy-head got his sleep (after he got up and gave the bread away...); and, the disciple got his lesson on praying!
7. One more little detail; the host with the empty bread box asked specifically for three loaves of bread. Why three?

Primary Interpretation

Now, let's try to piece everything together.

- We know the story.
- We know Jesus was teaching about praying.
- We know everybody in the story got what they were asking for.
- We know that Jesus concluded this parable with the summation, "So I say unto you: ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN YOU..."
- And we know, finally, that "boldness" is a key concept in this whole story (cf. verse 8ff).

So what was Jesus getting at?

1. Praying is based on relationship. One of the central themes in the passage is that these characters had friendships with each other that resulted in a willingness to be vulnerable – to the point of experiencing discomfort in sharing those needs.
2. Real NEED creates a feeling of desperation, and desperation drives us to seek help from ones we have relationships with, and ones who are able and willing to meet our needs. The traveler sought his friend although it was late at night; the host sought his friend when he realized he had no bread.
3. Strong relationships foster boldness – to the point of presumptions, almost... The combination of need, desperation, and relationship evoked a response of boldness; each of the characters did what it took to "get by."
4. None of the requests was for self-consumption. How critical this point is! The motive for the asking was "something for others." The boldness each had was because the "need" was to meet the "need" for "others."

Plain Application

Now, in sum, let us consider how this touches our prayer life.

1. Consider, first, that Jesus was teaching by contrast.
 - a. God never sleeps.
 - b. God never says, "Don't bother me."

- c. God never says, "I can't get up and give you anything."
 - d. God WILL respond based upon the relationship (though the friend would respond only because of his pal's boldness).
 - e. God does not expect us to hammer at His door with the attitude that He will honor our troubling Him by giving us what we ask for.
2. Next, Jesus was teaching by comparison.
- a. God always answers.
 - b. God will always give as much as is needed.
3. The real "secret" to Jesus' praying – and this is MOST IMPORTANT – was
- a. He believed His Father was good,
 - b. He believed God was able and willing to help meet needs,
 - c. He was obsessed with praying to meet the needs of others who, by us, might be considered imposing on Him.

These three things we need in order to pray as Jesus did.

Pray with your heart knowing God is good, and that He is able, and that He is willing to answer our prayers when we are desperate and need something for others.