

“The God Who Answers Prayers”
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Text: Luke 11:5-13

Some of you may know that I was born and raised in Malaysia before I came to Canada. When I was a young Christian teenager back in Malaysia, I heard sermons about this passage. And the main point I remember is that the lesson here for us about prayer is persistence. We need to keep praying, keep asking, keep seeking or keep on knocking until God gives us what we ask for. So, the virtue of persistent prayer is the main theme of this parable of the friend at midnight. If we pray hard enough, ask persistently enough, and kept trying different means, God will give us what we ask for. Of course, there's a qualification that God won't give us anything that is not in his will for us. He won't give us anything that is bad for us and hurt us, even if we want it badly. So, it's not a blank check sort of promise but if you pray persistently for what God wills, then you will surely get your prayers answered positively. Have any of you heard that interpretation before? That this is about persistence in prayer?

These days, however, I have a different view of this passage. I believe now that this parable and the passage that immediately follows are about God's graciousness and lovingkindness in answering our prayers. The focus is not on our persistence but on God's goodness and love. We can be confident about God answering our prayers, not because of our efforts in persisting, but because of God's love for us.

I will explain how I get there. To do that, I will first start with talking about translation issues, then I will look at historical and cultural context to understand this passage better, and then you will hopefully, by then, see how I got to this view of the passage.

Translation Issues

So, what are the translation issues? As many of you know, our Bible was originally written in different ancient languages. The New Testament was written in ancient Greek. What I want you to remember is that **every translation involves interpretation**. There is no such thing as a neutral, perfectly objective, word for word translation, even if some translations want to sell themselves as such. It is almost impossible to have that because languages do not always work the same across cultures, time and language. And especially when languages have words with multiple meanings. And that is the case we have here in this passage.

There is a Greek word in verse 8, *anaideia*, that has multiple possible meanings, and it has been translated in various ways in English. In NIV 2011 – “shameless audacity,” in the older NIV edition it was “boldness.” In the NASB, NKJV and the NRSV it was translated as “persistence”. The old KJV has it as “importunity.” The ESV translates it as “impudence.”

The original Greek word can mean all these things. The translators have to make a choice: they must choose which, they think, was the intended meaning in the context. And in this context, many interpreted it as persistence, while others interpreted the context as talking about shamelessness or boldness, which has a slightly different emphasis, right?

Now there is more than just this one word that translators must make choices about. Basically, we are not 100% sure **who** is being called, “shameless” or “impudent” or “bold”. The NIV translators interpreted it to mean the neighbor who was asking for bread that is being “shameless”. But was it? Or was the neighbor who was sleeping and was reluctant to get up and help, was he the one who is being “shameless”?

Every translation involves interpretation. Translators have to make judgment calls and choices, which means, they have to interpret this story and decide how to translate it. And their translation colors how we read and understand this story. If you were reading the translation that says, persistence, then you are predisposed to read this parable as about persistence in prayer. Now, let me turn to some historical and cultural context.

Historical and Cultural Context

Now, firstly, from our modern, Western cultural lenses, we would think that the traveling visitor coming at midnight is rude, and secondly, the host knocking on his neighbor's door asking for bread at midnight is rude. We would think that those two guys are out of line. And we would probably be like the sleeping neighbor – leave me alone, it's midnight! What are you thinking? Right?

But the ancient middle eastern culture was different. Firstly, it is not that far fetched, or necessarily uncommon, for a traveler to end up at your place late in the night. Remember, this is the middle east. It is very, very hot in the daytime. It was not unreasonable for people to prefer traveling, which back then was mostly walking, or maybe riding a camel, in the evening and night when it was cooler. And in the day, you sleep and rest in the shade. Remember, they did not have trains, planes and automobiles back then. So, depending on

how fast you walk, you could end up at your destination quite late at night, maybe even midnight. So, that may not be so surprising or being rude.

Secondly, this midnight traveler would not be regarded as a guest of only the one family. He would be regarded as the guest of the entire village. The ancient middle eastern culture puts a very high value on hospitality. It was basically a sin if you don't show hospitality. If an outsider enters and visits a village, he is the guest of the entire community. It is a very communal worldview. That's why coming over to ask your neighbour for bread is not out of line.

Therefore, it is likely that they would not have thought of the host who is asking for bread as acting shamelessly. People would expect him to ask for help to show hospitality. It is more likely that the neighbor who initially refuses to get up from bed to help is the one who they would consider is acting with shameless audacity. Because people back then would not leave their friends or neighbours crying outside the house, especially when there's a guest or visitor to the village. The reputation of the village is at stake! Everyone who originally heard Jesus tell this parable probably would have done the same thing – get up and give the neighbour everything he needs, no matter how inconvenient it is. Because otherwise, people are going to talk the next morning. What? You didn't help our poor friend last night with some bread? What kind of friend are you? So, even if the neighbour has the shameless audacity to not be hospitable and give bread, he will still do it just to get you to go away.

The God Who Answers Prayer

This parable is a big "how much more" argument, just like in verses 11-13. If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, then how much more God who is infinitely wise and good will give good gifts to us? If you who are evil would give bread to your neighbor in the most importune times, like midnight, even when you are a shameless person who didn't care about communal hospitality, then how much more will God our heavenly father give us what we ask for? God, who doesn't sleep or slumber? God who is not shameless, but who is loving? Therefore, it's about the goodness of God, not about the perseverance of us who pray. And I think that's a good shift in focus. We shouldn't be focused on ourselves in prayer – on our persistence, on our strength, on our efforts. But the focus is on God's grace and generosity.

Now, this does not mean, again, that God will give us anything we ask for when we pray to him because he is so generous we don't have to ask twice, so to speak. It doesn't mean either that we cannot pray persistently or ask for the same thing more often. It's ok to persistently pray for something. Frequency is **NOT** the point here.

The point is: **God is like a loving parent to us his children. Be confident that God will answer your prayers in the best possible way, not because of your efforts, but because of who God is.** God won't give us bad things. He will only give us what is good for us. And God knows what's best for us even better than we know ourselves. And, so, he might not give you what you ask for not because he is mean but like a good father, he won't give you scorpions or snakes!

Finally, though, remember that Jesus said that God will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! Now, the Jewish people in those days see the Holy Spirit as a gift only to those who are special – to those who are prophets! Not everybody or anybody can get the Holy Spirit. So, when Jesus says that God is so generous and good that he will give you the Holy Spirit just by asking, that is a profound statement for them! It underlines how gracious God is. That is the God who answers our prayers.

Finally, we Christians believe in the Holy Trinity – the belief that God is three persons in one – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. So, if God gives us the Holy Spirit, that means God is giving us himself. God gives us the Holy Spirit generously, unconditionally, easily. God is giving us himself! That is the greatest gift of all – God with us. Ultimately, that is what prayer, in my opinion, is fundamentally about. It is not asking for things, it is being with God. Prayer is communing with God, spending time with God, being close to God. You tell God what's in your heart, what you desire, not because you want to get things, not because God doesn't know – he knows everything – but because that's what you do with people you love. You share your life, you share your heart, you share your self with each other. God will give his very self, his Holy Spirit to be with you. God will give himself to you, not because you earned it with great spiritual obedience. God will give himself to you if you just simply ask. Because he loves you. That's the God who answers our prayers. Therefore, be confident when we pray to him. Let us pray.