

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 11:1-13

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In this section of Luke, Jesus is talking about prayer in response to one of his disciples asking him, "Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples." This story is a series of sayings by Jesus in response to this request: first the Lord's prayer, second the parable of the persistent friend, and then a series of sayings about asking.

The mnemonic structure of the prayer is familiar: kingdom, bread, forgive, not trial. However, because Luke's version is different than Matthew's (the commonly prayed version of the Lord's prayer), there is need for a little adjustment to the remembering. Luke's version of the Lord's prayer is simpler: "Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to [who sins against] us. And don't bring us to the time of trial." That's it. The more balanced phrases of Matthew are not present here. This is all simple, direct commands to God about what I want.

The prayer is followed by a parable. The parable has three sentences. The first describes the friend going at midnight and knocking on the door saying, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread." The verbal thread here is "friend": "Suppose one of you has **a friend**. You go to him at midnight and say, '**Friend**, lend me three loafs of bread, for **a friend** of mine has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.'"

The next sentence is the answer from inside, a rebuff: "Don't bother me. The door is already locked. My children are with me in bed and I can't get up and give you anything." The third sentence is Jesus' statement about the reward of persistence. Even though the "friend" won't get up and give him anything because he is his friend, if he keeps asking, his "friend" will finally get up and give him what he needs. His persistence will be rewarded. Thus, Jesus' second response to the disciples' request is: be persistent in prayer.

The next episode also has a memorable structure: "So ask and it will be given; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened." The structure is: ask, search, knock. The second part has that same structure: whoever asks receives, whoever searches finds, whoever knocks the door will be opened. **A**sk, **s**earch, and **k**nock: ASK.

The final episode is about parents giving good gifts to their children. If your child asks for a fish, will you give a snake; asks for an egg, a scorpion. Mnemonic structure is: fish/snake, egg/scorpion. "So if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?" That keyword, "ask," concludes the story.

Now regarding the sounds of this section. This is direct teaching and instruction followed by the parable and further admonitions. Jesus' tone is to ask and to be confident that God

will respond and give what is requested. We tend to hear the Lord's prayer as a series of supplications made in a tone of begging. I expect that the tone of Jesus' prayer is much more assertive. It's worth noticing that Jesus' prayer is a series of imperatives, of commands to God: hallow, give, forgive, etc.. It's pushier and more demanding than we are accustomed to praying. It's in a tone of stating what it is that we want. This is Jesus' way of teaching his disciples and us both what to pray for and how to pray. These are the things that really matter, rather than the trivia for which we often pray.

The parable is fun. It is a parable about two guys who are yelling at each other through the door. And even though the inside guy won't get up and give the other one anything, because in the end he's a friend, and because of the outside guy's persistence he does get up and give him what he needs. So this is a "guy" parable. It has the spirit of guys mouthing off to each other. It's not pious, it's not holiness talk, it's fun.

The last part of the story is another set of commands and statement of the results directed to the disciples: "Ask, it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened. For whoever asks, receives, whoever searches, finds..." The spirit and tone is both direct and confrontational. There should be a lot more energy in telling this scripture than there is in the way we normally read it as a series of pronouncements. I recommend that you explore telling this in a different way than we have normally heard it.

Now, what's going on here in relation to the prayer? The prayer is simple and direct. It's distinguished by a set of imperatives. It is spoken in a good spirit that is confident, not begging. It's not quiet and imploring. There's also no praise or thanksgiving here. It's not saying "Thank you God for all the things you give us (food, friends, whatever)."

There's also no implicit confession here, no "Lord, have mercy on me; forgive me for this and that which I did." Instead, confession is summed up with the petition "Forgive us our sins" followed by a statement of expectation of reciprocal forgiveness: "For we, also, are forgiving everyone indebted to [who sins against] us" which is not what we would normally pray.

Another dimension of the prayer is that a significant part of the prayer is focused on the future: "Your kingdom come," and "Don't bring us to the time of trial." Those are things in the future, not present needs. It is also a prayer about daily living: "Give us each day our daily bread." That's each day. "Forgive us our sins." We clearly need that each day.

"Father" is the most starkly simple introduction of a prayer in the entire tradition of Israel. It may be a child's word, *Abba*, Daddy. It is a word of family intimacy. All of this prayer is thoroughly Jewish. I recommend that you look up Joe Fitzmyer's commentary 900-901, where he collects a series of quotations from various Jewish prayers that have almost exactly the same content. The difference is that there are a lot more words. Jesus' prayer is starkly simple; it's also starkly brief and intimate. These are the things that you would say to your father.

"Hallow" here means: make your name respected and honored. Hallowed does not mean that it would be spoken with a sense of awe or wonder or holiness. It's about respect and honor. Why? Because people are regularly using God's name in curses and speaking God's name with hostility and degradation. This is what blasphemy is about. It is also about an attitude toward God—an attitude of hostility, resentment, and blaming. The prayer is "Make your name respected, honored and valued."

"Your kingdom come." This is an expression of the deep desire that God's government in the world would be fully and completely established. "Your kingdom" is not about establishing a position of power in which God will dominate the world as a king. It is rather that under God's government—a government of peace, reconciliation, and justice, in which everyone has enough to eat and has health care—basic needs for human beings would be met everywhere in the world. That's the prayer. "Your government, your desire for the Earth be fulfilled and implemented, done, accomplished. No war, peace, honor among people, bread enough for everybody to have to eat, healthcare so that everyone is taken care of, your government."

"Give each of us our daily bread" just makes explicit what one part of God's government in the world would be: everybody would have enough to eat every day. "Bread" probably does not mean the bread of heaven or the bread of Eucharist but rather the simple bread that people need in order to live.

The petition about forgiveness expresses the desire that the cycle of revenge and hostility between people and God, between people and other people in the world, would be ended. And it starts with me: forgive me as I also forgive others. "Forgive us our sins in the same way that we also forgive others who are indebted, who have sinned, who have trespassed, who have done violence to us, whoever is in any way indebted to us, that we forgive them." These are ways of implementing God's government in the world.

Finally, "Do not bring us to the time of trial." This is the prayer that we would not be killed, that we would not be tortured for our faith, that we would not be faced with the choice of either being tortured or killed or of saying we don't believe in God. The time of trial was the time of ultimate testing and it was a familiar experience. It is reflected in the stories of the martyrs in 2 Maccabees and the stories of the prophet martyrs like Isaiah. It is reflected in stories about being put on trial, like the story of Susanna. This is a prayer that we not be subjected to that kind of violent testing.

The parable is a simple parable, but there is one place that is initially confusing. When Jesus says, "Even though he will not get up and give him anything, because he is his friend, because of **his** persistence..." to whom is he referring? The last pronoun refers to the guy who's outside banging on the door. I'd suggest you tell this parable in the way that Jesus told it, which is that he re-created the situation and told about it like somebody knocking on the door and asking for his friend to wake up and give him some bread, and so forth. It is told in good humor. It is a parable about persistence in prayer.

Persistence in prayer is what Jesus' words finally encourage. The first part is about asking: "Ask and it will be given, search and you'll find, knock and the door will be opened." This is about prayer, about what you do in relation to God. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.

This is about a style of prayer. The instruction is to ask for what you want persistently. In Ignatian prayer, you name the desires of your heart and ask in confidence that God will give you what you ask for. It's the same theme as is developed in Jesus' discourse in John 14: "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it for you." If you ask, God will respond and will give you the Holy Spirit and in some way or another will respond to your request.

Jesus' instructions about prayer are to identify what you want, to name it, to be explicit. But they are also to focus your prayer in relation to the big things that will break the cycles of violence in the world and will honor God's name. It is to pray for God's government, for everybody to have bread, for our sins to be forgiven, so we also then can and will forgive others, and that we will not experience times of trial, execution, martyrdom for our faith.

They are simple instructions. Jesus suggests that whenever we pray, the prayers be short, simple and direct, rather than wordy with long sentences. Try to keep our sentences as short as Jesus' sentences are here and make them direct requests to God about what we want, shaped by the desire for God's government in the world. Thus, my prayer: peace.

A translation of Luke's form of the Lord's prayer, probably more original than Matthew's:

Daddy, may your name be honored.

Your government come.

Give us all our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we also forgive those who have sinned against us.

Do not bring us to the time of trial.