



**Sunday School Lesson Summary for January 20, 2008
Released on Wednesday, January 16, 2008**

"Finding a Listening Ear" ("Inspired to Pray")

Lesson: Luke 11:5–13.

Read Background Scripture: Luke 11:1–13.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 28:6–9.

LESSON TEXT Luke 11:5–13

5 And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves;

6 For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?

7 And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.

8 I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth.

9 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

10 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

11 If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?

12 Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

13 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

TODAYS AIM

Facts: to understand the importance of persistence and expectation in prayer to God.

Principle: to understand that God answers the prayers of His children according to His will and what benefits them most.

Application: to trust God to answer our prayers at times of His choosing and in ways that will help us most.

How to Say It

IMPORTUNITY im-per-*too*-nuh-tee.

INTRODUCTION

Asking and Seeking

Imagine going to your bank manager to ask for a loan. You sit at his desk and open the conversation with, "You probably won't want to give me a loan. I know you're pretty tight-fisted. In fact, I've heard you never grant loans—especially not to people like me." In spite of your somewhat insulting tone, he continues with the usual process and asks you to present your proof of income. You respond, "Oh, I didn't bother to bring any papers with me, since I expected you probably wouldn't be interested in giving me the loan anyway."

Do you think you'd get the loan? I imagine not; in fact, it would be natural for the flabbergasted bank manager to ask why you even bothered to come to his office if you had no hope that he would give you a loan. Leaving the bank, you tell yourself, "I knew he wouldn't give me the loan," as you blame the manager's hard-heartedness. But would you be right in that assessment of his motives?

When we approach God with a request, how do we assess His motives? Do we assume He's looking for a reason to give us as little as possible? Do we neglect even to approach Him when we sense a need because we think He doesn't care? As we'll see today, when it comes to dealing with the one who knows our hearts, motives are as much a factor as the specifics of the request.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Jesus' life on earth was a life of prayer. The Gospels relate numerous instances in which Jesus communed with His Father. At times of His most successful ministry, He withdrew from the crowds to pray alone (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). He prayed when He was baptized (Luke 3:21), before He called the Twelve (6:12-13), before He asked them who He was (9:18), and when He was transfigured (vs. 28-29).

Jesus went away to pray by Himself after He had fed the five thousand, knowing that the Galileans would try to make Him king (Matt. 14:23; John 6:15). On the other hand, during Passion Week, when He knew opposition was increasing, He spent nights in prayer on the Mount of Olives (Luke 21:37). It was there, in Gethsemane, that He poured out His soul in the face of the cross (22:39-46). And, of course, He prayed when He was crucified.

It is not surprising, then, that Jesus' disciples asked Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1). He responded by giving them the pattern that we commonly call the Lord's Prayer (vs. 2-4).

QUESTIONS

Friend's Request (Luke 11:5-8)

1. How is this week's parable related to the Lord's Prayer?

At the beginning of this chapter (Luke 11:2-4), Jesus taught His disciples (vs. 2-4), He told them what to pray for. But how should they pray? Should they be reluctant to ask a holy God to meet their needs? How often could they bring their requests to Him? Jesus taught the answers to these questions through a parable they could identify with.

2. Why was it necessary for the man in Jesus' parable to ask his neighbor for bread (Luke 11:5,6)?

Jesus pictured a situation in which a man received a visitor at night and, having no bread to give him, went to a neighbor and asked for three loaves. He began with a question: Which of the disciples would have the boldness to go to a friend's house at

midnight to make such a request? Traveling at night was not unknown to them, but it was unusual for someone to arrive at midnight. Thus, going to a neighbor's house with a midnight request was an imposition.

In our society, we would not even think of waking up a friend for this reason. The willingness of the needy neighbor to go to his friend's house to ask for food suggests that he is confident that there will be a positive outcome to the request. He has good reason for this confidence because hospitality is a part of the fabric of the culture. So, based on what is "normal," he expects that the nearby *friend* will oblige (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9).

3. What circumstances caused the friend to refuse to grant the request initially (v. 7)?

The neighbor, however, did not want to be bothered. "Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed," he said. The response, in short, is "Go away, we're asleep!" So the "friend" did not feel friendly at this point. He added that he could not get up and give his neighbor any bread. He did not claim to have no bread or object to the principle of giving it. He just did not want to be bothered under these circumstances.

And let's be honest: we are not surprised at this response in this situation. However, while we may consider this as somewhat "normal," Jesus actually is using this as an example of ungracious behavior. Having just offered us the example of the model prayer—that we may pray to God for our needs (Luke 11:2–4)—Jesus now implicitly contrasts an ungracious attitude to God's graciousness.

4. What finally enabled the man to get the bread he needed (v. 8)?

With the words "I say unto you," Jesus brought the parable to its conclusion. The friend would not give the petitioner bread because of their friendship, but because of "importunity" he would get up and give him all he needed. The word *importunity* refers to an urgent request or begging. Some may think that this verse means that if we badger God long enough, then He will give us whatever we ask for. Surely Jesus was not implying that God is like a grouchy neighbor who resents being bothered by our requests at an inopportune time.

Jesus argued, rather, from the lesser to the greater. If even an irritated friend will eventually respond to a bold, insistent request, how much more readily will the heavenly Father respond to our requests? Therefore, we should not hesitate to bring them, even though, for good reasons of His own, He does not grant them immediately. Our importunity will eventually be rewarded.

Ask and Receive (Luke 11:9,10)

5. What is the significance of the present tense of "ask," "seek," and "knock" (Luke 11:9)?

Again Jesus addressed His disciples with "I say unto you," and this time He gave concrete instructions. Each of Jesus' commands, "ask," "seek," and "knock," are in the Greek present tense, which conveys continual action. When the statement *Ask, and it shall be given you* is read in context, the emphasis shifts away from ourselves and toward God. The result is that we ask because we have confidence that God will give.

Jesus invited disciples to keep asking. Some may think that because God is omniscient and sovereign, He will automatically give us what we need. But He wants us to ask as an expression of our dependence on Him. He also wants us to give careful thought to what our needs really are and thereby to grow spiritually. It may also be to

our advantage to have to wait for an answer, for as we ask repeatedly, we may be forced to rethink our values and reframe our requests.

"Ask," said Jesus, "and it shall be given you" (Luke 11:9). He did not mean that God will give us anything we ask for. He meant that God understands our need better than we do and will graciously meet it as we continue to ask. The answer may not take the form we originally envisioned, but it will be the best answer because it comes from an omniscient and loving God.

Jesus also commanded His disciples to keep seeking. Much of prayer consists of seeking the Lord's will and guidance. His written Word embodies His will for the ages as well as for individual lives. We need to seek discernment as to how our lives can best help fulfill His eternal plan. This entails seeking guidance for even the most mundane details of life.

Jesus promised that those who seek will find. Our heavenly Father delights in showing His way to those who truly desire to walk in it. Thus, if we keep seeking His will, we are assured that we will never be without His guidance. The practical question is whether we desire it enough to keep seeking it.

Jesus' third command for prayer was that His disciples keep knocking. There are other forms of "knocking" in prayer that do require perseverance, however. Some doors are closed that only God can open. How many of us have prayed for years that an unbelieving relative's hard heart will be penetrated by the gospel? And who has not heard missionaries' pleas that we pray for open doors to present the gospel of Christ? Jesus promised that persistent prayer for these opportunities will be answered (Luke 11:9-10; cf. Acts 14:27).

6. Why do you think people fail to ask God?

You may have met people who feel that they cannot ask God for anything until they have exhausted their own resources. God says just the opposite: ask for His help first! Some people feel they are too sinful to expect a response from God. If that were true, then no one could come to God. Some of us do not like to let go of control. When we ask God to take care of something, that means He will do it in His way!

7. Was there ever a time when you "gave up" on prayer? What happened? How did you turn this around?

Some of us have been hurt by what we considered to be unanswered prayer. So we gave up on asking God for anything. Biblically, we may understand that God answers prayer with *yes*, *no*, or *not yet*. But personally we find that the *no* and *not yet* answers hurt.

Yet sometimes we can look back and see God's wisdom in the *no* answers. For example, that relationship you prayed for never became a marriage, but the one you later met became a true soul mate. Or that healing that you prayed for but did not get taught you a new kind of grace and gave you a new depth of compassion.

The prophet Jeremiah—certainly no stranger to sorrow!—exclaimed, "When I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer," and "Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through" (Lamentations 3:8, 44). Yet he still prayed. God did not show Jeremiah all the answers in his lifetime, and the same applies to us.

Giving Father (Luke 11:11–13)

8. How did Jesus illustrate God's desire to give us good things (vs. 11,12)?

In emphasizing God's love in giving good gifts in answer to prayer, Jesus used illustrations from family life. A father on earth would answer his son's request only with good things. Some early manuscripts of Luke do not include the first illustration,

giving a stone for bread (v. 11). But it is included in Matthew's account (Matt. 7:9); so we know Jesus actually spoke this.

All parents have had the experience of their children asking to receive food. The questions that Jesus asks challenge His audience to think through a certain issue in light of their own experiences with their families.

The proper response is obvious. That is just the point: the degree to which the right response is obvious is the degree to which we can be confident in placing our trust in our heavenly Father, who meets our needs.

9. Why did Jesus' disciples have to pray for the Holy Spirit (v. 13)?

Jesus now drives home the point of His illustration. If human fathers give good gifts to their children, how much more will the heavenly Father do so? He begins the comparison with the striking phrase "If ye then, being evil." In Jesus' mind, the sinfulness of mankind was taken for granted. Many today want to reserve the word "evil" for the thugs, criminals, monsters, and mass murderers of the world. Surely the rest of the human race are decent, good people capable of improving themselves!

In the seemingly offhand remark, however, Jesus gave God's assessment. All of us, no matter how well intentioned, have a nature flawed by sin that is incapable of pleasing God. This flawed nature also taints our human relationships. Yet for all of this, said Jesus, we are still able to give our children good gifts. We have enough moral sensitivity to tell good from evil.

If we in this condition know how to give good gifts to our children, "how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13). "Father" shows the parallel with earthly fathers and implies the same kind of intimacy between Himself and His own. He will give His children gifts even surpassing earthly ones.

In the parallel account in Matthew 7:11, the Father is said to give "good things" to those who ask. But in Luke 11:13 the greatest gift of all, the Holy Spirit, is singled out. At that time the Holy Spirit had not yet been given to all believers; so it was proper for a devout disciple to pray for His presence in his life (cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 8; 2:33). It was prayer for God's presence and direction, and He would be pleased to grant it.

Jesus thus assures us that our heavenly Father is delighted to have us come to Him in prayer. He enjoys our fellowship and is eager to meet our needs. Therefore, we ought to express those needs boldly and repeatedly. If He does not answer immediately or if the answer does not always take the form we anticipated, it is only because His love has dictated something better than we could have imagined.

CONCLUSION

If we understand just how much God loves us and just how good and generous He is, our thoughts of our own worthiness (or lack thereof) will not be the main issue in our prayers. A tried-and-true prayer format is summed up in the acronym *ACTS*. This stands for *adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication* as a series of steps to follow when praying. Notice that *supplication* (which means asking humbly for something) comes last. The first three steps refer to praising God for who He is, acknowledging the things that hinder our relationship to Him, and recognizing what He has already done for us. If we go through those three prayer-steps first, then our supplications are more likely to be offered with right motives.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

God helps those who *forget* themselves.

PRAYER

Our good and generous Father, we trust that You love us because of Your own goodness, not ours. Help us to ask for those things You want for us and to trust that You will grant them to us. Even as we pray, we know that You will answer in accord with Your perfect will. By Jesus' generous work we pray, amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

It seems that many modern believers are sliding into the grip of the materialism in our society. Ask your students to think about this in their own lives this coming week. Are we really striving for material well-being, or are we seeking to build up the kingdom of God? Are we being good stewards of the resources God has given us?

So, does all this mean that God is not at all concerned about our material situation in life? In next week's lesson, we will see Jesus draw attention to this very issue. Study **Luke 12:22-34 "Inspired to Trust"** (Combating Anxiety and Worry).

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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