

Luke 11:1-13

The Parable of the Complaining Host: Competency vs. Prayer

I'll begin this sermon with a joke. I'm hesitant to tell it because I've heard the same joke told before and nobody seems to get it. However, you are a particularly sharp audience so I'm sure you'll get it OK. But just to be on the safe side when I get to the punch line I'll hold up this sign. That's when you're supposed to get the joke and laugh. Well here goes:

"Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'

⁷"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.'"

Lift sign indicating time to laugh.

As I feared my joke was a flop. It must be the way I told it. Think about this story:

Suppose a small child idolizes his dad who is the Managing Director of a multinational organization. He goes to his dad and says, "Dad, what do you in your job?" His dad sits his son on his knee. "Son," he says, "What I do is very simple. In order to increase shareholder value I get rid of thousands and thousands of insignificant little people."

I got this from a cartoon. A ruthless businessman who thinks like this is not likely to say this to his small son. The man in the house of Jesus' parable is also a cartoon character; a caricature. He says what a host of his time might think but would never say aloud.

In Pakistan I recall a pastor who traveled from his village to consult a certain missionary. The missionary, under pressure, sent out a servant to say he wasn't available. The village pastor was deeply upset. The missionary had acted like this before and his name was mud among the churches. His conduct was regarded as shameful. The fact is if you visit someone in Pakistan your host is obligated to serve you. It would be highly offensive if he was to say your coming to him was a great inconvenience. It just wouldn't happen.

The *Parable of the Complaining Host*. Remember the story of Hansel and Gretel? Lost in a forest Hansel uses bread crumbs to mark out a trail to lead himself and his sister back home. Follow the bread crumbs in this passage and they lead back to the home of another complaining host. At the end of Luke 10 Martha "*opened her home to [Jesus].*" As host Martha feels she has obligations she must discharge to her guest. Under pressure she comes to Jesus and complains. But she doesn't aim her complaint at her guest - that's an absolute No! No! She aims it at her sister. But the bottom line is that Jesus is to blame for the pressure she's under, "*Lord, don't you care?*" she asks. "*Tell her to help me!*" she insists. So Jesus' *Parable of the Complaining Host* is very timely while the Martha incident is fresh on everyone's minds.

Martha represents discipleship based on competency. Mary represents discipleship based on sitting at Jesus' feet. For Martha the way to show Jesus she is his disciple is by being a competent host. For Mary the way to show Jesus she is his disciple is by

sitting at his feet. It is Mary who epitomizes what discipleship is really all about. As Jesus himself made clear, she chose the one thing that is needful - to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen to his teaching. Are you a true disciple? Do you have the heart of a learner? "One of Jesus' disciples" did and asked, "Lord, teach us to pray." When it comes to prayer, we are particularly prone, like Martha, to be "worried and upset about many things"; to forget the only thing that is needful. Like Martha we are inclined to think of discipleship as using our gifts to serve Christ. But Jesus now goes on to teach us that discipleship is all about receiving God's gift as the answer to dependent and trustful prayer.

In the so-called Lord's Prayer God wears a number of different hats. He is our greatly honoured Father: "*Father, holy be your name.*" He is also King: "*your kingdom come.*" He is our Host: "*Give us each day our epiousion bread.*" He is our Creditor: "*Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.*" Finally, he is our Guide: "*And lead us not into temptation.*" In the *Parable of the Complaining Host* Jesus focuses on the identity of God as Host, the provider of our bread. He asks each disciple ("*Suppose one of you*", v5) to imagine himself needing to ask a friend for bread, seeking out a friend and knocking at his door to get bread. Now I don't know why he had no bread to give his friend. Maybe because his wife was lazy. After all everyone who makes bread is a loafer. Anyway, Jesus has just taught them to pray, "*Give us each day our epiousion bread.*" Now, in his story, he has the disciple asking, seeking and knocking for bread not for himself but for a friend who has arrived at midnight. We have a corporate responsibility to care for each other and see that our brother or sister's needs are met.

Jesus' story contrasts the complaining host with his Father. Cultural obligations compel the complaining host, like Martha, to meet the need of his guest. Though unwillingly he will get up and give him "*as much as he needs.*" Generosity can be a product of social obligation. As you know, a fishmonger is never generous. Didn't you know that? That's right, a fishmonger is never generous because his business makes him sell-fish. But while you can't expect generosity from the fishmonger, the disciple can certainly expect it from his friend as a culturally obligated host. Jesus says the host will do this "*because of his anaideia*". Literally, this means "because of his shamelessness." But whose shamelessness does Jesus have in mind? It could be the shamelessness of the disciple who knows his inconvenient request is merely discharging his own duty as a host to his own guest, and that his approach to his friend is socially accepted and even expected. Or it may be that the man in the house decides he will not be shamed in the community by failing to discharge his obligations as a host. Either way, the outcome is certain: the host will give the disciple the food he seeks because it is his inescapable duty to do so.

A while back my family and I enjoyed hospitality in an Egyptian friend's home. I'm sure if you had all been with me that night there would still have been plenty of food. Generosity! And there was no doubt that what we experienced was not just a generosity of culture but a generosity of spirit. My friend was a great host.

God is the perfectly generous host, as Jesus now emphasizes in verses 9 and 10: *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. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

Jesus says nothing here about persistence in prayer - that's later in Luke 18. The images of ask, seek and knock are presented in the parable. We don't have to keep on asking, seeking, and knocking. All we need to do is come to God as the Great Host.

To understand God's generosity go beyond the concept of God as host. God does not answer our prayers because he is obliged to. He does not accede to our requests begrudgingly. To grasp this Jesus takes us from the concept of God as host to the concept of God as Father in verses 12-13: *"Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

Like the Father-Son relationship and the prayers *"Give us each day our epiousion bread"* and *"Lead us not into the testing"* so too the association of snake and scorpion recalls Deuteronomy 8, when God provided supernatural bread for his people in his testing ground, the desert, where snakes and scorpions were the only potential source of food. Jesus also coupled the snake and scorpion in the preceding chapter: *"I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you."* As fathers, Jesus' disciples don't act like Satan. We don't seek to harm our children but to lovingly meet their needs. We don't belong to "the dark side", yet Jesus reminds us, we are still evil. So our fatherly love and generosity is radically flawed. But our Father, uncorrupted by any evil, simply delights in lavishing his grace on us, even giving us the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit is paralleled with the gifts of the fish and the egg and, before that, with the gift of bread. This time the trail of bread crumbs takes us back to the prayer, *"Give us each day our epiousion bread."* There are various ways of understanding the word *epiousios* but only two basic ways of reading verse 3: (1) "Provide us with food each day"; or (2) "Give us each day food which is a foretaste of the food you will provide on the Coming Day." This second view fits best. *"Your kingdom come"*, we pray in one breath. *"Give us each day the bread of the Coming Day"*, we add in this next. Luke often connects food with the Messianic banquet. As each day we pray God will provide our need for food we keep in mind that great day of feasting at the Messianic banquet.

With the gift of the Spirit God answers every request Jesus taught us to present. It is when the Spirit is poured out at Pentecost that God's name is made holy as the great works of God are proclaimed. Pentecost is proof that Jesus reigns, that the kingdom has come. The gift of the Spirit is us our supreme foretaste of the Messianic banquet. The gift of the Spirit expresses the reality of God's forgiveness. So later the outpouring of the Spirit on Gentiles is interpreted by the early church as proof God had granted them repentance to life and accepted them. Further, Jesus' disciples, despite his warnings in the Garden of Gethsemane, fell into temptation because their flesh was weak. It is the gift of the Spirit which empowers and emboldens the early Christians, enabling them to courageously withstand severe testing. Pray for the hallowing of God's name, for the coming of the kingdom, for the provision of material needs as an anticipation of the blessings of the consummated kingdom of God, for the forgiveness of sins, and for protection against temptation, and realise how wonderfully God has answered all of these prayers in giving us the Holy Spirit.

Consider Jesus' closing statement: "*How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!*" Ovid said, "*The gift derives its value from the rank of the giver.*" The Spirit is the most precious gift imaginable because it is given to us by our Father "in heaven", that is, the one who rules the universe from heaven.

A good friend of mine migrated from South India. He and his wife wanted to migrate to Australia when he was in his 30's. He asked his father's permission. His father said, "No." So they stayed in India. Only when Manoj was 38 and his father gave his permission were they able to migrate to Australia.

Do you treat our Father like this, recognizing that as the Great King he holds immense authority? The gift of the Spirit is the expression of that awesome authority. Remember how the passage begins: "*Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.*" John said he could only baptize with water but one was coming after him who would baptize with the Spirit and fire. Jesus now prepares his disciples for the baptism of the Spirit when they will be clothed with power from on high. In Luke-Acts this occurs after Jesus, as Risen Lord, ascends to his Father and takes his seat at God's right hand. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "*Your kingdom come.*" This prayer was especially answered at Pentecost and in the subsequent outpourings of the Holy Spirit. In a very real way the kingdom has already come. We do not ask for the gift of the Spirit because as those who love the Lord we have already received that gift. Our prayer is that God we filled, control, and empower us by the Holy Spirit.

The context takes up the different elements of the Lord's Prayer. Verses 1-13 unpack what it means to come to God as our Father. They also deal with his identity as the Great Host and in the parable and its application we get an idea of what it means to look to God each day for bread. Verses 14-28 correspond to the prayer "*Your kingdom come.*" Whenever Jesus repels the kingdom of Satan by the finger of God then the kingdom has come. Verses 29-32 correspond to the prayer, "*Forgive us our sins.*" What a contrast there is between the forgiveness available to Jesus' disciples and the doom awaiting the unrepentant wicked generation. Finally, verses 33-36 correspond to the prayer, "*Lead us not into temptation.*" Here we are warned about the importance of controlling our eyes.

Jesus' teaching on prayer begins and ends by emphasizing that we come to God as our Father. Many in our society desperately need to know God as Father. My own father died in a factory accident when I was 11 years old. My stepfather was a disaster: two of my sisters became wards of the state. Immediately following my conversion at the age of 19 I recall the overwhelming realization that God was my heavenly Father who loved me. Bertrand Russell quipped, "*The place of the father in the modern suburban family is a very small one, particularly if he plays golf.*" We live in a society in which marital breakdown is all too familiar, in which children are left fatherless. It is not uncommon for single mothers to enter into de facto relationships with men who end up physically or sexually abusing their children. Such experiences may cause some to scoff at the notion of God as Father. Feminism has also undermined the importance of God's Fatherhood. Margaret Mead opined, "*Mothers are a biological necessity; fathers are a social invention.*" To some the biblical portrayal of God as Father is but a social construction made by dominating males in chauvinistic patriarchal societies. One of the keys to helping people discover the true nature of God's authoritative yet wonderfully loving and generous Fatherhood is through the very channel employed by

Jesus. Jesus leads us into understanding our Father's generosity by first presenting him as the Perfect Host. Learn to pray by deepening your understanding of God's Fatherhood. Reverentially treat him as the holder of immense authority that he is. At the same time delight in his uncomplaining generosity towards us, the children he loves so much that he has given us the most priceless gift available, the Holy Spirit.

Let's end where we started. In this chapter Jesus takes us to the heart of discipleship. Being Jesus' disciples is not so much about using our gifts and abilities to serve him, though, of course, we should. Being Jesus' disciples is more fundamentally about prayerfully depending on our loving and generous heavenly Father to give us his Spirit and work through our lives in the power of his Spirit.