

Parables of Luke 11-12; Prayer

We will begin by wrapping up Jesus' teaching on prayer in Luke 11. As we walked through the parable we saw that Jesus was creating an hypothetical scenario, bringing our misconceptions about God to the surface, such as our tendency to think that God is irritable and mean-spirited, that He doesn't answer ordinary common requests and is indifferent to our needs. The wording of the Greek text shows that Jesus is asking people to imagine something that is not true. While the NIV translation reads, "Suppose one of you has a friend," the literal Greek does not begin with the word "suppose." It begins with a question: "Who of you has a friend?"

A number of times in the Gospels Jesus used the formula "Who of you has this?" or, "Who of you would do that?" Each time He used it to introduce something that's impossible or foolish. For example, in Luke 12:25, He asked, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?" Can anybody do that? No. Another time He asked, "Who of you would leave an ox in a ditch on a Sabbath day?" Would anybody do that? Would anybody let an animal die when it fell down a ditch because it was the Sabbath? No. In Luke 17:7, Jesus asked, "Who of you would invite a dirty, smelly laborer who just came in from the field to sit down with you at your table for dinner if you were the master of the house?" Would anybody do that? No. He would at least have to clean up first if he were invited at all.

So Jesus used the question, "Who of you..." to introduce impossible things that He wants His audience to think about. He often did this with a parable. It is not possible that God would really be like this, but Jesus was encouraging His listeners to imagine that God is in fact disinterested in us. Even if He were, He would answer our prayer to avoid being shamed for His own namesake. Now after Jesus has answered our fear, He then says what is actually true, in Luke 11:9-13:

"And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, 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 him!"

In verse 11, we see that God is really like a Father to us. Then we see that He gives us good gifts in verse 13—the best gift of all, the Holy Spirit. So after labeling our fear, Jesus then tells us what the truth is. Then He uses a technique that is called in Greek, *inclusio* or the similar English word, "inclusion." It's when a key word or key phrase appears at the beginning and end of a passage to frame the passage, like book-ends. At the beginning Jesus said, "When you pray say, 'Father.'" At the end of the passage He said, "Your Father will give good gifts." So first and last He says God is a father; the one to whom we pray is a father.

The theology of prayer is the main focus of Luke 11. Does Luke teach persistence in prayer? Most definitely. Is it right to spend some time attending to the method of prayer, the words of prayer? Is it even good to get up early in the morning and pray? Those are fine. Certainly we should get the words right. However, the root of prayer is to understand that God is good, God is loving, and He does want to give us what is good. It is not our manipulation, but His goodness that makes Him give to us.

One might ask about the idea of going before God boldly, as is implied here in the command to ask for what we need. The word "boldness" is not really a literal translation of the Greek word there. The Greek word is *anaideian*, which always has to do with shame and specifically shamelessness—a desire to

avoid shame. The desire to avoid shame does not belong to the person who is knocking. In fact, it doesn't even say he knocks. This comes up later in verses 9-13, but in the parable, the word "knock" never appears. He might have called to him or whispered through his window (they had open windows, without glass). The shame belongs to the asker, the petitioner, not the sleeper. When we walked through the structure of the passage we saw that all the assertions about giving and so forth are about the sleeper. If there were a change of antecedent, a change of reference for the pronoun, the whole verse would be about the asker. But since the text does not indicate that there is a change of the subject, we have to assume that the subject is the same, namely the asker.

Was there any shame for the asker because he did not have a meal for his friend? Yes, there would be some shame if he didn't provide for his friend, but it would be mitigated by the fact that the friend came at midnight because travelers did not ordinarily come at midnight. Some scholars might say that travel took place at night because it was so hot; but Israel is warm, not hot. In most of the populated parts of Israel it is cooler in the summer than most cities in North America. So a midnight traveler would be very rare. The shame would actually fall to the whole village more than to the man because he wasn't expecting a visitor at midnight and because he did try to find food. The sleeper might feel ashamed because he would know he should do better. In that culture you just had to give somebody food when he had been traveling because there were not restaurants or hotels along the way. If you didn't give him food, he would go hungry. In a situation like that the social pressure to help a traveler was enormous. As in the parable of the talents, you must use what you have. If you have food, you must use it; you must share it.

We also must remember that there is nothing in the Bible to make us think that by hounding God and trying to force His hand, He will give us what we ask. First, the Sermon of the Mount says don't babble with vain repetition. Consistent or persistent prayer is biblical, but this parable is not about persistent prayer. There are other places in the Bible where it teaches persistence, but this isn't one. Also, persistence alone is not going to make God change His mind. If God is not giving you something, it's not because He's disinterested, but because He has something better in view. If He refuses to give you the job that you want, it's because He has a better job for you. What seems to be a logical, good request in our eyes may be a deadly request, and God knows this. If He says no, He may know things about the situation that we don't know.

Let's move on to the second theme that shows up in a parable in Luke's Gospel—money. Of all the topics Jesus addresses, money is the most common, more common than parenting, than good marriages, than getting along with your neighbors, or than having a good work ethic. The number one topic is money. It comes up especially in Luke 12, as well as Luke 16, and several other times. Luke knew his readers needed this; we all need this. We all love to imagine what we would do if we were rich. It's a game we like to play. However, sometimes it is absolutely serious. This is what we find in Luke 12.

Jesus had been teaching a large crowd about the nature of discipleship, addressing significant themes: warning them against the corrosive effects of hypocrisy; urging them not to not fear those who can kill the body but cannot destroy the soul; encouraging them to confess Him before men; promising them that if they were brought before rulers, the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say (Luke 12:1-12). Then someone in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me" (v. 13). The details of this man's life are not given, but there was a custom that in Israel if a man had two sons, the older would get two-thirds of the inheritance and the younger would get one-third. But if there were three children, the inheritance was divided: one-half, one-third, and one-sixth. Half-brothers and half-sisters would make things really complicated!

The man who spoke to Jesus here felt that somehow the division of property had gone wrong. Jesus replied, “Man, who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?” The man was regarding Jesus as a teacher or a rabbi, as rabbis were considered arbiters, decision-makers, to whom a righteous person might come. Jesus let him know that He might not resolve the matter in his favor, saying, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”

Repetition, like *inclusio*, is another tool Jesus used to communicate truths to people. Jesus said, “Watch out,” or “be on guard” twice in a row, emphasizing that this is something we really need to beware of. It is very easy to think that life does consist in the abundance of one’s possessions. We all want more possessions, whether it be a house with just one more room, or a nicer car, or more clothes, or money for a better vacation. Whatever it is, Jesus said to watch out and be on guard. Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. To illustrate this truth, Jesus told a story about it.

The story initially seems counter-intuitive because the man in the crowd said he didn’t have enough money, and the man in the parable had too much money. Outwardly they’re opposites, but inwardly they are the same because they both share the conviction that having the right possessions is the key to the abundant life: “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods.’” He saw that he had a problem, storage. He had to protect his non-durable assets. The Lord had given him an abundant crop and he needed to take care of that crop. His solution was building bigger barns; a capital investment designed to protect those assets seemed very logical. He was quite satisfied with this solution and planned to take it easy once he had solved his storage problem. However, we can also see that there was some folly about this man. If we read through the passage more slowly and emphasize the pronouns, we can see that this man is not simply a wise businessman—he is an egoist:

“What shall *I* do, for *I* have no place to store *my* crops? *I* will do this. *I* will tear down *my* barns and build larger ones, and there *I* will store all *my* grain and *my* goods and *I* will say to *myself* [in the Greek it is actually “self”] ‘*I* will say to *myself*, ‘*Self*, you have plenty of good things laid up for many years. *You* take life easy. *You* eat; *you* drink. *You* be merry.’”

In the Greek there are 51 words. Depending on how you count things, 16 or 17 of them have “I, me, my, myself,” or a command he gave to himself: “You eat; You drink.” He was a total egoist. His surprise was that he found that although he thought he was talking to himself, there was someone else in the room, and that someone else was God and He had been listening. God responded to the man, saying, “You fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” The Greek word for “required” here is “recalled.” So it would be, “Your life and all that you possess is a loan and is going to be recalled and now you are going to be disappointed, because the things you prepared, whose will they be?” The answer to that colossal question was, of course, “Not yours.” The sorrow is that his God, mammon, disappointed him in the hour of greatest need, which is what mammon always does and what false gods always do. They always disappoint us when we need them the most. The lesson is: Be rich toward God.

Being rich toward God could be the overall theme regarding money in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus actually presented this theme in two ways. First, He said that you need to be rich toward God by using your mind. Second, He gave six reasons not to let money control you. One, there is more to life than food and clothing (v. 23). Two, the ravens do not toil, do not fret, do not store up, and yet God cares for

them. We are worth more than the ravens. Three, worrying can't do anything. You can't add anything to your life by worrying. Four, God clothed even wild flowers and grasses with beauty, though their blooms last but a day. Certainly you are more valuable and they. Five, you're not pagans. The pagans run and strive after all these things, but that's not who you are. Six, your heavenly Father knows what you need. Therefore, be rich toward God first with your mind, by not worrying. Second, be rich toward God by seeking first God's kingdom (v. 31), then by giving away your treasures (v. 33), and by storing up treasure in heaven and being content with what you have (v. 34).

Every type of person is liable to greed. The richest person can imagine a scenario in which he will somehow run out of money and therefore need more. And the poorest person easily persuades himself that he needs more. Even Christians, who know they are supposed to be content, can fall into greed and misconceptions about money by perverting a few Christian ideas: "God loves me and is a Father to me, and He wants me to be happy. One thing that would make me happy would be if I had more possessions, so God wants me to have more possessions. So I'll pray for that and ask for that." Now, it's not evil to have wealth, but it's evil to live for wealth, to set your hopes on wealth. It is possible to get wealthy by accident, simply by loving what you do and doing it well. But it's wrong to live to get wealthy, to set your heart on it, as if it were the main thing.

Since we are discussing discipleship, it is appropriate to consider some basic biblical principles about career choice.

1. You should choose a career that takes care of your basic needs. 1 Timothy 6 defines basic needs as food and covering (that is, clothing and shelter).
2. Your career should be one that allows you to use your gifts, even if it's not the most remunerative.
3. Your career should allow you to do good for others. It should be an honest career. You don't want to be a thief, casino manager, printer of pornography, or various other things along those lines. You should be doing something constructive that actually helps people.
4. Your career should give you an opportunity to manifest some part of God's kingdom, God's reign. Somehow what you do should enable you to reflect His justice, His truth, His kindness, His love. Somehow you should have some opportunity in your career to move this world at least a little bit closer to the form that God wants it to have. "Your kingdom come" is a prayer that is relevant for your career choice. In other words, "May Your kingdom come in what I do."
5. If you get rich by accident, it's okay, but don't choose your career in order to get rich. "Watch out; be on guard against greed and covetousness."

The next section of our discussion is what I call "party parables." These parables deal with the question: "With whom should I associate?" Should I associate with the poor, with the outcast? Jesus was clearly an "equal opportunity party attender." Not having His own home, He never threw His own party, but He would go to any party. If a tax collector or a leper threw a party, He would go. He associated with all kinds of people, even His adversaries, the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders.

Luke 14 records one Sabbath day when Jesus was at a party, and He observed the people there. His enemies had probably set Him up by bringing a crippled man to see if Jesus would heal him. They were watching Him, and He was watching them. Jesus noticed that they were all picking seats of honor. In the ancient world, you could tell your social status by where you were seated at the table, called a *triclinium*. It was low on three sides and was the most common arrangement for a banquet. The closer you were to the host, the more noble your status was. Jesus noticed that people were angling for the good seats. He told them that this could be a dangerous practice because if someone gets the "good seat" early on, and

then someone more important comes in later, that person could be humiliated in front of all when he is asked to move to a lower place.

Jesus was not really interested in seating arrangements. He was teaching about the tendency of striving for honor, telling them it is a fool's game. Honor will come to you by itself if you deserve honor, and it will come to you when you're busy at other things—being a friend, doing good, and so forth. Jesus also noted those who weren't striving for honor, namely, those who weren't invited—the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the outcasts of society. And Jesus told them that if they truly wanted to have a good feast or a good party, they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. He told them not to invite friends, brothers, relatives and rich neighbors, only to be repaid. For a real blessing, He told them to invite those lower who were lower on the social ladder.

Then Jesus told a parable to illustrate this lesson. The parable was about a man who is evidently quite rich. You can tell he is rich because he hosts a great banquet, and invites many guests who seem to be wealthy. When they get the invitation they say they will come but when the day of the feast comes they all make excuses for not attending, and their excuses show their social status. Excuse number one is: "I've just bought a field, please excuse me." So this guest was a landowner. Impressive. The second excuse is: "I have just bought five yoke of oxen; please excuse me." This was a large capital investment. So it is obvious that this person was wealthy. The third guest used being newly married as his excuse. Anyone who was getting married would have known ahead of time, so this is also not an acceptable excuse. To say "yes" and then "no" was socially outrageous, and all of the excuses were unacceptable.

The man giving the party realized he had to fill his banqueting hall, so he began to invite other people from elsewhere in the town. He invited the poor, crippled, blind and lame that Jesus talked about earlier, and they all came and there was still room. Then he sent his servant into the roads and lanes, that is, the other villages and the countryside, to compel people to come into his house. These people would wonder if this wealthy man really meant to extend invitations to them—they were of lower class and he didn't even know them. But he assured them that he was sincere in his invitation and told them to come.

This has to do with associations, but it is also a low-level allegory. Who does the one doing the inviting stand for? Who does he represent? He represents God, or Jesus. God is in the business of inviting people to Himself, to His banquet, and of course, Jesus does the same thing. He did it in His ministry, inviting people to Himself, and He still does. Who are the people who said "yes" and then "no" with miserable excuses? The Jews, the Jewish leaders. Who are the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame? They are the common people, the ones who initially said "no" or appeared to be undesirable or disinterested in God. Finally, who is represented by those who are far out in the lanes, who didn't even know the host? This would be the Gentiles (Romans, Greeks and Samaritans), anybody that you would think would be the last person to be invited, who would say, "Who, *me*?" And yet, that's what Jesus does throughout Luke's Gospel. It is God's plan. It is consistently predicted in the Old Testament that God, although He was the God of the Jews, would bring the nations to Himself, and that they would flood to Israel, to Jerusalem. From the very beginning, Luke has said that Jesus' mission was to the entire world. Even when He was born He was a light of revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32). His genealogy goes back to Adam, the father of all mankind. From the beginning to the end of Luke and continuing into Acts, Luke says that God's plan is to reach the Gentiles.

So there are two aspects to this teaching. First, we learn about associations. Second, we see Jesus starting with something social and moving on to something broader, that is, the free offer of the Gospel. He was showing that the Gospel is not just for social outcasts, for the poor, but for absolutely everyone. The Gospel is that Jesus genuinely invites *you* to His banquet. You are not worthy of it; you do not

deserve it; you are an outcast. But He says you are invited anyway. You say, “But I’m unworthy; surely there must be something I can do.” No. You’re unworthy; yes, but there’s nothing you can do. All you have to do is say “yes.”

We have to watch very carefully what Jesus does next. After describing the free, undeserved invitation to His banquet, Jesus then turns to the crowds and talks about the cost of discipleship. There is nothing you can do to deserve the invitation, but once you say “yes,” you owe Him everything. First He gives everything, then you give everything. Jesus says in Luke 14:25-26 that you have to hate mother and father, have to carry your cross, have to count the costs. It’s like building a tower. You don’t want to start if you cannot finish. He tells them that anyone who does not give up everything cannot be His disciple.

Taking up the cross is absolutely vital, but easy to misunderstand because crosses have become so pretty today. In Jesus’ day crosses were really ugly. They were rough, splintery, crude. Today they are polished, made of silver, bronze, gold and brass. They’re so light that they can be hung from your ears or your neck and they are suspended in churches. They’re lovely. We’ve lost the meaning of the word cross. We’ve also lost the understanding of what it means to give up all you have. We have everything we need, and a lot of what we want, and the idea of really sacrificing is foreign to us. Even our churches are pretty places. There’s nothing wrong with being pretty, but if they get too pretty, it can undermine the message of sacrifice. It is far more common for people today to say, “I chose this church because it has a great music ministry and a great youth ministry,” than to say, “I joined this church because I had the opportunity to pour myself out in it, to sacrifice.”