

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

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### Luke 11:5-13

The theme of seeking God in prayer appears in many places in Jesus' teaching. We have for example the parable of the friend at midnight, which is a story that illustrates how a disciple should pray. Let's read this passage.

*Luke 11:5. And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves;*

*6 for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him';*

*7 and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'?*

*8 I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs.*

*9 And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.*

*10 For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

*11 What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;*

*12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?*

*13 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!"*

### Showing hospitality

Here is the picture of a person who finds that at midnight a friend of his arrives. That is an odd time to come to someone's home you might think. Well, it was not that unusual at that time in Palestine. People often preferred to travel after dark in order to avoid the heat. We read in the Bible that the wise men traveled at night, and so did Joseph and Mary (Matthew 2.9, 14). And because there was no telephone or public postal service in Jesus' time, visitors often arrived unannounced.

So this person gets awakened at night unexpectedly by a tired and hungry traveler. The man feels that he has the obligation to feed his friend for hospitality, in the context of that culture, was a sacred duty. But food was not as readily available as it is today. There were no evening shops and bread was baked each day to meet the day's need. The host in the story has to deal with an important problem: he has a late night visitor who needs food but he has no bread to offer. What is he going to do?

He looks around and he thinks for a moment. 'I know that my friend over there has some bread. Perhaps I can ask him.' Village life then was much more a shared, public life than life in large

modern cities. It was quite normal to know which neighbors had bread in their house. ‘But it’s midnight. If I knock at his door, I might wake the whole place up and he is not going to like that.’

This man has to make a decision. ‘Shall I let my friend who has just arrived be hungry until the morning? Or shall I go and disturb my friend across the road?’ You see his dilemma. If he refused to feed his traveler friend, he would break the norm of hospitality, which was seen as of extreme importance in that culture (Genesis 18:1-8; Hebrews 13:2). And if he would go to his neighbor, he might incur his displeasure. ‘Well, after all, what are friends for? A friend in need is a friend indeed, right? So I’m going to knock on my friend’s door. He might be asleep but I won’t disturb him for very long. It takes only a few minutes to give me the bread. Then he can go back to sleep again. Otherwise this poor fellow who has just arrived is going to be hungry until the morning.’

### **A reluctant friend**

So he decides to walk to his neighbor’s house, knock on his door and ask him for three loaves of bread. He doesn’t get a very enthusiastic response as you can well imagine. We all treasure our sleep. Who likes to be awakened in the middle of the night? So the friend inside the house replies, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is now shut and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you what you want.’ In other words, the answer is ‘No’. In his mind, he was probably thinking, ‘Doesn’t he know how late it is? This is not the time to be knocking on somebody’s door. He should be more considerate than that! Just leave me alone and go away.’

*My children are with me in bed.* This is a reply that reflects the likelihood that all the family was sleeping on one mat. Houses in Israel, especially in rural areas, were small, consisting of one room only. You can imagine a small dark room with a raised area at the back where the family lived. In the front lower part of the house, you have the domestic animals (chicken, goats...). There is one door which was left open throughout the day. In the evening, the family would close it and slide a wooden or iron bar through rings in the door panels. It is easy to see that removing this bar in the middle of the night would be quite noisy. That is why the man inside the house said, *The door is now shut.* Then on the elevated floor, mats were spread out and were used as beds on which the family slept side-by-side. Getting up would probably wake the children. In such circumstances, it was a considerable nuisance to be asked to get up in the dark and find some bread. It was easier just to stay in bed.

But this person who was asking for bread is not going to go away. He keeps knocking on the door. He keeps saying, ‘Please, give me some bread because I can’t let my friend get hungry. Could you get up?’ And the other person keeps saying no. After a while, the neighbor inside the house realized that he’d better do something about the request. ‘If I don’t give him these three loaves,’ he thought, ‘this guy will be knocking on my door till dawn. I am not going to get any sleep, and he is going to disturb other people on this street as well. I think it’s better to give him what he wants. That is the only way to stop him from making all that noise. It’s somewhat troublesome but at least I will be able go back to sleep again.’

Remember how Jesus opened the story. *Which of you...* These words typically introduce a hypothetical question and for which the answer is self-evident. *Which of you who has a friend...* It is like saying, ‘Can you imagine a friend...’ By these words, Jesus invites his hearers to exercise their imagination about their friends. Do any of them have a friend who would refuse help if he went to him at midnight in order to provide food for a friend who had unexpectedly arrived from a journey? In every culture, the bonds of friendship involve a readiness to help one’s friends. True friends come through for us despite inconvenience to themselves. Also, in Jesus’ culture, the responsibility of showing hospitality was seen as of extreme importance. Put in that context, the problems of getting up and unlocking the door and thus disturbing the children’s sleep seem pretty insignificant. The answer to the question, ‘Can you imagine a friend who would behave like that,’ is clearly negative. No, of course! No imaginable friend would refuse to assist you in your request for bread.

## Because of his importunity

The question, *Which of you...*, runs from v. 5 to the end of v. 7. Then in v. 8, we have the punch line of Jesus' story. He says, *I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs.*

*Though he will not get up...* In other translations we have, Even if he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend. 'Even if, out of friendship's sake, he will not give him the bread, yet...' This 'even if ... yet' sentence underscores the fact that generally speaking, the bonds of friendship are sufficient to secure the help needed. But even in those (unlikely) cases where friendship is not enough, the outcome will still be the same *because of his importunity*.

What Jesus is saying is this. 'You are quite right to think that no friend of yours would behave in such an unhelpful way. But even if your friend might not help you for the sake of your friendship, yet he will get up and give you the bread because of your importunity.'

This word 'importunity' is a key word in the parable. It refers to a combination of boldness and shamelessness. The point that the Lord Jesus is illustrating is this shameless persistence, a persistence that does not take no for an answer. This comes out also in the following verse, in v. 9, where we have three actions. And the three verbs are all in the present continuous tense. 'Keep on asking and it will be given to you. Keep on seeking and you will find. Keep on knocking and it will be opened to you.'

That is exactly what the man is doing. He keeps on knocking until the door opens. He keeps on asking until he gets an answer. He keeps on seeking those three loaves of bread until he gets them. He is got to help his hungry friend, whether the neighbor likes it or not. It takes nerve and audacity to behave like that. You see that there is an element of impudent insistence to the point of shamelessness. Now, that's importunity. He is willing to go to great lengths and even to suffer rebuke in order to get the bread.

## Being importunate with God

This is somewhat puzzling. What is the lesson that Jesus wants to teach us here? It seems that he is exaggerating in encouraging shamelessness, is it not? Persistence is a good quality but there is a limit to how persistent you should be. If you press it too much, you become an inconsiderate person. Can you imagine Jesus' disciples going around and knocking on people's doors at midnight in order to be accommodating hosts? Well, that's not exactly the point that He is making.

Notice that this passage comes immediately after the Lord's teaching about prayer. In v. 1, He gives the disciples the prayer that we know as the Lord's prayer. *Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.* And so forth. Then, having taught what we should pray, He turns to the question of how we should undertake such intercession. He says, 'There is one thing that you have to learn when you pray. You have to approach God with shameless persistence. You have to be importunate with God in prayer, just like the man who is asking for bread in the parable that I'm going to tell you.'

For some people, God's greatness and holiness might cause them to feel that the Lord of heaven and earth is unapproachable. They say to themselves, 'If God is busy with the whole universe, surely He is not concerned with my personal requests. And besides, He knows everything. So there is no point bothering Him with what He already knows.' But the truth is that God has a tender concern for His children. He is not so great or so distant as to be unavailable. In teaching this parable, He is telling His disciples to be shamelessly persistent in their requests for blessing.

Jesus wants us to change our thinking about God. He is saying to us, 'Maybe you think that you should not burden God with your requests. But let Me tell you, God doesn't think as you do. His thinking is totally different. He doesn't mind if you phone Him at 2 o'clock in the morning. He doesn't mind if you come at midnight and knock on the doors of heaven. In fact, He loves it. He is looking for people who have the boldness to do just that, who will give Him no rest spiritually.'

### **Pray without ceasing**

This reminds me of Isaiah 62:6-7. I think it is fair to say that this passage in Isaiah provides part of the OT background to the parable of the friend at midnight. Listen to these interesting verses.

*Isaiah 62:6. Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, 7 and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.*

Isaiah has received a vision that Jerusalem will be 'a praise in the earth,' shining in the world with God's glory. Jerusalem will be a spectacle for the whole world to see. And the prophet prays with persistence for that day to come. Here in v. 6, the watchmen are the godly, protecting the city from the forces of evil by their prayers. The spiritual Jerusalem is the church. In this passage, God encourages us to pray without ceasing. He invites us to cry after Him and even asks us to 'give Him no rest.' Be importunate with Him in the same way as the friend at midnight was with his neighbor. Of course, God needs no reminding but He does involve others, through prayer, in the fulfillment of his purposes. He wants us to know that He is pleased with us for being earnest and importunate when we approach Him.

God likes people who have spiritual determination. These are the people who, having carefully considered their purpose in life, fix their mind upon it. And with decisiveness, they say to God, 'Lord, I'm going to pursue this goal until, by your grace, it is fulfilled.' *Give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.*

I am probably right to say that all of us have thought at one point or another that because God knows our needs and is sovereign, we shouldn't bother Him. Rather, we should just let Him do His will. Well, this parable teaches us to think very differently. He wants us to trouble Him. He wants us to be importunate with Him. He wants us to be like Jacob who hung on to the Lord and said, 'I'm not going to let you go until you bless me. You can do whatever you like to me but I'm not going to let you go (Genesis 32:26).' We need to understand that by praying persistently, we are not trying to get a reluctant God to answer our prayers. Instead, we are showing that we are very serious about our requests. If we do not want what we are asking for enough to be persistent, it shows we do not want it very much.

Then in v. 9, Jesus says, *And I say to you...* This indicates that Jesus is now applying the parable and developing the response that should emerge from it. We have here three present imperatives that exhort the disciple to ask, seek, and knock continually. All three actions are metaphor for praying. And to each action, there is a corresponding response: it will be given, the disciple will find, and the door will be opened. These three sentences emphasize the truth that those who bring their needs to God can trust that they will be satisfied. There is an assurance of a response to all those who ask, seek and knock.

We should not take this promise as a blank check however. Prayer is not a magical way to obtain whatever we want. Remember that we do not pray in order to change God's will, but rather to bring our will into harmony with His will, with the honest attitude that we accept His will above our desires.

## Arguing from the lesser to the greater

But there is something awkward in the reluctant giving of the neighbor. Would it not have been better if, in the parable, the neighbor had responded because of the depth of his friendship rather than because he couldn't help it? That is a strange picture of divine generosity in response to prayer. The answer to this is that this parable is not one that works by saying, 'God is or acts like this...' Rather it works by saying, 'If a friend who is not really much of a friend (at least in the middle of the night) will give you the bread you ask for, then how much more will the loving God give you the things you need when you ask Him! We have here a spiritual argument that goes from the lesser to the greater. This rule declares that if it is true in the case of the lesser, so much more will it be true in the case of the greater.

That is precisely the point of the rest of the passage where Jesus explains, by arguing from the lesser to the greater, that we can depend on God to answer our prayers. He gives the picture of a father who gets a request for fish. What father would give his child a snake? No one! No parent would do that to his child. Jesus has intensified the image by moving from an illustration of friendship to that of parent and child. The second picture makes the same point. The child who requests an egg will not receive a scorpion. No human parent is so cruel as to do this. And the 'how much more' argument is that if sinful people can give good gifts to their children, how much more can the heavenly Father make provision for His children. The most important gift He could ever give is the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4), whom He promised to give all believers after Jesus' death, resurrection and return to heaven (John 15:26). This doesn't mean of course that the Holy Spirit is supposed to substitute for all our other needs. It is rather that the gift of the Holy Spirit as God's highest gift should give us every assurance that he will not withhold from us anything that we need.

Jesus' model prayer, 'Our Father,' expresses the disciple's dependence on God and his desire that God's glory be revealed in the universe. However it does not address the attitude that a person is to have when he prays to God. Since God is sovereign, some people might get the feeling that they should keep their requests to a minimum and be careful about bothering the holy God. That is a false belief. Therefore, after teaching what we should pray, He turns to the parable of the friend at midnight where He tells us how we should intercede. And the point is very clear: God is approachable and should be approached often, boldly and with confidence.