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## LK 11:5-13 : THE GENEROUS FATHER

*No. EE30*

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**M**ost Christians wrestle with guilty feelings over the fact that they do not pray enough. Sermons and books about prayer are so challenging that one becomes discouraged before you even start praying.

But this is not the Lord Jesus' approach. Lk 11:5-13, following as it does right after the Lord's Prayer, is wonderfully encouraging. We are invited to approach the Father's throne of mercy with boldness and to do so again and again.

What we are taught here should govern our life of prayer as well as our walk with the Lord. Many of our problems with prayer can be attributed to the fact that we are to some extent ignorant of the truths in this teaching.

### A rhetorical question (5-8)

In the original the Lord begins with one long rhetorical question which presupposes the reply: *Certainly not!* (5-7).

It may be paraphrased as follows: *Can any one of you imagine having a friend - to whom you go at midnight to borrow bread, because you have an unexpected guest - who would refuse to get out of bed, sending you away with a number of silly excuses?*

This was unthinkable in a culture in which hospitality and good neighbourliness was valued much more highly than today!

In v. 8 Jesus then comes to the conclusion: In view of their friendship the man will of course get

out of bed! But even if their friendship were insufficient motivation (what a silly idea!) the petitioner's *shameless boldness* (Greek) would compel the man in bed to assist him. Undoubtedly the midnight-host will get his bread!

### Application (9-10)

In v.9 our Lord issues three injunctions in succession: *Ask! Seek! Knock!* This is of course really one and the same command, only worded in three different ways.

Each of the injunctions is followed by the assurance that obedience to it will not be in vain. Ask, and you *will receive!* Seek, and you *will find!* Knock, and the door *will be opened!*

In the case of all three verbs the tense used in the Greek text indicates *ongoing action*. This can be interpreted in one of two ways. Jesus either emphasises that we should *keep on praying*, or that we should *always* pray. In the former case the idea would be that we should *keep on, persist, and not give up*. In the latter He would mean that we should pray *always, and not be timid - that we should go again and again to the throne of grace!*

All this may look like splitting hairs, but the way in which we interpret these injunctions holds far-reaching implications. The first interpretation would convey the message that prayer is not easy, but that perseverance will ultimately be rewarded. The second would constitute a hearty invitation to ask again and again, with the utmost boldness. Which is the correct interpretation? The answer can be found in the very next verse.

Verse 10 starts with the causal conjunction "for". Jesus is thereby indicating that He is about to explain what He meant in the previous verse.

In the original language the words "ask", "seek" and "knock" are present participles. The idea is therefore that while asking, we receive; while searching, we find; while knocking, the door is opened to us.

What the Lord is therefore saying, is not that we will eventually receive after we have prayed for

a long time, but that we will receive while praying. So it's clear. Verse 9 is a hearty invitation and an encouraging assurance: *make continual prayer part of your way of life and answered prayers will be a daily reality*. The Lord is therefore giving us the assurance that any disciple of his will always be welcome at the throne of grace. He is assuring us of the goodwill and generosity of His Father. This is the main point of the parable.

However, Jesus does not want to give his hearers the wrong impression. He is not suggesting that prayer is a superficial exercise. It is not just a matter of asking at your heart's content. He knows that prayer is sometimes a demanding battle, and that persistence is often essential. This is, in fact, what He teaches in Lk 18:1-8. And here in Lk 11 His careful choice of words balances the encouraging invitation above.

What He is saying, as it were, is, "When you pray, you will sometimes get the feeling that your Father is not there. But seek Him purposely and you will find Him. At other times you may get the feeling that He is ignoring you, but knock with determination, and the door will be opened."

This is exactly the way in which a neighbour will assure you of his goodwill: "If you need me, don't hesitate to call on me - night or day. Just remember, I am sometimes in the back garden, so just come and get me there. And I am a tight sleeper, so don't hesitate to hammer on the door!"

### Driving it home (1-13)

Our Lord clearly does not wish us to miss this invitation to pray. Again He uses two rhetorical questions to strengthen his point. Will a father give his son a snake when he asks for a fish, or a scorpion when he asks for an egg? Of course not! Pray therefore, it pleases your Father. Pray! Your prayers will be answered! Pray! It is never in vain!

A final rhetorical question drives the conclusion home. Again the answer is crystal clear: *If sinful parents know to give only the best to their children, all the more our heavenly Father!*

## The Father's great gift

In verse 13 the Lord Jesus gives an unexpected twist to His teaching. Contrary to what may be expected from what He has been saying, He does not promise a general answering of prayers, but specifically the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The promise Jesus makes in Mt 7:7-11 is verbally almost the same, but with a more easily understandable ending: the Father gives *good gifts* to those who ask Him.

Taking all of the above into consideration, we arrive at three very important truths.

*Firstly*, the Holy Spirit, in fact only He, is God's great gift to Christ's New Testament church. If we have Him, we do not really need anything else. Whatever God and our calling demand of us, we find in Him.

*Secondly*, believers know that they receive nothing from the Father except on the grounds of Christ's merit. However, we forget only too readily that we also receive nothing of eternal value save through the working of the Holy Spirit. Every good gift that we receive from heaven is, as it were, delivered by the Holy Spirit.

*Thirdly*, we receive from the Father only that which the Holy Spirit will deliver. He is holy and will bring nothing that is in conflict with His character. He brings only good gifts. We need to keep this in mind when we pray, or else we may end up asking for something that is in conflict with God's will - and of course not receive it.

## Four practical implications

### 1. Jesus encourages us to pray with boldness, not with presumptuous rashness.

These two attitudes differ like day and night.

To be bold in prayer means to appear before the holy God in trusting faith and expectation, in spite of your remaining sin, solely on the basis of the perfect mediatorship of His Son. It means praying in His Name - without hesitance, timidity

or fear, but freely and with assurance. It means to pour out your heart before your Father's throne.

On the other hand, presumption in prayer has to do with an attitude of smug self-assurance and self-centeredness, which knows very little of the fear of the Lord, or one's own unworthiness.

### 2. Our heavenly Father does not wish us merely to pray, but to pray boldly.

While the danger of presumption in prayer is ever present, the absence of boldness is probably a bigger and more general problem. That is why the Bible encourages boldness more often than it warns against presumptuousness in prayer.

Here in Lk 11 Jesus assures us repeatedly of the Father's benevolence towards His children - ten times over.<sup>1</sup> There is hardly another promise that receives greater emphasis in the Bible.

### 3. Knowledge of God and His promises is the key to boldness and persistence in prayer.

Although the emphasis in Lk 11 is not primarily on perseverance in prayer, it so happens that we can and will persevere because we are convinced of our Father's generosity. After all, the very reason why you keep on hammering on your neighbour's door until he wakes up, is because you are assured of his goodwill. You would only hesitantly knock on the door of an unfriendly neighbour - and only once or twice - before turning away.

Nothing is of greater importance to our prayer life than true knowledge of God - more particularly His goodness, love, grace and covenant faithfulness towards those who are in Christ. It is because we know God in truth that we pray as we ought to - with boldness.

### 4. Only white-hot prayers reach heaven; cold prayers freeze before they get there.

This saying of the old Puritans is confirmed by many prayers in the Bible, especially in the Old

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1. Once in v.5-8; 3 times in v.9; 3 times in v.10; once in v.11; once in v.12; and once in v.13.

Testament. Quite often we come across prayers full of holy impatience - almost to the point of blasphemy. Can you imagine praying like this? "Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! Do not reject us for ever. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?" (Ps 44:23-24). "O Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?" (Ps 89:49). "O Hope of Israel, its Saviour in times of distress, why are you like a stranger in the land, like a traveller who stays only a night? Why are you like a man taken by surprise, like a warrior powerless to save? ... do not forsake us! (Jer 14:8-9)

Surely prayers like these would have been blasphemous had they not sprung from hearts aglow with passion for God's honour. But exactly here lies the secret. Nothing pleases God more than a burning zeal for His glory (Num 25:7-13).

How do we get this intensity of zeal for the Lord and His honour. What leads to prayers like those above? There is only one answer: my heart will burn with love and zeal for the Lord to the extent that I know Him! And the higher the flame of love and zeal burns in my heart, the more will I pray boldly - simply because I can not tolerate the dishonouring of His name.

*And of course, the man or woman with a white-hot zeal for God can hardly pray a self-centred and presumptuous prayer!*

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