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“The Persistent Widow” by Jorge Cocco Santángelo

WHAT DO THE PARABLES OF THE IMPORTUNING FRIEND AND WIDOW TEACH US ABOUT PRAYER?

“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; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?”

Luke 11:5–6

THE KNOW

The Gospel of Luke records that after Jesus had finished praying, “one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples” (Luke 11:1). In response to this earnest plea, Jesus taught this disciple a form of the Lord’s Prayer (see Luke 11:2–4).

Jesus went on, explaining not only *how* to pray but also how this prayer would be *received* by God the Father. Concerning Jesus’s intent, John and Jeannie Welch have noted, “Most of all, he wants [us] to know with assurance that God will hear and answer [our] prayers.”¹ This is made especially clear in the Joseph Smith Translation of this chapter, which adds the following statement: “Your heavenly Father will not fail to give unto you whatsoever ye ask of him” (JST, Luke 11:4).

Parable of the Importuning Friend

It is in this context that Jesus offered a parable regarding an importuning friend at midnight:

Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? 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. 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. (Luke 11:5–8)

S. Kent Brown points out that the awakened friend’s “answer is completely out of character in the ancient Orient,” which placed a high value on hospitality.² Perhaps recognizing his lack of courtesy, the awakened friend eventually relented. Yet he did so not merely out of a sense of duty to a friend but because of the importunity—meaning the persistence—of

his petitioner.³ According to the Joseph Smith Translation, Jesus then declared, “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. . . . If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give good gifts through the Holy Spirit to them who ask him?” (JST, Luke 11:9, 13).

Concerning this parable, Brown writes,

Jesus captures the essence of prayer: its success requires consistent and sustained effort. The importuning man succeeds not because of the goodwill of his friend who is already in bed—and there is plenty of goodwill—but because he persists in knocking and imploring at the friend’s door. In the end, his friend cannot deny him. . . . [A]t the edge of Jesus’ notation about the time of day rests the reassurance that God is available at any time and in any circumstance.⁴

Parable of the Importuning Widow

Later on in His ministry, Jesus offered a similar parable, often called the parable of the importuning widow, in which a widow relentlessly approaches a judge who “feared not God, neither regarded man” (Luke 18:2). Her plea was that the judge would “avenge me of mine adversary” (verse 3). Although he tried at first to ignore her, the judge eventually gave in, stating that “because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me” (verse 5).

In this story, the judge’s initial reluctance may have been partially due to the difficulty of the case, as laws regarding widows could be complex and potentially would “have involved many people, technical rules, and contested claims.”⁵ As for the point of the story, Jesus asked, “Shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?” Jesus then answered His own rhetorical question: “I tell you that he will avenge them speedily” (Luke 18:7–8).

THE WHY

“The dominant message of both parables,” write John and Jeannie Welch, “is the vividly portrayed assurance that God will hear and answer prayers. He will grant sincere requests.”⁶ The answers to our prayers may not come when we want or even how we want, but the promise that God hears our earnest pleadings is sure.

Through these parables, Jesus further offers a stark contrast between how God will answer our prayers and how flawed mortals—similar to people we may meet in our own lives—grant requests. In both parables, the friend and the judge act mostly out of self-interest in hopes that the petitioner will stop bothering them at inconvenient times. Contrasted

to these individuals who knew “how to give good gifts” even with less than perfect motives is the love and mercy of our Heavenly Father as He will respond to our sincere and earnest petitions: “How much more shall your heavenly Father give good gifts through the Holy Spirit to them who ask him?” (JST, Luke 11:13).

Prayer, of course, is not just a tool to access divine help when it is convenient for us. Rather, “we must pray persistently, constantly, and sincerely, not sporadically or just when trouble strikes.”⁷ In addition, according to the Bible Dictionary published in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible, “Blessings require some work or effort on our part before we can obtain them. Prayer is a form of work and is an appointed means for obtaining the highest of all blessings.”⁸

President Russell M. Nelson has taught, “Imagine the miracle of it! Whatever our Church calling, we can pray to our Heavenly Father and receive guidance and direction, be warned about dangers and distractions, and be enabled to accomplish things we simply could not do on our own.” He further invited all to “Pray in the name of Jesus Christ about your concerns, your fears, your weaknesses—yes, the very longings of your heart. And then listen! . . . As you repeat this process day after day, month after month, year after year, you will ‘grow into the principle of revelation.’”⁹

FURTHER READING

John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 124–131.

S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2014), 549–600; 805–848.

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NOTES

1. John W. Welch and Jeannie S. Welch, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2019), 125.
2. S. Kent Brown, *The Testimony of Luke* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2014), 557.
3. The BYU New Rendition renders the ending of this parable as “although he will not rise up and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will give to him as much as he needs,” clarifying what the friend’s importunity was. Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 556.
4. Brown, *Testimony of Luke*, 559.
5. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 127.
6. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 128.
7. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 128.
8. Bible Dictionary, “Prayer.”

9. Russell M. Nelson, “Revelation for the Church, Revelation for Our Lives,” April 2018 general conference.