What Do the Parables of the Importuning Friend and Widow Teach Us About Prayer?

“And be 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

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. 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

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).

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“The Persistent Widow” by Jorge Cocco Santángelo
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).

Further Reading


Notes

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.
5. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 127.
6. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 128.
7. Welch and Welch, “Parables of Jesus,” 128.