

## **There is Another King, Jesus**

*Luke – Acts*

### **The Father's Eagerness to Answer Our Prayers**

*Luke 11:1 – 13*

#### **Introduction: Ben's Story**

Let me tell you what a boy named Benjamin discovered about God his Father. Being black and at the mostly white Higgins Elementary School in Detroit was hard. He was at the bottom of the class. What made it harder was that his earthly father left the family when he was eight, leaving Benjamin, his older brother Curtis, and his mother Sonya to fend for themselves on the streets of Detroit. Not surprisingly, with this background, Benjamin had a major problem with anger. In seventh grade, Benjamin was at his locker. A bigger boy was teasing him for something he said in English class. Their voices rose, and finally Benjamin turned away to open his combination lock. Just as he opened the lock, the other boy shoved him. Without thinking, Ben smashed the lock into the boy's forehead, creating a three inch gash. In the principal's office, Ben apologized, saying sincerely that he hadn't meant to do it. Afterward, Ben forgot about it, saying to himself that he wasn't the kind of guy who'd split open a guy's head on purpose. Some weeks later, Ben's mother Sonya brought home some pants for Ben that he didn't like. Sonya insisted that Ben wear them because she got them on sale. Ben almost hit his mom, and would have if his older brother Curtis hadn't jumped him from behind. But in ninth grade, the unthinkable happened. Ben was listening to the radio with his friend Bob. "You call that music?" Bob shouted, flipping the dial. "It's better than what you like!" Ben yelled back, grabbing for the dial. "Come on. You always..." In that instant, blind anger took possession of Ben again. Grabbing a camping knife from his back pocket, Ben snapped it open and lunged at his own friend, toward his stomach. The knife hit Bob's heavy ROTC buckle with such force that the blade snapped off and fell to the ground. Ben looked at himself in disbelief, unable to say anything. He turned, ran home, and locked himself in the bathroom for two hours. He felt sick as he looked at himself. Even though Ben would say later that his temper was pathological, uncontrollable and irrational, he wrote, "From somewhere deep inside my mind came a strong impression. Pray...I had been trying to control my temper, figuring I could handle it myself. Now...I knew the truth... 'Lord, You have to take this temper from me.'" Ben asked his Father in prayer to give him more power to deal with this, and to make him more loving. After that, Benjamin Carson was never controlled by anger again. He later became the neurosurgeon who separated the Siamese twins joined at the head by converging veins inside their brains, facing stress everyday and never losing his temper, and remaining that way even later when he trimmed back his hours to be a dedicated family man who also does youth ministry. As a ninth grader who had lost his father and grown up on the streets of Detroit, he found that God was a Father eager to help.

#### **Our Prayers: v.1 – 4**

Is it possible that God answers prayers like that? Can we be empowered like that to deal with our problems and become more loving? Suppose you were one of Jesus' original disciples. You've been with Jesus at the point for a few months. You've seen him teach with authority. He's rebuked illnesses, demons, nature and death itself. Everything retreats at the advance of Jesus. Not only that, he courageously confronts all these things, he extends his welcome to outcasts, and lives stuck in sin and self-centeredness are transformed because of the sense of holiness that this man exudes. In Luke 10, Jesus encounters a lawyer who asks him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself." So because you want that power and love yourself, you ask him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

I hope that we do desire the same thing today. If you know people through whom God has done mighty things, or if you read the stories of Mother Teresa, Hudson Taylor, Elizabeth Eliot, and many others, you'll likely be impressed with the sense of God's power in their lives and the amazing love these people show. How can these men and women live the lives they do? Where does the sense of power come from? Perhaps it too comes from their prayers. So we too ask, "Lord, teach us to pray." So Jesus gives a sample prayer.

"He said to them, 'When you pray, say:  
Father, hallowed be Thy name,

Thy kingdom come.  
3 Give us each day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our sins,  
4 For we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us  
And lead us not into temptation.”

The disciples must have felt surprised at this. How could this prayer be so short? The rabbinic prayers of the time were much longer and more elaborate and flowery. This is shorter than earlier occasions Jesus taught on prayer, as reflected by Matthew’s version in Matthew 6. This is even shorter than contemporary models of prayer, like the ACTS model where you have Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. This prayer has a little bit of adoration, basically no confession, no thanksgiving, and some supplication. This prayer only has the A and the S. By any standard you use, this is a short prayer. And that is the impression Jesus intends. He wants us to be impressed by the shortness, the simplicity, of prayer.

How can our prayers be so simple? The disciples’ faces probably registered confusion, bewilderment, even shock at this kind of prayer. So much power can be unleashed by a few phrases? Now let me make a qualification. We’re talking here about a certain kind of prayer, prayers that are related to being empowered by the Spirit. I think that because in v.13, Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit. There are other kinds of prayers that are related to deep healing, or changing circumstances, or listening for answers. Those kinds of prayers are not necessarily the kinds of subjects Jesus is dealing with.

But when we do pray for the empowering of the Spirit, we can look at this text. Why can our prayers be so short? Because first, God is more eager than a hospitable neighbor to meet your need. And second, God is more eager than an earthly father to meet your need.

#### **God is More Eager Than a Hospitable Neighbor: v.5 – 8**

Let’s take the first analogy. God is more eager than a hospitable neighbor to meet your need. In v.5, he tells a parable of the hospitable neighbor. “Can any of you imagine having a friend, and going to him at midnight, and [in typical Ancient Near East fashion, not knock, but call from outside and] saying to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey and I have nothing to set before him.’

It’s important to highlight a few things about the cultural background of Jesus and the disciples. First, hospitality is the responsibility not just of the individual, but of the entire community. The entire community was expected to rally, share their bread, food, wine, and other things to be hospitable. This mentality is still present today. When I went to Israel on a business trip in late 1998, all of my Israeli associates in our work group rallied together. Each night, someone in the group either took me out or invited me into their home for an amazing meal. They had coordinated it so that each of them participated in hosting my visit.

Second, to not be hospitable and go out of your way for a guest in your community is a violation of social etiquette. It would be like not pitching in with everyone for a friend’s birthday gift when the money was being collected and everyone is there. But it’s all the more severe. It’s shameful and embarrassing. Everyone participates in hosting a guest.

Third, no one serves just bread for a meal. Bread is not the meal. Bread is the fork, spoon, and knife with which the meal is eaten. Ethiopian cuisine is very much still like this; you break off some bread and use that to handle the food. What the hosting friend is hoping for is also cheese, olives, fruit, and wine, and the best pitcher, tray, tablecloth, and goblets that the community has to offer.

So Jesus throws us into this situation. Let’s say a guest arrives at your place. You go asking for the smallest part of the meal because you don’t want to be burdensome, you’re not best friends with your neighbor, and maybe you want to understate your needs. But the expectation you have is, “Of course this sleepy neighbor will help out. It’s a minor inconvenience, but it’s perfectly within the realm of possibility, and it’s just a common social duty.”

But in v.7, Jesus throws in the surprise negative element. “And from inside he shall answer and say, ‘Do not bother me, the door has been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’” That is a ridiculous excuse. It would be like saying, “I’ve got to rearrange my sock drawer,” or “Oh, my toe hurts so I can’t get up.” To say, “The door has been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything,” is absurd. No one says that. Therefore the answer to the rhetorical question is, “No.” I cannot imagine that.

Jesus seems to have used rhetorical questions like this a lot. The phrase, “Can any of you imagine” is repeated in Luke three other times. In each case, Jesus expects the answer to be no. “Can any one among you imagine a son falling into a well and he shall not immediately draw him upon the sabbath day?” (14:5) “Can any one among you imagine having a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, not leaving the ninety-nine in the wilderness and going after the one that is lost?” (15:4) “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, Come at once and sit down at table?” (17:7). In each case, it’s an emphatic NO. So however this sleepy neighbor hypothetically responds, we’re expect to answer, “No, we can’t imagine that happening.”

Jesus describes the actual response this sleepy friend will give: “I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because [or on the basis that] he is his friend, yet because [or on the basis] of his shame he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” It’s his sense of shame that will compel him to get up and give him whatever he needs.

Unfortunately our Bibles translate this incorrectly. Both the NASB and the NRSV says, “yet because of his **persistence** he will get up and give him whatever he needs.” Circle the word “persistence.” If that is the right way to translate that word, it seem like you need to holler outside your sleepy neighbor’s window to the point of being annoying. And by extension, it seems like Jesus is saying, “God is like a sleepy friend that you need to annoy by praying repetitiously and annoyingly.” Now there is something in us that wants to believe that, isn’t there? If our prayers for being empowered by the Spirit get answered, it’s because we’ve persevered so long! But if the word is “shame,” then we get the opposite view. The sleepy neighbor is motivated not by our persistence, but by his own sense of shame; he doesn’t want to appear negligent in his social duty.

So why do I think it should be the second translation? First, the linguistic arguments. In ancient Greek literature, stretching from Archilochus in the seventh century BC, through Plato, Sophocles, and Herodotus in the fifth century BC to Epictetus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, the word meant “sense of shame.” In three ancient major papyri, the root word appears and clearly means “shameful.” In the Septuagint Old Testament, Daniel 2:15 is translated, “Why has the impudent [or shameful] decree come out from the face of the king.” In Josephus, the word exclusively means “shameless” or “impudent.” (see Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p.199)

Second, the literary arguments. Jesus gave another parable on prayer in Luke 18:1-8 using the same “how much more than” logic. There was a poor widow who annoyed an unjust judge so long, she finally got the judge to pay attention to her. But the point is, if the unjust judge finally responded to the widow, how much more will God respond to us? That’s Jesus’ point of contrast: “Will not God bring about vindication for His elect...and will He delay long over them? [The rhetorical answer is NO!] I tell you that He will bring about vindication for them speedily.” In Luke 18, yes the widow is persistent, but that’s the negative contrast. The point is that God is not an unjust judge who doesn’t care about us; He cares and will act speedily! So we don’t have to feel like it’s our persistence that will move Him to bring about vindication. Likewise in Luke 11, God is not like the sleepy friend who offers ridiculous excuses, so it’s not our persistence that moves Him to empower us by the Holy Spirit.

Looking locally, the rest of the passage has nothing to do with persistence, but with God’s desire to answer prayer quickly. Verses 9-10, the “ask, seek, knock” passage has no sense of persisting and waiting. And in v.11-13, God is even more willing to give the Holy Spirit to His children than earthly fathers are willing to give food to their children.

Third, the cultural argument. If the community owns hospitality and not just the individual host, and if failing to help out is shameful, it makes all the sense in the world to translate this, "sense of shame." It appears that the later Greek and Latin translators of the church did not understand how to translate "sense of shame" because they didn't understand the Israelite culture of hospitality that Jesus was drawing upon. Thus, they shifted the meaning of the Greek word to persistence, and that influence has lasted until today.

So what is Jesus saying about your sleepy friend? He will get up, if not on the basis of being your friend, then on the basis of social pressure and social convention, i.e. his sense of shame. He will not get up because you are persistent, but because he wants to save face. What will your sleepy friend give you? Not just bread, but notice v.8? Whatever you need! Bread, wine, cheese, olives, fruit, meat, a cloth and even a serving plate.

More importantly, what is Jesus saying about God? God is not motivated by persistence from external people, but by a force internal to His character: His love for us. And He's motivated by something stronger than a sense of shame or a self-protective desire to save face. He is motivated by real love for us. He wants to give you whatever nourishment from the Holy Spirit you need to love others.

That seems hard to believe, and I struggled with it, too. But let me tell you about how God taught me something about this. There was one summer when a friend of mine and I were hanging out at a Vietnamese noodle house. He asked me how I was doing, and I said, "Good; I'm starting to get to know this girl." My friend said to me with a worried look on his face, "Um, what do you think about two friends liking the same girl?" I thought, "Oh no." How many of you have been in a love-triangle situation? How many of you are currently IN a love-triangle situation??? Well, I always want to make practical applications, so here's one example. I walked away from that conversation with a sinking feeling in my stomach, and I'm sure my friend did, too. My prayer that night was, "If someone has to get hurt in this situation, I pray that it would be for the right reasons, and not for the wrong ones. That is, God, let there be no hostile feelings, no suspicions between me and my friend, no dishonesty, and above all, Lord, let there be no gossip. Lord, You have to be intimately involved with everything we do." There were some tense moments, like the time I was at her place hanging out and my friend stopped by. We liked to go ballroom dancing, so that was always something we had to think about in advance because we had many friends in common. Eventually our other friends found out about this because we didn't lie about it either. Two of my non-Christian friends knew me, my friend, and the woman we were interested in. They were closest to me, though, and I was honest; I told them, "This is really hard." That situation lasted for five long months. Basically my friend felt that there weren't enough things in common he had with the woman, so he called me to tell me that. Later, when she and I started dating, he was the first person to say that he was happy for us. In fact, he and I became better friends than before. The most interesting thing about this is that my two non-Christian friends were watching this whole thing happen. When it resolved, they said to me, "I CANNOT BELIEVE how well you both handled that! We have never seen anything like that." I said, "We're Christians. God was involved intimately every step of the way." In fact, Jesus was pouring his life and love out from within us. As a result of us asking Jesus to be involved, there was no dishonesty, no bad feelings, and most importantly, there had been no gossip. One of my non-Christian friends was shaken in his agnosticism, and my other friend later decided to read through the entire Bible and after years have passed, we're still dialoguing over email about it. That's what it's like to be in Jesus and to have Jesus in you. You can ask him to pour out his life through you at any time.

One of my mentors experienced it this way. When he was in college, he would wake up in the morning and pray very simply, "Lord Jesus, by your Spirit please live your life out through me today." One day, at the beginning of one term, he ran into a friend who was in need of some encouragement. Jesus Christ had a word of encouragement to speak through my mentor. A few months passed where the two didn't run into each other. When they did meet up some time later, the other guy talked about a problem he was facing. That day, Jesus Christ had a word of warning to speak to that friend. Another few months passed before my mentor ran into him again. This time, this friend held up his hands and said, "NO!!! Every time I see you, God has something to say to me." That simple prayer of asking, "Lord Jesus, by your Spirit please live your life out through me today" is something we can all say every morning. That's what we find in the next few verses.

### **God Is More Eager Than Earthly Fathers: v.9 – 13**

Jesus says in v.9-10, “And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened. For everyone who asks, receives; and everyone who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it shall be opened.” Jesus is not talking about asking God for anything at all. If that were true, then both Gore and Bush would be President. Again, Jesus is referring to a type of prayer that is specifically rooted in wanting more of the Holy Spirit.

Then Jesus gives a second illustration of God hearing our prayers in v.11-13. “Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”

Again Jesus gives us an argument from extremes. Of course we’re not going to give our children a snake or a scorpion, especially when they’ve asked for food! Who would do that? No one. Likewise God is not going to give us something evil or disempowering. He’s not going to give us something that doesn’t satisfy and nourish us and make us strong. But, if human parents are evil and give this much, how much more will God, who is good, give His children what is good???

Do you see the logic running through this passage? How can our prayers be so simple and short? Because it doesn’t depend on how nice and long your prayers are. It depends on the Father’s eagerness to answer those prayers! Look, if a sleeping neighbor will get out of bed because of his sense of shame, how much more will God leap at the chance to respond to you? And, if earthly fathers who are evil and sometimes really screw up their kids still know how to give nourishing food, how much more will God give us a banquet of the Holy Spirit? Therefore, ask, seek, and knock for more of the Spirit. God will respond!

I’m encouraged by watching one of our housemates, Tischa. Our friend Tischa was born and raised in Dorchester. Aside from the difficulties of being a black woman in an inner city neighborhood, and the oldest child in her family, Tischa got involved in a ministry to high risk youth that was very taxing. She and a few other women formed a household and each of them mentored a young woman from that youth group. Two years ago, Tischa wound up legally adopting her mentee, a Puerto-Rican girl named Melissa, because neither Melissa’s natural family nor her foster family were doing the job. So on top of Tischa’s job as a teacher in a Montessori school, she would come home and essentially be a single mother. Though she had a lot of help, those were trying times reparenting an at-risk teenager. Both of them moved in with us in September of this year, and I’m amazed at what God’s Spirit and empowerment has meant. Melissa is now a freshman at Lesley University, and is a Christian. Two weeks ago, she shared the gospel with some of her friends in a dorm room, which led to a spontaneous Bible study the next day. How can all these exciting things be going on? In part, it’s because Tischa prayed for the Spirit’s strength every day to sustain her and to love Melissa. She’s often felt like she’s got nothing left to give, but she asks God for the resources to keep her going. Now it shows, not just in her life, but in the life of her adopted daughter.

How many of you are going home for the winter holidays to a home situation where you feel like you have no resources? Somehow you become the nastiest you can be? How many of you have old friendships that bring up old feelings and patterns? How many of you feel discouraged because ministry is powerless and not exciting? How many of you feel like not praying for more of God’s Spirit because you think God is stingy about His personal resources?

God’s not stingy!!! Now that I am a father, Jesus’ words make special sense. What if my little John got a little older and said to me, “Dad, oh Dad, would you please consider giving me maybe a word of affirmation, oh Dad, to sustain my soul? And guidance, oh Dad, from your great wisdom, Dad? And if I could somehow, oh Dad, borrow your willpower, oh Dad? Please, in your sovereign mercy?” I would say, “Wait a minute? What’s going on here? Don’t you know I always want to talk to you? Don’t you know I always want to share my thoughts and feelings with you? And if I could give you whatever experience and strength I have inside me, I would?” My son could be well-intended, but I would gently say, “Son, you don’t have to say all that. Just ask me, ‘Dad, can you help me?’”

What Jesus is saying here is, in regards to the Holy Spirit, it doesn't matter how long or how eloquently you pray. Because I didn't exposit the short prayer in the beginning of this passage might make you feel like I'm belittling prayer, I'm not spending a lot of time defining it, considering it, etc. I don't want to belittle prayer at all; prayer is non-negotiable. BUT, you can have a high view of prayer because you have a low view of God's eagerness to respond to you AND a high view of yourself or the particular prayer tradition you come from.

So when you go home, when you step back into that sticky friendship, when you're discouraged about your own failures, when you feel like the Christian life is not exciting, understand that this is exactly the type of prayer that God is eager to respond to. He jumps at the chance. So pray, "Lord, by your Spirit who already lives in me by my faith in Jesus Christ, fill my life to overflowing. Pour out the life of Christ through me."

What are some barriers we have to praying like this? The first barrier we might have is not having a high view of Christian love. The host could have just hung a sign on his door that said, "No visitors welcome." That way, he would have never had to ask for help. There are ways in which you might be unwelcoming to others because you don't want to be burdened. You don't want to be put into the position where you have to ask God for help. But as Jesus does live his life out through us, he will bring us to people who are frightening and scary for us to interact with. And he'll say, "I want to love this person through you."

Another barrier is that we think God wants to crush our hunger for significance rather than redirect it. That's totally wrong. God wants to redirect our hunger for significance. I've learned from being a father that I want my son to feel like his life is significant, but not on his own terms, on God's. The reason Ming and I named our son the painfully long name, John Athanasius Yang-Guang Nagasawa, is because each name reflects our hopes for him. John, because the apostle John knew Jesus so well. Athanasius because that's the name of the brilliant and courageous fourth century theologian who defended the deity of Jesus in the face of the entire Roman Empire when it followed the Aryan heresy. Yang-Guang because it means "looking towards the light," and that's how we hope his life will be focused. Now if I as a father want my son to live a significant, meaningful, and empowered life, how much more does God want that for all His children?!? But the big difference comes here. I can only give my son some flawed love and some meager advice. God can give him all of Himself in the person of His Spirit.

Another barrier is that you're afraid you'll be rejected. The host who needs bread might have been afraid of asking for help. Same goes for the children with their fathers. We may have had demanding and exacting authority figures in our lives before, such that that if you ask him for three loaves of bread, that He'll give you exactly three loaves of bread. "There you go, that's what you asked for!!! And no more!!!" But God is not that way. Jesus' resounding point here is that the Father LONGS EAGERLY to give us the strength and significance we ask for. So don't just ask for the bare minimum of emotional or spiritual resources you need. Don't just ask for three loaves of bread because you think that's all God will give you or because you don't want to reveal that you're needy. Ask God for everything you need. Go to Him at any time. Midnight, 4am, it doesn't make a difference. He never sleeps. He never slumbers.

#### Questions

1. How giving or empowering was your earthly father?
2. How easy is it for you to ask for help?
3. In what area of your life do you need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit right now? Or in what relationship?

Pray for God's help in reminding you to pray in the mornings, "Lord, please live your life out through me"