

Russell Kelfer

Because of His Persistence

#1364-B

Series: The Parables of Scripture



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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To Jesus, there was no greater privilege than prayer. The right to be alone with His Father and communicate heart to heart was an honor to the Savior. He never took it lightly. No matter the press of the ministry, when the time was right, He would leave his band of dependent disciples, and quietly flee the aggressive throng that drew from Him His very strength, and He would depart to a quiet place, there to pray.

His disciples observed this, though they did not fully understand it. They knew that there was a kind of power and a kind of intimacy that Jesus drew from these times alone with the Father; and from hearing Him teach, they knew that such fellowship was intended to be theirs, as well. Just how to achieve that, they were not yet sure.

Jesus told at least two parables that spoke to the heart of the issue of prayer, and as usual, He told them in the context of delivering a message on the very same subject. Perhaps one of the most significant facts about the first of those two parables was that it was His example that prompted the curiosity of His team, and thus set the stage for His story. We read in Luke 11, beginning with verse 1:

And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.
(Luke 11:1)

The disciples were watching Jesus pray. He wasn't praying like the Pharisees, to be seen of men. He was praying, and He happened to be seen by men. They knew how crucial Jesus' prayer life was to Him, so they waited until He had finished, and as He rose from His knees, one of the disciples (we can only imagine it was Peter) asked Him to teach them how to pray, the way John the Baptist taught those who followed him. This appears to be a lone reference to John's teaching on the subject, but it is significant that God's Spirit enabled him to understand such

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a kingdom concept well enough to communicate it to those who had ears to hear. “Lord, teach us to pray”. What an incredible prayer request in itself. Have you asked God to do that for you? Be careful. In order to teach you how to pray, He sometimes must place you in positions where you have no choice but to pray; but oh, what glorious instruction is ours when we ask God to teach us something that is according to His will.

Prayer was more than just a discipline to Jesus. He didn’t look at His check list each morning and determine that He had to pray. Nor did He glance again and again at His Timex while he prayed. Prayer, to Jesus, was a privilege. It was His entrance back into the Holy of Holies where the Father waited to pour out His heart to His Son.

His disciples had asked Him to teach them more about this spiritual mystery that seemed so important to Him. Lovingly, He obliged. He answered:

And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth.

Give us day by day our daily bread.

And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil. (Luke 11:2-4)

We are all familiar with those words. This apparently was not a part of His message on the mount, but was another, more intimate visit with His inner circle, wherein He repeated His gentle, but complete pattern for prayer. We have looked at that pattern, word for word, so we will see it in this lesson only as a backdrop for what comes next. What comes next is another parable. It goes like this:

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?

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

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and give him as many as he needeth.

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.

For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent?

Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him? (Luke 11:5-13)

There is much in this parable about prayer. That is for certain. But there is also a treasure of hidden reflections of the mind of God that tells us how He would respond on planet earth to the needs of hurting people. Add the two together, and you have a rich harvest of Biblical principles. Let's explore them together.

One of the keys to understanding the kingdom concepts reflected in this story is to place yourself on both sides of the door to that house. Imagine yourself as the owner of the house, and thus as one being inconvenienced by the demands of another at a most inopportune time. Then place yourself on the other side of the door, and make the "spiritual switch". You are now a believer, coming to God in Jesus' name, asking for something in prayer. How persistent should you be? That is the application the Master made, so it is an appropriate application for us to make; in fact, it is an essential application. The whole of the passage deals with prayer. It begins with Jesus demonstrating prayer, follows with Jesus teaching about prayer, then concludes with Jesus giving a practical story about prayer.

No subject was dearer to the Savior's heart. But rather than simply encouraging His hearers to ask with intensity and consistency, He decided to weave into parable format, a word picture of someone knocking on your door at midnight, begging for food. This was no beggar, however, it was a friend of yours who was so desperate for help that he or she was willing to get you out of a deep sleep to ask for three loaves of bread. Maybe he thought you had an interest in a bakery, I don't know, but that does seem like a rather strange request, and a rather large request.

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Nevertheless, the friend had a reason for asking. It wasn't for him; it was for a friend of his who arrived apparently unexpected in the middle of the night, and that friend hadn't eaten and was hungry. The one seeking had a problem. He wanted his friend to be fed, but he had nothing in the pantry to offer. The only thing he could think of was you. You didn't live far away, usually had extra food on hand, and had been a reasonably good friend for years. I know, it's late, but there seems to be no other way.

So he trudges across the meadow to your house and with fear and trembling, knocks on the door, and when you appear on the front porch clad in robe and slippers, he somewhat embarrassingly asks you, "Can I borrow three loaves, please?"

It would be nice if you cheerily replied, "Of course, dear friend, I just happened to have stopped at the K-mart bakery on my way home from the football game, and I picked up an extra half dozen loaves of bread just in case someone knocked on my door at midnight who was hungry. Of course, take whatever you need." But you didn't. Instead, you sort of grumbled at your somewhat embarrassed neighbor and answered, "Can't you read your watch? It's midnight. The lights are out, the kids are in bed, what you're asking is out of the question. Cheery-oh, see you at the club tomorrow."

But, according to Jesus, the pesky neighbor wouldn't take "no" for an answer, but stuck his foot in the door (politely, of course) and said, "Please, neighbor, this guy's seven feet tall and hasn't eaten in two days. He's hungry, and I'm desperate. You're already awake. You had to wake up to answer the door. Can't you make it from here to the pantry and just hand me some bread? I'll even take rye or whole wheat. I don't want to show up back at home empty-handed. Please?"

Jesus turned to the disciples and drew this unusual conclusion. "Okay," He said, "So you won't raid your pantry out of love and good will, but because of his persistence, won't you give him what he's asking for?" I can't help but imagine that the disciples each turned and looked at each other, wondering if it was spiritual to answer "Yea, Lord, I guess I would." Fortunately, they didn't have to think about it very long. Before they could so much as answer, Jesus explained the application to the story. He said, "That's the way it is when you pray. You must keep on asking God, and He will answer. You must keep on seeking

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truth, and you will find it. You must keep on knocking on the door to His heart, and He will open its treasures to you.”

As if that wasn't enough, He then told why God responds when we keep asking, knocking, and seeking. He does it because of a Father's love for His children. He asks another series of questions:

“Which of you, who are parents, would listen to your child ask you for a piece of bread, and give him or her a rock instead? Or which of you would see your child come in the room, beg for a piece of fish, and slip him a slimy snake instead? If he asks you for scrambled eggs, would you hand him a scorpion?”

With those obvious questions setting the stage, The Master draws a net around the whole concept. He says, “If you, whose hearts are basically evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, deserving or not, don't you think your Heavenly Father knows how to give His Spirit and the Spiritual gifts that flow from Him to those who ask Him?”

Ouch! Oh, ye who are doubting God's love for you because He hasn't answered a certain prayer as quickly or as completely as you thought He should, are you doubting His love for you? And oh, you who are fuming because He doesn't seem to be answering at all, could it be that He is waiting for the perfect time to glorify His name? Or could it be that what you are asking for is not His will? Or could it be that He has already answered you, but because His answer did not please you, you chose to ignore it?

Jesus is redefining prayer, and He is doing it in the most practical of ways. He is bringing it down to a level a child can understand, and He is sifting through the superficial and leaving only the realities of God's purposes in prayer and His parameters for prayer as His plumb lines. Then, He is inserting into the formula a most interesting extra touch. He is explaining the need for persistence in prayer. This is an area that may be problematic for some. He is insisting that continuing to ask God for the same thing until He answers may not represent the absence of faith, but rather the very presence of faith. He is painting a picture of some midnight madness about three loaves of bread in order to emblazon on the very scrolls of Scripture the principle of bombarding the gates of heaven to demonstrate to God the intensity with which we believe in His grace.

It is obviously not a call to repeat seemingly meaningless

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memorized prayers over and over as though the saying of the words many times would produce greater results. We know that from Matthew 6, where we read:

But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.

Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

(Matthew 6:7,8)

So Jesus is not recommending that we turn prayer into some kind of mechanical hammer with which we exercise repetitive activity to beat a weary Deity into submission. Prayer is not designed to transfer our will to God, but rather to transfer His will to us. He does, however, want us to want His will more than anything in the world. To do that, we must develop faith. We must learn to pray believing that His will is good, acceptable, and perfect, and that His timing is the key that makes His will generate His glory.

Therefore, we continue to ask. Not to wear God out, but to wear us in. Not to convince His heart that what we want is best, but to convince our hearts that what He does is best. Beloved, the difference is monumental. We are to keep on asking, keep on seeking, and keep on knocking because as we do, we are developing the muscles of our faith through the exercise of asking.

There are many reasons God does not answer all prayers quickly.

1- Those we pray for have a free will. Sometimes our prayers for others causes God to draw them through circumstances into situations where they will be more prone to cry out to Him and more likely to appropriate His grace. The timetable in those cases is not determined by God's waiting, but by the free choices that person for whom we are praying is making.

2- Time is an ally in the process of prayer. It is the "trying of our faith that works patience". God is as interested in developing our faith as He is in answering our prayers. If He were to grant instant answers every time, He would become a heavenly genie, waiting for our every command so He could do our bidding. We "have need of patience, that after we have done the will of God (by praying) we might receive the promise". (Hebrews 10:36) The

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longer the heavens appear to be silent, the more He stretches our faith. The more He stretches our faith, the more glory He will receive when the answer comes.

3- Timing is crucial to glorifying God. It is often the split-second timing of God in answering prayer that reminds us it is an answer, and it is of grace. It is often the seemingly last-minute answers that honor Him the most. When all other hope is gone, and there seems to be no way out and God moves in at the very last second, it is so obvious who did it. Often, when we ask God for something and it simply happens, we internally wonder if it wouldn't have happened anyway. When the ship is sinking, and there is no hope, however, God's rescue boats are obviously not accidental.

4- The picture is always bigger than we realize. We pray for people and for things in the perspective in which we see them. God sees the bigger picture. He sees the effect His answer will have on the one for whom we are praying, those around them, and others who will follow. He knows the heart of the one you pray for, as well, and knows when the moment is right for maximum conviction and deliverance. We can't see the heart of man or know the mind of God completely. We see the boat and the water. He sees the whole ocean and the boats around the bend. Oh, that we could rejoice that His ways are higher and His vision broader than ours will ever be.

5- Not until we have entered into the fullness of His suffering, do we know how to enter into the grandeur of His grace. Prayer is one way for us to gain entrance into that place so near His heart. Watch Jesus in the garden. He was the Son of God. He knew the heart of His Father. He could have casually prayed and rushed on to some other task or to the immediacy of His crucifixion. But the agonizing He did in the garden that day was partially to teach us that until we enter into the fellowship of His sufferings, and until we labor on our knees to find His will, we will not truly grasp the price He paid to become our intercessor. He ever lives to make intercession for us, because He was willing to die to make atonement for us. Coming to that realization is not an instantaneous thing, nor is it a casual thing. It involves a kind of prayer few ever experience, because it is a kind of experience few ever want to have.

God's plan for us in prayer is that we become men and women

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who so believe God and who so believe God knows best, that we will not rest until we have received every ounce of spiritual blessing He has for us. So we stay in His presence and continue to seek His face day and night. We keep on asking. That's what the original text indicates. We don't toss up a casual request as though God is waiting for our next tidbit of need, we pour out our hearts as though God is wanting to teach us how to pray. The disciples had asked Him to do that. Dear God, may we do the same, and may we be ready, when He chooses that the time is right, to enter into the Holy of Holies with Him to receive His answers.

Some of those answers may come quickly. Praise God. Others may be slow-developing, like a photograph that gradually surfaces in the developing room, emerging in ever increasing brilliance until it arrives in startling, living color; still others may never seem to come, and as we wait and wait and wait, and ask and ask and ask, we find that though the answer we seek is slow in coming, in the process of waiting, we are coming to know a God of love in a way we never thought possible. It may be weeks, months, or even years before we awaken to the fact that the very process has been our answer. Had God given us what we wanted when we wanted it, we would have better known the God who can, but since He didn't, we came instead, to better know the God who is.

That's who the Master wanted us to know. That is why He concluded the parable by asking that series of questions about children and gifts.

God wants us to keep on asking, so He can reveal to us how much our Father loves us. When we begin to doubt that God is going to answer our prayers, we need to stop and take into consideration just who it is we are asking. Jesus used a series of simple questions to drive home His point.

He asked, "Which of you would give your child a piece of rock and disguise it as a slice of bread?" I can't help but wonder if the Master didn't pause for a moment to see if anyone would answer. That question was followed by another that was equally simple to respond to. He asked, "Or which of you, if your child asked for a fish, would give him a snake instead?" Assuming there were no takers, I think Jesus went right on. "Then, which of you, if your child were to ask for an egg to eat, would put a scorpion on the

plate and think it was appropriate?”

Notice the gravity of the questions. He wasn't comparing fresh bread with stale bread. He wasn't comparing tenderloin of trout with some kind of bony, inedible fish, and He wasn't comparing fresh eggs with hard-boiled ones. He was talking about something wonderful to eat versus something dangerous or deliberately evil. He knew these men would never give their children anything that would hurt them.

Then He added: “And you're not God. You are men who are capable of sin, capable of doing that which is evil. But because you love your children, you would never ever think of bringing them harm. Now, then, just imagine a loving God who cannot sin nor tempt men to sin, hearing the prayers of His children. Do you honestly think He is capable of just ignoring you? Of course not.”

But watch what it is that God gives His children. Is it a new car because they asked? Not necessarily. Is it a better job because they are dissatisfied? Probably not. Is it a pain-free life because they are a believer? I think not. *He gives them His Spirit.* He gives them what His Spirit wants them to have. He answers their prayers by giving them what they need, and what they need is basically spiritual. That does not always mean He will not give you that car or that job or that promotion or that good report from the doctor. It does mean, I think, that if what you have asked for will not be best for you spiritually, and you prayed, “nevertheless, they will be done”, He will give you what will most change you into His likeness and most glorify His name instead. I also believe that the more intensely you pray, and the more consistently you ask, the more likely He is to give you what you need, not necessarily what you sought.

But He knows your heart. And should you be praying for things or for comfort or for the removal of trials God has sent to edify you, and He knows you do not really want His will to be done, He may do for you as He did for the children of Israel. “He gave them their request, but sent leanness to their souls.” He gave them what they begged for, and let them pay the consequences. So the command to keep on asking that you may receive must be coupled with the command that if you ask anything according to His will, He hears you. Otherwise, you will be playing God, and your insistence will become a mark of presumption, rather than

a reflection of faith.

Oh, what depth there is in this parable. It reaches to the heights of God's love, and it plummets to the depths of men's hearts. It takes some of the simplest of questions and frames them in such a way that the hearer cannot help but better understand how much God longs for His people to pray, and how much He longs to answer.

We sometimes tend to gauge God's love for us by what we can see visibly or by what we can testify of what He has done that we asked Him to do. What we often forget is that only a limited number of things we ask Him to do are best for us, spiritually, or best for the kingdom. As we pray for those things that are not best for us, and ask for His will to be done, we are, in effect, asking Him not to give them to us, and when He answers that way, we are to praise Him just the same. Understanding how to pray, then, is crucial to understanding the rest of this parable. But once we grasp that, the persistence with which we call upon Him is, according to this passage, a yardstick by which He measures our faith and rewards our prayers. And many of us pray like "sprinters", not like "marathon runners".

There are, for instance, many prayer requests that we can pray that we know are in His will. Abraham and Sarah had a promise from God. They knew that what they prayed for was God's will. What they didn't know was that the train of God's provisions often runs on a different track at a different speed than the "Human Express". Our concept is that the less time it takes for God to do something, the stronger God is. The more time it takes Him, the more difficult it was for Him to bring it to pass.

Beloved, there is nothing you can ask God to do that He cannot do before the request comes out of your mouth. He can heal that person, change that circumstance, stop that storm, move that kingdom in the twinkling of an eye. When He decides to move into history again, by the way, that's how long it will take Him. The more time He takes, the more of Himself He reveals to His children, and the more faith He imparts to them as they wait. Abraham and Sarah waited so long they assumed God had either forgotten, they had misunderstood their role, or He tried, and just couldn't make it happen. So they decided to try to assume the role of "co-Gods". They decided to help Him out. You know

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the story. And you have probably, as I have, written a few of those “co-God” stories yourself. God took a little longer than you expected to answer. You gave Him a little more help than He asked for as a result. Oh, what tangled webs we weave in our fleshly desires to speed up His work.

I do not know what God may be doing in your life. I do know that in many of our lives, there is at least one prayer request that we have made through the years that just seems to be on hold. We know it’s in harmony with His will. We have prayed, believing. We have sought to have a pure heart as we did. But nothing happened. Not yet, anyway. In the meantime, God has answered prayer after prayer, and in so many other ways has demonstrated His love. But still we wait.

Sometimes, in our impatience, we tend to chastise God, or in our frustration, we tend to imply that it’s okay, this is one He just can’t handle. Dear God, what blasphemy! Can’t handle? The One who framed the universes? The One who laid the foundation of the world while the morning stars sang together and the sons of God shouted for joy? The One who is coming again on clouds of great glory to put all of His enemies under His feet? The One before whom one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord? Something He can’t do? Blasphemy is not a strong enough word.

No, the issue isn’t what God can do. The issue is what God is willing to do because He loves us so. He is willing to wait and wait and wait for the perfect timing to bring about His answer. He is willing to listen to our anxieties, our questioning hearts, our doubtful spirits. He is willing to watch the church in our day mobilize and organize Him right out of the picture because His slow and awkward ways are just too antiquated for our modern-day technology. He is willing. He is willing to do whatever it takes to bring us to the end of ourselves, so that when He does answer, no one can ever share His glory.

What He has asked us to do in the meantime, is to keep on asking, to keep on seeking, to keep on knocking. Because He needs to be reminded? Of course not. He is omniscient. Because we need to be reminded, beloved. We need to be reminded that “what God hath promised, He is able also to perform”.

The parable of the persistent teaches us that waiting is an opportunity for asking, not a season for depression; that silence

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is an open invitation for man to come closer to the heart of God where He can hear the very heartbeat of His God and, as He waits, come to learn God's mind in ways we never dreamed of. Don't twist it around to say that the more you badger Him, the more obligated He is to perform for you. God is not a performer, and we are not His instructors.

Don't forget to walk outside and take the role of "Captain Midnight" either. He has come in the middle of the night to get help. The one thing he doesn't need is a lecture. He's in trouble. He needs someone to care enough to help. The man of the house didn't have a good reason not to help. It was all a matter of inconvenience. The kids were asleep. He was in bed. The pantry light was out. Big deal. But don't laugh. You and I have used more selfish excuses than those to turn down brothers and sisters in the faith who were in need, all the while quoting on Sunday that we have "all things in common". Most of us don't even understand what that means, let alone are experiencing it in our daily lives.

That one at your door, according to Scripture, may be an "angel unawares" whom God has sent to test your response. You are expecting God to answer you just because you asked. For someone else to ask of you, however, is a different matter. Use this parable to measure your willingness to listen to and respond to the needs of others.

The greatest lesson, though, has to do with prayer. It has to do with those seemingly unanswered prayers and our eventual lack of faith that sometimes causes us, like Abraham, to either assume that God didn't hear, didn't care, couldn't meet our need, or simply didn't want to. May God forgive us. He is only creating a scenario to bless us more. He wants us to have more of Himself, so He allows the heavens to be silent for our benefit. We pray and nothing happens. We cry and nothing happens. We get others to pray and nothing happens. Days go by. Weeks go by. Months go by. Years go by. The pages of our prayer diary grow yellow with age. We look in the mirror and see the lines of age advance upon us, yet still no sound from heaven where that one crucial prayer is concerned. Has He forgotten? Has He grown weary? Oh, beloved, no.

Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching

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of his understanding.

(Isaiah 40:28)

God has not grown weary, dear friend, and neither must we. He is in the throne room of heaven waiting for the perfect moment to best reveal His grace. What are we to do? We are to keep on asking, that's what. For how long? Until He answers. Or until He comes again.

He will be pleased because of our persistence.

And we will be blessed.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- Does the statement about John teaching his disciples to pray change your image of John in any way? What kind of ministry do you envision him to have had?

2- Do you think Luke 11:2-4 was given at a different time than the sermon on the mount? What reasons would you give for making that assumption?

3- What other parable or parables did Jesus tell in which prayer was a major theme? What do they have in common?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- How have you viewed this parable in the past? Does it raise an issue in your mind about faith versus presumption?

2- Are there prayers you have prayed for a long time that seem to go unnoticed by God? Do you tend to get discouraged or cynical? Have you ever been honest with God about your frustrations and your discouragement?

3- Why do you think timing is so crucial with regard to answered prayer? Would you give your children everything they asked for the moment they asked for it? Why not?

4- Consider asking God to “teach you to pray” more perfectly. Then take “The Lord’s Prayer” along with the other prayers in the New Testament and begin to personalize and pray those prayers as a pattern back to God. Ask Him to give you His perspective of time as you joyfully praise Him when you have to wait for answers.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 11: 8,9

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10602 Mossbank, San Antonio, TX 78230
210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778

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