

Luke 11:1-10

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] Amen. So if you were here over the last few weeks you'll know that we were going through John's Gospel but we came to a good place to break from John's Gospel just before chapter 13 last week.

It was a good place to stop or at least for John to have a break from us for a while. So I wanted to go through a series of parables in Luke's Gospel before we get to Christmas.

There's a whole range of parables that Jesus teaches dealing with different issues in Luke. But to start off with I wanted us to look at Jesus' parables on prayer in Luke's Gospel.

So that's going to be for the next couple of weeks or so. The disciples ask the question, don't they, teach us to pray. Because prayer is something that we need to learn.

It is the most difficult thing to do in the world actually, naturally for us. Many of you will know that as soon as you come to pray, you're instantly distracted.

[1 : 07] You're lacking in the words. You can't concentrate. At times when we come to pray there is nothing that we want to do less than praying, isn't it?

Suddenly cleaning the bathroom or paying the bills seems more interesting than prayer. Do you know, it is much, much easier for me to speak to you about prayer for 20 minutes now, isn't it?

Than for us to go away and pray for 20 minutes. And what Jesus shows us in these parables that we'll see is that our problem in prayer is not a practical problem.

It is a theological problem. It's not that I'm too busy or I'm too tired to pray. It's not that I've got more important things that I need to do so that I can't pray.

The problem is not a practical thing. It is a spiritual and theological problem. And we know that because what Jesus gives us is not practical advice, but theological teaching.

[2 : 14] He gives us a parable, little earthly stories with a theological meaning attached. Ed Clowney, a professor in seminary, he said, The Bible does not present us with the art of prayer.

It presents us with the God of prayer. The more clearly we grasp who God is, the more our prayer is shaped and determined accordingly.

Prayer is not about a technique or a script that we learn off by heart. But it is about a heart that has learned about God.

And so Jesus gives us this parable so that we can understand what God is like. And its theology will fuel our prayer and the words of our prayers.

So on to this parable in Luke 11. There are certain questions that are asked that aren't really questions at all, aren't there? Is the Pope Catholic? Is water wet?

[3 : 23] No one ever bothers to answer those questions, do they? And you all know that the answer is totally obvious. Is the sky blue? It's obvious. Well here's another question for you.

Does God really answer your prayers? Does God really listen to the prayers of his people? And the answer is?

It's obvious. Because Jesus tells a story here in which he asks an obvious question, which has a really obvious answer.

And there's an obvious application. Obvious question, obvious answer and an obvious response. So first of all, an obvious question. Look with me at the story, the parable he tells, from verse 5 in the passage.

And here is the shortened version. He says, Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight asking for three loaves and will hear the answer from the friend, don't bother me.

[4 : 25] My kids are in bed, the door's shut. I can't get up and give you anything. The parable is in the form of a question, isn't it? And notice where the question begins and where it ends.

It starts with the words in verse 5, Which of you? And then it ends with the words at the end of verse 7, give you anything. And there's a question mark there.

So it's three verses, isn't it? That have the contents of this question. The whole parable and this story about a guy going to his friend at midnight asking for bread is the question.

Jesus pictures a scenario where a man goes to a friend in a culturally compromised position. He's had an unexpected visitor, hasn't he? And he needs some food to host this visitor.

So he goes round to another friend's house and he asks for some spare loaves. But the man inside the house refuses to open up and he stays in bed. And the whole scenario, the whole picture is a question as if to say, Which of you has ever experienced anything like that?

[5 : 41] Which of you has ever found themselves going and knocking on a friend's door and being knocked back like this man does in this situation? And it's important that we see that that is the whole question.

And how the question starts. Because there are ways of reading this parable that I think misunderstand what Jesus is trying to teach us about prayer. Some translations of the original Greek that Luke wrote it in Put the words at the start of the question.

Suppose. Suppose one of you has a friend and you go to him at midnight and you're refused your request. But that word is an accurate translation.

The words at the beginning of the question is a question word. And to say suppose has a kind of domino effect on the whole passage.

I don't want to kind of bog you down with the technicalities. But it changes the feel of what Jesus is asking. Because the question isn't, suppose you are refused a request, what should you do to make that person change their mind?

[6 : 56] What can you do to make God change his mind? That's not the question. The question is more like, have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous as such a request being refused?

Which of you has ever experienced anything like this? And it's an obvious question because it secondly has an obvious answer.

It has an obvious answer. We've got some folk in our church who've spent quite a bit of time in countries where the culture is a lot more like the culture of ancient Israel than it is in modern day Britain.

They were telling the story of how an Iranian friend they hadn't seen for a long, long time, they thought they'd actually lost touch with this guy, but one day, out of the blue, he phones them on their mobile phone and he says, I've just arrived in Heathrow Airport.

I'm going to be in London for two weeks. I need a place to stay. How do I get to your place? Now for the reserve British, that would be incredibly rude, wouldn't it?

[8 : 03] But culturally, for them, they were explaining that that was just normal for an Iranian to do. It's perfectly normal to put upon somebody like that.

To expect hospitality even from complete strangers if you're visiting different towns on a journey. And the same would have been given to our American friends if they'd gone to Iran and visited their town unannounced.

And so we've got to understand the culture a little bit to see how obvious this question is that Jesus asks. It is a question with a blindingly obvious answer. He pictures a scene where a request for bread is a request that no one in their right mind would refuse in that culture.

Which of you, he asks, would ever have experienced anything like this? And it's obvious, as if we need to answer that, Jesus, the disciples might say. The answer is, no one would have such a refusal.

It is unthinkable. It's the same obvious question, kind of answer, move that Jesus uses in a lot of other places in the Gospels.

[9 : 20] This kind of which of you question where the answer is really obvious. Which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his life? Which of you, who's got a son who falls into a well, wouldn't pull him out on the Sabbath?

The answer is always obvious, isn't it? No one. No one, Jesus. So who would go to his friend and receive a knockback like this?

I'm in bed, go away. No one. And so what Jesus is doing here is genius, isn't it? He wants us to answer the really obvious question with the obvious answer, so that we can answer a more profound question with instinct.

Does God answer prayer? It's as if Jesus is saying, do you know how ridiculous that question is? Is the sky blue?

Is water wet? Does anyone ask for bread in the middle of the night and get refused? The point of the parable is, is to show us that our prayer and our requests to God are answered.

[10 : 31] And it would be unthinkable to think otherwise. See what Jesus does, it is an argument from the lesser example to the greater example, isn't it?

If a human friend, if you go round to your neighbours, or you stick your head over the fence of your back garden and ask your neighbour for some help, you expect him to help you, don't you, your neighbour?

And if your friend, if your neighbour is bound to help you, how much more is God bound to help you? When you ask him. If you would ask for help from a neighbour and expect that help, how much more?

With God. And actually, Jesus ramps up the comparison. It is a lesser example to the greater example, but it's sort of beefed up. Because not only is it unthinkable that a friend would refuse a request, but it's unthinkable that a friend would refuse a request, even when it's rudely asked. Look at verse 8. I tell you, though he'll not get up and give him anything because he's his friend, yet because of his impotence he'll rise and give him whatever he needs. Now again, there are a few issues in the original text.

[11 : 48] It's one of the extremely rare cases where the English is quite hard to translate it. So let me just cut to the chase, and I'll guess you'll just have to take my word for it, won't you?

But the word impotence there refers, I think, to the rudeness of the requester, of the man outside the house at midnight. Because even though this kind of thing was normal, this is still pretty annoying behaviour, isn't it?

He grants the request even when, and especially because it's been rudely asked. Even in this culture, the man inside the house still thinks to himself, this is a real pain.

It would be unthinkable to refuse a request from a friend, but he's thinking, this is a bit inconsiderate. You know, it is midnight.

Yet, even then, it would be ridiculous to think that anyone could refuse the requester, even if the requester has been a bit rude about it.

[12 : 56] It's an obvious question with an obvious answer. And so, thirdly, Jesus calls for an obvious response from us. I want to say, this parable is not about persistence in prayer.

Many people read it like that, but I don't think that that is the point of the parable. There are other parables about persistence in prayer. But this is not so much about persistence, but about certainty in prayer.

Martin Luther said, prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of his willingness. It is not about trying to change God's mind the longer we pray, or being heard for our many words. You know, these kind of 24-hour prayer vigils. I slightly worry about that, as if God is going to listen to us more the longer we pray for. The point of the parable is the very opposite of the feeling of uncertainty.

Once we get the obviousness of the story, we're meant to draw the lines, aren't we, with prayer. Which of you has had this experience? No one. And so, which person has sought and asked and knocked and been refused by God?

[14 : 16] And the answer is, no one. And if this sleeper, if this human example, can't refuse, then how could God refuse? It is precisely because God is not like the sleeping man inside this house.

He is not reluctant. Somebody has said that God is biased in our favour when we come to him. In the favour of his people.

Now, of course, this doesn't apply, does it, to my request for a Porsche? Or perfect health, or whatever it is I think I need. But as we pray according to his purposes and his will.

And this is the theological picture we are to have of God. He is the enthusiastic listener. He is the willing answerer.

He is the one who listens and acts. The one who meets requests and needs of his people. So as we think about this, I wonder how you pray.

[15 : 25] The reformer, Calvin, he pictures someone who needs to hear this parable. And he pictures someone who is doubtful of being heard and answered.

And he imagines them sitting in their room and praying a prayer like this. Oh Lord, I am in doubt whether you will hear me. But because I am pressed by worry, I run to you.

That if I am worthy, you may help me. But he says this is not the way that saints pray in the Bible. There is a humility, isn't there, of course.

But he says the Holy Spirit instructs us to draw near to the heavenly throne with confidence that we might receive grace. And he says this is the only way that prayer is acceptable to God, which is born out of presumption of faith.

And is grounded in unshaken assurance of hope. Sounds a bit arrogant, doesn't it? Presumption of faith. But I think he understands Luke 11.

[16 : 38] When we come to God in prayer, through the Lord Jesus, we come in confidence and assurance of being heard. If we know that confidence when we knock on our neighbour's door and ask for help, how much more we should know that confidence when we seek God's help.

You know, it might be for the first time that today you might actually do this. That you might actually pray. And you should do that.

If it's your first time or your thousandth time to pray. So when you go back home today, when you go back to work, remember in prayer you have to begin with God, don't you?

And what he is like. Rather than beginning with yourself. We're not trying to learn the art or the technique of prayer first.

But we are trying to learn about and to know the God of prayer. And Jesus is telling us here, he is not the God who is reluctant. And that his reluctance is something that we must overcome in prayer.

[17 : 48] But there is a willingness in God that we are to grab hold of. And that is what you are doing when you pray to him. And who has ever come to God and prayed and sought grace from him and been refused?

Well, isn't that obvious? Jesus says, no one. Let's pray.