PARABLES

The Friend at Midnight and the Poem on a Father's Gifts
Luke 11:5-13

The Friend at Midnight (Lk. 11:5-8)

The Context

This story is part of 'The Travel Narrative' of Luke (Lk. 9:51-19:48)

There are a number of themes recurring through these chapters – 10 double sections

1. Eschatological events (9:51-56; 18:22-35; 19:10, 28-48)
2. A call to follow Jesus (9:57-10:12 and 18:3-19:9)
3. What shall I do to inherit eternal life? (10:25-41 and 18:18-30)
4. **Prayer** (11:1-13 and 18:1-14)
5. Signs of the present Kingdom (11:14-22) and signs of the future Kingdom (17:11-37)
6. Something about the cost of salvation (ch. 15)
7. Conflict with the Pharisees: money (11:37-12:34 and 16:9-31)
8. The Kingdom is now **and** not yet (12:35-59 and 16:1-8, 16)
9. The call of the Kingdom to Israel (13:1-9) and to outcasts (14:12-15:32)
10. The nature of the Kingdom (13:10-20 and 14:1-11)

It is strange that it is called 'The Travel Narrative' because no travelling takes place. It may be because it is a collection of stories told during the last time Jesus travelled to Jerusalem.

The two sections on **prayer** are Lk. 11:1-13 and Lk. 18:1-14.

There are three sections in Lk. 11:1-13:

- The Lord's prayer – v. 1-4
- The friend at midnight – v. 5-8
- The poem on the Father's gifts – v.9-13

We will look at the second and third sections.

The Lord Jesus tells the story and the poem to illustrate His teaching about prayer.

"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place and when He finished one of His disciples said to Him, 'Teach us to pray…..'. And He said to them…" (Lk. 11:1)

Why did these people ask to be taught to pray? All Jewish children knew how to pray. The disciples were not asking about the **method** of prayer. Rather they were trying to learn the **secret** of prayer!

The story begins with a question to which the hearers would answer with an emphatic 'No'. Here is a paraphrase of the question:

"Can you imagine having a guest and going to a neighbour to borrow bread? The neighbour offers a lot of stupid and ridiculous excuses about a locked door and sleeping children?"

A person from the Middle East would answer in a shocked tone, *"No! I can't imagine such a thing!"* But the man does get up and fulfil his neighbour's request – not because of friendship or neighbourliness, but because of his sense of honour and the great need to avoid shame. The story is about honour and the shamelessness of the man asleep. The story teaches that God is a God of honour and we can have complete assurance that our prayers will be heard.

There is a parallel story in Luke 18:1-8 about a persistent widow and an unjust judge. That story is about persistence in prayer, but that is not the emphasis in this story.

The Structure

Introduction

"And He said to them, 'Which have you, having a friend, will go to him at midnight ….' "

WHAT WILL NOT HAPPEN

1. ***"And say to him, 'Friend <u>lend me</u> three loaves' "*** [Request]
   2. ***"For a friend of mine has arrived on a journey"*** [Reason for request]
      3***. "And I have nothing to set before him."*** [An appeal to duty]
      3* ***"And he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me.' "*** [Duty refused]
   2* ***"The door is now shut and my children are in bed with me."*** [Reason for refusal]

1* ***"I cannot get up and give you anything."*** [Request denied]

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

1. ***"Though he will not <u>give</u> him anything…"*** [Won't answer the request]
   2. Having arisen
      3. (Not giving him anything) ***"Because of being his friend"*** [Not for friendship's sake]
      3* ***"But because of his <u>avoidance of shame</u>…"*** [For honour's sake]
   2* ***"He will get up."*** [He gets up]

1* ***"And give him whatever he wants."*** [Request granted]

So the structure is a double parabola. The focus of both parabolas is **giving** and the key topic is **honour** – i.e. between 3 and 3*. Clearly the first parabola is the pattern used in the second. The key phrase is ***"avoidance of shame"*** – sometimes translated 'persistence' or 'impudence'!]

Cultural Aspects

The story begins with the familiar, ***"For which of you ….."*** This is a way Jesus often began a story. [See Lk. 11:5; 14:28; 17:7 and Jn. 8:46] It is the equivalent of "Once upon a time …" i.e. a standard formula. [See also Mt. 6:27; 7:9; 12:11] Jesus uses this introduction to try and force the hearer to take a definite standpoint. Most of the times it is used the answer nearly everyone would give is 'No'.

For example: See the paraphrase of Luke 14:5:

"Can any one among you imagine a son falling in a well on the Sabbath day and he would not immediately draw him up?"

The certain answer is 'No'. So to understand the phrase, ***"For which of you …"*** in verse 5 is to expect a very emphatic 'No'. This is crucial in understanding this story. The Lord Jesus is asking us to imagine going to a neighbour, asking help to entertain a friend and getting the answer 'No'. It would never happen! Arab hospitality and responsibility for a guest is legendary. Arab hearers can't imagine the very silly excuses about a closed door and sleeping children when the care of a guest is the issue.

Here are some cultural factors:

The visitor

1. Bedouin often travel by night – especially in the summer when it's very hot. They use the stars to navigate. But villagers don't travel at night except in rare circumstances. Along the Hills of Judea, Samaria and Galilee up into the Lebanon there is usually an on-shore breeze that keeps the temperature down. So for a villager to travel by night would be very unusual.

2. The bread eaten in Palestine has not changed much over the millennia. In Lebanon there is "mountain bread" – thin, flat and about 2 feet across. But in Palestine and Jordan – then and now – the bread is round and raised. A guest is always given an unbroken loaf – usually more than he will eat.

3. In some parts of the world a peasant family would bake bread every day, but this isn't so in villages in the Middle East. It needs too much wood! [In towns today there are professional bakeries.] A village household makes enough dough for about a week's worth of bread and then takes it to the village oven. The women of the village co-operate in bread baking. So all the women know who has baked recently.

4. Why three loaves? One is for the guest, one for the host and one for "the angel" at the table. This "angel" was a rabbinic tradition. It is still current in Jordan.

The host **must** serve his guest and the guest **must** eat even if they both know he isn't hungry. The issue is not the food itself, but rather **adequate food for the occasion**. Middle East hospitality requires the host to provide for the guest almost beyond his ability to provide.

5. The host sees himself not as an individual, but as part of the community. Typically, the host will say to his guest, *"Welcome, you have honoured our village"* – not me, or even my family. Ideally a guest leaves the home of a host thinking, *"Wow! This is really a hospitable village!"*

So in going to his sleeping neighbour the host is asking him to do his duty towards a guest of the village. The host knows his neighbour's family have just made a batch of loaves and have several to spare.

As long as the request is modest enough, refusal is unthinkable. In any case, bread is a humble part of a meal. Bread is not the meal. Bread is the fork and spoon that is dipped into the common dish. Each person breaks off a piece of bread, dips it into the common dish, scoops some out and eats it. Then he starts again. This is hygienic because each time he uses a fresh piece of bread. So bread is always eaten with something. Even if the host is abjectly poor bread will be eaten with salt. In Arabic, after the meal is over, the guest will compliment the host on the wonderful meal and the host will reply, *"Before you, my noble guest, the best I have to offer is only bread and salt".*

Everyone knows that the host doesn't just need bread. He also needs the common dish (meat, beans or something else). He probably needs other things as well.

The Host

The host is confident that any request he makes to a neighbour will be granted. Why?

- Because he is a host and not a borrower. He is not asking for himself.
- Because he goes to one friend in order to honour a second friend.
- Because he is asking for basic, humble food – the bare minimum.

The host perhaps starts his round of the neighbours – a tray from here, a pitcher from there, mugs etc. In the end his sleeping neighbour ***"gets up and gives him whatever he needs"***.

The host probably had lots of food already – olives gathered at harvest time and stored in brine, grapes, molasses, cheese etc. In a one-room peasant house the family's food supply was stored in a loft at the far end. So when the host says, ***"I have nothing"***, he is speaking idiomatically. He means, *"I have nothing to serve my guest so that I may honour my village"*. The appeal to the sleeping neighbour is for him to do his duty for the honour of the village. The host is not **borrowing** the three loaves. To return them would be an insult – like returning a borrowed teaspoon of sugar when drinking tea with a neighbour.

So 1st century Palestinians know the background. As they listen to Jesus they think, *"This would never happen"*. The excuses are very feeble. The door bolt is not heavy and the children

will fall asleep again. (They don't have to go to school the next day!) The excuses are humorous to the hearers! So in this story the hearers are meant to identify with the host.

The meaning of *"anaideia"*

In normal Greek literature *'anaideia'* (translated 'impudence' or 'persistence') has the meaning 'shamelessness' – a negative quality. Greek authors Plato, Sophocles, Heroclutas and Epicletus (50-130 AD) used *'anaideia'* in this sense. Josephus uses the word to mean 'shameless'. By the second and third centuries the Greek word was translated 'to act with impudence' – again a negative quality. In European translations the change to 'persistence' (a positive quality) occurred several centuries later.

Why is this a problem?

We are to identify ourselves with the host. If the teaching of Jesus at this point is that God is like the sleeping man in bed who is too lazy to get up to give his friend bread, then this is an insult to the character of God! God is no sleeping man in bed wanting us to beg and pray. Is it shameless for a believer to take his requests to God in prayer? Clearly not! So many European translators take the negative quality (shamelessness) and turn it into a positive quality (persistence). In order to justify this change they compare this story to the story of the Unjust Judge. The widow is persistent and finally gets an answer.

In this story it is assumed that the host keeps on knocking until the sleeping neighbour changes his mind. The implication is that we should persist in prayer until God answers – i.e. we are to cajole God to get Him to change His mind. Jesus teaches us that we should persist in prayer until an answer is given, but once the answer is given we should not cajole God to get Him to change His mind. Our response should be, *"Your will be done."* So persisting to influence God to change His mind is **not** being taught. Persisting in prayer is not to get God to do what we want, but to prepare us to receive His blessing. So to change *'anaideia' to* 'persistence' creates severe theological problems!

What really happened?

The host doesn't knock he calls. To knock on a neighbour's door in the night would frighten the neighbour. A stranger knocks, but a friend calls and when he calls his neighbour will recognise his voice.

In line 3* – ***"But because of his** 'anaideia'…"* the 'he' refers to the sleeping neighbour, not to the host. The neighbour clearly refuses to do his duty to the village community. So there is no indication that the host is persistent in calling!

So modern translators use the word 'shamelessness'. In Luke 18 clearly the judge cares nothing for the woman. The sleeping neighbour cares nothing for the host and won't help him for friendship's sake.

Leon Morris, in his commentary on Luke's Gospel in the Tyndale Series gives a fairly typical evangelical commentary – although he doesn't say that the world *'anaideia'* means 'shamelessness'.

So the sleeping neighbour has 'shamelessness' and this makes him get up and do his duty. **The problem** with this is that in the story, the sleeping neighbour represents God and God is absolutely never shamed!! Shamelessness is a very negative quality. So how have the theologians tried to solve the problem?

1. **Shift the 'shamelessness' back to the host** – i.e. the host is persistent. Therefore we are to come boldly to God in persistent prayer. But this is poor exegesis!
2. **Look again carefully at Greek grammar**

   '*An-aideia'* consists of two parts:

- *'Aidos'* (the noun of *'aideia'*) has two meanings:
  - a sense of shame/honour – similar to self-respect (a positive quality)
  - a shame – a scandal (a negative quality)
- Adding 'an' to the beginning changes the positive to a negative. So, a sense of shame/honour + 'an' = without a sense of shame/honour.

In Semitic languages there is a very big difference between 'shame' and 'a sense of shame'. But in Greek there is no difference! Shame is a very important factor in Middle Eastern cultures. In the Far East it is called 'face'. **Law** covers some areas of life, but all areas of life are **controlled** by shame (a great negative). This must be avoided at all costs because of an individual's inner sense of shame – i.e. a shame-honour oriented conscience.

So in translating the Aramaic words of Jesus, Luke used:

'aidos' + '*an'* = '*anaideia'*
(shame) (avoidance of shame)
negative **positive**

In English we take a word like 'blame' (a negative quality). We add to it 'less' and it gives us 'blameless' (a positive quality). If this is the correct exegesis, how should we understand the story Jesus told?

The sleeping neighbour is wakened in the night by the host. He learns that the host must provide a banquet for his guest and is going round his neighbours to ask their help. Now if the neighbour refuses to give any bread (which he certainly had and which was a trifling request) then the host would go on to another neighbour's house. But the story of the sleeping neighbour's stinginess would be all over the village by morning and he and his family would be deeply shamed! So because he wants to avoid shame he gets up and gives the host whatever he is asking for – i.e. much more than just three loaves! **So the motive is not friendship, but the avoidance of shame in a deeply honour-shame society**.

What does this say about prayer and the nature of God?

When the host goes to his neighbour to ask for bread everything is apparently against him. It is night and neighbour is asleep in bed. The door is locked. Perhaps his neighbour doesn't like him – i.e. he isn't his friend. Still in an honour-shame culture his neighbour will receive him and give him much more than he asks. Why? The neighbour is a **man of honour** and integrity and he won't violate this quality.

Now God also has His honour and He will not violate His honour! He will always act with the highest degree of honour. **The preservation of His honour is a prime virtue of God.**

So in this story Jesus told there is a **"how much more"** argument. If you are confident that a neighbour in your village will help out in a crisis, **"how much more"** can you be confident as you take your requests to a loving Father-God!

This story is followed by a poem in which the **"how much more"** argument is repeated twice with the same purpose.

So the story deals with two issues:

1. **The nature of God** – the God to whom you pray has honour of an infinite nature. He will not violate this. Beyond this, He also loves you!
2. **The assurance of the person who prays** - this is the **"how much more"** argument. If you can be confident of having your needs met when you go to a neighbour in the night, how much more can you rest assured that you will receive a response when you take your requests to a loving, honourable Father!

Summary

This is a Middle Eastern story of a man who knows that even a neighbour who doesn't like him will honour his request in the night! The neighbour's motive is the avoidance of shame. The sleeping neighbour preserves his honour by granting the host's request and more.

So as we come to God in prayer, we have much more reason to be assured that our requests will be granted.

The Poem on the Fathers Gifts – Luke 11:9-13

Introduction

This is a poem composed of three unforgettable comparisons. It is probably addressed to opponents of the Gospel. It affirms that a Heavenly Father gives good gifts to **all** his children. Luke places the poem here to strengthen the teaching in the story of the 'Friend at Midnight.' Here and in Lk. 16:1-13 we have a story followed by a poem, connected by, "***And I tell you ….".***

Compare the story of the 'Friend at Midnight' with this poem:

Friend at Midnight (v. 5-8)	**Poem** (v. 9-13)
A neighbour deals with his neighbour.	A father deals with his son.
The neighbour asks for bread and gets bread and more.	The person asks for something good and gets something bad.
The neighbour only calls once.	Continued action in asking is implied.
Neighbours call to each other.	Knocking is introduced.

The Lord Jesus gave us the same poem on the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 7:7-11)

The Structure of the Poem

"And I tell you ….

1. ***Ask and it shall be given to you***
2. ***Seek and you shall find***
3. ***Knock and it shall be opened to you***

1*. ***For everyone who asks receives***

2*. ***And the one who seeks finds***

3*. ***And to the one who knocks, it shall be opened***."

So there is a repetition – ask – seek – knock. In Aramaic the first 3 lines rhyme at the end and the second 3 rhyme at the beginning with a repetition of 'everyone' at the start of each line.

The present tenses of the imperative imply continuous action – i.e. keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking. In the back-translation to Aramaic the repetition of 'everyone' is to emphasise an appeal to **everyone** – even outcastes. They too will receive if they ask. [It speaks of the universality of the Gospel.]

Asking is still part of life in the Middle East, but street beggars are despised. So both sinners and the 'so-called righteous' are equally invited to ask and will find an equal response.

The 2nd verse of the poem has a different structure to the 1st but the 3rd is a repeat of the 1st – i.e.

1

2

3

1*

2*

3*

The Structure of the second verse

A ***"If the son asks the father for bread***

A* ***will he give him a stone?***

B ***or a fish; instead of a fish***

B* ***will he give him an eel (snake)?***

C ***or if he asks an egg***

*C** ***will he give him a scorpion?"***

[C and C* are not present in Mt. 7:7-11.] Again in this verse there are rhyme structures.

Note: Bread, fish and eggs are the common food of the common man. But bread in Palestine/ Jordan/Lebanon is round and flat, if dusty, it could look like a stone. There is little outward difference between a certain type of fish (an eel) that can reach 5 ft in length and even crawl a few meters on land and a snake. A scorpion looks very like an egg when it folds itself up.

The eels in the Sea of Galilee are 'unclean' – i.e. not 'kosher'. Fishermen would often catch both edible fish and eel-like creatures. These eels would be thrown back into the sea.

In Arabic versions of the poem there is a word play on *'hut'* – fish in classical Arabic (*'samak'* is the colloquial) and *'hayyah'* – snake. In Aramaic there are other word assonances.

A valuable insight from visiting many cultures is that there is a nearly universal characteristic of human nature – in spite of man's failure and breakdown; there is an instinctive care of a father for his child. There are some fathers who don't care, but in terms of percentages this is low. Jesus took this care for granted. A father never mocks a child's request.

The Third Verse

"If therefore..

1. ***You being evil***
   2. ***know good gifts***
      3. ***to <u>give</u> to your children***

1* ***how much more the Father***

2* ***out of heaven the Holy Spirit***

3* ***shall <u>give</u> to those <u>asking</u> Him."*** } Literal word-for-word translation

There are few promises in the Bible so broad and unqualified as the one in this wonderful verse. The Holy Spirit is beyond doubt the greatest gift God can give to a person. If we have this gift, we have all things – life, light, hope and heaven. Having this gift we have God the Father's boundless love, God the Son's atoning blood and full companionship with all three persons of the Trinity. This is held out to us by the Lord Jesus as a gift to be obtained by prayer. If we want to change we need to ask – seek – knock for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Old Syriac – very similar to Aramaic – says, ***"How much more the Father from heaven gives the Holy Spirit"***. The structure is:

1. Giver
   2. Gift
      3. Receiver

He is making the point that the person who asks God can be assured of receiving even better gifts than those a father gives to his son.

In verse one of the poem: all will receive

In verse two: all will receive and the gift will be good

In verse three: the gift will be good

The twin emphases of the poem are: **all** will receive **a good gift**!

What is the good gift? **The Holy Spirit**!

To whom was the poem addressed?

Options include:

- The disciples – the followers of Jesus
- The crowds
- The opponents of Jesus – the scribes, pharisees and the temple hierarchy

Jesus uses an introductory phrase: ***"And I tell you …."*** (v. 9)

This is used 5 times in Luke's Gospel:

- **To the opponents of Jesus** in:
  - The ox falling into a pit on the Sabbath (Lk. 14:5)
  - The Lost Sheep (Lk. 15:5)
- **To the disciples** in:
  - The discussion about the unworthy servants (Lk. 17:7)
  - Anxiety and the lilies of the field (Lk. 12:25)
- **To the crowds** in:
  - The building of a tower (Lk. 14:28)

Probably it was said to the opponents of Jesus for it uses the phrase, ***"You, being evil …"***.
The admonition to ask, seek and knock sounds very much as though Jesus was talking to those who had not yet done these things. The pharisees taught that only **some** (the righteous) who call on the name of the Lord would be saved. Jesus insists that **everyone** who asks receives.

Perhaps the story was directed to the disciples and the poem to the pharisees. In effect the poem says that sinners can pray to God and if they do, He listens. Jesus says something like,

"Your eyes are closed against the fatherly goodness of God. Consider how you behave with your own children. If you, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, why are you unwilling to believe that God will give the gifts of the New Kingdom to those who ask Him?"

A Summary of the Poem

- It states dramatically that a gracious father always gives good gifts to **all** who ask him.
- So God who is good will hear our prayers.
- We are encouraged to ask, seek and knock and so receive answers to our prayers.
- We have a Gracious Father who always gives good gifts, and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit, to all who ask Him.

Let us ask ourselves whether we know anything of real prayer. 'Saying prayers' is not praying. Our relationship with God is always measured by our prayer life and the highest attitude in prayer is the attitude that seeks and obtains from God His Holy Spirit – the infilling and the outflowing of the Holy Spirit.