

## **“Keep Knocking”**

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*<sup>1</sup>[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." <sup>2</sup>He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. <sup>3</sup>Give us each day our daily bread. <sup>4</sup>And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

*<sup>5</sup>And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' <sup>7</sup>And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.*

*<sup>9</sup>"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. <sup>10</sup>For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>11</sup>Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? <sup>12</sup>Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? <sup>13</sup>If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

*(Luke 11:1-13)*

When Molly and Kate were little, there was a year when the movie “Finding Nemo” essentially ran on a loop in our house. They loved it, and I’ll be honest I did, too. One of the scenes that was seared into my brain was a moment when Marlin, the clown fish father who was desperately trying to find his lost son Nemo, seems to lose all hope. When that happens, his friend Dory is there to lift him up.

“Hey Mr. Grumpy Gills,” she says, “when life gets you down, you know what you gotta do? Just keep swimming... Just keep swimming... Just keep swimming, swimming, swimming...” When Marlin was ready to give up, Dory urged him to persist, to keep on trying, to keep moving forward.

That is one of the key lessons Jesus teaches about prayer. After laying out the basic elements of prayer, Jesus shares a parable about a person in need. A traveler has come to their home late at night needing food and shelter, but the cupboards are regrettably empty. They have no food to offer the unexpected guest. So they run to the home of a good neighbor. They hate to have to ask such a favor so late at night, but they have no other option. So they knock on the door of their neighbor to see if that household might be able to share some food for the hungry traveler.

I would say that this parable is about two things. First, it is about honor and shame. In that culture, it was an ironclad social expectation that, if a traveler in need knocks on your door, you must welcome them in, feed them, and give them a place to sleep. You were obligated to do this. This kind of hospitality to the stranger is repeatedly emphasized in the Old Testament covenant law, just as the example of the Good Samaritan is lifted up in the New Testament. You take care of aliens in your midst. Period. Failure to live up to this moral expectation would bring great shame on a house. That was true for the one who greeted the traveler at the door, but it was equally binding on the neighbor down the street who had already gone to bed and didn’t want to be bothered. In that culture, at that time, it would have been a preposterous, indefensible thing for someone to refuse to get out of bed to tend to this need. They believed that no decent person would turn their



back on such basic hospitality. So, the stakes here were more than a meal and a bed. This is a matter of honor or shame.

But the parable is also about persistence. When the friend knocks on his neighbor's door at midnight, only to hear the muffled response "Don't bother me. We have gone to bed, my children are asleep, and I am not getting up," does the knocker give up hope and go back empty handed? No, he keeps knocking. He keeps knocking and knocking and knocking until the neighbor has no choice but to get up. Jesus puts it this way: even if the neighbor will not get up to help because it is the right thing to do, they will get up if it is the only way to make that infernal knocking stop! The Greek word Jesus uses, ἀναίδεια (*anaideia*), is translated in our version as "persistence," but it is really more than that. It also means shamelessness, even impudence. Why did that door open late at night, after everyone had gone to bed? Not because of friendship or honor or ethical duty, but because of unrelenting... borderline obnoxious... persistence.

The late, great Presbyterian missionary Kenneth Bailey, who served in Lebanon for more than forty years, used to share a story that he carried with him to the mission field. It came out of Iraq in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. I will share it in Bailey's own words....

*It was in the ancient city of Nisibis, in Mesopotamia. Immediately on entering the gate of the city ... [there] was a large open hall, the court of justice of the place. On a slightly raised dais at the further end sat the Kadi, or judge, half buried in cushions. Round him squatted various secretaries and other notables. The populace crowded into the rest of the hall, a dozen voices clamoring at once, each claiming that his cause should be the first heard. The more prudent litigants [stayed back away from] the fray, but held whispered communications with the secretaries, passing bribes, euphemistically called fees, into the hands of one or another. When the greed of the [secretaries] was satisfied, one of them would whisper to the Kadi, who would promptly call such and such a case. It seemed to be ordinarily taken for granted that judgment would go ... for the litigant who had bribed highest.*

*But meantime, a poor woman on the [out]skirts of the crowd perpetually interrupted the proceedings with loud cries for justice. She was sternly bidden to be silent, and reproachfully told that she came there every day. "And so I will," she cried out, "till the Kadi hears me."*

*At length, at the end of a suit, the judge impatiently demanded, "What does that woman want?" Her story was soon told. Her only son had been taken for a soldier, and she was alone, and could not till her piece of ground; yet the tax-gatherer had forced her to pay the impost, from which as a lone widow she could be exempt. The judge asked a few questions, and said, "Let her be exempt." Thus her perseverance was rewarded. Had she had money to fee a clerk, she might have been excused long before.<sup>1</sup>*

Like the parable told by Jesus, this is story of shame and honor. In a place where people sought justice, rulings were being bought and sold with bribes and kickbacks. It was the kind of place that, if Jesus had been there, he would be angrily knocking over tables and exposing embedded hypocrisies. But then, when no one could be expected to do the honorable thing, a lone voice is finally heard over the screaming crowd. It is the cry of a poor widow whose only son had been forcibly taken and conscripted into military service, leaving her unable to farm her meager plot of land to make a living wage. To add insult to this injury, the local tax collector had deceitfully exacted from her the standard farm tax, even though she, as a widow, was clearly exempt under the law. Will this story end as it had unfolded, shamefully, without justice? Or will the court -- against its every broken instinct -- somehow do the honorable thing?

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<sup>1</sup>Story cited in Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), p. 147.

And, again like the parable of Jesus, this is also a story of persistence. Day after day, this poor woman comes to the court to plead her case. Day after day she is pushed aside, mocked, and barked at to keep quiet. But she keeps showing up, again and again and again. “And I will keep on showing up,” she cries out, “until the Kadi hears me.”

These are the things that Christ wants us to understand about prayer: about God’s part in prayer, and our part in prayer. In this parable, God is behind both doors. When we are in need – when we as weary travelers are scared, vulnerable, worn out, or hungry, when we are in need a place of refuge, we will not be turned away. “*Ask, and it will be given you,*” God says. “*Search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*” In other words, from God’s perspective, hearing and listening to prayer is a question of honor. It would be preposterous to God, incomprehensible to God, to ignore us in a time of need. It would contradict the very nature of God’s character, God’s justice, and God’s love. When we, as burdened travelers, come to God’s door and knock in prayerful hope, God will always open that door.

And God is also behind the door of the sleeping neighbor. We human beings are fallible. We get tired. We get cranky. Things happen that do not bring out the best in us. And that is especially true when someone inconveniently knocks on our door in the middle of the night. By contrast, there is **never** a time when God is not right there, ready to open the door to welcome a friend or a stranger. We know this because scripture tells us so very clearly: *I lift up my eyes to the hills— from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth. He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*<sup>2</sup> You heard it – it is right there, in no uncertain terms: God will not fail you. God will not flake out on you. God will always be there for you, because God does not sleep or slumber in your time of need!

This is a good thing to remember, because sometimes we forget. The psalms repeatedly ask a question to which many of us can relate: “How long?” How long, O Lord, must we wait for justice? How long, O Lord, before you save us from our pain? The poor widow in Iraq surely asked this question. How long before justice is finally done? The truth is that prayer does not guarantee that our pleas will be answered in a certain way, or in a certain amount of time. Those decisions, those answers, are above our pay grade... they are not in our hands. But let’s admit it: after a while of asking this question, after we have been knocking on God’s door day after day, some doubts begin to creep in. The author Philip Yancey puts it this way: “When God seems slow to respond, we may suspect a lack of concern.”<sup>3</sup> Maybe God really doesn’t care.

Against that tendency to doubt, this parable eliminates any question about God’s care and concern. God cannot imagine, will not imagine, leaving us hanging. When we knock, God will always answer the door.

That’s God’s part in prayer. So what about our part? Our part is to be persistent. Why did the traveler get fed? Because the person who went to their neighbor in the middle of the night was persistent. Why did the poor widow receive justice? Because of her persistence. She would not be shamed... she would not be silenced... she would not be denied. She kept showing up – every day -- until the door of justice was finally opened to her.

For our part, we must follow this example. Even when hope seems lost, we cannot grow despondent. When the basic needs of vulnerable people are not being met... when shameful things are happening around us, things that we know are displeasing to God... when our neighbors are not living up to standards and expectations that we hold dear as a people... we have to keep pounding on the doors day and night until the lights come on and we are heard.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 121:1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Yancey, 147.

And, even more importantly, we need to keep seeking God. Yes, we can ask, "How long must we wait?" That's fine. God is used to that. But in the meantime we need to know that God is hearing us... that God is there for us... that as Psalm 121 says the Lord is our keeper, the Lord will keep us from all evil, the Lord will guard "our going out and our coming in from this time on and forevermore."<sup>4</sup>

People of faith, when life gets you down, you know what you gotta do?

Just keep knocking.

Just keep knocking.

Just keep knocking, knocking, knocking.

***Amen.***

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<sup>4</sup> Psalm 121:5-8.