

There's a missionary family back in the States from a 17 year term in Indonesia. They have been blacklisted from the country. The story goes that, I will call the husband Dave, and an Indonesian Christian counterpart befriend an Ulama (explain) using storytelling. They find themselves with a crowd around them and the Injil, Arabic for the Gospel, is passed around and read aloud in the crowd. The Injil then gets taken by some radicals who were in the crowd and the result is that Dave and his Indonesian friend are arrested for proselytization which is illegal in Indonesia. They think it will only be a few days, but it is extended a number of times and stretches into months. The question as Christians were praying for this is, "Where is God"? Dave's wife has to bribe guards to smuggle basic needs in, where is God? Condoleezza Rice, our secretary of state at the time, steps in but to no avail, where is God? The State Dept. gets increasingly worried and things grow worse. More false information is disseminated through the mosques and the situation is growing dangerous, where is God? God just does not seem to be answering prayers!

Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."² And he said to them, "When you pray, say:

"Father, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

³ Give us each day our daily bread,

⁴ and forgive us our sins,

for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

And lead us not into temptation."

⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves,'⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him';⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'?'⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.¹

Question: Is God reluctant or inconvenienced by us? Is prayer effective?

Have we prayed feeling that it's really having no effect? For years not seeing answers? How many doubt the very effectiveness of prayer? Where's God?

Proposition: God's children are shamelessly persistent in prayer.

As westerners we can't appreciate the issues of shame involved in cultures like this one. As in Indonesia, and many other cultures, the guest is a serious issue. If the guest isn't received well, shame is brought on the family, and in some cases, as is here, the

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Lk 11:1–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

whole village. A guest must be cared for. If not, then it would bring shame, not only on that person's family, but on the village.

Remember, Jesus, at the request of his disciples, has just taught them how to pray the Lord's Prayer. Now he's giving illustration to show what prayer's like. There're two ways to give illustration; by comparison of like things, or contrast of unlike things. One's in the positive, one's in the negative. Jesus firstly uses a negative contrasting image of a friend who is inconvenienced by another to illustrate what God isn't like concerning prayer.

We need a visual image; houses at that time were often times one room structures with one window. There may've been an elevated spot for a cooking fire, and the floor would have been earth. The family would sleep on mats around the fire. It was also customary to bring in animals at night and allow them to sleep in there as well. Tight quarters, any disturbance would wake the whole lot of them. Normally in the morning the door would be left open all day, with little privacy, which indicated that the family was open to receiving visitors. If the door was closed it usually meant that you were not receiving visitors at that time. Those traveling would avoid the midday heat and do their traveling during later hours which sometimes brought them to their destinations at night. Typically bread was baked in the home but only enough for the day since it would go stale.

So here we have a man who's received a guest late at night, however the homeowner is out of provisions for the day. Luckily, as it goes in village life, you would know which neighbor had leftover. The problem is it's late, doors were shut. Yet, the overwhelming thought of shame drives this man to pound on the door of a neighbor for bread. If he doesn't feed his guest it's a shame on his family and village. Communal life. The man behind the door is put out, and at first doesn't want to comply. However he's also bound by rules of shame, if he doesn't inconvenience his own family, he too would bring shame. Therefore, the wording here for boldness (impudence), is actually better translated as 'shameless persistence'.

The disciples would've understood, they're bound by obligation to provide for guests. The request was driven by the possibility of losing face before others. The asking and giving is not necessarily out of intimate relationship, but due to an unwritten law they all live under. So the man stands at the door in the middle of the night, risking being a jerk, because the fear of communal shame is greater. These little dynamics teach us something about the story. Is Jesus teaching that we must stand at the door in prayer over and over again pounding to get God's attention? Is he teaching that our prayers should be driven by our own self-interest or reputation? Is Jesus teaching God is reluctant and bothered by prayer? The answer is no, it's a study in contrast. Persistence is the lesson. God is contrasted with an opposing image - an angry neighbor behind the door; God is opposite, he's not reluctant to answer and provide. But the question is, do our prayers reflect the heart of God? Or, are they a mask for self-interest or preservation?

Life is complicated. What God deals with is incomprehensible. Let's take an earthly example. My brother Joe is Executive Pastor of a large church which includes about a million different decisions a month. The conversations and situations throughout his week are many and varied. A person may come to Joe and say they want to do X in the church. Joe may agree it's the right direction, and be fully supportive. But to make the proposal happen Joe must weigh the desires and hearts of many others. What we think is a simple decision is complicated. To make a decision based on one person's desire may have detrimental effects across the board as good as it sounds. That's the difference between leading and micromanaging. A micromanager will just make the decision, and then go around putting out all the fires as a result. A leader, over time through conversation with people, can start to slowly implement an idea and move it forward in a very positive manner.

God isn't bound by the whims of man like my brother, but only by his own goodness, grace, and love. If I am praying for a person, God is pleased and listens, and answers that prayer, although it may take time and persistence in prayer from me. In other words we get frustrated since it seems that God is not answering. Yet in reality he is, just not in the swift manner we think it should happen; and maybe not in the way we desire. God hovers above knowing all the complicated dynamics, concerned about more than just our desire in a given situation. We, however, don't understand these complicated dynamics nor do we need to. Ours is to pray with persistence, exploring the heart of God.

So, what happened to our missionary in prison? In the beginning, there'd been a major Muslim leader who had claimed he would help, he didn't. He'd betrayed them. He had said he would be a man of peace, opening doors and providing protection, he wasn't. He left as soon as the crowd gathered. Where was God? On his way home from the mosque, he dropped dead, and it began to rain heavily for days. People took this as a bad omen. The matter went to trial, and our Indonesian counterpart, risking 5 years imprisonment, wrote a 20 page personal testimony arguing from both the Injil and the Al Quran how Muslims should be comfortable to follow Jesus. And to everyone's surprise the judge allows this document into court. Was this a slip of judgement, or something divinely ordered? On the next trial day the Ulama they had befriended originally comes in and sees the copy of the Gospel (Injil) and this testimony, and says, "There's my Injil, they gave it to me, I asked for it". Which absolves these men from any crime since the Ulama had requested it himself. He leaves court with his copies of the Injil and testimony. Then the testimony and Injil are copied and distributed to various offices for people to read for posterity sake. And as it goes in cultures of shame to save face, Dave is deported and the Indonesian Christian gets 2.5 years in prison. Remember, people had been praying for immediate release of these two men from the beginning, and were upset that God had not intervened. But this mans testimony and the Injil are distributed to many Muslims as a result, and read openly in one of the most closed people groups of Indonesia precisely because they had suffered for the kingdom.

Is it possible that God seems to not move in our prayers because something greater is at stake? That more is going on in a situation than we understand? Was it wrong for

people to pray that they would be let out of prison? No, absolutely not, but are we also seeking God's will? Praying that God would use us no matter how painful it may be? Are we comfortable in the unknown of spiritual battle?

You remember in Acts 16 when Paul and others are imprisoned. They are praying and worshiping until an earthquake happens, the doors open and their shackles fall off. The Jailor is about to kill himself thinking they escaped, but Paul yells out don't do it. They end up sharing Jesus with this man and his family who all get baptized and the next morning Paul and his friends are freed! Who knows what God is doing! I would've ran out of the prison when the doors flew open - but Paul, intimate with the mind of God, stays and people are saved.

Prayer is an invitation to intimacy, to know God's heart and will; it's not just for our personal requests. Modernism has taught, unintentionally, that God is found in the cognitive only; learn more, know more, know God. But you may know a lot about God, but not know him intimately. Jesus is trying to get his disciples to realize how intimate God is in relationship; not only to know God intellectually, but to know God intimately; to become children in tune with the fathers heart. The depth of this intimacy is seen in the crucifixion when the curtain to the holy of holies in the temple is rent in two. The sacrificial death of Christ tore that curtain down the middle so that all can have intimate relationship with God at any time; we may enter with shameless persistence. Our relationship with God was revolutionarily transformed by the cross.

A friend used to use a story when witnessing to Muslims in Indonesia. This is when Pak Soeharto was still president. He'd say, "What if you went to the presidential palace in Jakarta and knocked on the door. When the door opened if you asked to see President Soeharto how far would you get?" The answer was always, "Aduh, Nddak mungkin Pak! Nddak mungkin bertemu Pak Harto!" 'No way, you could never meet Pak Soeharto!' Then he'd ask, "What if you approached that door with Tommy, the presidents' son, how far would you get then?" And they would answer, "Emang, nddak ada masalah kalau begitu, Pak! Boleh, langsung masuk, Pak." 'Yeah, no problem, you'd go right in!' Mike was teaching the principle of salvation through Jesus; the Son opens the door to the Father. But if we take that story one step further, what if you were adopted into the presidents family as a child yourself? You'd have a key to the door. That has been done for us in Christ! We've been adopted and may intimately know God (Galatians 4:4-8). Prayer's our key to open the door.

Jesus is fleshing out the Lord's Prayer by this story. What does the Lord's Prayer teach? God is our Father. His name is holy. Our first concern is his kingdom/his will. It teaches us to be concerned about the things of God, not just our self-preservation. It's reminiscent of Matthew 28, The Great Commission. The Lord's Prayer forces us to think kingdom thoughts. It teaches our dependence on him; in sustenance, forgiveness, relationships, and purity – for his purposes. God gives and sustains in all things. It's by his grace we've been saved, nothing else, which should prompt shameless persistence in prayer. The Lord's prayer is a constant reminder of utter dependence. It teaches our first concern, his will.

Do we have a God who is reluctant and bothered, must we knock over and over again on his door for attention? No, which is why Jesus follows the negative comparison up with positive comparisons.

⁹ And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ¹¹ What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; ¹² or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? ¹³ 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!"²

God will open the door, he'll answer. But many of us believe he doesn't care, he's reluctant or bothered. Jesus is using contrast to show God is at the door and we have the key. But does that mean we go to him with all our selfish little desires, and self-preservation; no. We ask, seek & knock desiring to know, understand, and see his will implemented in everything. He's a loving, caring, gentle father who gives good gifts to his children. He wisely may move slowly and gently in a given situation, moving the hearts of people towards himself.

The verb structure here, ask, seek, and knock is in the present tense. As children we persist, not just in the times of trouble. A persistent, healthy prayer life cultivates an intimate relationship revealing God's will, not dictating ours to him. It's a model of prayer, we're not rote in our prayers, reciting over and over again something meaningless. God wants so much more from us in relationship through prayer. In prayer we seek the mind of God. This model gives us direction; the principle of intimacy. That, coupled with this story that Jesus follows up with, gives us a few things to remember.

1. Know your place
 - a. It reminds us of a healthy attitude of who we are as compared to God. It puts us in the mindset of realizing we don't have it all together. God's in charge.
 - b. We're utterly dependent on a compassionate, loving, gracious God, with his ultimate purposes in mind.
2. Approach with a spirit of learning
 - a. We approach thinking we know what we need. We need to go with the attitude of a learner, with questions. The terminology here is ask and seek, we come in the spirit of understanding instead of dictating a list to God.
 - b. We allow God to reveal his heart. We conform to His will, not his to ours.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Lk 11:9-13). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

- c. Demanding, or out of frustration that God is not answering the way that we think he ought, is a frustrating existence. Listening prayer brings peace, assurance, and rest in the fact that though we may not know what'll happen, we trust that his purposes are best.
3. We come as shameless children
- a. We've seen that we've been made sons and daughters of the father. Children go with shameless persistence realizing he's constantly listening. (Ephesians 1:5)
 - b. Realize what we have in Christ
 - i. In the letters of Paul he often prayed that we would know what we have in Christ; the riches, the blessings, the power and so forth. It is not enough for us to know about God, he wants us to know him intimately; to interact in prayer.
 - ii. Sometimes we pray for these things when we already have them, but are not utilizing them in our lives.
 - c. God calls us to a consistent ongoing prayer life; ask, seek, knock are verbs of increasing intensity. This isn't something we do in the foxhole only. As God lays prayers and concerns on our heart, the intensity and passion increases.
4. God answers
- a. Many of you remember my worries that I shared last week upon returning from Indonesia. And, although my prayer life was probably out of more fear than faith, God answered with abundance. Life doesn't look the way I expected, it's better.
 - b. God also answers in ways unseen which isn't our concern. God doesn't need to explain every little detail of his working.

So is God inconvenienced or reluctant to answer? No, but life is much larger than ourselves, more complicated. With shameless persistence we can know and experience the heart of God.

Deuteronomy 4:7 says, "What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?"

I Thessalonians 5:16-17 "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:6-7 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."