

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 14, 2009

OUR DAILY BREAD

Luke 11:5-13

THE PARABLE OF THE GROUCHY NEIGHBOR

You might call this story Jesus told “The Parable of the Grouchy Neighbor.” And who can blame him for being grouchy? How would you feel if a neighbor was banging on your door in the middle of the night, or you got a phone call at 3 A.M. from a friend who merely wanted to borrow a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk? How would you feel?

Wouldn't it bother you that you were being disturbed in the middle of the night? Couldn't this have waited until morning? You might think so, but the realities of life in the 1st century were much different than today. The neighbor's need was immediate, and there was no 7-11 open just around the corner.

The grouchy neighbor didn't want to help his friend in need. He didn't want to be bothered. He didn't want to get up out of bed. But eventually he did. Eventually he got up and gave his friend what he needed. Not out of friendship. Not out of compassion. Not out of a charitable spirit. But so his needy friend would just stop bothering him. So he could get back to the comfort and warmth of his bed.

What about God? Is Jesus trying to tell us that God is like this grumpy, reluctant-to-help neighbor when it comes to dealing with our needs? Are we bothering God? Are we interrupting or inconveniencing Him when we bring our requests to Him in prayer? Is that what Jesus is trying to tell us? Not at all.

Jesus is not *comparing* God to this grouchy neighbor. He is *contrasting* the two of them. Every parable has a point, and the point of this parable is to show us what God is like – and what He is not like. To be specific, God is not like this tired, grumpy neighbor who comes to the aid of his friend in order to keep the friend from continuing to bother him. On the contrary, says Jesus, our Father in heaven is always ready, willing and able to come to our aid when we ask. No matter what time it is. Even in the middle of the night.

Unlike this grouchy neighbor, God never sleeps. You never need to worry about disturbing God from His sleep. The Bible says in Psalm 121 that He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep (verses 3-4), and that He is watching over our coming and going now and always (verse 8). He will never doze off or fall asleep.

Also, unlike this grouchy neighbor, God never gets impatient or irritable with us when we bring our requests to Him. Our prayers are not bothersome interruptions, regardless of the hour. In fact, God takes pleasure in meeting the needs of His children – material, physical, relational and spiritual. He tells us in Hebrews 4:16 to “approach the throne of grace with

confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” Sounds like a pretty good offer to me!

Third, unlike the neighbor who helped his friend in need only to keep the friend from continuing to bother him – and perhaps to relieve his conscience as well – God is always generous. Generosity is part of God’s DNA. (I know God doesn’t really have DNA, but you get the idea.) The Bible tells us over and over that “the Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding with love” (Psalm 103:8). He is the Giver of “every good and perfect gift” (James 1:17). He is the “fount of every blessing,” as Robert Robinson wrote. God is generous with His gifts. And His grace abounds to sinners like us.

The God we worship (who is the only true God, the only living God) is not like the grouchy neighbor in the story Jesus told.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on in verses 11-13 to *contrast* our Father in heaven with our earthly fathers. No earthly father is perfect. Even the best of us is sinful. All of us who are fathers fall short in our calling and responsibilities, in our opportunities and privileges as dads. No argument or debate about it. But even sinful, fallen fathers know how to give good gifts to their children. No father worth the name would intentionally put his child in danger or do something evil to his son or daughter. If that is the case, says Jesus, “How much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him!” That is what it says in Matthew 7:11, in the Sermon on the Mount. Here in Luke 11:13, Jesus says something a little different. He says: “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!”

Can there be any better gift than the Holy Spirit? The gift of the Holy Spirit means the presence of God Himself in the lives of His children. It means the power of God Himself to live the kind of life that pleases God. It also means the distribution of what the New Testament calls “spiritual gifts” to be used in the service of God. What Jesus is saying is that God will withhold nothing we need in order to carry out His plan and purposes for our lives. Psalm 84:11 says that the Lord will withhold no good thing from those who walk in His paths.

God is not stingy with His gifts. He cares for us as a loving Father cares for His children – because that is what He is. You know what the Bible says in 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your cares on Him (the Lord), because He cares for you.” I don’t know how it can be much clearer than that. And that applies to you in your life today – personally. It applies to me. It applies to all of us.

The question is: Do you really believe that? Do you really believe that God cares about *you*? In the challenges you face in life, whether they involve health or finances or unemployment or relationships or something else – or all of the above – do you really believe that God cares about you? And that He is at work in the details of your life for your good and His glory? Sometimes that is hard to see. Sometimes, from our perspective, it is impossible to see. So God asks us to trust Him. He asks us to walk by faith – without which, it says in Hebrews

11:6, it is impossible to please God. I want to please God. So walking by faith – trusting God for what I need and trusting Him my life to lead – is not optional. It is the only way to live.

GIVE US THIS DAY

The prayer Jesus taught His disciples provides yet another window into the character of God and our proper relationship to Him. In the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus turns to *our* needs. The first three petitions deal with God: His name, His rule and His will. Now Jesus encourages – no, instructs – us to pray for our own needs and the needs of humanity in general. In the words of John Stott: “Since God is ‘our Father in heaven’ and loves us with a father’s love, He is concerned for the total welfare of His children and wants us to bring our needs trustingly to Him, our need of food and of forgiveness and of deliverance from evil” (*Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 148).

This petition: “Give us this day our daily bread” is another indicator that God really does care about us and our needs, including our most mundane, down-to-earth, daily, material needs.

Some of the early church fathers had trouble believing that Jesus was really teaching His followers to pray for literal bread for the body. So they allegorized this petition. They said the bread must have a spiritual meaning. Early church fathers like Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine thought it must refer either to “the invisible bread of the Word of God” (Augustine) or to the Lord’s Supper. Jerome also thought it meant the bread of the sacrament. The Reformers, though, had a different view. They had a more down-to-earth understanding. Calvin thought the spiritualizing of the early church fathers was “exceedingly absurd.” (But I’m sure he said it in love.) Luther recognized that “bread” was a symbol for “everything necessary for the preservation of this life, like food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, (spouse), children, good government and peace.” (Quoted in *Christian Counter-Culture*, p. 149).

Elsewhere, in his *Small Catechism*, commenting on the meaning of the first article of the Apostles’ Creed (“I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth”), Luther said:

“I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that He has given and still preserves to me my body and soul, my eyes and ears, and all my members, my reason and all the power of my soul, together with food and raiment, home and family, and all my property; that He daily provides abundantly for all the needs of my life, protects me from all danger, and guards and keeps me from all evil; and that He does this purely out of fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which I am in duty bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”

It *is* most certainly true.

It is most certainly true that Jesus directs us to ask God for the necessities – not the luxuries – of life. This is a prayer for our needs, not our “greeds.” J. B. Phillips translates the prayer:

“Give us this day the bread we need.” And “the bread” for which we pray includes not only our food, but our shelter and clothing as well.

God cares about all our needs. And He wants us to learn to trust Him to provide for us one day at a time. He wants us to learn to live in constant dependence on Him. Most of us aren't aware of our need to live in constant dependence on God because we don't have to be concerned about where our food for tomorrow will come from. Most of us have so much food in the fridge or the freezer or the pantry that we don't know what to do with it. But in many parts of the world, people are forced to live one day at a time, because they only have enough for today. If they have that.

According to the United Nations, nearly one billion people in the world today are undernourished. Somewhere in the world a child dies of malnutrition or starvation every six seconds. (That works out to 10 every minute and 600 every hour.) It is not that there is not enough food produced to feed everyone in the world. It is not that God has not provided sufficient resources to feed the whole world. He has. The problem is with our human failure – our greed, our selfishness, our prejudice, our hatred, our political strife – to get sufficient food to those who do not have enough.

Not for a moment does it mean that God doesn't care about people who go to bed hungry every night. You know as well as I do that God wants us to do what we can in His name to care for the poor and needy here in our own community (through ministries like Koinonia) and around the world, through a plethora of ministries of caring and compassion. In so doing, we become a part of the answer to the prayer: “Give us this day our daily bread.”

In my own life, when I pray the Lord's Prayer – particularly, when I get to this petition – I not only ask God to give us our daily bread, I also thank Him for doing so. I thank Him that I – that so many people in this country and around the world – do not have to wonder where we will find enough to eat tomorrow. We are blessed beyond what we know. And, of course, with blessing comes responsibility. With blessing comes opportunity. Opportunity to share. Opportunity to give out of a grateful heart. Opportunity to be the hands and feet of Jesus to meet the needs of those whose lives may depend on it.

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, make it your habit not only to ask God for your daily bread, but to thank Him for it. Because He is the source – the “omnipotent source of supply,” as J. I. Packer says – for every need you and I will ever have, from the smallest and seemingly most insignificant to the most ginormous we can possibly imagine. So make sure you say the Lord's Prayer with a note of both trust and thanksgiving.

The Lord's Prayer teaches that God really does care about us and our needs. He cares about each one of us. He cares about all of us. And we can trust Him to provide for us. One day at a time.

BREAD FROM HEAVEN

The people of Israel had the opportunity to learn this lesson when they were in the wilderness, after the Lord brought them out of Egypt. It didn't take long for the people to begin grumbling among themselves and complaining to Moses and Aaron about the lack of food for such an enormous mass of people. After all, counting men, women and children, there were about two million Israelites encamped and moving together in the wilderness. Where do you get enough food for two million, when you have just left the "civilization" of Egypt and escaped into the barren wilderness?

But God had a plan. God always has a plan. A good and gracious plan. The story of God's plan, God's provision and the people's response is found in Exodus 16. In response to their complaints, the Lord said to Moses: "I will rain down bread from heaven" (16:4). The people were to go out each day and gather enough for that day. On the sixth day, they were to gather twice as much, so there would be enough for the Sabbath as well.

In addition to the bread from heaven – they called it "manna" – God also promised to give them meat to eat. He said: "At twilight you will eat meat, and in the morning you will be filled with bread" (16:12). Though some of the people were slow to trust God and slow to obey Him, they learned that God could be trusted to provide their "daily bread" one day at a time. The Bible says that for 40 years, until they reached the border of Canaan, until they came to a land that was settled, they ate manna. He gave them enough for each day. Day after day. Week after week. Year after year. Enough for gratitude. But not for greed.

They learned that God really did care about them. And that He could be trusted to provide for their needs. Have you learned this life lesson? Do you really believe it in your own life? If you do, there will be no room in your life for anxiety or worry.

Take to heart the familiar words of Jesus in Matthew 6:

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air. They do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

"And why do you worry about your clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself" (6:25-34).

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

Our Father in heaven is the God who cares and the God who provides. In fact, one of the names by which God made Himself known in the Old Testament was Yahweh-Jireh (Genesis 22:14), which means “The Lord Will Provide.”

Do you remember the dramatic story in Genesis 22, when Abraham and his son Isaac made a pilgrimage to Mount Moriah? On the way, not knowing that God had instructed Abraham to offer him on the altar of sacrifice, Isaac turned to his father and said: “We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?”

Abraham’s reply? “God Himself will provide the lamb for the offering, my son.”

God Himself will provide. That was a statement of faith on Abraham’s part. He did not know what God would do or how He would do it, but He believed God would provide. He believed God would preserve his son, or, as it says in Hebrews 11, that if He wanted to, God could raise Isaac from the dead (11:19).

When they got to Moriah, Abraham obeyed God. He was about to sacrifice his son on the altar – the son of the covenant promises – when the Lord stopped him. In the bushes, Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the place Yahweh-Jireh, which means “The Lord Will Provide” (Genesis 22:1-14).

Our Father in heaven is Yahweh-Jireh, the Lord who provides. He has provided for our spiritual needs by giving His very own Son as the perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. As you trust God for your daily bread and all your material needs, never forget that Jesus is “the true bread from heaven” (John 6:32). And do not forget the exhortation of Jesus, when He said: “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which I will give you” (John 6:27). To know Him in the power of His saving love and to trust in Him alone as Savior and Lord of your life is to have “the bread of life” (John 6:35), which is found in Jesus alone.

The magnificent beauty of the gospel is that God cares so much about you, He loves you so much, that He has provided a Savior for you. Trust Him for your daily bread. Trust Him for all your material and physical needs. Trust Him to meet your needs one day at a time. But trust Him also for eternity. Trust in the complete sufficiency of His saving work on the cross for you. Trust Him to give you the grace you need each day to live in a manner worthy of His name.

CONCLUSION: A SLICE OF BREAD

When World War II ended, the allied armies in Europe gathered up scores of hungry, homeless, orphaned children and put them in camps, where they were fed and cared for. At night, though, many of the children had trouble sleeping. They seemed restless and afraid.

A psychologist came up with a solution. As the children were being put to bed, each one was given a slice of bread to hold. If they were hungry and wanted more to eat, they could have more, but this particular slice of bread was not to be eaten. It was just to be held.

That slice of bread worked wonders. (You might even say it was “wonder bread.”) The children would go to sleep, subconsciously knowing they would have something to eat tomorrow. It gave the children a calm and restful night’s sleep.

Do you worry about God’s provision for tomorrow? Do you worry about what tomorrow may bring? Better than holding onto a slice of bread at bedtime is to ask God each day for the bread you need, and to thank Him for what He gives. Remember how God provided manna and quail for the people of Israel in the wilderness – one day at a time for 40 years. Remember, as Abraham and Isaac discovered, that He is The Lord Who Provides. Remember that God cares about you, and about all our neighbors near and far. That is the kind of heavenly Father He is.

If you have never put your trust in the Savior God has provided for you, I urge you to take hold of Him today. If you have already done so, I urge you never to let go, but to press on in gratitude and grace, in faith and hope and love and joy, knowing that He will never let go of you.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.