

Every once in awhile there's a passage in the Bible that makes me cringe. I'm sure we all have our catalogue of uncomfortable Bible passages. Well, this is one of them for me. Prayer is such an important, yet mysterious aspect of our Christian faith that the few passages that provide direction or insight into prayer a rare gifts... but this one has been deceptive by a wayward translation of a single word, which throws off the entire direction of the lesson.

After being asked how to pray and providing part of the, famous, "Lord's Prayer," Jesus presents this parable giving some insight into how to conceptualize prayer. The story has shaped generations of pray-ers and opened some troubling inconsistencies and theologies along the way, all because of one word... "persistence." Don't give up... just keep praying... persistence pays off... like the prophet Bob Dylan says, just keep knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door. The story seems to build to that point:

A man, desiring to feed an unexpected guest, tries to borrow bread from his friend. He knocks (whoops, the tradition made up that part!), makes his request, and waits... but no one appears at the door with the needed provision. The problem is not that there's no bread in his friend's house. The problem is that it's midnight and his friend has no interest in getting out of bed at such an impossible hour. But the would-be host persists. Does he knock 3 times, 10 times, 50 times? Who knows. Whatever it took, he managed it. He outlasted his lazy friend, who finally decided he'd get even less sleep if he stayed in bed. Getting up he gives the bread... not because of the friendship, but because he can't stand the knocking anymore. Persistence pays!

I wonder and worry how many people have been devastated this year when their persistent prayers didn't produce the result. How many people this year are wrestling with feelings of guilt that they "gave up too soon" or "just didn't stick it out long enough." There are a lot of people that weren't healed this year. What's it say about God if "persistent prayer pays?" What's it say about us? Do we just have to outlast a reluctant deity, who is easy enough to wear down and wear out if we just keep badgering? Would God prefer to be left alone? That feels wrong, right?

Maybe it's more about God testing our resolve, eagerly cheering us on to prove our seriousness. Maybe if we prayer all day, or all week, or for 100 days... or maybe if we can get 100 people to pray for 100 days... not exactly sure how to work out the arithmetic, but whatever it is and however it works, we have to show God we're committed! Is that any better? A God who really would love to give us what we're asking, but we only got 99% of the way there... needed just a little more persistence... you were so close. Better luck next time. That's not a more believable God... or at least not one worthy of being believed.

That's the problem with persistent prayer... if you stop to think about what it says about God and us... it's just so unbelievable that prayer would depend on persistence... and yet... there it is, in the text. Even if your translation says "boldness" or "shamelessness" it doesn't really solve the problem. It's still a matter of we the pray-er performing our prayer in the proper formula, otherwise God is out. It paints God as some sort of distant or sleepy deity who doesn't want to be bothered but if we just pray ENOUGH times we'll rouse him... or one who's distracted by other things. It doesn't sound like God at all. You know who it sounds like? It sounds Baal. In 1<sup>st</sup> Kings 18:27 Elijah and the prophets of Baal are in a prayer competition and Elijah mocks the Baal prophets for their persistent cries and performances. He says, "CRY LOUDER! Perhaps YOUR god is asleep and must be awakened! Perhaps he going to the washroom and needs more time to respond." We forget that it is exactly the persistent pray-ers who are mocked for their theology!

Jesus says something similar in Matthew's version of the Lord's prayer in 6:7-8. In Matthew 6 Jesus teaches his disciples a way of praying that distinguishes it from pagan praying specifically because it did NOT depend on endless repetitions to be effective. In Matthew's account of the Lord's Prayer we get the explanation that its absolutely NOT about the amount of prayers or the repetition! That's what the PAGAN'S think!? SO WHAT IS GOING ON with this little word "persistence!?" If we could only change THAT it would make ALL the difference in the world!

Well here's some good news: despite everything we've heard in the past, the word translated as "persistence" almost certainly does NOT mean persistence. And the parable almost certainly does not teach that the effectiveness of prayer depends on us getting all the techniques right and outlasting a reluctant God! As I said, some of you may have translations that say "boldness" or "shamelessness" instead of persistence, and that's an improvement, but still doesn't quite get there. The problem arises from the fact that this is another instance in the Bible where a word shows up once – and ONLY once – in the whole scripture.

The Greek word in the text "a-nai-dei-a" literally means "non-shame". We KNOW it has something to do with negating shame, thus "shamelessness" or "boldness" get the nod nowadays, but it's deeper than that. And it all revolves around how unbelievable this parable *really* is... and who it's *really* about. Because this story really is unbelievable... but it's not easy for us to see why.

Firstly, like many of Jesus' parables, we're invited into a scene that would be incredibly normal, pedestrian, banal to Jesus' original listeners, with an unbelievable twist. But our modern lenses aren't attuned to see it... or, more accurately, we've flipped the parable and find all the believable parts unbelievable, except for the twist. Let me paint the picture:

Imagine Jesus has invited us to imagine the unimaginable. He's encouraging us that what we're about to hear is unthinkable. "Suppose one of you were to encounter this unbelievable situation..."

A traveler arrives at midnight. "Unbelievable!" we might say, who travels at midnight? Well... they do. Jesus' (and Luke's) audience would be well accustomed to midnight traveling. Their climate was far hotter and drier and traveling late into the night wasn't uncommon to avoid the heat. Unbelievable to us, but not to them.

The midnight traveler expects some food. "Unbelievable!" we might say, who expects food at midnight. Well... they do. There are no convenience stores, no fast food places, no late-night markets. Traveler got hungry and sharing bread was like sharing coffee, it was always expected.

But, the host HAS no bread. "Unbelievable!" we might say, if bread's expected any time why wouldn't the host have any... Well... they typically didn't make much extra bread. It's daily bread... not weekly bread. There's no preservatives or refrigeration, each family baked enough for the daily needs, so it's not uncommon to be out of bread by midnight.

The host goes to a neighbors place at midnight to ask for bread. "Unbelievable!" we might say, it's not their responsibility... Well... yes... it is. The obligation to host a traveler rested upon the entire village, not just a single family. The reputation of the village was at stake and a guest must not go to bed hungry. So, if there is ANY bread left in the village the host is obligated to find it.

It's not hard for us to find unbelievable parts of this story... the whole thing seems unbelievable to us... except, that is, for the behavior of the sleepy friend. We have little trouble imagining (and relating to) the friend's response, "The doors are locked; and the kids are in bed. Don't bother me." That's perhaps the most relatable part of the whole parable... to us. BUT, that's precisely the most UNBELIEVEABLE part of the story to Jesus' audience.

Let's recap:

It is unthinkable, isn't it, that a scenario would unfold like this: You are in bed; it's midnight. Suddenly you hear your friend at the door asking for bread. A traveler has arrived at his house and he has nothing to offer him. You do indeed have a couple of extra loaves...

So far Jesus' audience would be saying, "So far so good..."

Now try to imagine yourself telling your friend, "Don't bother me; the door has already been locked and my children are in bed.'

Jesus' Audience would gasp and say, "NOBODY would answer like that!

Why not? – we ask... "how SHAMEFUL!" they'd respond. "If you acted like that, then your friend would simply go to your next door neighbor to get the bread... remember it's the whole village's responsibility, and while he's doing so he would say, "Can you imagine what the guy next door told me!? He had the bread but was too lazy to get up! By the morning your entire reputation would be ruined!"

No one, NO ONE, in Jesus' ancient world would be so unbelievably shameful. They'd do anything to avoid that kind of shame... and that's the point of the parable!

The parable should be read like this: “Even in this unbelievable scenario... one in which NO ONE would behave like this sleepy friend... would not even HE still get up to help out his friend in need, at least his shame-avoidance would be enough to provoke him to get up and give him everything he needs!”

Do you see? This parable ISN'T about the host... it's not about *his* persistence, or *his* boldness, or even *his* shamelessness... **it's ALL about the sleeper!** It's about his HONOR and his motivation to maintain the honor of HIS name and reputation! It's the *anaideia* (the non-shame) of the sleeper, not the host that makes the difference in the story.

The point Jesus is making is that even in this unimaginable, unbelievable scenario, the one thing that you could count on is that the sleeper would be motivated by their reputation. Undoubtedly FRIENDSHIP would be more than enough of a motivator but even if it weren't, he would move for the sake of his honor! Jesus point is that God ISN'T like the sleeper, BUT even if he were, he'd still be motivated by preserving his reputation. God is instead like the good parent, who knows needs before requests, who would never give a snake instead of a fish.

Jesus' parable about prayer now fits with the rest of scripture... it's NOT about wearing out God with our persistent prayers... it's NOT about proving ourselves worthy of answer due to our seriousness... it's NOT about changing God's mind... effectiveness of prayer doesn't depend on our techniques or persistence.

Even if we couldn't count on our LOVING Parent—which would be unbelievable that we wouldn't be able to count on God's LOVE because even SINFUL father know how to show love, there is always God's honor that we can count on him maintaining... He acts for the honor of his name!

So... what's that mean for how we pray?

It means prayer is much more about quieting *our* desires, and listening to what God is doing. Prayer becomes about discerning God's directions and lining up accordingly rather than pestering God to line up with us. Prayer is about figuring out how to make our lives match God's desires than making life match ours.

That doesn't mean we can't approach God with our desires for how we'd like to see life go. Hopefully our desires have already been shaped by God, but it's quite appropriate to bring that to God. Jesus prayed for a different outcome. Paul prayed for the thorn in his side to be removed... but they didn't pester. They didn't persist.

They both prayed three times, then they discerned that God's answer was “no.” And they reoriented their lives to match God's reality.

That's why the line in the Lord's prayer that may be the most consequential isn't about daily bread but rather, “Hallow (honored) be *your* name...”.

The Bible also still speaks to being persistent, not with God, but with others. We're invited to be persistent in forgiveness, persistent in working to help God bring about justice and shalom, even persistent in working on ourselves... but we never have to worry about wearing God down. We have to align ourselves with what God is doing – and that's principally what prayer is about.

So... May we invest more in discerning God's will than in our persistence to bend God to ours. May this be comforting to those who worried that they were responsible for the God not responding the way we wanted. And may our prayers come into closer and closer parallel with God's name and reputation. Amen