

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS.
ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,
And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XI. 5–13.

<p>5 And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves:</p> <p>6 For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him?</p> <p>7 And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee.</p> <p>8 I say unto you, Though he will not rise and <i>give</i> him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and <i>give</i> him as many as he needeth.</p> <p>9 And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be</p>	<p>given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.</p> <p>10 For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.</p> <p>11 If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if <i>he ask</i> a fish will he for a fish give him a serpent?</p> <p>12 Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion</p> <p>13 If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall <i>your</i> heavenly Father <i>give</i> the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?</p>
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IN these verses our Lord Jesus Christ instructs us about prayer. The subject is one which can never be too strongly impressed on our attention. Prayer lies at the very root of our practical Christianity. It is part of the daily business of our religious life. We have reason to thank God, that upon no point has our Lord Jesus Christ spoken so fully and frequently as upon prayer.

We learn, for one thing, from these verses, *the importance of perseverance in prayer*. This lesson is conveyed to us in the simple parable, commonly called the "Friend at Midnight." We are there reminded what man can obtain from man by dint of importunity. Selfish and indolent as we naturally are, we are capable of being roused to exertion by continued asking. The man who would not give three loaves at midnight for friendship's sake, at length gave them to save himself the trouble of being further entreated. The application of the parable is clear and plain. If importunity succeeds so well between man and man, how much more may we expect it to obtain mercies when used in prayer to God.

The lesson is one which we shall do well to remember. It is far more easy to begin a habit of prayer than to keep it up. Myriads of professing Christians are regularly taught to pray when they are young, and then gradually leave off the practice as they grow up. Thousands take up a habit of praying for a little season, after some special mercy or special affliction, and then little by little become cold about it, and at last lay it aside. The secret thought comes stealing over men's minds, that "it is no use to pray." They see no visible benefit from it. They persuade themselves that they get on just as well without prayer. Laziness and unbelief prevail over their hearts, and at last they altogether "restrain prayer before God." (Job xv. 4.)

Let us resist this feeling, whenever we feel it rising within us. Let us resolve by God's grace, that however poor and feeble our prayers may seem to be, we will pray on. It is not for nothing that the Bible tells us so frequently,

to “watch unto prayer,” to “pray without ceasing,” to “continue in prayer,” to “pray always and not to faint,” to be “instant in prayer.” These expressions all look one way. They are all meant to remind us of a danger and to quicken us to a duty. The time and way in which our prayers shall be answered are matters which we must leave entirely to God; but that every petition which we offer in faith shall certainly be answered, we need not doubt. Let us lay our matters before God again and again, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. The answer may be long in coming, as it was in the cases of Hannah and Zacharias. (1 Sam. i. 27; Luke i. 13.) But though it tarry, let us pray on and wait for it. At the right time it will surely come and not tarry.

We learn, for another thing, from these verses, *how wide and encouraging are the promises which the Lord Jesus holds out to prayer.* The striking words in which they are clothed are familiar to us if any are in the Bible: “Ask, and ye shall receive; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.”—The solemn declaration which follows appears intended to make assurance doubly sure: “Every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth, and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.”—The heart-searching argument which concludes the passage leaves faithlessness and unbelief without excuse: “If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?”

There are few promises in the Bible so broad and unqualified as those contained in this wonderful passage: the last in particular deserves especial notice. The Holy Spirit is beyond doubt the greatest gift which God can bestow upon man. Having 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 communion with all three Persons of the blessed Trinity. Having this gift, we have grace and peace in the world that now is, glory and honour in the world to come. And yet this mighty gift is held out by our Lord Jesus Christ as a gift to be obtained by prayer! “Your heavenly Father shall give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.”

There are few passages in the Bible which so completely strip the unconverted man of his common excuses as this passage. He says he is “weak and helpless.” But does he ask to be made strong?—He says he is “wicked and corrupt.” But does he seek to be made better?—He says he “can do nothing of himself.” But does he knock at the door of mercy, and pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit?—These are questions to which many, it may be feared, can make no answer. They are what they are, because they have no real desire to be changed. They have not, because they ask not. They will not come to Christ, that they may have life; and therefore they remain dead in trespasses and sins.

And now, as we leave the passage, let us ask ourselves whether we know anything of real prayer? Do we pray at all? Do we pray in the name of Jesus, and as needy sinners?—Do we know what it is to “ask,” and “seek,” and “knock,” and wrestle in prayer, like men who feel that it is a matter of life or death, and that they must have an answer?—Or are we content with saying over some old form of words, while our thoughts are wandering, and our hearts far away? Truly we have learned a great lesson when we have learned that “saying prayers” is not praying!

If we do pray, let it be a settled rule with us never to leave off the habit of praying, and never to shorten our prayers. A man’s state before God may always be measured by his prayers. Whenever we begin to feel careless about our private prayers, we may depend upon it there is something very wrong in the condition of our souls. There are breakers ahead. We are in imminent danger of a shipwreck.

NOTES. LUKE XI. 5-13.

5.—[*Which of you shall have a friend, &c.*] Here, as in many other cases, we should notice the lowly condition of life, and simple range of social circumstances, from which our Lord drew His illustrations of spiritual truth. This is one of the reasons why the Bible is so peculiarly suited to that class of mankind which is always most numerous,—the poor.

[*Three loaves.*] We may conclude from this expression, that a loaf of bread in the New Testament days was much smaller in size than it commonly is now. Three of our loaves would be more than sufficient for the wants of one man. This fact should be remembered, as it throws light on the miracle of feeding the multitude with a few loaves.

6.—[*In his journey.*] In order to understand the arrival of a friend from a journey at midnight, we must remember that in hot countries people often travel by night, and rest during the day. All who have travelled in India will see the reasonableness of this circumstance in the parable.

7.—[*My children are with me in bed.*] The family of a poor man in eastern climates often all sleep in one common sleeping chamber. This appears to be the simple meaning of the expression here used: “We have all retired to our sleeping chamber. We are all in bed.”

8.—[*Importunity.*] The Greek word so translated is only used here in the New Testament. It would be rendered more literally “shamelessness.” It signifies a continual asking and entreating, in spite of rebuffs, like the asking of an impudent beggar.

11.—[*If a son shall ask bread, &c.*] The sentence so translated would be rendered more literally, “What father of you, if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?”

There is an evident resemblance implied between the appearance of a loaf and a stone, a fish and a serpent.

12.—[*An egg...a scorpion.*] Bishop Pearce shows, by a quotation from Bochart, that the large kind of scorpions, when coiled and rolled up, had a white body not unlike an egg.

[*Will he offer.*] The Greek word so translated is the same which is rendered in the preceding verse “will he give.”

13.—[*Being evil.*] Let this expression be noted. It is one of those which show the natural wickedness of man. He is by nature only evil. “Every imagination of the thought of his heart is only evil continually.” (Gen. vi. 5.)

[*Your heavenly Father.*] There is a notable distinction between the Greek words so translated and those rendered “Father which art in heaven,” in the Lord’s prayer. Here it signifies “Father *from* heaven.” There it is “Father *in* heaven.”—Alford remarks that “when we address God, He is our Father in heaven; when He answers us, He is our Father from heaven. In the former case we go up to Him and His abode. In the latter case He comes down to us.”

I cannot leave the above passage without expressing my own dissent from the allegorical signification which the Fathers and other commentators have thought fit to place on many of its expressions. I cannot hold, with Augustine, that the three loaves represent the Trinity, man’s food and life, or faith, hope, and charity; nor yet that the “fish” represents faith, or the “egg” hope.—I cannot hold, with Bede, that the guest newly arrived is the spirit of man, weary and hungry; the host, natural man unable to satisfy his soul,—and the appeal to the friend, application to God for help.—I cannot hold, with Vitringa, that the guest is the heathen world, the host who receives him the disciples of Jesus, who must receive bread of life from God for the relief of the heathen, and solicit it with all perseverance.—I cannot hold, with others, that the children in bed are the angels, or the saints who are already in glory. Several of these interpretations will be found in “Trench on Parables.”

I leave all such explanations of Scripture to those who can receive them. I for one cannot.—To some minds they may appear wise, clever, and beautiful. To me they appear fanciful, dangerous, destitute of sobriety, and unwarrantable additions **to** the mind of Christ.—Most parables are intended to convey one great lesson. Even those in which almost every part has a meaning, such as the Ten Virgins and the Prodigal Son, require to be handled with great caution. In the parable of the Friend at midnight I am unable to see any warrant for searching out far-fetched allegorical meanings. We have no right to enquire what the words of Scripture can be twisted, and strained, and wrested into meaning. We have only to consider what was the original scope or intention of the Holy Ghost when the words were written, and by that to abide. The protest of Stella, the Spanish commentator, on this subject, in his commentary on this very place, is well worthy of remark. It is fair to observe, that the broad promise at the end of the passage, “Your heavenly Father shall give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him,” is differently explained by different theologians.—Some would interpret it as a general promise, graciously held out to all mankind, as an inducement and encouragement to pray.—Others would confine it to God’s children and true believers, and interpret it only as an argument for converted people asking much that they may have much.

The reader of my exposition will perceive that I am unable to place the more confined and narrow view upon the promise. I feel obliged, in fairness and honesty, to regard the words as one of those great, broad sentences, in which God holds out His hands to the unconverted, and sets before them an open door.—That no man can pray acceptably without the Holy Spirit, I am well aware.—In what way a man can ask for the Holy Spirit, unless he has first received the Holy Spirit, I do not pretend to explain. I only know that I find the words of this promise plainly laid before us, and that fair interpretation seems to require them to be *generally* applied. I desire to receive the promise as a little child, and to press it on unconverted people. I dare not be more systematic in my theology than Scripture itself.