

## NEVER TAKE “NO” FOR AN ANSWER

Most of you have known better all along, but there are those who have tried to blame Eve for all our problems because she ate that fruit first and then gave some to Adam. It is time men took their rightful responsibility and admitted their own prior bad choices.

It happened like this: After the first few days of bliss and wonder, Adam was walking around in the Garden of Eden one day looking very sullen. So God asked Adam: “What is wrong with you, my son?” Adam said he didn’t mean to be grumpy or ungrateful, he was just feeling so lonely he didn’t know what to do. God said: “That’s easy. I can give you a companion – a woman. She will cook for you and wash your clothes, and never ask you to help with the dishes. She will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear your children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you, and will always be the first to admit she is wrong when you’ve had a disagreement. She will never have a headache, and will freely give you love and compassion whenever you need or want it. Yet she will busy herself with her own affairs when you do not feel like talking.”

Adam’s eyes were aglow. He asked God, “What would a woman like this cost me?” God answered, “An arm and a leg.” Adam said, “Hmmm ... what can I get for a rib?” The rest is history.

Ever since that day, Adam has had problems praying. He forgets his own part in every relationship, whether with God or with other people. He seldom asks for what he really wants. He tends to be suspicious, even with those who love him, whether it be God or other people. To this very day, he is often sullen and lonely.

If he ever does get around to asking for something, he is often curt and skittish about it – often running away from his own requests before others have had a chance to understand what he really wants. And this pattern stays true even in prayer. Lots of people start out to pray but then, when they hit “dry spots” or feel they are not getting instant answers, they stop praying altogether. This sermon is a simple reminder: Never do that! Never take NO for an answer.

The Scripture passage reminds us that it is really fun to get scolded by Jesus. It is no fun to be in a serious argument with Him, but this is a

friendly scene and a quiet time, and after the prayers, the disciples come to request further instruction in prayer. They end up, as do we who read this passage, getting quite a scolding. Only, it is fun to get scolded by Jesus.

With most people, when they get scolded, they go away feeling pretty low. You know how it feels: After someone gives you their perspective, you feel ashamed or angry – put down or misunderstood. Even if you end up justifiably asserting yourself, it is still an uncomfortable business. The days are more pleasant if we make it through them without scolding or being scolded. But not so with Jesus. Even His complaints open up new vistas and leave us clutching at new hope and smiling at new possibilities. We are used to being scolded for being self-centered, selfish, lazy, greedy, careless, too demanding. Jesus scolds us for being content with too little, and for being too unassuming, too unexpectant, too willing to forego our deepest needs and truest desires.

We think we want too much. We tell ourselves to be patient. We remind ourselves to be thoughtful of others. We are convinced that we should not make too many demands on life. After all, who are we? Worthless, undeserving creatures who should be grateful, keep quiet, and think only of others. At least that is how we often think when we are thinking about being “good” (though that is not our only mode or mood). However, when Jesus scolds, it is usually because we have not asked for enough; because we have settled for such minuscule bits and pieces of the life and gifts God offers; because we do not know or claim our rightful purpose or identity.

There may be someone here today who, in one area of life or on certain occasions, does not need to hear this passage. But most of us should feel properly scolded. Jesus does not like our attitude. He has a serious quarrel with our self-image. He says it is high time we stopped acting coy, shy, frightened, self-effacing. Especially, it is time to throw out all timidity (not respect – timidity) when we talk with God. Time to go bold-faced and open into The Presence and say, “Hey Lord, it’s me, your cherished child. I need YOU, and I need your help. I need your Holy Spirit. I need to escape from my fears and inadequacies. I need a gift to use and a blessing to give – and a love to carry it through. Give me, please, the things I need – and right away, please.” Isn’t that great? It really is fun to get scolded by Jesus!

That is indeed the flavor we come away with after listening to this parable. I can hardly bring myself to put it into words – to say it out loud even to you – never mind actually praying this way. To contemplate going into God’s presence with such an attitude feels very unnatural, even wrong.

If I didn’t know that it was Jesus telling this parable, I would think that whoever made it up was really strange, and maybe a little sick. Suppose you had never heard any of Jesus’ teachings about prayer – nothing about the widow and the judge, or the pearl of great price, or the mustard seed, or this neighbor at midnight, or any of it. Can you imagine, then, how you would react if I came in here with this story and said, “Look, this is how you should approach God when you pray”?

You would think I was ludicrous, or worse. You would hope there were no visitors or children present to hear it. Someone asked me just a few weeks ago why we always read from the Bible in a worship service. I said that it was to keep ministers from getting lynched, though it hasn’t always worked. It is to remind people that what we are saying is not coming from us. *How* I say it may be my fault. But *what* I am talking about is not my fault – not my idea; I am just trying to pass it along.

How would we feel outside a neighbor’s door in the middle of the night? It takes a pretty fair emergency to make me knock on somebody’s door in the middle of the night after all the lights are out. And unless we have been raised in a truly nurturing, Christian home, it takes a pretty fair emergency to get us to knock on God’s door at *any* time. Ritual and rote are okay, of course, but now we are talking about *really* knocking.

In any case, a normal household in Jesus’ day had one comfortable bed off in the corner of the main living room – a mat filled with wool or feathers or straw or whatever. The youngest child would be put to bed first. After he dozed off, he would be moved off the bed to a blanket on the floor. Then the next child would go to sleep, with the same result. Finally, with the kids scattered around the room on the floor, fast asleep, Mom and Dad could have the bed for the rest of the night.

So in the parable, when the friend comes knocking on the door at midnight, it is not the loan of some food that is at stake – it’s the kids! Please, dear God, don’t wake up THE KIDS! It will only take a few moments to get the food, but it will take an hour, if we’re lucky, before we can get everybody back to sleep.

But the friend just keeps pounding on the door. The law of hospitality is very high on the priority list of every honorable Jewish family. “I’m very sorry!” the neighbor calls. “I have no choice. My friends arrived late. They are on a long journey, weary and hungry. I will never live down the shame of not providing for them. You have to help me!” So he keeps knocking.

Pretty soon the five-year-old says, “Mommy, what’s that noise?” Then the seven-year-old and the three-year-old sit up. Then everybody is awake. So Papa gets up. What’s the difference anyhow – it’s too late; the damage is done. He’s probably quite cheerful about the whole thing by now. “Come on in Ben, you are welcome here. Hey, think nothing of it. I’m glad to do it. What are friends for? You would do the same for me, I know.”

This would be a very familiar scenario to Jesus’ friends. They could all picture and “taste” the flavor of the parable with the ease of hearers familiar with such circumstances. In that day and time, they might have risked waking each other up in the middle of the night more easily than we do. But in that day or this, who would seriously dare to bang on God’s door with this same outlandish nerve and insistence? (Who, that is, besides Jesus? And maybe a few who dare because He said we should.)

The parable is told to illustrate the attitude and approach we ought to have when we go to bother God with our needs and requests. Most friends do not turn us away when we come with real needs. We only *dread* the thought that they might. When it comes to making requests of God, our dread is tenfold. And that is the real issue of this passage: not what God is like, but what we are *afraid* God is like. It does not come out when we write our theologies, preach our sermons, or talk to each other. But it does come out when we try to pray. Despite all theories and instructions to the contrary, deep inside we fear and dread the thought that if we make a request of God, there will come a deep and mighty response: “DON’T BOTHER ME.” Sometimes we even wonder if maybe God already said that to us once, years ago, and nothing has happened to change anything since.

Jesus would not bother us with such a simple, basic parable if we were not estranged from God enough to need it. When you go into The Presence with a request, do you expect to hear God say, “Oh, please come in. How wonderful to see you! I’d love to do anything I can for you.” Or do you expect to hear, “DON’T BOTHER ME.”

It is a struggle going on behind the scenes of every Bible Study group and prayer retreat I have ever been involved with. We try to keep from being personal. We try to act mature and objective. We keep things general and vague. We will not walk into The Presence and say, “Please God, I want a bicycle. Or I need a car. Or I need you to help me win this person for my mate. Or my friend is sick and I want you to make them well. Or I can’t get through to my child lately and I need your help.”

The message of the parable is dramatic. It is, first of all, strong permission to ask for what we need, even little things we need at the moment. I still frequently run into people who cannot get personal in prayer. But that is a contradiction in terms. Prayer is the most personal thing in all the world. Nevertheless, it seems to many people to be beneath the dignity of God, or of prayer, to get below the level of “world peace” or “national prosperity.” God cannot or should not be bothered, they say, with “my personal needs or wants.” Men make history, dynasties, and eras. God makes days ... one day at a time. Men make heroes and kings – great leaders and mighty saints. God makes children ... one individual at a time. Which is to say that God does not need our grandeur. That is not in short supply in God’s realm like it is in ours. If we want to know God, we have to get to the little things, the personal things, the day-at-a-time things. Everything else has to come from that and build on that anyway. It is no insult to let God in on the ground floor, where we really live. And we cannot wait until we get everything all cleaned up and figured out before we go into The Presence. The parable reminds us that nothing is too small or unworthy or off-limits to bring before God. THERE IS NOTHING IN THIS WORLD THAT GOD IS NOT INTERESTED IN.

So, when we feel small, insignificant, rejected, useless, or unimportant, Jesus’ word seems to be: DO NOT BELIEVE IT. It is not the truth – it is only our own attitude or mood or perspective at the time. We must go on asking, and insist on being blessed. Never take NO for an answer! God is always saying YES. If that is not what we are hearing, we are not hearing God.

It is common and often-quoted pop theology to say that “God always answers prayer, only sometimes God says NO.” Do you believe that? Can you believe that Jesus believed that? If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, sometimes God will say NO? Ask, and sometimes God will say NO? Seek, and you may never find? Knock, and the door might be

slammed in your face and bolted from the inside? That does not sound like Jesus; that sounds like us. Jesus did not believe in NO. NO is not even in God’s vocabulary. NO is Satan’s word. God is Creator, not Negator. God is the God of Light and Life. Where have you been going to church all these years, where are you getting your theology, what Bibles have you been reading ... that you are willing to take NO for an answer?

Humans say NO, and even accuse God of saying NO, when God’s YES is so big it scares them. YES is the way to LIFE. We cannot afford to take NO for an answer. We have to keep banging on the door until the YES comes clear to us. Settling for NO gets us nowhere. True, saying YES implies a NO to everything that interferes or disagrees with that YES choice. But saying NO in any other way leads toward death. If the focus is on NO – if NO is what we are hearing – well, we cannot follow a NO for very long without getting to nothing: the void, the abyss. Jesus did not care at all about what people were against. Presumably God does not either. We can spend our whole lives saying NO to every kind of evil, but it will never add up to more than zero. (I can still hear my mother on the subject of goodness: “You think Jesus came out of Heaven and died on a Cross so we could become almost as good as fence posts? A fence post doesn’t lie, cheat, steal, screw, show prejudice, horde, gossip, or murder. Is your destiny no higher than that of a fence post?”) Only the YESes count. Only what we are *for* matters. God is the great YES-giver. Do you remember Moses asking for God’s name? For God’s very essence? “Tell the people ‘I AM’ sent you.” I AM – not I AM NOT. I AM NOT is for atheists. Only atheists take NO for an answer.

We can be certain that God is saying YES to us, in some fashion, in every circumstance of life. That does not mean we can always have what we want. On the other hand, quite frequently *we* do not want what we want. God is always and ever directing us toward a truer and better LIFE – showing us how to support and encourage each other in moving toward LIFE together.

God opens new directions ... reveals larger and more beautiful plans ... wants to trade good for better, and better for best. We aren’t sure we want to try to live up to, or into, all of that – it looks like a mighty big city to us country folk. Even one of God’s YESes is so big we cannot begin to see to the other side of it, and it looks mighty risky out there despite the excitement and fascination. Sometimes we hear the whisper of a mighty YES and don’t even get to the door, never mind find the

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courage to knock. So we go back home and say, “I’m not really sure, but I tried to pray, and I think God said NO. Or maybe he was asleep. At least there wasn’t any answer.”

I suspect *that* is the most common reason for humans claiming to hear NO when God is trying to say YES. We have to suspect that most of the time we argue with, or even reject, God’s YES simply because it looks too big. We get frightened by the sheer size and audacity of the affirmation, and try to recover by pretending that we did not hear the invitation, or that we do not believe in such possibilities, or that we heard only our own NOs, when in fact they were only tagging along behind a great YES.

Something is amiss at our end of the prayers when that is the way it seems to us. God is always saying YES. If that is not what we are hearing, we are not hearing God. The Creator, Sustainer, Affirmer, Author of Life ... is never negative. But God’s YESes are frequently more than we can handle – and that is the real conflict of every prayer life. We are the ones trying to find some NO to slow down the pace of God’s fantastic and everlasting YES!

The point of Jesus’ story, and of much that Jesus did and lived and said, is precisely this: No matter what it looks like from here, no matter how it seems to you at the moment, NEVER TAKE “NO” FOR AN ANSWER. Not if you are talking with God. Keep on praying, and knocking, and seeking, and asking ... until you hear YES. Because the truth is, it is not a prayer until you hear God saying YES!

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