



Christian Workers – Finance for Living Series

to ask or not to ask

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A difficult question

There is a question that often crops up during support raising seminars and it is this: “is it ok to ask for support?”

It comes in different forms, ranging from the theological: “is it Biblical to ask?”, to the emotional: “I’m too scared to ask, can’t I just pray instead?”

Sometimes great heroes of the faith, like Hudson Taylor, get quoted as examples of people who didn’t ask for support. Taylor said, “God’s work, done God’s way, will never lack God’s supply”. If they just prayed and didn’t ask, the argument goes, then we shouldn’t ask either. Sometimes this is described as living by faith.

But what about other great heroes of the faith who were equally used by God and who did ask? Like D.L. Moody, the American evangelist from the late 19th century who was hugely used by God in his day and who was very open about asking for money. He said, “I show my faith when I go to men and state to them the needs of the Lord’s work and ask them to give to it.”

So was Taylor exercising more faith by not asking? Or was Moody showing more faith by approaching people for money?

We need to be careful not to build our theology, philosophy and practice just based around great heroes of the faith, whether they asked or didn’t ask. We need to build our foundation around the principles of scripture. And there is one passage in particular that is worth exploring that shows both Taylor and Moody were right!

Elijah’s story

Take a look at 1 Kings 17. At the start of the chapter we see Elijah confronting Ahab, Israel’s most ungodly leader to date. As King, Ahab considered himself to be the supreme power in the land, so Elijah decided to show him who had the *real* power. He announced to Ahab that by the power of the God of Israel (as opposed to just the *King* of Israel) it wouldn’t rain again until Elijah said it would rain. Ahab wasn’t best pleased with this challenge to his authority, so life for Elijah suddenly became dangerous.

In verse two, we see God telling Elijah to hide in the Kerith Ravine and saying that he will survive by drinking from the brook and eating food brought by ravens. And it didn’t just happen by chance: God tells Elijah that he has *ordered* the birds to take care of him. So Elijah was able to survive thanks to these very unusual special gifts.

But Elijah had told Ahab that it wouldn’t rain. So what happened to the stream? This vital source of Elijah’s supply dried up. God could have made the empty brook fill with water as easily as he had arranged for the birds to feed Elijah, but for some reason he doesn’t choose to continue with this type of unusual provision.

Instead he tells Elijah to go to Zarephath, a village well north and west of where Elijah was hiding that wasn't even part of Israel. God tells him that he has *commanded* a widow there to take care of him. When God had ordered the ravens to take care of him, the provision had simply appeared – Elijah didn't have to ask or even explain his needs to anyone.

Now God has *commanded* the widow to take care of him. So Elijah heads off to find this special provision that God has already prepared for him.

As he approaches the village he sees the widow gathering sticks for a fire. First of all he asks her for a drink of water and then, as an additional request, could she also bring him a piece of bread. The water she could get from the village well, but the bread was a different matter. It would have to come from her own resources – and she has just enough oil and flour left to make one last meal for herself and her son, and then they will die. So she turns down Elijah's request – it just isn't possible.

But God has already told Elijah that he has commanded this woman to take care of him. Unlike the same command to the ravens, this one doesn't seem to be so straightforward. The negative circumstances surrounding the widow are so contrary to God's call that she can't hear the command, let alone respond to it, and even if she wanted to help, there is no way she could.

So how does this man of God respond to her refusal to care for him?

First of all he tells this woman with only enough food for one last meal not to be afraid – probably a good idea, given what he's going to tell her next! He then tells her to make some bread for him first. Only after that, he says, can she make a meal for herself and her son. So with this tiny bit of food, barely enough for her and her young boy, she is now supposed to feed this grown man first. He ends his request with a promise that, if she does as he asks, God will meet her needs in a miraculous way until the rains come again and she will be able to provide for herself once more.

The woman does as Elijah asks, using her last resources to feed him first, and it turns out just as Elijah had said. Miraculously, she has enough oil and flour every day to keep her going until the rains come.

At the start of the story we see Elijah being provided for in an unusual way, with no asking and no one but God aware of his need. Maybe Hudson Taylor was right.

Then we see Elijah not only making his needs known to the widow, but asking her to meet the need. And when she says that she can't help him, he doesn't accept her 'no' as an appropriate answer and asks her a second time, insisting that she use her last provision for his benefit. Maybe D.L. Moody was right.





what can be learnt?

So, what lessons can we learn from this story?

First of all, I am not suggesting that we take the last penny from every widow we meet! Nor am I suggesting that we don't accept someone's decision not to support us. But there are some key points about support-raising in this story.

God chooses how our support works

Sometimes his plan involves support arriving from apparently strange sources without our asking. Sometimes his plan involves us making our needs known to people and asking for their support. In this story both happened to Elijah immediately after each other, with no apparent reason for the change. We don't have the freedom to let our preferences, emotions or abilities be the deciding factor in whether or not we ask for support. I am a firm believer in the freedom to ask for support, but I recognise that God has often chosen to provide for us without us asking. Similarly, those who are firm believers in the freedom not to ask for support need to recognise that God, for whatever reason, might give them situations where they need to ask. Both Taylor and Moody were right. But it isn't their choice whether or not you should ask. Nor is it my choice, or even yours. It is God's choice.

We need to keep talking to God about our support

It was God's instruction to go to the widow that gave Elijah the confidence not only to approach her, but also to ask again after she turned him down. If Elijah had just been acting by his own reasoning, he might not have approached her at all and he probably wouldn't have asked a second time after she said no, and the widow and her son would have died. It isn't a case of asking *or* praying. We always need to pray, whether or not we ask.

Sometimes the person receiving the support needs to have faith for both themselves and the person being asked

It wasn't until some time later in the story that the widow understood that Elijah was God's man.

God might create a set of connections and circumstances where your need to receive is the trigger required to help another person recognise their need to give

It might feel strange, it might involve direct asking, it might include discussion about the person's response and it might feel uncomfortable, but it shouldn't be our levels of discomfort that determine whether we encourage someone to discover a call of God on their lives.

We don't know why the other person needs to give but we do know that God blesses giving

In this story Elijah is quite specific about what this blessing will look like. It is unusual for us to have such insight and it can sound like spiritual blackmail to tell someone that God's blessing will follow their giving. But even if we don't explain it, we know from Jesus' own words that blessing follows giving, even if the

potential supporter isn't aware of it. In this case the blessing to the widow and her son was that their lives were saved. What if Elijah had chosen not to pursue his request for her support?

In the end, neither Elijah nor the widow are the central characters in this story. God is at the heart of it, arranging connections between two people, one with a need to receive and one with a need to give. Elijah was well aware of his need to receive but the widow wasn't aware of her need to give. It took a strange set of circumstances engineered by God to bring both needs to the surface. Elijah needed to have faith for both of them and it was by asking the widow to give him food that the call on her life was awakened.

The provision through the ravens without asking and the provision through the widow with asking are both expressions of God's grace and they are both expressions of Elijah's faith. It's not up to us to decide how it works: it is up to God. And that might mean being willing to ask in situations where our emotions will make it a challenge to do so. We need to let God's word be our guide, not our emotions.

a final note

It's easy to read a story like this and say, "Yes, but that was Elijah. He was a prophet of God. It was OK for him to respond like this, but not me." Not true. When talking about Elijah's relationship with God in terms of his prayer life, James tells us, "Elijah was a man just like us." [James 5:17]. You and I are no different today from what Elijah was back then – someone with material needs that need to be met to allow us fulfil God's call on our lives. All of us are fully dependent on God and, like Elijah, we need to follow how he leads in the process. And it might be down some unexpected paths – maybe even more unexpected for the supporter than for you!

The Finance for Living series of papers forms part of Stewardship's resources for Christian Workers. With contributions from a panel of advisors each of whom has significant experience within the area of mission, the series draws on their expertise to offer biblical teaching and practical guidance on issues affecting those living on personal financial support. The papers are available to download from the Stewardship website see <http://www.stewardship.org.uk/christian-workers>

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