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PERSEVERING IN PRAYER

Luke 18:1-8

By

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Luke Lesson 81

Persevering in Prayer Luke 18:1-8

One of the most difficult aspects of prayer is persevering when it seems that God is not answering. Jesus instructed us to pray that the Father's kingdom would come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And yet here we are, almost 2,000 years later, and that prayer, prayed millions of times by millions of Christians down through the centuries, is still not answered.

In spite of years of prayer and missionary efforts, some of the Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu sections of the world seem as resistant to the gospel as ever and so it is easy to become discouraged about praying for world missions. On a personal level, all of us have requests that we have brought before God for years—requests that would be to His glory to answer—and yet it seems like God isn't answering His phone and He doesn't even have an answer machine! In light of these problems, it is easy to lose hope and even to give up praying.

The Lord Jesus knew the weakness of our flesh and that we all are prone to lose heart. In light of that, He graciously gave His disciples and us this parable "to show that at all times they [and we] ought to pray and not lose heart." This instruction fits in with the preceding context where the Lord told the disciples that the days would come when they would long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but they would not see it (17:22). During the time between His ascension and His Second Coming, the world would go on in its disregard of God, much as it had in the days of Noah and of Lot. The church would be much like this widow, left without her heavenly Bridegroom, much maligned and persecuted by the ungodly. During this time of waiting and struggle, how can the saints persevere? Jesus shows that we will persevere as we continue in believing prayer. And, to persevere in prayer,

To pray always and not lose heart, we must properly understand both God and ourselves.

God has promised that His Messiah, the Son of Man, will return one day in power and glory. He will judge the earth and vindicate His people. But in the interim, as we wait for His promises to be fulfilled, if we want not to lose heart, we must pray always.

1. At all times we ought to pray.

As the apostle Paul instructs us, we should “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). Right away—be honest—most of us think, “That’s impossible! I’ve got to go to work for at least eight hours every day. I’ve got to pay bills, to eat my meals, to talk with my spouse and others, to take care of my house and lawn and car, and a hundred other things to do each week. How can I possibly pray without ceasing? What am I supposed to do, join a monastery or something?”

Jesus modeled for us the kind of life that we are to live in dependence on the Father. As we look at His life, He did not live in the desert as a hermit so that He could pray around the clock. Rather, prayer was something that Jesus frequently engaged in, even though in one sense of all people who ever lived on this earth, Jesus had the least need to pray! He did not have to wrestle with the inner lusts of the flesh as we do, since He was born without sin. And, yet He often prayed.

He prayed as the Holy Spirit descended on Him at His baptism (Luke 3:21). He often would slip away from the crowds into the wilderness where He would pray (5:16). He spent the whole night in prayer before He called the twelve (6:12). It was while He was praying that Peter gave his well-known confession that Jesus is the Christ (9:18). It was while He was on the mountain praying that He was transfigured before Peter, James, and John (9:28, 29). And, on the night before the cross, Jesus not only prayed for Peter, that his faith would not fail, but He also agonized fervently in prayer, sweating great drops of blood, as He wrestled with becoming our sin-bearer (22:32, 40-46).

When the apostle Paul tells us to pray without ceasing, the word he used was also used of repeated military assaults. The army would attack and then withdraw and regroup. Then they would

attack again and again until they achieved victory. That is how we are to pray. The word was also used of a hacking cough. A person with a hacking cough doesn't usually cough without coming up for a breath. Rather, they cough frequently and repeatedly. That is how we should pray. While we should be in a spirit of communion with God at all times, there should be a number of times every day when we stop and bring our specific requests or burdens or praises to God in prayer. Sometimes, especially in times of great need, we ought to set aside longer times to devote ourselves to prayer. But whatever else we do, at all times we ought to pray.

The word ought has the idea of necessity. Prayer is not an optional activity for the more committed. It is a necessity for every believer because it acknowledges our total dependence on God. Not to pray is arrogance, because I am really saying, "Thanks, God, but I can handle this by myself." But the truth is, I can't handle anything by myself apart from God's grace and power! And so, at all times we ought to pray. But, ...

2. We are prone to lose heart and to give up on prayer.

Jesus knew that and that's why He told this parable (18:1). This parable and the one that follows are the only ones where the purpose of the parable is given up front. Jesus knew that we are weak and that in the face of His delayed return, when we may be laughed at by the world because of our faith, we would be prone to lose heart and quit praying.

There are a number of reasons that we are prone to lose heart and quit praying. Sometimes we assume that we are competent to handle things in our own strength. This is especially a danger when it is a task that we do repeatedly. We hop in the car and head off on a trip without a thought of prayer, because we've driven safely for many years. We forget that we depend on the Lord for protection. We go to work every day and do our jobs without prayer because we know how to do our jobs. We forget that we are dependent on God to do our jobs competently. This can even be true of spiritual tasks, such as preaching or leading in worship or anything else that you do so often that it becomes routine.

Or, if God has given you a strong natural ability, it is easy to do it without prayer because you know how to do it and you do it

well. I'm thankful that I have always felt incompetent when it comes to preaching, because I cannot do it without consciously depending on God. And, thank God, almost every week as I prepare sermons, I hit a wall where I feel overwhelmed and I despair as to how I'm going to get the message together. Of course that's right where the Lord wants me, because then I have to trust in Him for the message. But, there is another major reason that we are prone to lose heart and quit praying:

3. A main reason we lose heart in prayer is the delays in God's answers.

In the context, this is the source of discouragement that Jesus is addressing. He knew that His coming would be delayed to the point that the disciples would long to see Him come, but He would not come (17:22). During His absence, they would be mocked and rejected just as Noah and Lot were (17:26-30). Some would be persecuted to the point of death. Others would go through awful hardships. And, He knew that from our limited human perspective, it often seems that God is not answering or even listening when we pray because we do not see things from His eternal perspective. And so He told this parable to show that at all times we ought to pray and not lose heart.

There are two characters in the parable. The first is a wicked, judge who cares about no one but himself. He even knows that he is a scoundrel, because when he thinks about this pesky woman, he admits in his own mind that he does not fear God nor respect man, but he just wants to get rid of her to gain some relief. She was annoying him to the point that he says (literally in the Greek), "she is going to give me a black eye." He didn't mean that she was literally hitting him, but rather that he felt emotionally beat up by her non-stop nagging.

The second character is this needy widow. In that society, widows were especially vulnerable, in that there were not many vocational opportunities for women. Life insurance was non-existent. She was dependent on whatever her husband had left her. But now some scoundrel had cheated her out of what little she had to live on. So she comes to the judge and asks for justice. He takes one look at her and figures, she's not going to give me much of a bribe, and I've got many others who can reward me hand-

somely if I take their cases. So he refuses to give her any help. He tells his bailiff to escort her out of the courtroom and he thinks, "That's the last I'll see of her."

Wrong! He no sooner leaves the courtroom to go home for lunch, than this woman dogs his steps all the way to his house. When he comes out to go back to work, there she is. When he goes home at night, she's there again. Every morning she is parked at the door of the courthouse, waiting for him to show up. Every day he tells her to get lost, but she keeps coming back. He can't get rid of her! She's beginning to dominate his life. He begins to hate going to work, because he's going to be confronted by this nagging woman!

Finally, after weeks of going on like this, he says to himself, "Even though I don't fear God and I don't care about his woman, I'm going to grant her request just to get her off my back!" Jesus says, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said." There's a lesson to be learned from this situation about persevering in prayer when God seems to delay the answer.

4. The answer to the problem of delays is to have a proper view of God and a proper view of ourselves.

A. We need a proper view of God.

We would be greatly mistaken if we thought that Jesus was teaching that God is like this self-centered, callous judge. That would run counter to the entire biblical revelation of the character of God as a loving and tender Father in relation to His children. Jesus uses this humorous example as an argument from the lesser to the greater, taken to absurd lengths. If this widow could get justice from this hardened, crusty, uncaring old judge, doesn't it follow that the loving, tender, gracious Heavenly Father will hear and answer His own children whom He has chosen when they cry out to Him for relief? There are four things here that we need to know about God:

(1) God cares for us.

"Just as a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). "Zion has said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on

the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; ..." (Isa. 49:14-16). To a persecuted church, some of whose members Nero had covered with pitch and used to light up his garden parties, Peter wrote, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you" (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Even when you are suffering terribly, keep in mind that God is totally unlike this uncaring judge! God cares for you!

- (2) God never delays answers because of a lack of care or a lack of power.

Although even in this lifetime we may not understand the reasons why God delays to answer our cries of agony, we can know for certain that He never delays to answer because He does not care for us or because He is unable to do what we need. He is able to do far more than we can ask or even think, even if it seems impossible to us. Because He is omniscient, God knows even the needs that we do not bring to Him in prayer. Because He is omnipresent, He can deal with your needs in Flagstaff at the same moment that He is dealing with some needy saint in Bangladesh. Because He is omnipotent, He has plenty of power to go around. Meeting your need won't drain His supply!

- (3) God's delays are always for our good, even if the reasons are hidden from us.

The reason for the delay with the widow was that the unjust judge was unwilling (18:4), but that is never the reason with our loving Father in heaven. The unjust judge was acting out of selfish motives all the way, even when he finally granted her request. But God always acts out of self-sacrificing love, as seen supremely in the cross of Christ. This judge was only concerned for his own relief, but God acts out of wise concern for the well-being of His people.

Four-year-old Caitlin was impatient for a sibling. One morning she told her mother, "Maybe if we both prayed out loud, God would hear us." So they prayed together. As soon as they finished, Caitlin asked, "What did he say?" Her mother explained that it doesn't work that way; sometimes it takes a long time to get an an-

swer. Caitlin was indignant: "Do you mean we were praying to an *answering machine*?" (*Reader's Digest* [12/94], p. 154.)

Sometimes it seems like it, doesn't it! God doesn't usually explain in advance why He is delaying the answers to our requests. But we need to cling to the fact that His delays are always for our good, even if we don't understand the reasons why.

- (4) God ultimately will bring swift and certain justice for His elect.

Jesus asks, "Will He delay long over them?" and then answers emphatically, "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily" (18:7b-8a). The first question is difficult to interpret. It can mean, as translated, that God will not delay in bringing justice. Or, it can mean that He will be patient in the sense of not becoming irritated with His children's frequent requests (as the judge did), and He will honor their requests by vindicating them in due time.

But what does Jesus mean when He says that justice will come speedily? Here we are almost 2,000 years later, and Jesus has not returned to rescue His needy people. We all know stories of faithful saints who have prayed for something all their lives, but their prayers went unanswered. What does *speedily* mean?

We must understand it from God's timetable, not ours. With the Lord, a thousand years are like a day or as a watch in the night (2 Pet. 3:8; Ps. 90:4). He told Noah that there would be a flood, but 100 years went by without a drop of rain while Noah endured his mocking neighbors. He promised Abraham a son, but he watched Sarah go through menopause and 25 years elapsed before Isaac was born. He promised Joseph in his teenage years through his dreams that his father and brothers would bow down to him, but he spent his twenties in an Egyptian dungeon. He promised to deliver His people from bondage in Egypt, but 400 long years went by before He raised up Moses, and that only after Moses spent 40 years in the desert after his failure. He promised to send His Messiah, but His people had to wait 400 years after the last prophet before, in the fulness of time, God sent His Son (Gal. 4:4). Speedily by God's calendar is not speedily by ours! One answer to the problem of delayed answers to our prayers is to get a proper view of God.

B. We need a proper view of ourselves.

I can only give a sketchy outline here for sake of time. Note these four things about ourselves:

- (1) We are often grieved by mistreatment and difficult trials.

The church is like this widow, who not only lost her husband, but then she had to contend with someone who was taking unfair advantage of her. Somewhere we have gotten the silly notion that if we follow the Lord, everything in life will work out neatly with a storybook ending. But the Bible shows us plenty of saints who were tortured, mocked, scourged, put in chains and imprisonment, stoned, sawn in two, and put to death with the sword. They went about in animal skins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated, wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. "And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised (Heb. 11:35-39).

- (2) We should persistently bring our heartfelt needs to God.

Like this widow, we should cry out day and night to our Father in heaven. She had no attorney, no advocate to plead her case, but we have the Holy Spirit to help us pray as we ought and the Lord Jesus Himself interceding at the right hand of the Father on our behalf. She had no guarantee of getting what she desired, but we have the Lord's promise that whatever we ask in His name, He will do it. What made this widow persist is that she knew her great need. Sometimes the Lord delays to answer us because we do not see how needy we really are until He keeps us waiting for a while. It is only when we sense our own insufficiency that we begin to pray, as Calvin puts it, with "an earnest—nay, burning—desire to attain it" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster], 3:20:6).

- (3) We must trust Him even when the answers are delayed.

Sometimes He is waiting, like a patient farmer, until the fruits of godliness, faith, and humility in our hearts is ripe before He grants the answers (Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* [Spire Books], pp. 88-89). Jesus says that when He returns, He will be looking for faith on the earth, but the implication is that it will

be a scarce commodity (the Greek expects a negative answer). While the world may scoff because God seemingly neglects His saints, surely we ought to cling to Him in faith!

(4) We can trust Him because we know that we are His elect.

Jesus refers to His people here as His elect (18:7). This means that you do not follow Jesus because you first chose Him, but rather because He first chose you. He chose you totally apart from anything that He saw in you. He did not choose you because He saw a spark of goodness in you. He did not choose you because He saw that you would choose Him. He chose you unconditionally while you were a rebellious sinner, so that His unmerited favor would shine forth through you. If you do not believe in the doctrine of God's sovereign, unconditional election, you don't believe what Jesus believed and you rob yourself of a source of great comfort. Even when God's answers to your prayers are delayed, you can trust Him knowing that you are one of His elect.

Conclusion

I have not had time to deal with the problem of when to stop praying for something that God isn't granting. It's not an easy question. Sometimes the Holy Spirit may say, "Stop asking; My grace is sufficient for you." Sometimes He gives us an inner assurance that the request will be granted, and so we can shift from praying to praising Him for the answer. Sometimes He removes the burden from our hearts and we move on to other requests. The Lord told Jeremiah to stop praying for disobedient Israel, because He had determined judgment for them (Jer. 11:14).

But often, He wants us, like this nagging widow, to keep on asking until we receive what we need. God isn't like this reluctant judge. He cares for us and is more than ready to grant our requests when He knows that we are ready to receive the answer. So keep on praying and don't lose heart. He will bring about justice for you speedily, according to *His* timetable, not yours!

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever felt that God is like this crusty old judge? Why is a proper view of God essential (see Gen. 3:1-7)?
2. Is it right to pray once in faith and drop the matter, knowing that God will answer? Do we need to keep bringing it to Him?
3. How can someone who has gone through awful trials maintain his or her faith in God's loving care?
4. How is the doctrine of election an important practical truth in times of delayed answers to prayer?
5. What does Jesus mean by His last question (18:8b)? Is it directed toward His disciples, toward the world, or both?

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