

Ought Always to Pray

Luke 18:1-8 | May 24, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Our Savior taught us that “with God all things are possible.”¹ And Paul said the same thing about his own growth as a Christian: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”²

These are words spoken by optimists, not pessimists. Neither man was blind to the broken state of this world, or to the active ragings of the devil, or to the thousand temptations that race around and within the believer’s heart.

Yet seeing all these hindrances in one glance, they could still say, “None of these is a problem for God. He will overcome them by the word of his power. He cannot lose, and so neither can I.”

That is optimism. It is healthy, realistic positivity. The Scriptures frown on sin, but they smile at the future.

Do you? That godly woman at the end of the Proverbs, she has a mind molded by God’s precious word and so she, just like the word itself, clothes herself with “strength and dignity” and “laughs at the time to come.”³ She is an optimist. Are you?

Perhaps you were, and then what you like to call “reality” hit you in the face, and all your dreams and ambitions for a flourishing life scattered like a pile of ash puffed upon by a strong wind. At one time you felt Christ near, and expected his return from heaven any second of the day. That was life! But then something—or a long series of somethings—took place, and now Christ’s presence and his return to earth seem like mere pieces of data. Your bills, your disappointments seem more concrete now than Christ does.

And you have accepted this new sort of life. Well, you may have accepted it, but Scripture never did, never does. You look ahead with fearful, squinted eyes; but the word of God gazes forward with wide open eyes of hope.

“Ah, but what will make the difference,” you think. You had hopes before and they were dashed; if you regain your confidence, how

¹ Matt. 19:26 (ESV); see also Mark 10:27.

² Phil. 4:13.

³ Prov. 31:25.

can you be sure they will not be dashed again. Why will things be different this time?

And Scripture answers you this morning: the difference will be prayer.

In God's world, prayer is perhaps always the difference between success and failure, the prayers of some person somewhere. God can easily give success apart from prayer, no doubt—but he has not chosen to. He has decided that all the great activities in his kingdom, all the lasting successes, all the flourishing Christian lives will be begun and carried on by prayer.

Without prayer, we do not expect success. If it happens, we look on it as a gracious accident of sorts. But our hope is not in accidents. Our confidence concerning the future is in the power of God, and that power, by God's own free choice, touches earth at prayer's call.

If you are a believer, there may be many things you cannot do—but you can pray. Therefore there is no reason you cannot be an optimist about the future, regardless what may have transpired in your past.

We here at Faith Bible Church can expect success as we move forward, whatever the obstacles before us, if we are a desperate people who depend upon God by praying always and not losing heart. This is the very principle Jesus teaches us in Luke today.

LUKE 18:1-8

Often when Jesus tells a parable, he follows with an explanation of it, to show what he means by it. But here we have just the reverse—Luke lets us know in the very first verse what the parable is meant to teach us. “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

The “them” in this verse must be the disciples. He had started talking to the disciples in verse 22 of the last chapter—they are the closest candidates for the “them” here. That matters because if you are a Christian, you are one of Christ's disciples. He is telling you this parable with this purpose in mind: that you yourself would always pray and not lose heart. He is not looking at the person next to you this morning, but at you. It does not matter if right now you pray little and do lose heart regularly. If so, you are

in the right place. You are seated before Jesus who is telling you a parable in order to change that fact about your life.

He tells you this parable so that you would become the kind of person who always prays and does not give up praying. That is our only hope for a rich Christian life, so we are glad that Jesus has brought us now into his school of prayer.⁴ We are his students, and for most of us we have no lesson we more need to learn at this very moment than how to pray always without losing heart.

Let us then happily hear our teacher out. What is the parable he offers us? Afterward we can turn to his own explanation of it.

The parable

The parable itself begins in verse 2.

He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’”⁵

The place of this parable and the names of its actors are not important—it is a “certain city,” in which are “a judge” and “a widow.”

But note the kind of persons we have before us. Here is a judge, a man in authority who is deciding cases for the good or ill of people’s lives. And he is corrupt. He does not fear God. This would open him up to all the perversions of justice—accepting bribes, partiality, and the like. Now, many authorities who do not fear God at least fear the public. They are kept from gross excesses of evil because they know that the cameras are rolling.

But sadly, this unrighteous judge does not even have that to compel him to do right. He “neither feared God nor respected man.” Neither do not find in him any regret about his own vice—

⁴ See Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*.

⁵ Vv. 2-5.

he asserts it plainly in verse 4: "Though I neither fear God nor respect man..."

There is no virtue to tie this judge to the widow who now comes before him. The Old Testament often urges us to care for widows in their need, since God himself takes the side of the oppressed. "Plead the widow's cause," cries Isaiah. And from Mount Ebal we hear the curse, "Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow." But when the Israelites respond, "Amen," this man's voice is not heard among them. He does not care. He does not fear God. So, deference to heaven's monarch does not push him to help the widow.

Nor does a concern for his own name, nor does any actual feeling of pity or compassion for her. "A righteous man," says Psalm 29:7, "knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge."

It would seem therefore that this widow, to whom now we turn, has no hope of a fair hearing before this judge. She cannot appeal to his own selfishness in many of the ways that others can. She cannot put silver in his hand, cannot promise him promotion in society. What is left to her? Only one tactic.

"And there was a widow in that city that kept coming to him."⁶

Here was her one appeal that could speak to his selfish heart. She could not appeal to a fear of God, or a fear of men, or compassion, or pity, or justice, or future judgment. She could only appeal to this one selfish quality of his: he did not like to be bothered.

So she bothered him. Over, and over, and over again. So much in fact that hear how matters turn out, and listen to the thoughts at play in his own mind, in verses 4 and 5:

For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming."

He has only one concern: that she might not beat him down by her continual coming. He does not want to be bothered. And that

⁶ V. 3.

is the only way she can speak in a language he can understand, so she speaks that language.

And as a consequence, he gives her justice.

That is the parable.

Meaning

Now, what are we to take from this parable? How can this parable teach us to pray always and not lose heart? Thankfully we do not have to guess at an answer; Jesus himself explains the parable right after giving it, in verses 6 to 8:

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

First Jesus points at the judge, at his reasoning. "Hear," he commands, "what the unrighteous judge says." The judge had only one motivation for giving the woman justice—his own selfish desire not to be bothered. That was it. And yet that single interest was enough to compel him to give the woman what she wished.

Now Jesus makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. The lesser is the judge—he has only one motivation to grant the widow's request, yet that one motivation is enough. Now to the greater—*how much more* will God give us our good requests, since he has many more motivations to do so than that judge did?

"And will not God give justice to his elect?" If one small, selfish motivation gets justice, how much more will the thousand powerful, divine motivations mean God gives us justice?

Look for a moment at God's motivations to answer prayer, before we consider in this text just what prayer he is answering.

God's motivations

The judge was not driven by a zeal for God's glory. But God has such a zeal. I do not say that motivation "drives" him, for God cannot be driven anywhere but by himself. Yet out of God's own essence flows this current, this force, this persuasion that moves worlds and determines dynasties: his zeal for his own glory.

If the unrighteous judge will answer the widow's request without this zeal, *how much more* will God answer your prayers with it? If you ask aright, then God's glory is tied to his answer. No, he will not always answer yes, precisely because his glory is sometimes better served by answering no. Yet in many cases he will answer yes if we will regularly appeal to this zeal of his.

Consider Joshua's prayer of old, when he and the Israelites lost their battle against Ai. Doom lay before him, so like the widow he made his appeal desperately:

Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel. And they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, O Lord GOD, why have you brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies! For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it and will surround us and cut off our name from the earth. *And what will you do for your great name?*"⁷

The fate of God's people is tied to the very name of God. He wishes us to flourish in our Christianity, for then he is honored. He does not always wish us wealth and physical comfort, for often he is better glorified by our suffering. But it is his will that we should prosper inwardly, that our faith should be firmly fixed upon him, and that we should have every fruit of his Spirit within us: love, joy, peace, patience, and all the rest. It is also his desire that those who are perishing should reach out to him and find him, through our witness.

You can pray for these things, and many other things, by means of this appeal: "God, what will you do for your great name?" If the unrighteous judge answers without this motivation, how much more will God answer with it.

But this is not the only motivation at play—there are others, contained under the umbrella of this one. For example, out of

⁷ Josh. 7:6-9; emphasis mine.

God's nature flows also his love for his own. Notice in our text that Jesus asks, "will not God give justice *to his elect?*"⁸

The elect are those chosen by God to be his own people. They are all his true disciples—you, if you truly know him. And there has sadly been so much argument about election in the history of the church that we are prone to miss the poignancy in this term, "the elect." These are the apple of God's eye. He did not have to choose them, but he did choose them—not because of what he found in them, but because of a love he found flowing out of himself.

But having chosen us, God loves us with a love incomparable. The unrighteous judge did not love the widow who came to him, yet even without this love he gave her what she wished. *How much more* will God, who loves us powerfully and unchangeably, give us what we ask?

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!⁹

If the judge, who is evil, knows how to give justice to the widow, *how much more* does God know how to give justice to his beloved children?

We could name so many other motivations in God's mind related to these: his pity, his compassion, his inherent righteousness and goodness. When you pray to your Father in heaven, all these conspire to get you what you pray for.

And if you believe this, then you will pray. This parable was told to keep us from losing heart in prayer—but why do we lose heart in prayer? Because we cease to believe that God wants our best, or that he hears our prayers, or that our prayers can accomplish anything. And we cease to believe this most often because God does not always answer our prayers immediately and just as we would wish. We pray to be a good witness for Christ at work, and the very day we pray this we are racked with temptations and

⁸ V. 7; emphasis mine.

⁹ Matt. 7:9-11; emphasis mine.

dishonor him! It almost seems as though our prayer brought about the very opposite.

Or we pray for a perishing friend, and he is just as perishing as before.

What is the consequence? We guess that God doesn't want to hear this prayer, or that he is not at all interested in answering them, so we lose heart and cease praying. We try other methods than prayer. We work harder, read more, sleep less. We tried prayer and it did not work.

To you Jesus commands, "Look at the judge!" The widow got her way with him, little motivation though he had, because she was persistent. She believed that she could get what she was asking for, or she would not have gone on asking—even though she was resting her hope on so slender a chance and so small a motivation.

You on the other hand have the whole essence, the whole nature of God in your favor. Yes, he will often delay his answer to test our faith, to see if we believe he hears and cares, to see if we will persevere in prayer. And so this parable comes to you with a principle that, if believed, will keep you from losing heart in prayer. The principle is that God does hear and has many reasons to answer your request. Keep asking. Keep knocking. Keep seeking.

God's interest in his dealings with you and in his delayed answers is to exercise your faith. You can see this even in the final verse of our passage: "I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will anyone still believe that he hears and wants to answer? Will anyone still be praying? Will any widow still be appealing to him?

This parable of Jesus teaches you to pray always and not lose heart by teaching you that God has many reasons to answer your prayers, and only delays so that you will keep on asking. If you believe that, you will go on praying. If not, you will lose heart.

Justice

Now naturally the question arises, "Well, does this mean God will give us anything we ask for, so long as we keep on asking for it?" The answer is no. For though there are many passages in Scripture

which teach us to pray confidently, and to bring all our requests to God, there are also many which warn us not to expect God to fulfill our selfish desires. There are prayers that God does not answer as we would like, and he has his reasons, which are all good.

But that fact must not dissuade you from praying. Pray even for uncertain things, things which God has not committed himself to always answer with a yes. Pray for health, pray for your work, pray for whatever concerns you. You ought always to pray, and not lose heart.

Yet it is clear even in this text that Jesus does not have every prayer sort of prayer in mind as he tells the parable. The widow sought justice from the judge—we don't know how her opponent wronged her, but somehow he did. And so she was asking only for her due, for justice, for something right.

And when Jesus explains the parable, he shows that he too has justice in mind. "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily."¹⁰

And how will God give them justice? Verse 8 answers: "when the Son of Man comes."

We can take the principle of this passage and apply it to all our prayers—but it has its most direct application to our prayers for the return of Christ.

You may be surprised to hear this—how often do we pray for Christ's return? Well, we pray for it very often in spirit, if not in word. Jesus equates his own coming here with "justice." That is, the righting of wrongs. Do you pray that wrongs will be righted?

If so, then it is only a small step to praying for Christ's return, for his return will be the final and fullest righting of all wrongs.

Do you pray for an end to suffering? Then to pray for Christ's return to occur quickly is just to pray that all our suffering will come to an end. It is no wonder that after, in the last chapter of

¹⁰ Vv. 7-8.

your Bible, this world's restored state is described, John adds this prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus!"¹¹

Brothers and sisters, this too must be part of our faith. We must not lose heart in hoping for our Savior's return. If we believe that God cares about his world and its agonies, we believe too that he will one day soon end those agonies. Now he tarries, that all the elect may be brought into the fold. But very soon, that task will be done, Christ will come, and we will see that none of our prayers for rescue have been in vain.

You may think the return of Christ a fixed thing that your prayers can in no way alter. In one sense that is true—not only of Christ's return, but of all that God has decreed. Yet on the other hand God has set up his world in such a way that your prayers are a necessary part of what will come to pass.

It matters that you pray for Christ's return; without such prayers, he will not return! That may shock you. But God who has decided that the Son of Man will return has also decided that the elect shall pray for that return, resulting in it.

Conclusion

Family of the living God, let us pray as though we believed he lived. Let us pester God by our prayers, and not let up. Unlike the judge, he loves to be bothered so.

What is it you wish to see happen for the kingdom? Who do you wish were Christian, and which of your sinful habits do you wish were put to death? Pray for these things. Begin now. Do not let up. Appeal to the Judge of all the earth and appeal again. Say, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."¹²

By this means, and this means alone, shall we advance toward heaven, and heaven advance toward earth.

¹¹ Rev. 22:20.

¹² Matt. 6:10.