



## Persisting in Prayer

Luke 18:1-8

When we get on the internet and read the news, it only takes a millisecond to realize that there's much suffering in this world. I personally like to follow global, national and local news. And yet, I can walk away lamenting many times. I may turn on the TV and hear about a murder or people starving or human trafficking. I review the religious persecution taking place around the world in other countries. A few years ago Open Doors ministries stated the following about Christian persecution: 322 Christians are killed for their faith around the globe, 214 churches and Christian properties are destroyed, and 772 forms of violence (like beatings, abductions, rapes, arrests and forced marriages) take place *per month*? Then I read of the dynamics of our current world with regards to COVID. I read of a friend's father and mother who died of COVID. I then find an article in the Holland Sentinel last week about the struggling restaurants in our area that needs to pay their workers who are scraping the bottom of the barrel and needing to feed their children.

I see the groaning of the curse at work in this world, don't you? Sometimes I wonder why I even read about what's going on, but then I believe I can act wisely when I read about these things. God doesn't necessarily want me to *not* know. He wants me to know and respond with wisdom. But what does wisdom look like? Today, I want to encourage us in what I believe is God's *first step* for us as Christians who live in a broken world, anticipating the day when he will make all things new.

What is that "first step?" Turn in your Bibles to Luke 18. We're going to study one of Jesus' parables (a parable I mentioned the first week of this study on prayer), and this parable is told after Jesus talks about the delay to his return to restore all things. Before speaking the parable, in chapter 17, Jesus says, "26 Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. 27 They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all."1 The days of the Son of Man are those days before he comes and restores everything. Jesus says here that when he comes again, people are going to be going about doing their own things, doing life their own way with basically no thought of Jesus.

Keep in mind, Jesus is speaking to his disciples (meaning, those who trust him and follow him) and he is saying that things aren't going to happen according to their plans and ideas. Instead, they are going to long for Jesus' return but they're not going to see it as soon as they think. There's going to be delay. Since there's a delay, how are they going to live? This world is broken, isn't it? People rebel against the Lord, right? There's sin and unrighteousness and injustice, right? Yes. So, how do we live, Jesus? Enter the parable.

The parable of Luke 18 is commonly known as "The Parable of the Persistent Widow." Jesus essentially states that if you want to persevere in the midst of injustice and if you want to keep faithful as a disciple all the way until the end, pray. The reality is that **God hears and grows Christians (and the Christian faith) through persevering prayer.** In verse 1, we're told that Jesus is speaking to the disciples and calling them to persevere in prayer, and to not give up.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 17:26–27.

As I begin this sermon, I want to stress the importance of being a follower of Jesus. The Bible tells us we were created for God's glory. We were made to find our joy in him, and yet all of us are born sinners. Not only do we not want God, we want to take the Ruler and Sustainer, the Eternal One, and make him serve us. We want to take his gifts and turn them in on us. We have sought to usurp his throne, all the while, we're on the pathway to death because we've rejected Him – who is Life. And yet, this rejection of God has led to all the vanity and pain we see in this world. Please hear me, if you are not a follower of Jesus. If you've not embraced Jesus as the only Savior who took the punishment that sinners deserved and then gives eternal life and reconciliation with God, please call on him this morning! Why wait?

I begin with this emphasis because this parable is spoken to Jesus' followers. Any message on prayer does not matter for you if you don't call on him to forgive you and rescue you. But for all who believe on Jesus, the Scriptures tell us that God accepts us, wants us, and that God also wants to answer our requests that we lay before him as we commune with him! What a tremendous encouragement, right? And we need these words as we realize that Jesus is "waiting" to return again. He seems to be delayed. So what do we do during this delay? Jesus calls us to commune with our God in persistent prayer. God hears and grows his children, Christians, through prayer. And, through prayer, God *will* bring justice. Therefore, pray and don't give up.

These are things we see in this parable. So let me restate the parable now. The story goes that there was this city with a judge in it that was responsible for the justice in that area. Jesus describes this man as someone who doesn't fear God or regard man. In other words, he doesn't subscribe to the "Greatest Commandment" to "Love God and love others." Automatically we should be thinking that he's not going to be a very helpful person. He's corrupt. He's a judge who only thinks of himself, and in that day (as well as today) there would be judges who would take bribes to make more money. He's not concerned with justice because he's infatuated with himself.

Jesus then goes on and says that in this city, there's a widow. Stop here. If this guy doesn't care about God or other people – unless maybe they can give him money – is he going to care about a widow? In that society, widows had it much worse than many widows in our day, from a monetary and status position. Clearly, if this judge really is fearless, then he is not going to care for this woman. So, Jesus wants us to realize the dire circumstances of this woman – not only in being a widow, but in being a widow under this judge's jurisdiction.

But then there is something almost shocking that takes place: she "kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'"<sup>2</sup> Jesus doesn't describe the injustice that's taken place, but the type of injustice isn't the point. The point is that there's injustice and this widow has an adversary. Of all people to answer her need, it'd be the judge, but he doesn't care about justice.

What we see here, though, is that this woman knows that there's only *one* person who can answer her. She's desperately dependent so she decides to continually come to the judge. This is persistence! In the Greek language that this was written in, the phrase "kept coming" is in a tense that indicates that she started something that she's going to keep doing until she gets a response. That's persistence.

Jesus says that for a time the judge refused. That was in keeping with his character. But, after a while, he's annoyed and maybe a little fearful. He says to himself, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man,

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:3.

<sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’ ”<sup>3</sup>

This man admits that he doesn't really care about people, but the persistence of this woman bothers him, and it causes him to think that he should give her justice. The reason he gives the justice is so that she doesn't beat him down by her continual coming. The phrase of "beat him down" is probably a figure of speech that talks about damaging someone's reputation. While the judge doesn't fear God or others, he probably wants to keep his position and lifestyle. With her incessant urgings to him, he's afraid he'll lose his status. So, even though he's still only thinking of himself, he does answer this woman's need and decides to give her justice on the basis of his own glory.

What does Jesus want us to grasp in this story? Even in the worst of circumstances, human beings can persist? Even under despotic rule, certain people can rise to the occasion and fight for justice? Humans don't lose heart? The story of this widow has all the makings of any great book or movie – from the ashes a person rises and wins! But there's more. Jesus tells us what he wants us to understand in verses 6-8: <sup>6</sup>Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. <sup>7</sup>And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"<sup>4</sup>

### **The Lessons:**

Jesus is making an argument from lesser to greater. In other words, Jesus is *not* saying the judge and God are identical. Yet, we all are in desperate need of God, and God always acts on the basis of his glory (which is eternally good, unlike the judge). While the action step is to pray, Jesus is motivating the disciples by emphasizing the character of God. That's what I hope to do today, too, Ventura. I could simply say, "Pray persistently," but pray to who? What if you are tempted to believe God doesn't care or that God is vindictive? I'm so grateful that Jesus embeds the command of prayer in the character of God himself because, as we've been seeing again, prayer is about relationship with the Lord. So let's rehearse the basic lessons of this parable and then apply them to prayer. After all, if we are to make it in this sinful world, we must live in dependent, persistent communion with him.

#### **1. God is Just.**

I remember lyrics to a song written several years ago that says, "God is God and I am not. I can only see a part of the picture He's painting. God is God and I am man. So I'll never understand it all For only God is God" (Chapman, *God is God*). This song talks about the turbulence of life, and this author has gone through the turbulence. Some years after writing this song, his daughter was hit by a car and killed. The driver of that car was his son. And yet, to this day, this man continues to cling to Jesus. He was right, in the midst of troubles like these, our most basic comfort is remember that God is *God*. God is loving. God is perfect. God is compassionate. God is slow to anger. God is infinite. God is holy. God is unchanging. God is all-glorious. God is truth. God is just! Nothing that I see around me has changed the perfect character of God. And nothing around me has dethroned him. Yet, in life, **We often let what we see be the judge of God instead of believing God will be the judge of what we see.**

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:4–5.

<sup>4</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 18:6–8.

Look at what Jesus says in verse 6: “<sup>6</sup>Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. <sup>7</sup>And shall God not avenge. . . .”<sup>5</sup> If we can understand a judge trying to save his own skin, how much more should we resolutely believe that God will avenge? Is God not God? He most certainly *is* the just God! In fact, he is the *only* One who can bring the complete justice this world needs.

As the widow went to the judge because only he could give her what she was asking for, so Jesus is saying that only God can give you what you’re longing for. He’s the only One who can answer our prayers and give the complete peace and perfection we’re looking for. If God is God, and he is, then look to him! Personally, I often can feel the burdens of the tortured, the dying children in and out of the wombs, the deaths to all sorts of disease. But these realities ought not to cause us to cease to pray, but instead they should summon us to God’s throne. I’m reminded of the martyrs in Revelation, and even in Heaven they are *praying* before God’s throne saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”<sup>11</sup> Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer. . . .”<sup>6</sup> Do you see here that the martyrs blood still isn’t avenged? Even in heaven, they’re praying. Talk about persistence in prayer. They are continuing to pray for vindication.

God’s response to them is rest a little while longer. That said, when you read the book of Revelation, you see that our God is a just and holy and righteous and perfect God. You do see that he will punish and restore. Jesus will come to judge the world and bring a New Heaven and New Earth. Ventura, God is just!

## 2. God loves his children.

In verse 7 Jesus asks, “shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?”<sup>7</sup> Again, Jesus is talking specifically about those who trust in him! The idea of being “elect” in the Old and New Testament brings confidence, hope and love! Being the “elect” of God means that God’s love isn’t based on your love for him. Instead, your love is based in his. As a result, if you have turned to the Lord Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God, you know he loved you first. You are part of the elect people of God. Being elect means that we have the confidence that we are under his secure care. We may falter. We may fail. But God will always be faithful. These truths and more are communicated with this word elect.

Therefore, let this word elect cause awe. Jesus here says “won’t God avenge his elect?” If God loved you before the foundation of the world, how can you ever doubt that he loves you *right now*? If God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to the world, and if his only Son was torn and beaten in my place, how could any one of us think God will now think, “I’m tired of these people. I’m done with this justice stuff?” It’s against his glory to do that!

Think of this parable again with me, the judge is unjust and concerned only for himself and that leads to injustice. But what about God? God is the eternally just because he maintains his glory as central! This is almost staggering, but hear me out. God is the definer of *everything*. God does all for *his glory* because without him, there’s no glory. So, let me ask you, will God ever deny himself? No. Therefore, if you are God’s elect. If you are God’s child. If you are in God’s hands, God *must* vindicate you because in doing

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<sup>5</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 18:6–7.

<sup>6</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Re 6:10–11.

<sup>7</sup> *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Lk 18:7.

so, he vindicates himself and his own glory. By the way, that doesn't mean that he's going to answer immediately or even exactly as we ask, but that's a sermon for another time. That said, I do believe Jesus is saying that our prayers will not go unheard. They will be answered, and one day (maybe even many days, months or years from now), justice will come. And, when it comes, it will come in a moment!

So we have a God who loves us. We have a God who is just. Therefore, we have a God who hears and *answers* his children's prayers. On the basis of these truths, let's get to the application Jesus wants us to have.

### Application for Us

**Pray.** Do we remember the point of the parable? Verse 1: And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.<sup>8</sup> Since God is just and since God loves us, we ought to pray.

This might seem somewhat confusing to us because we could say, "But God can see the problems. Why should we have to pray?!" I have one illustration to give and then the point Jesus gives in verse 8. I may be getting into an illustration that can feel trite, but I hope it doesn't come across that way. With five children God teaches me many biblical lessons, and my children have given me another one on prayer: the need for asking with humility. You may have experienced this as well, but how often have you had a son or daughter simply state what they want: Milk! Or maybe they don't sound so bossy. Maybe they say hint around with a little bit of that victim voice that says, "I sure wish I had a piece of that. . . ." Or maybe they say "No fair." Or they don't say anything and walk away. In any of these scenarios, you could say to your child, "If you just asked me, I probably would have given it to you. Or, even if I wasn't going to give it to you, we could have talked about it. In any of these situations though, we understand that our kids are not believing we love them and they're not being humble. The mere fact that they refused to ask exhibits an element of unbelief, love and/or pride. Similarly in our lives, when we don't ask, the apostle James says we don't receive. Why? Because God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. And God's goal for his children is that their trust in him would increase. So, in the midst of confusion and pain and difficulties, we should cling *all the more* to him. The reality is that the basis of prayer and the goal of prayer is dependence (and greater dependence) on the Lord himself. We pray because we are confessing the Lord is our sufficiency and all that we need.

The example of the woman's utter persistence should speak to us. Do we believe we need the Lord and that he is completely and gloriously good? Persist in communion with our Savior and God. Do we see a broken world? Do we recognize our feeble hearts? Are we burdened that God's glory is treated so tritely by the world and by professing Christians? Is there a yearning for God's glory and God's justice. Is there an understanding in you that *only God* can change people's hearts and lives? If so, then pray! And do not give up praying. Pray 'til your dying day.

In verse 8 we hear Jesus' words: <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?<sup>9</sup> As I mentioned a couple weeks ago, throughout these seven verses, we have not heard the word "faith" mentioned *at all*. The parable even begins with the point: always pray and don't give up. But the conclusion is "when the Son of Man comes, will he find *faith*. . . ?" What does faith have anything to do with this? Answer? Faith is intricately connected to

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<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:1.

<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Lk 18:8.

prayer. A prayerless person is the same as an airless person – dead. So what Jesus does here with this parable is he brings it together with his previous teaching on the days when he comes again. Until he comes again, Christians are going to yearn for his return and long for his justice. The world will be wicked and many will not even give a thought of the Lord, but Jesus here says “What about you? Will you be trusting me?” Let me ask you today. Do you trust Jesus today? Keep in mind that Jesus is talking to his disciples *plural!* And he’s asking if there will be faith among his disciples *plural* when he comes again.

This is a penetrating question and it’s not meant to cause the disciples to be frozen with fear but instead to impel them to cling to the Lord in prayer. Now we as disciples of Jesus today know that there will be believers on this earth when Jesus returns. So, how do we fit that with Jesus’ question here? I think Jesus’ words indicate that when believers persist in prayer, they leave a heritage of faith so that faith will continue throughout the following generations. In other words, continuing prayer means continuing faith in the generations to come, and continuing faith leads to continuing prayers in the generations to come until Jesus comes again.

This reminds me of the heritage of faith my grandmother left me. On her deathbed, under hospice care, I sang hymns to her. I remember introducing her to Karis, who she met for the first time on her deathbed. She three months old. “Isn’t she precious,” my grandma said. At one point, my grandma said to me, “I’ll be praying for you when I’m in Heaven, Tim.” I tend to think she is. The world is still broken. The martyrs in Heaven still pray for justice and for the completion of God’s redemptive plan. But even if she’s not praying today, she prayed ‘til her dying day because we always need the Lord. This is the point Jesus is making. Don’t give up praying. Keep on keeping on. But not only individually, but corporately. Disciples before us have prayed. Now we pray, and I pray that the next generation of believers will continue in prayer.

Again, we know Jesus will find faith on the earth because the Bible says Jesus will come again and bring his children home. God will nourish and grow Christians and the Christian faith globally as they continually take the primary steps of faith and prayer daily. So, let’s pray until he comes.

**Therefore The questions are, “Will we pray?” “Do we have faith?” “Do we want to see God’s justice in the world?” “Do we long for our children to know and love the Lord?” “Do we want God’s fame to be known around the globe – not only in 2021, but in 2050 or 2200 (if the Lord were to tarry)?” Let’s pray!**

#### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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