

The Relentless Pestering of God

Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 12, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8, NRSV)

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One of the first and most important things Jesus teaches his disciples to do is pray. In Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer the second line of the prayer is straight and to the point: **“Your kingdom come.”**¹ Disciples are to petition God to make things down here on earth as they are up there in heaven, that the world would be set right again. It’s a prayer for justice, a prayer for healing, a prayer for restoration. If you are a Christian, how many times have you prayed this prayer in these words or others like them: **“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”**

So let me ask you, is it working? Is God answering this prayer? Yes or no? Stop and think about it for a minute. For as long as Christian disciples have been asking God to bring his Kingdom, has earth in fact been changed to look more like heaven? As you look around our city, our nation, our world, do you see more or less justice, healing and restoration than there used to be? Is love winning the day over hate in our world? Is poverty disappearing, the gap between rich and poor narrowing by the day? Is violence becoming a thing of the past? Are marriages and families around us flourishing like never before? Do our children today grow up in a world that is less anxious, less addicted, less frenzied, less fractured, less hate-filled than the world we grew up in?

Imagine you’re a child and your dad tells you one day, “Son, I want you to ask me to give you an allowance.” So you do, you ask him to give you an allowance. You ask him for several days, then several weeks. You are an especially persistent kid so you ask him for a whole year to give you an allowance. But he doesn’t. Eventually, what’s going to happen? You’re going to stop asking, right? Our Father in Heaven tells us to pray for his Kingdom to come to earth. The disciples of Jesus’ day, facing incredible persecution and hardship, must have worn out this prayer. Many Christians today have done the same thing. And yet have we seen this prayer answered? Has God’s Kingdom come?

There are some of you in this room who are worn out from asking God to do what you absolutely believe God wants to do. You’ve prayed for the healing of a loved one. You’ve prayed for a wayward son or daughter to find their way back on track in life. You’ve asked God for a husband or a wife, somebody with whom you can share life. You’ve prayed for revival in the church. You’ve prayed for somebody you love to come to trust Christ. You’ve prayed for release from some addiction or sin. You’ve prayed for an end to racism, to homelessness, to war, or to some other social injustice. And yet our prayers seem, at times, to have fallen on deaf ears. As far as you can tell, heaven remains silent, unresponsive. And so with the Psalmist you want to yell at God:

**Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.
Why do you hide your face
and forget our misery and oppression?²**

I want you to see that it is to disciples like this who are about ready to give up praying for God’s Kingdom to come that Jesus gives this parable about a poor widow and an unjust judge. This parable is given to disciples like us, and so I pray that you will hear it as God’s Word to you this morning.

Jesus begins, **“In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.”** In other words, this is not a good man. He’s a judge, yes, but he is far from the picture of blind justice we like to expect from our judges. He is accountable to nobody but himself, acting only out of self-interest. He doesn’t care about what God thinks and he really doesn’t care about what happens to other people. Unless you are a

¹ Luke 11:2 (NRSV)

² Psalm 44:23-24 (NIV)

person of influence or wealth, a person in a position to bribe or coerce this judge towards a favorable ruling, you do not want your case to end up in his court, at least if it's justice you are expecting.

That's a problem for this widow because she not a person of influence or wealth. The fact that she comes alone tells us that she had no man – no husband, no father, no son – to stand up for her. You see, as a woman in that culture she had no real voice. She is in especially defenseless and vulnerable position. Her only income was likely from begging, so bribing this corrupt judge is out of the question. And because she has to keep coming to this judge to beg for justice, it's clear that though she has a legitimate claim, her enemy has beat her to the punch and likely paid off the judge, leaving her out of luck.

Here's the first point this parable makes. This woman is utterly powerless to effect the change she knows should rightly happen. What she wants to happen, what she *needs* to happen, is for justice to be carried out. She's not asking for revenge; she's asking for justice, for things to be set right. And in no small way. She's not asking to be cleared of a traffic ticket, or asking for good weather during her upcoming vacation, or asking for relief from seasonal allergies. No, *real justice* is at stake, and *honor*, maybe even her future. But she is powerless to make it happen, just like we are powerless so often to make things happen. I mean, can you relate? Can you see places in your life and in our world that you want to be set right, that you *need* to see set right, and yet you find yourself powerless to bring about change. You can't cure the cancer. You can't beat the addiction. You can't save the marriage. You can't rescue the lost soul. You can't heal the division. You can't undo the damage. You can't stop the bloodshed. You can't drag the Kingdom down from heaven. You just can't.

So what solution does Jesus offer that might get us through this impasse? Relentless pestering. That's it. The only card this woman has left to play is to nag this judge incessantly, to go to see him day after day, maybe several times a day, and to keep asking him over and over to give her justice, never letting up until he breaks down and gives her what she wants and needs.

Anybody here who has been a parent has found themselves, at one time or another, on the receiving end of this tactic. Your kid wants something you don't want to give him. He knows he's powerless to just take it himself. So he plays the only card he has left to play: relentless pestering. "Dad, can I have a...Dad, can you get me a...Dad, I'd really like a...Dad, what about a..." On and on and on. Now, on our better days we might be able to fend off this tactic. But even the best parents

find themselves in a position one day where, because they are just too worn out to put up a fight, or a fight right now in public would be too much of an embarrassment, that you weaken and give in to the pestering. The Lucky Charms end up in the grocery basket. The pet turtle because a part of your family. The nose gets pierced and the nose ring set firmly in place. And, as every parent eventually learns, if you give in to relentless pestering even one time, the kid never forgets. From that day forward, no matter how hopeless the situation might appear, he knows there's always a chance to wear the old man down if I just keep at it.

This is exactly the tactic Jesus commends in this poor widow. At first the unjust judge has no intention or interest in giving her what she wants. But her appeals to him are like water dripping on sandstone and they eventually wear him down. Not because he suddenly becomes motivated by compassion or a sense of doing justice, but because he's just plain fed up. "...**because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out...**" The term "wear me out" literally translates, "beat me black and blue." It was a boxing term in those days, and Luke uses it because he wants us to picture the face of this judge swollen and discolored by repeated blows. This woman, of course, is not physically striking the judge, but her relentless pestering makes him feel like she is. He's on the ropes. The fight is over.

Here's Jesus point in all this: "**Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?**" Don't be confused here. Jesus is not suggesting that God is exactly like this unjust judge. No, he is using an argument from the lesser to the greater here. In other words, if a judge like this, who cares nothing for justice, will eventually give justice when pestered to do so, *how much more readily* will God, for whom justice is of infinite importance, also grant justice to those who need it and ask for it!

This is the claim of scripture, right? God cares about justice and we so we see God, all through the Bible, acting with great intention to relieve the suffering of those who suffer from injustice. God is committed to setting things right in this world. God hates poverty. God hates racism. God hates violence and war. God wants the hungry fed, the sick healed, the homeless housed, the captive set free, the addict clean, the refugee welcomed, the despised beloved, the orphan adopted, the downhearted filled with hope and joy. So Jesus teaches us here that we should relentlessly pester God for these things to happen until the day when justice is realized, the day when the earth finally resembles

heaven. God will do these things, Jesus says, so keep crying out to him day and night and God will not delay in his response.

Jesus could not be more clear in verse 8: **“I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.”** God will not drag his feet here. You ask for justice and justice will be granted. This is what Jesus declares here, and yet it’s this promise that trips us up. This can’t be right? I mean, look at our world. Jesus spoke these words 2,000 years ago and yet, look at our world today. It’s as broken as ever. So define “quickly” for us, Jesus. People have been pestering God for a long time to deal with all the junk in our world, and so it’s not hard to understand why so many people, perhaps many of us, wonder why things seem to get worse rather than better.

This is, in fact, the point at which lots of people simply give up. It’s the age-old question: How can God be good if, at the same time, he allows so much evil to go unchecked in the world around us? It’s a question you’ve probably heard from people before. Maybe you’ve felt like you have to try to defend God when people know you are a Christian and ask you this question. Maybe you’ve asked the question yourself. I have. The ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus classically framed it this way: “Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is evil. Is he both and able *and* willing? From whence then is evil?”³

Most of us know somebody who has given up on God because they can’t reconcile the injustice and suffering in the world with a God who is supposedly loving, just and powerful. And so they give up praying. Or they give up believing altogether. The problem of course – and I’m just thinking logically here – is that if your deep sense of a need for justice and fairness in the world leads you to conclude that there must not be a God because justice and fairness is in such short supply, how do you then account for your deep sense that there should be justice and fairness in the world. If there is no God, then injustice isn’t actually a problem. Right? It’s just the way the world is, and who is to say that it shouldn’t be that way. Evolution says it should be this way. The evolutionary mechanism of natural selection actually *depends* on death, destruction and violence of the strong against the weak, meaning that from that perspective these things are all perfectly natural.⁴ Yet, something in all of us tells us that can’t be right. And so the fact that we recognize injustice in the world is great evidence that there must be a God who made us and who wired into us this collective contempt for injustice.

Furthermore, if there is a God who hates injustice, then it cannot be that God is unable to do anything about it. If God is truly God, then God, by definition, can do whatever God wants. At one point in the Old Testament book of Numbers, Moses gets frustrated with God because he doesn’t see how God will be able to do what God has promised to do. In response, God asks Moses this great rhetorical question, **“Is the Lord’s arm too short?”**⁵ No, God’s arm is not too short. In an instant God could set all things right in our world if that was what God, in this instant, wanted to do.

So why doesn’t he? Why does justice, which Jesus says God is quick to grant, seem so slow in coming? Well, think logically with me. What would happen if God did bring heaven to earth all at once immediately, this morning, right now? What would it look like if this morning God acted and made everything in the world right again? It would look like final judgment, like the end of time. Right? Remember, most injustice in the world is the result of human sin. But God is the great respecter of human free will, which means he will not force people to act justly and to treat one another with love. He will not reprogram us in this way. God will command, he will woo, he will teach, he will encourage, he will warn, but he will not force people to act justly against their will. So again, that means that if God were to come to earth today and put an end to all injustice at once, that would mean that those who are the cause of that injustice would face judgment and, apart from repentance, find themselves removed from the picture. That’s what will happen one day when Christ returns. That’s the natural consequence of ending evil and suffering in this world.

Is that what we want to happen today? Maybe so. Probably so. But for his own reasons God has chosen to hold off for now. II Peter 3 gives the reason as clearly as we read it anywhere:

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.⁶

You see, God’s plan to save the world, while it is motivated by a compassion to relieve oppression and injustice, is also motivated by a love for sinners who need to repent. God’s patience, then, is intended to allow time and space for that to happen. I think of David, before he was King, when he finds himself one day standing over the sleeping body of King Saul, his enemy who has been trying to unjustly take his life. In

³ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 250.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 26.

⁵ Numbers 11:23 (NIV)

⁶ II Peter 3:8-9 (NRSV)

that moment the power is in David's hands to bring justice, to run Saul through with a spear and set things right. He doesn't do so. Why? I think his great patience is motivated, at least in part, by his hope that his enemy the King will change his ways and begin to treat him as he deserves to be treated.⁷

Similarly, I think of the parent who spies her child doing something he shouldn't be doing. As the mom, she has every right to step in right then and there and impose the appropriate consequence, to bring justice. Instead, she waits and watches. Maybe she even begins to count aloud: "1...2...3..." She wants to give the child the opportunity to change his ways before she imparts discipline. This is justice mixed with compassion. Parents have it for their children. God has it for the world.

And so, while God's delay may seem, from our perspective, agonizingly prolonged, Peter reminds us that for the Lord a thousand years are only like a single day. In fact, Biblical scholars tell us that the word "quickly" which Luke uses here in verse 8 can also be translated 'suddenly' or 'certainly'. In a way, this makes more sense. "Quickly" is a matter of perspective. To an eternal God who stands outside of time, 2000 years passes quickly. To us, however, a toothache that lasts all day can seem like an eternity. But "certainty", that's not a matter of perspective. And so when Jesus says that God will *certainly* bring heaven to earth, he means exactly what he says. The kingdom is coming; you can bank on it!⁸

Here's why. God is not only the judge who promises to dole out justice, God is also the savior who has already stood in the place of the unjust. When Christ gave his life on the cross, the wrath of God towards all sin, all evil, all injustice, was poured out on his Son. At the cross, Christ took it all upon himself, even the endless exclusion from God that the human race had merited, hell if you will. Furthermore, at the cross, Christ, who was fully human, came to know firsthand all human despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, grief, captivity, pain, and even death. In doing so, Christ not only consumed these things but now is with us in our suffering.

And the work of Christ didn't end at the cross. At the resurrection – and we talked about this at Easter – Jesus became the "first fruits"⁹ of all that God will one

day do. In Jesus' resurrected body, alive in ways it never before had been and would always be from that point forward, we see pictured what God intends to do with all creation, for all people who come to him in faith. It is in and through the resurrection of Christ that heaven truly has come, and will come, to earth. This is what Jesus says God will *certainly* do for all those who now cry out to him day and night. C.S. Lewis spoke of this future glory when he wrote, "They say of some temporal suffering, 'No future bliss can make up for it,' not knowing that Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even the agony into a glory."¹⁰

So brothers and sisters, listen to me. It is with this confident hope that we must pray, and continue to pray, reverently but relentlessly pestering God to do what God has promised to do, what he has already begun to do in Christ. Of course – and this is Jesus' point here – we should not be surprised that as we offer up these prayers we will inevitably find ourselves enduring long periods of silence. Though we hammer at God for justice, plead with him to make earth like heaven, sometimes all we will hear in response from heaven is crickets. We ask, we seek, we knock. We wait, and wait, and wait. As time goes on, faith may shrink to the size of a mustard seed. Sometimes we get flat-out angry with God. Good! Get angry with God if you must. Sometimes we scream at God. Sometimes we weep. Sometimes we have no words to speak. As one writer put it, prayer is not a parlor exercise, perfunctory and tidy. It is an existential battle, ongoing and ever present, beset all along the way with opposition and discouragement.¹¹

The story is told of a large gathering of people who had come together to protest certain unfair and oppressive conditions in society. At one point in the middle of the protest, an elderly minister stood up and read this parable from Luke 18 and then gave a one-sentence interpretation: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is."¹² Is this not part of the reason Jesus gives disciples this parable, to warn us that perseverance will be required?¹³

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Macmillan, 1946), 64.

¹¹ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Eerdmans, 2015), 497.

¹² Cited by Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, (John Knox Press, 1990), 210.

¹³ John Calvin writes, "We know that perseverance in prayer is a rare and difficult attainment; and it is a manifestation of our unbelief that, when our first prayers are not successful, we immediately throw away not only hope, but all the ardor of prayer. But it is an undoubted evidence of our Faith, if we are disappointed of our wish, and yet do not lose courage. Most properly, therefore, does Christ recommend to his disciples to persevere in praying."

⁷ See the story in I Samuel 26:6-25

⁸ John Calvin writes, "But if we could penetrate into his design, we would learn that his assistance is always ready and seasonable, as the case demands, and is not delayed for a single moment, but comes at the exact time."

⁹ I Corinthians 15:20: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (NIV)

It's been suggested by some people that as we persist in praying for God to bring heaven to earth, sometimes through long seasons where silence and inactivity seem to be our only response from God, that as we persist God will be slowly and silently shaping us into the sort of people who will be ready to receive heaven when it does come. In this sense, perhaps in prayer it is not God who is moved as much as it is we who are moved. God desires justice far more than we will ever desire justice. God wants to end suffering and pain in this world more than any of us have ever wanted to see these things end. The challenge here, therefore, is not God's faithfulness to act but our willingness to keep faith and persevere. We must not give up in prayer. We must relentlessly pester God to do the things God has already told us he will certainly do.

In fact, the passage ends with a question. Did you notice it? **"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"** Jesus would not tell a parable intended to keep disciples from losing heart in praying for God's Kingdom to come if there were not the real danger that disciples might eventually lose heart. It is a real possibility that you and I will eventually give up. Some of us are probably close to giving up even now. Maybe you are somebody who already gave up. The question is for us all: on the day Jesus returns will you have any faith left to offer him?

It is here that faith is tested. Do you take Jesus at his word? God is coming quickly – certainly! – to make earth like heaven in every way imaginable. That's the promise. So do not lose heart. Do not give up. Pester God about this when you get up in the morning. Pester God about this when you go to sleep every night. Pester God all day long if you can keep it up. For if such pestering will eventually wear down even a wicked judge who cares nothing for anybody but himself, do not doubt that our loving Father in Heaven, who wants all things made right more than we could ever begin to want all things made right, will not he also do what he has promised to do when the time is right.

He will. And so we pray, "Lord, your Kingdom come. Your kingdom come. Your kingdom come. Your kingdom come..."

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What method did you use to try to get your way with your parents? Sulking? Tears? Nagging? Lying? Humor? What worked best?
2. Read Luke 18:1-8 again. What stands out to you from this story? What do you notice first?
3. How is God like this judge? How is God *not* like this judge?
4. Jesus declares here that God will quickly grant justice to those who cry out to him for it. Does this match with your experience? Have you seen God do this?
5. Does God really want us to pester him about things? Is that the message Jesus has for us here in this parable?
6. Regarding our impatience with what we perceive to be God's delay in answering our prayers, John Calvin once wrote this: "But if we could penetrate into God's design, we would learn that his assistance is always ready and seasonable, as the case demands, and is not delayed for a single moment, but comes at the exact time." Do you agree?
7. How have you been encouraged here to persist in prayer? Specifically, what is one thing you now realize that you need to keep relentlessly pestering God about?
8. If Christ returned today, would he find you to be a person of faith? Why or why not?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

How many times should we ask God for something?
1 time? 5 times? 50 times? 500 times?