

Learning to Pray with Dependence

Part 2 – Nagging Persistence

Luke 18:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 12, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹ Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I 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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Jesus’ parable on prayer here comes in Luke just on the heels of his teaching on the Second Coming, on the time when he will return to earth, bringing heaven with him to set all things right. Apparently Jesus knew that his disciples, then and now, would expect that this day would come sooner than it would. When it does not come right away, as it has not, then they, and we, would easily become confused, frustrated, or even hopeless. He tells this parable on prayer, therefore, in anticipation that we will need encouragement when his kingdom is, from our perspective, delayed. As we wait, Jesus does not want us to give up praying.

This reminds us of something we talked about last week, that prayer is a practice we learn. In some ways that’s the underlying assumption of this whole sermon series on prayer. You see, sometimes we mistakenly think that prayer is just something we do. We can’t get it wrong. All prayers are the same. All prayers are acceptable. But if that were so, why would Jesus spend so much time teaching us how to pray? Fact is, some of us may not be praying the right way. Certainly all of us can stand to learn a great deal from Jesus about how we should and should not pray. One of the things he is teaching us here is that when we pray we must learn to pray with persistence.

I hope by now I have your attention. Isn’t it true that there are some of us here who have given up in our prayers, or who are tempted to give up? You have been praying for something or someone for a long time and in response God has been silent, or so it seems. But from your perspective, your request is a no-brainer. How could God not want to do what I’m asking him to do – to heal this person, to save this person, to bring justice to this situation, to fix this problem? Is that you? Are you about to give up on some prayer, or on prayer in general? The good news is that Jesus saw this crisis coming and here speaks directly to it.

This parable is for us. In fact, Luke tells us so as he opens this passage: “**Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and not to lose heart.**” Again, we need to *learn* to pray with persistence. As we look at Jesus’ parable, then, let’s remember what we learned about parables in our last sermon series. These stories are pictures Jesus gives us about how things work in his Kingdom, pictures that we are then to hold up to our own lives as mirrors so that we can see how our lives do or don’t conform to the Kingdom. Ultimately, then, the parable becomes a window through which we can see what life can be like when we live according to God’s will.

So let’s look at the picture Jesus gives us here. It includes two people. The first is a judge. “**In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people.**” This is most likely a Gentile judge, probably one appointed by the Roman authorities. In those days, if some injustice was done to you there were no police, no district attorney, no jury to try or hear your case. You had to go on your own and plead your case to a judge who then had sole authority to grant or deny your plea for justice. The problem was that in Jesus’ day these judges we’re like the one in Jesus’ parable, notoriously crooked. In fact, such judges normally demanded a bribe in exchange for a favorable verdict.

A saying in those days stated, “Our judges pervert justice for a dish of meat.”¹ And once the verdict was given, that was that. There was no appeals process to try to overturn an unjust verdict. The judge’s verdict, even if it was completely unjust, was the verdict you were stuck with.

Now, if you know anything about Jesus’ parables you are suspecting at this point that Jesus means to compare this judge to God. But how can that be? If you were there the day Jesus told this parable you might even interrupt him saying, “Hold on, Jesus. God’s not coming off very good in this story of yours. Don’t you want to choose somebody with a little more character and integrity than this guy if you’re going to teach us something about God?” But be patient. As we’re about to see, Jesus is not likening but contrasting God to this judge.

The second figure in the parable is a widow. Now, in choosing a widow for this story Jesus chooses somebody from his society who was the lowliest of the low. Widows in those days had no intrinsic value or status in society, and typically they had nobody to stand up for them. In other words, this woman is a picture of ultimate vulnerability and need. Now, we don’t know what her specific claim is but we can imagine that it was likely a matter of this unnamed opponent withholding material resources that were rightly hers. The only recourse this woman has to get justice is this judge.

It’s clear that in Jesus’ parable he means this widow to represent us, because whether we realize it or not we also find ourselves in a desperate place out of which we cannot, on our own, escape. Our need for help is great. Think about the things Jesus’ teaches us to pray for in the Lord’s Prayer. We should pray for God’s Kingdom to come, for things to be set right in this world. Well, unless God acts this will not happen. On our own we cannot rid the world of violence, hatred, division, racism and poverty. We are also to pray for our daily bread, for things that we need to survive. And again, if God doesn’t provide nourishment, healing, strength, even breath to our bodies, we cannot go on. We are to pray for forgiveness for our sin, something clearly only God can grant. Lastly, Jesus teaches us to pray for deliverance from temptation and evil, because on our own we can’t stand against these things. So as we look at this widow and her need, remember that she is us and her place of desperation is our place of desperation.

Now, the problem for this widow, of course, is that she doesn’t have anything with which she can bribe the judge. And so with nothing to gain from dispensing justice, or maybe because this woman’s opponent *did* offer a bribe, the judge refuses the widow’s request. She was out of luck. With nowhere else to turn that should have been the end of it. It wasn’t. This woman simply will not take no for an answer as she comes back over and over, day after day, pleading with the judge to act justly on her behalf. She will not let it go.

Well, eventually the judge gives her what she wants. Not because he fears God or respects this woman and her plight – in fact, he tells us those *are not* the reasons. No, he finally grants her justice because she will not leave him alone and he began to fear that “**she might wear me out by continually coming.**” The Greek word Luke uses here is actually a boxing term and literally means “to give a black eye.”² Maybe this judge was worried that this woman was so desperate that at some point she might assault him with more than words. Or maybe he’s speaking figuratively, worried that her constant pleas might jeopardize his social standing, giving his reputation, so to speak, a “black eye.” Either way, he gives in and lets her have what she wants.

Who can blame him? If you’re a parent you certainly know what this is like. You’re in the grocery store with your young child who spies something that he really wants. He asks you to buy it for him. You refuse, for good reason. He asks again. You refuse again. He puts on his best sad face and asks again. You ignore him. But aisle after aisle he won’t let it go. He’s a dog with a bone. When he finally realizes that politeness and sweet talk won’t work he chooses more desperate measures. You can see the tantrum brewing. Right there in the frozen food section he escalates things, right there within eyesight and earshot of people in the community you know, people you hope think of you as a good parent with a good family, right there this little punk is going to make a scene that will not be quickly forgotten. So to save face you rush to give him what he wants and everybody is happy...until, of course, next time you go with him to the grocery store.

Certainly this is not what God is like with us, is it? Is Jesus teaching us to be persistent in our prayer requests, even to throw a tantrum, so that God will eventually become so annoyed with us, or tired of us, or even afraid of us, that he will answer our prayers simply to get rid of us, or save face, or to keep us on his good side? Of course not! As Jesus puts it,

¹ William Barclay. xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

² Green commentary (641) xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.” In other words, if this crooked judge eventually gives into justice, don’t you think God, who is the picture of justice and wants justice far more than you want it, and who loves you and wants the best for you, will also grant justice? Of course he will! He will do it quickly and gladly! If humans who are given to cruelty can eventually give in to seeing justice granted, how much more will God, who is given to mercy, do so!

Jesus’ teaching here is very simple: be persistent in your prayers. God loves you and loves this world and wants the best for us all. This is an affirmation of God’s faithfulness. God will do what God has promised to do and God has promised that everything which is wrong with this world will eventually be set right. So because God is faithful we can persevere in hope. As Jesus put it else where, **“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”³** Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking. When we pray according to the God’s will, as the Lord’s Prayer teaches us to do, we can be confident that God will do what we are asking God to do: bring his kingdom to earth, provide daily bread, forgive our sins and help us forgive those who have sinned against us, protect us from temptation and from the evil one.

We need this word of encouragement because sometimes we are tempted to give up. For instance, when I hear somebody say we ought to pray for peace in our world in places like the Middle East, my first reaction is often one of cynicism. We have been praying for peace in the Middle East for centuries and in some ways things over there seem to be getting worse and worse. Some of you have been praying for somebody you love to come to know and trust Christ as Lord and Savior – a friend, a child, a spouse – and you have been praying years and years with no evident results to show for it. But we know these are both things that are in accordance with God’s will. We know God wants peace in the Middle East. We know God wants all people to trust him and be saved. So we must keep praying. We must not lose heart.

Even so, it’s natural that we begin to question why God is taking so long to answer these prayers, to grant justice and set things right, especially in light of the fact that Jesus himself says here that God will grant us justice *quickly!* What does God take so long?

There is no easy answer to this question but there are a couple of things we can say. First, we need to remember that God, unlike us, sees the whole picture. God sees time and history whole, every moment present before him at once. As II Peter 3:8 declares, **“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.”** That means that what seems like a delay for us is no such thing in God’s eyes. All-wise as he is, God knows when the time is right to move. As the reformer John Calvin put it, “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.” God may not act when we want him to act but God always acts on time.

Do you remember how God’s people, the Israelites, were slaves in Egypt for 400 years? Clearly, it is not God’s will that people – any people! – remain slaves to other people. And for all those years those desperate people must have cried out to God for their freedom. But generation came and generation went without justice being granted. It was not until the time of Moses when God finally answered their prayers and sent him to set his people free.

By why did it take so long? 400 years! Well, we can’t know for sure but we can know that God has his reasons. When the Israelites first went to Egypt they were only one family, just a handful of people. We do know, however, that it was God’s will that this family eventually grow into a nation of multitudes.⁴ Could it be that God knew that in the brutal dog-eat-dog world that was the ancient Middle East, the only way for that to happen was for them to grow under the protection of their master, Egypt, who was the biggest bully on the block? Who knows? What we do know is that God did hear their prayers and that in his time he acted to grant justice, doing so in ways that none of them ever could have envisioned beforehand. We also know in retrospect that it’s a good thing they didn’t give up crying out to God.

In the early 1980’s Christian Führer was the pastor of St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig, East Germany. This was the time when the Berlin Wall still stood as the most visible symbol of the great division between his people in East Germany and the rest of the non-communist world, including the other half of Germany. Pastor Führer, however, was

³ Matthew 7:7

⁴ See God’s promise in Genesis 12:1-3.

convinced that this wall was not God's will. So in 1982 he began hosting a prayer meeting every Monday evening in his church to pray for its removal. These were desperate prayers because he and the others praying with him had no power themselves to tear down the wall and, in fact, they had a hard time imagining how anything short of a miracle would bring it down. Still, because they believed justice called for the wall's removal, they prayed.

At first fewer than a dozen people attended the prayer meetings. Many people were afraid to come because the East German government at that time strongly discouraged such gatherings. But Pastor Führer persisted, eventually posting a sign outside the church announcing that these meetings were "open to all." It may have been the only public invitation of that kind in all of East Germany in those days and people took notice. Over the years more and more people began to come and pray on Monday nights. As the prayer meetings grew the authorities became concerned and began to threaten Pastor Führer to put stop to it all. He refused. In spite of the danger, he and the others continued to persist.

On October 9, 1989, after nearly a decade of prayer, the crowd gathered in St. Nicholas Church had swelled to 8,000 people and the prayer meetings had now also taken the form of peaceful protests. Other churches in Leipzig had opened their doors to others so that on that evening 70,000 people were gathering around the city to pray. After the meeting was over Pastor Führer led the worshippers outside for a candlelight march around the city. Others from the neighboring churches joined them. The tension was palpable as the authorities hurriedly assembled hundreds of police to meet the praying protestors. When the two groups met, however, the police did not attack as expected. As East German officials later admitted, they were ready for anything that night, anything that is except candles and prayer.

Exactly one month later, on November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall came down amid scenes of jubilation witnessed around the world, the most poignant moment in the eventual rending of the Iron Curtain. In spite of where credit is usually ascribed for these events, there are many who believe that it was the persistent prayer of this pastor and his congregation, and others like them, year after year even under the threat of severe punishment, which eventually moved God to grant the justice for which they were praying.⁵ Again, God may not act when we want God to act but God always acts on time.

A second reason that there are times when God seems to be delayed in responding to our prayers for justice is that there are instances when God wants to use our prayers to change us before he changes what we are asking him to change. In other words, sometimes God's delay can be explained by his "parental intentions."

You know, plenty of studies have shown that when children get from their parents everything they want when they want it, things do not ultimately go well for such children. And so even when parents and children want the same thing, timing is critical. For example, all good parents want their children eventually to have their independence. Wise parents, however, are not ready to give independence as quickly as their children would like to see it given because such parents know that their children are not ready to handle it. Of course you eventually want your kid to be able to cross the busy street on his own. He thinks he's ready when he's four. You know he's not. So you delay giving him what you both want him to eventually have.

When God is delayed in answering our prayers we may want to ask what it might be God is trying to teach us before he does. Think of the husband who is separated from his wife and is praying for his wife to come back and for the marriage to be restored but no such restoration seems to be happening. There is no doubt that God wants the same thing, for the marriage to be healed. So why the delay? Could it be that God is saying to the husband, "Let's start with you first. If I bring your wife back before you have learned how to let me have control of your life so I can shape you into a loving and selfless husband, she's just going to leave you again. So if you're willing to trust me and let me work to change you from the inside out, no matter what the cost, then perhaps there will be a day when you are ready for me to bring her back."⁶

Also, sometimes we've simply gotten locked into praying for something we want God to do when God has something completely different in mind. It's still good that we persist in asking, seeking and knocking, but as we do God may help us begin to realize that we're praying for the wrong thing. We might never have realized that, however, until we had

⁵ BBC Online, "Did a prayer meeting really bring down the Berlin Wall and end the Cold War", by Peter Crutchley, October 2015, report found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/0/24661333>

⁶ I'm borrowing this illustration from Andy Stanley in a sermon entitled, "Speed Dial" (*Preaching Today: Today's Best Sermons*)

spent time persisting in prayer, to the point where we have become so desperate and open to God that we are willing to allow him to re-shape our prayers to match his desires.

The point here is that when we pray persistently God may or may not do what we've asked God to do but God will do something, and often something far different, even far greater, than we had first imagined. So ask yourself, if God seems delayed in his response to my prayers, what might he be trying to teach me before he does?

Jesus ends his parable with a challenge. Remember, he intends this picture he has given us to be a mirror and a window. **“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”** One of the ways we demonstrate our faith is by our persistence in prayer, for when we do not lose heart in our prayers we show that we really do believe that we are praying to a God who can answer our call for justice, no matter how tall an order it is. You would not keep asking somebody to do something when you believe that person can't do what it is you are asking them to do. That would be foolish, even cruel. That means that the person who believes that God can and will set all things right in this world is the person who keeps on asking God to do so. That's also the person who, in humility, recognizes that he or she cannot do this without God.

And this is the sort of faith Jesus wants to find when he returns. It's why the scriptures are full of encouragement for us to persist and persevere. In Romans 12:12 Paul urges us, **“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”** In Ephesians 6:18 we are told, **“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.”** In II Timothy 4:7 Paul holds up his own life as a model when he declares, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”**

This is not easy. Trust me, I know. I am acutely aware of this in my own faith journey. There have been times, even recently, when I have grown weary and have felt like giving up. Maybe you have as well. There is so much failure, so much hardship, so much injustice which seems impossible to eradicate. *But we must not lose heart.* We, like this widow, must persevere even when God seems silent, trusting that in his time, and in his wisdom, he will grant the justice he has promised to grant.

So let me end by asking you to consider how it is that you are persisting in prayer. How are you being diligent in your cries for God to set things right? Is there anything that you are consumed with in your prayers? If you have not already, begin to make a list, even keep a journal, of these things so that you can remember to pray for them over and over again. Pray for peace in the Middle East and in other parts of our world, because you know God desires peace. Keep praying for people you know and love who are now far from God. I could tell you stories of people like that who finally accepted Christ after decades of being prayed for. Pray for healing, and for grace, and for reconciliation. Pray for an end to poverty. Pray for your broken marriage, and other broken marriages you know about. Pray for relief from guilt or grief. Pray for God to set all these things right.

As you do, remember that there will come a day, maybe sooner than you think, when we will see that God has granted justice, and healing, and peace and wholeness, and done so to an even far greater extent than we ever even dreamed to ask for. With this hope in mind, this confidence in the faithfulness of our God to do what he says he will do, let us not lose heart and keep on praying.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Luke 18:1-8 again. What is the first thing that sticks out to you from this parable?
2. Why do you think this widow is so persistent? Why does the judge eventually give in to her? What is Jesus trying to teach us here?
3. Do you ever lose heart when you pray? What is it that you find most discouraging about prayer?

4. Was there a time when you persisted in prayer, praying even for years for God to act, and eventually you did see God act and do so in astounding ways?
5. Jesus says here (vs. 7-8) that when we pray day and night God will not delay in helping us, and that he will quickly grant justice. Has this been your experience? How do we reconcile this teaching with the times in life when God does seem to delay and does not grant justice quickly?
6. Jesus wonders if when he comes he will find “faith on earth”? What is he asking here? How will Jesus recognize faith when he sees it?
7. Read what Jesus teaches us about prayer in Luke 11:5-13. What does this teaching add to our understanding of praying with nagging persistence?
8. Where are you diligent in your prayer life right now? In what way are you praying “day and night” for God to act? What is one way you need to start praying persistently for God to grant justice?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Sometimes we ask God for good things but God doesn't always answer us right away. Why do you think God does that?