

Luke 18:1-8
Pray and Don't Lose Heart

Prayer is fundamental to the Christian life. Our littlest children learn to pray. They pray before they can read the Bible. They pray before they can have meaningful spiritual fellowship with other believers. They pray before they even take communion or are baptized. When Paul came to faith in Christ, He began to pray. “¹⁰Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, ‘Ananias.’ And he said, ‘here I am, Lord.’ ¹¹And the Lord said to him, ‘get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying” (Acts 9:10-11). Prayer is one of the first acts of faith, and the lack of prayer in the life of a believer is a sure sign of weak faith, “⁴⁰and He came to the disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, ‘so, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? ⁴¹Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:40-41).

Not surprisingly then, prayer permeates Scripture. A quick Google search reveals that there are about 650 separate prayers in the Bible. Jesus, Himself, is recorded as praying 25 different times. Furthermore, there are over 450 answers to prayer in Scripture. We are given many examples of Old Testament saints praying for specific personal needs. For example,

Abraham prayed that God would give him a heir (Genesis 15:2-3)

Jacob prayed that God would protect him from Esau (Genesis 32:9-12)

Moses prayed that God would be pleased with him (Exodus 33:12-13)

Hannah prayed for a son (1 Samuel 1:10)

David prayed for help frequently (Psalm 18:6, 22:19, 69:1)

Jonah prayed that God would spare him (Jonah 2:2-10)

Daniel prayed for forgiveness (Daniel 9:20)

The Old Testament gives examples of people praying not for themselves only, but for others,

Abraham prayed that God would spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:23-32)

Moses prayed that God would spare Aaron (Deuteronomy 9:20)

David prayed for Solomon when he became king (2 Samuel 12:16)

Elijah prayed that God would raise a young boy from the dead (1 Kings 17:20-21)

Elisha prayed for the Shunamite woman's son who had died (2 Kings 4:33)

Job prayed for God to forgive his friends (Job 42:8-10)

And the Old Testament records many prayers for the nation of Israel,

Moses (Exodus 32:11-13)

Samuel (1 Samuel 7:5-9)

David (2 Samuel 24:17)

Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-54)

Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:14-19)

Ezekiel (Ezekiel 9:8)

Daniel (Daniel 9:3-19)

Ezra (Ezra (9:5-15)

The New Testament is replete with prayers as well. Among the many prayers recorded, we can mention that,

Jesus prayed for the disciples (John 17), for Peter specifically (Luke 22:32) and for those who crucified Him (Luke 23:34).

Paul prayed for Philemon (Philemon 4-6), Timothy (2 Timothy 1:3), and the salvation of the nation of Israel (Romans 10:1).

Peter prayed that God would raise Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:40)

John prayed for Gaius (3 John 1-2)

Peter and John prayed for the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-15)

We know the commands of Scripture on this matter. “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). “Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). Still, it is easier to begin the habit of prayer than to continue in it. A tragic event, or worldly concern can bring us to our knees, but once satisfied or once the shadow of fear has passed, we rise up again and go our way. If our prayers are not answered as quickly or in the way we wish, we can be tempted to give up.

As believers, we are commanded to pray for those in authority over us (1 Timothy 2:2), lost sinners (1 Timothy 2:1), other believers (Ephesians 6:18) and those who are our enemies (Matthew 5:44). But as we reflect on our own prayer life, as full as it is of praise, confession, and supplication, we might consider how often we pray that Jesus might return quickly. Jesus recognized this gap in thinking, and took the time to address His disciples on the subject in the passage we have before us today.

The Story

Jesus “was telling them a parable” (v. 1). The ‘them’ referred to are His disciples, to whom Jesus had been speaking for some time. There is no break between the conversation Jesus began when He began addressing His followers in Luke 17:22. These are His disciples in the broader sense of that term. That is, it is not only the twelve, but others who had committed themselves to follow Him. Jesus had just described the difficult years before the final coming of the kingdom of God. He had been speaking so intensely of His second coming that the disciples had been overwhelmed with what Jesus had said. Ever the thoughtful and gracious teacher, Jesus wanted to encourage them. Naturally, it was sensible that He encourage them to continue in prayer. So, He told this story to remind them “that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart” (v. 1).

Jesus understood what the disciples did not - that the time between His first advent and His return would be significant. It has been already some two millennia. He knew that the disciples would not live to see the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in their lifetimes. He realized they would misunderstand and be confused. He understood their expectations, and He knew that the gap between their expectations and reality would be filled with disappointment. He appreciated that the disciples would be tempted to doubt and that His followers would wonder at what delayed His return. Therefore Jesus encouraged them to pray. It was not prayer in general, though that, too, is mandated in Scripture, but rather to specifically pray for His return that Jesus was considering in this account.

This was not the first time Jesus taught on this subject. When teaching the disciples how to pray, Jesus said that they should pray “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). Nevertheless, in telling them this parable

He did not want them to misunderstand. Luke informs us that Jesus gives the object of His story beforehand. We cannot tell if, at this point, Luke is simply commenting on the story, or if Jesus explained the parable to His disciples in advance. In either case, Jesus made clear His meaning in verse 6.

Jesus began by saying that “in a certain city there was a judge” (v.2). The judge was in a city, because such a figure would have no place in a small village. We do not know that Jesus was in a city as He spoke, but those in the audience were familiar with the scene presented. Most of those following Jesus were from the lower ranks of society and probably had at best an uneasy feeling about judges, who were often corrupt and in the hands of the powerful.

This particular judge was one of that type. Jesus described him as a judge who “did not fear God and did not respect man” (v. 2). This was a common ancient phrasing to describe the worst of humanity. Only the most wicked of people received this characterization. That the judge was clearly anti-God, did not mean that he was an atheist, but rather that he had no concern for honoring God with his decisions. The first great commandment meant nothing to him. So hardened was his heart that he even boasted of his disdain for the Almighty, “I do not fear God nor respect man” (v. 4).

This judge was not one of the religious leaders who ruled on the great spiritual and legal issues of his day. He had no place in interpreting the Law or the religious traditions. His role was much more mundane. He handled the ordinary affairs of daily life. His role was much like that Jesus referred to when a rude man interrupted Him to have Him arbitrate his claim to being defrauded, “¹³someone in the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ ¹⁴But He said to him, ‘man, who appointed Me a judge or arbitrator over you?’” (Luke 12:13-14).

Yet, even though he dealt with routine affairs, his role was vital in Jewish society. Judges had been warned to “⁶consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. ⁷Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe” (2 Chronicles 19:6-7). And through the prophet Amos, God had declared,

“¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live;
And thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you,
Just as you have said!
¹⁵Hate evil, love good,
And establish justice in the gate!
Perhaps the Lord God of hosts
May be gracious to the remnant of Joseph” (Amos 5:14-15).

Despite these warnings, the second great commandment was equally ignored by this particular judge. He cared very little for people. He cared very little for justice. He simply enjoyed his position and wanted to take care of business with as little inconvenience as possible. He had no desire to use his place for good. He was more interested in that to which he was entitled as the result of his position than in how he could use his position to invest in the lives of those he encountered.

Sadly, such judges had become more the rule than the exception in Jewish life at the time of Jesus. So much so that there had evolved a turn of phrase playing on the pronunciation of the word. Their official title was *dayyaney gezeroth* meaning judge of punishments. Instead they were referred to (behind their backs, of course) as *dayyaney gezeloth* or robber judges.

Jesus describes the judge as having no respect. Luke uses the word, *entrepō*, which means “to be put to shame.” That is, this judge had no shame. He could not be embarrassed. Even if his actions were made public, he did not care. This was especially meaningful in the context of the shame-based culture that was 1st century Judaism. That this judge felt no remorse, not only when acting wickedly, but even when others knew he did so, represented the depth of depravity to Jewish mind. No shred of pity could be found in him; no amount of fear could be appealed to. He was utterly impervious to the feelings of humanity.

One day in his chambers there appeared “a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘give me legal protection from my opponent’” (v. 3). That she kept coming is an indication of her need. That she kept coming informs us that she probably had been unjustly treated. Perhaps she had not been given what was rightfully hers when her husband died. One of her husband’s brothers, or worse yet even one of her own sons, may have defrauded her. That she represented herself in court indicates that either she had no sons (or any other male relatives to support her) or that they chose not to be her advocate. She was alone, she was poor, and she was desperate.

She asked for justice. The Law was on her side. The Old Testament speaks frequently and eloquently about the responsibilities of society toward widows.

“You shall not afflict any widow or orphan” (Exodus 22:22)

“¹⁷For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing” (Deuteronomy 10:17-18).

“A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows,
Is God in His holy habitation” (Psalm 68:5).

“Learn to do good;
Seek justice,
Reprove the ruthless,
Defend the orphan,
Plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

The judge likely knew the widow’s claim was just. However, he also knew that she could do him no favors. She was too poor to offer a bribe and of no consequence in the city, so seeing no benefit in this for himself, “for a while he was unwilling” (v. 4). But she persisted. She came every day until the judge finally giving in to her persistence, said “⁴even though I do not fear God nor respect man, ⁵yet because

this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out” (v. 4-5).

Though he admitted his depravity and lack of concern either for God or man, the widow’s continued tenacity won the day. She did not necessarily change his heart, but she made him change his behavior. Luke’s use of words to describe the widow’s behavior is, again, worth noting. Her actions threaten to wear out the judge. The words literally means to “hit in the face” or, as we might say today, to “beat black and blue.” She was figuratively beating up the judge with her relentless efforts. So much so that, like a prize fighter at the end of a long fight, the judge simply put his hands up and surrendered.

The Explanation

Jesus did not want His story misinterpreted, so He gave the explanation Himself. “⁶The Lord said, ‘hear what the unrighteous judge said; ⁷now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? ⁸I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly’” (v. 6-8).

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand this story in the context of His return. To do so, He used the common rhetorical strategy of arguing from the lesser to the greater. God and the wicked judge are opposites. If the wicked judge could be persuaded to heed the pleas of a widow, so much more would a sovereign and loving God heed the requests of His children. The judge simply responded to the widow. He had no special feelings for her. He did not care about her. She was simply one of the other people in the city over which he had jurisdiction. He simply wanted to be left alone. But believers are chosen by God. Believers are His elect.

“²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” (Romans 8:29-30).

“²We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; ³constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-4).

“He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him” (Ephesians 1:4).

This is a concept hardly invented by Calvin or Augustine. Neither is it a New Testament idea. God has always chosen. He chose Noah. He chose Abraham. He chose Saul. He chose David. This list goes on.

Specifically for these disciples, God had chosen the nation of Israel to bear witness of His special grace.

“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness” (Jeremiah 31:3)

The disciples needed to understand that, like believers today, they were specifically chosen. We need to remember this lesson as well. If God had not chosen us, we would never have chosen Him. If He had not chosen us of His good pleasure, we could never have done anything to induce Him to favor us. Unlike the widow and the wicked judge, we know that God loves us. We know that he cares for us. God never wearies of our talk. This is why we can cry out in prayer as we await the return of our Savior. We, too, are in the interval between Christ's first coming and His second. So, naturally, it makes sense that we should pray and not lose heart.

Another illustration of God's special grace is found in the phrase "delay over them" (v. 7). God is being patient. He is allowing time for all whom He has chosen to receive Him. The word combines two Greek words. Taken together, *makrothumeō*, means "far distant" and "wrath." The disciples recognized this from the Old Testament,

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" (Psalm 103:8).

Peter said it eloquently, "the Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). The word 'quickly' (v. 8) does not, then, refer to the return of Christ and the establishment of the final edition of the kingdom of God, but rather to the fact that God does not unnecessarily delay in answering our prayers.

Think of the promises that God fulfills while we wait,

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
But the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Psalm 34:19)

"We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28)

"No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13)

"For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17)

The Challenge

Jesus then concluded with a question for His disciples. No doubt looking them in the eyes, He asked, "when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (v. 8). I wonder what the disciples were thinking. Perhaps Peter, being Peter, almost spoke out saying "I will be faithful!" Perhaps Judas hid his face in shame. The others were somewhere between embarrassment and genuine concern. Would they remain faithful until Jesus returned? I am quite certain they did not fully grasp what Jesus was asking.

The question was for self-assessment, not for a definitive answer. Jesus had already explained that there would be faith on the earth when Christ returns.

“⁴⁴For this reason you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will. ⁴⁵Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes” (Matthew 24:44-46).

“³⁴I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed; one will be taken and the other will be left. ³⁵There will be two women grinding at the same place; one will be taken and the other will be left” (Luke 17:34-35).

That there will be faithful when Christ returns is clear. Who will be among them is less so.

Takeaways

A proper understanding of Christ's return and the final establishment of the kingdom of God ought to have three beneficial effects for every believer. First, it ought to give us great comfort. Second, it ought to spur us on to godly living. Finally, it ought to embolden us to evangelize.