

Valley Bible Church – Parables of Jesus

What is God like? He expects persevering prayer. (Cont.)

Introduction

In lesson 4 we introduced three stories that Jesus told to teach about prayer. He had just given his followers the "Disciples Prayer," a pattern to answer the request, "Lord teach us to pray."

He immediately told them the story of a man who received a visitor at midnight and had no bread to fulfill the cultural requirement of caring for him. He went to a friend's house and, under threat of waking his entire family and the neighbors successfully borrowed the bread. The neighbor gave him the bread to get rid of him. The lesson was two fold: Prayer should be direct and definite, specific and precise, and prayer should be persistent.

Later he told them a story of a widow who went to a judge to get relief from a person who was causing her grief. He only listened to her and acted in her behalf after she bothered him so much he felt like she had "beat him black and blue." Lessons from this parable are clearly: Direct prayer to the one who has the power to act in the area of need, and again prayer should be persistent.

Under lying this teaching is the truth Jesus tied to these parables that help us understand God's command for persevering prayer. Even a human father would not give something harmful to his children when they ask him to meet their needs. How much more will the perfect, loving Father God give what is needed to His children.

So the continued asking, seeking, and knocking must be for our benefit not God's. It must teach us patience and remind us of our dependence on God for meeting our needs.

Since we are studying the parables, this is not an in depth study of prayer. That would take weeks and so we must hold that for another time. But there are a couple of questions raised by the teaching of the "Friend" and "Woman" parables that concern me.

These two parables clearly teach perseverance:

Luke 18:1, *"Praying always."*

Luke 11:9, *"Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking."*

Other Scripture passages clearly teach trusting:

1Peter 5:7 *"casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you.* The picture is of one rolling a great load onto a beast of burden and never taking it back.

Philippians 4:6 and 7, *"Be anxious for nothing, but with everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your request be made known to God."* No need to be anxious because God is knows the need and is powerfully able to do above all we ask, think, or even imagine.

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Question 1: How can we both persevere and show trust?

I mentioned the possibility of bad results coming from asking persistently for bad things:

Example 1: The children of Israel were tired of manna and moaned and groaned for meat to eat until God buried them in quail.

Example 2: The children of Israel wanted a king like the heathen nations around them and prayed until God gave them what they wanted, King Saul.

Question 2: Should we be afraid to persevere in prayer for fear of getting something that is bad for us?

The dilemma is caused by our sense of logic. We think if X is true, Y cannot possibly be true. Sometimes both are true whether we understand it or not.

Example: Which is the correct statement according to Scripture? Salvation is all of God, He chose us and will keep us until we are with Him in heaven. Or, if we are true believers we must persevere to the end in order to see God. BOTH!

This is a paradox. Two things that seem mutually exclusive but are, in fact, both true whether we understand them or not. The answer may lie in our limited understanding or perhaps in seeing things from different points of view.

Example: *Read James 4:2 and 3*

Verse 2, "*You do not have because you do not ask*".

Verse 3, "*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,*"

There are two concepts taught: One an ACTION, the other as ATTITUDE

1. You don't receive because you don't ask

You need the right ACTION

2. You don't receive because you ask wrongly

You need the right ATTITUDE

NOW APPLY THIS TO OUR TWO QUESTIONS:

Question 1: How can we persevere in prayer and yet show trust in God?

1. Attitude

I trust God to care more for my needs than I do.

I trust God to be faithful to His word that he will provide

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2. Action

Pray always

Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking

Question 2: Will I get answers that are bad for me if I persevere?

1. Attitude

God knows what is best for me

I will not ask for anything I know is wrong, i.e. Pre-marital, extra-marital sex, not being involved in a local fellowship, breaking the law.

2. Action

I will pray for things I know are God's will, i.e. the filling of the Holy Spirit, growth, understanding, evangelism

I will pray for wisdom in things not spelled out in Scripture, i.e. career decisions, use of gifts in the body, (Luke 11--will your heavenly father not give what is good to those who ask?)

With this as background lets look at the last parable:

The Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:9-14)

A. Two men enter the Temple to pray

Use your imagination to visualize the scene:

1. Both men stood

The Pharisee "*stood,*" struck a pose in a prominent place

The Publican "*stood some distance away even unwilling to raise his eyes*"

2. Both men prayed

The Pharisee "*was praying to himself*" (Read verses 11b and 12)

In two sentences he uses the word "I" five times: I'm thankful; I'm not like others; I'm a faster; I'm a tither.

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He seems to think that if he parades his virtues before God that God becomes his debtor. I do and I don't therefore You must accept and bless me.

One writer said, "He moved in a circle, the center and circumference of which was himself." We can scoff at this, but we do the same. I do or I don't, I check off the boxes, therefore I am righteous and you must. !

The Publican *"was praying to God"* (Read verse 13)

Bowing his head in humble submission he cries for mercy. He is a sinner. He deserves punishment. He needs mercy. In fact he says,

"be merciful to me, the sinner."

He is in trouble, he needs help, he is poor in spirit, like Paul in I Timothy 1:15--*"It is a trustworthy statement, deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."* Or like the Prodigal Son, *"I have sinned against heaven and against you father."*

B. Who are the two men?

1. The Pharisee

A Pharisee was a leader in the Jewish community. He was considered the protector of the traditions of the Jewish religion and culture and his job was said to be "building a fence around the law." He was condemned by Jesus, not for teaching adherence to the letter of the Law, but for adding teachings of men and extrapolation rules that brought their people into bondage rather than a relationship to God.

The closest we come to them today is the Orthodox Jews in modern day Israel. There are roughly 6 million American Jews and only about 10% are orthodox. Interestingly, we presently have a candidate for Vice President who is an orthodox Jew, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman. This gives us a current source for a glimpse at their teaching. A brief summary of Orthodox Jews appeared in the August 8, 2000 issue of The Los Angeles times. I quote from that article:

"Orthodox Jews teach that the Torah--the first five books of the Hebrew Bible--were given directly by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. As a result, they strictly observe the biblical commandments . . .

"Among the chief elements of Orthodox practice are:

"Strict observation of kosher dietary laws inside and outside of the home. Meat must be from animals killed by special butchers who use methods designed to be as humane as possible. Meat and dairy products may not be eaten at the same meal. Certain foods, including pork and shellfish, are prohibited.

"Adherence to the Sabbath, the Jewish day of rest, which begins on Friday at sunset and ends at sunset on Saturday. Work is to be avoided on the Sabbath, and instead time should be devoted to prayer, study, family, and rest.

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"Prayer three times a day.

"Separation of men and women in synagogue during prayer services."

He sweeps into the temple at one of the three precise prayer times (9, 12, or 3) in full regalia described in Scripture as long flowing robes with decorative fringes, ornamentation, and oversized phylacteries on their arms and foreheads. And he "prayed to himself."

I read a news item several years ago about a prominent speaker who was appearing at a large church in Boston. The article said, "The preacher gave the most elegant prayer ever offered to a Boston audience." Pomp and elegance obviously doesn't guarantee an audience with God.

2. The Publican

There were many taxes in the Roman Empire: Land taxes, poll taxes, personal property taxes, import taxes, excise taxes, tolls on roads, docks, harbors, city gates, bridges, etc., etc., etc. The Roman system of roads, shipping, education, and protection made the taxes worthwhile.

As it tells us in verse 13, a publican was a tax-gatherer. That fact alone would have made a person unpopular. No one loves the taxman. But there was much more to the problem. If your race had fought for over 1000 years for independence from the occupation of a foreign power and one of your own people had sold out to that power to collect taxes from their own people in order to become rich, that would be especially painful.

The approach to collecting the taxes was the problem. The Roman government hired people to collect taxes from their own national groups. They were interested in getting all the money due them and much less interested in how they got it.

Each Publican was assigned a portion of the population and told the amount of taxes they were expected to collect. In reality they could collect, under the authority of Rome, whatever they wanted as their payment for the collection as long as Rome got their money.

Publicans became wealthy by collecting exorbitant amounts for their personal estates. They tended to be unjust and cruel as well as corrupt.

Matthew is a great example. When he became a believer he chose to payback the people he had cheated with interest.

C. Two men leave the Temple

1. The Pharisee

He came into the Temple proud, arrogant, self-righteous, and boastful. He leaves condemned by God.

John Calvin said, *"Christ reproves and condemns two sins--improper confidence in ourselves, and pride in despising others--one springs from the other."*

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2. The Publican

He came humbly asking forgiveness. He leaves forgiven and justified by God, declared righteous, just as if he never sinned.

To apply today's teaching on prayer we could say:

1. Attitude--Humility
2. Action--Confession

Big Point:

God expects us to pray directly specifically, persistently and humbly for our benefit and the benefit of the kingdom..

"Now let's thank God we're not like that terrible old Pharisee!"