

Pray and Do Not Lose Heart

LUKE 18:1-8

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This morning I would like for us to return to our series of lessons from the life of Christ. Some of you might remember that those here on Wednesday night a week and a half ago were given the opportunity to turn in some of their favorite scenes from the life of Jesus. Last week (because of this), we looked together at that passage in Luke 22 where the Lord told Peter that Satan had demanded permission to sift him like wheat. We learned that Satan is a real enemy, we learned that Jesus is pleading our case, and we also learned that when we come out on the other side of a period of sifting or testing, we are to use that experience as we turn around to go out and strengthen others who may be going through something similar.

This morning, I would like for us to consider another passage from the book of Luke, and the passage comes in the form of a parable – Luke 18:1-8 (p. 1636). It is a parable concerning the importance of prayer. A parable, of course, is a story with a double meaning. The word “parable” literally means, “to cast alongside.” In my mind, I picture two people bowling side by side at the same time. They are casting alongside each other. In one lane there is the literal meaning of the story, but then for those who want to investigate further and dig a little deeper, there is the parallel meaning over in that other lane, but the stories are cast side-by-side – the literal meaning and then the much deeper spiritual application. And the purpose of a parable is to teach a deep spiritual lesson in a way that people can understand. And that is what happens here in Luke 18. The Lord tells a parable on the importance of prayer.

I am very thankful that we are able to study this parable this morning, because all of us need some regular encouragement to pray. In our society, it seems that we get so busy that we hardly have time for prayer. There are other times when we might doubt whether prayer really does any good. It is important, therefore, that we go back and study the words of Jesus himself as he encourages us to pray.

If you will, please look with me at Luke 18:1-8,

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I

will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

Usually, when we look at a paragraph from God’s word, we ask ourselves the question, “Why is this passage here?” And then we dig into it to find the meaning, to find the answer to the “So what?” question. Thankfully, though, Luke makes it very easy for us!

This is rare, but in verse 1, Luke just comes right out and says it: ***“Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart.”*** So, the main point is very easy for us to dig out here! It doesn’t usually happen this way, but we are thankful that the Bible tells us what the main point is before we even have the story! So, we know that the goal of the story we are about to read is to get us to keep on praying. The purpose is to show that we are to pray and not lose heart.

With this as background, then, I want us to look at the **MAIN CHARACTERS** in this story before we end with the Lord’s conclusion.

1. But in the order they are introduced, let us begin by looking at the JUDGE in this parable.

It is probably safe to assume that this man was appointed by the Roman Empire. I have read that judgeships would often go to the highest bidder, a little bit like the tax collector system back then. If you wanted to be a judge, you would make your best offer to the governor, and the governor would then make his decision. I think we see the danger in that. And so instead of the people choosing somebody for their knowledge of the law, instead of a man being chosen for his great integrity, the position would instead be awarded to whoever outbid all of the others. As you can imagine, then, these judges would turn around and try to recoup their investment. And so if I were to pay \$10,000 to the Roman governor in order to get my judgeship, I need to get that money back somehow. So, the judges would often go looking for bribes. They would basically charge admission for a case to be heard.

Based on secular writings from that time, we know that these judges did not operate out of a courtroom as we might have today, but they would travel from town to town setting up a tent as the judge would cover his circuit. The judge controlled that tent. He would set the agenda. He would set the schedule. And he sat in this tent surrounded by his assistants, and he only heard cases that were approved by those assistants. That, of course, meant that someone would probably need to bribe one or more of those assistants (or have some kind of a friend in that position) in order to have any chance of the judge calling that case before the court. Anybody could gather around and watch what was going on, but you had to offer a bribe to actually have a case heard by the judge. I think of the situation with Governor Felix in Acts 24:26 where Felix left Paul in prison for two years, for he was ***“hoping that money would be given him by Paul.”*** This system produced Felix! Felix refused to decide Paul’s case and kept on putting it off in hopes of getting a bribe. That was common among judges and Roman governors in the First Century. And so we get the picture of a very corrupt man.

Jesus, in fact, tells us in verse 2 that this man ***“did not fear God and did not respect man.”*** The judge repeats this down in verse 4. He did not fear God. A fear of God, of course, would have caused him to help this woman, but the fear was not there. In a similar way, the judge also had no respect for his fellow man. There

was no concept of mercy. There was no care for his fellow human beings. He was a godless, uncaring, money-grubbing bureaucrat.

2. So now, let us look at the WOMAN in this story.

In verse 3, we find first of all, that she is a widow. In the ancient world, many times people would take advantage of widows, and that seems to be what is happening here. At the end of verse 3, we find that she is looking for legal protection from her opponent. So we find that this woman has some kind of an adversary. Somebody is out to get her legally.

If you know anything about the book of Luke (and the book of Acts, also written by Luke), then you know that Luke often features those who are usually overlooked and abused by society – women (widows in particular), the poor, the sick, the disabled, Samaritans. And this passage is no exception. The widow is pretty much the hero of this story. Somebody is after this woman legally. Perhaps somebody is trying to cheat her out of an inheritance or maybe the land that her husband left to her. In the ancient world, women were often taken advantage of. We think of Ruth and Naomi and how they returned to Bethlehem as widows. They had no legal right to claim the land left by their husbands. Fortunately, though, Boaz married Ruth and became her redeemer and protector. That was a provision under the Law of Moses. The point is: In the Old Testament and in the New Testament, God's people have always been commanded to be especially kind to widows. In the Old Testament, the people were commanded to set aside a part of their crops for the widows and the orphans. In the New Testament, James tells us that pure and undefiled religion involves taking care of widows and orphans in their distress.

However, when faced with a judge who does not fear God and does not care about his fellow man, the widow in this parable is pretty much helpless. I say "pretty much," because she does have her persistence! She might not have a wealthy friend, she might not be able to bribe her way into the courtroom, she might not have a powerful attorney, she might not have a husband to stand up for her in court, but she is determined. And when it became obvious that her polite request was not enough, she starts to become more and more vocal. In verse 5, we find that she was approaching the judge **"continually."** We can see her maybe following this man home at the end of the day. We can see her harassing this man on his way to work in the morning. We can see her tagging along as he goes out to meet friends for dinner. We can see her following this man in the marketplace. **"Continually,"** this woman kept on pressing the judge for protection. She was persistent.

Those who have studied the Greek language give us an interesting lesson from the judge's response in verse 5. The New American Standard Bible has the judge being worried that by coming to him continually, **"she will wear me out."** As you might be able to see from the footnote, that little phrase could also be translated **"give me a black eye."** Translated literally, the judge was worried that this woman would punch him in the face and give him a black eye. Not that he was concerned about physical violence, but he was using a figure of speech. He was worried that she would give him a black eye. He was worried that with her constant pestering, this woman would damage his reputation.

And so, because of her persistence, we find in verse 5 that the judge decided to give her the legal protection she was asking for – not because he feared God, not because he cared about her, but instead, simply to make her go away! This woman was wearing him out, and so he finally gave in. Now at this point, I can see those in the audience nodding their heads in agreement. Remember: These people who heard it for the first time don't know where this story is going. We know where it is going because of verse 1. They didn't have verse 1. Verse 1 is Luke's explanation after the fact. All they know is that there is a robber judge who finally gives in after

being continually harassed by a poor widow. They all have their own horror stories dealing with the government. It would be like some of us getting together and talking about our last experience with the DMV or the IRS. Several years ago, I had to stop in at our local IRS office to pick up a few forms, and there were two older men standing there in the doorway in the crowded lobby, and they started yelling – not at each other, but in a conversation with each other about the government. Here we are all upset because we have to take a number and wait in this huge line for the privilege of paying our taxes, and these old guys start yelling about light bulbs, *“Yeah, the government’s taking our light bulbs away, and these newfangled things don’t last as long as the old ones, and they’re expensive, and they make a toxic mess when they break,”* and these guys are just feeding on each other. I’m standing there just trying to stay out of it, and I notice the armed guard just kind of stands up from his chair and just slowly rests his hand on his holster. And I think to myself: There is a good reason why they have an armed guard in this place! As far as I know, the IRS has nothing to do with light bulbs – we know this, and I’m pretty sure the two old guys know this. And yet we also know that the decent people sitting behind those desks do represent the face of a government that doesn’t always make the best decisions. And so, going back to our parable, at this point (as Jesus starts talking about an evil judge), everybody in the audience is thinking, *“Yes! We have been there! We have all dealt with the Roman bureaucracy. We have all dealt with these robber judges. You’re right, Jesus, that is exactly how it is dealing with those people. Amen! Preach on, brother! Way to go, widow!”*

The woman, therefore, was persistent. Did you know that a woman in Wisconsin history had this same kind of persistence? Has anyone ever heard the name Cordelia Harvey? Cordelia lived from 1824-1895 and had an interesting impact on our state. According to an article in the *Wisconsin State Journal* (February 27, 2008), Cordelia went to the South in the fall of 1862 to care for Wisconsin’s soldiers who were wounded in the Civil War – thousands of soldiers all crammed into some very small and badly ventilated rooms. We know from history that for every Civil War soldier killed in battle, two more died from disease. Cordelia knew that if she could only get the soldiers back home to Wisconsin, only then would they recover. However, military regulations did not allow this, and she kept hitting roadblocks as she tried to get Wisconsin soldiers back to the north. Well, her husband had been Wisconsin’s Republican governor, so in 1863, Cordelia went right to the top and set up a meeting with a fellow Republican, President Abraham Lincoln. According to her, the president *“...was plainly clad in a suit of black that illy fitted him.”* This was no fault of his tailor, she said, *“Such a figure could not be fitted. He was tall and lean, and as he sat in a folded up sort of way in a deep arm chair, one would almost have thought him deformed.”* Lincoln believed that if soldiers recovered in the North, they would never go back South to fight. In fact, the president said to Cordelia, *“I believe the idea of northern hospitals is a great humbug.”* Cordelia persisted, though, and went back to the White House morning after morning to plead her case. Is this sounding a little bit familiar? According to the Wisconsin Historical Society, *“Finally Lincoln, worn down by her arguments, authorized a hospital in Madison. Others followed in Milwaukee and Prairie du Chien.”* Once he had caved, Lincoln asked her, *“What would you have done...if I had said no?”* Cordelia replied, *“I should have been here at 9 o’clock [in the morning], Mr. President.”* Like the widow in our parable, Cordelia Harvey was also a very persistent woman. By the way, Cordelia was also a widow. Her husband, Governor Louis Harvey, drowned in the Tennessee River in Savannah on a medical supply trip in April 1862. He was climbing from a barge onto a boat, fell in between, and drowned in the river. Governor Harvey and his wife are both buried at Forest Hill Cemetery here in Madison.

The point is: The widow in today’s parable was persistent. She kept on harassing the judge until he finally gave in.

With this, let us now go back and notice how the Lord applies the parable. What does this story mean for us? And again, as Luke pointed out at the beginning, the main point is that WE ARE TO KEEP ON PRAYING! We are to pray, and as we pray we are not to lose heart.

In verse 6, the Lord says, *“Hear what the unrighteous judge said.”* In other words: Learn from this story! In one lane we have a poor widow and an evil judge. What do we have in the other lane? What is the parallel that is “cast beside”? Well, it seems pretty obvious to me that we are the widow. Right? When it comes to prayer, we are the ones who are in need. We are the ones who are pleading for something.

When it comes to the judge, though, I want us to notice that Jesus is not making a comparison. Instead, the Lord is making a contrast. He isn’t saying that God is like an evil judge. Instead, the Lord is saying: If this evil judge can be harassed into listening to a poor widow, then how much more will God in heaven listen to his own children! Notice in the middle of verse 7, we are described as God’s elect. In other words, we are God’s chosen people. And if an evil judge will listen to a poor widow, then God will certainly listen to us. We are his children. For those of us who are parents, we know that we love hearing from our children. We want to give them a positive answer. As we learned from Matthew 7 in our scripture reading this morning, we want to give our children what they are asking for, but as parents, we also know that some situations are rather complicated. If our 5-year old little girl asks for a pony, we want to say “Yes,” and yet we know that it is a rather complicated request! It’s not just about going out and getting a pony. We need to provide food. We know that the City of Madison might have something to say about us keeping a pony in our back yard. We know that a pony is an investment that might sink our family financially. As parents, we know that our children may not be ready for what they are asking. As parents, we may know something about their future that they may not. We may know that this might be a decision that we need to put off for a little while, and so there is a delay involved. In a slightly similar way, God is so much wiser than we are. God looks at time in a different way than we do. From our point of view, it might seem as if God is not listening. From our point of view, we might be tempted to think of God as an uncaring judge, but that is not the case at all. So instead of giving up, we are to pray and not lose heart.

The lesson, therefore, is not that we need to harass God into doing what we want! The lesson is not that we need to keep on pestering God until he finally gives in! Instead, we are to pray and not lose heart. It is not a matter of us wearing God down, but it is a matter of us being patient. It is a matter of us being persistent, even when we do not understand why we do not have an answer. C.S. Lewis explains it in this way, “Prayer is request. The essence of a request, as distinct from a demand, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant them and sometimes refuse them.” Very interesting! As we pray, then, we are not to give up, but we are to keep on praying. We are to pray, and we are to leave the answering to God.

Conclusion:

I want us to close this morning by looking back at that very last question in verse 8, *“When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”* In many ways, the answer to that question is up to us. Prayer and faith are tied together. God knows that we go through some very tough situations, so the question is: Will we keep on seeking God through all of it? Will we keep on praying, even when we see this delay in the answers to our prayers?

- Maybe we are facing a difficult family situation.
- Maybe we are facing a serious health concern.

- Maybe we are concerned about our children.
- Maybe we are eager for a friend or loved one to obey the gospel.
- Maybe we are looking for God's help in breaking some kind of addiction.
- Maybe we see the great need for elders here at this congregation.

Sometimes the answers to prayers are not quick and easy. The question is: How do we handle the delay? The passage we have studied this morning tells us to keep on praying, even if we do not see results immediately. What I really love about this parable is that the hero of the story is not really out of reach. In other words, this woman is not like King David, or Moses, or Job, but she could be any one of us here this morning – this woman was desperate and persistently took her case to the one person who had the power to do something about it. And that is what prayer is! We are to pray and not lose heart!

As we close, did you know that baptism itself is pictured as a kind of prayer? In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter is speaking of the great flood, and he says, ***“Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you— not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”*** Baptism is our appeal to God for a good conscience. Baptism is our appeal to God. I am thankful for the request for a sermon on the parable in Luke 18. But as we close, we would invite you to consider making the greatest appeal to God that any of us could ever make, the appeal to God for a good conscience. We make that plea through baptism. We believe in Jesus, we turn away from sin, and we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in baptism for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we hope you will ask. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com