

# That We Might Always Pray and Not Lose Heart

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup> And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup> And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' <sup>4</sup> For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:1–8)

### How Has Your Prayer Life Been Lately?

- A. I wonder, if you are a Christian in here with us this morning, how has your prayer life been lately? Has it been fresh and active and vibrant? Or has it been a bit stale and apathetic and dead? Are you busy with just about everything else but prayer?
- B. I realize, ironically, if ever there was a time when this would be the case, it would be the holiday season, wouldn't it? I say it's a bit ironic, because at the time of year when we say it's all about making space to remember what God has done for us in the sending of His Son into the world, we strangely often find ourselves too busy and distracted to spend any time in prayer with Him.
  - 1. I've got black Fridays and cyber Mondays to shop; I've got work parties and white elephant exchanges to attend; I've got lights and decorations to put up; I've got cookies and other treats to bake; I've got movies to watch and carols to sing; and on it goes.
    - a. Prayer? Sometimes, if we're honest, it's the last thing we're thinking about.
- C. All the more reason, I suppose, why the parable we have before us is of critical importance and we would be wise to hit pause on all these other matters we get so worked up about and, instead, let us give our whole attention to it. God is looking to address us this morning—to re-center us, to get us back into orbit around the things that truly and eternally matter.
  - 1. I'll divide my dealings with this text into three parts for us in this sermon: (1) The Setup (v. 1); (2) The Story (vv. 2-5); and (3) The Significance (vv. 6-8).

## (1) The Setup (v. 1)

### Living in the Space Between

- A. Before I draw your attention to v. 1, I actually want you drop your eyes down to v. 8. There's a clue here that can't go unnoticed as it really connects us back to all we saw last time in [Luke 17:20-37](#)

and provides context for the parable in our text and the call the persistent prayer. Let me show you what I mean.

- B. After saying all that He does in vv. 1-7 He comes out in v. 8 and concludes as follows: “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”
  - 1. Now, this is a clear reference to the second coming of Christ. And with this, again, we see that Jesus is really just carrying on the conversation He began with His disciples back in Luke 17:20.
    - a. I do not have time to go back through all that we saw there but the big takeaway, you may recall, was that the kingdom of God is both already present in some sense and yet not-yet fully consummated. Jesus, at Christmas, has made His initial appearance and initiated the first phase of the kingdom’s arrival, but there still remains a day fixed somewhere out in the future where He will come again and with phase two bring in the fullness of the kingdom—the righteousness, the glory, the eternal life, the new heavens and new earth.
- C. And we live in the space between these two comings of Christ, these two advents, these two phases of the kingdom’s arrival. The Son of Man has come once and the Son of Man is coming again. And in the space between, we pray, and we pray, and we pray, and we pray.
  - 1. That’s the point of this parable. That’s why our text begins the way it does in v. 1: “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

## For Those Losing Heart

- A. I don’t know about you, but I found this opening line to be wonderfully encouraging.
  - 1. When Jesus tells this parable, as Luke says, to the end that we not lose heart in our praying, He is acknowledging the fact that we will be tempted to lose heart in it. Do you see?! He is admitting that there will be times you will pray and pray and pray and feel like it is nothing but a waste of your time and breath. “God is not listening. God is not moving. God is not even here.”
    - a. As you pray in the space between the two advents, you will feel like giving up on prayer and, in that, giving up on God.
- B. Have you ever been there? Perhaps you are in that frame of heart even now.
  - 1. If so, Jesus is telling this parable for you. So let’s look at it together now . . .

## (2) The Story (vv. 2-5)

### A Helpless Widow and an Unrighteous Judge

- A. Let’s just read it again: “<sup>2</sup> He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup> And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me

justice against my adversary.”<sup>4</sup> For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, “Though I neither fear God nor respect man,<sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.”” (vv. 2-5).

1. This is a pretty easy story to grab ahold of and I will not belabor the matter much here. I only want to make sure we’ve gotten the details clear in our minds before we proceed.
  - a. We meet here both a helpless widow and an unrighteous judge.
- B. With regard to this helpless widow we understand that some injustice and oppression has befallen her and she is torn up about it and in need of the judge to rule in her favor lest she get swept away in it. So she “kept coming” (v. 3) and pleading with this judge to grant her the justice she so desires.
- C. But then, with regard to this unrighteous judge we are told that he “neither feared God nor respected man” (v. 2). He has no regard for the two great commandments. He has no love for God or neighbor, but only for himself. And so he has no interest in helping this poor woman. What’s in it for him?
  1. We know that Jesus is wanting us to mark the selfishness of this man in particular because of the awkward way He has the judge hold counsel with himself there in vv. 4b-5. He reiterates the opening description again only this time putting it on the mouth of the judge himself: “<sup>4b</sup> Though I neither fear God nor respect man,<sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.” What he says here amounts to something like: “Though I am a royal scumbag I suppose I’ll give you what you ask for if it means you’ll stop bothering me and I can get back to my self-centered existence.” You see?
    - a. The exaggeration of Christ here brings out the point. The man is wicked and yet still he gives in because of the persistence of this widow.
- D. Now, what in the world is Jesus meaning for us to get out of this?

### (3) The Significance (vv. 6-8)

#### How Much More?!

- A. In vv. 6-8 He comes out of this story and begins to speak to its significance, the point He is after in this for you and I. This is helpful. Listen up: “<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says.<sup>7</sup> And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?<sup>8a</sup> I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” (vv. 6-8a).
- B. What we have here is yet another example of the “how much more” logic we’ve seen leveraged in this gospel before. Jesus uses it often.
  1. We are supposed to consider the story here with this widow and judge and then extrapolate from it certain implications with regard to our relationship with God.

- C. The idea here really comes out when once we compare and contrast the identities of both the one being petitioned and the one doing the petitioning.
1. In the parable, the one being petitioned is, as we've already made plain, an unrighteous judge. Jesus calls Him such there in v. 6: "Hear what the unrighteous judge says."
  2. The one doing the petitioning is, again, as we've said, a helpless widow. She has no previous relationship with this judge, no familial or friendly connection. She has no real status, no social capital, no bargaining chips to play with. The only thing she has, it would seem is her own obstinance and persistence. Her only hope of getting what she wants from this unrighteous judge is to annoy him into submission.
- D. Now, if we were to simply draw a straight line from this parable towards our relationship with God we could make some pretty devastating mistakes.
1. Are we supposed to think from this that God is unrighteous and selfish and wicked and has no regard for us but will in the end give in to our requests if only we beat him over the head with them? Is that the point?
    - a. If that's the takeaway the very heart of prayer has been run through with a dagger. This is not the Bible's teaching on the matter.
- E. And here is where we come to the "how much more" logic I referenced. You see, it's not one for one here. It's rather: If x, how much more y?!

### How Much More . . . God?!

- A. That's why Jesus goes on to say: "<sup>7</sup> And will not God give justice to his elect . . . Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily."
1. As one commentator concludes on this point: "If a wicked man will sometimes do good, even if from bad motives, how much more will God do right!" (TNTC).
- B. He is not like this unrighteous judge. He is a righteous and holy Judge and, more than that, He is a good Father to His kids.
1. As Jesus has said earlier in this gospel:
    - a. Luke 11:11-13: "<sup>11</sup> What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; <sup>12</sup> or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? <sup>13</sup> If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"
    - b. Or, similarly, Luke 12:32: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."
- C. God is not sitting back with arms crossed needing to be persuaded why He ought to do what is right for you, He is leaning in and ready to help.

## How Much More . . . Us?!

- A. But there is more to be compared and contrasted here. We are not meant only to consider this unrighteous judge alongside our righteous God. We are also to consider who this widow was in relation to the judge alongside who we are in relation to our God.
1. This is what is brought out by the words “his elect” there in v. 7: “And will not God give justice to his elect [his chosen ones]. . .”
- B. Listen, I recognize that there are different ways to take this word, and whichever way you slice it you run up against mystery.
1. But, however we take it, we must not permit that the word “elect” here be neutered to such a degree that the active energy of God is stripped entirely from it and all that is left is some passive foreknowledge on God’s part regarding who would, in fact, elect Him. That is simply not going to do justice to the biblical notion of election. Nor does it do justice to the grammar of this text.
    - a. That’s why I emphasize that we are talking about “his elect” here. Not just the elect in some generic sense but his elect, those whom He has sovereignly laid His hands on for Christ’s sake—saving them from sin, adopting them into His family, and preserving them unto glory. There is gracious activity of God in this word!
- C. And if you don’t believe me based upon this text alone, consider a few others:
1. Mark 13:19-20: “<sup>19</sup> For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.<sup>20</sup> And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.”
  2. John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”
  3. 1 Cor 27-30: “<sup>27</sup> God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;<sup>28</sup> God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,<sup>29</sup> so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.<sup>30</sup> And because of him you are in Christ Jesus.”
    - a. How all of this holds together with human responsibility, I do not know, but one thing seems to be clear: If you are in Christ, God has done that. And if God has done that, He’s not about to turn His back on you now.
- D. And that, I think, is the “how much more” point in all of this.
1. This widow had no relationship whatsoever with the judge and yet because she kept coming and coming and coming with her request it was finally granted.
  2. How much more then will God grant to us—His own children whom He has chosen of His own sovereign will and grace—the help which we so humbly and yet persistently petition Him for?

- E. It's the difference between a salesman knocking on your door and a son.
  - 1. With the former, you may open up simply to get him to stop knocking: "Fine, I'll take two of whatever you're selling, just move along man!"
  - 2. But with the latter, you are waiting by the window and, when he's arrived back from college for the holiday or whatever, you throw open that door before he can even rap a knuckle against it and you have your arms around him. "Welcome home son—let's get some coffee brewing, let's get the fire going, I want to hear how you've been."
    - a. How much more!
- F. He is Father and He is faithful. You are child and you are chosen. You put the two of these truths together and therein you have the unbreakable backbone of the Christian disciple.
  - 1. There is our encouragement to keep coming and persisting in prayer.

## Two Closing Questions

- A. I'd like to spend the rest of our time reflecting on two questions. Let's consider them one at time.

### Question #1: Are You Unrelenting in Your Lamenting?

- A. According to this text (and many others) I think we are to understand that the Christian life, as it was for this widow, will often be what I might call the unvindicated life. We will be unappreciated. We will be overlooked. We will be misunderstood. We will be maligned. We will be taken advantage of. We will be ill-treated. For following Christ and His ways.
  - 1. And the question that we will constantly have to face in all of this is: So what are we going to do about it? Are we going to vindicate ourselves?; take matters into our own hands?; make things right in our own strength? What will we do in response to the unvindicated life? When sinners prosper in their wickedness and the saints of God are left languishing in the dirt?
    - a. Well, in the words of v. 7 of our text, we "cry to [God] day and night."
- B. In these words, it seems to me, we are confronted with the biblical category of lament (cf. [Psa 88:1](#)). Taken from our modern dictionaries it's a word that means: "a passionate expression of grief or sorrow; an expression of regret or disappointment; a complaint."
  - 1. This really hearkens back to what we were saying at the beginning. In this space between the two advents of Christ we ought to be lamenting or we aren't truly living.
- C. When a person is failing to lament, to cry out to God day and night for relief, for justice, for His kingdom to come—you know at least one of four things are in play:
  - 1. Denial: Here is where a person is not willing to look at reality and face up to how hard this life really is. If you would say that you are not struggling, that you are not suffering, that you

are not disappointed in some way, that you are not letdown in some way, then I would say that you are not being honest.

- a. Instead, allow yourself to feel, move towards God in the pain—pray, cry, lament in His direction day and night. He hears, He cares, He will soon act.
2. Distraction: Here is what I mentioned in passing really at the beginning with regard to the Christmas season. We may no longer be in denial. We may know that this world is fundamentally broken and we need help, we need rescue, we need the kingdom to come, but we just get busy with other stuff.
    - a. Like the people in Noah’s and Lot’s day, as we saw last time, we get distracted with some of the good stuff of life: eating, drinking, marriage, buying, selling, planting, building, and so forth (cf. [Luke 17:27-28](#)). “There’s so much to do. I don’t have time for this unrelenting lamenting.”
  3. Deviation: Here is the person willing to stop denial and distraction and own up to the fact that they need help. But by “deviation” is meant that they go looking for help in the wrong places. They are not lamenting in God’s direction and waiting for His rescue, they are running off after false gods and gospels.
    - a. “If God is going to take His sweet time I will figure out a way to rescue myself.” Maybe the coming of Jesus isn’t the answer. Maybe it’s a career change, or a new relationship, or a new house, etc. We deviate from the gospel. We stop crying out to God because we no longer think He can or will help.
  4. Despair: And then at last, perhaps we finally just give up all together. We’re no longer denying that we are broken and hurting and grieving and needing rescue, nor are we distracted by the everyday things of life. And we’ve stopped looking around for anything that could ever make it right.
    - a. We’ve accepted the hopelessness of it all. God can’t help and nothing else can either. We just give ourselves up and over to despair.
- D. It actually takes work and great faith to lament in the way we are called to in this text. In our unrelenting lamenting, in our persistent prayer, we are refusing to let God go. We are saying: “We know that You will come through for us in the end.” With Peter, we declare: “[Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life](#)” ([John 6:68](#)).
1. “We are going to cry out in Your direction day and night, day and night, day and night, until the Son of Man comes again and makes all the wrong—both outside and inside us—finally and fully right.”

## Question #2: Does Prayer Really “Work”?

- A. It’s a question I think a lot of us want to ask, but we’re a little scared to. We feel we’ll get a wrist slap or, worse, shunned, or something like this. But we all wonder about it and struggle with it.

1. “Jesus seems to indicate here that justice is going to come ‘speedily’ (v. 8). Well, I’ve been praying for the same thing for a couple decades now and it still hasn’t come to pass. What about that, Nick? Does prayer really ‘work’?”
- B. Three things regarding prayer are helpful to remember when we are faced with such crises of faith. I’ll bring them out now one at a time and then we’ll be done:

### (1) God Meets with Us in Our Prayers

- A. Even in the question—“Does prayer really ‘work’?”—we show our cards, as it were. We expose our own idolatry and ignorance as to what prayer truly is supposed to be in the first place. Prayer is not fundamentally about results but about relationship. It is not about what you can get from God but about the fact that you get to be with God.
- B. This is why Paul talks about when God puts His Spirit in us the first thing that Spirit leads us to do is cry out in God’s direction: “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). It leads us to talk to God as dad, in relationship. That is what prayer is.
1. Therefore, if you are not praying to first meet with God as Father and friend then I daresay you are not yet praying at all!
- C. We are not shaking a vending machine—punching at the buttons until we get the treat we want. We are approaching a Person, drawing near to His heart to talk to Him about the stuff that’s on ours.

### (2) God Moves in Response to Our Prayers

- A. Listen to me: Just because you don’t get the answer you want doesn’t mean He’s not answering. He is. He always does.
1. Sometimes, it would seem, prayer changes the course of things. The cancer goes away. The boss gives you that raise. The loved one comes home. The friend gets saved.
  2. But, whether we witness the circumstances round about you change or not, you can be sure that prayer is always, in a more fundamental way, changing us.
    - a. Sometimes, through prayer, God parts the waters. Other times, through prayer, God supplies the strength we need to swim. But in either case, God moves in response to our prayers!
- B. When we hear this idea of unrelenting lamenting or persistent prayer we may be inclined to think it is our will versus God’s and we are trying to press Him in the direction we so desire.
1. But, what we come to find, after our all of our wrestling with God is that prayer truly is something more akin to pressing clay into a mold. The harder we press into God’s heart and mind and will, the more we find ourselves conformed to it—not the other way around.



- a. Prayer is not so much our means of conforming God to our will as much as it is God's means of conforming us to His will. That's the beautiful irony in it all. We press in thinking we are changing Him. But truly He is changing us. We come into the prayer closet with our desires and find ourselves walking out with His.

- i. As Paul Miller writes in his book *A Praying Life*: "God wants to do something bigger than simply answer my prayers. The act of praying draws God into my life and begins to change me . . ." (p. 166).

C. Prayer doesn't always "work" in the way we want, but it always works:

1. So Job cries out for justice thinking he knows best and he ends with his face in the dirt saying: "<sup>5</sup> I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; <sup>6</sup> therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6). "In my lamenting I have met God. I've not changed Him. He has changed me!"
2. So Habakkuk, when he sees Babylon rising in prominence and understands that they will soon be trampling down the Holy Land, he cries out to God, "Where is your justice in all of this?!" The book begins with him acting as if he knows best, but it ends with his declaration that God knows best and that is enough.
  - a. Lamentation and prayer and lamentation, in this case, changed not God, nor the course of events, but the man. God does move upon the requests, just not in the way the prophet first desired.
3. And, of course, this is Jesus in Gethsemane, is it not? "Father, if there is any other way, take this cup from Me." Now, God doesn't make another way for His Son, but we're told that, in response to His prayers, the Father sends an angel down to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). "I can't take the cup, but I will help You drink it!"

### (3) God Makes Everything Right in the End

- A. I'll leave you with this. Though He may delay, He will not delay long. God is telling a longer story and He gets the last word. And the justice, the help, the rescue you so long for, will be coming at the end of it, however many twists and turns there are along the way.
- B. Jesus drank down the cup of shame on Friday as He hung naked like a criminal on that cross. But the Father vindicated Him on Sunday, raising Him up to everlasting life.
  1. And so it will be in the end for all who trust in and wait for the Son. So, Mercy Hill, let's always pray and not lose heart!