

Don't Give Up, Pray!

Trinity CRC, May 1, 2022 AM
Prayer Service

Luke 18:1-14

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Dear fellow pray-ers,

Mrs. Smith (or was it Andermatt?) climbs to the top of Mt. Sinai to get close enough to talk to God. Looking up she asks, "Lord, what does a million years mean to you?"

The Lord replies, "A minute."

Mrs. Smith then asks, "Lord, what does a million dollars mean to you?"

And the Lord replies, "A penny."

So Smith then asks, "Lord, may I have a penny?"

And the Lord replies, "In a minute!"

When it comes to God and prayer, we probably all have times when we treat God like a cosmic Santa Claus who can supposedly give us everything we want. Often our prayers may seem that way to God as well. But thankfully God is wise and knows how to respond best to our requests.

But how about when our needs are real and desperate? Frans Baker in a book on prayer—probably the first book on prayer I ever read—writes this thought-provoking paragraph:

"Some people say that they have prayed enough already, and so they stop. This proves (however) that the need of the soul does not weigh heavy enough. Those who have a true need cannot stop; they would rather die at the feet of Christ than stop." (21)

Persistence in Prayer

This speaks to persistence in prayer and seems to be the teaching of Jesus himself. Luke introduces our Bible reading with the words,

Lk 18:1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

That's a message for us as well... always pray and not give up.

Jesus goes on to tell the story of a widow in great need who pleads her cause for justice with the local judge who didn't care about God or people. He did the exact opposite of the command to love God first and his neighbour as himself. Instead, he was selfish and proud. The widow was nothing but a nuisance to him.

Now you must understand that being a widow in the first century was a not good place to be. Being a widow means your husband has died. And while that's sad and hard even today, in the first century that meant you also had no means of income and no means of defense. That's why God set up the Jewish system whereby the next male heir in the family would take the widow under his care. She would be provided for and protected. And Luke shows us repeatedly that Jesus has a real

heart for widows and orphans and the injustice they could often face when people didn't live by the word God gave to protect people when they are vulnerable.

In Jesus' story this widow has no one to provide for her or to protect her. Consequently, she has been taken advantage of and that's why she appeals to the judge for justice. One commentator says, "Someone may have deprived her of the little she had, or may have prevented her from receiving that to which she was entitled. So she went to the judge, hoping that he would confirm her claim and give her whatever justice demanded." (NTC)

The judge, however, couldn't really be bothered with this woman even though she seems to have had a good case and is entitled to justice. She had nothing to offer him, if he was looking for a bribe. And it was clear she had integrity. However, the judge just ignored her. She, on the other hand, would not be ignored. She would not take no for an answer. So she kept coming back and pleading for the justice she knew she was entitled to. And finally, because she wore him down, the judge gave her what she asked for. He didn't give it because he was righteous and cared about her. He was just sick and tired of her persistent banging on his door.

At the end of Luke 17, Jesus is reminding us that the time of his coming again is unknown and it may be a long time but it will come. So, Luke 18 starts by reminding us that we shouldn't doubt Jesus and his love for his people. He will come back and he is interested in us now. That's why we must keep praying, keep praying for his return when all things will be made right. And keep bringing our daily needs to him as well. Jesus said,

Lk 18:7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?

The implied answer is "Yes." And

Will he keep putting them off?

The implied answer is a resounding "No."

God cares for every detail in the lives of his children. Jesus is not suggesting that God is uncaring like the judge in the parable. What the NIV calls *his chosen ones* is *the elect*. That gives us the sense that God knows us from before the foundation of the world and he also loves us with an everlasting love (Jer 31:3). What Jesus wants us to see is that *God and the wicked judge are opposites*. God will surely see to it that what we need and are entitled to—justice in this case—will be granted. He will surely answer our prayers. God, says Jesus, calls us to keep pouring out our hearts to him. He answers the prayers of those who cry to him day and night. The verb in v.7 means those who "continue to cry to him day and night."

Our requests will be granted in his time and according to what he knows is best for us, regardless of whether we might agree at the time. That's why Jesus ends this story saying,

Lk 18:8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

The point of saying that he will respond quickly is to contrast God with that lazy judge. While the judge did not care about the people he was responsible for and while he dragged his feet when he should have been quick to help the widow, he did not. God, in contrast, loves his children—the elect—and will respond lovingly and personally to our prayers. The opening joke reminds us, however, that God’s timing is different than ours. His timing is right on time to suit the greater plan that he has for us. We ought to understand “quickly” as “right on time” because God’s timing is always right. We may not understand that but we can trust it.

Our job is to cry out in faith. We cry out persistently, knowing that God loves us and believing that he will answer our prayers at just the right time—when all that needs to be accomplished is accomplished. He won’t let us wait a second longer than necessary. So we cry out to him over and over, confident that he hears and answers our prayers because he loves us dearly.

We have an important advantage over the widow in the parable. She was dealing with a selfish, uncaring judge. We, however, can have confidence that the God to whom we pray hears our prayers and any delay in answering is about a greater good he is accomplishing through our life in this world and for his glory.

I’m bad at remembering the titles of books and movies. A while back Patsy and I watched a movie of a dying elderly lady who knitted a sweater for a great niece of hers. When they were talking about the purpose of our life and how God answers our prayers, the elderly woman explained to her family that every thread in the sweater was connected and intertwined by the work she did with her needles. But, she said, if you cut any one of these threads, the whole sweater can unravel. So, she explained, every single person in this world is important. They may not appear to have a significant role to play but we are all interconnected and part of the whole sweater of history. Every single one of us matters to God. He is working out his all-important purposes through our lives. And in almost every case, God’s ways are too grand for our small brains to comprehend. But one day we will see how marvelously every stick of our life fit into the whole.

So when life doesn’t seem to be going your way. Hardships of any kind. Pray! Keep praying until you get an answer. It might be what you were hoping for or something completely different. But as long as it’s important to you, keep praying. And know that the Lord will answer—in his way and his time—as all things work together for the good of his elect. Praying with persistence happens when we know that God is good and will give us what is best. We can trust him with our lives.

Humility in Prayer

This means we also pray humbly. That’s the lesson in the second section of Luke 18 that we read. We see this publican or tax collector who prays earnestly but won’t even look up because he knows he’s not worthy of God’s goodness. But he prays anyway, believing that God is merciful. Praying humbly means recognizing that we don’t have any merit in ourselves to come to God in prayer. We don’t have any reason in and of ourselves to think that we are entitled to an answer. But we

come in faith, recognizing that Jesus has made it all possible for us to enter into the throne room of God, to be heard and loved and to receive an answer to our prayers.

Praying with humility means that we fully trust Jesus to do what is best for us. We trust him completely, even when we can't figure out his ways. We know he is always for us. So, look to him confidently because he knows us so well and has all the power of heaven and earth to do whatever needs to be done in our lives.

When I think of praying with faith and humility, I'm reminded of an old man who always prayed, 'Lord, prop us up on our leanin' side.' The writer says, "After hearing him pray that prayer many times, someone asked him why he prayed that prayer so fervently."

He answered, "Well sir, you see, it's like this. I've got an old barn out back. It's been there a long time; it's withstood a lot of weather; it's gone through a lot of storms, and it's stood for many years. It's still standing but one day I noticed it was leaning to one side a bit. I went and got some pine poles and propped it up on its leaning side so it wouldn't fall. Then I got to thinking about that and how much I was like that old barn. I've been around a long time. I've withstood a lot of life's storms. I've withstood a lot of bad weather in life, I've withstood a lot of hard times, and I'm still standing too. That said, I find myself leaning to one side from time to time, so I like to ask the Lord to prop us up on our leaning side, 'cause I figure a lot of us get to leaning at times. Sometimes we get to leaning toward anger, leaning toward bitterness, leaning toward hatred, leaning toward greed, leaning toward a lot of things that we shouldn't (perhaps leanin' toward doubt and fear or an unwillingness to do what the Lord commands). That's when we need to pray, 'Lord, prop us up on our leanin' side! Help us... so we can stand straight and tall again and be able to glorify You.'"

Uncertainty can make us lean away from God. Life is filled with uncertainties all of the time. Right now, we have a war in Ukraine that has us all uncertain about international security and how we might be drawn in. We must be praying about that. We have economic uncertainties in our own country. We have moral challenges in our culture that increasingly make life uncertain for Christians. We have similarly related uncertainties in our denomination surrounding our views on human sexuality. Locally, there is uncertainty for a lot of churches and businesses as we rebound from 2 years of pandemic restrictions. We can personally face uncertainties related to our health and our family or our work. Farmers are about to plant their crops for another year. We never know exactly what sort of weather will be coming and how that will negatively or positively affect the growing season.

Therefore we pray. We pray persistently and humbly because our loving God holds the world in his mighty and gracious hands. And, my friends, when it comes to praying with persistence and humility, seeking God's glory is where it's at. When that's our goal for our life, our church, our work, our country and our world, then our prayers will always be answered on time and just right. As Jesus said, "all who humble themselves will be exalted or lifted up." We know that God helps us at just the right time and in just the right way because he is merciful.

So let us look to him today and every day in faith and humility. Let us pray and not give up until God answers our prayers, knowing he answers because of Jesus and will always act on our behalf in the way that is best for us and magnifies his glory in this world—that more may see and know his love and mercy.

And all God's people say, Amen.