

The Privilege of Prayer

Trinity CRC, September 9, 2018 AM
Prayer Series #1

Luke 18:1-8

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Dear friends in Christ,

What does it take to convince us that prayer is a privilege? That it's something we all need to take full advantage of? Remember the words of the old hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"? "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh, what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer." What struggles do you face? Or on the positive side, what passions has God laid on your heart that you are unsure about pursuing? Whether our circumstances are desirable or negative, what does it take to move you and me to prayer?

I hope it doesn't take the near death of a loved one to convince you that we are very blessed to have the gift of prayer. As you know, on March 14, almost 6 months ago, our daughter Rachel suffered a brain bleed that almost took her life. Here's the very first picture we saw of her hours after it all started—a screen shot while we were on Google Hangouts with her husband Tory. She was in a coma for 10 days, attached to a ventilator, feeding tube, I-V and other tubes. On her head a bandage covers a small hole which was drilled through her skull so that a drain could be delicately inserted into her cerebral-spinal fluid to take off the blood that had pooled there and was squeezing her brain in every possible direction. If you're visiting here, you may not know this story. It gets better. Rachel is making a wonderful—even miraculous—recovery. And we praise God for that!

Prayer played a role in getting us through it. But, quite honestly, I'm a little baffled as to what role it played. I prayed more than ever, I'm sure. I know that almost everyone here has been praying faithfully for Rachel and our family for the past 6 months. And again thank-you! People all over the world have been praying for us.

Some people said they prayed for specific things at specific times and those things happened at exactly that time. On one particular occasion, though, I realized that the time those people said they were praying turned out not to be in line with their story because there was a huge time zone difference between North America and Thailand. I don't say that to take away from the sincerity of those telling me that story. But I do think it helps me understand that we need to be careful about thinking that our prayers do more than they actually do.

It's God's Grace

The first thing I'd say about prayer is that, whatever happens, God gets the credit. It's his grace that heals. It's his grace that restores. It's his grace that grants us what we ask for. And even when we don't get what we ask for, it's his grace that gives us peace to whether the storm.

In the story of the persistent widow in Luke 18, there's no doubt that she drove the judge nuts with her constant requests. And Jesus wants us to take away from this story that we should indeed pound on the doors of heaven like our life depends on it! I'll give that woman credit for her persistence. And I'm thankful for all those who persist in prayer when things look bad or even when they look good in a certain situation. I've certainly learned to persist in prayer in that last half year.

But let's be clear from this parable of Jesus that nothing would have happened if the judge didn't take action. He was the one with the power in this story. And he is the one who worked for the good of the widow. And, likewise, it is God alone who works good for us when he answers our prayers.

That said, Jesus doesn't intend for us to get the impression that God is stingy with answering our prayers. Or that he doesn't answer us until we annoy him sufficiently, like the widow annoyed the judge. The judge and God are not the same in that regard. Jesus only wants us to see that God has the power to do all things, even the seemingly impossible. And the point is not that we have to pray and pray and pray until God gives us what we want. Rather, God loves to hear our prayers. It's a privilege to pray because the God of the universe loves us, hears our prayers and goes into action for us.

The danger of this story, as I said a bit ago, is that people think we must get the formula right. Just enough petition and just enough people praying with us, just enough fasting and just enough of whatever else. And then God will give us what we ask for. On the flip side, the danger is that people start to think that we don't get what we pray for because we weren't persistent enough. We gave up too soon. We didn't have enough people praying with us. We didn't pray long enough or hard enough or we didn't use the right words to petition Almighty God! We didn't keep going like the widow in our parable.

These are not the things that Jesus is teaching here.

The biggest take away from this parable is that if a judge who doesn't care about God or people will give a widow what she deserves, then our loving, heavenly Father will definitely provide what we need when we pray. If an unjust and uncaring judge grants a just petition to a defenseless person for whom he cares nothing; but if he does this just because he's annoyed by her and wants to stop her from crying out to him for justice, then we can be much more certain that our just and merciful God hears the cry of his children and will certainly give what is needed to those whom he loves! Our God of grace will hear us and answer us and give us what we need.

We Have the Ear of God

Moreover, dear friends, the grace of God working for us means we have the ear of God. And that's huge!

Everywhere, and through all times, people have felt that there is something beyond us. Today those who are atheists might doubt that. But as has been noted throughout history, there are no atheists in the foxholes during a war! That is to say,

when we are afraid for our life, we recognize the need for help from outside of ourselves and even outside of our world. Ancient folks talked about the *Ultima Thule*, a Latin word referring to the farthest point in the north. It was the place people figured God might be living... the farthest point away from our world. "They felt themselves to be in the presence of Powers other and higher than human," and those Powers somehow influenced their destiny and, therefore, humans had to win the favour of that Power and steer away from angering it. "And so Paganism reared her altars, almost numberless, dedicating them even to the 'Unknown God,'" whom the Apostle Paul refers to in the city of Athens. These ancient peoples figured it's better to be safe than sorry in case you have forgotten to please one of the gods of the *Ultima Thule*. Even the attempt of the people in Babel to build a tower to the heavens signaled their belief in a god or gods out there whom we should try to connect with.

Jesus teaches us in the parable here in Luke 18 that we have the ear of God! Of our good and gracious, loving and just God! The maker of heaven and earth, the God above the universe is the God who has come into the world he created to be with us in the person of Jesus. To walk with us. To help us. To hear our cries and petitions and to answer them. And just as Jesus did that on earth so he does it now from heaven.

We sometimes say, "Prayer works!" or "I believe in the power of prayer!" We mean well when we say such things, but we can give the impression with such statements that we trust in power of prayer rather than in the power of the God to whom we pray. It's a subtle but important distinction. I believe in the importance of prayer! I believe it is a huge privilege to pray. But prayer in itself is not the power. God is the power. And we do not trust in some unknown divine power "out there" in the *Ultima Thule*. No, we trust in the God who created the world and who sent his own Son to save the world from sin. We know this God in the person of Jesus!

When we pray we can be certain that we have the ear of God because he has us in his heart. And he has us securely in his heart because of Jesus alone. The power of prayer comes through the Son of God who gives us access to the throne room of heaven. This is the privilege of prayer—that the God of the universe has stooped down to enter our world and that he continues to stoop down to listen to our prayers. It's not unlike the story of Einstein helping the little girl with her math. The poor widow in the parable had to fight her way to the judge. The language being used in that parable evokes violence. In Luke 18:5 the judge says the woman is going to "wear me out". The new translation of the NIV has the judge saying he will give her justice "so that she won't eventually come and attack me!" And commentator says it literally means "to give me a black eye."

Dear people, we have the promise of God through the victory of Jesus over our sin and death. We know that the suffering we should have endured because of our estrangement from God through sin has been leveled on Jesus. We have free and open access to God through Jesus now, according to Romans 5. And Hebrews 6 likewise teaches us that the grace of God in Christ gives us access to the inner sanctuary of heaven where Christ entered on our behalf as our high priest. The way is wide open! The connection is secure and free for us. Hence, we have the ear of God Almighty! We

don't have to punch our way into his presence in order to get him to hear us. His ears and heart are wide open to us through Jesus.

Let us Use It

So, let us use this gift of prayer. Let us take full advantage of the privilege of prayer. It is a gift earned for us through Jesus alone! And every answer to prayer is due to Jesus, not our own doing! So, let us pray confidently, knowing that our God in heaven is our Father because of Jesus and that he loves us and will certainly hear us. And he will answer us in love, unlike the unrighteous judge in Jesus' parable. He loves to answer us rather than answering us because he's annoyed with us or afraid we might hurt him if he doesn't respond as we wish.

By praying confidently, I mean we can ask the Father for anything we need. We can and we should! And we must then trust that the God who drew near to us from the far away place, as the ancients pictured him, the God who came to us in Christ, the God who has opened heaven for us, will act on our prayers without a doubt. He will hear and he will answer when we pray in faith. That's Jesus' point in the last verse we read:

Lk 18:8b *However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*

In other words, Jesus is asking, will he find people praying to him when he returns? Will people still be seeking him, still calling on him, still trusting him to answer them? And in the case of the heart of this parable, will people still be trusting him to do what is just for his people who have had to wait and suffer for his name sake here on earth?

Again, it's not about the quality or quantity of our prayers. It's about our faith. Do we trust Jesus with our life, no matter what? That's not talking about big faith. Jesus said elsewhere that we just need faith as small as a mustard seed. It's not about how big our faith is. It's about the bigness of our God and Saviour!! Remember, the judge in Jesus' story has the power. The widow was powerless. But she did keep going to the one who had the power. And that's what we need to do. That's what we are invited to do. That's what we are privileged to do!

My fellow office bearers, new and returning, dear sisters and brothers, encourage us as congregation to pray to our great God and Father in heaven. Model a commitment to prayer. Know for yourself that God hears and answers our prayers. Take time for prayer and commit to praying daily.

And congregation I hope that you will learn from us that prayer is not a "once and done" thing. We learn this from the parable of Jesus too. The point of the widow returning to the judge time after time is not that we have to convince God that our cause is righteous. No, he knows the virtue of what we pray for. And he is the wise God who holds the world in his hand and works all things together for the good of those who love him. So, when he hears our prayer, he has a bigger picture in mind. He's not waiting for us to get the prayer right. He's waiting for us to get to the point where he wants us before he answers that prayer. He's working on us. And he's working on redeeming the whole world at the same time.

Every prayer is important to him. And every prayer is answered. Some are answered with a “No.” Some with a “Not yet.” And some with a “Yes.” Our calling is to pray and to leave the answer up to God, knowing and believing—even with our small faith—that he will do what is right and good. And he’ll do that out of love for us and the greater world.

I’m so very thankful that the Lord chose to answer my prayers and your prayers for my daughter Rachel with a “Yes.” But I say unequivocally that this yes was for his greater purposes and for his glory in this world. It was not because I prayed the right sort of prayer or because I’m a minister. That’s where the mystery lies. That’s where we need humility to trust that the Lord to whom we pray is up to good for us all—all the time! Even when we don’t get what we pray for.

And one more thing. Pastor Michael and I decided to do a series of sermons on prayer starting today because we know that our church needs to be in prayer as we enter into the Renewal Lab process. As office bearers we will be encouraging the congregation to be a vital part of this journey. Unless in faith we are asking God to lead, direct and guide, we will not be able to help the church grow healthier and stronger. We have come this far by God’s grace. And we need to be in prayer for the Lord to provide in us all the will to change, adapt, and grow, the desire to expand our hearts, our vision, our love. These are things that we can be sure the Lord will answer yes to. But we need his power to do it all. So that’s why we want you all to pray for the leadership team of the Renewal Lab as well as all our office bearers and our own hearts.

This parable of Jesus on the privilege of prayer is given in the context of waiting for the second coming. Look at chapter 17 later on. But here in chapter 18:8 we learn that persistence and humility in prayer for the coming of Christ and his final triumph over evil are the primary focus. And that’s because everything we do until Christ returns is important. We work as God’s people for making Christ’s name greater and greater until he comes again. And within that view, everything we do matters. And we need God’s grace to do everything!

So let us never forget what a privilege it is pray. Remember that Christ has made this privilege possible. And that when we pray in faith—small or large as our faith may be—let us know and trust that the Lord is listening and answering, granting us all that we need to fulfill his destiny in our lives and his will in the world.

Children's Message based on: <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-privilege-of-prayer-joe-la-rue-sermon-on-prayer-how-to-121787?page=1&wc=800>

What an amazing thing that the God of the universe, the one who created all there is and sustains it by His power; the one who is radiant and holy and full of glory, has invited us to come into His presence and pour our hearts out before Him in this thing we call prayer. It amazes me that God would invite us to do that. I mean, when I think of who he is, and who I am.... Why would God want to hear from me?

1. This is the same question that confounded King David. He wrote in Psalm 8, When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—the moon and the stars you have set in place—what are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us? (Psalm 8:3-4, NLT).

Do you hear what he's asking? God, who are we, that you should think of us?

It's the same question that was once asked of Albert Einstein. When Einstein fled Nazi Germany, he came to America and bought an old two-story house within walking distance of Princeton University. There he entertained some of the most distinguished people of his day, and discussed with them issues as far ranging as physics to human rights.

But Einstein had another frequent visitor. She was not, in the world's eyes, an important person like his other guests. She was a ten-year-old girl, named Emmy. Emmy heard that a very kind man who knew a lot about mathematics had moved into her neighborhood. Since she was having trouble with her fifth-grade arithmetic, she decided to visit the man down the block and see if he would help her with her problems. Einstein was very willing and explained everything to her so that she could understand it. He also told her she was welcome to come anytime she needed help.

A few weeks later, one of the neighbors told Emmy's mother that Emmy was often seen entering the house of the world-famous physicist. Horrified, she told her daughter that Einstein was a very important man, whose time was very valuable, and he couldn't be bothered with the problems of a little schoolgirl. And then she rushed over to Einstein's house, and when Einstein answered the door, she started trying to blurt out an apology for her daughter's intrusion – for being such a bother. But Einstein cut her off. He said, "She has not been bothering me! When a child finds such joy in learning, then it is my joy to help her learn! Please don't stop Emmy from coming to me with her school problems. She is welcome in this house anytime."

(Peter Kennedy, Copyright 2000, Devotional E-Mail, "It Is His Joy" (located at <http://www.geocities.com/palmercog/joydevo.html>) (last visited April 22, 2008)).

And that's how it is with God! From it's very opening pages, all the way to the end of the book, the Bible is a story about how God has pursued us with an unchanging and unquenchable and UNDESERVED love, because he wants us to come to his house! And we do that in this life through prayer! It's an amazing privilege.