

Persistence in Prayer
Luke 18:1-8
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Luke 18:1-8 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ ” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 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?”

Each weekend a different group of people gathers for worship at Mt. Olive. We have different patterns for worship attendance. Some of us are here every week. Some of us are more sporadic as we juggle schedules filled with responsibilities that demand our attention. But when we come, it is no accident. The Lord himself brought us together. Jesus has prepared a message for each of us, and he brought us together to hear it. His message is a simple prayer admonition. **“Always pray and never give up.”** And as we hear this admonition from the Lord, we begin to understand why he brought each of us here.

You see, everyone in this room can call to mind prayers we have prayed in the past that went unanswered. Some of the people in this room have stood by the bedside of someone they love and asked the Lord to spare the life of their loved one, only to see the Lord respond by calling that loved one home to heaven. Some of the people in this room have come to God’s throne with a marriage in shambles. Yet the marriage failed in spite of our prayers. We have prayed for success and found failure instead. With experiences like that common to us all, it is likely that some of us here today have wondered if our prayers do any good at all. Some may even have concluded we should give up on prayer. The Lord Jesus sees our concern and our doubt. He brings us here to admonish us **“always pray and never give up.”**

To teach us this prayer lesson, Jesus in this part of the Bible tells a small prayer story for our learning. It is a simple story with only two characters. The first is a judge, a man of power in his community. **In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men.** This was a man who was in a position of power, and he used his powerful position to advance himself by helping those who benefited him. Those who came to his court offering bribes or benefits to his career received attention. Those with nothing to offer would not be heard.

And that brings us to the second character in Jesus' story. **And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'** This woman had a grievance and needed justice from the court. However, she was not a person of power. She was a widow, all alone in this world. She had no money to bribe the judge. She had no powerful friends to speak to the court on her behalf. Jesus tells us the judge's response. **4 For some time he refused.** The judge would not hear the woman's case or grant her the justice she needed.

Jesus tells us that when the judge refused to hear her case, the woman decided to keep on coming to the court. Every day she came, day after day. And every day the judge turned her case down. But finally, he said to himself, **'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'** Notice the reason the judge changed his mind and granted justice to the widow. Her persistence altered the picture.

God wants us to pay attention to her actions as we come to him in prayer. Just like the woman, God wants us to **"always pray and not to give up."** And the reason for this is something we need to keep in mind. We are not bringing our prayer requests to a selfish evil judge presiding over an unjust court. We are offering our prayers to our loving heavenly Father. And the Lord said, **"Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8 I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.** We are praying to a God who cares about us and is eager to answer every prayer we pray. The apostle Paul put it this way. **Rom.8:31,32 "If God ... did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things."** God gave all he had for us in the life of his own Son. Surely this God will never hold back anything else we need. That is why Peter urges us to **"cast all our cares on him because he cares for us."** (1 Pet.5:7)

Yet we still find reason to struggle with the idea that God cares about what we want. Some of our concern regarding God's will arises from passages like this. **1 John 5:14,15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.** Be very careful how you understand these words. Some Christians hear these words and walk away thinking that God filters our prayers through his will and answers only those prayers that somehow agree with God's will. It is as if God is saying he cares only about doing what he wants and not what we want. This is not at all what Jesus is saying. What you want matters to God. Our Father in heaven is eager to hear what matters to you and he is eager to grant your requests.

I know that because God tells us that. You all know the words. **(Matt.7:7) “Ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock and it will be opened to you.”** Think about what God is telling us here. We know that God is not promising to grant every prayer request we make, as if he is some kind of heavenly Santa Claus. Rather, God is revealing his attitude toward every prayer we bring to his throne. God is telling us to bring our cares and our fears and our dreams to his throne. He wants to hear them, and he wants to answer them. We matter to God.

However, there is one more aspect to this issue that we need to examine. That has to do with the answers God gives our prayers. Many years ago, when I was in confirmation class, my pastor taught me from the Bible that God has three answers to prayer. Sometimes God says yes, like he did with King Hezekiah granting him 15 more years of life when the king was facing certain death. Sometimes God says no, like he did with the apostle Paul when Paul asked God to remove what he called the thorn in his flesh. And sometimes God says, “not yet,” like he did with his mother at the wedding of Cana. This was the prayer truth I was taught in confirmation class. You can teach from the Bible that there are three answers to prayer. But as we examine our prayer experience, and as we hear the promises of God, we can refine that answer to one that is more precise and more accurate.

In reality our loving God provides only two answers to every prayer a Christian prays. The first answer that God gives to a Christian’s prayer, the answer God is eager to give, is yes. Ours is a God who is eager to answer our prayers and to give us the things we ask. That is why he says, **“ask and it will be given.”** Sound shocking to you? Listen to Jesus speaking in **Mk 11:24** **“Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.”** We have a God who is eager to answer our prayers. If it is at all possible, and if it is best for us, God will give us exactly what we are asking for. But within that prayer truth lies a second response that God sometimes offers to the prayers we pray.

You see, there is only one reason God has for not giving us exactly what we are asking for. That reason? God is wiser than we are. God knows the future and sees the full picture. While we might be fully convinced that we know what is best for our lives as we come in prayer to the Lord, the fact is that sometimes God will know there is a better way to go, a direction that will bring us more blessing. In moments like that, when the Lord has a better answer for our need than the one we requested, God in his love will give us that answer.

There are a number of well know examples of God doing exactly this. We mentioned the Apostle Paul and his thorn in the flesh before. Another example is the prayers Israel prayed as they dealt with the snakes in the wilderness. They came to God in repentance for their grumbling in the desert and prayed that God would take the snakes away. But God had a better answer for them.

God had Moses make a serpent of bronze and he told Moses to put that bronze serpent on a pole in the middle of the camp. When the snakes bit, the people were told to look upon the bronze serpent and trust God to spare their lives. The presence of the snakes and the bite of the snakes caused the Israelites to exercise their faith and trust in God every day. God gave an answer that was better for them than what they asked.

I am sure that the people in this room have faced times when God furnished a better answer to their prayer than the one they requested. In moments like that, as you already know, we will not always understand how the answer God gave is better than the one for which we asked. As we walk this earth, we may never understand why God answered as he did. But even now I can promise you this. There will come a day in the future when you and I will stand before the throne of God in heaven. When that moment comes, bring your list along, that long list of prayer answers you do not understand. I can assure you as God shows you the whole picture on that day revealing his full wisdom to you, you will bow before the Lord and thank him for choosing the answers he did to your prayers.

But that brings us to the closing thought with which Jesus concludes his lesson. After finishing his story, the Lord said, **However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?** That question highlights a truth many of us already know. What we are talking about is faith. This is the essential foundation for all who **“always pray and never give up.”** You may have entered God’s house today carrying a burden on your heart, something that fills you with worry or fear. The Lord Jesus calls on you today to bring all your prayers to the throne of God in faith. Come believing that God is eager to hear your prayers, that he cares about your fears and dreams. Come to God knowing he will either give you what you are asking, or he will in his wisdom give you something better. When you pray with full trust in your loving God, you will put into practice Jesus’ admonition: **“always pray and never give up.”**