

“Prevailing Prayer”  
Luke 18:1–8  
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January 30, 2022 • Sunday Morning Sermon

Harry Reeder and I go way back for he actually did premarital counseling for my wife and I back in Chattanooga as he pastored a small reformed Baptist church that we attended. This March of 2022 my wife and I will be married 45 years. I think we only had one session but he did a good job although Harry would say Leslie did a good job.

We will be looking at Luke 18 for this study. I picked this parable because it speaks to a tremendously important topic when we come to spiritual gifts in the start of this year as we learn to discover, develop and deploy our spiritual gifts. This parable will help us as we are praying for those gifts, as they are being manifested in our church and in our daily lives. This is a wonderful parable that teaches us from Jesus about prayer.

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

One of Jesus’ most common teaching tools in the New Testament were parables. I have been asked ‘how many parables were there’ and that really depends on how you define a parable. Some commentators define a parable as a little more than an illustration. An example of this would be the phrase ‘the fields are ripe for harvest’ and those commentators would call that a parable. Another phrase they would call a parable would be ‘a city set on a hill’ but if you use that then there would be probably 70 or more parables in the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. Many will define it more tightly and say that parables are just memorable stories like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son and if that is the case then there are probably only about 30 to 31 parables.

I like the definition of a parable that says ‘a parable is a fictional yet realistic story – a simple story – that illustrates a spiritual truth. With that definition then you would probably come up with about 37 to 42 parables. The reason I mention this is because parables are a very important part of Jesus’ teaching. It shows us wonderful lessons and teaches us His style of teaching and preaching, but this particular parable in Luke 18 is so valuable for us because it speaks so strongly about the value of prayer.

We typically call this parable the parable of the persistent widow and it might ring a bell in some respects or at least it should because earlier in the book of Luke there is a parable called the friend at midnight, in Luke 11:5-13. It is a story of a man who is awakened at night by a guest who shows up at his house unexpectedly. In that day in ancient oriental culture, it was expected that you had to feed someone like. This man doesn’t have any bread so he goes to his neighbor banging on the door saying ‘I need bread’ but the neighbor refuses and says ‘go away.’ This man is persistent with the neighbor and the neighbor eventually acquiesces. Jesus uses the

parable to show how gracious God is in giving and willing to give us what we need, unlike like that stubborn neighbor. In fact, Jesus closes this parable by saying in Luke 11:13, *[13] 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!*”

I say this because in Luke 18 it's a similar emphasis but with a different emphasis. In Luke 18 this poor woman has an adversary and is seeking justice but we're not given a lot of details of what the adversarial relationship was. She goes before this judge who was apathetic, didn't care especially about poor people and just ignores her. He keeps pushing her away but she persistently pursues him and, in a sense, wears him down. He finally responds. As you look at this parable God in a sense is to be compared to this unjust judge yet God is not in anyway unjust. God is gracious, merciful and willing to answer our prayers but I think there is more of an emphasis in this parable on the persistence of this widow.

Luke 18:1 tells us the parable's purpose is that Jesus' followers ought to pray and pray persistently. In fact, Luke 18:6 says to hear what the righteous judge says and this judge is focusing on this irritating woman that kept coming to him. Certainly, Jesus is not like this judge for He answers our prayers graciously, but the central comparison I think is not between the judge and God but between the widow and us. I think Jesus wants us to focus on our prayer life to the way the woman was urging and pursuing this judge. So, this brings up a question; what does this widow teach me about my prayer life? I think the answer to this is very important.

It's interesting that all religions basically promote prayer. Many think that prayer is very good but many vastly misunderstand it. They think that prayer is primarily about themselves, a time of meditation, time of getting in touch with ourselves and perhaps becoming one with God or one with creation depending upon the religion. Others believe that prayer is more about self-improvement – I need to pray to make myself a better person or a more productive member of the community, and on and on... Prayer is a valuable time of meditation and certainly improves those who pray, but when we come to the Bible, we realize that prayer is actually a rigorous conversation between God and people.

Prayer is people bearing their soul before God, laying out their needs and concerns before God, lifting up their praise and worship before God. It's an intense interaction between us and our heavenly Father as One who can provide. In retrospect, most of us in looking at our prayer life, we can almost always think of other topics that we'd rather talk about. Most of us have a lot of concern for we often focus on our inadequate practice of prayer in our life. We think about our lack of discipline, our lack of time, our wandering minds or preoccupation with ourselves, our lack of methods. Sometimes we get discouraged with our prayer life. We find it to be a constant battle as we walk the Christian life on a regular basis.

I think Jesus challenges us from this parable with a couple of things that are very important. I'm not going to cover all the concerns but I will cover two of them – two fundamental things that should characterize our prayer.

The first is simple for it's the practice of persistence. It is illustrated in this parable by the poor widow and the negligent judge. She had a need, he tried to ignore her and no matter his response she kept coming and coming. This idea of persistence perhaps causes us to think of a couple of kinds of prayers we engage in. Here are two different prayers with similar words.

The first prayer is continuous prayer. One theologian called this flash praying. It's the prayers we constantly engage in between ourselves and God on a daily basis. Paul says in I Thessalonians 5:17, *[17] pray without ceasing*. It's that odd admonition that we pray all the time about what is going on. We live in a fallen and dangerous world. We pray for our travel, our

kids, our health and due to being fairly unorganized we pray to the Lord about needing to talk to somebody, we need wisdom and we help with things we need to do. Things happen unexpectedly and that adds to our prayer life. This is very Biblical praying when we are constantly lifting up needs before God and it's very important praying.

Frankly, persistence in prayer is really pretty easy. There are certain urgencies and dangers surrounding us where we pray all the time and we should pray all the time, but I don't think this prayer is addressing continuous prayer as much as continued prayer. Continued prayer is a little different for it's the idea of praying specifically for something that is important, something that is a burden or need we have and it's praying for an answer.

It's like this widow for she had a specific need. It was something to do with an adversary and she goes to the judge seeking an answer specifically. Persistence in prayer in this area is a little tougher. We all have this area in our lives – the great concern about a friend who may be sick and we're praying for them to get healthy or it might be us. It might be an unjust or unrighteous situation that needs to be rectified and we need justice to prevail. It might be a broken relationship we've been carrying that has been affecting us for years and we keep praying to the Lord for reconciliation. It might be a financial need and we don't know what we're going to do so pray and pray. Perhaps it's just a friend or loved one that needs to come to Christ so we pray and pray. I have a friend in my life who I prayed to come to Christ for almost 50 years and I'm still praying. That is continued prayer and it's tougher because it doesn't necessarily bring quick responses or quick answers yet that is when Jesus says we need to be like that persistent widow who kept coming until she got a response/answer.

Remarkably in this parable we see a lady who shrugged off disrespect, opposition, injustice and kept coming. Finally, the judge said in Luke 18:5, *[5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.* I like that phrase 'beat me down' for it's a Greek word that literally means 'give a black eye.' It doesn't appear that this widow was about to assault this judge but it would be a black eye on his reputation and the way he is viewed by his colleagues for how he handled this widow. He finally says 'forget it, I'm going to give this lady what she wants.'

God is a different Judge for He is loving, righteous, just and graciously answers. I Peter 3:12a says *[12a] For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayer.* What a privilege! I John 5:14-15 says *[14] And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will He hears us. [15] And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of Him.* None of us know the secret counsels of God's decreed will and ultimately, we don't know how He is going to work in every situation but I do know God's revealed will and He wants people to come to Christ. He wants righteousness to prevail. He wants justice to win out and so He wants us to persist in prayer. So, we keep persisting in prayer. This parable is teaching us that we need the practice of persistence in prayer.

There is a second lesson here that I think is more fundamental for us Christians where God wants us to have this attitude of rebellion – this refusal to accept the status quo – and in this case in this parable, the judge's hard heart, his hatred of the poor, his refusal to work. This woman came in a sense rebelliously. I wonder if I pray rebelliously. In other words, it's defined in my context here by a professor I had named David Wells. Wells in this parable defines the word rebellion this way; rebellion against the world and its fallenness. An absolutely undying refusal to accept as normal what is pervasively abnormal – the conviction that evil is not simply a variation of God's goodness but is the antithesis of God's goodness.

I think Jesus' point is the greatest enemy of prayer is not a wandering mind, a lack of discipline or a lack of time but it's apathy. What does apathy look like? It's accepting life as it is – this is the way life is, God is going to do what He is going to do, so I don't need to pray or something has been a certain way for so long that I can't imagine it changing. I'm not saying we announce apathetically that we're not going to pray, we just pray less and less about those things that just have not come and apathy destroys that prayer.

Christians can criticize rightly music in our culture as being too decadent or too sexually explicit, too violent or too incomprehensible, however when I think of criticizing music so I think about criticizing the song from the 1950s movie *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, by Ray Livingston and Jay Evans. In 1956 that movie won the best original song and it became the signature song for Doris Day. The song title was *Que Sera Sera, whatever will be, will be*. It's a delightful little melody but it has terrible theology. One man said it was a song of cheerful fatalism that is contrary to Biblical culture, but it's a perspective that leaps into our lives so often as we face problems that seem so overwhelming, as we face trends in society that seem so unreversible, or as we face circumstances in our lives that seem unchangeable. When these things seem to be it's easy to think 'why bother to pray?'

There are things that I need to accept contentedly that probably would not be the recipients of wise prayer. I'm short and that's just the way it is. I will probably not ever play in the NBA. I had to accept as a young man that I'd be a great football player except for size, talent and speed. I realize in God's providence that it was probably unrealistic to pray for things like that. I'm called to obey laws and that is by the Scripture. I'm called to honor those in authority. I'm called to cut my grass and I could pray that it would stop growing but that is probably not a wise prayer. I have to provide for my needs, take care of my marriage and I certainly pray for my marriage but there are things that I need to do that I don't need to pray about because the Bible tells me clearly what to do. For those things we're called to seek contentment.

Paul says in *Philippians 4:11* [11] *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content*. However, I'm never called to resign to fate or random circumstances or ever to see God as an uncaring, unjust Judge who doesn't want to be bothered by trivial sins. I'm never to see God as unable to overcome our circumstances and therefore not to pray to Him.

I love the story in *Daniel 6* when a conspiracy forms among Daniel's colleagues and they go to King Darius telling him they think he should set up a law that nobody would pray to anyone but him for 30 days and if they pray to anyone else we'll throw them in the lion's den. I love this description of Daniel in *Daniel 6:10* which says [10] *When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously*. I love those last five words, for what a picture! No expressed fear, no difficulties, just steady, strong prayer and he goes after prayer despite the document King Darius had just signed. That is persistence in prayer.

So, Jesus leaves us with maybe a two-fold solution. Jesus challenges us to cultivate two convictions. One is that life in this world ought to be better for me and for everyone else. We think in terms of the Lord's Prayer so I need to pray with persistence knowing that God's name is hallowed to irregularly in this world. The Lord's Prayer is found in *Matthew 6:9-13* which says [9] *Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. [10] Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. [11] Give us this day our daily bread,*

*[12] and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. [13] And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

A rebellious Christian then prays because God's name is hallowed to irregularly that we need to honor God. God's name needs to be respected for the worship of God is too neglected in me, my family, my church, my job, my school and beyond. I pray for God to work and specifically for God to hallow His name. God's Kingdom has come too slowly. The influence and power of God's rule needs to be seen as more in me, my family, my job, my neighborhood and beyond. God's will is done too infrequently. Biblical truth is not seen and exercised enough in me or my family, my job, my school and beyond. The world is not going to care about God's name, God's Kingdom and God's will unless the power of prayer produces a concern for that in my life, my family and in this church. The buck stops with us. We are called to pray and pray persistently. That's one conviction. Life in this world ought to be better. Do we really believe that or you just getting by?

Here is a second conviction. God Himself is able to change things. He really can and He wants to and He wants to use our prayer to do that. The key is that petitionary prayer is a supreme expression of hope. Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-8, *[7] "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. [8] For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."* James 1:5 says *[5] If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.* James 4:2b says *[2b] You do not have, because you do not ask.*

That is what Jesus is pushing here – not only are we to be persistent in prayer but we develop a spirit of rebellion against the status quo. Too many of us have kind of waved the white flag as we whine and complain about the way things are, but we don't spend the time on our knees about the way it is and that's a shame. We can certainly look at the example of Christ and see this is true for Him prayer was obviously an essential function. His Gospel, when it comes into our lives, when we trust Christ as our Lord and Savior, as He pays for the penalty of our sin and clothes us with His righteousness, one of the dramatic changes that begins to work in us is a desire for conversation with Him, our heavenly Father. R. C. Sproul says 'One of the surest marks of the Christian is his prayer life. One might pray and not be a Christian but one who could not possibly be a Christian and not pray.'

We see in the Gospels that Jesus prayed especially when His life was pressed beyond measure. In Matthew 14 after feeding the 5,000, He put His Disciples in a boat, dismissed the crowd and went up on the mountainside to pray alone and He prayed all night. Busyness was never an excuse to neglect His heavenly Father. Jesus prayed during times of temptation. He prayed in an unhurried way, self assured and powerful in those times of temptation and God used Him mightily to push back Satan. He prayed at crucial times – before great decisions, in crisis, at turning points in His ministry, at His baptism, at His transfiguration, at the cross and even in choosing the Disciples.

I love what David Wells says about this; 'the only possible explanation of His choice of that ragtag bunch of nonentities (referring to the Disciples), boastful, ignorant and as uncomprehending as they were, was that He had prayed before choosing them and they turned the world upside down.' I never would have chosen those guys. I never would have chosen me but Jesus prayed and the world was turned upside down.

We are here worshipping this morning because someone prayed for us. Somewhere in our past we were running from God, perhaps not even knowing God and someone prayed and

you came to Christ or perhaps you are coming to Christ. You are reading this today because someone prayed for you in the past. That is your responsibility now. What a delight!

I want to conclude with a couple of quotes. D. L. Moody said 'I'd rather be able to pray than to be a great preacher.' Jesus never taught His Disciples how to preach, only how to pray. What an emphasis it was in Jesus' life and should be in ours. When times are hard and those continued prayers are not being answered we just keep praying and praying.

S. D. Gordon said 'How much prayer meant to Jesus for it was not only His regular habit but His resort in every emergency however slight or serious. When perplexed He prayed. When hard pressed by work He prayed. When hungry for fellowship He found it in prayer. He chose His associates and received His messages upon His knees. If tempted He prayed. If criticized He prayed. If fatigued in body or wearied in spirit He had the recourse to the one unfailing habit of prayer. Prayer brought Him unmeasured power at the beginning and kept the flow unbroken and undiminished. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer.'

When I think of what Gordon said I think of the model of this parable from Luke 18 and say 'Am I enough of a rebel to have a truly Biblical prayer life?' I hope we all are. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, what a privilege to know that You the Lord and King of the Universe cherish hearing from us. You want to know our needs. You want to know our thoughts. You want to know our requests and You desire our fellowship. Lord, forgive us when we allow the daily responsibilities of life to destroy that conversation, to relegate it to insignificant moments, in quick flash prayers. Lord, I pray that we will all develop a sense of indignity when we look at this world around us and we won't just whine or complain, but we will get on our knees and pray as You have called us to do and as You have ordained as the means through which You get things done. I thank You Lord Jesus that You use even us. Continue to work in us, Lord Jesus for Your glory and we pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.