

## THE POWER OF PRAYER

Luke 18:1-14

Key Verse: 18:1

“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”

In the last passage Jesus told us, “The kingdom of God is within you.” When we repent of our sins and accept the good news, Jesus comes into our hearts and establishes his kingdom. He rules with peace and love and we are truly happy. Without Jesus, we are nothing but restless wanderers. In the past, one young man went alone to the lake shore from time to time to find peace. It lasted for a few minutes and was gone. But when he accepted the word of God, the kingdom of God came into his heart. Now he has true peace and joy always, without visiting the lake shore. Moreover, his Bible students all became happy and lively. There are so many restless young people in America who have no kingdom of God in their hearts. Some think that a spring break in Florida or Mexico can give them peace. But this is not the case. Only Jesus can drive out the power of sin and death and give us the kingdom of God within us. May the kingdom of God come within 800 students through one-to-one Bible study this spring semester.

Today’s passage is closely related to the previous passage. Jesus foresaw the situation of the disciples who wait for his Second Coming. They would suffer much and be rejected in a world that suppresses the truth through godless materialism. How could they survive spiritually? Through prayer. Through prayer they could depend on God’s power and overcome the world. So Jesus teaches them about prayer through two parables. May God help us to learn the life of prayer from Jesus.

First, Jesus wants us to always pray and not give up (1-8).

Look at verse 1. “Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” As Jesus neared Jerusalem, he was increasingly concerned about his disciples. They were men of many weaknesses. But a most glaring one was their lack of prayer. Until now, Jesus did not urge them to pray. Rather, he taught them through his own example. One theme of Luke’s Gospel is Jesus’ prayer. Jesus prayed at the time he was baptized. Then he received the Holy Spirit and heard the word of God (3:21). During his earthly ministry, Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (5:16). It was his power source and the way for him to discern and follow God’s leading. Jesus sometimes spent the night praying to God (6:12). Jesus prayed as he helped his disciples accept his death and resurrection (9:18,29). After some time, his disciples began to be interested in prayer. So Jesus taught them the Lord’s Prayer (11:1). Still, there is no record that the disciples actually prayed. Someone once asked the eminent theologian Paul Tillich, “Do you pray?” He said, “No, I meditate.” If someone asked Jesus’ disciples about prayer, they might say, “Jesus prays. We eat.” Prayer is not natural for sinful men (Gal 5:17). Maybe it was too hard for them to hear about prayer directly. So Jesus taught them indirectly, by means of a parable. The main point is simple: always pray and not give up. But Jesus taught in a most interesting and meaningful way.

Look at verses 2-3. “He said: ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, “Grant me justice against my adversary.”’” What a striking contrast these two people make. The judge was a symbol of power to rule. By his one decree a person could be set free or go to prison. Judges are supposed to be instruments of justice. They are supposed to rule according to God’s law, the Ten Commandments, which form the basis for law in most parts of the world. They can be summarized in two parts: love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves. But this judge neither feared God nor cared about men. He was lawless. He was selfish. He was not a normal human being. But he had the power to rule. It seems he could exercise his authority without restraint.

On the other hand, there was a widow in that town. To our common sense, widows are a symbol of powerlessness. This widow had no influence in that male-dominant society. She may also have been physically weak. When moving something heavy, she had to ask help. When taking care of business or legal matters, she had to ask help. In addition she had to struggle with inner sorrow and loneliness all the time. She seems weak. But verse 3 says that she kept coming to the judge with the plea, “Grant me justice against my adversary.”

Apparently, she had been treated unfairly. Perhaps her house had been confiscated by clever businessmen or her insurance company refused to pay her medical bills. She wanted justice. She kept coming to the judge pleading, “Grant me justice....” She could not sit down and receive unjust treatment. She was compelled to visit the judge

again and again to plead for justice. Perhaps she visited him first at his office. He told her he would be with her in a few minutes but let her sit there all day long. Then he left without saying goodbye. He expected her to give up. But the next morning, she was there waiting for him, saying, "Good morning your honor. Grant me justice, grant me justice!" For some time the judge refused. He tried to avoid her and used his security guards to try to control her. But she always found a way to come to him. It was so irritating and exacerbating to the judge that it wore him down. He began to feel that she was following him wherever he went. He began to see her in his dreams, with pleading hands, "Grant me justice...." Her relentless pleading became a health hazard. He developed stomach ulcers and high blood pressure. The widow's power of bothering the judge was so great that he finally decided to grant her justice. "...he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 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!'" (4b,5)

Verse 6 says, "And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says.'" Jesus' focus in the parable is not really on the persistent widow. It is on the judge, and through the judge Jesus wants to teach us about God. This judge was answerable to no one. He looked so powerful and unapproachable that he could not be moved by anything. But there was a weak spot inside of him. He was selfish and he wanted to enjoy his life. The widow perceived this weakness, for women are very keen to see the inner weaknesses in men. When she hung on this weakness persistently, the judge finally surrendered and granted her justice. In the same way, our holy and almighty God is unapproachable and too far away. However, the heart of God has a weak spot toward sinners. In fact, there are at least two weak spots. When we know the heart of God we can pray effectively. When we know the character of God we can pray effectively. When we know God personally we can pray effectively.

Look at verses 7-8a. "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? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly." God is so different than the unjust judge. First of all, God loves justice. Isaiah 61:8a says, "For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity." Jeremiah 9:24 says, "...but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight." Our God is a God who loves justice. In fact, God's justice is absolute. That is why God agonized so much over sinners. God loves sinners. But he must punish sin to be holy and just. Therefore, in order to satisfy his justice, he sacrificed Jesus on the cross. Romans 3:25-26 says, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." Our God is a God who brings about justice, even at the cost of his one and only Son.

Not only does God love justice, but he loves his people as well. They are called his chosen ones. They have accepted the blood of Jesus as their ransom price. They have confessed Jesus as their Lord and Christ. When they cry out to God, God hears them. God is like a Father who hears his children's cry. They cry in the middle of the night, in the morning, in the afternoon. Each time they cry, he hears them. Each tear they shed because of injustice is known by him. When the Israelites were in Egypt as slaves they suffered all manner of injustice. They were beaten and abused ruthlessly. Exodus 2:23-25 says, "The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them."

Since God loves justice and he loves his chosen people, he is not reluctant to bring about justice for them. It is what God wants to do; it is what pleases God. God works to bring about justice in our fallen world. God will bring about perfect and eternal justice at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Those who know God's character should be more earnest in prayer than the persistent widow. Here we remember Father Abraham. When he learned that God would bring judgment on Sodom, he sensed the danger for his nephew Lot. So he began to plead with God based on God's righteous and just character. Abraham said, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25) Abraham asked God to spare the cities if fifty righteous people could be found. God agreed. Then Abraham asked God to spare the cities for the sake of forty-five. God agreed. Abraham went from forty-five to forty to thirty to twenty and finally to ten. God agreed to spare the cities for the sake of ten. Abraham held on to one word of God and prayed persistently. God remembered this prayer. Even though he could not find ten righteous people, he spared Lot from destruction for the sake of Abraham.

The question is not whether God will answer prayer, but whether we have the faith to pray. Look at verse 8b. "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Prayer and faith are closely related. Prayer

is not a mere exercise of willpower, like that of a widow pleading for justice. Prayer is the extension of our faith in God. When we believe in God we can pray. We must believe in God Almighty who created the heavens and the earth with the word of his mouth. We must believe in God Almighty who rules the world he has made with justice and righteousness. We must believe in God Almighty who works for the good of his children in all things. We must believe in Jesus Christ who died and rose again to forgive our sins and give us eternal life in the kingdom of God. With this faith, we can overcome injustice in this world and pray to God. With this faith, we can always pray and not give up.

After Jesus' ascension the early Christians looked so weak and helpless compared to the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman Empire. It was not easy for them to stay in Jerusalem as Jesus had told them to do. They stayed in the upper room with the doors locked for fear of the Jews (Jn 20:19). Moment by moment they had to overcome the desire to give up and go back to their ordinary lives. What could they do? Acts 1:14 says, "They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers." Through prayer they received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gave them the power and wisdom to proclaim the gospel to all kinds of people in Jerusalem. They were threatened by the unjust religious leaders. But God enabled them to live before God, not men. The believers prayed together again. They did not pray for their safety and security. They prayed for God's power to preach the gospel boldly and to reveal Jesus' grace and love. After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. Then the gospel spread throughout Jerusalem. The gospel spread to Judea and Samaria. The gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire and came to the whole world. Jesus' people may look small, but when they pray, God works mightily through them. We must always pray and not give up.

We have a clear prayer topic to pioneer 561 American campuses and 250 Canadian campuses with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have a clear prayer topic to make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to send one million missionaries to 233 nations in the world. This is rooted in Jesus' prayer topic, "...your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is God's will for us in this generation. Sometimes we want to give up. But we must always pray and not give up. We believe God will accomplish this prayer topic through one-to-one Bible study. So we must pray for one person at a time with the mind of Jesus. But we often meet limitations. Sometimes our sheep never seem to change. Still, we must always pray and not give up. We have many personal struggles in our ministries, families, studies and jobs. Sometimes we feel our own strength is completely gone. That is the time we must pray to God. We must always pray and not give up.

Second, God hears humble and repentant sinners (9-14).

When we pray persistently for God's justice to come on earth, there is a danger for us to be self-righteous. So Jesus gave us a second parable to teach the right attitude of prayer. Look at verse 9. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." These were people who thought they were already experts in prayer and faith and just about everything. But their confidence was in their own righteousness, not in God. It is not easy to bear with arrogant people. But Jesus really wanted to help them. Look at verses 10-12. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" This man does not seem to be praying, but having a moment of self-appreciation in the temple.

Look at verse 13. "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" This man was a sinner. He probably did not want to come to the temple. Perhaps he felt a cold sweat break out on his back. He knew that God was holy and he was sinful. Beating his breast was the expression of loathing himself because of the evil things he had done. He could do nothing but ask for mercy from God.

Look at verse 14. "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." God hears the prayer of the humble and repentant sinner. The tax collector was forgiven and recognized as a child of God. The Pharisee was not.

In this passage Jesus teaches us to always pray and not give up. We can do so when we know the heart of God who loves justice and loves his children. Jesus also teaches us to pray with humility and repentance. When we do so, God hears our prayers and forgives our sins. May God help us to grow as people of p