

TWO PRAYERS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD

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.”

Do you sometimes wonder, “Does prayer make a difference? Does God hear my prayers? Are my prayers too self-centered or simply wishful thinking?” Do your prayers sometimes feel like a list of requests, rather than a heart-to-heart talk with God? What are the prayers that God hears and accepts? Jesus deals with these questions in this passage.

Prayer is a theme in Luke’s gospel. Zechariah prayed. Anna prayed. Especially Jesus lived a life of prayer. Jesus prayed at his baptism (3:21). Jesus withdrew to lonely places and prayed (5:16). Jesus prayed all night on a mountain before he chose his 12 apostles (6:12). Jesus taught, “pray for those who mistreat you” (6:28). Jesus prayed in private before asking his disciples about his identity (9:18). Jesus prayed when he was transfigured (9:28). Jesus taught his disciples how to pray through the Lord’s Prayer (11:1-2). Let’s learn more about prayer now, especially two prayers that are acceptable to God.

First, persistent prayer based on God’s character (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.”** Teaching truth often goes in one ear and out the other. Did you know that you should always pray and not give up? Gee, thanks for telling me that. Can you please give me an example? So Jesus did. Jesus often taught truth using parables, because we like stories and we remember them. Stories stick longer than mere facts or truth. Consider the Parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. Many non-Christians even know these stories that Jesus taught. So what is the parable on always praying and not giving up?

Listen to it (4-5): **“In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”**

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That's the parable: a heartless judge and a persistent widow. The judge was not a good judge. He didn't fear God or care about people. Good judges rule in the fear of God with concern for people. This judge was like the people of Noah's time or Lot's time who didn't fear God or care about people. They were too self-centered, and became violent and corrupt. It is surprising that this widow got her justice from this judge, even though he didn't fear God or care about people, because she kept coming to him with her plea for justice. What an amazing woman! How could she persist like this? It was like she was trying to knock down a tree with a baseball bat—not very likely. So does this parable mean that whatever we want from God if we just ask God enough times or with enough fervor, then God will grant it? Not necessarily.

Jesus gave the meaning of the parable in verses 6-8: And the Lord said, **“Listen to what the unjust judge says. [What did the judge say? “I will see that she gets justice...” Jesus continued,] 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.”**

Jesus says several things here about this kind of prayer that God accepts. God will bring about justice for his chosen ones. There are two important details here: who is asking and what is being asked for. The ones asking are God's chosen ones. Who are God's chosen ones? They are God's people, God's children. In the context of Jesus' audience, they are those who repented of their sins and believed that Jesus is the Messiah, sent from God. They committed their lives to Jesus. They are those who transferred their trust from money and self and worldly comforts to God and his Chosen One, Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 3:12 says, **“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”**

What do his chosen ones cry out for? Is it to win the lottery? That would be nice, wouldn't it? But that's not the prayer that God accepts. I knew a young Christian who really wanted to get in to a theater show, that is, to make the cast through an audition. He prayed for this. But he didn't get in. You know what he said after not getting what he prayed for? “What good is prayer if God doesn't give me what I asked for?” He thought prayer is asking God for anything we want. He thought, “If I pray and don't get what I want, then I'm not going to pray anymore.” Do you ever feel like that? That's not an acceptable prayer to God. What's wrong with that kind of prayer?

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That kind of prayer is self-centered, based on what I want, not necessarily what God wants. Remember, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, **“your will be done.”** 1 John 5:14 says similarly, **“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.”** If we’re honest with ourselves, a lot of our prayers are quite self-centered, or even worldly. James 4:2-3 says, **“You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”**

Then what is an acceptable prayer to God? What should we pray for? Of course, we should pray for God’s will to be done, in the world and also in my own life. Then what is God’s will? God’s will is to make us all more and more like Jesus. Romans 8:29 says, **“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”**

What did the widow in the parable keep asking for? She was pleading for justice. According to the Old Testament, God particularly hears the cries of widows and orphans who cry out to God. Why is God particularly attentive to widows and orphans? It is because they have no husband or father to protect and provide for them. God comes to the defense of the defenseless who cry out to him. God delights to show himself strong when the weak cry out to him.

God is much better than the parable judge, because God cares about people and justice. God is just and righteous. God does what is right. That is the character of God. Far be it from the Almighty to do wrong. Abraham in Genesis chapter 18 shows us how to pray according to God’s will and character: **“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”** (Gen 18:25) God will judge the wicked and save the righteous, because God is just.

God will bring about justice—that which agrees with righteousness and holiness. God will do this for his chosen ones who repent and believe in him. Jesus said two more things here about prayer that God accepts. His chosen ones cry out. Crying out is not a nonchalant or casual request. Crying out is desperation, from a sincere and earnest heart. It is like Hannah’s earnest prayer for a son and her vow to give him to the Lord (1Sa 1:10-11). Crying out is from a heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness. What do you cry out for? What grabs and moves your heart? What is your heart’s cry?

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Jesus also said they cry out day and night. Their concern weighs on them all the time. They pray without ceasing. They are often, earnestly asking God's intervention: **O God, your kingdom come, your will be done.** Nehemiah prayed often, even during his daily tasks (Neh 1:4-11; 13:22,29,31).

Have you heard of Monica, the mother of Augustine? She lived around 350 A.D. She was married to a non-Christian. She obeyed the Bible teaching in 1 Peter 3. It tells a Christian wife to quietly win an unbelieving husband over without words by a reverent, quiet lifestyle. Her prayerful, persistent spirit impressed her mother-in-law who came to believe, as well as her husband near the end of his life. Monica shed many tears in prayer for her son Augustine who preferred immorality and a cult religion rather than Christianity. When she tried to get the bishop of Carthage to talk with Augustine, the bishop basically told her, "Just leave him alone, and pray for him." Augustine later met Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, who was schooled in rhetoric, and could better articulate and defend the Christian faith. Ambrose advised Monica to pray saying, "Speak less about God to Augustine and more about Augustine to God." Ambrose had said of Monica, "It is impossible that the son of so many tears should perish." By the grace of God, Augustine had an encounter with the words of Romans 13:13-14, and was converted to Christ. Just before his mother died at age 56, she told Augustine that she had hoped she would live to see his conversion to Christ. She lived to see her persistent prayers for Augustine answered. She did not know that he would become one of the greatest thinkers and defenders of Christianity the world has known.

Speaking of prodigal children, Ruth Bell Graham wrote a book called, "Prodigals and Those Who Love Them." She wrote: "We mothers must take care of the possible and trust God for the impossible. We are to love, affirm, encourage, teach, listen, and care for the physical needs of the family. We cannot convict of sin, create hunger and thirst after God, or convert. These are miracles, and miracles are not in our department." She also wrote this poem as a prayer for prodigal children:

I bring those whom I love to You /commit each to Your loving care:/ then
carry them away again/ nor leave them there:/ forgetting You/ Who lived to die/
(and rose again!) care more than I.

So back I come with my heart's load/ confessing my lack of faith in You
alone/ addressing all I cannot understand to You Who do.

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You know each heart, each hidden wound, each scar/ each one who played a part/ in making those we bring to You/ the ones they are (and dearer each to You than us, by far),

So—now I give them to Your loving care,/ with thankful heart—and leave them there.

Jesus concluded this parable saying, **“However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”** People who don’t fear God and don’t care about people also don’t pray. Prayer is a vital expression of faith in God. When Jesus comes again, will he find people who pray persistently based on God’s character?

Second, penitent, God-focused prayer (9-14). The first parable about persistent prayer was directed to his disciples. This parable is directed to other specific people. Look at verse 9, **“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable...”** So it was aimed at self-righteous, condescending, pride-filled people. Do you ever find self-righteousness or condescension in your mind and heart? I know I do. So let’s listen to Jesus’ next parable in verses 10-13: **“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ‘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.’”**

Both characters in this parable went to the temple to pray: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Pharisees were very religiously disciplined, upstanding people, widely respected in that society. They meticulously kept the commandments of God. The Pharisee’s prayer was really just talking about himself, how he was a good guy who didn’t steal, do evil, commit adultery or collect taxes. He kept religious disciplines like skipping meals two times a week and giving 10% of his income in the offering. It’s not that fasting and giving are bad; these are good spiritual disciplines. Jesus regarded these as deeds of righteousness (Mt 6:1). The problem was the Pharisee’s spirit of boasting about himself and looking down on others. He exalted himself in his own eyes when he compared himself with others. So in his prayer he was only looking at himself rather than God, and comparing himself against other sinners, rather than against better people or God himself, who

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is perfect and holy. His prayer was actually a boast of who he was and what he had done.

How about the tax collector's prayer? He stood at a distance and would not even look up to heaven. It meant he didn't even feel worthy to approach God or look up to God. Next he beat his breast, as a gesture of self-loathing or despising himself. It is opposite to exalting oneself. It is similar to falling on the ground. He did not say much, only, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** How he viewed himself was quite different from the Pharisee. Why? Because he was looking at God, comparing himself to the holy and perfect God. He did not compare himself with people in order to feel good about himself. Before God he recognized that he didn't deserve to stand or to even be alive or to ask anything from God. He was a sinner, and God is holy. He could only plead for mercy. The Pharisee actually didn't even pray for anything. He was just expressing his good feeling about himself. The tax collector had an accurate view of God and of himself. The Pharisee had an inaccurate view of himself since he didn't recognize sin in his life and heart.

Jesus concluded this parable saying, **"I tell you that this man [that is, the tax collector], rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."**

Jesus said that the acceptable prayer was the repentant or penitent prayer of the tax collector, who humbled himself before God, acknowledging his own sin and unworthiness. 1 Peter 5:5-6 says, **"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.' Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."**

Some Christians think that once you repent of your sins and accept Jesus, you don't need to repent or confess your sins any more. That's only true if you stop sinning completely. If you still sin, you need to confess and repent of such sin. Nobody is sinless, although all Christians should be sinning less and growing in holiness. As we grow in holiness, it is like getting closer to a light or a mirror. You can see more imperfections and dirtiness in yourself than you saw before.

Our fallen human inclination is to become proud whenever we have a little success, thinking it is due to our own talent, skill, hard work or even our prayer. Yes, we can become proud of even our prayer. Jeremy Lin is a well-known,

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successful professional basketball player. He said, “I struggle with pride every day, but the one thing that I try to remind myself every day is that I'm still a sinner no matter how many points, assists or wins I get on the court.”¹

In these two parables of Jesus we have learned two kinds of prayer that God accepts: a persistent prayer based on God's character, and a humble, repentant prayer for God's mercy. Both prayers are God-centered. Both prayers show us to rely on God, not on ourselves or on something or someone else. Jesus wants us to always pray based on God's will and not give up or lose heart. Jesus wants us not to be confident of our own righteousness or look down on anyone. Rather, Jesus wants us to confess and repent our sins before God, humbling ourselves, to let God do the exalting in his time and way.

Do you have one person in your heart that you are praying for earnestly? It's good to pray for your own improvement, but it's even better to pray intercessory prayers for others.

May the Lord give us prayers, words, dreams and lives that honor and glorify God. May the Lord give us earnest intercession for our children, relatives, friends, neighbors, classmates, workmates, colleagues, leaders, etc. May the Lord give us humble, repentant hearts to confess and turn from all sin every day.

¹ http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/keywords/sinner_2.html