

Don't Give Up; Pray!

Luke 18:1-14

Key Verse: 18:1

by Steve Stasinos

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

One of the themes of Luke's gospel is the prayer life of Jesus. In chapter 11 when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught the content of prayer and bold courage in coming to God their Father in prayer. They likely tried to pray like Jesus said, but found it difficult. Today, we want to study two of Jesus' parables, intended to encourage a vibrant prayer life in his disciples as they await Jesus' Second Coming. Through these parables we learn two points: persistent and humble prayer. Let's learn from Jesus how to pray.

I. Persistent Prayer (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.”** Prayer is basic to Christian life. Prayer has been likened to spiritual breathing. If we don't breathe, we die. Prayer is the expression of faith. Prayer is conversation that strengthens and confirms a right relationship with a holy Savior. Jesus says to always pray. But being told to do so wasn't enough for the disciples. Jesus knew they would suffer difficulties and persecutions. At those times, the disciples would feel like giving up and despair. The same is true in our day. We are weak. Worldly pressures at times seem overwhelming. We may be tempted to give up, saying, “Bah! Whatever!” Jesus understands our weakness. So he teaches us this parable to help us.

Jesus' parable begins with two people in a town, one a judge, the other a widow. At that time a judge was to be God's representative. When a judge fears God and loves people, the people can enjoy the freedom of living in God's community. But this judge did not fear God. This didn't make him a people pleaser either. He didn't care about people's opinions or their sufferings. Likely he sat on his bench, awaiting bribes, before he would even listen to a case. The people of that town all suffered because there was no justice.

But no one suffered more than the weak and powerless, like the widow. Having lost her husband, she suffered from sorrow and loneliness. After my father

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died last September, my mother has been going through this. But the Lord has not left her alone. He draws near to the widow and orphan. In addition to loneliness, the widow had to worry about how to survive on a limited budget. If that were not enough, she had the added burden of an adversary. We don't know the details. Perhaps someone was after her house, or trying to take her children to pay a debt. To whom could she go? Who in that town would even hear her case? Oprah? There was no one. What could she do? She needed a strategy. She made a decision and went to the courthouse. Interrupting the proceedings, she made her plea to the judge: **"Grant me justice against my adversary."** The pain of her situation became a strong motivation to keep coming to the judge. Although it required humility to beg the judge, she kept coming to him with her plea. She had no other option available to her. Her strategy was persistence.

The judge cared nothing for the widow. In fact, for some time he refused. This meant he rejected her plea: "No way!" She did not give up. She began to plea to him every day, bearing his painful rejections. When he came to work, there she was, with her plea: **"Grant me justice against my adversary."** So he took a vacation to golf. But she was there on the golf course! He gave up golf. Each time, she became bolder. But the judge became weaker. **"Finally 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!'"** Out of self-preservation, he finally gave up and caved in. That day, he went to the court and dealt with the adversary. The widow received justice, and her agony and suffering were lifted. Persistence had won the day.

Jesus' parable is heart-moving, humorous, inspiring, exciting, and full of courageous struggle against evil that is overcome. We smile with a great sense of satisfaction at the widow's victory. But what was Jesus' point? I thought, "We should be like that widow, a superhero of faith who vanquishes injustice through her tenacity and persistence." Trouble is, when I look at myself, I'm discouraged since I'm more like the selfish judge than the persistent widow. My prayer life is inconsistent, let alone persistent. I tend to seek my own comfort, not pray persistently for justice. But Jesus doesn't want us to think about the widow only. In verse 6 **"the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says.'"** Jesus turns our attention to the motive of the judge in granting the widow's plea. The story isn't about a widow and a judge, but about our prayer to God Almighty. 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**

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they get justice, and quickly.” If such an evil man can be motivated to bring about justice in response to a persistent plea, how much more our God will bring about justice for his chosen ones! Jesus encourages us by showing to whom we are praying.

Since we are crying out to God, not an unjust judge, we are in a much better position than this widow. She was making an appeal to a stranger, but we pray to our Father God, who knows us intimately. He loves us as his precious children. She was pleading with an unjust man, but we beseech the attention of the Righteous Creator of heaven and earth. He told her, “No,” and pushed her away, but we pray to one who bids us to come boldly to him (10:9-10; Mk 11:22-23). She made her plea alone, but we join in prayer with God’s children around the world. Even better, we have an advocate in heaven: Jesus Christ, who is interceding for us (Ro 8:34; Heb 7:25). She was limited in her opportunity to plead her cause, but God is listening to us day and night (7). Her judge cared nothing for her justice or well-being, but our Father God so loves us, while we were weak and powerless, he gave his Son to save us from our sins (Ro 5:8) and made us his children (Jn 1:14). He has loved us with everlasting love. We are the apple of his eye (Dt. 32:10). As our Father, he is not annoyed by our pleas. We do not bother him or wear him out. Even mothers grow tired of the constant pleas of children, but not God. Though he may put us off for time, it is for our good (Ro 8:28). In his time and way, he will bring about justice (2Pe 3:8-9) and quickly. He will not delay.

Jesus wanted to show his disciples that their loving Father in heaven is ready and willing to listen to the cries of his people day and night. On the basis of this parable I want to think about two applications.

In the first place, we need burning prayer topics based on our hope in the kingdom of God. In verse 8, Jesus adds this point to the application of the parable: **“However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”** Jesus is always the best example of his own teaching. Seeing the tendency for no faith even in his disciples, Jesus may also be discouraged. But Jesus did not give up. He hoped to reach the world through his disciples, and he prayed about this urgently. He had a burning prayer topic in his heart. Jesus is coming again, and will be looking for faith that cries out day and night for the kingdom of God. With the kingdom of God within us (17:21), we can find out the prayer topics that please God, not our pleasures. If we are convinced this is the will of God, keep praying, knowing he will answer (1Jn 5:14). We long for the day of justice to come on this world as it is in heaven. We pray for our salvation and the salvation of others. We

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pray for America to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We pray to send missionaries around the globe, including ourselves, even though it will invite suffering. This hope compels us with bold confidence to pray and work for the expanse of God's kingdom. Dr. Joseph and Esther Chung, well into their old age, have this just prayer topic burning in their heart. So they went to Uganda as a medical missionary family. Jesus is coming again, and in that day, all our hopes will be realized. Let us not give up, or grow faint, but give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, knowing our labor is never in vain (1Co 15:58).

In the second place, Jesus encourages us to practice the principle of the parable: persistence. Like the widow, many times we will face impossible situations, harrowing experiences, and heart-wrenching agonies. When Jesus taught us in the Lord's Prayer the core of what we should pray. These prayer topics become burning prayer topics as we have urgent need. When we don't know how we will eat tomorrow, "Give us this day our daily bread" becomes urgent. When we are facing temptation, "deliver us from the evil one" becomes urgent. We pray to our Father God, crying out to him day and night, no matter what the agony. There are many things that often discourage us, but these are opportunities to cry out to God and experience his love and power.

This begins in crying out to God for salvation. Sometimes we have no assurance of God's grace and love. We know the gospel story. We are sinners, and lost. God sent his Son to die on a cross, bearing the penalty for our sin, and raised him from the dead that we too may have a new life. But can such a thing really be true to me? Can I believe God? He promises us that when we seek him, we will find him, if we search for him with all our heart and with all your soul.

When we have no job, we need to cry out to God. In 1984 Dr. Paul Hong accepted God's call to join Toledo ministry, which was going through intense growing pains. He obeyed and went, for the glory of God. But he had no job. He cried out to God for a job, more than one year. He eventually took a job teaching inmates at the local prison. Persisting in prayer, he got a PhD, and is a professor and researcher in the field of Business Administration. As the pastor of Toledo church, he has been a blessing, not a burden. They just finished building their new church, and it is beautiful. Rather than despairing and giving up God's call, Dr. Paul Hong persisted in prayer, and God worked it out.

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Some families among us are praying to have children. Paul and Mary Choi who are in St. Louis now, served the Lord fervently in Chicago. They prayed for children, but seven years went by and nothing happened. Yet they did not give up, and God gave twins. My son Judah wanted a baby brother. So at the age of 2, he began to pray. I witnessed him pray every single night before he went to bed for a baby brother. I marveled at his persistence. After 3 years Josiah was born. Judah began praying for a baby sister. I asked him, "Why pray so soon for a sister?" He said, "It took God 3 years for a brother, so I'm starting now for a baby sister." I should be teaching him prayer, but I'm learning from him.

As parents, we pray for the salvation of our children. The best story may be that of Monica, the mother of St. Augustine. He wasn't always a saint. In his youth he was a promiscuous young man, as well as a member of an agnostic cult. His mother, a devout Christian, prayed for him 17 years. She pleaded with a bishop to intercede and counsel her son. The Bishop was not willing, telling her to go and have faith. She began to weep. Seeing her tears, he told her he himself had once been a member of that cult, and was delivered from it. Then he said to her: **"...it is impossible that the son of these tears should perish."** She accepted this answer, believing God heard her prayer.

A young woman among us didn't have the kingdom of God in her, but just a desire for clothes and the things of the world. Her mother cried out in prayer for her, and persisted in this until her daughter was changed. She is now a disciple of Jesus, a good shepherd, and a good wife. The kingdom of God burns in their family, and they pray to go to and serve a USA campus in the next two years.

Some are burdened in prayer for their marriage, or the marriage of others. Abraham's servant earnestly prayed, and the Lord led him to meet Rebekah, who later became Isaac's wife. M. Joshua Hong cried out in prayer for the marriages of several men in our church and God helped them marry one by one.

Jesus teaches us to always pray and not give up. Do you have an urgent topic that pleases God on your heart? You know what God's will is, but are hesitant to pray, or perhaps have given up due to a difficult issue? Jesus encourages us to trust in God's love, justice and timing, and cry out to God day and night in persistent prayer.

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II. Humble Prayer (9-14)

In his second parable, Jesus teaches humility before God in prayer. Look at verse 9. **“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable...”** In some ways, such people have reasons to be confident. They are typically hard working, maintain their purity and keep the law, live a highly moral life, as well as a religious life. But is that a basis for approaching God? Let's learn from the parable.

Jesus describes the Pharisee's prayer first. He stood boldly before God, thankful he was not like other people, including the tax collector sneaking in the back of the temple. He had no sense of unworthiness before the holy God. Instead, he condemned others in his prayer, rather than pray with tears for their salvation. The basis of his thanksgiving was not because of anything God did in his life. His repeated use of “I” (5 times) reveals that he saw himself, not God. On the basis of his righteous deeds, he bragged before God. He fasted twice a week, beyond what the law required (Lev 23:26-32). Some people don't faithfully tithe from their paycheck, but this Pharisee tithed from everything he received. When his garden produced 10 tomatoes, he surely gave one to God. In many ways he was exemplary compared to others. But the problem is that none of these things can be our righteousness before a Holy and Perfect God. The Bible tells us clearly, **“No one is righteous, not even one (Ro 3:10b).”** No matter what we have done or achieved, before God we have nothing to boast about.

In contrast, Jesus shares the prayer topic of the second man. This man was an obvious sinner, as a tax collector, who betrayed his people and his God for the sake of money. Some who are obviously sinning do not see themselves as sinners. But this man really saw himself as a sinner before God, demonstrated by his non-verbal behavior: 1) He stood at a distance, 2) He would not look up to heaven, 3) He beat his breast. Without saying a word, we see his contrite heart before God. He knew that he deserved judgment for his sinful life. But he also had a clear prayer topic in coming to God: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** He believed that God is merciful to sinners. On the basis of this faith, he humbly came to God with his request. Perhaps he repeated it until tears welled up in his eyes.

How does Jesus conclude the parable of the two men? Verse 14a reads, **“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”** The tax collector went home justified. His prayer was accepted by God. His sins

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were forgiven, and he was declared not guilty. He experienced peace with God (Ro 5:1) that led to joy and hope, and the power to live a new life. On what basis could God receive him? On the basis of Jesus Christ's blood shed for sinners. Regardless of the fact that he was a terrible sinner, when he pleaded to God to act in mercy on him, God answered, and he was justified. What an encouragement! When I reviewed my prayer life in preparing this message, I had one conclusion: I'm a sinner. I can only pray, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** Sinners have access to God's mercy. He will never ignore this plea.

But the Pharisee, who was confident in his own righteousness, while being justified in his own eyes compared to others, was not at all justified before God. He lived under the wrath of God. Jesus' teaching is very clear: **"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."** The way of salvation is available to all. But only those who humble themselves before God will receive it.

Through this passage Jesus wants to encourage each of us live a persistent and humble prayer life. May God help us to pray topics that please God, and persistently cry out to God day and night the agonies of our lives in following him.