

ALWAYS TO PRAY AND NOT LOSE HEART

Luke 18:1–8

Key Verse: 18:1

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

What gets you praying? Does someone have to ask you? It may take a severe problem to get us to really pray. We may begin praying, but then stop. We get discouraged. We lose interest. Or we just forget. In today’s passage our Lord Jesus teaches about prayer. We need to listen and learn from him. But what’s his point? *How* should we pray? *Why* should we pray? How *can* we pray? These are important questions. Today’s Bible passage gives us some answers. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

Of all four Gospels, Luke stresses the most how important prayer is.¹ He shows how our Lord Jesus, throughout his ministry, modeled prayer through his personal life.² On this journey to Jerusalem, he’s been teaching and training his disciples. One of his main topics has been how to handle material possessions.³ Another key teaching has been prayer. His own quiet example finally inspired his disciples to ask him how to pray. So he taught them the Lord’s Prayer, and how to pray shamelessly and confidently.⁴ Now, seven chapters later, he gives his disciples a new parable on prayer. It has an unforgettable lesson in it. What is it?

Let’s read verse 1. “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” The word “And” indicates this is connected to the previous passage (17:20–37). Jesus has just been describing “the day of the Son of Man.” It’s the final Judgment Day, which will come suddenly. On that day, when Jesus comes back, he’ll be looking for those who have an inner spiritual life in him. If he finds us depending on ourselves, engrossed in physical life or our own business, we won’t be ready. Without the life of Christ within us we’ll be left behind. So how can we be ready? In English, verse 1 says we “ought” to pray. But in Greek, this word is “must.” It’s one of the author Luke’s favorite words, and it’s very important.⁵ “Must” means it’s not an option, it’s non-negotiable. Luke says disciples “must” pray. It’s not a good idea or a suggestion; both morally and spiritually it’s absolutely required. To truly be his disciples, ready for his coming back at any time, we *must* pray. A fervent prayer life, based on faith, keeps us from temptation.⁶

Luke uses another key word here: “always.” What does it mean? Do we have to stay on our knees, at the church, 24/7? No. In Greek the word is “pantote,” which means “at all times” or “ever.” In the Bible, this Greek word especially describes praying for *people*. Apostle Paul uses

¹ e.g. 1:10,13; 2:37

² 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18,28–29; 10:21

³ 12:15,33; 16:1–13

⁴ 11:1–13

⁵ 2:49; 4:43; 5:38; 9:22–23; 12:40

⁶ 22:40,46

this word in his letters frequently, to describe how he himself was *always* praying for people.⁷ This word “always” has a broader meaning also. Basically, it means to have the spirit of prayer throughout the day, every day, in all that we do. “Always to pray” is not something we do only on occasion, once in a while, or only at church. “Always to pray” is to approach life with a basic posture of depending on God. Following the Lord’s Prayer, “always to pray” means to ask, first and foremost, for God’s name to be hallowed, and for his kingdom to come. “Always to pray” also means to ask God for our daily needs, for his forgiveness, for both ourselves and others, and for his deliverance from temptation and evil.⁸ As Jesus mentions in verse 7, “always to pray” means crying out to God—with these prayer topics our Lord Jesus gave us—day and night.

The last part of verse 1 adds “and not lose heart.” In Greek, “lose heart” is “enkakein.” It was a strong word often used for bad soldiers. It literally means to “be exhausted,” to “give up” or “become spiritless.” It can even mean to be a coward or just plain lazy. While living out our Christian faith in this cursed world, waiting for our Lord Jesus to return, frankly, many things will be hard. Sharing the gospel will be hard. Enduring persecution will be hard. Sometimes, people’s sinful attitudes and behavior will make us want to quit.⁹ But our Lord Jesus calls us to fight the good fight of faith.¹⁰ He doesn’t want us to turn back, give up, or lose heart. To be faithful to him, we ought “always to pray and not lose heart.” But how?

Let’s look at the parable. It begins with two characters. Look at verse 2. “He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.’” This is not a flattering description. As a judge, he has a position of authority and influence. But sin has hardened his heart. So he ignores God and has no basic respect for people. Yikes! Who’s the other person? Look at verse 3. “And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’” She’s at the other end of the social ladder—at the bottom. As a widow in that society, she has no power, no wealth, no influence. As we’ve seen, in his Gospel accounts Luke loves to highlight this “Great Reversal” of the humble and the exalted, the first and last.¹¹ Many people might disregard a widow as a weak, sorrowful, insignificant person. But this widow is feisty. She doesn’t show up just once, with a feeble request. It says she “kept coming” to this judge. No matter how much he ignores her, she won’t let it go. She’s showing up every day. What’s she asking? Her request is very simple, clear, and always the same: “Give me justice against my adversary.” Evidently, someone’s trying to cheat her. Who does *that*, cheat a widow? But the Bible says sin can make any one of us a “foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” person (Rom.1:31). Moreover, this word “justice” is important. In today’s passage, the word “justice” is repeated four times (3,5,7,8). In Greek “Give me justice!” literally means “Avenge me!” We’ll get into what this means for us a bit later.

Now, the parable turns to the judge’s reaction to the widow. Look at verses 4–5. “For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man,

⁷ Rom.1:9–10a; Phil.1:3–4; 1Thess.1:2; Philem.4

⁸ 11:2–4; cf. Matt.6:9–13

⁹ Compare 2 Corinthians 4:1–18, where Paul uses this same Greek word for “lose heart” twice.

¹⁰ 1Tim.6:12; 2Tim.4:7

¹¹ e.g. 1:52; 14:11

yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.” The word “bothering” in Greek is literally “wailing,” “grieving” or “beating the breast.” This widow isn’t just talking; she’s crying out in intense pain. And the judge’s expression “beat me down” is literally “give me a black eye.” Wow! This woman’s persistent cries eventually puncture the arrogant judge’s elitist bubble. He’s not giving in to her because his heart is moved, but because he’s afraid of looking bad.

So what lesson is Jesus teaching? Read verse 6. “And the Lord said, ‘Hear what the unrighteous judge says.’” Once again, Luke refers to Jesus as “the Lord,” implying that we all need to obey him.¹² Jesus our Lord commands us to “Hear.” Hear an *unrighteous judge*? Why? In this context, “hear” means to “understand.” What does Jesus want us to understand? Read verse 7a. “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?” Two things stand out here.

First, God is the God of justice. God is such a contrast to this unrighteous judge. God is the origin of all righteousness. His righteousness is perfect. On the other hand, this sinful world is full of unrighteousness and injustice. In our sin, our human “righteousness” is false and relativistic. Basically, strong people oppress and take advantage of weak people. It’s been going on for thousands of years. It’s not just about widows, women, children or orphans, or those with a disability or disadvantage. It happens in all kinds of ways, to all kinds of people, every day. It’s demoralizing. It seems people get away with using and abusing each other and with being cruel. But our just God is watching.

As we’ve seen, in Greek this word “justice” means “vengeance.” It’s a powerful word. But what is “vengeance” exactly? Vengeance is different from revenge. Those who seek revenge want more than justice; they’re looking for some personal satisfaction, a vindication of their own pride. But in the Bible, this vengeance is God’s righteous and just response to human wickedness. It’s God’s just punishment for human wrongdoing. For the time being, proud, vain, abusive people seem to suffer no consequences. But God says, “Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly” (Deut.32:35). This is no abstract doctrine of God that no longer applies. It’s repeated in both Romans 12:19 and Hebrews 10:30, where God is still saying: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.”¹³

We Christians need to believe in God’s vengeance, God’s justice. Faith in this truth about God enables us “always to pray and not lose heart.” It helps us not take matters into our own hands, but leave room for God’s wrath.¹⁴ When someone hurts or takes advantage of us, it’s time for us to ask God for his justice. Also, this awareness of God’s vengeance challenges us to check our own behavior. For example, Apostle Paul warns us not to walk in the passion of lust and thus,

¹² 7:13,19; 10:1,39,41; 11:39; 12:42; 13:5; 17:5–6

¹³ The Book of Revelation also describes how God will “avenge” the blood of his servants (Rev.6:10; 19:2).

¹⁴ See also 1Cor.4:5

wrong a fellow human being, and he writes, "...because the Lord is an *avenger* in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you."¹⁵

When will God's avenging justice become real? It will happen when Jesus comes again. Apostle Paul told the Athenians: "...because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is sure proof that God is the God of justice. One day, our Risen Lord will come again as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). It's the day when God's "righteous judgment will be revealed," when he will "judge the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom.2:5b,16). By faith in him, we are sure that God's own justice will prevail. By faith in him, we can "always pray and not lose heart," asking for God's justice to come soon.

Second, God hears the cries of his people. Read verse 7a again. "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" This is one of the simplest yet greatest truths of the Bible: our living God hears and answers prayer. It's wonderful! People may ignore us and tune us out, but God is listening. Of course, if we won't repent of our own sins, God won't listen (Psalm 66:18). If we won't forgive others, God won't listen to us, either (Matt.6:15). But if we come to him with a broken, contrite heart over our own sins, God won't despise us (Ps51:17). Yet God doesn't want to be listening to an endless litany of self-centered, petty, manipulative, benefit-seeking prayer requests. He hears us when we start asking according to his will (1 John 5:14). Also, we should think about this word "elect." It means not only "chosen by God" but also "the objects of his special kindness, favor and love, cherished and beloved." Because of his grace of election,¹⁶ God actually *loves* to listen to our prayers.

Jesus concludes. Read verses 7b–8. "Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" At first it's hard to see what he means. It seems Jesus is telling us God will answer our prayers quickly. But we know that's not always true; God doesn't always answer us right away. So what is Jesus saying? He's telling us to see God's response to our prayer from God's point of view. From *our* point of view, God's answer may seem slow. But from *God's* point of view, he does answer "speedily," "without delay" (Rom.9:28). And the greatest answer to all our prayers is for Jesus to come again. He is our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.¹⁷ He will be redeeming and restoring all things from the ravages and curse of sin and the devil.¹⁸ He will bring God's final justice when the devil and his agents are cast into the lake of fire and sulfur to be tormented day and night forever and ever, along with all those who practiced evil.¹⁹ So, praying for God's justice, God's vengeance, really means to pray for Jesus to come again soon. In the light of eternity, Jesus' coming will indeed be happening "soon."²⁰

¹⁵ 1Thess.4:1–6; cf. Acts 24:25a

¹⁶ cf. Rom.8:33; 9:11; 2Tim.2:10; Tit.1:1

¹⁷ 1Cor.1:30; Luke 21:28

¹⁸ Acts 3:21; Rom.8:23

¹⁹ Rev.20:10; 21:8

²⁰ Rev.3:11; 22:7,12,20

This is the faith our Lord Jesus wants us to have (8). The prophet Habakkuk wrote: “For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous will live by his faith” (Hab.2:3–4). Here, faith means to wait humbly and patiently for God’s answer. Faith is to believe that God’s timing in answering our prayers is perfect. We need the faith to wait on God.²¹ James 5:8 tells us: “You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.”

Read verse 1 again. May God help us pray persistently for Jesus to come again soon and bring God’s full justice to this sinsick world. May God help us always to pray, for all kinds of people, and in all that we do every day, so that we won’t lose heart but be ready for his coming at any time. Most of all, may God help us to pray by faith and wait on him, believing our Righteous God hears our cries.

²¹ Ps.27:14; Prov.20:22; Isa.30:18