

## A Person of Persistence

*Luke 18:1–8*

In high school, I played basketball, football, baseball and I ran track. One thing I did not do was wrestle . . . at least not of my own volition. There was, however, one time when I had to wrestle because that's what we were doing in PE class. My only real memory of that was being on my back and not being able to breathe. And at least for me, when I can't breathe and it feels like I'm going to pass out, it is pretty easy to lose heart. And without heart it is easy to give up the fight and let the guy pin you. That's what I did.

Sometimes life is like wrestling. We face situations that are painful, or confusing or hard. And when it comes to prayer for such things as they go on and on and on, we can feel like we are on our backs and we can't breathe and we begin to lose heart. We when we lose heart we can be tempted to stop clinging to God and calling out to Him to inter-vene.

**Transition:** Over the past three weeks we have been looking at characteristics of the kind of person who prays well. We've seen that the person who prays well is a person of the Word, a person of faith and a person of obedience. A person who prays well is also a person who doesn't give up. A person who prays effectively is a person who is persistent in prayer. They continue to cling to God and trust Him.

Today, we are looking at a parable that Jesus taught to his disciples specifically about the need to be persistent in prayer. The parable is found in Luke 18:1-8. The first thing Luke does is give us the purpose of the parable.

### I. The Parable

#### **Purpose of the Parable** (v. 1)

In verse 1 Luke writes:

*<sup>1</sup> Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,*

The parable is about praying at all times and not losing heart. This parable flows out of the discussion that started back in 17:22 where we read:

*<sup>22</sup> And He said to the disciples, "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it."*

Jesus knows that there will come days for his disciples that will be so dark and difficult that they will long for the return of Christ. But Jesus tells them that they will not see it at that point. It is in this context that he is teaching them about praying at all times and not losing heart. *To lose heart* is to get weary in prayer; it is to come to a point of despair that makes us want to give up.

These are the kind of days that Jesus knows will be ahead for his disciples. And these are the kind of days that sooner or later will be ahead for us as well. These are the kind of days for some of you now. In these kind of days, Jesus is encouraging us to have a persistent, faith-filled life of prayer.

In verse 2, Luke goes on to record the parable.

### **The Parable Proper (vv. 2-5)**

<sup>2</sup> *saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man.*

This judge would have been a local official who was accessible and who had authority to make decisions. He is the kind of person to whom the powerless ought to be able to go for help as they seek justice. But this judge *did not fear God*. He did not care about God. We are also told that he *did not respect man*. He had no concern for other people.

<sup>3</sup> *“There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’*

A widow in Jesus’ day was in a difficult spot. She was vulnerable. She was socially powerless. She had no male figure to defend her against those who sought to defraud her or take advantage of her. We don’t know exactly what her legal issue is, but we know that she has an *opponent*. And so she pursues the only course of action available to her and that is looking to this judge to *give her legal protection*.

Does she get it? Not at first because it says that *she kept coming to him*. If the protection had been granted she would not have had to keep coming to him. But she keeps coming to this judge and asking him over and over again for protection.

<sup>4</sup> *“For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’ ”*

This judge had no interest in helping this widow, but eventually, he is forced to change his mind. He doesn’t change his mind because he fears God or respects for man. He changes his mind, because the widow bothers him by her continual coming. He says that she is going to *wear [him] out* by her *continually coming* to him.

The phrase, *wear me out*, is translated by the NIV as “come and attack me.” It literally means, “to strike under the eye.” It probably has the sense of giving a black eye. When we say that someone was given a black eye, it has the sense of shame or a damaged reputation, right? And so it seems that by her continual coming, the judge’s reputation is being damaged; his shame is growing. The pressure increased on him as people saw

his failure to do what was right. She wore him out with her persistence. She tenaciously kept coming and coming and that eventually wore him out and he granted her request.

Jesus then goes on to apply the parable starting in verse 6.

### **The Parable Applied (vv. 6-8)**

*<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge \*said; <sup>7</sup> now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?"*

What did the *unrighteous judge* say? Essentially, he said that he would grant the widow's request because of her persistence. Jesus then moves from the example of the judge to God and asks a question. Will not God bring about justice for His people who cry out to him with persistence? And of course the answer is yes!

Jesus' logic goes like this – if it is the case that an unrighteous judge, who doesn't care about the widow, will eventually give justice to the widow because of her persistence, how much more is it true that God, who loves us and who cares about us, will bring about justice for His elect to who cry out to Him with persistence.

We are like the widow. We have needs. But the relationship that we have with God is far different than the relationship that the widow had with the judge. We are God's children – the elect. We are the chosen by God for salvation. That's who we are. And God, unlike the unrighteous judge, is not begrudging when it comes helping us. He is a good, loving, heavenly Father who is not reluctant to come to the aid of His children.

Now, remember the purpose of what Jesus is teaching here? It is so that at all times we would pray and not lose heart. And why shouldn't we lose heart? Because we are God's elect. And we shouldn't lose heart in light of who God is. He is our good, loving, heavenly Father. He will bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night. We have every reason for hope. And so though we may experience delays in seeing our requests answered, keep praying. Be tenacious in our prayers, just like the widow going to the judge. Pray with persistence. Do not lose heart!

In verse 8, Jesus concludes by saying:

*<sup>8</sup> "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"*

Help is on the way. God will *bring about justice . . . quickly*. I think that Jesus is saying that once the proper time arrives, God will act quickly.

Jesus asks one more question in verse 8. Will he find the kind of faith that continues to look to God and hold onto God with trust in difficult circumstances? It is a question that

invites us to examine our own lives. Do you have this persistent faith that keeps going to God? Do you have the kind of faith that prays at all times and doesn't lose heart?

What kind of person prays well? It is the person who keeps on praying at all times and who doesn't lose heart. She doesn't give up. He keeps trusting God. That's what Jesus is teaching here. This is a quality of a person who prays well.

## II. Points of Clarification

Now, as we think about this principle of praying persistently, I'm sure it raises some questions in your mind. It does in mine. And so I want to mention three points clarification to address at least some of these questions.

First, **just because we pray persistently, it doesn't always mean that God will do what we ask.** When my sister was sick with a brain tumor a number of years ago, I prayed persistently (as did many others) that God would heal her. Scripture teaches that God does heal and that we should pray for it. As best I know, I was praying for her healing in faith and with persistence based on God's word. But God did not heal her. I don't know why. From my vantage point it seems that it would have been good. It wasn't a selfish request. She loved God and served Him in some amazing ways. She had five young children. But God chose not to heal her. Just because we pray persistently, it doesn't always mean that God will do what we ask. There is always mystery here.

Do I think my persistence in prayer for my sister's healing was wasted? No, I don't. It was through persistent prayer that I clung to God during a difficult time. And God was at work in my heart through those prayers.

Second, **sometimes God does lead us to stop praying for a request.** For instance, in 2 Corinthians 12:7ff, Paul talks about how he was given a thorn in the flesh. We don't know exactly what it was, but it was something that God used to keep Paul from exalting himself. Paul tells us that he prayed three times for the thorn in the flesh to be removed. But eventually God's answer to Paul was that His grace would be sufficient for him. In other words, he should stop asking. Sometimes God will do the same thing for us. As we wrestle in prayer, God's will gets clearer and clearer and at times we are led to stop asking.

Third, **sometimes God gives us an inner assurance that He has granted our requests.** And in such cases to keep asking would be rude. If God gives assurance then the appropriate thing to express to God is thanksgiving. We stop asking and we start thanking.

With those points of clarification, I want to ask one big question of this principle that Jesus is teaching here. The question is this: What keeps us from praying persistently? As I studied this passage this past week this was the question that has been in my mind. "Why don't I pray more persistently?"

### III. What keeps us from persistent prayer?

I want to mention three things that I think contributes to a failure to pray persistently about anything. I'm sure there are more than these things, but these are big things.

First, sometimes **we don't think we need God to do things**. I would never say, "I don't need God", but I know that too often I fail to see how dependent I am. I tend to think that I can do it; I can figure it out. This attitude of self-sufficiency leads to prayerlessness and so it certainly leads to a failure to pray persistently. But the reality is that all of us are like the widow. We do have desperate needs. We need God's help for things in our own lives or for things in the lives of people we love or for things we see in the world around us. Prayer is an expression of dependence on God.

If you sense that self-sufficiency is part of why you don't pray persistently, ask God to increase your sense of dependence. Jesus is teaching us to stay dependent on God. Ask God to help you refuse to look anywhere else for what God alone can do.

Another thing that keeps us from praying persistently is that **we don't know what God wants to do**. People who pray persistently are those who have clarity about what God is up to in the world. And the reason they know these things is that they are people of the Word. They understand what God has promised. And so as they look at the gap between what God has promised and what is going on in the world around them, it creates what Bill Hybels calls "holy discontent" and it drives them to prayer. They cannot, not pray. The knowledge of God's will is a kind of fuel that keeps them persistent in prayer until God does what He has said He will do.

And so when you think about your children, or your spouse, or your friends, or the world around you, what has God said? What has He promised? Search the Scriptures to know what God has said and then let that knowledge lead you to persistent prayer.

Here's one final reason that we don't pray persistently at times. Sometimes **we don't care about what God wants to do**. We see war in Syria. We see the refugee crisis. We see our own county embroiled in all kinds of racial tensions. We see homelessness and hunger. We see human trafficking. We see people living far away from God. We see marriages and families crumbling. I could go on and on.

Do we know what God's will is in most of these things? Yes, in broad terms we do. Peace. Justice. Reconciliation. Provision. Protection. But so often we still don't pray. We don't pray (and I'm talking about myself as well), because we really don't care about what God wants to do. And if we don't care, we will not pray let alone pray with persistence.

If you find yourself not caring about things that God cares about, the place to start is to simply confess it. And then invite God to give you a growing sense of His heart for the world and let that move you to prayer. You may not have the capacity right now to pray about all of the good things that you should. You might for a day or two, but you may not

be able to persistently pray about such things. I would encourage you to not beat yourself up for this. Rather, start by praying persistently for the things you do care about and trust God to grow your heart for other things.

Here is how Dallas Willard describes this:

Prayer simply dies from efforts to pray about “good things” that honestly do not matter to us. The way to get to meaningful prayer for those good things is to start by praying for what we are truly interested in. The circles of our interests will inevitably grow in the largeness of God’s love. . . . Many people have found prayer impossible because they thought they should only pray for wonderful but remote needs they actually had little or no interest in or even knowledge of.

Start with the things that you do care about. Pray persistently about those things and know that as you walk closely with God He will enlarge your heart and you will grow in your capacity to pray about other important things.

A person who prays well is a person who prays persistently. Why God works this way, I don’t know for sure. I think a part of it is what he wants to do in our own hearts as we cling to him persistently in prayer. But I think we have to honestly admit that we don’t always know why God wants us to pray this way. When it comes to prayer there is always a sense of mystery. We don’t always get answers to our “whys.” But what is clear is that the people who pray effectively are those who pray with persistence. God is a good, loving heavenly Father. Go to him with your needs. And keep going to him with persistence.

Amen.