

Title: Prayer Matters
Text: Luke 18.1-8
Theme: Pray always
Series: Luke
Aim: I aim to encourage my congregation to keep praying and never stop.

One time when I was little, I was in a swimming pool. Another boy, much larger than me, thought it would be funny to dunk me, then hold my head under water. I remember the terror. If you ever felt as if you were suffocating, you will never forget the fear. There may be worse ways to die, but suffocation feels terrifying. There are plenty of scenes in movies that show people holding their breath under water as they try to find a way to escape. Imagine being underwater trying to find air. 30 seconds ago, you released the last bit of air in your lungs and now your chest feels like it is on fire. If you don't find air soon, you are going to die. Then, in the distance you see someone in scuba gear swimming toward you. You lunge in that direction to get to them as quickly as possible. As they approach, they offer you their oxygen. Beloved, the way you view that oxygen is the way you must view prayer. If you realize that your life really depends on God, then you will see how important, beautiful and personal prayer really is.

Read Text:

In this parable, Jesus tells us the main point. You must always pray and not lose heart. There are times when you are eating a meal and you are offered an item that you pass on. Either you don't like it, or you don't have room for it, or something like that. In that moment you determine that it isn't necessary, you can certainly live without it. Prayer is not like that. Prayer is not optional for a believer. If you do not pray, you do not depend on God and if you do not depend on God, you are not a follower of Christ. It is that simple. Let's see how this plays out.

Jesus healed 10 lepers. Only one, upon realizing that he had been healed bothered to return and thank Jesus. The other nine did not care about Jesus. They did not care about stopping and going back to talk with him, like the one did. And when the one came back, what did he do? He prayed! That is, he talked with Jesus. His praise and thanksgiving were an expression of his faith. He prayed because he believed. Those who believe, pray! That event set the stage for the question the Pharisees had about when the kingdom of God would come. Jesus gave the Pharisees a minimal answer, but then talked about this in greater detail with the disciples.

Luke 17.22-37 are sobering because Jesus is seeking to prepare his disciples for what he was about to face, what they were going to face and eventually, what we would face. The pattern is clear: suffering comes before glory. As we get closer and closer to the return of Christ, the suffering will get worse. Don't be surprised by suffering. We live in a sin-cursed world. We may see someone whom we think is living a charmed life, you know, the person who seems untouched by tragedy, misfortune or hardship, who somehow always manages to escape danger and come out on top. If there is such a person, we call them charmed because that is certainly not the rule. The rule of life is difficulty. The wind of adversity is in our face. That is true for every person. However, the follower of Christ usually has other sources of adversity.

A couple of weeks ago I talked a bit about antisemitism, which is the irrational hatred of Jews because, they were the people through whom God brought his moral law and the natural human heart hates God. If the world has consistently hated the Jews because it was through them the Law of God was revealed, how much more hatred can we expect because we follow the Word of God in flesh, Jesus? Jesus is a threat to every government of man and history tells us that governments tend to view genuine Christians as threats because our ultimate allegiance is to Christ and not to man.

Just as things were ramping up in intensity for the rejection, arrest, trial and crucifixion of Christ, we can expect things to ramp up in intensity the closer we get to the return of Christ. Satan is stirring the pot. Jesus makes it clear that things will get worse before they get better. In fact, things will get so intense that many will decide that following Jesus is not worth it. To them, to us comes this warning and promise: *"Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it."* (17.33) When you are tempted to preserve your life by giving up, don't. But how do you not give up? What do you do when you are in the gap between the promise of the return of Christ and its fulfillment? You pray! And you pray like your life depended on it, because it does.

1. **Because God loves you and loves to respond to your prayers.** (1-7)

In the story that Jesus tells, the judge is a real work of art. He doesn't fear God. This means that he does not function in his role as a judge concerned about accountability for his decisions. Psalm 112.1 says, *"Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments!"* This is a parallel statement. In other words, the man who fears the LORD is a man who greatly delights in his commandments. Fearing and delighting are in harmony. Fearing God means to esteem him, even love him. This esteeming of God brings a delight in his commandments. The law of God is seen for the good and beautiful gift that it is. If you hate God's law, it is because you hate God.

Romans 3.18 says, "there is no fear of God before their eyes." This is actually a quote from Psalm 36.1 where David is describing the wicked who flatters himself thinking that he is above the law. He can do what he wants and no one will ever know. So, when Jesus says that this judge did not fear God nor respect man, he is describing a terrible person. He doesn't care about anybody but himself. Somehow, he became a judge, but forget about fairness. And forget about enforcing the law. The OT law states, *"You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn...."* This judge couldn't care less. He is the law. He decides whatever he wants and clearly, he could care less about this widow who came to him because she had been wronged. But the widow would not give up and she kept coming and kept demanding justice against her adversary. Girls often married as early as 13 or 14 and if they married older men, they could be widows in their 30's. So, this lady may have been older, but perhaps not. And being a widow, she may have been swindled out of her husband's estate. Jesus doesn't say, it's not his point. What is his point is how persistent this woman is.

Parents, you have some experience with this, right? Some kids have in infinite capacity to pester you until you are completely exhausted and you give in. On the one hand, their relentlessness is impressive. You think, if you could just practice soccer, math, music, or science with that same level of zeal, you would rule the world. This widow will not quit.

Finally, the judge relents. It is not that he ends up sympathizing with the widow and she gets an opportunity to present her case and win his heart. No, not at all. He only relents because he cares about himself. He even admits it. He does not fear God and he does not respect man. But he grants her request so that he doesn't have to listen to her whining to him all the time about it. His sole motivation is his own comfort. When he says, (v.5) "*I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming*" the judge uses a phrase that literally means, so that she will not give me a black eye. Since he doesn't care about his reputation, this doesn't mean that she is making him look bad. He already looks bad and he doesn't care. It means that she is exhausting him and there is no sign that she is ever going to quit. So, this self-centered judge makes a self-centered decision. Give her what she wants so she will quit bothering him.

V. 6 is a command. *Hear what the unrighteous judge says.* Hear what he says! He is going to grant her request so she will not pester him anymore. Look at v.1. Jesus tells us to always pray and not lose heart. But God is not telling us to always pray because if we keep pestering God, he will finally get exasperated and give in. NO! That is NOT how prayer works. God is not like the unrighteous judge. If the unrighteous judge will finally relent and do right by the widow, HOW MUCH MORE will God do what is right by us? God loves you. Think about this. If your prayers pestered God, would he have made you? If your prayers pestered God, would he have created prayer, filled his Bible with prayers and encourage us to pray? If God wanted to be unbothered and left alone, would he have given us the capacity to talk with God and relate to him? God could have simply filled the earth with animals and amused himself with their shenanigans. Instead, God made us in his image in order to enjoy us, relate to us, engage with us.

Do you remember the story of Manoah and his wife in Judges 13? The angel of the Lord appeared to them to let them know that they were going to conceive and were going to have a son who was to be consecrated to the Lord. Having an angel of the Lord show up is unnerving enough, but when the angel of the Lord ascended to heaven in the flame from the altar that Manoah had built, Manoah told his wife that they were going to die because they had seen an angel of the Lord. His wife said that she didn't think God would send a messenger to let them know that they were going to have a son if he was simply going to kill them. Beloved, God would not give us the capacity to pray, the desire to pray, the command to pray, and the language of prayer (the book of Psalms) if our prayers were a bother to him.

When I Facetime with my grandchildren, it is not generally, at this point, the most intellectually stimulating conversation I've ever had, but that isn't the point. I love them and enjoy engaging with them, even if I am watching the grass grow with them.

2. **Because God uses your prayers as part of his plan to bring justice.** (7-8a)

The unrighteous judge does not care about God nor man. Therefore, he has no compassion on those who look to him to do the right thing. However, God not only cares about us, but God cares about God. God acts in accordance with his character and God is righteous and just. Therefore, while the unrighteous judge is, unrighteous and therefore doesn't care if justice is served or not, God does. God will ensure that justice will be served. But here is what is so fascinating. God uses our prayers as an element in his plan to bring justice to the earth. We know that God is sovereign over all things, but his sovereignty is not reason to not pray, but is actually motivation to pray. God's sovereign plan employs our prayers to bring about what he has decided to do from eternity past. But your prayers matter.

I do not know exactly how God uses our prayers to carry out his sovereign plan, but he has given us a couple of examples that quite frankly, blow every fuse in my little brain and not only amazes me, but motivates me to pray. The first one is in Daniel 10. (turn) Daniel is older and has lived through the Babylonian empire and is now in the empire of the Medes and Persians. Daniel is living in modern day Iraq. At the beginning of chapter 10, Daniel initiates a season of fasting and praying. In response to his prayers, God sends a messenger (angel) to give Daniel more insight on what was going to be happening. However, (v.13) the messenger was delayed by the prince of the kingdom of Persia. The angel is delayed because he is engaged in a battle with the angel (demon) who is responsible for the Kingdom of Persia. This battle goes on for 21 days, the time that Daniel is praying and fasting. Michael is sent to help the good angel and he, after 21 days, is victorious and is able to bring the answer to Daniel. During those 21 days, Daniel keeps praying and does not lose heart. He has no idea of the battle that is taking place, but he prays.

In Revelation 5, the Lord pulls back the curtain on heaven for a bit and allows us to see some of what is going on behind the scenes. John records a vision he has of a scene in heaven. John sees a scroll that is sealed with 7 seals. The scroll appears to be a massive legal document like a will, a contract deed, a covenant or even the title deed to the earth. Much of the rest of the book describes what happens when each of these seals are broken and that part of the scroll is carried out. In chapter 6, when the 5th seal is broken John sees the souls of those who had been martyred for the gospel and for their witness under the altar in heaven. They are crying out to God (praying) saying, *"O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"* Like the widow, they are asking for justice. Unlike the unrighteous judge, God does not ignore them, but God gives each of them a white robe and tells them *"to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers (and sisters) should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been."* God knows what is going on. He knows the exact number of believers who will be martyred for the faith and he will respond, but not yet. In chapter 8, (turn) the 7th seal is broken. The 7th seal marks a significant escalation of the justice of God being carried on the earth. When the 7th seal is broken 7 angels stand before God and each are given a trumpet. Each trumpet that is blasted marks the start of another judgment of God. However, before the first trumpet is sounded (v.3), *"another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the*

smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.” This angel offers this incense, along with the prayers of the saints on the altar. The result is that the smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the saints rises before God. God is moved by this incense and prayers and God responds. What happens next? The angel took the censer that he had dumped on the altar and he now fills it with fire from the altar. In other words, he fills it with what is burning on the altar, which is the incense and the prayers of the saints and he threw it on the earth and basically all hell breaks loose. The prayers for justice become part of the arsenal of God’s judgment. So, do your prayers matter? Way more than we ever imagine! 3rd reason in this text to pray and not lose hope...

3. **Because God uses your prayers as part of his plan for Christ to return.** (8b)

Jesus makes it clear that God will bring justice. He will do it and he will do it speedily and Jesus links the speedy response of God for justice to the return of the Son of Man. But Jesus sets forth a question: *“when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”* Given the context here in Luke it sounds as if Christ is anticipating that the persecution against his own will result in many choosing to preserve their life rather than face the consequences of being a follower of Christ. When, in answering the prayers of the saints for justice, God carries out his plan for judgement on this rebellious world, he climaxes his response by sending Christ who takes back what belongs to him and takes over what his Father had created for him to have. At that point the kingdom will come and his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven and our prayers are part of the fuel that fires the engine of God’s plan. So, always pray and do not lose heart. Pray like your life depends on it, because it does. The question is not, will God respond to our prayers. The question is, will we believe God enough to pray?

Prayer is relational – God loves to relate to us

Prayer is cataclysmic – God’s justice on this earth is put into motion by our prayers.

Prayer is our lifeline – God uses prayer to fuel our faith when it is challenging to hang on. Prayer is a means that God uses for us to keep looking for him and those who in the faith are those who are looking for him, not simply agreeing with his message.