

Persistent Praying • Luke 18:1-8

A few years ago I started writing a book on unanswered prayer. It was first published under the title

When God Says No and later under the title *Praying To the God You Can Trust*. It was a book exploring some of the hard questions about Christian prayer. In many ways it was a book for me as much as for my readers as I sought my own answers to those questions.

Part of the research for the book included a request for stories. I wanted to hear from others about their unanswered prayers. The response surprised me. Not only did many people share their stories and give permission to include them in the book, the stories were different than I expected they would be. I thought there would be more disappointment, more anger with God and more disillusionment with God and prayer. Certainly there was some of that. The true stories included accounts of painful diseases, shattered relationships, broken hearts, prodigal children and other disappointments in life. What surprised me was the persistence and faith in the face of repeatedly unanswered prayers. I remember wondering to myself if I would not have given up when others kept praying. Some prayed for many years before God said yes. Some were still praying and trusting when there seemed to be no answer in sight. Again and again these Christians prayed like a widow in one of Jesus' parables.

The parable is in of Luke 18:1-8. At first reading it is a strange story, subject to some initial misunderstandings. But when properly understood it is a powerful encouragement to keep on praying even when we are tempted to give up on God. Let's take a look at the parable:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 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 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!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 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. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Jesus often told parables and let his listeners figure out the teaching for themselves. Other times he told them later. This time he gave the reason up front: "Jesus told his disciples a

parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."

Jesus did not tell us much about the woman in this story, except that she was a widow. Maybe that is all the explanation we need. Widowhood was a cruel destiny for women in the first century. Besides the death of a husband and the challenges of raising children alone, women did not have the same legal standing as men. If their husbands died they were often left with nothing. No money and no way to make money. They could be forced into begging or prostitution or starvation.

This particular widow apparently had money or property that was illegally taken from her. It could have been a piece of land or an inheritance upon which she depended. Whatever it was, she was desperate. She could not physically fight her adversary. Her only hope was the civil court. Maybe a judge could return what was hers. Maybe a judge could get her justice.

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She asked and the judge refused to help. So she asked again and the judge refused again. She asked and asked and he refused and refused. Over and over, day after day, she pleaded,

“Grant me justice against my adversary.” It became obvious to everyone that she was annoying the judge rather than persuading the judge and that she was not going to get what she wanted. At least it was obvious to everyone else, but not to this widow. She kept asking.

Perhaps she kept asking because she was a persistent person. I know people like that. We might even use the word “stubborn”. They just will not take *no* for an answer. Or maybe she kept asking because she was so very desperate. It was a life and death issue. She had nowhere else to turn; there was nothing else she could do. Whatever the reason, she came back day-after-day saying, *“Grant me justice against my adversary.”* And he kept saying *no*.

Have you been where she was? Perhaps you worked toward a certain job for years, had terrific reviews, got additional education, but when you applied for the job you were repeatedly refused. No good explanation was ever given. Maybe there was an insurance claim you had every right to receive but the company repeatedly refused to pay. Or did you seek reconciliation in a relationship but your husband or wife or some other person simply would not listen?

The desperate widow in Jesus’ story faced a seemingly impossible situation because she was dealing with a corrupt judge. He was a typical Roman judge and a bad man. We know he was Roman because Jewish courts were not set up like this. If Jews had disputes they took them to the synagogue for resolution. There were always three judges—one chosen by each party and a third judge who was the tiebreaker. Romans judges ruled alone.

The problem was there was widespread corruption. Judges routinely decided their cases on the basis of bribes; the highest bidder won the court case. Judges were appointed on the basis of politics and bribes rather than on the basis of competence and justice.

The judge *“neither feared God nor cared about men.”* You would hope for the opposite in a

judge—someone who feared God and cared about people. But this judge had no controls on him. He was not afraid of what God would do to him if he were unjust and he had no compassion for people in need.

Have you ever run up against someone like this? It may be a person who makes up his mind about what he is going to do regardless of what God or the Bible has to say. Quoting Bible verses or appealing to do right makes no difference. He simply does not care. Maybe this person is just heartless. He can see people suffer and it does not bother him. Tears will not get his attention. He cares only about himself.

If you know someone like this you know he is a tough person to deal with. There is no way to get through. Everything that would normally work on others will not work on him.

The judge in this story finally caved in. Not because he suddenly turned to God or because his heart softened toward this woman. She just wore him out. She was more trouble than the bribe was worth. He decided to give in to her just to shut her up. *“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.’”*

The expression *“so that she won’t eventually wear me out”* can be translated *“so that she won’t give me a black eye.”* Maybe he was afraid that one of the encounters would result in a physical assault; she might punch him in the eye. Or, maybe he figured that her constant asking would cost him sleep until bags formed under his eyes and he looked like he had black eyes. It is almost as if he was fearful of her. She must have been quite a persistent person!

The desperate widow persisted until the corrupt judge gave her what she wanted! But, remember what this parable is about: *“Jesus told his disciples this parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”*

Let’s not misunderstand what Jesus was teaching. He is not saying that God is like the corrupt judge! Jesus’ point is that God is not like that judge. God is good. God is compassionate. God is just. God wants to give us what we pray for.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that God is like that judge. We may have our frustrations and disappointments with God. We have heard stories that may make us wonder if God is unjust. We certainly have plenty of misunderstandings about God. But, Jesus knows God better than any of us, and Jesus says that God is not like this. Jesus insists that God listens to our prayers and that God acts in response to our prayers.

After he finished telling the parable, Jesus asked two pointed questions. His first question was, “Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry after him day and night?” And the answer is “Yes, God will bring about justice for Christians who cry out to him day and night.” Jesus’ second question was, “Will (God) keep putting them off?” The answer is “No, God will not keep putting them off.” So Jesus says loud and clear: “I tell you, (God) will see that they get justice, and quickly.”

Yes, but here’s the problem. There are thousands of people who pray and do not get justice, at least not very quickly. So, what do we do with this? Do we reinterpret God in terms of our own human experiences and disappointments or do we interpret our human experiences and disappointments in terms of God?

There are many people who are disappointed with God, angry with God or just frustrated with God and are close to concluding he is not as good as he claims to be. Let’s try to set the emotions aside for a minute and realize the logical implications of deciding that God is not good. If God is not good there is no justice. If God is not good, evil prevails. If God is not good we have no basis for determining what good is. If God is not good we have no hope. Those who interpret God by difficult circumstances are traveling down a very dangerous road toward disaster.

I prefer to side with Jesus and the Bible. Jesus says that God is good and that those who pray to

him do get justice—and get it quickly! How, then, do we understand this? We choose to believe that God will do what is right at the time that is right. God’s clock does not run by our emotions and his calendar does not always follow our pace. II Peter 3:8-9 says:

“Do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

As Christians we trust God to work out everything for good, including the things we do not know or understand. Let’s suppose that someone treats me with terrible injustice. I pray to God for a remedy. If God immediately answers my prayer and cuts off my adversary, that person may never again have an opportunity for repentance and a right relationship with God. So, God seems slow to help me in order to express patience with the other person. I may not like that. I may disagree. But, God’s decision is rooted in his love and compassion for everyone—including the bad guys.

So, what are we supposed to do in the meantime? That is the point Jesus is here making: keep praying and don’t give up! Jesus wants us to be like the widow. Hang in there. Persevere. Be persistent. Keep praying and do not give up.

Usually we think of persistence in prayer as a price to pay in order to get what we want. We assume that if we pray long enough and hard enough God will finally give in and grant our request. Instead, think of persistent prayer as an expression of

faith. When we keep praying we communicate that we believe God will do what is right and good, we trust God for his perfect timing and we trust God to keep us going until the answer comes.

Jesus’ concern is that people might lose faith in God and quit praying. He is concerned that as

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time drags on we may give up. We may stop believing when things get bad or when we don't get what we want. So, he asked, "*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*" Will anyone still be praying? I believe the answer is "yes." Christians will never give up on God. Through the best of times and the worst of times Christians believe. Christians pray. We will not quit on God and we will not quit praying. Right up until the day Jesus comes back to earth again we Christians will still be praying with faith. God is not like that judge. God listens and God acts. So we keep on praying and do not give up.

Let me tell you a modern version of Jesus' parable. It is not the story of a widow, but the story of a divorced single mother named Brenda. Her former husband accidentally dropped their newborn son, Zachery, during a bath causing damage to his brain and rupturing his retinas. The physicians said that if the baby survived he would never be able to see, walk, talk or sit up. His initial hospitalization was long and very hard. His mom sat by his side as he repeatedly had grand mal seizures. She quoted the Bible and prayed for a miracle.

Ten years later *USA Today* reported that Brenda's prayers had been answered. Zachery is partially blind, able to read words and see objects that are held within inches of his face and he gets around fairly well. As a rambunctious fifth-grader he was mainstreamed into many classes. He was enrolled in special education classes to learn math, spelling and how to tell time.

But *USA Today* also told the rest of the story. The example of Brenda and Zachery greatly impacted the life of a young man they knew. His name is Kurt and he was so impressed by her persistence in prayer and her faith in God that he too became a Christian. By his own report his life was totally transformed.

Brenda got her miracle. Her prayers were answered—not exactly as she expected, although she is convinced that God gave her far more than she asked. You may have seen Brenda on television, as well as her son Zachery. Brenda's husband and Zachery's adopted father is Kurt Warner. He was the quarterback for the St Louis Rams when they played in the Super Bowl.

Brenda prayed a long time. God heard and answered. God's will was done on earth as it is done in heaven.

Remember the widow. Remember Brenda Warner. Remember: "*Jesus told his disciples (this) parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*"

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