

CHURCH IMPROVEMENT: OBTAINING THE RESOURCES TO BUILD LUKE 18:1-8

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is really hard. There are days when Jane, after facing childishness or disobedience all day long says to our children, "I quit. I'm no longer your mom. Do whatever you want." We have a good friend that tells her kids, "When dad gets home at 5pm, I'm no longer your mom. I'm punching out". We work so hard as parents and the fruit of our labor seems so meager at times that we just decide to quit, to give up, to not care, to not keep on trying.

The desire to quit because results do not come as quickly or as spectacularly as we had hoped is not limited to just parents. How many students have quit studying because they can never make the grade? How many aspiring musicians or athletes have given up because the skill did not develop quickly enough? How many Christians give up praying because the answers don't come soon enough?

I heard Michael Card speak this past fall at a conference. He told the story of how one of his siblings had a child born with a very serious birth defect. The family prayed intensely for the child's healing but the child died. His mom refuses to pray any longer. "What's the use", is her response to his encouragement to prayer. While few of us have experienced such a traumatic disappointment, all of us have experienced the disappointment of unanswered prayer. Unanswered prayer is one of the stumbling blocks to persistent praying.

No where in the Christian life is the pressure to quit greater than in our praying. "How is your prayer life?" is a question that is able to make the most serious Christian squirm and blush. Why is that? What is it that keeps us from persisting in prayer? Why do you not pray like you know you should? (Turn to someone next to you and brainstorm for 60 seconds reasons you don't persist in prayer.) Share answers.

It is not difficult to diagnosis the problem of prayerlessness and perhaps its causes. However, what we really need is to talk about how to persist. Today I want to spend time talking about how to be persistent in prayer. We are going to examine a parable Jesus tells for the express purpose of motivating persistent prayer.

Read Luke 18:1. If we are going to be impacted by this parable we must see the context within which it occurs. Please read with me 17: 20-30 What I want you to notice is that Jesus is discussing what his coming will be like. Now we know he's talking about his second coming. But the disciples are convinced that Jesus is going to set up his kingdom on earth right now. But he tells them here and on many other occasions that he is going to leave and then come back. Now notice 18:8. The question Jesus asks is, "Will anyone be living by faith when he returns?"

So, 18: 1-8 describes how Christians are to live in that period of time following his suffering and death and his return in glory. We are to live by faith during this time and Jesus sees the chief evidence of faith as being a person who persists in prayer. The Christian life can be defined as a life of prayer. In this parable Jesus' aim is to keep us praying. He does this by showing that...

GOD FAITHFULLY ANSWERS THE PERSISTENT PRAYERS OF HIS PEOPLE BECAUSE...

I. GOD'S PEOPLE ARE IN NEED

Who does the widow represent? Christians. Why does she go to this wicked judge? She has a powerful opponent who is seeking to oppress her. This is a very common story line. There are dozens of books and movies that contain this basic plot. A widow owns a piece of property which she farms with the help of her teenage son and younger children. A rich rancher wants her farm because it has a spring of water and possible gold deposits. So he tries to buy her out, then he threatens her, then he bribes the local authorities to

find something wrong with her title, then he burns down her barns. She keeps seeking the help of the authorities who have been bribed but they never help. So, finally she goes to the US Marshall, Matt Dillon, and he comes to the rescue. The only difference is that she doesn't go to the Marshall in this story. The corrupt judge himself gives in.

So, if we ask the question, why does the widow persist? Part of the answer is that she is in desperate need. She has an enemy who is trying to harm her in an illegal fashion. Why do I not persist in prayer? The #1 reason I don't pray, I don't need to pray. I have everything I want without prayer or I have a plan to obtain what I need without prayer. Prayerlessness is the chief evidence of a proud heart, a self-reliant life. A prayerless life is a life lived with the attitude of a toddler, "I can do it myself!" On the other hand, prayer is the open admission that I am helpless and weak and unable to do anything to help myself. The widow knows this and so she persists in asking.

Her persistence is described by Jesus in v. 7 as a crying out to him day and night. The word is the same one used of Jesus crying out on the cross, "My God, My God. Why have you forsaken me." It is used of the father with an epileptic son who cried out to Jesus, "I beg you to heal my son". It is used of the blind man crying out for Jesus to heal him and in Isaiah 58:9, "Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I." It is the cry of desperation.

Persistent prayer is the natural and spontaneous action of people who know how helpless and desperate is their condition.

- The cries of the woman stranded on a flooded road outside of Champaign who cried out to a house from 5am to 6:30am before anyone heard her.
- The cries of Jaimee to nurse.

We do not pray because we do not have a gut wrenching desperation in our lives. So much of what we want, what we feel a need for could be given with just a little more money or a good therapist or doctor or friend or a lawyer. We don't long for things that can only be provided by miracle, by God's intervention.

If you want to persist in prayer, the place to start is by asking God to give you a sense of your desperate need, of the injustice of your spiritual condition. We need to feel the weight of the oppression of our enemies: sin and Satan and a world that believes life can be lived without God. This is where prayer starts, "God humble me. Show me in a way I cannot miss that I am helpless to obtain what I really need."

God faithfully answers the persistent prayers of his people because

- *His people are in need*
- *And because...*

II. HIS PEOPLE CRY OUT FOR JUSTICE

The widow persisted, not only because her need was so great but also because she knew her rights and she knew the judge was responsible for dispensing justice.

What is justice? Justice is getting what's coming to you. It means to receive what you deserve. Now every Christian knows that what they deserve is hell. If God was going to deal fairly with me, if he was going to repay me according to how I've lived, then I would be dead and in hell at this very moment. So, how can I, a guilty sinner, ask a fair and impartial judge to give me justice? The answer is that I don't come on the basis of my life but on the basis of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I ask God to deal with me as he would with Jesus because I am united to Jesus by faith. When Jesus died, all my crimes against God were placed on that cross and God the Father killed God the Son instead of killing me. Then, God the Father took all the goodness of Jesus and placed it upon me, so that I am not only pardoned but I am perfectly holy in God's sight because of Christ. What I deserve, because of Jesus, is to have God fulfill all his promises to me. This

is what Paul says in II Cor. 1:20, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.”

The assumption of this parable is that God’s people are being unjustly treated. That our rights as God’s children are being denied and trampled upon. I don’t believe for a minute that Jesus has in mind what so much of American Christianity is whining and complaining about. We protest that we’re not treated fairly in the media and that the political parties won’t pay attention to us, after all, there are so many us. Nor do I think like those heretics who preach that because we are God’s children we are supposed to be healthy and financially secure. If the Lord Jesus had no home and lived on the generosity of others, why do we think God is obligated to provide a middle class lifestyle to Christians? If the apostle Paul suffered all the abuse and poverty that he tells us he did in 2 Cor. 11, then why do we think that if God really loves us that we will not suffer?

What is justice for God’s chosen people? That we would live in the freedom that Christ has purchased for us. That our lives would reflect the reality of 17:21 (read it). That King Jesus would rule and reign in and among his people. We are a people who belong to God and He intends that we live as his people. He has made great and precious promises to us that we are not experiencing and this is supposed to trouble us and drive us to despair and then to our knees in persistent prayer. I want you to see four of these promises and then to consider the reality of their fulfillment in your life.

- Ezekial 36: 24-27
- I Peter 1: 8-9
- Titus 2: 11-14
- Acts 1:8

I don’t need a bigger house, a bigger paycheck, more obedient kids, a more loving wife, better self esteem, more friends, a promotion, a secure job. What I need, what justice would be for me, as a child of God, one of his chosen ones, is for God to pour out His Holy Spirit so that these promises he has made to me are fulfilled in my life. I need God to give me himself.

Persistent prayer will continue to be a dream for us if we do not seek to find out what God has promised to us, if we do not then ask Him to fulfill His promises to us. Read this book, memorize its promises, talk with other believers about your desperate condition and the great promises God has made, then pray for a heart that feels the absence of Christ’s presence as much as it aches over the absence of human affection. And pray for a heart that yearns for Christ, that pants for God, that hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

- Describe my fear, anxiety, and then anger over losing Jane’s checkbook when Joelle was three (she had put it in one of her many bags and we found it about a year later). Did I need the checkbook? No, what I needed was Christ and to be satisfied with him and confident of His ability to care for us.

God faithfully answers the prayers of His people because

- *His people are in desperate need*
- *His people cry out for justice*
- *And because...*

III. GOD IS CONCERNED FOR THE REPUTATION OF HIS OWN NAME

In v. 6 Jesus tells us the key to interpreting this parable. He says, “Listen to what the unjust judge says”. What did the unjust judge say? You are going to have to pay careful attention.

First, “this widow keeps bothering me”. Literally, “this widow keeps giving me trouble”. Look at Lk 11:7, another parable about persistent prayer. What was the trouble the persistent friend brought to the sleeping friend? Had to get out of bed. What is the trouble the widow brings to the judge? This is where the second

half of the verse comes in. The NIV says, “so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming”. The Greek word translated by the phrase “wear me out” is used only one other time in the NT. Read I Cor. 9: 27. “I beat my body” or “I give my body a black eye”. (You can see this in the margin of the NASB) In other Greek literature it was used of giving a person a black eye and then, metaphorically, to blacken someone’s face, to shame them, to bring them into disrepute. This makes perfect sense in the context, doesn’t it? Imagine you had an unscrupulous car dealer who regularly sold cars that were damaged. He regularly turns back the odometer. He has evaded problems but then he sells a car to a person who won’t leave him alone and threatens to take him to court. In order to save face so that his business won’t be damaged he may give the person justice. This is what the unjust judge does. He doesn’t respect God or man and so why does he give in? So he can keep on being judge, so his position as judge in this town won’t be jeopardized.

So the judge gives the woman what she wants for the sake of his own reputation. This is what Jesus wants us to “hear”. He reemphasizes this when he says won’t God, who isn’t unjust, deal justly with his chosen ones? Why does he refer to Christians as “chosen ones”? You didn’t choose God, God chose you. He saved you. It’s his reputation that is on the line in your life. What kind of a God is it that saves people and then lets them be oppressed and trampled upon? God’s reputation as a great and powerful and merciful Savior is at stake in our well-being. He must, for the sake of His own name save us. What’s amazing is that there are hundreds of prayers in the Bible that express this exact logic.

- Numbers 14: 13-19
- Psalm 25: 11

Desiring God (2nd ed.) P. 138 & 140

Jesus gives us a lesson on how God saves his people for the honor of his own name in vv. 7 and 8a. The question that v. 7 asks is will God bring about justice for his chosen ones? Then v. 8 says a resounding Yes! Now, the problem is with the last phrase in v. 7 which says in the NIV “Will he keep putting them off?” What does this mean? It will seem, for the Christian, that the answer is not coming soon enough. The fullness of God’s salvation is so partially experienced, there is always this sense that I’m so far away from where it seems the promises of God point me. God, are you going to keep putting me off? Quote Ps 90:13-14. The word of Jesus comes back that justice will come “quickly”. This word can mean one of two things, “immediately” 16:6 or “soon, in a short time” Rv 1:1, 22:6. Here, the meaning is soon, in a short time. It has to be this in light of the context. Jesus would not have to tell us to persist in praying if we immediately received the fullness of what we were asking for. Why does God do this? Why, as we cry out for the fullness of His salvation in our lives and families and church and world, why does he wait to send its fullness? I can think of at least 2 reasons:

- If we asked God to give us his fullness as Paul does in Eph. 3: 19, and he gave it to us, then we wouldn’t need to pray anymore. In essence we wouldn’t need him, we would become self sufficient. So God increases our experience of his salvation but never removes that sense that there is so much more that we can experience so we will continue to depend upon Him. (Describe the picture of repeated thirst implied in the promise of John 4:14, “whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst”)
- Unfulfilled desires for holiness and nearness to God create in us a greater longing for heaven and a greater hope in heaven which gives us greater endurance in trials (II Cor. 4:16-18). It keeps us from loving life on this earth.

God faithfully answers the persistent prayers of His people because

- *His people are in desperate need*
- *His people cry out for justice*
- *God is concerned for the reputation of His own name*

At the end, Jesus asks a sobering question, “However will the Son of Man find faith on the earth when he comes?” The question he is asking is will His people be crying out to Him for justice so that His name might be honored in all the earth or will we quit caring about justice and his honor and so quit praying? I don’t think he’s asking if

human beings will be praying, because prayer is a common human reflex. But he is asking, will this kind of praying be taking place. Praying that arises out of a yearning for God's kingdom to come in its fullness and that won't rest until God does what He promises for the glory of His name.

Will there be faith in us and in our church when Jesus comes? This next week we will be joining together each evening in various homes to do this kind of praying. The question for us is this: Do we desperately yearn for God to fulfill his promises to us or will we be content with the status quo? Come pray because you know your condition is hopeless, because you yearn to know more of God's power and presence in your life and because you love God's name to be seen to be great.

Haymaker: Texas school and sprinkler system

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