

Title: Persevere to the End
Date: January 24, 2021
Subject: Persevering in our faith in Christ
Scripture: Luke 18:1 - 8

In the parable of the persistent widow Jesus gives us, as his disciples, two commands -- we should always pray and not give up. Two weeks ago we combined them: don't give up when it comes to prayer, keep on presenting our requests to the Lord. We're to pray, pray, pray. The reason to do so is Christ reminds us God will bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night. He won't keep putting them off.

We can think of a balance scale. On one side have been placed all sorts of evil and injustice. There's hatred, murder, strife, the garbage of sin and life in general inflicted upon people. Christ's return is God putting his thumb on the other side of the scales. "God is not unjust. He will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them" (Hebrews 6:10).

He will rid the world of evil. "their destruction has not been sleeping" (2 Peter 2:3). It may seem that way to we mortal humans, but in God's economy... it's the next ringing of the alarm.

This morning we get to the second purpose of the parable -- we should never give up, not quit. For the full background, read Luke 18 again. The intended audience is the church, described at this point as "widowed, desolate, oppressed... during the present absence of her Lord in the heavens" (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary).

Read Luke 18:1 – 8.

I need to repeat the good news -- Jesus Christ is coming back. He's not a slick salesman employing a bait and switch where he decides to do something else, like tool around the universe by himself and not come back. He's not going to leave us hanging because he's suddenly bored with people. He will come back.

The first two questions Jesus asked as he summarized the parable focused on what God will do. The third one is geared toward what people will be doing -- "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Amplified Bible: "Will He find [this kind of persistent] faith on the earth?" NKJV: "Will He really find faith on the earth?" What will be the condition of people? Will there be genuine, true trust in the One True God, his truth as expressed in his Word and his Son Jesus Christ?

This isn't the only time Jesus expressed concern about the spiritual condition of people when he comes again. "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold...false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect...As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away"

(Matthew 24:10 - 12, 24, 37 – 39). Doesn't sound real good, does it? Deceivers, love growing cold, similar to Noah's time when the Lord only found 8 people with faith in him.

Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren, "The conviction that society needs to be reconstituted on other principles is spread everywhere, and is often associated with intense disbelief in Christ the Regenerator. Has not the past proved that all schemes for the regeneration of society which do not grapple with the fact of sin, and which do not provide a means of infusing into human nature a new impulse and direction, will end in failure, and are only too likely to end in blood? These two requirements are met by Jesus, and by Him only, and whoever rejects Him and His gift of pardon and cleansing, and His inbreathing of a new life into the individual, will fail in his effort, however earnest and noble in many aspects, to redeem society and bring about a fair new world. It is pitiable to see the waste of high aspiration and eager effort in so many quarters today. But that waste is sure to attend every scheme which does not start from the recognition of Christ's work as the basis of the world's transformation, and does not crown Him as the King, because He is the Saviour, of mankind" (THREE KINDS OF PRAYING. THE CREDULITY OF UNBELIEF). These words were written over 120 years ago and human society still hasn't progressed to find anything that can do what the Gospel of Jesus Christ does.

The question about lack of faith points to a "sorrowful scarcity." It can be understood in a couple of ways. The first has to do with the number of people who will have true faith in Christ as their Savior. Some believe Jesus worded his question about finding faith so there is only one possible answer. That answer would be "No". This means when Christ comes back he wouldn't find any faith on earth. That seems to run contrary to the rest of Bible teaching. God has always had a remnant, at least a few who were faithfully following him, whether it was Noah and family, Lot in Sodom or a some in the nation of Israel. There will be at least a remnant when Jesus comes back. Will there be many who claim and are in actuality fully devoted Christians? The answer to that depends on the second.

The second way to understand Christ's question is about those who are his disciples, his followers. Will he find them holding on to him, being loyal to him? Will they persevere in their hope in Christ? Barnes' Notes on the Bible, "the danger is that his elect - his afflicted people - will be discouraged; will not persevere in prayer; will not continue to have confidence in him; and will, under heavy trials, sink into despondency."

What can cause a lack of faith among Christ followers? There's the problem of difficulty. It can cause doubt and pessimism. "I thought God was good and bad things weren't supposed to happen to his children. I'm not so sure he really cares about me." There can be anxiety and worry. "What's going on? Woe is me. I know other bad things are gonna happen. The other foot is about to fall." There can be anger at God and others. "How come you aren't doing something about this?" Difficulties and delay can push us away from the Lord. We can be like turtles who withdraw their heads into their shell and say, "Enough. Not going to stick my head out. I'm just gonna give up. It's no use."

Another cause of lack of faith is the slow spread of the Gospel. Huge challengers rise in opposition. There's the advance of sin and ungodliness. It seems like the world is getting deeper and deeper into sin. There

are lots of competing voices, belief systems that are appealing to people and gaining favor. People are placing their trust in society, government, pleasure, science, money. Communist nations and others attempt to minimize the spread of Christianity or halt it altogether. Christians around the world are being persecuted. Here in the good old “Christian” U S of A, followers of Christ are being laughed at and mocked. We may feel, “It’s taking so long to get through to people that God loves them and wants to forgive their sins and give them a home in heaven. The message seems to be falling on deaf ears so we might as well keep quiet.”

The agonizingly sluggish movement of time can cause faith to grow dim. The pace can be slower than watching grass grow or paint dry. As we wait longer and longer, as the tide seems to turn against the Lord, we can find ourselves crying out “How long, O Lord?” (Revelation 6:10). Jesus said, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it” (Luke 17:22). He connected this teaching to the prevalence of deceivers who will falsely claim that Christ has returned (Luke 17:23). The Lord speaks through Peter: "Above all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, *Where is this 'coming' he promised?*" (2 Peter 3:3-4).

F.F. Bruce, “It is often the case that God's action as a Deliverer is delayed until his people have ceased to hope for deliverance. So it was with Israel in Egypt; so was it with her again in Babylon. *Grief was calm and hope was dead* among the exiles when the word came that they were to return to their own land; and then the news seemed too good to be true. They were *like them that dream* when they heard the good tidings. This method of Divine action - long delay followed by a sudden crisis - so frankly recognized by Christ, is one to which we find it hard to reconcile ourselves. These parables help us so far, but they do not settle everything. They contain no philosophy of Divine delay, but simply a proclamation of the fact, and an assurance that, in spite of delay, all will go well at the last with those who trust in God" (Pulpit Commentary).

The call, in spite of what’s happening or isn’t happening, is to have persistent faith. Vehement. Relentless. Unremitting. Dogged. That makes me think of a hound in pursuit of a rabbit. It locks on the trail and begins following. The scent gets stronger and the dog takes off. Sometimes it catches the rabbit in the open and the chase is on – around trees, under brush piles, through the snow. We had a beagle named Sport. He loved to go hunting and chase rabbits. He didn’t like to bark so we didn’t know where he was unless you saw a blur through the trees. But he was dogged in his pursuit.

We’re to have a dogged faith, one that keeps on keeping on.

Each year millions of people make New Year's resolutions. It seems most will be whisked away with the winter wind. Some sources say mid-February is the make it or break it point, others the beginning of the second month and one points to January 12 for athletes who make resolutions. One study says only 1 in 12 manage to keep their resolutions.

I read through their prescriptions for maintaining resolutions. Some of the intended helps were fluff. Other suggestions had substance with parallels, if we alter them, to running the Christian race. We need to remember that we’re human. We fall from time to time. Don't beat up on ourselves. Another is to realize we

need help and strength from an outside source, outside human capability, from the Lord. We move toward him as we seek him in His Word and talk to him in prayer. At the same time we understand we're part of the team. It's not an individual effort. It's a life-long marathon not a one-day sprint.

Followers of Christ are to keep on keeping on "growing in grace" (2 Peter 3:18) and "building up yourselves on your most holy faith" (Jude 20). Maybe you're a fan of spreadsheets and Excel charts...or not. You just like to keep running score in your head. We can ask questions about aspects/spiritual habits in our lives today compared to a year ago. Prayer. That's the focus of the first part of the parable. Are we growing, praying more and not quitting? Studying God's word. Are we learning to learn and feeding ourselves? Fellowship. How's our loyalty to the church family and the overall body of Christ? Giving. Has our dependence upon God as his stewards been demonstrated by the amount we give and the joy with which we give?

Jean and I were talking yesterday about the dire world situation and how we as followers of Christ can have peace. It can be difficult and vary from person to person. This came from the devotional we read talking about the writers of the Psalms: "Their songs and prayers provide us with honest reflections on life and its inevitable pain. They touch us in places we find difficult to access. For example, in Psalm 6:6 David cries out, *I am worn out from my groaning. All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.* The fact that such raw honesty is included in the inspired songs of the Scriptures gives us great encouragement. It invites us to bring our fears to God, who welcomes us into His presences for comfort and help. He embraces us in our heartfelt honesty" (Bill Crowder, Our Daily Bread, 1/23/21).

Spurgeon addresses Christ's question about finding faith: "Do you not think that this, put in a question as it is, invites us to intense watchfulness over ourselves? Do you not think it should set us scrutinizing ourselves as our Lord will scrutinize us when he comes? You have been looking for a great many things in yourself, my brother; let me entreat you to look to your faith. What if love grows cold! I am sorry for it; but, after all, the frost must have begun in your faith. You are not so active as you used to be; that is to be greatly regretted; but the streams run low because the well-head is not so full as it was wont to be; your faith is failing. Oh that your soul were fed upon divine realities! Oh that you had a vivid consciousness of the certainty of God's presence and power! When faith is strong, all the other graces are vigorous. The branches flourish when the root sucks up abundant nutriment; and when faith is in a healthy state, all the rest of the spiritual man will be vigorous also. Brethren, guard well your faith...

"You were converted by a divine agency from your lost estate of sin, and brought by the same divine agency into newness of life: were you or were you not? Unless you are quite certain about this, it is not possible for you to rise to any height of faith. You must know that God has come into contact with your soul, or else what have you to believe? Next to that belief, you must know your full pardon and sure justification through the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ your Lord. Believe in the precious blood: whatever else you doubt, believe in the merit of the great sacrifice of Calvary. Rejoice in your own acceptance through the sacrifice, seeing your whole faith rests therein. O brothers, our eternal hopes cannot be built on speculation; we need

revelation. We cannot fight the battles of life with probabilities; we need certainties for such a conflict. If God has not revealed fixed truth, you may go and think and dream; but if he has given us a clear revelation, let us believe it, and cease to imagine and invent.” (spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-search-for-faith/#flipbook/).

Max Lucado (When God Whispers Your Name, pp. 191 - 195) recalls a Colorado vacation. They decided to climb a 14,000 foot mountain the easy way - drive to a trailhead to hike one mile to the summit. “Our four-year-old Sara had it doubly difficult. A tumble in the first few minutes left her with a skinned knee and a timid step. She didn’t want to walk. Actually, she *refused* to walk. She wanted to ride. First on my back, then in Mom’s arms, then my back, then a friend’s back, then my back, then Mom’s,...well, you get the picture.

“In fact, you know how she felt. You, too, have tumbled, and you, too, have asked for help. And you, too, have received it. All of us need help sometimes. This journey gets steep. So steep that some of us give up. Some stop climbing. Some just sit down. They are still near the trail but aren't on it. They haven't abandoned the trip, but they haven't continued it. They haven't dismounted, but they haven't spurred either. They haven't resigned and yet haven't resolved.

“They have simply stopped walking. Much time is spent sitting around the fire, talking about how things used to be. Some will sit in the same place for years. They will not change. Prayers will not deepen. Devotion will not increase. Passion will not rise. A few even grow cynical...The pilgrim moves on while the settler settles. Settles for sameness. Settles for safety. Settles for snowdrifts.”

He tried to encourage his daughter about what they’d see when they got to the top - a view of other mountains, trees and sky. It didn't work but he commented about trying to encourage her: “Nothing puts power in the journey like a vision of the mountaintop.” Then he shared how followers of Christ are on a hike ascending the mountain of God in heaven where we'll see thousands of angels, God's children living in perfect harmony and above all, seeing God. Everything will be new. The old will be wiped away. Jesus will be there.

“My, what a moment. What a mountain. Believe me when I say it will be worth it. No cost is too high. If you must pay a price, pay it! No sacrifice too much. If you must leave baggage on the trail, leave it! No loss will compare. Whatever it takes, do it. For heaven’s sake, do it. It will be worth it. I promise. One view of the peak will justify the pain of the path.”

His family eventually made it to the mountain top where Sara proudly exclaimed, “I did it!” Max wanted to tell her she didn't, that the others got her up the mountain. “But I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything because I'm getting the same treatment. So are you. We may think we are climbing, but we are riding. Riding on the back of the Father who saw us fall. Riding on the back of the Father who wants us to make it home. A Father who doesn't get angry when we get weary. After all, he knows what it's like to climb a mountain. He climbed one for us.”