

Title: A Judge, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector
Date: June 23, 2024
Subject: When prayer isn't only about prayer
Scripture: Luke 18:1 - 14

Every day 23 billion texts are sent. That's 270 thousand per second. Are you doing your part?

What would you do if you got a text that read: "Jesus is on his way and is expected to arrive at approximately 11:35 AM"? It didn't bother Paul too much as he was waiting. . .for the refrigerator repair technician to arrive. You guessed it. The technician's name was "Jesus" (hay-SOOS).

Though the Lord Jesus doesn't use a text or other means to give the specific time of his return, He doesn't want us to be caught off guard. What is to be done as we look forward to Christ's return? Jesus dips into his repertoire of parables.

Read Luke 18:1-5.

Jesus' audience is his followers. This is one of the few parables where Jesus reveals the point before the story – he wants his people to always pray and not give up. Prayer and perseverance could be treated as separate issues but the Lord brings them together.

Since Jesus makes up the story, he can make the judge's character however he wants it to be. He decides the judge has few, if any, redeemable qualities - he neither feared God nor cared about men. Jesus drives this home by having the judge give the same critique of himself: "I don't fear God or care about men."

He probably was the type who took bribes. Justice to the highest bidder. He didn't respond to the widow because he was hoping she'd incentivize his ruling. However, she didn't have money to pay up front so he'd hear her case and it seemed unlikely she'd give him a kickback if he ruled in her favor.

The widow sought protection and relief. She kept seeking. She wouldn't give up. She may have followed him to where he held court. When he left, she was there to pick up the conversation. She walked with him to his house. The next morning, she was there... again. "Remember Me from yesterday?" Maybe she tried to occupy his court room or engaged in protest: "What do we want? Justice from my adversary. When do we want it? Now." And so it went - on and on and on and on. She bugged the daylights out of him.

The meaning behind the phrasing in v. 5 of wearing out is the idea of giving a black eye. The judge was concerned his reputation would take a hit from having an annoying woman continually hound him and complain about not getting justice. People would question his ability to deliver justice in a prompt and effective manner. The judge finally caved in and gave justice to the widow.

Jesus gives the application.

Read Luke 18:6 - 8.

The character of the judge is important for the contrast it provides. Jesus says the Heavenly Father is nothing like the unjust judge. He isn't an irritable, grumpy, irascible tyrant.

We shouldn't think of persisting in prayer as twisting God's arm to make him act. Ray Stedman told the story of a man who was troubled about our country's moral conditions: "He determined to fast and pray until God sent a sweeping revival to correct the moral degeneracy. He would keep on even until death, if necessary. His strength began to fail and he grew weaker and weaker and finally was confined to his bed. Daily updates were given. He was evidently a man of unusual determination, for most of us would have quit after the third day and settled for a good steak. He went on with his fast until he died. The funeral was widely covered and many lauded his persistence." Stedman asks, "Was that really prayer? No, it was not! It was an attempt to blackmail God. This man was holding his life as a pistol to the head of God and demanding all his money! He was insisting that God move on his terms and according to his time schedule" (Stedman, 6/1/2014 devotional).

Jesus says pay attention to the judge's words: "I will see that she gets justice." The insight we're to gain is that if a self-serving human judge can give what is just, won't the loving and caring Heavenly Father provide justice? He won't keep putting off those who cry out to him. He will see that they get justice and get it quickly.

The word "quickly" stirs up an emotional response in us. Quickly? It's been 2000 years since Jesus was on earth. There's a lot of injustice going around, prayers that have been brought before God for years, for decades and nothing has happened. Yet Jesus says God will act quickly.

How are we to understand "quickly"? Other versions say speedily (ESV), promptly (Berean Standard), swiftly (Christian Standard), soon (Weymouth New Testament) or soon enough (NEB). Those help?

We can't separate the parable from its context of Christ's second coming. Even as the flood of Noah's day and the fire and sulfur raining from heaven during Lot's time happened quickly and unexpectedly, so Christ's return will take place. People will be carrying on with life as usual and then BAM! Christ returns and delivers justice for his people. It will make people's heads spin.

God isn't delaying because he doesn't know what to do or has been caught off guard. It isn't that he doesn't care about people. The parable and the Bible don't so much present a theology of delay as they state the reality of delay. They also provide assurance the Lord will take care of those who trust in him.

The point of the parable isn't to be persistent in prayer in general. That lesson was taught in the parable of a man who was asleep and wouldn't get up to get food to his neighbor who had visitors come to his house in the middle of the night, but eventually got up because his friend was persistent. Jesus concluded the teaching by saying to keep on asking, seeking and knocking.

The Lord's teaching here is to persist in praying that God would provide justice. This will take place when King Jesus returns to usher in the eternal kingdom in all its splendor.

Jesus wouldn't need to teach about persistence and perseverance in prayer if the kingdom was just around the corner. Since there is what's perceived as delay, he doesn't want his people to lose heart, faint or give up. The disciples would put this into practice shortly after Jesus' death. They faced difficulty upon difficulty as they proclaimed Jesus as Savior. The expressed purpose of the parable was to always pray and not give up.

Now, in v. 8, he asks the question “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” What will be the condition of the earth and more specifically of those who are his followers?

The previous chapter compares the conditions on earth at Christ’s return to the days of Noah and Lot. Those who called out to God were an endangered species as there were so few of them. Lot’s uncle Abraham had negotiated with God all the way down to if there were 10 righteous people in Sodom and Gomorrah that he wouldn’t destroy the cities. There weren’t 10. It was worse in Noah’s time. There were only 8 righteous people on the entire earth who were rescued from the flood.

Jesus said the world and people’s souls at his coming will be like they were at the time of Noah and Lot. There’ll be a drought of spiritual vitality, a scarcity of people who truly seek God.

What about those who cling to their faith? Jesus’ instruction is to pray and not give up. Benson Commentary (Luke 18:1): “In the course of his ministry, our Lord often recommended frequency, earnestness, and perseverance in prayer, not because God is, or can be, ever tired out with our importunity; but because it is both an expression and exercise of our firm belief of, and confidence in, his power and goodness.”

There are numerous reasons people use for not praying – think we can do things by ourselves, distractions, discouragement, trials, temptations, delays in answering prayer, sin increasing around us, others throwing in the towel. There are numerous reasons people use for giving up – discouragement, trials, temptations, delays in answering prayer, sin increasing around us, others throwing in the towel.

Matthew West shared why he wrote the song Don't Stop Praying. “Every year I land on a personal theme that becomes a mission statement for my own faith journey. This year’s theme is don’t stop praying. We’ve all been to a place where discouragement can make us wonder if God really hears our prayers. I wrote this song for anybody who’s ever felt like giving up or losing their faith. I couldn’t be more excited to start the new year off with this new song. I hope it encourages anyone who hears it to join me in a commitment to prayer in 2024. Pray for our families, for our friends, for our enemies, for our nation, for our world. God hears the prayers of his people, so don’t stop praying.”

<<<<Video of Don’t Stop Praying>>>>

Though adversity, persecution and injustice suggest that Christ’s coming and the establishment of justice are delayed, even unlikely, we’re to persist in praying for God’s justice. We’re to always pray. We’re to never give up. We’re to remain true to faith in Christ Jesus.

Jesus tells another parable about how we are to view ourselves.

Read Luke 18:9-14.

The audience has shifted. Jesus didn’t segue by saying, “Okay. Now. You guys who think you’re spiritually better than everybody else...” He simply switched gears. Luke puts in what could be considered an editorial comment that helps us understand the point, which this time, is given at the end of the parable.

The Lord spoke to people who viewed themselves as the spiritual elite. They were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else who didn’t measure up. They were judgmental and

critical of others. They thought they had it made in the shade on the downhill grade. The Pharisee felt really good about himself. He studied Scripture, prayed, helped people. Those things were nice, but there was more. He presented himself as one who was indispensable to God. He and God were really tight. God didn't have it so good until he came along. The man felt he had a lock on getting into heaven because of what he was doing. He prayed about himself. Some texts say "to" himself. He really didn't need God except to use as a means to show off his goodness.

His prayer was an awards ceremony where he gives himself the awards: for making time to pray three times a day in the temple - the praying hands medallion. For going beyond what the Law requires, fasting not only on the Day of Atonement but every Monday and every Thursday, the sackcloth ribbon. For tithing my money, produce from my land, income from my business and also when a child gives me a stick figure breaking off a tenth of the sticks and bringing it to the temple, the gold medal. For not being like other people including that tax collector who engage in deplorable sins, for not being like those scums of the earth - the white badge.

He's the kind of guy which it could be said he felt: "I'm just too good to be true. Can't take my eyes off of me. The sight of me leaves me weak. I thank God I'm alive. Going out of my head over me. I love me." He suffered from N E S. Since lots of diseases use the first letter of each word - stands for narcissistic egotistic spirituality. It's often a fatal disease.

The other man who prayed was a tax collector. They had a bad reputation, the result of the many who lied, cheated, stole and colluded with the Roman oppressors. They were hated and despised by most people.

The praying tax collector didn't fit the stereotype. He stood by himself and couldn't bring himself to look heavenward. Something gripped him so profoundly he repeatedly hit his chest as if to say, "Oh you wretched heart." He wished he could beat the evil out of himself. He was so overcome by his sins he could barely get his mouth to form the words "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Most versions read "a sinner" though the word "the" is in the original language. The man didn't feel he was a run-of-the-mill sinner but "the" sinner without equal. He knew the condition of his heart was wicked and sinful. He knew he needed help from outside himself. There was no way he could demand to be in the presence of God. He was a sinner.

Jesus declared the tax collector would go home justified. He had repented of his sin. He was declared not guilty and treated as righteous by God.

The apostle Paul: "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:13 - 16).

The other guy, the outwardly appearing super righteous Pharisee, was in for a rude awakening. He went away as he came - proud, self-sufficient, self-righteous... and condemned. He wouldn't make it to heaven.

One of my favorite verses on the mercy and grace of God is: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Would you say it with me? “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Let's personalize it by putting our names in instead of the pronouns: “But God demonstrates his own love for Doug in this: while Doug was still a Sinner, Christ died for Doug.”

We can broaden the application beyond initial salvation to what Christians are to do when they sin. We can plead for God's mercy, remembering the Lord doesn't want us to sin, but if we do, Jesus Christ speaks to the Father in our defense as he's the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 2:1, 2). We can be like the apostle Paul who cried out: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24, 25). The complete rescue will be when we get to heaven, but God also desires to help us now. We aren't to stay in a state of being a worm that some Christians feel should be our attitude toward ourselves throughout our spiritual lives.

Lauren Daigle in her song “How Can It Be”: “I am guilty, ashamed of what I've done, what I've become. These hands are dirty. I dare not lift them up to the holy one. You plead my case, you right my wrongs.”

We can't fake it with God. He knows the conditions of our hearts. We dare not trust our own righteousness but constantly come to God for his continuing mercy in our lives. The truth is we can easily become like the Sunday School teacher who, having told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, said, “Children, let's bow our heads and thank God we are not like the Pharisee!”

We find a promise in the last part of v. 14. READ 18:14B.

This applies to the issue of salvation and the entirety of a person's life. Those who humble themselves before God, admitting they can't get to heaven by themselves and desperately need what Jesus provides through his death on the cross, will be exalted, become children of God and live forever in his presence. Those who exalt themselves, feel they can earn salvation, deny they need help, will be humbled eternally.

For the rest of life, the outworking of humbling and exalting doesn't always take place on earth. Sometimes those who exalt themselves will be humbled on earth. In high school I thought I could be God's agent during gym class to humble those I thought were arrogant and proud. Guess who had the problem.

The Lord is against those who are proud and serve themselves. Those who are humble and serve others will be rewarded according to God's riches.