

## LEARN TO PRAY

Luke 18:1-14

Thomas Edison invented many things. He kept trying, failing, learning, and trying again until he discovered something that would work. The truth of the matter is that most things we try the first time do not work very well. In such areas, persistence pays off.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus taught about the importance of our taking actions and following through in order to be successful. The formula can be boiled down to three words: ask, seek, and knock. The idea of these three imperatives is that we are to ask and keep on asking, seek and keep on seeking, and knock and keep on knocking.

We find Jesus returning to the idea of taking initiative and sticking to it as it applies to prayer in the first nine verses of Luke 18.

### Pray with Persistence – 18:1-5

<sup>1</sup>Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, <sup>2</sup>saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. <sup>3</sup>“There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>“For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” Luke 18:1-5 (NASB95)

The context of the parable is in conjunction with the teaching in the latter part of Luke Chapter 17. Jesus was asked a question regarding the coming of the Kingdom of God by the Pharisees. After He briefly answered their question, He then addressed His disciples regarding what would be happening in the time period following His death and leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem. (Note that many apply this discourse to what will happen in the “end time” events rather than being fulfilled by the destruction of Jerusalem.)

The exhortation to always pray carries at least two ideas. First: that we are expected to pray rather than NOT pray. Second: that the time to pray is “whenever.” Prayer (talking with God) is always appropriate. The Greek word translated “always” is *pantote* and can mean in “all kinds of times.” The admonition is not that we are to go into our prayer closet and remain in a state of isolation at all times. It helps me to think of it this way. If you are awake, then you are probably communicating with someone. You may be talking to a friend or family member, but most likely you are talking to yourself. We are always processing information and we do that with words. As we think about something or as we “mull over” an idea, we are essentially carrying on a conversation with ourselves. If we have a problem, then we try to figure out how to handle it. We rack our brains for ideas and think through possible outcomes and consequences before we actually deal with an issue. I think what Jesus was saying was that we need to be carrying on that conversation with God. Instead of asking ourselves what we should do, then we should be asking Him what He would want us to do. By doing this we are expanding our resources beyond ourselves and tapping into the power of the Holy Spirit.

Many of the problems we encounter and attempt to solve have solutions that are beyond our capability to do what needs to be done. If you are in conversation with God (Who is all powerful) then it becomes a natural next step to ask Him to act on our behalf.

The alternative to this kind of prayer is to “faint” or give up. The Greek word for “not to faint” literally means “not to give in to evil, to turn coward, lose heart, behave badly.” This parable would then apply to many different responses we **might** have when we are confronted with difficult situations. The range of responses when confronted with evil could be on the extremes of our participating in the evil, we might just be passive and do nothing, or we might

take inappropriate actions to oppose the evil and find ourselves also behaving badly. Just as an example, we could consider the Abortion issue that we are confronted with today. We could give up and give in and go work for Planned Parenthood (participating). We could do nothing (passive). We could go bomb abortion clinics (behaving badly). The other alternative is to pray and seek the Lord's wisdom and then follow His direction.

Jesus introduced the cast of characters in the story that was illustrating His point about prayer. The first character is the judge. Jesus set this illustration and painted a picture of an example of a really terrible and uncaring judge. He later used this as a contrast to God Who is good and perfect in all things. This judge was not guided by his conscience (did not fear God) and he was not guided by the opinions of other people. He was not concerned about the wrath of God nor the criticism of people. These two things naturally go together. If a person does not respect nor honor God, then he is not likely to have any respect for anyone else. You get the idea that the only person this man cared about was himself. He was driven by selfish motives. At the same time, he was a person of considerable power and influence and because of his position could force others to do his bidding.

The next character (the widow) is introduced in the first part of verse three. (The third character (the adversary) is also identified in this verse.) In that society, a widow was an example of someone who was (for all practical purposes) powerless. She came to the judge and did not demand help, but plead for help. She was not asking for revenge or any advantage over another person but was seeking "fair" treatment or justice. She is presented as a stark contrast to the judge with regard to having influence and she was conducting herself within the accepted decorum of the day (she did care what people thought).

The third character in the parable is "the adversary." This is a person who was apparently doing harm against and taking advantage of the powerless plight of the widow. As crass as our society has become in the last several decades, most of us still have a sense of indignation against anyone who would take advantage of those who are defenseless and powerless. That feeling was not so much the case in the society of the first century. There were unscrupulous people who looked for those they could take advantage of. We know from the local news that some people are still practicing the same scams today.

The scene is set up with the characters and the situation: bad judge, poor widow, mean adversary that leads to a constant outcry for justice from the poor widow to the bad judge about the mean adversary. So what does the judge do? Let's look at verses 4 and 5.

The first thing we see is a delay in any visible action on the part of the judge. The delay is a result of his not caring about what is right or what is justice for the widow. Since he cares only for himself, his action is prompted by what will help keep **him** from being bothered. This is not a good example of being properly motivated, but it got the job done.

How does this parable apply to the disciples and how is it related to the discourse that Jesus gave at the close of Chapter 17 about the coming tribulation?

1. The judge is an antitype of God and His nature.
2. The powerless widow is a type of the church (the elect) who were going to undergo pressure from the adversary and had no status or influence on those in civil government. This was the experience of the early church in the 40-year period between AD 30 and AD 70. (Alternate: The powerless widow is a type of the church at any time and especially during the end time.)
3. During this time, the adversary was the Jews who were persecuting them and literally ran the Christians out of Jerusalem. (Alternate: The adversary is represented by the devil and the evil spirits that seek to thwart the purposes of God through the church. Some might even argue that

this is referring to the anti-Christ.)

So, what can we learn from this parable. We find the lessons in verses 6-8.

### Pray with Faith – 18:6-8

<sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; <sup>7</sup> now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? <sup>8</sup> “I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” Luke 18:6-8 (NASB95)

The idea presented is that if an unjust judge who is motivated by the reasons given in verses 4 and 5 will eventually decide in favor of justice, then how much more will the Righteous God Who wants only the best for His people also carry out justice on behalf of His people. Look at the contrasts between God and the unrighteous judge:

The judge did not know nor care about the widow – God knows and cares for and protects His own.

The widow had an adversary who persecuted her – The church had and has adversaries who persecute

The judge delayed for lack of concern – God delays so that the work of redemption can be done

The widow was all alone in her pleas for help – The church have many who agree when united

The widow had to keep her distance from the judge – We are invited to come boldly to the throne of grace

The widow came to an unrighteous judge – We come to a righteous Father

The widow had to plead her own case – We have an Advocate with the Father

The widow had limited access to the judge – We have no limitation but are to cry out day and night

The widow's constant asking provoked the judge – Our prayers are a delight to the Father.

As part of Christ's teaching on prayer, He gave them another narrative to illustrate the kind of attitude we should have when we pray.

Have you ever known anyone who thought he or she was the greatest, most talented, smartest person who ever lived? So many times these folks aren't any better off than the average person, it is just that they think they are. Then, there are others you meet who seem to be almost apologetic for just being alive. These are somewhat extreme examples of the various personalities that we encounter as we deal with people in our daily walk.

Most of us react to these two types the same way. The arrogant and proud person, we try to tone down or resist; while we want to try to encourage the humble person and get him to see himself in a better light. If we are honest with ourselves, then we can probably find elements of these two personality types residing in each of us. We have the potential to be either of these two types. Which will we encourage and which will we resist?

### Never Pray with Arrogance – 18:9-12

<sup>9</sup> And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ Luke 18:9-12 (NASB95)

These two men represented the extremes of the socio-religious order of that day. The Pharisee was the religious one who was respected by the community and was held up as a “good example.” The publican (a tax collector) was probably not into going to religious gatherings or having fellowship with other folks. He was not likely to have any real friends except fellow tax collectors and was despised rather than respected in the community. We learn a little more about the Pharisee in the introduction that Luke used: trusted in himself for his righteousness and he looked down on others.

A lot can be read into the description of how the Pharisee prayed even apart from the words he used. The KJV says that he “stood and prayed thus with himself.” You could interpret

this as saying that he stood apart from the rest of the people and this is probably correct. Although he was probably not so far away that they could not hear him. In his arrogant self pride, he was not likely to rub shoulders with lesser beings if he could help it. You might even be able to conclude that he prayed with himself rather than praying to God. He might as well have been praying to himself, for it is doubtful that God was giving any heed to his prayers. He was more interested in impressing himself and others with how great he was rather than trying to draw near to God. The NIV translates this part of the verse as “he prayed about himself.”

Three times a day the devout Jews stopped whatever they were doing and entered a time of prayer. What a great opportunity for a person to draw closer to God and to seek His help in daily life. This man wasted the opportunity by concentrating on his exalted opinion of himself rather than realizing that he had great needs. Instead, he chose to compare himself to the dregs of society and this made him seem to be outstandingly better. There is nothing wrong with being thankful for having been delivered from a life of crime and uncontrolled passions; however, it is wrong for us to take the credit for it. When we see people whose lives have been ruined, then we should not feel pride that our lives have not been ruined, but rather should experience humility, knowing that, but for the grace of God, it could be you or I.

The Pharisee was not only proud of not being involved in evil things; he was proud of not being employed in a despised occupation. He also took pride in his religious activities of fasting and tithing more than the law commanded. The law of Moses required only one fast per year and that was associated with the Day of Atonement. During the time of captivity in Babylon, the Jews fasted four times a year. To fast weekly was a lot and to fast twice per week was going far beyond the requirements of the law. Tithing was required on the increase one received such as the produce of the ground (and even the herbs), wages received, etc. But this man tithed of everything he possessed. Again, this was going far in excess of the requirements of the law.

Why was he going above and beyond the requirements of the law? While we should not judge him and his motives, his own words bring their own judgment. People will make great sacrifices in order to build up themselves and to be viewed as “great” in the eyes of men. This is pure and simple PRIDE. He may have convinced himself that he was doing all these extras to please God; however, it was not working since God knew his heart. This ability to convince ourselves that we are doing things for pure motives while the actual motivation is purely selfish and an effort to make ourselves look great or super spiritual is a constant danger for every person.

A sure danger sign for all of us to be vigilant for is when we count our blessing and that process turns into a “how great I am” session. We are all very blessed people. Good advice is to remember that all human advantages are only hindrances if they nourish the old Adam.

When we are critical of other people for what they do or the way they approach God or their lack of spiritual depth or spiritual commitment or whatever the topic, then we need to be looking around for the sin of pride that is lurking at our door and its desire is to overcome us.

#### Always Pray with Humility – 18:13-14

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> “I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:13-14 (NASB95)

The other extreme that Jesus presented in this story is the tax collector. He got even farther away from the majority of the people, and for a completely different reason than that of the Pharisee. Here was a person who did not feel worthy of coming up close to the altar area. Additionally, he didn't want anyone else to hear what he had to say to God and he would not even look up as he prayed. His prayer was simple and it was genuine. He simply asked God for mercy. He knew that he was not perfect, he knew that he needed help, he knew that there was nothing that he could do to earn the favor of a righteous and holy God. Knowing these things, he had no other recourse except to appeal to the mercy and grace of God. He knew more about the nature of God than the religious Pharisee would ever know. The words of Jesus regarding being justified summed up the outcome and results of these two approaches to prayer.

We look at this scene and we are "turned off" by the person who was so proud of all that he did and especially by his attitude that showed he thought that he was better than someone else. We'd like to reach out and help the publican find a way to a better life. If we react in this way to these two (and we aren't perfect), how do you think God reacts? God resists the proud and He exalts the humble.

Jesus used the term justified to describe the reaction of God toward the humble man. In other words, he received a favorable judgment from God. We use that same term in describing the salvation experience. In fact, the action of the publican is very much like what is done when a person turns to God for salvation. First of all he turned to God for help (he went to the temple to pray), he was a person that was not proud (he was hesitant to join the rest of the people near the altar), he recognized that he had done wrong (he called himself a sinner), he realized that he could do nothing to help himself (simply asked for mercy). If we follow this path, then God will still justify.