

Luke 18:1-8

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[0 : 0 0] I don't do resolutions, not because of any great principle involved, but really because I've failed so miserably on numerous occasions that the prospect of failing again is a very depressing one, so it's best just not to do them at all. Now, I should say I'm just sharing my own perspective on the matter. I'm not in any way being prescriptive on this. If you have resolutions and if you've set yourself resolutions, good on you, and I trust that you do well with whatever resolutions you've set, presuming they're good ones, which I'm sure they would be. However, if I were to venture into the realms of resolutions at the beginning of this year, I would hope that prayer would be a likely candidate to establish or set a resolve, a resolution in the matter of prayer. It's got to be a good thing to pray. It's got to be a good thing to pray more. And so, as I say, if I were to resolve, then perhaps that would be an area that it would be helpful to resolve in.

Well, leaving aside the advisability or otherwise of resolutions, it is the case that the start of a new year is a suitable time to reflect on the place of prayer in our lives as believers. I want to spend a little time doing that this evening with the help of the passage that we've read. There can be little doubt that Jesus understood prayer as a daily activity to be something that was to characterize his disciples.

You remember, of course, the occasion when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and he taught them by providing them with what we ordinarily call the Lord's prayer. And within that prayer, one of the petitions is, give us this day our daily bread. And in that one petition, without thinking about it or thinking about any of the rest of the prayer, just in that petition, the implication is very clear that this was something that a disciple ought to do on a daily basis. Our bread is required daily, and we ask for it and indeed give thanks for it every day. And on other occasions as well, it's if not explicit, implicit, that Jesus sees this as what is reasonable to expect of a disciple.

But prayer that is persistent is difficult. It's not difficult for us to agree in principle that to persevere in prayer, to be persistent in prayer, is a good thing. I can't imagine I would hear any dissenting voices this evening to the proposal that it is a good thing to persevere in prayer, to be persistent in prayer. That's easy to agree. It's another matter to actually practice what we are persuaded of. The reformer John Calvin gives his own take on this matter of persistent prayer, and I can only presume that he did so born from personal experience. What he says very much sounds like something that somebody would say from personal experience. Let me quote what he says on the matter of persistence in prayer. He says this, we know how uncommon and difficult a virtue is persistence in prayer. That's a very honest declaration from Calvin, and I'm sure it wasn't simply him observing the limitations of others, but also sharing from his own life and experience.

And Jesus knew that his disciples found it difficult to persevere in prayer. That is the reason why he gives them this parable. There would be no purpose, there would be no sense in giving a parable, encouraging persistence in prayer, if it wasn't an issue. If his disciples found it very easy, then why teach them? Why encourage them to do something that they were already doing with no difficulty at all? Clearly, they did find it difficult. Jesus knew that that was so, hence the concern of Jesus. He knew his disciples. He knew his disciples then, those who surrounded him, and he knows his disciples now. In this regard, disciples are the same from generation to generation.

[5 : 28] And what does Jesus do, conscious of the difficulties that his disciples have in this matter? Well, perhaps he could have rebuked them. It would have been legitimate for him to have rebuked them, but he doesn't rebuke them. There is a place for rebuke, but on this occasion, that is not the way he deals with this weakness of the disciples. Rather, he gently and firmly encourages them with this parable.

And I think it is possible to do something gently and firmly. And I think that's what we have here. There is a firmness, as we'll see in a moment, but there's also a gentleness in his approach to encourage, to exhort his disciples in this matter. In the passage that we've read, there in Luke chapter 18 and the first eight verses, Jesus presents a duty concerning prayer in verse 1. And he then, in what follows in the parable, he encourages his disciples as to the performance of that duty. So he says, this is what you ought to do. And then he gives the parable, he tells the parable to help them do what they have to do. We're going to spend more time just on the beginning of what Jesus says, the duty commended. But then we will spend a little time seeing how disciples are encouraged in the performance of that duty. First of all, though, what Jesus says at the very beginning of the chapter, then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. So at the very beginning we're told what the purpose of the parable is. It is to show the disciples, to encourage the disciples, to make it clear to the disciples that they should always pray and not give up. So let's just think about that, this duty that is laid upon his disciples.

The way we'll think about the duty is by looking at three of the words that Jesus employs, or certainly that Luke employs in relating to us, the parable that Jesus gave and the reason why he gave it. And the three words, as we look at them each, will each of them illustrate or reveal one aspect of this duty that we find presented here at the beginning of the chapter. The first word that I want to draw your attention to is the word should. There in verse 1, then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. This word that is translated here in verse 1, should, is sometimes translated in other contexts, it is necessary. So Jesus told them a parable to demonstrate to them that it is necessary for them to pray always. And it conveys the idea, the sense of compulsion. The same word is used by Peter in the book of Acts in chapter 5 and in verse 29, when Peter is wanting to emphasize the obligation upon him and upon believers to obey God. And he says in that verse, we must obey God rather than men. And there that word, we must obey God, is the same word that we have here. There is this idea that it is a matter of obligation, of compulsion to do this.

It's not simply a choice to be thought about and, well, different people can come to different conclusions. No, we must obey God rather than men. This is the language that Jesus uses here or that is used of Jesus. He is saying that disciples should always pray and not give up. Why does he choose this word or why is this word employed? Well, Jesus is making clear that prayer is not simply a good thing. It is a good thing. It's not simply something that is highly recommended to disciples. We could think of all the benefits that come from prayer and, on the basis of that, highly recommend prayer. And of course, we could do that and it would be reasonable to do that, but Jesus is going beyond that. He is saying that it's something that is required of his disciples. It is something that we should do. It is certainly a privilege, but it is also a duty. Now, in stressing this aspect of duty, I readily recognize or acknowledge that I have much sympathy for the commonly expressed view that we ought not to lay some heavy guilt trip on ourselves or on others, shaming others or ourselves into prayer. I agree that that can be an unhelpful approach, but we do need to avoid different extremes or both extremes. And I think it would be an extreme to ignore this aspect that Jesus stresses concerning the duty of prayer, that the obligation that is laid upon us to be men and women of prayer. Yes, it is a good thing. Yes, it is highly recommended. Yes, there is much to be gained and much benefit to be had from prayer, and we can stress all these things to encourage people to delight in prayer and to do so gladly and willingly, and that is all good. But we also recognize that Jesus presents prayer as a duty, as an obligation that is laid upon us. A happy obligation, a blessed obligation, if you wish, but an obligation all the same.

Well, that's the first word that I want to just stress or that I have just identified. But I also want to notice another word that we find here at the very beginning as the duty is commended. When Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray, this word always, we are to always pray.

[12 : 02] We might say, well, yes, we agree that prayer is important, persistent prayer, and persevering prayer, but how often are we to pray? How regularly are we to pray? Well, the word that is employed here, the goal that Jesus has in the parable is to encourage his disciples to always pray. The idea of the word is not, this wouldn't make any sense, it's simply not possible. The idea is not that we pray continuously. We can't do that. We can't be constantly praying. That's just not possible.

But rather, the idea is that we are to pray regularly and persistently. As we turn to the parable, we'll do that in a moment, but just at this point we could turn to the parable and see how the parable further explains the meaning of always. The widow who is presented to us in the parable, her plea was persistent and constant. But also we have the application of the parable that Jesus makes in verse 7, and he says, and will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? And so those words of Jesus, day and night, interpret if you wish this word always.

Day and night, regularly, persistently. We maybe could add the idea of always speaking of or pointing to the opportunity and indeed the obligation to pray in all circumstances, at all times, in every kind of circumstance and situation. What Jesus is speaking about is not daily prayer meetings, but a permanent attitude and practice of prayer, the cultivation of a communion with God where speaking to him becomes ever more natural and spontaneous. We ought to pray. We should pray, and we should pray always.

Then there's a third word here that is translated, and not give up. The word give up. We're not to give up. And with this phrase, we appreciate what we mentioned a few moments ago, and that is that Jesus knew his disciples, and he knows his disciples today. He knows that we are prone to give up. Again, there would be no purpose in an encouragement not to give up if that wasn't a temptation, if that wasn't perhaps the reality for the disciples that he's speaking to. He knows that it is. Hence, the challenge and the encouragement to not give up. Again, the word here that's translated give up in other versions is variously translated as lose heart or become discouraged, and maybe those are words that resonate a bit more with you and your own experience, the reality that sometimes we do lose heart, that sometimes we do become discouraged. Maybe as a result, we give up. And I wonder, I ask you, this evening, does this sound familiar to you? Does this sound very personal to you? Is this you?

Is this you being described? The one who loses heart, the one who becomes discouraged? Maybe now you're discouraged in this matter, and as a result, have given up, or are close to giving up, or in some measure have given up. Well, be encouraged, if that's how you feel. You're clearly not alone. Jesus was conscious that that was true of his own disciples, those who were around him and surrounding him and walking with him and following him. They were discouraged. They knew what it was to lose heart.

[15 : 53] You are certainly not alone, but don't give up. That is the call, the encouragement of Jesus.

Well, this is the duty commended. This is the goal that Jesus has with regard to his disciples, that they would always pray and not give up. But he then tells them a parable, and there's much in the parable that we could draw on, but we're going to limit ourselves simply to identifying that the principal encouragement that Jesus gives through the parable to his disciples, that they would always pray and not give up. Again, we make the point that Jesus' response to this reality, this problem, if you wish, is not to simply rebuke his disciples, not even to simply instruct his disciples and say, well, this is what you should do. He is using the language, or the language of obligation is being used, but he doesn't just say, this is something you ought to do. He doesn't say to his disciples simply, you ought to pray, you ought to pray always, you ought never to give up. He encourages them by means of the parable that he tells. Now, the type of parable that we have here is one that Jesus employs a number of times. It's of the how much more variety. God is not being compared to an unjust judge. Strictly speaking, that's not what's happening, but rather what is being done is that

God is being contrasted with the unjust judge, and that is an important distinction. We possibly use the words compare and contrast almost synonymously, but there is a difference. It would be wrong to say that God has been compared to this unjust judge. That would be a wrong thing to do. How could you compare God to such a man? But he has been contrasted with this unjust judge, and the logic is clear.

If the unjust judge eventually answers the widow's plea, which he does, how much more will God answer the cry of his disciples? And the weight of this logic, the weight of this how much more is appreciated by noticing the dramatic contrast that can be drawn between the unjust judge and God in this matter of responding to the plea of the one who approaches him. And let's draw that contrast and as we do, try and feel the weight of the argument, and as we are able to feel the weight of the argument, so be encouraged to pray always and not give up. What I've identified from the parable, and perhaps we could identify more, but I've identified four striking contrasts between the judge and between God. And as we see each of these contrasts, each is intended to be a prod and an encouragement to pray as we see how God stands in such stark contrast to this man who does respond eventually, but he does respond. How much more are God? The first contrast that we can notice, a very obvious one, is that the judge is a stranger while God is our loving Father.

The widow goes to the judge because he's the man she has to go to, but he's a stranger. He's a stranger to her and she's a stranger to him. There is no relationship of any meaningful kind between them, and that creates, of course, a distance between the widow and the judge. But how different for us as we pray, how different for us as we approach God, we're approaching not only the one who is able to do all things, we know that is true of God, but we're approaching the one who is our Father in heaven, the one who loves us, the one who has brought us into his family, the one who has provided his own son to secure our belonging to his family. That is the one we approach. How important it is for us to have a clear sense of our personal identity as Christians. We are sons and daughters of God, a God who knows us, a God who loves us, and who does so as his sons and daughters.

[20 : 45] If an unjust judge eventually responds to this widow, how much more are God who is our loving Father? Another contrast, and some of these contrasts, they overlap somewhat, but another contrast we can identify is that the judge is largely unavailable, while God is always available. That's the problem for the widow.

She's not able to secure an audience, not in any meaningful way. The judge isn't willing. Perhaps in some cases, he's not able to attend to her. There are so many to attend to.

But that's not true of our God. Whatever you are, whatever your circumstances, however tentative your approach, your Father is available, and he will give you his undivided attention.

That's something we can't comprehend. We can't get our heads around. How is it that God can give me his undivided attention when there are so many clamoring for his attention? But that is the reality. He is able to give us his undivided attention. Another contrast that we can draw from the parable is that the judge presented to us here in the parable is indifferent. It's not just that he's unavailable. He's indifferent to the plight of the widow, even when it is known to him. It doesn't cause him any distress. It doesn't cause him great concern. The fact that she is in great need of justice is of little concern to him.

Well, that's not true of God. The contrast is that God is one who is intimately interested in you and in your every circumstance. Indeed, in the case of the judge, he's not only indifferent, he's also irritated by the widow and her constant pleas. Not so, your heavenly Father. God invites you to pray.

[22 : 53] He is the one who wants you to pray. He delights in hearing you when you do pray. And as a result, he is the God who answers quickly, to use the very language that Jesus employs in explaining the parable. There in verse 8, I tell you he will see that they get justice and quickly. Now, when we read of this promise, really, this description of the way in which God responds, it's not to be understood with immediately, but rather that he will respond, God will respond at just the right moment and in just the right way. But then a final contrast that we can draw to give weight to this encouragement that is being given to us to pray is this, that the judge is unjust. That's how he's described.

He's an unjust judge. While God, the one we pray to, the one we approach, is just and righteous. We can be confident that God will always do the right thing. When we come to God with a burden, with a concern, with a fear, we don't know what is to be done. We don't know what God will do, but we can be sure that he will do the right thing. Whatever that may turn out to be, it will be the right thing because he is just and he is righteous. And he will always answer your prayer in a manner that is consistent with his justice and righteousness, that is an absolute coherence in God.

His action is always consistent with his character. And so, in the matter of answering prayer, that will also be so. Of course, what that does mean, this acknowledgement that God is just, that God is righteous, it does mean that we have to respect his call, his prerogative to make a call, and the call that he makes in relation to what we pray. It might be not what we wanted. It might be very different to what we expected. It might be very perplexing, the manner in which he responds.

From our perspective, it might seem quite inadequate, but we have to acknowledge that God knows what he is doing, and what he does will always be coherent with and consistent with his justice, his righteousness, and his love, the love that he has for us. He will always do the right thing. And so, in this way, by means of this parable, by means of this contrast that is drawn between the unjust judge and our loving Heavenly Father, the disciples who were struggling to pray, who were struggling to persist in prayer, who were tempted to give up, who were losing heart, who were discouraged in this matter, Jesus gently and yet firmly encourages them to pray always and to not give up.

Well, in the light of these verses of the Bible, we can say that we know what Jesus expects of us. We know that our duty is to pray always and not to give up. We've heard the manner in which Jesus encourages us to pray, and now it's over to us. It's over to you. Pray. Pray always. Don't give up.

[26 : 21] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we readily acknowledge, not gladly, but readily acknowledge that we are so prone to give up, so prone to lose heart, so prone to become discouraged. How lacking we are in perseverance and persistence in the matter of prayer. We have no difficulty in mentally acknowledging, in recognizing what a good thing it is and what a blessed thing it is to come to you in prayer. We have no difficulty in readily acknowledging what a wonderful gift prayer is, and yet we also have to acknowledge that so often we do lose heart. We do become discouraged in this matter. Lord, we thank you for Jesus. We thank you for the fact that he knows us. He's not shocked by our prayerlessness. He is disappointed by it, but not shocked by it. He saw that in his own disciples, but we thank you that as he sought to encourage them, so he also would encourage us. We pray that we would be encouraged, but we pray that we would also have a clear sense of the duty that is laid upon us and that we would see this call to prayer as a duty that we ought to perform, that we would know your help and your encouragement in so doing, but that we would indeed be true to who we are and to this calling that is laid upon us. We thank you that when we do come to you. We come to the God who loves us. We come to the God who knows our circumstances, and we come to the God who does all things well, and so we can come and lay before you our every burden and our every concern, our every doubt, our every fear, our every request, and do so in that sure and certain confidence that you heed us, that you will answer us, and that you will do the right thing, and these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.