

The Parable of The Persistent Widow

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[0 : 0 0] Do you pray? Do you pray in a regular and systematic way? Do you set aside time every day to pray to God? Perhaps a very short time, but a time that is set aside for that purpose every day. Now, those questions are not difficult questions to answer. Each of them has a yes or no answer. The matter that they concern is a matter that can be very difficult, but the questions aren't difficult. We can simply, honestly, in our own hearts and minds, answer the questions, as I hope you have done, as they have been posed to you. It is very clear that Jesus understood daily prayer as one of the characteristics of a faithful disciple. We remember well the occasion when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, and His response was to provide them with what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, as I suppose a kind of model that would instruct them as to how they should pray. And we know that within the Lord's Prayer there is, among other petitions, give us this day our daily bread. Now, that petition by itself carries with it the very clear implication that Jesus assumed that they would pray daily. The petition makes no sense if it's not being asked on a daily basis. So, Jesus took that as a given, that His disciples would pray in that way, in that regular way, that they would have within their daily daily basis. So, let's see, a daily basis for prayer. It would be a daily basis for the prayer.

It could be a daily basis for the prayer. It could be a daily basis for the prayer. It could be a daily basis for the prayer. But persistent prayer, prayer that is regular and persevering is very difficult. It can be very tough.

Now, maybe there are times in our Christian life where prayer is not difficult. Perhaps many of you can identify occasions or seasons or periods in your life that your life as a Christian where it has not been a difficult thing? Would it have been something that you delighted in and you sought out the opportunities? That maybe is your situation today, and if it is, well, thank God for it. But I'm sure it is the case for many of you as you look back on your Christian life, those of you who are Christians, or perhaps as you observe and examine your Christian life today. It may well be, and I suspect it is the case for some, perhaps many of you, for many of us, that that is not your situation, that prayer is difficult, and it is tough to persevere in prayer. I think we can all find it fairly straightforward to agree in principle that persistence and perseverance in prayer is a good thing. I can't imagine anybody protesting against that affirmation. We all agree, it's easy to agree, yes, that is a good thing, but it's quite another matter to actually practice that which we are persuaded of in our own minds, as it were. I wonder if you can relate in a measure to what I am saying. I imagine that many of you can.

And if you can, be assured of this, that you are not alone. It has been the experience of Christians through the ages that it is difficult to persist day after day, week after week, month after month, indeed year after year, in persevering in prayer. If I can just mention what John Calvin says on this very subject of persistence in prayer. And as he spoke concerning this matter, I think in fact in connection with this parable, and he says as follows, we know how uncommon and difficult a virtue is persistence in prayer. But never mind what Calvin has said on the matter, not that it's unimportant, but let's listen to what Jesus has to say on this very matter. And what Jesus has to say as he tells his disciples a parable that addresses this matter of persistence in prayer. We've read the parable in question in Luke chapter 18. If your Bibles aren't open there, I'd encourage you to have them open there in Luke chapter 18. There, Jesus addresses this matter as he teaches his disciples. And of course, that teaching which was given to them has now been provided and has been preserved for us so that this evening we can also listen to and learn from the teaching that Jesus gives. Now, as we consider the parable, the way we're going to do so is to focus our attention principally on what is said in verse 1.

In verse 1, we have presented to us what Jesus' intention is in giving the parable, what the lesson is that he wants his disciples to learn, what the objective of the parable is, if we want to put it in that way.

[5 : 55] And as we consider the verse, we'll be able to discover what it is that Jesus was concerned that his disciples would learn. So, we will be considering particularly what we find there. We will, of course, then proceed much more briefly to consider how this parable achieves that objective. There would be merit, of course, in concentrating our attention on the parable itself. But the manner in which we're going to do this this evening is a slightly different way. First of all, think what it is Jesus wants the disciples to learn, and then more briefly see how the parable serves that purpose.

But before we do consider these verses in the manner that we've described, I just want to notice an implication of the parable that is, I think, very comforting for us. The implication of the parable, or to put it another way, the very fact that this parable exists and that Jesus thought it necessary to teach his disciples by means of this parable, assures us and communicates to us that Jesus knew that his disciples found persistent prayer difficult. He knew that they struggled in this matter of daily, regular, persistent prayer. It was this reality, this reality of the disciples, and Jesus' knowledge of this reality that provides the *raison d'être* of the parable. And though a couple of thousand years have passed, we can be sure that disciples haven't changed that much. We are not, I'm sure, that different in many ways to the disciples that surrounded Jesus and to whom He taught in this way. We, like them, still struggle. And Jesus still knows that we struggle. So, what does Jesus do about it? What does Jesus do, given that He has this knowledge that His disciples struggle to be faithful in this matter? What does He do? Does He rebuke them? Well, that is not the manner in which He deals with this problem, if you wish, this important issue. Rather, what He does for them, and He does for us, is to gently encourage us by means of this parable. But moving on to what we had indicated is what we want to do, and that is to establish what it is that He wanted His disciples to learn. And we're told that in verse 1. So, we'll start with the what of verse 1, as in what does Jesus want His disciples to learn? Then we will move on, and time, I suspect, will mean much more briefly, to consider the how.

That is, how are they to discover or be persuaded of these lessons by means of the parable that is given?

So, I hope that is clear. The first question then is, what must the disciples learn concerning prayer? And the answer to that question is found in verse 1, without a need to go further. In verse 1, we have the answer to that question. What is it that they are to learn? What is it that Jesus wants them to learn? We read there in verse 1, then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them. And then what follows gives us His objective, gives us the lessons that He's trying to impress upon them, to show them that they should always pray and not give up. Even in these few words, there are three words, which as we think of them briefly, will, I think, answer the question. What is it that the disciples must learn concerning prayer? The first word which we want to notice is the word should. There in verse 1, He told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray.

The word that Jesus uses here is a word that is sometimes translated, it is necessary. And it conveys the idea of compulsion. To maybe illustrate it and give that a little bit more life. Notice how that same word is used by Peter in Acts chapter 5 and verse 29. And there we read in that verse, Peter and the other disciples replied, we must obey God rather than men.

[10 : 46] The occasion is when they are before the Sanhedrin and the Sanhedrin are wanting to forbid them from preaching the gospel. And Peter's response is, we must obey God rather than men. This is the word that is used here by Jesus, translated should. It has this idea of compulsion. It's not simply that it is a good thing, coming back to this parable, not just a good thing to pray, not just a healthy thing to do, but there is this sense of compulsion. It is something that the disciples should do.

Jesus then, even in the use of this word, is making clear an important truth for us to to grapple with and to take on board. Prayer is not simply highly recommended for the disciples. It is indeed highly recommended, but it's not just highly recommended. Prayer is both necessary and required of disciples of Jesus. It is something we should do. It is a privilege, but it is also a duty. And these two things are not contradictory. These two things can and do go together, certainly with regards to prayer. It's a privilege to pray. But for the Christian, it is not only a privilege, it is also a duty. It is something that we should do. We can maybe better understand why that is so when we just consider for a moment what prayer is. Prayer is more than a petition. If prayer was only petition, then we might say, well, it's a good thing to be able to ask God to help us in the circumstances we find ourselves in. If we thought prayer was only intercession, we might say, well, isn't it a good thing that I can help somebody I love by praying for them? And of course, it is a good thing. But we know that prayer is not only these things. Prayer is also an opportunity to praise God. Prayer is also thanksgiving, where we thank God for all that He has done for us, all that He is. Prayer is also confession, where we come confessing our sins before Him. And as we understand all that is involved in prayer,

I think it helps us to better appreciate why it is that Jesus presents prayer as a duty. It is something that we should do. Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them, to show them what? To show them that they should always pray. So, that first word gives us the first element of what Jesus wishes His disciples to understand. But then there's another word there in verse 1 that immediately follows. It says there that they should always pray. They should always pray. It's established that we must pray.

The next question would be, well, how often are we to pray? How regularly should we pray? And the answer Jesus gives is a clear one. Jesus says that His disciples should pray always. The meaning of the word is not that we should pray continuously, as in without a break. That evidently isn't possible.

It's not practical. But what it does mean is that we should pray regularly and persistently. This is the idea behind the word always. Regularly and persistently. And maybe we could think of other adjectives that would enrich the idea. But certainly these aspects or these characteristics of prayer that is regular and persistent. And of course, the parable that follows further explains the meaning. The widow's plea to the unjust judge was persistent. It was constant until she received the answer she was looking for.

[14 : 40] Indeed, as the parable is explained by Jesus, there in verse 7, we find the expression of, in the application of the parable, of praying day and night. And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones who cry out to Him day and night? We are to pray always. This is what Jesus wanted His disciples to understand. And as we think of that word always and all that it covers or implies, we could maybe add the idea of in all circumstances. Our circumstances can be so varied. We can have a good day. We can have a bad day. Everything can be going swimmingly or everything can be going terribly for us for a multitude of reasons. Perhaps our own sin, the opposition of others, just life. So many different circumstances we can be in. Jesus wants us to know that whatever our circumstances, it is right and proper that we should pray. We should pray always. Now, it goes, I think, almost without saying, and yet I'm now going to go on to say it, that this does not imply a daily attendance at a formal prayer meeting where we gather with others to pray. Now, that is a good thing to do, of course. But what Jesus here is speaking of is not requiring that, indeed is not satisfied by that, but rather the idea is of this permanent attitude and practice of prayer. As we would cultivate our communion with God, and as we do so, speaking to Him will become both natural and spontaneous.

Though even then, we will find that it is on occasions difficult to maintain in the manner that Jesus is recommending. So, we have the second word. This is that helps us to see what Jesus wants His disciples to learn. He wants them to learn that prayer is a duty. It is something that they should do, not just a nice option if they choose to go down that road. No, if they are disciples, then they should pray. He also wants them to understand that the manner in which they should pray is persistently and regularly. They should pray always. But then there is a third, a word that in English is translated as a phrase. They should always pray and not give up. They should not give up.

And here again, this emphasizes what we were noting a few moments ago as to how well Jesus knows His disciples. He knows them well. This isn't somebody in an ivory tower, you know, indifferent to or oblivious to the real world of His disciples. Giving a discourse on prayer, but disconnected from the real life that His disciples are living. No, He knows them well. He knows that they struggle. He knows that they do give up. He knows certainly that they are tempted to give up. He knows that they struggle in this matter as we are. And there are so many reasons why we perhaps are tempted to give up. Sometimes we succumb to that temptation. Perhaps when we don't receive the answer that we long for. Perhaps when there seems to be a silence from heaven. We've sung in a Psalm of how God answers us from heaven. But is it not the case sometimes that there seems to be no answer? And our prayers don't seem to be reaching

God at all? And when that is our perception, then we are tempted to give up. Maybe that which we are looking for, that which we are seeking from God, seems so unlikely, seems so difficult that it would ever happen. And so we are tempted to give up. And Jesus says to His disciples, and this is what He wants them to learn. He wants them to learn that this is something they should not do. He understands that they are tempted to do so. He appreciates the reasons that there are that would lead them in that direction.

But what He wants them to discover and to learn is that they ought not to do that. That they should not give up. This phrase that here in verse 1 is translated, that they should not give up, is in other versions translated in slightly different ways, with the same basic meaning. But as we just notice one or two other ways it's translated, it maybe just gives us a richer picture of what is being said. It can also be translated that they should not lose heart, or they should not become discouraged. And again, when we think of these terms, maybe especially they should not become discouraged. Is this not something that we can all relate to? Does this not sound very familiar and very personal? Discouraged in prayer? Discouraged, perhaps by our struggles in prayer, or perhaps discouraged because there isn't the answer that we certainly are looking for, or in the timeframe that we would desire. And Jesus wants His disciples to learn this, that they should not become discouraged. Jesus knew His disciples then, and He knows His disciples now. And if you are discouraged, then, and this is a bit of a tongue twister, but be encouraged that you are not alone in becoming discouraged. Jesus knows that this is often the reality of His disciples, and He would encourage you not to become discouraged, and encourage you that if you are, you are by no means alone. Perhaps you are struggling to keep going in prayer. Well, join a very numerous club of other

[20 : 57] Christians who are in the same boat. But as you recognize that, still, the lesson that Jesus would have have you learn, as He would have had His disciples learn when the parable was first delivered, is don't give up. Don't be discouraged. Don't lose heart in this matter of Eddie in particular. Well, these are the lessons that Jesus wishes to impress on His disciples. As the verse says, to show them. Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them these things. This is what He wants them to learn.

This is the what of verse 1 is how we described it at the beginning. But there follows in the parable the how. The parable is the how they are to learn these lessons. The lessons are there. The lesson plan, if you wish, has these as the objectives. That the pupil should learn that prayer is a duty. That the pupil should learn that He should always pray. That the pupil should learn that He should not be discouraged.

That's clear. That's the objective. That's the purpose that Jesus has in mind. But how is He going to achieve that? How is He going to secure that learning objective in His disciples? Well, He does so by means of a parable.

How is He going to secure that learning? Those of you who are teachers will know much better how that works. In a lesson plan, you have an objective that you're trying to achieve and you have to discover, well, what teaching methods will I use to reach that objective?

Well, in this case, Jesus uses a parable for that purpose. He doesn't simply tell them. Jesus could have done that. He could have gathered His disciples round and said, Disciples, I want to give you a lesson today about prayer.

[22 : 47] Now, the first thing I want to say to you is that prayer is something you ought to do. Okay, are you taking note? Just note that down. That's the first thing. You ought to pray. And His disciples would have nodded and said, Yes, Lord, that's good. Okay, we've got that.

And then He could have said, Now, the second thing I want to tell you is that you must always pray. Are you hearing that? You must always pray. Yes, Lord, we've heard that. And then He could have said, And by the way, you'll probably be discouraged sometimes.

Well, you shouldn't be discouraged. You shouldn't give up. Okay, is that clear? And the disciples could have said, Yes, Lord, that's wonderful. We've got the lesson. He could have done it that way, but He doesn't. He wants to impress upon them this lesson by the means of this parable.

He wants to encourage them. If He had simply limited Himself to saying these things, maybe the disciples would have said, Well, yes, we knew that. The problem is we don't know how to do it. So, He encourages them by means of this parable. Now, the type of parable He uses is of the how much more variety.

There are different kinds of parables, and you can categorize them up to a point. And this parable is of this kind, of the kind where the teaching works in this way, how much more. So, something is given, and then it's how much more.

[24 : 02] In this case, the unjust judge, and then there is how much more does God answer and respond. Now, as we do move briefly to just think about some of what is said in the parable, it is important to be clear that what Jesus is doing is not comparing God to the unjust judge.

He is contrasting God with the unjust judge. Now, that may seem a very, what shall we say, a technicality almost.

But I think there is an important distinction between the idea of God being compared to the unjust judge, which actually creates a whole lot of problems. How can God be compared to this wicked man? But he's not being compared to the judge. He is being contrasted with the judge.

I think we can appreciate that there is a significant difference in these two things. So, let that be clear. What is going on here is a contrast is being painted rather than a comparison being made. There are parables where it is a comparison, but in this one, it is a contrast that serves the purpose of the parable.

The logic, if you want to use that word of the parable, is clear. If the unjust judge eventually answers the widow's plea, how much more will God answer the cry of His people?

[25 : 31] And the weight of the how much more is appreciated by noting the dramatic contrast that can be drawn between the unjust judge and God.

And that's what we're going to do now. Just briefly, in this one single way, consider the how of the parable by making that contrast or developing that contrast that there is between the unjust judge and God.

And as we do develop that contrast, the purpose of the argument is that we would feel the weight of the argument and so be encouraged to pray always and not give up.

I want to suggest that there are four striking contrasts between the unjust judge and God, particularly in this matter of how they respond.

What are the four contrasts? There's maybe more contrasts that you might be able to notice or identify, but four that I want to mention. The first one is this, that the unjust judge is a stranger to the woman, while God is our loving Heavenly Father.

[26 : 47] This woman has to approach the man who happens to be judge. He's an unjust judge. She possibly has never met him before. She is a stranger to him, but he is a stranger to her. There is no relationship between them.

Perhaps there's a duty of care on the part of the judge, but he's a stranger to the woman. But God is no stranger to his people. God is no stranger to the Christian.

God is no stranger to his disciples. He is our loving Heavenly Father. And so the contrast is clear. If a stranger to this persistent woman eventually answers her, how much more will our God, who is our loving Heavenly Father?

In order for us to feel the weight of the contrast, it is important for us to have a clear sense of our personal identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, as Christians. Because if we don't have a clear sense of who we are as Christians, sons of the living God, then we won't feel the weight of this contrast.

But if we appreciate who we are as Christians, as those who are trusting in Jesus, as our Lord and Savior, and so given this great privilege of being sons of God, then the weight of the contrast will be much more significant.

[28 : 05] Well, this unjust judge, a stranger to the woman, eventually responds, how much more our loving Father in Heaven? That's one contrast we can see.

Another contrast is that the unjust judge, as the parable makes clear, is very difficult to get hold of, certainly difficult to get his attention, difficult certainly to get his concerned or undivided attention.

Well, our God is always available, always ready to hear us, always willing to listen to us. You know, wherever you are, however slow you are to approach Him, whatever your circumstances, however tentative your approach, He is available and will give you His undivided attention.

The unjust judge, how difficult it must have been for this woman to get his ear, as it were. However, I imagine He would have been very adept at avoiding this woman, no doubt, and it's only a parable, so this is, in a sense, simply playing around with words, as it were.

But you could imagine if He had servants, He would give them instructions, if this woman ever comes, you know, I'm not in. I really have had it up to here with this woman. How difficult for this woman to get his attention and the great contrast that is given.

[29 : 27] Not a comparison, but a great contrast that for God and for us, as we approach God, we have a God who is always available to us.

That's a second contrast. Another contrast that we can make, and some of these, there are elements of overlap, is that the unjust judge is indifferent to and also irritated by the widow.

Whereas our God who is in heaven, He invites us to pray. He is delighted to hear our cries. The contrast is so stark.

The unjust judge, annoyed by, irritated by, this woman who comes at Him and is there and there and there and won't give up.

And our God who is delighted when we come. Delighted when we come. Indeed, as the parable is then explained in verse 8, we are told how God is ready to respond so differently to the unjust judge.

[30 : 31] I tell you, He will see that they get justice and quickly. Now, the word quickly here, just to clarify, shouldn't be misunderstood as being synonymous with immediately.

Jesus is not saying that we will receive necessarily an immediate answer to our prayer. Certainly, God hears us immediately and is concerned for us, and in a sense is dealing with the matter that we bring immediately.

But the answer we receive will often not be immediate. But the idea is that it will be at the right moment. Just when it is required, at that moment, we will receive the answer that God determines for us.

And so, another contrast. The unjust judge, indifferent to, irritated by the widow, but our Father in heaven invites us to come and is delighted when we do.

But one final contrast, in a sense, the most obvious one, even using the language of the parable. The unjust judge is, and this is no great revelation, unjust.

[31 : 41] That's the way He's described. He is an unjust judge. And what a contrast with our God. Our God is altogether just, altogether righteous.

The difference is, the difference is, between night and day. And as we appreciate that the one we approach in prayer is just and righteous, it also helps us, I think, in being willing to accept the manner in which He answers us.

We must respect His call. When we pray, it's God's call, if you wish, the manner in which He answers, the answer that He gives.

It's up to Him. He may answer in a way that we think is inadequate. He may answer in a way that we find very perplexing. But we must rest in the confidence that as one who is just, as one who is righteous, that He will do the right thing by us, even if it proves for us difficult and perplexing to understand.

So, these contrasts that I think we're intended to draw from the parable, with what purpose that they would add weight to the lesson that Jesus wants to impress upon His disciples and on us?

[33 : 02] If this indifferent, hostile, unjust judge eventually responds to this poor widow, how much more your Father in heaven will do so.

So, in the time that we have spent briefly considering this parable, we have reached a point, I hope, where we know what Jesus expects of us.

He has showed us. He has showed us that we ought to pray. He has showed us that we ought to do so always. He has showed us that we ought not to be discouraged.

We ought not to give up. We ought not to lose heart. But we have also heard, very briefly, the manner in which Jesus encourages us to take on board these lessons as we have contrasted, as the parable does, this unjust judge with our loving Heavenly Father.

Now, it's over to us. It's over to you. The Word of God is before us. It's been presented to us. Now it's up to us what we will do with it.

[34 : 16] And I trust that we will all, in response, pray. Pray always. And not give up. Well, let us pray. Let us pray.