**Luke 18:1-8** October 13, 2019

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*Luke 18:1Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. 2He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. 3And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’*

*4“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’ ”*

*6And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? 8I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

As we are now finding out, one nice thing about kids getting mostly grown up is that they have figured out what they can ask for, and what they had better just not even bring up. It wasn’t always that way. You know: Back in the old days pushing the shopping cart down the breakfast cereal aisle, with the three-year-old hanging one-handed off the front of the cart, pointing with the other at Lucky Charms with new rainbow horseshoe marshmallows, “Mom, we *NEE-EE-EED* those!” And in the toy aisle, and worst of all in the candy bar lined check-out aisle. You remember the continual pleas for junk food, toys and candy.

As we grow up we learn better. Part of being an adult is knowing when to stop asking, and when to not ask at all. Yet, God says we sometimes need to act like children: child-like—not childish—child-like. Did Jesus not, at another time, tell his disciples to have child-like faith? Here today, Jesus teaches us another way we Christians need to be a bit more like children. He says, ***“Always pray and [don’t] give up.”*** In short,

**Jesus Tells You, “Be a Pest to God!”**

To bring this point home, Jesus told a parable. He told a parable, an earthly story that teaches about God’s kingdom. His story was about a most despicable man, a judge. . He had been given a public trust, but he couldn’t have cared less about anybody except himself. ***“In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him*** ***with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ ”*** He couldn’t have cared less about her either. She was of no influence. She had nothing to offer. She had no relative to make him toe the line. And it being the ancient world and she a woman, she didn’t even have the legal standing to bring a case to court.

Which is precisely why Jesus put these two in his parable. This man, like a renegade sheriff in the Old West, didn’t have to follow the law because he *was* the law. And she, being a widow, had absolutely no power—legal, financial or otherwise. None.

As Jesus tells this parable, a problem arises. Jesus is talking about us and God and prayer. But where is God in this story? All we see is a godless, loveless judge. Is this the God to whom we pray? You see, we like our parables to line up with real life. In this column you have the details of the parable, and over here in the other column all the points of real life match up perfectly. Many of Jesus’ parables do this. They line up parable details with real life application. This means this and that means that. But it doesn’t work here. Jesus is talking about prayer, but it is unthinkable that this most ugly power abuser, the unjust judge, is a picture of our God.

Jesus, being a master teacher, does not use the same teaching outline in every lesson. So in this parable he follows a different teaching method. He uses a “lesser to greater” argument. Jesus tells us that if this crumb is going to finally give justice to this widow even though he doesn’t want to, don’t you think your loving heavenly Father is going to give you what you need? ***“Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”***

God does hear. He is concerned. He will answer our prayers. And God is most pleased when we become pests with our prayers. He loves it when we come to him again and again. It shows that we really do have faith. We really do trust that he hears and listens.

Yet while the judge may not be a picture of God, we do well to consider how we *do* resemble the widow. She comes with no basis to put her case before the judge. So it is in our prayer. We have no right to plead for God’s favor. We have sinned and we continue to sin. This is the human condition. All the great names of the Bible (other than Jesus himself, of course), brought their prayers to God in great humility. Remember Abraham pleading for Sodom, calling himself nothing but dust and ashes. Many great believers prayed like that. That is why we often end our prays with those words, “…in Jesus’ name.” We cannot come to God in our own name. We are unworthy. We come in Jesus’ name, because he has paid the guilt of our sins. Because of Jesus, God listens to our prayers. Because of Jesus, we can humbly come to God time and again.

But here is the sticking point. In fact, the main point of this parable. At the beginning, ***“Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”*** Then at the end he restates, ***“Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”***

***“Who cry out to him day and night.”*** We nod our heads, “Yes, yes, Jesus. Thank you for reminding me. We should pray often, more often than we do. What a good picture. What a good parable. Even a decent sermon. Yes, note to self: ‘Pray more often.’” And we walk out of here, to our favorite Sunday restaurant and don’t even pray over the food we eat. We go home and watch the next 7 hours of football and forget any thought of God until that one hour at 10:30AM next Sunday. This evening we flop into bed, feeling no need to trouble our weary minds with bedtime prayers. Tomorrow we wake to an alarm, hit the snooze button until we have not one extra second. We get to work with hair still wet, McDonalds breakfast sandwich in one hand as we clock in with the other. Time for prayer? Hardly!

If we are actually going to ***“always pray and not give up”*** it needs to be more than a fleeting pious thought because we just won’t make it! Make yourself one of the Twelve. Listen to him unfold the story about the unjust judge and the persistent widow, and hear him declare, ***“Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?”***—and feel the shame. Find yourself trying to dodge Jesus’ gaze as he looks at you. You know the truth, and you know that Jesus knows the truth. Rare are the times you cry out to him day and night. And when you do, it is far more from selfish desperation than abiding faith. How many are the meals received without a conscious word of thanks, how many the days begun without a request of his guidance. How often you have felt burning temptations and not cried out to him for strength, how often felt the hurt of insult and injury and not committed your cause to him who created you. When you do pray the well-known Lord’s Prayer, how many of those words were merely rattled off without an ounce of thought or conviction. We are nothing like this persistent widow, are we?

Jesus’ admonition that we frequently and continually pray requires, first of all, repentance. I am not a continually praying child of God. Yet these words of Jesus are from the very one who has known our sinfulness and died for it, nailing it to the tree. And so as I stand there with the Twelve disciples, I feel waves of shame and then relief and finally commitment to thankfully mold myself to what Jesus tells me here.

This story of a judge and a widow is no cute story. This is what a Savior who wants me in heaven says to me, “Pray! Christian, pray!”

Like any other project, this requires more than noble sentiments. It requires an assessment, a plan, discipline. We need to realize that there are reasons we don’t pray as often as we should.

If you are like me, the biggest reason is distractions. I start to pray sitting there at my desk in my office, and there just to my right is the computer. As soon as there is a break in my prayer thoughts, my mind is drawn to that computer. There is work to be done, interesting facts to be discovered. Maybe for you, it is your phone on the end table. The effort required to close your eyes, and concentrate on thanking, praising and asking of God is not as easy as what that phone offers with its portals into an infinity of entertainment and information.

Another obstacle is unworthiness. Sometimes it is an unworthiness we feel, but which is not real. I’ve heard it in people who say, “I don’t know if God can ever forgive me for this.” But Jesus can and did. Pray! Sometimes it is an unworthiness which we don’t feel but we really do have – like when a couple chooses to live in sin without the commitment of marriage; or when I am unforgiving toward another person. As Psalm 66 reminds us, *“If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened”* (v.18). The Lord listens to sinners, but not people who love sin.

But the biggest obstacle to prayer is this: prayer is work, spelled capital W-O-R-K. For all but a few people, prayer is hard, very hard. It requires us to concentrate, to put all the things we would rather do, and think about, and talk about and worry about and put them to the side. We have to take our overstimulated minds and tell them to be quiet, and then to talk to God—not a thoughtless rush of words, but a meaningful account of our sins, our disappointments, our desires, our joys, our hopes.

If that sounds difficult, if the “discipline” of prayer is intimidating, good! Because now we are being realistic about prayer. Every athlete needs a routine. Long gone are the days when the athletes could play their game in the afternoon and spend the evenings in the bars, lazily relying on their God-given athletic abilities. Modern athletes have to have discipline and routine. Christians realized this about prayer many centuries ago.

That’s why your mother taught you bedtime prayers, and your father your mealtime prayers. And if they did not, then start, and start teaching or at least modeling better prayer habits to the next generation. Create habits, routines, work-out schedules of times and places for prayer.

Secondly, pray with structure. Prayer books like these, especially benefit our over-stimulated minds that have difficulty focusing [holding up a couple prayer books]. In these books you find prayers laid out for nearly all of life’s circumstances. Also there are outlines for prayer that you can carry around in your head. There is the ACTS—the “A-C-T-S”—outline of prayer that I would be glad to teach you if you ask. Many learned Christians have suggested that the Lord’s Prayer is actually an outline for prayer. It kind of makes sense that the One who spent entire nights in prayer taught us the Lord’s Prayer (which takes me 19 seconds to pray) that he taught it not to be the be all and end all prayer, but the be all and end all *outline* for prayer.

Being aware of the obstacles to and the aids for prayer (especially times, places and structure), these are crucial to frequent prayer. Then we can actually take Jesus’ interesting parable about a judge and a woman and not just be entertained, but taught. Dear Christians, how I hope that this afternoon, this evening, you will be led to say not, “That was a decent sermon,” but that you will be led to change something about the way that you pray to God.

It sounds like your pastor has things all worked out, right? Oh, dear friends, this is a message that makes me hang my head in shame. For while I am pretty sure that not a day passes without me saying a prayer, how far short I fall of what my Savior would have, and what I have just said to you. Yet, I encourage you that you follow not my example but the example of the one named Jesus, whose disciples when they couldn’t find him in the early morning hours often found him out in the countryside praying, Jesus who spent the last hours before his arrest praying so earnestly that the sweat fell like drops of blood, Jesus whose followers following him to the end heard his last words from the torture of the cross to be words of prayer. May that, not my words, be your reason to be a pest to God, to pray and never give up. Amen.