

August 12, 2007
Always Pray and Never Give Up
Luke 18:1-8

The disciples were not a lot different with their spiritual lives than we are. They struggled with prayer just as many of us do. They probably questioned whether prayer made a difference. They probably wondered if God even cared whether or not they prayed. Some of us may wrestle with these very issues as well.

The story is not difficult to follow. There are only two major characters in this parable: A widow and a judge. The story introduces the plight of the widow first. In today's world a widow can be a very powerful and successful person. She can be a respected and honored member of society. Lady Bird Johnson, who died just a few weeks ago, comes to mind. Even after her husband passed away, Lady Bird continued to have significant impact in shaping America. She put her influence behind many worthy causes and was a respected and honored person.

But in the ancient world the widow was not likely to have such a place of honor. Usually a widow was powerless and helpless. She usually was unemployed and always unemployable. The loss of her husband condemned her to a life of misery and poverty. She was not a person to be envied. Widows had to beg on the street corners just to survive and sometimes had to resort to prostitution. Their lives were spent in a daily struggle to merely find enough food. If they had small children, their plight was even more frightening.

To make matters worse someone was causing this poor widow woman added grief. We don't know what the problem was but some individual was abusing this widow woman. Perhaps this adversary owed this woman money and would not pay. Whatever the problem, this person was making the already miserable life of the widow even more painful.

What could the widow do? She was penniless and powerless. She was unemployed and unemployable. She had no contacts in the world, no one to be an advocate for her cause. How could she possibly find relief?

There was only one thing the woman could do: She had to go to the local judge in town and throw herself on his mercy. She could plead her case before him and hope that he would intervene and help her. Maybe he would have compassion and respond to her dilemma.

There was a problem. Enter character number two in our story—the judge, the big, bad judge. The Bible tells us in one very terse verse that the judge feared neither God nor was he a respecter of men. The woman had a problem.

The judge was not a compassionate person. He was not a person of love or mercy or kindness. The judge did not care about what was right, only what was advantageous. The judge was a man who simply did not care about other people's problems.

Here is the picture. A widow is poor and powerless. She is unemployed and unemployable. She has no contacts and no influence. She goes to a judge who simply doesn't care. He does not fear God nor does he care about other people.

The poor woman has no choice. She goes to the judge and tells him her story and he predictably laughs in her face. Time and time again she goes to this hard-hearted judge and the judge refuses to lift a finger to help the woman.

But the woman does not give up. She continues to see the judge even though he ignores her pleas for help. She goes back to the courthouse day after day. The woman has no other choice. Either the judge helps her or her life is ruined.

Finally, the judge has enough. The lady is driving him mad. Every day he comes to his court and this widow woman is standing there waiting for him. He grows tired of this woman pestering him and so finally he shouts, "I've had enough. Okay, tell me your problem and I'll see if I can help." At last the judge gives the woman the justice she was seeking and the story ends on a happy note.

What is the moral of this story? Is the moral of this parable: If you pester God long enough, he will finally grant your prayer? Perhaps there are some who think so. After all we are accustomed to badgering people to get what we want. If our kids shadow us day and night pleading for something, usually at some point we give in. If our husband day and night whines about buying those new golf clubs, eventually the wife says, "Okay, buy the clubs but quit your whining."

If pestering works with others, maybe it will work with God. If we just bother God long enough, God will eventually see things our way. Is that what this story teaches?

Jesus told this parable to help his disciples understand that prayer makes a difference. Pray, Jesus said, and keep on praying. It kind of sounds like Jesus is saying to us, "Just keep on badgering God and he finally will give you what you want."

I think a great many people read this parable in exactly this fashion. If God doesn't answer your prayer at first then just keep on pestering him. Every day just go to God and bang on his door and shout, "Listen, God, listen to me, God." After awhile God may just get tired of you and decide to answer your prayer.

After all, before God we are like the widow. We stand before God spiritually impoverished, powerless. We are frail creatures with the stain of sin and unworthiness all over us. We have no recourse other than just begging God day after day for his help.

Maybe we think that God is a pretty busy God. He has to hear the prayers of billions of people, not counting having to keep the universe going 24/7. He has a lot on his mind. He doesn't have time for our prayers and petitions. The only thing for us to do is to continually go before God and just hound him day and night until he finally listens to us. Maybe if we plead and beg and grovel long enough before God, he will have pity on us and answer our prayer. Right?

Some of us are probably thinking that if that is what it takes to get God's attention, then forget it. I don't have enough energy to pray like that, to badger him and beg him day after day. Thus, maybe there are those here this morning who have given up on prayer.

Listen closely. That is not what this parable is teaching. The parable of the widow and judge is a story of contrast. It is a parable of opposites. What Jesus is telling us is that you are not like the poor widow and God is not like the judge.

As a child of God you have connections with God. You are heirs of all that God has made. The entire universe belongs to you. You have connections with God. You are not like the poor and powerless widow. You have standing before God that you can scarcely imagine.

Moreover, God is not like the judge. God is a Being of incredible mercy, justice and compassion. God seeks to hear our prayers and desires to answer them in ways that will help us grow as human beings. God is not at all like the judge and we are not at all like the widow. The parable helps us to understand how important we are to God by using contrast.

You have no idea how important you are to God. Sometimes you may not feel very special, but you are special. You have been created in the image of God and there is something of God in every one of you. When you pray, God always pays attention. He listens to your every heartbeat and is involved in your life more than you can possibly understand.

Years ago I was visiting the office of a very important CEO in Dallas. He was a very busy man but gave me a few minutes of his time to discuss an important matter regarding our city. It took me several weeks to get an appointment with this very important executive, and I was honored that he was willing to spend a few minutes with me.

While visiting with him, the telephone rang and he excused himself and answered the phone. He spoke for ten minutes or so on the phone. It was obvious that he was speaking to one of his children. After he hung up he apologized for taking the call but then said, "I've told my kids that anytime they needed me, day or night, to call. I will always take my kid's calls. They are a priority for me above everything else."

That is the way any loving parent feels about his children. And that is exactly the way God feels about you. When you pray, God listens. Every whispered prayer has God's attention.

Now I know what you are thinking. If God is involved in my life, then why are there so many bad things that happen to me? Why is the world the way it is if God is so involved? Okay, let me try to help you with that thought by suggesting three truths that this parable teaches us about prayer.

One, *God pays attention to what you pray.* No matter how trivial your prayers are, God is interested in your prayers. When you speak to God, he listens. He is a Father who cares about every one of his children. And he has all the time in the world for you. God is not on a time schedule. He doesn't worry about time. He is above time. Because God is above time he can leisurely listen to all of our prayers and not feel the pressure of time.

Second, *God answers your prayer according to his purpose for your life.* God has a plan for you and he knows best how to help you become the human he created you to be. How difficult it is to understand that the purpose of life is not to get what we want, but to more fully grow as a human being.

Prayer for too many of us is an attempt to **use** God rather than allowing God to use us. We look at prayer rather like going to the grocery store and getting what we want. The purpose of prayer is to draw closer to God, not in order to get what we want, but in order to be strengthened by God's presence.

A wise parent realizes that if he steps in and solves all of his child's problems, then the child will never grow and mature into adulthood. A *Helicopter Parent* is a parent who hovers over her child, rescuing the child from every adversity. Consequently, the child never learns to grow from the pain and adversity of life.

God listens to our prayers and understands all about us, but his plan for our lives is not to make us comfortable and prosperous. His plan is to teach us how, by losing our lives for Christ's sake, we discover a far more rewarding way to live.

Third, *God encourages you to pray*. God desires for you to speak with him. He is desperately interested in your prayers. In prayer, a way is opened for God to enter into your heart. Prayer opens a channel for God to connect with you. Prayer puts you within listening distance of God.

God is not too busy for you. Even now God seeks for you to enter into conversation with him. Jesus tells this parable to encourage you in your prayer life. The way to God is not difficult. He waits for you to come to him in prayer.

I am sure that there are many people here today who are struggling with some problem or issue. Week in and week out you live with a heavy heart because of some issue that weighs you down. It seems that no one can help. The parable that Jesus told so long ago invites you to take all your problems to God in prayer. Pray every day and you will discover a renewed strength, a refreshed heart. In prayer God will lead you beside the still waters; he will assuredly refresh your soul.

DeDe and I love our two boys. From the moment we learned of their conception we pledged our lives to them. Our desire was to help them become the very best they could be. Sometimes we couldn't give them what they wanted because we knew it wasn't in their best interest. But we were always there for them, listening to them, encouraging them and trying our best to help them in ways that would really help them.

As much as any parent loves a child, God's love for you is infinitely greater. He loves you more than you can possibly imagine. He is there helping you to become the very best person possible. Go to him in prayer. Go to him every day. Take all your cares before him. Jesus says, "Always pray and never give up. Pray. Pray. Pray." Amen.