

Character: Widow

October 16, 2016

Luke 18: 1-8:

¹Jesus told his disciples a story about how they should keep on praying and never give up: ²In a town there was once a judge who didn't fear God or care about people. ³In that same town there was a widow who kept going to the judge and saying, "Make sure that I get fair treatment in court."

⁴For a while the judge refused to do anything. Finally, he said to himself, "Even though I don't fear God or care about people, ⁵I will help this widow because she keeps on bothering me. If I don't help her, she will wear me out."

⁶The Lord said: Think about what that crooked judge said. ⁷Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to him day and night? Won't he be concerned for them? ⁸He will surely hurry and help them. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find on this earth anyone with faith?



The basic gist of today's parable about the persistent widow, at least on the surface level, is to be, well, persistent. The parable's context for us today is really about being persistent in our prayers. As I thought about the events in our church these past two weeks, I thought, "What a hard parable this is". Many, if not all of you, have been praying for Brent Janak since last October. I'd guess there were literally hundreds of prayers lifted up each day for Brent to get new lungs. So this is a hard parable. When we read, "*Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to*

"Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to him day and night?"

him day and night", we say or think, what about our prayers for Brent? What about our prayers for healing, God? Well?



I am right there with you. It is natural to question, to want answers. Losing someone so loved and so prayed for seems to fly in the face of our faith. It makes us angry, it maybe makes us rail against God. In this parable, we may be tempted to identify God as the unjust judge. In the case of Brent and in other instances where we prayed for something that we thought was good or right, when God did not 'answer' our prayers, it seemed like God did not care, did not ensure us of fair treatment. I know these thoughts run against our accepted view of God as a loving, caring, benevolent Father. This is our vast experience with God – loving, caring, merciful. But at times, we do question, we do have doubt.

In the context of Jesus' day, the judge would have been under the Law to defend the widow. From early on in Israel's history, all too often a widow was a common and easy target. A widow had no one to stand for her, to defend her, to advocate for her in court. In Isaiah 1:17, the Law reads: *"See that justice is done. Defend widows and orphans and help those in need."* This would be a judge's duty in Hebrew society. But by Jesus' time, the judges worked for the Romans and most were corrupt. Bribes were often the common means of attaining "justice". So with no one to defend her and no money to pay a bribe, the widow was simply ignored.

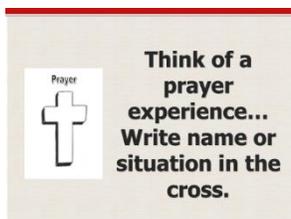
"See that justice is done. Defend the widows and orphans and help those in need."

Day after day she was ignored. But she knew she deserved justice so she kept after the judge. She was persistent. *“Even though I don’t fear God or care about people”* was what the judge said to himself. Oblivious to God and God’s Law and far past caring what people thought of his corrupt self, yet still deciding to give the widow her justice. Why? *“If I don’t help her, she will wear me out.”* Justice has been served, just go away now.



Now that we have an understanding of the practical part of the parable, let’s go back to the opening verse: *“Jesus told his disciples a story about how they should keep on praying and never give up.”* At first glance, Jesus is telling us to just keep on praying. He uses the example of the widow who would not give up until her request was answered to illustrate how we should persevere in our praying.

Now, in the parable, the judge could have sent her to prison for her pestering of the court. But that was below even his low standards. But that would have been the end of her badgering and probably of her prayers for justice. We experience something similar in our prayer lives. We pray and pray for healing, but someone passes. We pray and pray that our parents won’t get a divorce, but they do. There are times when we get an answer that we do not like. But there is an answer. We pray and pray and pray and God does give us an answer, just not our answer. This can be difficult. It can be hard to accept.



In the pew you will find a small piece of paper with the word "Prayer" at the top with a cross below it and some writing implements. Take a moment to think of a prayer experience in your life when you took something or someone to God in prayer over and over and over, but the eventual answer was not what we wanted. When you think of that experience, please write a word in that cross that signifies this experience for you. It could be a name or a word that represents that situation. Tuck that away for a few minutes.

So what do we make of all this? *"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."* Jeremiah 29:11 promises us that God has plans for our good, for our welfare.

"For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope."

God has plans for each of us for a future with hope. We know that life will bring us testing. Life will bring us times of pain and suffering. There will be trials.

1 Corinthians 10:13 speaks of this: *"No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone."* Life, at times, is a challenge. But the verse goes on, *"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."* With God, we can make it.

"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."



Many times in life, the trials are when we grow the most in our faith. We come to the point of not being able to do it or bear it anymore on our own, and we turn to God. Our trust must then fall fully upon God. Sometimes we need to get to this point. Our faith calls us to pray through these trials and hard circumstances. Our duty as Christians is to pray. We are told to pray to God without ceasing. We are called to pray not so that God answers our prayers how we want him to, but to become more dependent, reliant, and obedient to God. We pray and pray and pray to remind ourselves that we need God in our lives. We pray and pray and pray to God to acknowledge God's sovereignty.

"In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith — being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." When we have prayed fervently and without ceasing, when we have prayed with persistence like the widow, when we have laid our faith on the line, then we have prayed in ways that are pleasing to God. Our faith will be found genuine and we will bring praise and glory and honor to God. Because of our persistent prayers, God will walk with us through the trials and struggles. In some cases, God will carry us. When we turn to God over and over and over in prayer, we will walk through the fires and come out on the other side. Mere mortals, also known as non-believers, will be amazed. They will wonder how we could get through, how we could make it. They will desire what we have. We model walking through the trials with God.

When we do rely fully upon God, when we remain persistent in our prayers and in our reliance on God alone, when we have been through the trials, then our faith grows. There is a cycle here. As our faith grows, we learn to rely more on prayer and on God. James 1 speaks of the joy of this cycle: "² *My brothers and*

"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance."

sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, ³ *because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance."* We need to read this correctly.

James is not saying to be joyful because we of our trials. He is saying to be joyful because faith in trials produces growth in our faith, through an ever-increasing willingness to persevere by trusting more fully in God.



Pair Share:
How did this experience with prayer change or affect your faith?

Please take that paper with a cross and a word on it back out. Think for a moment about how God did answer that prayer. In just a moment I am going to ask you to turn to someone and to share how this experience affected or changed your

faith. It may have caused your faith to grow. It may have caused you to wrestle with God for a time. It may have caused you to question or doubt. You will each have about a minute to briefly explain what you wrote on the cross and then to share how you experienced God at work through this prayer experience. You may still be in the midst of it. If so, explain where you are now. I ask that the older person begins the time of sharing. Go!

"Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to him day and night?"

"Won't God protect his chosen ones who pray to him day and night." Friends, it is not about God answering the way we want. God does protect us, his chosen ones. Through our persistent prayers, God builds up our faith. Through our persistent prayers, God strengthens our reliance upon him alone. By always building our faith, God is protecting us. Just like our parents who wanted us to always be learning, always be maturing, always be growing so that we could face whatever life brought our way, so too does God work to prepare us to live a life and pray like we fully rely on God alone.

CHARACTER:
WIDOW



Why didn't God heal the person that we prayed and prayed for? Why didn't God stop the divorce and heal the parent's relationship? These are questions that are not answerable in our limited human understanding of God. On the one hand, we know that God *could* have brought healing or reconciliation. In our weakness, in our brokenness, in our grief, we may ask these questions. God is okay with that. God wants honesty. But they are questions we do not get definitive answers to. We may hear stories of how God worked through that life that was lost to save others. We may later learn that the divorce ended a miserable relationship but yielded two beautiful remarriages. We pray and pray and pray and we do hear little miracles that seem to answer our prayers in a way. Sometimes we do not even have these comforts. In these cases, we must trust that God alone is in control and that God alone knows the plans established for us.

We would be remiss if we did not also acknowledge that God does seem to answer prayers at times. In the Old Testament we have examples of where prayers to God do change God's mind. Moses intervenes and God relents in punishing the Israelites. We have examples of where God does directly answer prayer. Elijah calls upon God to bring down fire and the sacrifice on the altar is completely consumed. We have experiences where we have prayed for something very specific and the prayers worked. This too builds our faith. This too builds our trust.

To illustrate this point, Bill Hybels tells about an interesting experience after a baptism service in their church. He writes: "I bumped into a woman in the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, 'No, I'm struggling.' She said, 'My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I'm crying is because I came this close to giving up on her. At the 5-year mark I said, "Who needs this? God isn't listening." At the 10-year mark I said, "Why am I wasting my breath?" At the 15-year mark I said, "This is absurd." At the 19-year mark I said, "I'm just a fool." But I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith I kept praying. Then she gave her life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of prayer again."

Remember last week, when I asked if you remembered when you had been separated from God and how God drew you back into relationship? We talked about this being part of your story of faith. This week I asked you think of and

share a powerful experience when God answered your prayers. It may not have been how you were asking, but you can vividly see God's answer. Can you remember a time when prayer led you to feel the presence of God in a real and tangible way? Can you remember how being persistent in prayer affected your life? Can you remember how a time of persistent prayer built up your faith and trust in God? These experiences are part of your faith story too.

Persistent prayer changes lives. It changed the widow's life. It changed the life of the woman who had been praying for her friend. Persistent prayer changes our faith. It changes our lives. Persistent prayer changes our relationship with God. We trust more. We rely on God more. We weather life's storms better. This needs to be a part of our story because it can change another's life as well. Jesus calls us to be His hands and feet, His light and love in the world. We do this best by telling others the good news of what Jesus does for us and by loving others as Jesus first loved us. We make disciples by being disciples. This week may we begin to think about how we can share the good news of Jesus Christ with another. This week may we each begin to claim our own faith story.

Next week we look at how Jesus shared the good news with Zacchaeus. It was news that forever changed Zacchaeus' life. This week may we begin to see those in our lives that need to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) When was a time that you were really persistent in your prayers? How did this experience strengthen your faith?
- 2) Think of a time when persistence in prayer “paid off” for you. How can you share this experience with someone in a similar trial?
- 3) When have you prayed and not gotten the answer you were seeking, only to realize later that God had better or other plans?
- 4) How is your faith story shaping up? Do you have your two minute ‘elevator speech’ beginning to formulate in your mind? What matters in your faith?