

Desperation: Navigating Our Way to Dependence

Prayer: The Voice of Desperation

Luke 18:1-8

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¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' " ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Luke 18:1–8 (ESV)

One of Jesus' favorite teaching methods was telling stories with powerful points. They are called parables, and I'm sure you know a few of them. The Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son are probably the most famous parables. In fact, they are so well-known that the stories are part of our culture. We have "Good Samaritan Laws." And if you tell someone that you have a "prodigal son," most people will know what you mean.

Parables in the Bible are uniquely helpful in that they make a point in a way that is sometimes surprising or in a way that creates some tension. Parables are meant to be a bit shocking or jarring. That's what makes them memorable.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus told a parable about a judge and a widow because he wanted to make a particular point about prayer, desperation, and persistence.

As we wrap up our four-week series, I want us to see how prayer is directly connected to what it means to be desperate. Let's begin in verse 2 with the story.

The Parable

We learn that one of the main characters is a judge in a "certain town." Jesus doesn't need his location in order to make His point. What He does need is a man with authority. He chooses a judge because of the power that a judge can wield. I don't know if you've ever served on jury duty, but I remember my last experience. From the elevated bench, the black-robed judge instructed potential jury members and directed the attorneys. If the defendants were proven guilty, the judge would determine their penalty. I remember feeling really intimidated.

Judges have a kind of authority that reminds us of God’s authority. The thirteenth chapter of Romans makes this connection very clear. Judges preside over what is true and false, between right and wrong, between freedom and incarceration, and sometimes between life and death. A judge has a lot of power. And that’s the point.

But we also learn that this powerful judge is not a good man. He “neither feared God nor respected man.” In other words, he didn’t love God with all his heart—or his neighbor as himself. He was an unrighteous judge.

The second character is a widow. While the judge is powerful, the widow is the epitome of someone who is powerless and dependent. Especially in Jesus’ day, this woman was vulnerable. But we also learn that she had been mistreated. Some injustice had happened to her. We don’t know what it was, but we learn from verse 3 that she asks for justice against her adversary.

Perhaps someone had taken advantage of her. Maybe someone took property from her. Maybe her husband’s estate was not settled properly. Maybe someone injured her. Whatever it might have been, it is clear the injustice was important enough for her to keep appealing to the judge.

The judge, however, was not interested in assisting her for the purpose of justice. Verse 4 says that “for a while he refused.” But the woman persisted. She kept coming to him, asking him for justice.

Apparently, she was persistent enough that she got the judge’s intention. Jesus put some words in his mouth: “Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.”

The parable ends there, but it is safe to assume that the judge gave the widow what she desired. Yet, we don’t learn the specifics. And here’s why: the parable is not about the widow’s desire for justice; it’s about the widow’s determination for justice. This parable is about a woman whose desperation led to perseverance.

The Point

Every parable has a point, but sometimes Jesus just leaves the story hanging—without explanation. In this parable we have both Jesus’ concluding thoughts and Luke’s commentary. So, there’s no doubt as to what Jesus is saying here.

1. God is righteous and caring (vv. 6-7)

Jesus told this story to contrast a self-serving, easily-bothered judge with a sovereign, loving God who hears the cry of His children. Jesus is **not** saying that God answers prayer because He is bothered or annoyed by us. He’s not like the dad driving to Florida who says, “Fine—just stop whining. You can watch *The Incredibles* again.” He’s not like a mom on an airplane doing anything she can to get her three-year-old to stop crying.

Jesus instructs His listeners to consider what the unrighteous judge is like in comparison to God. The judge was motivated by the persistence of the woman, even though he was unrighteous and uncaring. Imagine how a righteous and caring God is ready to respond to the cries of His desperate children who need His help. Jesus is elevating the value of persistence based on the character of God.

As you think about prayer and your position of desperation, do you know that what you think about God is vitally important? We last saw this truth in reference to humility, but it's also true with prayer. For example:

- If you believe God is sovereign (in control), you'll pray because you know God can change things
- If you believe God is good, you'll pray because you know He has your best in mind
- If you believe God is righteous, you'll pray because you know He is going to make things right
- If you believe God's cares, you'll pray because you know He loves you and that the "gaps" are not intended to be needlessly painful

So, what do you believe God is like? Prayer is the voice of desperation, based upon what we believe to be true about God.

2. God's people are called to be faithful (v. 8)

The final verse in this parable asks a question: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Do you know what that means? To figure it out, you have to look back to the previous chapter—Luke 17:20-37. In this text, Jesus issues a warning about His surprising return and how unprepared most people will be. There will be "eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building" (17:28). In other words, these people are just living. They are not acting as if the end will come. They are living as if they have nothing to worry about.

The picture here is of a group of people who are distracted by all the "stuff" of our humanity, and it leads them to spiritual passivity. They are living as if Jesus is never going to come back.

But in contrast, Jesus is calling for His people to live beyond the distractions of "eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building." He's asking if there are going to be any faithful people—the kind of people who live with their hearts and hopes set on God.

If God leveled you recently, think about how your world stopped. You were so devastated that the normal activities of humanity didn't matter anymore. Pain and suffering do that. They wake us up to how much we need God's help. In many respects, suffering helps our dependency, which aids in our faithfulness.

3. God's people are to pray with consistency and perseverance

We come, finally, to how this parable began. We skipped over the first verse because it gives the entire purpose of the parable. I wanted you to see it at the end so that you can understand the full scope of what Jesus is saying.

Verse 1 says, “. . . he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” So, the purpose of this parable is clear. Jesus aims to motivate us to do two things:

Pray consistently. To always pray doesn't mean that you are always praying—like non-stop. But it does mean that you continually connect your life to your need for God's help. It means you live in such a way that you are always mindful of God's role in your life. The idea is to live with a consistent prayer-mindedness. Disconnect yourself from prayer, and it won't be long until you fall into a pattern where God's purposes are not on your mind. Remember, self-sufficiency and prayerlessness are connected. They feed off one another. Instead, Jesus calls us to embrace the posture of this woman, who knew that if the judge didn't help her, there was not going to be any justice.

Do you know you need God's help? In what area of your life is that painfully evident right now? Is there something for which you know that unless God moves, there doesn't seem to be any hope for change? Do you believe He hears you? Do you know that you should pray? For some of us, this sermon series on desperation has been a really helpful reminder about the necessity of consistent prayer.

Pray with perseverance. The other statement in this text is really helpful. And encouraging. It says that we should pray and “not lose heart.” It means to not give up. To not quit. In the context of Luke 18, Jesus is specifically referring to not losing heart about Jesus' return. We need to be careful about falling into unbelief—by living as if Jesus is not coming back, as if God has forgotten about us, or as if nothing is ever going to change.

Jesus invites us to keep praying and not quit. So, is there anything that the Lord is asking you to start praying about again? Do you find yourself tired? Discouraged? Cynical? Do you need others to pray for you or with you? Do you need to start praying again?

Giving voice to our desperation by prayer not only puts us in a position to seek God's help. It does that, but it does even more. Embracing dependency through prayer keeps connecting us to how we remain faithful to the end. Faithfulness is the goal. Crying out to God is part of the means.

In other words, we pray because we are desperate. But we pray so that we stay desperate.

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