

Persevering in/by Prayer

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you can open up to Luke chapter 18 in the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke chapter 18. We're going to read from there and then I'll pray for us and then we're going to look at that together.

As Steve said, my name is Graham and it's a pleasure to be here this morning. I'm here every Sunday morning, usually. I don't know if it is a pleasure to be right up here though, now that I think about it.

But Luke chapter 18, here the word of the Lord is recorded for us here. Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show that they should always pray and not give up.

He said, in a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, Grant me justice against my adversary.

For some time the judge refused. But finally he said to himself, even though I do not fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice.

[1 : 1 8] So that she won't eventually come and attack me. And the Lord said, 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?

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

This is the word of God. Let's pray. Lord, as our Lord Jesus often said about his parables, we pray this morning that you would give us eyes to see and ears to hear.

And by doing that through your word and by your spirit, you might move our hearts to faith and adoration, our lips to praise.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, unsurprisingly, I'm going to start this morning by just saying a little bit about a book.

[2 : 3 2] A favorite book of mine published in the early 1970s is a novel by a man named Richard Adams called Watership Down. It's widely recognized as a modern classic, rightly so, and many people's favorite novels, and certainly one of my own.

I'm getting a few shaking heads, but I'll look past that. Now, Watership Down is a tale about a small group of rabbits whose warren, their home, is destroyed by development, causing them to set off in search of a new home, a new place where they can live and be at peace and raise kittens.

Those are baby rabbits. But, as Richard Adams says, as he's telling this story, that rabbits very rarely travel more than a couple of hundred meters away from their homes.

I wonder if you knew this. In fact, most rabbits will never really go outside of eyeshot of the entrance to their holes. And so Watership Down retells a quite exceptional and tremendous journey.

An odyssey, of some, have called it an incredibly dangerous and difficult, precarious, fraught adventure that is full of hardship, suffering, and longing, uncertainty, too.

[3 : 57] And because of the rabbits' troubled existence without a place, or rather in between these two homes that there are between, like many peoples and cultures throughout history, the rabbits settle in every night to tell stories.

And these stories aren't simply there to pass the time or to entertain the younger rabbits amongst them, perhaps, but the stories are selected and told with purpose.

Most evenings recounted in the novel, the community gathers wherever it is that they've sought shelter for the night to listen to a story from their resident bard named Dandelion.

And these stories are always deliberate, always carefully selected. Sometimes they're told to calm fear, to bring about calm, and others to reiterate hope, the thing that the rabbits have set their hearts on, helping them to know what they can know, despite the many things they don't.

Other stories are told to inspire action and bravery, inviting them to imitate the great El Arira, the rabbit prince.

[5 : 15] Finally, some of the stories are told to serve the rabbit's memory, so that they don't forget what has been done for them in the past.

Storytelling, at least the best storytelling, is always purposeful. Steering and sustaining these frightened, unimpressive, and lost group of stragglers.

Dandelion tells his stories every night. And I want to suggest to you this morning that Jesus tells stories for very similar reasons. They're memorable, they're full of motivation, and always through the stories Jesus tells, like the one we read this morning, this parable, he teaches.

Look at verse 1 of our passage. Luke spells this out for us. He says, Then Jesus told his disciples a parable, another story.

But he told it to them to show them that they should always pray, and that they should not give up. And so Jesus' parable that we're looking at as told with this very simple design.

[6 : 23] These two things, to exhort prayerfulness amongst God's people, and to encourage perseverance in the faith. To move them to prayer, and to enable them to persevere.

Jesus' question at the close of the story, in verse 8, really brings these things together. Have a look at how the passage concludes. When the Son of Man, referring to himself here, Jesus asks, When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Will he find a people who are persevering in and through prayer? This is the question. This is indeed the purpose for Jesus telling the story.

And so very briefly this morning, we're going to consider the parable as Jesus told it, and what it teaches us, especially in light of the greater story that God tells throughout the scriptures.

And then I'll offer three points of application for us in closing. And so let's look at the story in a little more detail. There are just two characters, okay, so it's nice and straightforward.

[7 : 30] There is, verse 2, a judge. Only we're told in verse 2 that this judge doesn't fear God, and doesn't care what people think.

Some other translations have it that he doesn't care about people. And so we doubt or wonder about the suitability of this man for the task that he's been given.

Verse 3, we meet our other character, a widow from the judge's town, from his jurisdiction. And not unlike our own day in our own country, in many places across the world, widows were a particularly vulnerable people group.

And this is perhaps what Jesus uses a widow in his parable. And so the widow really has no course of action except for going to this judge when a dispute arises, whether it's over property, an inheritance, or something else.

She approaches the judge, verse 3, and she says, grant me justice. Grant me justice against my adversary. Only, verse 4, the judge is uninterested.

- [8 : 41] Perhaps he doesn't outright refuse to give justice, but at the very least, he couldn't be bothered. Maybe he's too busy advocating for more powerful and impressive clients, or simply because, as we've already been told, and now for the second time in verse 4, the judge himself is aware that he doesn't fear God and he doesn't care a whole lot about people.

But have a look at verses 3 and verse 5, and this is where this parable often gets its header from, if you saw that in your Bibles. The widow is persistent.

Verse 3, we're told that the widow kept coming to him. And verse 5, when the judge talks about this coming, he says that she is bothering me. When he sits down for his Saturday morning coffee, pulls out the Daily Maverick, has a reed, peers out the window, and there she is in the garden looking at him.

And then she says, grant me justice. Slams the window shut. Later he's out on the promenade, he's walking his dogs, enjoying the spring sunshine, and he hears that familiar voice again.

Grant me justice. And so verses 4 and 5, he finally breaks down, a bit like the parent who finally hands over the tablet to their child.

- [10 : 13] Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, he says to himself here, because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she will not eventually come and attack me.

Other translations say that she will not wear me down, or some even more stronger, that she will not crush me with her incessant asking.

Her persistence unsettles the judge. He feels threatened by this dogged, demanding insistence that she gets what she knows is rightly hers, justice in her case.

And so her plea is eventually met. The judge grants her justice. And that's really where the story ends.

Only, verse 6, Jesus, who is telling the story, now interjects. And so to add to this verse 1, where we're told that the story is told to stir prayerfulness and perseverance, Jesus interrupts the story to land the point.

- [11 : 20] And so he says, listen, pay attention. Hear now what the unjust judge says. And so Jesus alerts us to the fact that despite this man's gross indifference to others, his lack of fear for God, his indifference towards his job, despite being horribly self-interested and motivated really only by the preservation of his own sanity, eventually, Jesus says, he caves in.

And he gives justice. He does his job. Contrast with this now. Have a look at verse 7. Jesus asks, contrasting God with the unjust judge, won't God bring about justice for his people?

Won't God bring about justice for those who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? No. I tell you, he will see that they get justice and that they get it quickly.

If verse 1 told us the purpose for the story, to motivate prayerfulness and perseverance, that question and Jesus' interjection really gives us the key to understanding the parable.

It's this contrast between God, to whom we pray, and the judge, to whom the widow please, and just how unlike one another they are.

- [13 : 00] See, we can keep going prayerfully and trusting ourselves to God because, verse 7, he will bring about justice. But how can we know that?

I mean, can we really know that? Can we be certain about it? This is often not our experience in the world today or as we look back over history.

And perhaps in the day today, you feel a bit more like the widow. Desperate for justice. Desperate for an answer to your prayers. Looking for some reassurance that all will be well, even if it isn't now already.

And so the question this parable kicks up for us is where will that come from? How can Jesus speak with such certainty the way he does? I mean, how can we fathom such awful injustice and suffering that we're so familiar with in our world?

A world beset by pain. A world full of cries like the widows. Cries that often go unanswered. Perhaps you have cried out with her too.

[14 : 16] Grant me justice. And so the question is, where is that justice to be seen? Or where will that justice come from? And how can we know that that justice will be issued?

Second and last novel reference here. That question, where is justice, is central to a famous Russian novel, which I know you've all read.

It's called Brothers Karamazov by Dostoevsky. Oh yeah, I see all the hands. That question is central to Dostoevsky's book.

This question of justice, or rather, the problem of injustice. Because suffering confronts every age and all peoples.

Towards the middle of the novel, the novel, as the title suggests, is really about these three brothers. Two of them are having a conversation. Ivan, great Russian name, one brother, confronts his other, one of his brothers, his name is Alyosha, who is a believer.

[15 : 29] And Ivan says to him, he demands an answer to the question. He says, where is this justice? Or how can you explain that there is so much evil in this world? And how can you say that this will turn out for good?

In evocative terms, Ivan asks Alyosha, what are we to make of all these unredeemed tears? All this disharmony, all this suffering.

He asks directly then, he says, who can cover, or indeed, who can forgive all that is wrong? And the question hangs heavy in the novel in a way that it hangs heavily today.

But Alyosha, the brother, answers. He answers in a way that Christians have done so throughout the ages. not with complete knowing or understanding even, but simply by pointing his brother to the blood of the innocent one.

Unusual, perhaps strange, but Alyosha insists that the answer to that question, the answer to that longing for justice, is seen at the cross.

[16 : 43] in a word, it's seen in Christ's death. Because it's at the cross that we see God's justice. In an unusual, unexpected place, sure, but there, God's justice is meted out on the righteous one, or as Alyosha says, on the innocent blood, as spilt.

Just a few verses prior to our passage that we read this morning in Luke chapter 17, Jesus says to his disciples, who want the world to be remade, Jesus says to them, the Son of Man must suffer.

He must be rejected. In a peculiar way, this is the answer to that question. This is God's answer to injustice, evil, and suffering, and cries like the widows.

God doesn't wave his hand. God doesn't dismiss it. He fulfills justice. He brings down his righteous wrath against it at the cross.

Only, not against the world that has rebelled against him. Not against the people who have rebelled against him.

[18 : 12] Not against you or me. At the cross, God's justice is seen. It is executed. blood is spilled.

And so at the cross, we look with hope at the place where we can be saved. Saved by faith. Because we are also caught up in the mess of human society, we are condemned as well or stand with the world guilty, complicit, having contributed in various ways to hurt, to breakdown, to injustice perhaps, to the suffering of others.

And so the cross is not some abstract exercise, some historical event, but rather the moment at which God simultaneously says his justice will be seen and that those who look to the cross can be spared that same justice.

If we demand God's justice apart from or without the cross, then we must face it ourselves. But in the gospel, in that greater story told throughout the scriptures, the cross is where we look ourselves to be forgiven.

Where we can at the same time confirm God's justice and his compassion, his grace, as well as him being fair, or his love without leniency.

[19 : 53] With that in place, I want to conclude with three application points for us about prayer and about faith.

Just three short points. Firstly, and I think this is kind of throughout the parable that Jesus tells, prayers and faith must be personal, or maybe to put it differently, it must be our own.

Like some of you, I grew up in a school with a Christian ethos. My family attended church intermittently. The Lord's Prayer was about the first thing I memorized and the only thing I memorized before my 20s.

I was terrible at school orals. Our home bore some of the markings of the Christian faith, the Bible here, something knitted over there. I would occasionally even reference God and sometimes even Jesus.

But I didn't know God. I mean, I barely knew like a few things about Him. And the first time this really came home to me was when I was about age seven or eight and there was a sudden tragic death in our family.

[21 : 16] I remember being told and I don't know where I went, somewhere in our house, and kneeling down to pray and I started the way I'd been taught by parroting the Lord's Prayer!

And as I did it, it rang so hollow on my lips. Moving from the Lord's Prayer, I sought out words trying to express what I was feeling, trying to find comfort in someone else in my God, only He was a complete stranger to me.

I might as well have gone onto the street and hailed some random passerby and spoken to them, for that's how well I knew God. But have a look at verse seven.

God's people, Jesus says, they cry out to Him. They call on Him day and night, day to day.

They go to Him regularly, approaching Him in the trenches of life, in the mountaintops of life, and in every point in between. Prayer is personal because our faith means knowing God, trusting and turning to Him and not merely believing certain things about Him.

[22 : 38] as I prepped, I wondered if the reason we don't think this is that we have this idea that God isn't concerned with the insignificant and the trivial and the ordinary struggles of our lives.

You know, a bit like God doesn't sweat the small stuff. So why do you? And this would be, as I thought about it, a little bit like if I only told my son to speak to me when he had really big issues.

You know, the big ones. When, as a parent, I really should aspire and make it my ambition to treasure and to listen to and to be available to Him in all things and at all times, whether it's badly drawn soldiers or bullying on the schoolyard.

because I am His Father and not a stranger. And this is precisely how the Christian comes to God through what Christ has done.

As children who call on their Heavenly Father, it's why we start the Lord's Prayer with our Father who art in Heaven. We draw near, as the writer of the Hebrews says, with confidence expectant of His compassion and His care as a particular people with peculiar circumstances and very personal struggles and challenges.

[24 : 09] And so our prayers and our faith must be our own. It must be personal. It cannot be inherited or copied or borrowed. Prayer is the invitation into a relationship with God.

And we ought to do that as the parable says, day and night. We cry out to Him, to know Him. Secondly, prayer, this personal kind of prayer is, I think, as the parable teaches, a mark of true faith.

Commenting on this passage, Eugene Peterson says, prayer is not a pious interlude. He's always got a great way with words. Prayer is not a pious interlude. Prayer permeates life.

At all times and all places because the Christian faith, he says, is not a generalized abstraction, but it is a way of life and it is a way of life expressed in persistent prayer. Prayer is a mark of true faith.

Faith is a way of life expressed in persistent prayer, as Peterson says. Note the question that concludes the section in verse 8. When the Son of Man comes, Jesus asks, will He find faith on earth?

[25 : 24] He isn't asking if when the Son of Man returns, will He find churches with robust doctrinal statements, or church attendees with great records?

No. Here, faith is synonymous with prayer. And so Jesus is asking when He returns, will He find a people who are marked by prayer, who day and night cry out to Him, who yearn for Him, who bring their struggles to Him?

Jesus' question is really whether when He comes, will He find a people who know Him? A people who have been with Him? A people who have relied on Him to get to that moment when Jesus comes again?

This is faith. When He comes, will He find a people who adore Him? Not simply affirming the key tenets of their faith, but expressing and living a faith that is full of delight in God and delight in being with Him.

When the Son of Man comes, Jesus asks, will He find a people who know their God? Gerald Bray is a British theologian. He says that prayerlessness is a little bit like a marriage without any conversation.

[26 : 51] Such a marriage, he says, is, I guess, theoretically possible, but surely such a marriage cannot flourish and it will not grow.

In fact, it is very likely on a bad trajectory. Without conversation, prayer is that, just that, drawing near to and speaking to God.

Without that, parties grow apart and feelings grow cold. There is hardly a faith without prayer, persistent and personal time spent with your God.

Prayer is the mark of true faith. Finally, prayer is a means of perseverance. I tried to get clever with my title here. It's not a typo. I was like, we persevere in prayer, prayer.

We persevere by prayer. That's what we see in verse one. Jesus' short story is designed to promote prayerfulness and perseverance so those disciples don't give up, that they might not lose heart.

[27 : 58] But how do we do this? It would be silly of me to finish this morning and to miss that audience which I think this parable is in many ways told for.

Those of you sitting here today, perhaps Sunday by Sunday, ready to give up, losing heart, perhaps already having lost heart, and this for various reasons, being tired, being burdened, overburdened, worn down, hurting, doubtful, disillusioned, like the widow, perhaps you've cried out over and over again, grant me justice, help me, and to feel as though you've been met with silence, or what feels like unanswered prayers and inattention on God's part.

I tell you, verse eight, look, Jesus says, those who cry out will see, or God rather, will see that those who cry out get justice.

that their God will come near. And how can we know? Well, as I've already said this morning, I think the cross is the surest guarantee that they will know, and that they will get justice, but it still isn't easy, and I don't want to suggest that it is.

The wandering and the waiting, which so often marks the Christian life, we can only surmise at the risk of sounding cliché that God's timing is very different to our own, and yet, this morning, I would exhort you to confidently rest in that promise made by God, sealed by Christ, and guaranteed through his death and his resurrection.

[29 : 59] That's why Jesus can say he will come again, and when he does, he will bring justice for those who cry out. In faith, then, we run to him, not to abstractions, not pretending that we're fine, and having no need to do so.

One commentator puts it so well, he says, prayer is not some kind of parlor, exercise, perfunctory and tidy. He says, prayer is an existential, battle, ongoing, ever present, in the words of the Apostle Paul.

He says, prayer is to hope against hope. And all those who've persevered thus far can testify to its power that prayer is arguably the greatest antidote to losing heart and to not giving up, when there are so many reasons to do so.

because in prayer, we come to and depend fully on God. And as we're reminded week by week, we receive the grace to persevere.

Let's pray. Lord, we're saying this morning, those wonderful words, prone to wonder, Lord, we feel it, and prone to leave you the God we love.

[31 : 35] And so we ask this morning, take our hearts, take them and seal them for thy courts above. Lord, we know this morning that as much as prayer is a means by which we cling to and hope in you, Lord, we know this morning that it is you who holds and clings to us.

And that we see this in Christ, we know this through the cross. And so this morning, Lord, won't you give us a faith that longs, a faith that knows, delights, and a faith that is sure, not in our own strength, Lord, but in your great promises and in the work of your Son.

And in his name we pray. Amen.