

How Do We Keep Praying?

Luke 18:1-8

John Breon

Jesus wants his disciples to know that we need to pray always and not lose heart or give up. What situations tempt us to give up? What makes us want to give up? What causes us to lose heart?

Jesus is addressing several things here. He's talking about our response to those things that frighten us or overwhelm us, or those times when we are disappointed and wonder, "How long must we wait?"

Right before this parable (starting in 17:20), Jesus has been talking about the kingdom of God. He has referred to the coming day of the Son of Man, when he will be revealed. He's talked about life going on without reference to God and the need for God's people to trust and endure. He's said that judgment is surely coming and that it will separate people and will be obvious when it comes. He hasn't answered the Pharisees' question of *when* God's kingdom will come, and he hasn't answered the disciples' question of *where*. Instead, he moves on to talk about the need for constant, persistent prayer to keep from losing heart and to enable us to trust and endure when the kingdom's coming is delayed.

So this parable is about our response to crisis, trouble, hardship, disappointment and the final separation and judgment. The response Jesus calls for is trust and faithfulness that we demonstrate in persistent, consistent, continual prayer. Someone asked if we should ask God for something more than once or if that means we didn't trust God to answer the first time we prayed. I really doubt that God is keeping score of how many times we make a request. Still, I have heard this advice: Ask God once and then thank God a thousand times that he has heard. Do whatever it takes to keep us talking with God, staying close and being persistent in a life of prayer.

There are two characters in the story Jesus tells: a judge who didn't fear God or respect people and a widow who kept going to the judge seeking justice. At first, the judge refused her. She had no rights in that society, no one to speak up for her and no money to pay a bribe. But she

did have persistence. So she stepped out of the role society dictated for her and she kept appearing before this judge, making her case, pleading for justice. Finally the judge said to himself, "I don't fear God and I don't respect people, but I'm going to grant justice to this widow so she won't keep coming here and possibly become violent." The phrase "attack me" here can mean "give a black eye." So he grants her the justice she was seeking.

What's Jesus saying with this story? For one thing, he's showing that God is faithful. God is not like the unjust judge. God is called "the righteous Judge" (2 Timothy 4:8) and God is infinitely greater than this unrighteous judge. If the judge would eventually give in to persistent requests and possibly threats, *how much more* will God listen to the prayers of his people, his children, and give us justice.

Also, Jesus is showing the need for persistence, for showing the kind of faithfulness and determination that the widow showed. It's not that we have to make God listen to us. But Jesus wants us praying always, calling on God day and night. This means that prayer must be more than spoken words. It's a life, an attitude, a way of behaving. Constant and consistent prayer is how to deal with injustice and the seeming delay of God's putting things right.

The apostle Paul echoed Jesus' call to continual prayer in several of his letters. He practiced it and encouraged other Christians to practice it as well. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, as part of a series of exhortations, he says, "Pray without ceasing" or, "Pray continually." In Colossians 4:2, he calls the church to "devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful."

We hear this call and these words of encouragement. We know we need something to keep us from losing heart and giving up when we face difficulty, disappointment and frustration. The fact that God cares and listens and will give what we need motivates us. We want to be faithful, we want Jesus to find this kind of faith on earth when he returns. We recognize that prayer is a good thing, an important thing. We may even want to devote ourselves to prayer and to pray always. But how? How in the world can anybody do that?

First, we need to realize that prayer is not just an additional activity that we tack on to our already busy lives. Prayer becomes the heartbeat of our lives. We begin to live a life of prayer. A devotional writer of a past generation wrote, "You can do *more* than pray, *after* you pray. But you *cannot* do more than pray *until* you have prayed" (S. D. Gordon, in Bob Benson, *In Quest of the Shared Life* 109). I like that. We might also say that you can do *more* than pray *as* you pray. But you can't do more than pray unless you are praying.

We can live with an attitude of prayer, in such a way that we are always conscious of God, referring everything to God, listening for God and looking for God everywhere. Keith Green sang,

Make my life a prayer to you
I want to do what you want me to
No empty words and no white lies
No token prayers, no compromise

(*No Compromise*, 1978. Listen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNww8F6G9U8>)

Living prayer is one way we pray always and don't lose heart.

Some of us might be tempted to think, "If I pray with my life then I don't need to pray at specific times in specific ways." But that would be a mistake. None of us can just automatically make our life a prayer or easily enter into a constant attitude of prayer. Over the years, I've grown in praying, but still my own praying often seems feeble. The kind of praying we're exploring today is a goal. And there are people who can show us the way to such prayer.

It takes discipline and practice. You wouldn't expect to step up to the plate and hit a home run if you'd never swung a bat in practice. A musician doesn't just sit down and play a magnificent piece without having learned scales and repeated exercises many times. Peyton Manning, and all the others who'll play in the Super Bowl, didn't become pros without working out and discipline. And, they keep working out and practicing to stay able to play at that level.

A life of prayer is like that. We don't just suddenly start praying faithfully and effectively. We start small, with baby steps. We learn some basics about prayer. We keep working on those and learning and experiencing a little more. Set times for prayer can help us get in the habit of praying. Prayer at meals is one good way to start. Pray when we get up in the morning and before we go to sleep at night. When Nancy and I were dating, someone gave us the advice to pray together out loud. It took a while, but we got where we did that. We still pray together at night. We take turns starting. So we can remember whose turn it is, she takes even days and I'm odd.

You can pray in a group. Pray prayers that someone else has written as a way to jump start your own praying.

Also, prayer is not just us talking. It involves listening as well. If we think of prayer as listening, that makes it easier to understand praying continually. We can listen all the time. We just have to get tuned into God's Spirit and find ways to pay attention.

Another helpful step toward prayer without ceasing is what some call "breath prayer." This is a brief personal prayer that we can speak in one breath. The most famous of these is, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." You can repeat this kind of prayer and let it sink into your heart and keep you attuned to God. Such a simple prayer can take us deeper than we would have thought. (For an examination of this prayer that explores some of those depths, see John Michael Talbot, *The Jesus Prayer*.)

Still another way we can always pray is called "practicing the presence of God." This is where we keep our mind and attention on God as much as we can. We try to stay aware of God's presence in every moment. One example of this is a man called Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection. He was an assistant in a monastery in the 1600s. He worked in the monastery kitchen and called himself "the lord of all pots and pans." He spoke of making a private chapel of our heart and worshiping God there at all times, no matter what other activities we are involved in. After about ten years of practicing this, he said that he could pray and be aware of God's presence while hoeing the garden or washing the dishes as much as he could during

Holy Communion. (There are several editions in print of Brother Lawrence's *The Practice of the Presence of God*.)

Another example is Frank Laubach, who was an American educator and missionary in the 20th Century. He wrote that he set out to keep his mind on Jesus every moment of the day. He said that was the hardest thing to do, but doing it made everything else easier. That kind of attention to Jesus brings focus and integration to our lives. And we find in him resources for dealing with all aspects of life. (Richard Foster tells about Laubach in *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, chapter 11, and in *Streams of Living Water* 41-48).

We talk about "multi-tasking," performing more than one action at a time. And we all do that in one way or another. Right now, you're sitting there listening to me. But you're probably also remembering something that happened earlier or you're planning what you will do later. I can remember my brother watching one ball game on TV and at the same time listening to another on the radio. Parents are good at multi-tasking. Have you ever watched a mother with her children in a grocery store? She's keeping track of what she needs to buy and making sure the kids don't run off or fill the cart with a lot of extra stuff.

God's Spirit in us makes it possible to carry on our work or business or discussion or recreation and at a deeper level also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship, receiving the breath of God or nudges from God. Disciples of Jesus are multi-taskers who live and work and relate to people and at the same time stay aware of God and pay attention to God.

In Revelation 4, John describes a scene in heaven. Four living creatures are around the throne of God. "Day and night they never stop saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'" There are also twenty-four elders who surround God's throne. Whenever the living creatures give glory to God, which is day and night without ceasing, the twenty-four elders fall down in worship and cast their crowns before the throne and sing their song of praise. So these elders are continually, without ceasing, worshipping God. But then in chapter 5, when John sees the great scroll that no one can open and weeps because no one can open it, *one of the elders* speaks to him and points out the One who

can open the scroll. How does the elder speak to John if he is always constantly bowing in worship and singing praise to God? Multi-tasking!

This reminds me of a little worship chorus:

Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary

Pure and holy, tried and true

With thanksgiving, I'll be a living

Sanctuary for you

(Randy Scruggs—listen to a version here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGydpAP5BB0>)

In that way we can be devoted to prayer, pray always and not give up, because God is faithful.