

Keep praying!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 March 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Luke chapter 18, verses 1 to 14. Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them 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 he refused, but finally he said to himself, even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice.

So 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 and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

[1 : 09] And to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told the parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is God's word. Amen. Now, sometimes it's tricky to understand what the Bible says, isn't it? Let's be honest about that.

[2 : 15] I'm glad that lots of you have signed up to go through the Bible course in our Connect groups. By the way, it's not too late. If you want to join us for session two, a week on Wednesday, a week on Thursday, do join in whether you were there for session one or not.

But one of the things that we were thinking about in the introductory session a few days ago, we were thinking about the sense of confusion that we sometimes feel when we come to a particular part of the Bible. Sometimes God's word talks about situations and experiences, ideas that are foreign to our experience.

Sometimes even there are words and ideas that aren't part of our day-to-day vocabulary. And sometimes, sometimes like in this morning's passage, sometimes we read a section and we think, why would you say that?

Why would you use that picture? I mean, it's a bit odd, isn't it? To compare God to a judge who's meant to dispense justice but declines to do so.

How do we learn something about God from this disreputable character? And Jesus does this more often than perhaps we wish he did.

[3 : 23] We had something similar a few weeks, months probably ago. You know, the parable of the unjust steward, the guy who's commended for his shrewdness. Why does God do this?

Why does he say these things? Well, the trick with these situations, the trick is to look at what is being said and try not to get too carried away with reading other ideas in that aren't what God intends to say.

To try to focus on the lesson that Jesus intends to teach us from these rather shady characters. To focus on that rather than imagining that he wants to commend every aspect of their behavior.

You could think of it a little bit like when a package gets delivered, a familiar experience to most of us, especially at the moment. When it's delivered, if the outer box is all bashed up and damaged, it briefly gives you cause for concern, doesn't it?

You wonder, is it going to be okay? But once you see inside, well, if the thing that you actually ordered is fine, then who cares about the crumpled cardboard? We discard the outer packaging and keep the kernel, the thing that we actually ordered.

[4 : 33] Well, here we can kind of discard the outer packaging of the disreputable judge, if you like, and retain the kernel of what Jesus actually wants to tell us. And in this case, it's not particularly hard to figure out what that is, is it?

J.C. Ryle, he says the key is hanging by the door. It's right there in verse 1. Jesus tells us the reason why Jesus told this parable is to show his disciples that they should always pray and not give up.

That is what we are meant to learn here, persistence in prayer. Now, folks, I don't know about you, but persistence in prayer is something that I need to learn again and again and again.

And I'd be surprised if more than one or two people listening to me today would say that you have cracked persistent prayer. Almost all of us, I suspect, think that we probably ought to pray more than we do.

Most of us, being honest, I think would say we often pray about something once and then it's kind of gone out of our minds. Most of us, when it seems that our prayers are going unanswered, stop trying.

[5 : 47] And therefore, most of us need to hear this parable. We need to consider its implications for our own prayers, don't we? We're focusing this morning on verses 1 to 8. We read down to verse 14 because that's also connected with prayer.

But these first eight verses are more than enough to be going on with. So we'll leave the Pharisee and the tax collector for next time. But there are, I think, in these verses, there are kind of both a warning and an encouragement for our prayers.

If you like, a carrot and a stick, a caution and an exhortation. The two are kind of interwoven in these verses. So I'm going to start with the warning.

So, a warning to be persistent in prayer. Already here in verse 1, there's this language of should or ought coming through, isn't there?

There's an expectation. There's an obligation even. There's a command from God. Jesus expects his people to be persistent in prayer.

[6 : 49] He expects those who want to follow after him, whether that's in the 1st century or the 21st century, he expects us not to give up praying. Furthermore, the parable itself, it seems to contain something of a warning about the danger of a lack of persistence, doesn't it?

I mean, within the world of the parable, within the stories it's told, I mean, ask yourself, what would happen if the widow had not been persistent?

What would have been her experience if she'd given up? What would be the outcome if she kind of accepted the judge's first refusal to grant justice? Or his 21st refusal, for that matter?

What would have happened if she hadn't persisted? Well, verse 3 says, she kept coming to him with her plea. She didn't give up. And it's explicitly because of her persistence that her request is granted.

She receives justice because she persisted. This judge did everything he could to ignore her. Go away. I don't want to listen to you. Did everything he could.

[7 : 55] Nevertheless, she persisted. The widow, she needed to be persistent or she wouldn't have received justice. Now, as I say, we want to be cautious about reading more into the parable than Jesus intends.

But clearly he does intend to commend persistence. So is it fair to say that God is pleased, especially to hear, those who are persistent?

I think that's fair. Not because he's unwilling to answer. Not because he is unjust like the judge. Maybe that's who he listens to because that's how he intends things to be.

And John Calvin, he says, God does not all at once grant assistance to his people. Because he chooses to be, as it were, wearied out by prayers.

This is how God chooses to behave. He chooses to listen to those who persist. It seems that God wants us to be persistent. He chooses sometimes to wait a while before answering.

[9 : 01] Let me be very clear. That delay is not because he is unwilling to answer. Jesus is very clear elsewhere. God delights to give good gifts to his children. So why the delay?

Well, perhaps because he wishes to teach us something through that process of persistence. Or perhaps because his timing is simply wiser than us. That he knows when it is good for the prayer to be answered as well as how.

Now, if in these verses there's a particular kind of prayer in view, and I think there's an extent to which there is, that this is slightly more specific than a kind of general all prayer.

If there's a particular kind of prayer in view, it's prayer for Jesus' return. It's prayer for him to come in judgment. Prayer for the vindication of the righteous. I mean, remember, that's been the theme of the preceding episodes in Luke's account, hasn't it, that we've looked at over the past weeks.

Luke has been talking about Jesus' return. And that return is picked up in verse 8 as well. So if it's those prayers particularly, prayers for Jesus' return, if it's those prayers particularly, then we have another dimension in view, don't we, of why persistence might be expected.

[10 : 20] Why might God not immediately answer prayers for him to come in vindication, in justice, in judgment? Why might he not immediately answer prayers for Christ to return?

Well, because his desire is not that any should perish. He delays his return and yet urges us to pray for it. To rest our hope in his coming.

To give ourselves confidence that he is coming back. To teach our hearts to long for that day. To look forward to the glorious hope.

To depend on vindication from him yet to come in the future. Rather than depending on some kind of vindication at our own hands. Vengeance.

No. And then verse 8. Verse 8. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? It's a scary question, isn't it?

[11 : 21] Now maybe at first it seems a little bit out of place, doesn't it? I mean, what's this reference to Jesus' return? What's it got to do with prayer? Why is Jesus asking about whether or not he will find faith?

As I say, Jesus' return is not quite as separate as we might think. Because it is particularly that kind of prayer that's in view. But it also helps us to consider what is Jesus actually asking here?

When he says, will the Son of Man find faith? What's he asking? Will he find faith on the earth? My suspicion, I don't know exactly what you're thinking.

But my suspicion is that you equate faith in that verse to faith in God. The Christian faith. Faith in the sense of salvation. Dependence on God, etc.

I suspect that's kind of what you're mapping faith to in your mind. But I don't think that's quite what he means here particularly. See, this word faith sometimes means faithfulness rather than faith.

[12 : 26] Faith, if you see the distinction. Faithfulness in the sense of consistency. Faithfulness in the sense of dogged determination. We talk about a faithful dog even, don't we?

We mean a dog that is committed to a particular master. A dog that is faithful. And there's a hint that this is what Jesus means.

In that he actually says not, will he find faith on earth? But rather, will he find the faith on earth? He uses the definite article. Now that makes for awkward English.

But it's there in what Jesus said. And that could be a reference to the faith as in, you know, the Christian faith as distinct from all other faiths. It could be that.

But I'm inclined to agree with a number of commentators who suggest that the word the here should be read as kind of akin to this.

[13 : 26] In other words, Jesus is asking whether when he returns he will find this kind of faithfulness. The kind of faithfulness that he's just been talking about in the preceding verses. The kind of faithfulness that persists in prayer.

Suddenly this verse makes sense in its context, doesn't it? When Jesus comes back, will he find people praying like this? Will he find people who are persistent in prayer?

Will he find people who are longing for his return to the extent that that flows out into how we pray? Will he find people who don't give up?

Who don't get discouraged because God seems to be slow to answer? Will he find people who keep coming to him time after time? Will he find that kind of faith?

Jesus says that's what he desires to see. And in so asking, he suggests that true believers will be marked by that kind of an approach. Disciples of Jesus will be those who are faithful in prayer.

[14 : 31] This is what he's looking for. This is how believers will naturally behave. And therefore, actually, it's not that far away at all from faith in our usual sense, is it?

Whether he finds faith is tied to whether he finds faithfulness in prayer. Surely, therefore, there is a warning to be persistent in prayer, lest Christ return and find that you are not.

Now, I said we were going to have a warning and an encouragement. Before I move to the encouragement, into the carrot, if you like, I want to pause for kind of a sidebar, if you like.

I want to flag up something that I don't think is the main point Jesus is making in these verses, but is an implication of them, a necessary corollary, if you want to use those terms.

You probably don't want to use those terms. They're weird terms. A sidebar. Implications. Let's pause. Let's note, God cares about justice.

[15 : 37] It's here in these verses, isn't it? See how the judge is introduced. Verse 2, the judge neither feared God nor cared what people thought. He's not interested in the court of public opinion, but crucially, he's not interested in God's opinion.

This unjust judge doesn't fear God. He might have paid lip service to God if he was pressed, but he lives as if there is no God. He lives as if there is no judgment to come.

He acts as if there is no higher authority than his own. And the implication is clear. If this judge had feared God, as he should, well, then he wouldn't have acted unjustly, would he?

God cares about justice. Now, consistently in God's word, consistently, widows are emblematic of the powerless, of those in need of protection, of those who in an unjust system are very likely to lack the resources to protect their own interests.

Now, perhaps that isn't quite so acute for widows, specifically in our society today, but the issue of justice for the powerless is absolutely still the same, isn't it?

[16 : 51] God cares about injustice. And therefore, God cares whether the people who make our clothes are paid a fair wage.

Therefore, God is grieved when we ignore the plight of the destitute in our society. God cares about justice.

And if God cares about justice, then if we want to follow in his ways, then an attitude like his means we too surely must care about injustice. We must be willing to do something about it when it's close at hand, when there is some way that we can see injustice put right.

Well, we can't claim to share God's attitudes if we're not willing to do that. And we may not have the authority of a judge. I mean, I don't know who's listening on the live stream, but certainly those of you in the room, none of us are judges, are we?

And maybe we're not directly unjust like he was, but we can absolutely use our votes to stand up for the powerless rather than using them to protect our own interests.

[18 : 05] We can use our spending to reflect a desire for justice, can't we? And we can watch. We can look around at school, at work.

We can see where people are not being treated justly, where people are maligned and abused. And we have an obligation to stand up for them. God cares about justice, and so must we.

The judge should have feared God because God's authority is greater and God's judgment is coming. So how will God see your attitude to justice and injustice?

Okay, third, let's return to that main theme, shall we? And this time kind of come at it from a more positive angle, if you like. Come and see, come and see in these verses a tremendous encouragement to persistent prayer.

We need to ask ourselves, how does God compare to this judge? Clearly the parable is drawing a comparison between God and the judge, but how do they compare?

[19 : 11] What should we expect from God? If we cast ourselves in the role of the supplicant widow, which I think we're invited to do, well, the judge agrees to grant justice, doesn't he?

Yes, he does it grudgingly. He does it from dubious motives. So how does God compare? Well, Jesus isn't really saying, look, God's like this judge.

He's not really saying that, is he? Or at least not directly. No, I think the comparison could be summed up with the words, how much more? If this judge will grant justice, how much more will God do so?

If this ungodly judge will eventually grant vindication, how much more will the Almighty vindicate his beloved?

How much more will he preserve his chosen ones? Will he save them from injustice? Abraham asked, back in Genesis 18, Abraham asked, will not the judge of all the earth do right?

[20 : 17] Yes, yes, he will. The judge of all the earth will do right. If even a wicked man sometimes does what is right, how much more will God do what is right?

Do we need to doubt? Do we need to doubt, verse 7, that God will bring about justice for his chosen ones? Those whom God chose as his own before the dawn of time, the elect of God, do you really imagine that they will not receive justice?

Do you really imagine that we will not receive justice? And therefore, therefore these verses call us to persistence in prayer on the basis that God will listen.

And therefore, why wouldn't we continue in prayer when we have the assurance that the God of all creation delights to hear us?

Why wouldn't we keep praying, asking for that which God has said he delights to bestow? When we're grieved by injustice in our world, why wouldn't we bring it before the one who is perfectly just?

[21 : 32] When we're troubled by circumstances in our lives, why would we not cry to God to intervene? When we're frustrated that sometimes he seems slow to answer?

Shouldn't we reassure ourselves with the fact that he surely will answer? It may seem, it may seem that he delays for a long time.

It may seem that way. In fact, let's be honest, it's possible we might go our whole lives without seeing answers to our most fervent prayers.

It may be that way. And yet it's also the case that beloved family members do come to living faith in their last days on earth.

It does happen. It does happen that nations that seem hard and closed and unimaginable that they would ever allow people to go there and proclaim the gospel, well, sometimes those nations do see great revival.

[22 : 38] And ultimately, ultimately, absolute justice will be done. That will be soon, according to God's reckoning, even if it doesn't seem soon to us.

Therefore, therefore, if we are warned against a lack of persistence and we're encouraged to be always praying and never giving up, if we have these assurances about who God is and how he responds to prayer and the attitude with which he wants us to come in prayer, if we have these assurances, then how do we cultivate this kind of attitude and behavior?

How do we cultivate persistence in prayer? How do we instill that in ourselves? First up. First up, we do well to remind ourselves regularly that prayer works.

I don't know. Maybe it's me. I forget. I mean, functionally. I don't act like prayer works a lot of the time. I have to keep reminding myself prayer is the most effective thing that I can do.

We tend, don't we, to focus on the prayers that go unanswered or seem to be going unanswered at least. We focus on those prayers and forget about all the prayers that have been answered. Those are, you know, been and gone.

[24 : 02] We're focused on the one thing that isn't being answered. Or we're inclined to give up after one or two requests and maybe, therefore, we never do see our prayers answered because we're called to persistence.

We do well to remind ourselves that prayer does actually work. Second, if we wish to cultivate persistent prayer, then I think we do well to make it a matter of habit.

Rather than kind of happening to think about it, rather making it a matter of habit to pray. Many of you, I'm sure, already have this habit well ingrained, but perhaps many of us do not.

And intending to pray at the same time each day, that will be a great help to us in remembering to do so. Or if kind of a particular time of day is tricky for you, then kind of mentally tag it onto something else.

Attach praying to something that you will otherwise come and do. So that prayer becomes the default behavior when you do that thing. I suspect most of us are perfectly capable of washing up without a great deal of focused attention upon it.

[25 : 19] So couldn't you also be in prayer as you do it? I mean, even five minutes as you load the dishwasher, that would be an increase in prayer for some of us, I suspect.

Perhaps that seems unambitious. But my suggestion is it's more productive to set aside a realistic ten minutes than it is to beat ourselves up for the half an hour that we wish we were spending.

Yes, half an hour set aside would be great, an hour, two hours. And at some stages of life, and in some situations that may be realistic, and in some it isn't. Well, folks, better ten minutes a day than thirty minutes once a month when you happen to remember and have time and then crushing guilt the other twenty-nine days.

Be realistic. Make it a matter of habit. Third, if we want to be persistent in prayer, if we want to cultivate this kind of approach, well, it seems to me this means persistence not only in kind of prayer in general, the going and doing some praying, it means persistence in the specific content, doesn't it?

The widow came time and time to the judge, not with eighty-seven different requests, but she came again and again and again with her one request for justice in that one situation. I'm not saying you can't come to God with lots of things, but what I am saying is keep coming with the thing that you need to keep coming with.

[26 : 47] Don't for a moment worry that you are going to weary God by coming with the same request again and again and again. Even in the self-same words as you came yesterday.

My friends, God delights when you bring the thing that burdens you to Him. Fourth, persistence in particular matters I think sometimes benefits from the use of a system or notes.

There may well be one or two things that you're never going to forget to pray about. But if we're honest, there probably are lots of things that we intend to pray about that without prompts to do so, we will forget.

How many of you can name off the top of your head who are Covenant Church's mission partners? Well, if you're going to pray for them regularly, then you probably need to have a list of them written down, I suspect.

I don't want to be prescriptive here, but it isn't unspiritual to have a list of people who you've said you're going to pray for. It's reasonable to have a system where you devote Tuesdays to prayer for the church around the world and Wednesdays to wider your family and Thursdays to your local church and so on and so on.

[27 : 57] Or maybe you want to spread each of those across the day so that you don't feel like you're stuck in a rut on one particular... Whatever works for you as a system, whether you work better with focus or variety.

It is no more or less valid to use a mental list, a paper list, or a digital list. I use an app on my phone that's called Prayer Mate because it kind of does the list management for me.

I say, I want to pray for each of the topics on this list. I want to pray for them once a week. And the topics on this list, I want to pray for once a month. And it pops up each day and says, pray for this, now pray for this, now pray for this.

It works for me. Maybe it won't for you. Maybe you want a notebook. If you're using your phone, be careful though because it is very easy to pick it up intending to pray and find out that you're on Twitter instead.

Be wise in your choices. Fifth, finally, cultivate persistence by being realistic. Be gentle with yourself.

[28 : 57] Be realistic. The advice that I've heard in forming habits as kind of a general category is, the advice is, don't worry about missing your habit once. Worry about missing it twice in a row.

See, if we beat ourselves up over one omission, if we come with the attitude of, I didn't do what I was going to do. Well, I've blown it now and off we go.

We just give up because I've broken my streak so now why bother? Well, we know that's ridiculous, don't we? If you realize on Tuesday when you wake up in the morning that you forgot to pray at all on Monday, well, that's regrettable.

It is. But don't spiral down into despair because of it. Sit down and pray today. Because our God is a God who forgives. He is a God of second chances.

He is a God of compassion. He is a God who delights when you come to speak to Him. However long it's been since you last did. However faltering your prayers.

[30 : 01] So come to Him today and keep coming to Him. This afternoon, this evening, tomorrow, the next day, and the day after that, and the day after that. Be persistent in prayer.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, forgive us, we pray.

Forgive us for our lack of persistence. Forgive us that we act as though prayer were an afterthought. That we sometimes act like prayer is something to squeeze in when it's convenient.

That we act as though it doesn't make a difference. That we act as though the fact that you haven't answered on our timescale means you don't care. Forgive us for these attitudes, we pray.

Forgive us for our prayerlessness. And cultivate in us a habit of prayer. Not by rote, but out of love for you.

[31 : 09] Out of confidence that prayer works. Out of confidence that you delight to hear us. That you are pleased to hear us coming with the same request again and again and again.

Thank you that you love to see that confidence in you. That knows that you are the answer. Whatever the problem may be that the solution lies in bringing it to you.

In trusting in your power and in your goodness to us. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.