

Parables For Prayer

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[0 : 00] Will you turn with me please now to Luke chapter 18 and tonight we're looking at these two parables in verses 1 to 14.

And both of these parables as you will have noted when we read through them have to do with the subject of prayer. Jesus was himself a man of prayer and we've already seen in Luke's gospel how Jesus prayed at certain points when things were to be done by him or when something was demanded of him more than usually.

For example when he was being baptized he was praying at the moment the spirit came down from heaven like a dove. In chapter 6 before he chose his disciples he spent the whole night on the mountain in prayer.

Now that of course doesn't mean he didn't pray at other times but these are recorded specifically so that we can see that whatever things Jesus faced he met them by praying.

And of course that's itself hugely significant because he is the son of God and was then the son of God in his ministry on earth. And yet in terms of his ministry and its accomplishment and facing all the things that he needed to face and to overcome he exercised prayer constantly in doing that.

[1 : 35] And in these two parables that he taught here as he went on his ministry towards Jerusalem and as he goes towards Jerusalem the use of parables becomes less and less.

Because the more we look into these chapters the nearer we're getting to Christ actually reaching Jerusalem and then all the things of course that happened to him there at the end of his ministry. And these two parables on prayer you can see that in the introduction to each of them you find the reason why Jesus actually taught them at the time.

The first one regarding this persistent widow it was so that those who were praying ought always to pray and not to lose heart.

In other words that first parable is to encourage ourselves not to lose heart in prayer but to go on praying even when it gets difficult to do so.

[2 : 36] Jesus recognized that his disciples those who really do pray will have times when prayer is difficult when prayer doesn't come easily.

And that is why here he actually set out this parable so that they ought not to lose heart but always to pray. The second one is a parable on prayer directly especially to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Now obviously again that was directed specifically or mainly at the Pharisees because that's one of the men that's mentioned in the parable along with the tax collector was this Pharisee.

And by way of contrasting these two men and contrasting their prayers Jesus puts across the message to those that are listening to him of what prayer actually should be like in terms of humility and recognition of one's standing in relation to God.

And indeed in relation to our fellow human beings. So first of all we have that prayer should be persevering and secondly that prayer should be in humility.

[4 : 00] We'll look into something of what these two things entail. Prayer first of all to encourage those who pray not to lose heart but ought always to pray.

What kind of things will cause us to lose heart? Sometimes we spend too little time in prayer though it's not all about how long we pray or spend time in prayer.

But if we get into the habit of cutting down our times given to prayer then it'll be easier for us as time goes on and as our soul becomes decayed it'll be easier for us to miss out prayer.

And we won't feel so much like praying. That's really in a sense part of the process of backsliding if it sets in and if it goes on unchecked.

Sometimes we lose heart in prayer because we don't seem to be receiving an answer from God. Or at least in terms of what we're praying for specifically.

[5 : 01] If we're praying for somebody. If we're praying for something specific for them. And it doesn't happen and it keeps on that it doesn't happen. Then it's possible to lose heart in prayer.

And the Lord is saying whatever things we find discourage us from prayer. Whatever things we find actually cause us to lose heart as far as praying is concerned.

Listen to this parable. Come back to this parable. Consider what Jesus is saying in this parable. The soul that doesn't pray is dead.

The soul that ceases to pray dies. The church that doesn't pray is a dying church. Prayer is associated with spiritual life.

And in many ways it's related to spiritual life. The absence of prayer is an evidence of death. And the neglect of prayer is an evidence of death setting in.

[6 : 04] If it hasn't already set in before then. That's why we give such an emphasis to prayer in our congregational settings. As well as in our personal lives.

That's why we have early morning prayer meetings. And Saturday prayer meetings. And prayer on Wednesdays. And monthly prayer meetings. And prayer meetings before the evening service.

When the men pray in the vestry.

All of these prayer times. As well as the other times we pray. By ourselves or in groups or whatever. But they are all absolutely vital and crucial.

To the life blood spiritually of a congregation. Whatever we can achieve without prayer.

We can achieve nothing spiritually meaningful without prayer. That's why it's important to hear what Jesus is saying about our being encouraged to persevere in prayer.

[7 : 05] He talked about this widow. In this city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying give me justice against my adversary.

For a while he refused. But afterwards he said to himself. Though I neither feared 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.

And the Lord said here. What the unrighteous judge says. In other words the Lord is using an argument here. From something that he has in a parable. To something we want to actually apply then.

To ourselves about prayer. What he's really saying is. If this was the case as far as this unjust judge is concerned. How much more will it be the case.

That God will be interested in the prayer of his people. What does he say about this widow? Well the widow. We mustn't think that a widow in those days would necessarily be very old.

[8 : 13] Of course there are very young widows sometimes today as well. But in those days it was quite common to find many younger women as widows. And here in this setting in Israel.

All the way through the Old Testament. Indeed and up to this time of Christ's ministry. Widows were very vulnerable. I mentioned this morning about the provision that God made for the likes of Ruth.

When the near kinsman was required to take care of his nearest relative who had been widowed. And look after her and even at times marry her too.

And produce further heirs for the family. So the widow was very vulnerable. And if she wasn't looked after properly. There was really nobody in life.

If she was neglected by those who had responsibility. Then she didn't have access to the things that many other people had access to. And especially to justice. And you really read here about this widow and the way Jesus describes it.

[9 : 20] And it's pretty much to the effect that if this judge doesn't help her. She's really going to be in a bad way. She is going to be in serious difficulty.

If there's one person who in that community must help her. If he doesn't help her. Then she is really seriously in trouble. And what she's seeking is not revenge.

She has an adversary. She's got an opponent. Maybe an enemy. Something. Someone that she regards as an adversary. Somebody who opposes her for whatever reason we're not told.

But she's not looking for revenge. She's not looking for vengeance. She's not looking to get one back upon her adversary. She's looking for justice. That's the emphasis all the way through.

And we'll see that's significant when it comes to speaking about God. And our prayers. She said, give me justice against my adversary.

[10:25] And for a while, we presume that that was for quite a long while. This judge refused. He wasn't a very good man. In fact, he was a thoroughly bad man.

He was a judge. He had authority. He could help this woman in his position as a judge. But we're told that he neither feared God nor respected man.

And indeed, that was his confession. When he said, although I don't fear God or respect man, I will do this for this widow. And it wasn't because he was really interested in her.

And it wasn't because he was moved with compassion about her situation. But it was just so that he would get a rest for himself. So that he would not be bothered by her anymore.

Because she was really getting to him. And he said, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming. I will give her justice.

[11:20] I will do as she asks. And that's what he did. Now that then comes to be applied to God.

It's important that we make some distinctions. Obviously, God is not being compared to this unjust judge. He is being contrasted with him.

And when you see here that so also will God not give justice to his elect, to his chosen people who cry to him day and night.

It's an argument from saying, if someone like this unjust man did such a thing for this woman, how much more is it true that God will actually answer the prayers of his people?

That's the kind of argument that Jesus is using. That's where your encouragement comes to keep on praying. Don't think of God as somehow or other reluctant. Don't think of God as in some way or other keeping back deliberately from you something that you're praying for.

[12:27] God has his reasons. But what you're encouraged to do is to keep on praying, knowing the kind of God you're praying to. That he is thoroughly unlike this unjust judge who did this for this woman.

And when God comes to answer our prayers, he does so, not so that we will no longer cry to him. Not because we're wearying him. But because he has such an intense interest in our well-being and in helping us.

That he comes to give in response to our prayers. Tonight you may have been praying for something for a long time.

Maybe it's about yourself. Maybe it's praying for somebody else or for something to happen. Maybe you're praying about something that is important in your own life.

Some development in your life. Something about your future. Whatever it is. Maybe you've become somewhat discouraged. Maybe you've been somewhat put off from being earnest in prayer anymore.

[13:36] And really getting into the spirit of prayer, if you like. The Lord is saying to you, listen to what this unjust judge says. And shall not God all the more give justice to his elect to cry to him day and night.

So it's saying to us that God indeed will listen. But we need to keep crying to him. He has his reasons for what we might call delay.

God himself is not lingering. He has his own reasons why we don't get instant answers to our prayer. You know, the very fact that we need to persevere in prayer is itself a proof to us that an answer may be delayed.

Why would he emphasize for us that we just need to keep persevering in prayer if there was no such thing as a delay on God's part in actually coming to give us an answer to what we're praying for?

But there's something else here that's significant. You notice the word justice is used. And that's not just in terms of this widow and what she wanted.

[15:00] And what this judge, this unjust judge actually did for her. He gave her justice. Since he dealt with her case. Shall not God all the more give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? These words are capable of other translations as well. They're difficult to know precisely the meaning of these words. Will he delay long over them?

I tell you he will give justice to them speedily. Now, what's important really is that we notice the place of justice there. Because this is not just praying for anything.

The focus again is on justice. And we have to tie that with the coming of Christ, which has been part of what we've seen in the previous chapter.

And he goes on to speak about it elsewhere as well afterwards. In other words, that's one of the benefits or the beauties of studying a book as a whole. Just going through it like we're doing.

Because as you bring it all together, you begin to realize that this is really set in its context.

[16:07] It's when God's people are praying for justice. And justice does not yet seem to come. In other words, there are so many things in the world that we're praying for.

When our hearts are moved by the injustice of it all. And when we hear people saying, well, there can't be a God. Or he wouldn't have actually let things go as far as they are in human behavior.

As we see it in our own generation as well. We're praying for justice for those who are oppressed.

We're praying for justice for those who are being persecuted by enemies of the church and of the cause of God.

And yet we don't seem, at least much, to find justice coming their way. But the day is coming when Christ himself will come as the righteous judge.

That's why we're tied on to the coming of Christ. Our prayer for justice. Our prayer for things to be put right by God.

[17:19] Well, that's being delayed. The answer is being delayed to a great extent to the coming of Christ. That's why verse 8 has what it has.

When the Son of Man comes, nevertheless, will he find faith on earth? The Lord himself tied his coming to this praying of his people for justice. And the need to keep on praying and persevering in prayer.

Even though that seems still a long way off. Will he answer them? Of course, Jesus says, God will answer them. He will give justice to them speedily.

Now, how can you put that together with the fact that there's a delay in his answer? Why is he saying speedily when it hasn't yet happened? When it might not happen in our lifetime? Well, the answer seems to be this.

God will give justice in answering his people's prayers. And particularly so at the return of Christ.

When you think about the coming of Christ, as the previous chapter has put it, like the lightning that flashes from one side of the sky to the next.

[18:36] When you think about it in terms of the setting of it, as people were in the days of Noah, as people were in the days of Lot, so it will be when the Son of Man comes.

It will be sudden and it will be dramatic. It will not be slow. It will not be in slow motion. You will not see him coming in terms of having a lot of time to prepare yourself from the moment you see him coming until he begins to exercise his judgment.

It will be speedy. When God acts in the interest of justice, he doesn't delay. When God comes to set up justice and to act justly and to give people what is justly their portion, as in his judgment he will, be sure of this, it will be speedy.

It will be very fast. There will be no time to make adjustments. There will be no time to hide from what is happening.

Nevertheless, he says, I tell you, he will give them justice speedily. When he comes, as he will come, he will come and act with haste.

[19:58] It's almost as if it's saying to us that God, having put up with the injustices of this world for so long, having exercised his patience for so long, and remember, the patience of God as we find we're using the word delay, but of course everything is right in God's sight.

From our perspective, there may seem to be a delay in the coming of Christ, but that's in the mercy of God. That's in the patience of God. Because in that delay or in that interim, there is an offer of salvation.

There is grace at work. But the day is coming when the last believer will be converted and ready for glory. And then God will say, that's enough of injustice.

That's enough of a world that's in rebellion against me, and thus far has not been visited justly in my judgment. That's it. It's finished. That's an end of it. that I'm coming to act speedily to bring things to an end.

Keep on praying for Christ's return. Keep on praying for your own well-being. Keep on praying for the church. Keep on praying for those who are being persecuted.

[21 : 17] Keep on praying for all who are suffering injustice in this world. Keep on praying because your prayers are themselves going to be answered by God.

And when God answers, he will act justly and give justice to his chosen, to his elect people. And he adds this consideration in verse 8, the end of verse 8, nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Why is that added? What's the significance of that sentence? Well, it fits in with what you've said, what we've seen earlier in the previous passage at the end of chapter 18, the final part of chapter 18 that we looked at last time.

When the Son of Man comes, faith is not going to be the main characteristic of those who live in the world. We see that from the time, from the way, in the previous chapter that he spoke about just as it was in the days of Noah, just as it was in the days of Lot.

They were eating and drinking and buying and selling and planting and building. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage. All the things that you ordinarily do in life without really thinking that there's a catastrophe ahead.

[22 : 39] So it will be when the Son of Man comes. Faith, trust in himself is not going to be found in everybody.

Indeed, it's not going to be the main characteristic of those who are alive in the world when Jesus returns. But the question is also directed at you and I.

Because if he comes before we die, will he find faith in me and in you? Or go back to 24 hours ago. If he had come then, would he have found faith in yourself? Would you have been ready for him, waiting for him, welcoming him?

Or would it be that swift judgment that would sweep you into hell? That's what the question is for.

Remember the great question throughout the book of Luke so far is this, who is this man?

[23 : 57] Who is this individual? Who is this son of man? Who is this Jesus? What is he about? What does he stand for? What is this ministry about? Who is this person? Why did he come into the world?

Why this ministry? Why these parables? Why these miracles? All designed so that you and I will come to place our faith in him. And put our confidence in him before he comes.

So, prayer should be persevering and persevering in the light of Christ's coming. We have to go on praying even if it seems that the answer is being delayed.

Don't be discouraged from prayer by anything. Look to what this parable contains. And other parts of the Bible that encourage you to go on praying.

Secondary prayer should be in humility. The second parable is to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. That's the reason the parable was given by the Lord and so it's still the case that this parable is directed against our self-righteousness.

[25 : 11] And if we think tonight that self-righteousness has gone out of our lives when it comes to prayer then we're largely mistaken. Because self-righteousness is something that will be with us in some form or other to some extent or other while we're in this life.

Let's look at what he says. There are two contrasting men first of all then two contrasting prayers and then two contrasting outcomes. The one he says was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. They went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee the other a tax collector. They were at the opposite ends of the social spectrum if you like.

Here was a Pharisee here was somebody who was a pillar of the community somebody who had real status in the society of his day somebody who had such a religious reputation and here also was this tax collector.

You could not have found two more opposite people in their status and place in society than a Pharisee and a tax collector. The tax collector was despised. He was regarded as somebody who was simply a traitor especially if they were Jews as most of them were.

[26 : 28] They served the Romans they took in taxes for the Romans and the fellow Jews treated them with contempt and the Pharisee would look at this person as at the very very far end of the kinds of human beings that were unacceptable to him.

These are the two people these two extremes of humanity that go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee loves himself and despises this tax collector extremely contemptuous towards him.

In other words he is filled with pride. pride. And one of the great lessons of the parable is that we realize something of how horrible and awful pride is.

Whatever should characterize us in the presence of God it should certainly not be pride. We have nothing to be proud of. This Pharisee was a very proud man.

He thought so much about himself and his qualities and he looked down on this tax collector with absolute disdain.

[27 : 52] That's what pride does. It doesn't just make you think so much of yourself it makes you think so little of others. It makes you think yourself to be really something you're not and it makes you think other people to be something they're not as well because very often the person who's filled with pride those that he looks down on or she looks down on are usually far better people than they are themselves.

That's what pride does. That's just something as a glimpse into the workings of pride. pride. And this tax collector in contrast to the Pharisee who loves himself he hates the fact that he's a sinner. He would rather be someone else than be this sinner that he knows himself to be in the presence of God. He hates what he is as a sinner.

Therefore he comes with humility before God in the temple. And when we see his prayers we'll see in a minute his prayer is marked by the kind of humility that really shows this man understands himself properly in contrast to the fallacy who does not.

Because pride never understands yourself properly humility always does. these are the two men. And these are their two prayers.

[29 : 26] Listen to the Pharisee stand beside him as he stands there by himself praying thus. God I thank you that I am not like other men extortioners unjust adulterers or even like this tax collector.

He cannot even leave the tax collector out of his prayer which he is praying before God which actually isn't really a prayer at all. God just treats it with the contempt it deserves.

But he cannot leave this tax collector out of his reckoning out of his mind even when he's praying as he thinks to God. He has to bring the tax collector into it. He has to bring his despising of him into it when he says to God I thank you God I am not at least like this man.

I am very unlike this tax collector. Then he goes on to give God a list of the things that he does. I fast twice a week that's more than he was required to do.

I give tithes of all that I get that's more than he was required to give. You notice that there is nothing in his prayer about a request.

[30 : 44] He doesn't really need God to do anything for him. He is so good that he doesn't need that. He is so full of pride that there is no place in his prayer to ask God to do anything for him.

He's got it all. You might say that as somebody put it he is so full of himself he would think it quite appropriate to have God as his assistant.

That's the kind of man he is. There is no request nothing that God needs to do for him. He can't see that he has anything of any defect at all that God needs to provide.

And then there's this tax collector who comes to pray like this. It's not just that we find the words that he used but we find the posture that he used and the actions that he used.

he came standing far off and not even lifting up his eyes to heaven. He didn't even dare come near like the Pharisee to the place that was associated with the presence of God.

[31 : 59] But he beat upon his breast a sign of great emotion. He was really taken up with this. This was something that moved him deeply. This was something that really agitated him.

He came beating upon his breast as he prayed, God be merciful to me, sinner.

He truly knows himself. And the words literally are the sinner rather than a sinner in the text of the New Testament there.

Be merciful to me, the sinner. It's as if this man is so taken up with his sin and with the need of forgiveness and with his own horrid, inward, sinful self as he expresses it to God.

It's just as if he is unconscious of anybody else there. He doesn't even think about this Pharisee.

He's not concerned about this Pharisee. Right now he's concerned with his own heart.

[33 : 05] He's concerned with his own need. He's concerned with the fact that he's a sinner, with the fact that he needs God's mercy and God's cleansing and God's acceptance. And he is locked into that so much so that to him there is nobody else in the world that's a sinner but himself.

God be merciful to me sinner. And the word he uses, merciful, again gives us a glimpse into this man's mind because it's a word that includes the idea of requiring propitiation, requiring a sacrifice of atonement, something that recognizes that there is an anger in God, that there is in God something that's against him and for which he needs mercy.

Nothing like that in the Pharisee, he doesn't need mercy, he's beyond mercy, he's too good to be thinking of mercy. There's no possibility that God will be angry with him, of course not, somebody that good, how can God possibly be angry with him?

What he's really saying before God is look at all this list of my achievements Lord, how can you not be delighted with me? And here's this poor tax collector saying, God be propitious, please deal with my condition in a way that puts away your own condemnation of me, your own displeasure, your own anger against me, be merciful to me.

Listener, which would you rather be? We don't have any doubts surely in answering that question.

[35 : 11] And that's brought out in the outcome, in the two contrasting outcomes. I tell you, said Jesus, this man, this tax collector, went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now, you can just imagine these two men leaving the temple around about the same time. And you can just picture the Pharisee as he makes his way out of the temple and goes back to wherever he's going, whether it's to his home or to his place of work or wherever, and he's congratulating himself on the prayer he's just uttered.

He's congratulating himself that he's been able to tell God how good he is, and that he was genuine about it all, and that is all true about him, and really that was such a good prayer.

I'm so satisfied in what I've just done. That would be the thought filling his mind. And God from heaven has totally ignored his prayer.

Well, at least to the extent of dismissing it as unacceptable. people. And I can just imagine this poor tax collector, like many of ourselves, if not all of us, when we're asked to pray and think about it afterward, we tell ourselves, that was really a pathetic prayer.

[36 : 36] I really had to struggle through that. All I could say was, Lord, please be merciful to me. What kind of a prayer is that?

And you can imagine the devil just on his shoulder, saying to him, you know, that was really pathetic. Can you not do better than that? Could you not have been something more like this man that was beside you, that was able to tell God about the good things that he's able to do in his life, and about how good he is, and how upright he is?

What a pathetic being you are, that that's the kind of prayer, the only kind of prayer that you can offer. to God. And Jesus says, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified.

What does that mean? It means fully accepted with God, not because of his prayer, not on account of his prayer somehow or other, having some merit and God saying to him, well, yes, you've really bought yourself some acceptance because of the kind of prayer you uttered.

that's not what he's saying at all. It's because of the kind of man he is as a humble, confessing individual. It's because of how he utterly depends on the mercy of God that he goes down to his house justified.

[38 : 04] And the implication, because, you see, that's the only one that's mentioned by Jesus. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

All he says about the other is just he refers to as the other. He's forgotten. He doesn't matter. He's insignificant. Whatever he thinks of himself, he is absolutely insignificant to God.

His prayer counts for nothing except to condemn him. but this man, that's the one the focus is on. That's the one the eye of God is on.

That's the one the favor of God rests upon. He went down to his house justified rather than the other.

It's not what people think of us or what we think of ourselves at the end of the day that matters. The opinion of heaven is the only thing that's significant.

[39 : 15] And if God says about this man that's despised by so many, you're the one that I favor. Hallelujah to him. Blessed be him.

What a great future he has. Compared to what awaits the Pharisee if he doesn't repent. Friends, that's tonight what is saying to us.

It's not what we think of ourselves, what we think of our own prayers, what we think of others. It's not what others think of us, what others think of our prayers or about preaching, of our abilities, our disabilities, or otherwise, our lack of ability.

it's what God thinks. And what God thinks is always in accordance with what God requires.

God is not going to think well of us if we don't fit up to what he requires. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, will be brought low, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted. [40 : 26] Now let's ask a question. I have to put it to myself. Somebody who stands in pulpits, somebody who preaches the gospel, somebody who has that great privilege.

Which of these two men am I most like? And if I instantly say, oh, I'm certainly most like the second one, then I'm probably more like the first one.

because I am assuming, and it's a very dangerous assumption, that self-righteousness somehow doesn't lurk in my life.

too. And when we come before God, let us always try to be sure of this, that we cast out all ideas of our own sufficiency, of our own goodness, of our own righteousness, of our own ability, of our own achievements, of anything at all that has been done through us, that have benefited other people, because it's all of God, and not of myself.

And the moment I begin to think that somehow it's of myself, then I'm becoming a Pharisee. And I'm entering into the spirit of this man, who began to congratulate himself for what he was and what he wasn't in the presence of God.

[42 : 03] Which then of these are we most like? Well, we should be able to answer that something like this. I find myself often most like the first one, but I desperately want to be most like the second one.

Let's pray. Gracious and eternal God, teach us humility, we pray. Help us to realize more and more its nature and its beauty in your own presence and in the presence of our fellow human beings.

Forgive us our pride, O Lord, we pray, which so often comes to show itself in our lives, even before we know it. Help us to recognize it in all its forms.

Help us, Lord, we pray, to find it utterly distasteful, and so unlike the spirit that marked our Lord himself, who humbled himself and made himself of no reputation and took the form of a servant.

Grant, we pray, that we may ever follow his great example, that we may seek your grace daily, O Lord, to persevere in prayer and to do so with humility.

[43 : 24] We pray your acceptance of us now, accepting us and cleansing us from all our sin. For Jesus' sake, Amen.