

Persevering in Prayer

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's turn again to the chapter we read in Luke chapter 18. And I want us to look at the first two parables that Jesus has given to us there.
- The parable highlighted there of the persistent widow and also of the Pharisee and the tax collector. So that's what it says, chapter 18, verse 1.
- And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart. And then in verse 9, he also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.
- Now we live very much in a day of the instant where everything is expected to happen right away. We sometimes, in fact, the whole way of communication, the whole way of how we deal with things is so instant that it sometimes, in fact, it causes so many stresses and strains in life.
- And that kind of thinking of living in this world of the instant can have an effect upon us in the life of the church. And we must always guard against that.
- [1 : 1 9] Because the way of God is often very, very different to the way of the world or the way that, even of how we're living at a particular time. God teaches us that two of the most important things within the Christian life are patience and perseverance.
- And these two things are essentials as Christians that we develop patience and perseverance.
- And probably every person in here, I would say, even if you're known to be a relatively patient man or patient woman, you'll have to confess that patience is not something that we are naturally given to.
- Even people who might be termed patient or who appear patient, very often inwardly with anything, but particularly when everything around you is kind of demanding that things happen and things are not happening.
- It's very, very difficult often just to keep on waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting. But patience is an essential part of our Christian life.
- [2 : 2 9] And not just patience, but perseverance, the ability to keep going. In fact, it's one of the great marks of the Christian life is perseverance. In fact, as you look at your own life as a Christian, you will say to yourself, perseverance is quite a remarkable thing.
- In fact, this is one of the things that Jesus says, Those who persevere to the end, the same shall be saved. And when you look at your life, you say to yourself, you know, there are many, many times you could feel that as a Christian, that you could have gone under, you could have been derailed, that things just, you just felt, can I go on any longer?
- Have I pushed it too far? Will God turn us back on me now? There are just so many times you reach situations and come to these kind of thoughts.
- But the thing is, you are still going. You are still following. Despite all that has been and all that has happened and everything that is personal in your own life and your own circumstances, you find that here you are, you are still going on.

Despite all the knockbacks, despite all the questions, despite the disappointment of your own self, with how disappointed you are in yourself, still you go on.

[3 : 54] And that in itself is an evidence, a mark, of God's grace within your heart, within your life. This ability to keep going. This is the perseverance that is essential within the Christian life.

And just as perseverance and patience is important within the Christian life, so it is in prayer, which of course is a huge part of our Christian life.

And that's what the Lord is teaching about here, first of all, is the importance of keeping going in prayer. When you look at the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, we see a life that was clothed in prayer.

And our lives as Christians ought to be clothed in prayer. And I think you and I know that prayer is not an easy thing. It's not the easiest thing in the world.

It's never, in fact, all that easy. There are times we find it a lot easier to pray. There are times that there is a spirit of prayer. But often it can be hard praying.

[5 : 03] And sometimes we ask. And you know, we'll see that as we go on. All these sort of things. But prayer and the keeping going in prayer is absolutely essential.

Now, the Christian life, as we said, is a life that involves prayer. I think one of the great examples of that is Saul of Tarsus. I'm sure Saul, as a devout Pharisee, often prayed.

But after he was converted and the Lord told Ananias to go and see Saul, Ananias rightly was concerned and he said, That's a man who persecutes the church.

He was afraid to go. And the Lord said very simply to Ananias, Behold, he prays. There was a change. And this was the mark, the evidence, that he was now a praying man.

And I'm sure Saul, as a devout Pharisee, would have prayed and prayed and prayed. But it wasn't real prayer. Because we're coming just in a little to see what the prayer of the Pharisee was like.

[6 : 07] But now he was praying. And that is part of our Christian life. And, of course, we mustn't measure prayer by its length, but by its heart, by its sincerity.

And when you go through the prayers in the Bible, some of the greatest, the most effective prayers are just a few words. If we had carried on reading through to the end of this chapter, we find a very effective prayer.

And that's at verse 38, when we find the blind beggar by the side of the road. And when he heard it was Jesus of Nazareth passing by, he cried out, Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me.

And when Jesus had called him, he said to him, What do you want me to do for you? And he said, Lord, let me recover my sight. There's not a lot of, there's not great length to these prayers, but these were real, genuine, heartfelt prayers.

That was a prayer that stopped Jesus in his track. Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. That was sufficient to stop Jesus and to call this poor man to himself.

[7 : 24] And then he asks him what, so we were saying it's not the length, it's a heart, it's a genuineness, it's the sincerity of that prayer. Now, as we said, we find the life of Jesus is a life that is full of prayer.

Before he chose the 12 disciples, he spent the whole night in prayer to his father. And we find right throughout his ministry on earth that he was constantly in dialogue with his father.

And we keep following that right up until the time of his arrest and the time of his, in fact, even in Gethsemane, we find him spending so much time in prayer.

And Jesus, who knows how difficult it is for us in our struggles in the Christian life, and who knows, often the battles that are involved in prayer, gives us this parable to encourage us in prayer.

Now, as is often the case in the parables of Jesus, we have to go and try and spiritualize everything. Often the parable is simply teaching a fundamental and a clear lesson.

[8 : 34] And basically what the Lord is saying here is, keep going in prayer. That's really what it is. To be persistent, to be persevering in prayer.

And he highlights very simply that there was this judge, and there's possibly a Roman judge, because very often the Jews required two or three judges. So it was probably a Roman judge.

That doesn't matter who the judge was. But this man, he was totally, had no regard for anybody. He was his own man, and what people thought about him didn't mean a thing.

He would do exactly what he thought was right, irrespective of the consequences. So he wasn't somebody who was going to give in because of public pressure, or anybody's pressure.

But this woman kept coming to him over an issue, asking for justice. And she kept coming, and she kept coming, and she kept coming, and she kept coming, and she wouldn't give up.

[9 : 37] And Jesus is saying, at the end of the day, this judge, because of the persistence of this woman, it wasn't because he liked her, it wasn't because he decided to do a favor for her, it wasn't because there was somebody in her family that she knew, it wasn't for any of these reasons, it was simply because she would not give up.

And he said at the end of the day, I just, I can't take any more of this, I'm going to give her what she wants. And basically, that's what Jesus is saying. And he's saying, if an unjust judge, if this kind of person here, if this unrighteous judge says, gives because of persistence, how much more will your heavenly father give when we come to him in prayer?

And when the actual language here, where it says that he will not delay over, I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

That's what it says. God will definitely vindicate his people. So we are told that we have to keep on praying. And I think you could almost tie this persistence in prayer with what goes before in chapter 17 about the second coming, the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Jesus asking this question where he says, at the end of verse 8, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[11 : 18] He had been talking in chapter 17 about the coming again, of his coming into this world a second time. And this is, I don't believe that the Lord is in any way saying, I wonder, when I return, will there be faith amongst people?

I think what he's simply asking here is that it will be an encouragement and a spur to people to keep on praying, even although the days might be dark and they might be living in difficult times.

Keep on watching, keep on praying. But I suppose we have to ask ourselves the question, how is prayer so difficult?

If it is such a vital part of our Christian life, if it is that really which is so wonderful, I'm sure those of you tonight who love the Lord and follow the Lord, one of the things you'll remember at the very, very outset of your Christian life, really from the very beginning of when you began to seek the Lord, was the wonder of prayer.

Prayer was, I still remember myself just how amazing that you could speak to God, that there was this, that he was there, that you could speak to him at any time, you could go to him with anything.

[12 : 41] He was so real, he was so personal. It was just this, you were, as it were, brought into a new world of opportunity, a new world of privilege. And sometimes as we go on in our Christian life, we lose a sense of the amazement, of the privilege, of the thrill of what we have.

But prayer is the very heartbeat of the Christian life. But sometimes it's difficult. And it's difficult for varying reasons. One of the reasons is very often delay.

There is a delay in the answer to our prayers. And I'm sure every single one of you here know what that is. Where you have prayed, you have prayed, and you have prayed.

And there's nothing. And we find that God often works in this way. That his ways and his timing is so incredibly different to our ways and our timing.

And so often, like Abraham, remember how Abraham had been told by the Lord that he was going to be the father of a great nation. And year after year after year after year after year after year and nothing was happening.

[13 : 57] And there's no doubt but that Abraham was often bringing this matter to the Lord. But that is the nature of how it works. And so sometimes through the delay we question ourselves.

We question our faith. We say to ourselves, it must be because I don't have enough faith. It must be that I'm not a good enough Christian.

That's why the Lord is not answering my prayer. But the word of God shows us that often the Lord delays. And then again, prayer can be difficult because sometimes when we pray over a matter and over an issue, rather than getting better, it gets worse.

the situation becomes worse. Have you ever found that? And it reaches a point when you say to yourself, maybe I should stop praying.

It's at these points Satan is having a field day. And you will find experiences like the likes of Joseph in prison. Joseph was a good man. Joseph was constantly praying to the Lord.

[15 : 10] There is no question about it. He was a devout believer. And Joseph's life just went on a downward spiral. Down and down and down and down.

He went. Same with David. God had promised David that he would be king. And every day and every week and every month and every year, it was getting worse and worse and appeared less and less likely.

And you go through some of the Psalms and you can see how David was pleading and praying and asking the Lord over and over and over and over again. Year after year, rather than getting better, things were getting worse.

I'm sure you've experienced that. And as I said, Satan will say to you, hey, just quit. Stop praying. You're only making things worse.

But again, we mustn't listen to that. Because sometimes, you see, this is what we don't understand, is that God is preparing, very often, God is preparing us for the answer and he's preparing the answer for us.

[16 : 23] It's coming back to our idea that everything is in the immediate. Everything happens right away. It doesn't in God's timetable. And very often, God says, I am going to give you what you're asking.

But you're not ready for it. The time is not right for me to give what you're asking. Sometimes God has to work within our own heart, within our own life, because what we've asked for, rather than proving a blessing in our experience, might prove the very opposite.

God has to work within us. If God had taken Israel straight out of Egypt and taken them into Canaan right away into the land of promise, it would have been a disaster.

Because Israel, after all these years in Egypt, had become so caught up in the ways of Egypt, into the very idolatry of Egypt, that it took years in the desert, 40 years of breaking them, of crushing them, of remoulding them, reshaping them, until they were finally ready to enter into the land of promise.

And you see, that's what God was doing, chipping away, breaking bit by bit by bit by bit, reshaping, remoulding, until they were ready. And God is that with you and me as well. He breaks us.

[17 : 45] You and I know that if we get a knock, if we get a cut, if we get a broken leg, or a broken arm, or even a broken thing, broken anything, it's sore. And it's also true spiritually, it's sore when God is breaking us.

But it's for our good because he breaks in order to remould, in order to reshape and to prepare us. And God, we're told in the word, waits, that he may be gracious.

And he has a time for everything. As he said to the disciples, your time's always now. But he has a perfect time, the Lord, for everything.

So again, that is one of the reasons why prayer can become difficult. Because things get worse, or appear to be getting worse. And again, there are other times in prayer that we struggle, we hinted at that earlier, because of a sense of our own unworthiness and our own sin.

And there are times sometimes when we say, we come before the Lord in prayer. And we say to ourselves, you know this, I've prayed often, but there have just been little prayers here and there.

[19 : 02] but I've never really spent a lot of time just in one time with the Lord. And then you begin to think at that moment when you begin to pray.

And you begin to think of all the things you've done and all the things that you've said and what you are in the very depth of your being and your own deceit and your unfaithfulness and all these things come up and you say to yourself, I can't pray to the Lord.

The Lord is not going to listen to me because of who I am and what I've done and what I'm thinking and what I'm intending and all these things come flooding through us. And so it makes prayer difficult.

But these are things that shouldn't drive us back but sometimes they do. And again, sometimes we can become weary in prayer because of the spirit of the world, the spirit of the age.

Those who may be here or older people who have maybe been in times where there has been a little time of spiritual refreshing where you've known something of the Lord's presence within a community where there is a spirit of prayer, there's a spiritual vibrance about.

[20 : 18] Prayer is so much easier. But if we're living in a day when there is so much opposition to the Christian faith and there's a kind of a darkness, a spiritual darkness prevailing, then prayer is all the harder.

So that's why there are all these things we're highlighting because the Lord, as we said, is teaching us here keep on praying. Don't give in whatever the reason.

You have to keep praying. And we'll turn this round to look just for a moment, look at it a little more positively. Why should we keep praying? Well, first and foremost, because it's God's appointment for us.

And God will never appoint something for us that he is not going to be in, that he is not going to enable us with, and that he is not going to provide answers to what we are seeking.

So, it's absolutely essential that we keep on praying. And again, prayer, we've got to remember, is something that God has given to us, not simply that we get things from him, but that we get him himself.

[21 : 40] You know, I believe that the Lord sees that as the most important part of prayer. Because so often we can be caught up with everything else, with what's happening to us, in our work, in our home, in our families, in the world, in our communities, in all these things, and we come praying to the Lord about this, that, the next thing, which is right, don't get me wrong.

But we're not pleading with him and saying, Lord, it's really you I need. It's you I want. Help me, Lord, to get to know you better.

Help me, Lord, to understand you. That's a prayer that the Lord will never, ever, ever ignore or turn us away from.

But we've always got to make sure. And you know, the longer we spend in the presence of the Lord, the more wonderful he becomes, the more glorious he becomes, the more we see the glory of him and the less we see of ourselves.

But the Lord also has set out before us so many of his promises. And he's given us these promises in order to encourage us to pray. And when we go through the word, the word is just full of promises.

[23 : 03] And when, take it for it in its simplest form, the Lord says, ask, and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you. And we're to take God's word to himself.

And we're to say to him, Lord, you have said in your word, this is what you've said. Say, for instance, you're praying about your family.

Supposing there's somebody in your family or the people that you love, and they seem far away from the Lord. They don't seem interested in the Lord. And you're praying. Take God's word where it says, the Lord has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

The Lord would have all people come to faith. That's, that's a, there's, you know how it says that? He's, you bring things like that to the Lord and say, Lord, see what your word says.

This is what I am praying for so and so. That you will be according to what your word is saying. Bring his word and say to him, do as you have said.

[24 : 10] But one of the other areas in the whole struggle in prayer that we must remember is that there is this enemy of our souls who's out to thwart us and to spoil our prayer all the time.

And you know, whenever we come to worship the Lord, the devil's never too far away. And he will do whatever he can to take us off. He's a master in church of doing that.

He's a master, you know, when, whenever there's a sermon being preached, he does not want you to listen to the word because he knows that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.

He will do everything in his power to keep your mind from focusing upon the truth. He'll distract you. He'll bring you to start thinking about other things but what you're going to do.

He's great at bringing before you things that you had planned to do. You know, you were going to do things last week. You forgot all about it. And right now, sitting in church, he'll remind you.

[25 : 15] Satan will say, oh, you forgot to do that. And you'll say, oh, no. And that's your mind gone. And he's brilliant at bringing, bringing things into your mind when you're under the word.

And it's the same in prayer. He will do anything and everything to stop you praying. He'll make you feel sleepy. He'll bring a spirit of drowsiness and heaviness.

Have you ever felt that? You're bright, you're breezy, everything's okay. You can read the paper, you can read, and then you say to yourself, you know, I'm going to have a quick reading of the word and a wee prayer. And all of a sudden, you begin to get sleepy.

There's nothing there before. There was no sense of sleep before. We underestimate his influence, his power. He's the spirit of the power of this air.

And there's a classic example given to us in the book of Daniel where Daniel was praying and praying over something. It's in Daniel chapter 10. And the answer, God answered that prayer of Daniel's.

[26 : 21] But it took, was it three weeks or something for the answer to come? because of the spiritual battle that was going on in the spiritual realms that we cannot see where the powers of darkness were preventing the answer from coming.

Little do we realize all that's going on in the spiritual realm. But the great thing is, the Lord is God over all. And he will answer.

So what Jesus is saying to us here is, keep on praying. Do not give up. And just in five minutes to see, we've taken longer than I meant there, we see the Pharisee and the tax collector.

And here we see two different people with two totally different types of prayer. And Jesus tells at the very beginning who this parable is about. those who thought in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

And so, there are two different people and there are two different prayers. And as we see the Pharisee, it really is actually very, very sad because this man is deluded about prayer.

[27 : 38] And as he approaches God, we see a great boldness about him. Now, we are told to approach the throne of grace with boldness, but it's a humble boldness. This man had no humility, whatever.

And when he begins his prayer, you think all is well because he begins and says, God, I thank you. And you'd say, that's good. He's a man with thankfulness in his heart and he's coming to God to thank God and so we should.

Maybe it's one of the things we're most guilty of is our lack of thanking God. It's a serious thing actually, our lack of thanking God.

You remember, I'm digressing here very slightly, but you remember when ten lepers came to Jesus and Jesus healed them. They went off and they had to show the priest and on their way where they were going, they discovered they were all healed.

And one came back, he was a Samaritan, and he fell down at Jesus' feet and he thanked Jesus for healing him. And Jesus said, and where are the nine?

[28 : 46] And Jesus highlighted to the crowd that only one came back and that man who came back was a Samaritan.

Maybe we are too guilty of not thanking the Lord the way we should. Anyway, here's this man, it begins, well, I thank God. God. But you know, the problem here is that this man was all about himself.

He began to speak to anybody around and about who was listening and telling God and any audience about how good he really was.

And it's really quite extraordinary when you see what he's saying. I thank God that I'm not like other men or even like this tax collector.

So he was so deluded. He thought that God was going to accept him because of his morality, because of his liberality, because of all these things.

- [29 : 57] He thought because he was an exemplary citizen that God was going to give him like a gold star, a big tick and say, well done, you're a good man, you're a great man.
- Did he go home justified? No. He might have gone home with a sense of his own smugness and self-satisfaction, but he didn't know God's peace.
- And you know, the most dangerous or one of the most dangerous things that we can possess within our own heart is this kind of thinking. I'm all right.
- I'm a decent enough person. God will accept me for who I am in myself. That is the way of the Pharisee. That is such wrong thinking.
- God cannot accept us simply because of who we are in ourselves. Our sin disqualifies ourselves from that.
- [31 : 01] And part of the great problem is we don't realize our sin. By nature we don't. Our natural being is that we think we're not too bad.
- We look around and we say, poor, society today is a dangerous society in parts. We often see violence on the streets and such like.
- And we say to ourselves, oh well, I'm a decent enough person. We can congratulate ourselves and there can be a wee touch of the spirit of the Pharisee.
- And no. And that Pharisee stood and he looked down at the tax collector. Oh, look at him. I thank God I'm not like him.
- But then we see the other side and there's the tax collector. And this poor man is so aware of who he is and what he's done. And as we know the tax gatherers, they had a bad reputation.
- [31 : 56] Whether this man was such or not, I don't know. But he knew himself. That's the thing. He knew who he was in himself. And he couldn't even rise up.
- He was just bent down. And he was kind of banging on his chest. You know, it was just, it was just this anguish of who he is. And all he could say was, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.
- That's all he could say. Here's another of the short prayers in this chapter. And God heard that prayer because that prayer was uttered with all his heart.
- And you know something, God is a God who delights in mercy. One of the things, what that is saying is, amongst all the wonderful things of who God is, and the things that God takes pleasure in, one of the things, almost, it's not, we can't say above all, but he absolutely loves and delights in, is showing mercy.
- And when we talk of mercy, it talks of two things. It talks of a real need on the one, on the part of the one who is wanting mercy. And it talks of resources sufficient to meet that need on the part of the one displaying mercy.
- [33 : 20] mercy. We hear of mercy workers, of people going into places where there's been famine and where there's been, as is happening just now, the likes of hurricane devastation and such like.
- We hear that expression of mercy workers, people going to help, to bring supplies, to bring aid, to bring help to people. Well, that's what God delights to do, in our need.
- What he wants is us to discover that need, acknowledge that need, and come to him and say, Lord, you know, my life's a bit of a mess. In fact, I don't have anything really that I can bring before you that commends me to you.
- But Lord, all I'm asking is one thing, be merciful to me. And you know what? The Lord will. That poor tax collector, he went home justified.
- when he went out that door of the temple, the peace of God filled his heart. He was a content man. He knew that things were right between himself and God.

[34 : 31] And you know, you cannot put a higher price. There isn't anything better in the whole wide world than to know that, that things are right between yourself and God.

That doesn't mean that you're living a perfect life, but it means that your sin has been covered, your sin has been dealt with, that your sin has been pardoned.

Because indeed, in this very word, mercy, part of it has a slant in the word which means to cover. And that's what God does.

He covers our sins. I have cast, there's so many different expressions, I have cast your sins behind my back.

That's what you do with something you don't want to see anymore. You're finished with, throw it behind you. That's what the Lord says, that's what I've done with your sins. They're gone. Cast your sins into the depths of the sea.

[35 : 32] I've blotted out so that there's not a trace anymore. Your sin and your iniquity I will remember no more. this is what the Lord is saying.

When we go to him seeking for that mercy he will give us that mercy. Well I hope and pray tonight that all of us will seek the Lord and seek for that mercy and remember that he delights in mercy.

I don't know where you are tonight. If you don't know the Lord you don't know what you're missing. Because I'll tell you you might have a dead conscience but you don't have God's peace.

And you cannot put a price on God's peace knowing that because of what Jesus has done you are right with God.

It's priceless. Discover that for yourself if you haven't already. Let us pray. Let us