

Luke 18:1-8 "The Prayer-Hearing, Answering God"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me, if you will, this morning to Luke 18. It's on page 877, the Bible in the pew in front of you.

It's been nearly four months since I said turn to Luke. But now we're hitting the home stretch of Luke's gospel as we've been studying through it.

We're in the fourth quarter, so to speak, which reminds me, two years ago when we started, I brought a football.

And we started out where Vince Lombardi does every year with his team. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a football. It's the first priority.

[1 : 00] The thing you've got to focus on if we're going to do anything together this year. And Luke does that in his gospel. He's writing to Theophilus and he's saying to him, this is Jesus.

He's the one you have to focus on. He's the first priority. He must be the center of attention. The one that it's all about.

We must do that, we've said. Even in the last few weeks, we've said we must be unapologetically Christ-centered as a church. As we pray for God to transform us and our community.

And you can do that anywhere in God's word, of course, right? It's all about Jesus. But in particular, that's my heart as we come back to finish the gospel of Luke.

We've said Luke is the historical, paradoxical, upside-down, life-changing, true story of Jesus.

[2 : 03] And as we've gone through it, we've seen, just to review a little bit and catch us all up, Jesus announced by angels to shepherds as good news of great joy for all people.

Now, that's who he is. Jesus is good news and brings a message of good news all through the gospel of Luke. And he does it for all sorts of people.

Particularly many you wouldn't perhaps expect. We see the king himself engaging not merely shepherds, but many other social and religious outcasts of his day.

Valuing women, including Gentiles, loving enemies. We see him healing the sick, the possessed, even the dead. Quite a king, powerful and merciful in his actions.

Authoritative and humble in his words. This is the Jesus that Luke wants his readers to get a taste of.

[3 : 09] He's unlike anyone else they've ever known, Luke is saying. And now, we're headed to the most important part of the whole story. Jesus has been telling us for several chapters now that what must happen, what has to happen, he must go to the cross.

Suffer and be rejected and be killed and then rise from the dead. And Jesus is laser focused on this ultimate mission, isn't he? He sets a course for Jerusalem.

Fixes his gaze on his sacrificial death in our place. And he won't be deterred from it. Priority number one, Jesus says. All the value systems he's turned upside down.

All the undeserving outsiders he's welcomed in. All the remarkable things he's done and said. All of them hinge on his sacrificial death in the place of sinners.

And his living again to offer them new life. That's his first priority. That's the real good news. That's the only way to this new community.

[4 : 18] This transformed society that he's been offering. It's through his death and resurrection.

And soon we're going to be there. And actually read the accounts of what happens at the cross in the empty tomb.

But even now, every story we read is in that context. In the shadow of the cross. And that great task before Jesus.

Just in the next couple of chapters, Jesus is going to encounter Zacchaeus. You may have heard of him. Little children. A blind beggar. There's lots of really good stuff coming up even before we get to the cross.

But he's ultimately heading for Jerusalem right now. For a cross and an empty tomb. Just where we left off a few months ago, King Jesus has been teaching us about his kingdom.

Particularly in light of eternal matters. Pushing our hearts towards eternity. Toward living today with our lives shaped by eternal values. This morning we'll look just at one parable.

[5 : 23] To help our hearts as we follow him. Or consider following him. It's Luke 18 at verse 1. This is God's holy word.

Given so that we might know with certainty about Jesus and the hope that he gives. Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

He said, But in a certain 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 afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear 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, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

[6 : 32] Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will give them justice speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, Will he find faith on earth?

Let's pray together as we look at God's word. Father, we thank you for your word. And for this story in particular.

We ask that you'd speak to us this morning. Father, you know me. I'm a guy who loves to pray. I'm a guy who struggles to pray.

And I feel that. And we feel that. We long to come to you and lay our hearts out before you and live dependently on you.

And we love it in those moments where it happens. But we also struggle against it. And so we ask for your help. Would you teach us this morning?

[7 : 37] And Father, much more than teaching us. There's not a lot of new information in this story. We need you to change us. We need your word by your spirit to shape our hearts.

To mold us and turn us back to you. So would you do that as we know you love to. In Jesus' name, amen. Imagine for a minute this morning that you're a child who gets to go on a camping trip with your family.

Those are always very fun, right? And you've gotten everything set up. And it's kind of early in the afternoon. And you decide to go out wandering a little bit. Just kind of looking around, exploring the woods.

And you look up a few minutes later and realize you're not sure where you are. You're actually lost. Maybe some of you have experienced that it is terrifying for the child and for the parent, isn't it? It's a scary experience. And here you are calling out over and over for mom and dad. But you don't hear any answer.

[8 : 42] No one shows up. I mean, you think you know the way back, right? You hadn't gone too far. So you just keep walking and walking and walking. And then after what feels like forever, maybe just a few minutes, you walk by that same tree again.

It's that one you remember seeing with the funny roots that you laughed about when you went by. They looked so strange. And you think, oh no. I'm walking in circles.

Your heart just sinks. You're completely turned around. You cry out again and again. And no answer. The sun is beginning to set now.

And you come by that same tree the third time. Darkness is settling in. And you know there's no way you're going to figure out which way you're supposed to be going.

And so for the last time, you cry out a couple more last gasps. And no answer. Nobody responds.

[9 : 43] You sit down by this familiar tree with the strange roots and you just start crying. You were hopeful when you started out.

Sure, that you could find your way back. But now you're worn down from trying everything you know to do and calling for help with no answer.

You've lost heart and given up, right? Most of us know that feeling, don't we? Maybe you've lost heart, not in the woods, perhaps, but in your life.

In your profound grief over the loss of a relationship or a loved one. And you just feel like there's no way forward. As you struggle with depression, even the counselor and the meds that you found so helpful to you, they're not seeming to do anything anymore.

And they can't lift that darkness that seems to be just settling in oppressively. Maybe in the pain of seeing your children struggle and things not seeming to get any better, even though you've been crying out to God about it over and over.

[10:59] But here you are at the same place again. It's that familiar tree and you're running out of words. You're losing heart. Losing heart, giving up hope, feeling alone.

That's one reason we stop praying sometimes, isn't it? We talked a few weeks ago about the fact that we typically don't pray because we don't feel like we need to.

And painfully, we admitted, and at least I did and suggested, maybe you should, that a lot of times we don't feel that need because we're not actually on God's mission that we really need Him for.

We're just about what we want, and so we don't really need to pray. Well, in this passage, Jesus is urging us to pray. In fact, to keep praying.

But He's addressing our tendency, even when we do pray, to lose heart. We know we have a need.

[12:05] We've been willing to acknowledge that. But we feel we're not getting any answer, any help. Prayer is simply not helping. I feel my words don't get above the ceiling like I get an out-of-office auto-reply from God when I send Him a message.

Have you ever felt that? Have you ever lost heart that way? Have you ever thought, why keep praying when it doesn't seem to be helping? I've felt that way.

I think any of us who've ever prayed have felt that way at some point, right? I just don't see how this is fixing what I'm talking about.

Maybe God's people awaiting the promised deliverer, the Messiah, for hundreds of years and not seeing it happen felt that.

Maybe we, as we long for His second coming and for Him to make all things right the way He promised, maybe we feel that same thing. One of my very favorite parts of this whole passage is that Jesus understands that losing heart.

[13:19] This passage doesn't say, and this is what you might expect, it doesn't say, Jesus heard that His disciples sometimes lost heart and quit praying, even fell asleep.

So He scolded them and said, don't ever lose heart again. Is that what we read? No. Jesus, knowing that we would face difficulty and struggles and our own weaknesses, knowing we would be tempted to give up hope, to quit praying, to lose heart, says, let me tell you a story to encourage your faith.

Isn't that so good? Aren't you thankful that He's like that? Jesus tells us very clearly up front what the point of the parable is, doesn't He? Verse 1, He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Bible study tip for the week. When you're trying to understand a parable, and the Bible tells you specifically what it means in one verse, start there with what the parable might mean.

This is what the parable means. It's why Jesus told it, we should always pray. We should keep praying. We should not lose heart. And then what Jesus does is He motivates that prayer, not by merely telling, not by scolding, but as He often does by reminding us of who God is.

[14:53] He did this earlier in Luke when He was talking about the Lord's Prayer. He told His disciples that prayer is all about relationship.

Why should we keep praying when nothing seems to get any better? Doesn't make sense, right?

The heart of prayer is driven not by results we can count on.

Results we can count. Excuse me. Yeah, so you write something that's so cute, and then you don't say it the right way. Not by results we can count, but by relationship we can count on.

Prayer is driven by relationship, not by these immediate, tangible results. I actually wrote that down for me. Because I love efficiency.

I love getting things done. Seeing results. I need to see something come from how I'm spending my time. And God keeps reminding me lately that I need Him.

[16:01] Relationship. Way more, by the way, than He needs my advice and my prayers on how things should be going. Which I think I kind of feel that way sometimes.

If He'd just listened to me long enough, He'd know what should happen next. He loves to hear my heart. And as I slow down to listen to Him, He loves to shape it to His and to trust Him where I can't see and where I don't know what's best.

Jesus teaches His disciples to pray in Luke 11 by reminding them about the Father they pray to. That He is infinitely more eager to give good gifts to them even than earthly fathers are to their children.

You remember how He says it? Luke 11, 13. If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him? This is who God is. That's why you should pray. I love Paul Miller's illustration of this. He says that fixing prayer by just focusing on prayer and saying pray more and try harder to pray is like driving while looking at the windshield.

[17:21] If you've never tried this before, don't try it at home. This is dangerous. You don't drive by looking at the windshield. You drive by looking through the windshield to the other cars and people and objects that are around you, right?

When we are losing heart, when darkness is closing in, we must look through the windshield of prayer to the God who hears and answers prayer, the one we're talking to.

So that's how Jesus teaches us to pray. Again, by teaching us about God. That's what the story's about. He does it through a study in contrasts here.

This simple parable features two people. The needy widow with no legal standing, no one to help her make her case, no money to bribe the judge, and the unjust judge, who neither fears God nor cares about people, except he does care about himself, doesn't he?

He doesn't like to be bothered. This widow is so persistent in pleading with him.

[18:37] She's calling for justice, and he says she's near to beating him down. The phrase means to give him a black eye. So likely figurative talk, but nonetheless, he's tired of this, right?

I won't belabor the story because I think you get it. But when I first heard it, I thought of this parable as a comparison, that this is the way that I'm supposed to pray then.

If I just persist long enough in prayer, eventually God will be bothered enough to relent and give me what I'm asking for. What a great strategy.

I always wondered how to get what I wanted. If you're a parent, don't act like that explanation doesn't make sense. You've done that. You've done that too, haven't you?

You've been worn down before and given in. And that would be one way to motivate us to persist in prayer. Keep praying because eventually God might get so tired of you that he will give in to your demands.

[19:45] Friends, listen. I know it sounds like that. This is actually much, much better than that. This parable means something much greater than that. It's one of many places where Jesus is making an argument from the lesser to the greater.

This is one of those how much more passages. Let me just show it to you visually. If the unrighteous judge, right, in the story, if he hears the cry of a widow with no standing or relationship before him and he feels bothered and beaten down, but what happens?

He begrudgingly responds and defends her cause. She gets results. She gets what she's asking for. If that happens here, how much more will the righteous God, who hears the cry of his children, whom he gave both standing and relationship, when he feels deep love and compassion, how much more will he eagerly respond and defend their cause?

That's the whole point of this parable, right? He's that much better, that much greater. That's the God to whom we pray. That's what he's like.

He always hears and helps. We see it throughout the Bible, don't we? Over and over again, if you read through God's Word, you'll see God hears.

[21:14] The Lord heard. And then something happened. He heard his people in Egypt when they cried out and he delivered them. He heard the prayers of Hannah longing for a child who would serve God.

He heard Hezekiah we just saw a couple weeks ago as Ron was preaching and he healed his people. He heard the psalmist over and over. He inclined and heard my cry.

He heard Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah in the belly of a whale. The early church gathered around desperate, crying out to him at the end of all hope, suffering under persecution and losing heart.

Lord, you can never go anywhere or be in darkness thick enough that he can't hear and where he can't help.

Try him. This parable is not a threat from Jesus that if you don't keep praying long enough, God will never listen.

[22 : 19] No, rather, it's an encouragement toward how confident you can be that you are heard. Who hears?

What's he like? Really briefly, three things. He's a just judge. In contrast to the unrighteous judge who apparently doesn't care about people's plights or even doing what's right, God judges justly. Verse seven, will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Will not God give justice? Yes, he will give justice speedily, swiftly, and surely, albeit in his time. And unlike the righteous judge, he does care about people, right? Not to find the ones who have money to bribe or status to leverage, but actually to pursue justice for those who don't.

[23 : 33] That's his heart. We sang it earlier, didn't we? The defender of the weak. He comforts those in need. Psalm 146 gives all sorts of examples.

He executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets prisoners free, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down. He loves the righteous. He watches over the sojourners, upholds the widow and the fatherless.

This is what our God is like. Will not the judge of all the earth do right? Yes. He certainly will. That's who he is. Revelation pictures over and over his justice crashing in to rescue his people and to right all wrongs once and for all.

That's who hears when you pray. On top of being the just judge, he's the wise sovereign. We see this in verse 7 as the appeal is made to God as one who has the ultimate capability to help.

He's deciding. Will he wait? What will he do? He's making decisions about his elect, ones he has chosen. He's the one in charge. The one who hears your prayers knows everything.

[24 : 54] So he knows what's best and best for you. It just doesn't seem like justice is coming. Sometimes we pray and the prayer seems unanswered, right?

Sometimes we pray repeatedly and nothing's helping. Years and years of praying and nothing seems to change. But God does hear.

And the God who hears is one whose sovereign wisdom you can absolutely trust. Tim Keller says it this way, God will either give us what we ask or give us what we would have asked if we knew everything he knew.

Boy, am I thankful for his answering some of my prayers way better than what I knew how to pray for at the time? Can you look back at your life and say that?

Better than I liked the answer I got or the way things seemed to be playing out when I prayed them. Even the ones that made a lot of sense that I thought God really should understand and you probably should do this one, God.

[26 : 07] I've got good reasons. Have you not seen how all your longings have been granted in what he ordaineth?

Don't you want the person making the decisions for your life to be the one who knows everything? Your past? Your future?

How it all fits together? What actually works best for you because he knows you and he made you? Even that, though, might leave us wondering.

This is what I was wrestling with this week. That's great, Will. He's just and he's fair and he knows everything. Will, that doesn't encourage me.

Now I'm really losing heart. He'll never listen to me. Don't you know I'm the one who got myself into this mess? I don't have a just cause like the widow to plead.

[27 : 17] Feel a little bit of that? Y'all, this is why we need Jesus. This is where he comes in. This is where it gets so exciting.

As you come to God through Jesus, trusting what Jesus has done, not how well you have performed, you are crying out to your loving Father.

He's not just a just judge and a wise sovereign. He's your loving Father. Remember, prayer is driven by relationship. Not a distant judge or a king far off who's never met you, but your beloved Father who hears.

See, if you cry to him, it's because he came calling out to you first. That's what verse 7 means. Will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

It was never about what you deserved. When he rescued you the first time, it wasn't because you were good enough that you finally got his attention and made him think you deserved his help.

[28 : 32] It was because he loved you. He chose you to have this special relationship. So, of course, he longs to hear your needs and to defend your cause.

He's your Father. And he wanted to be and he wants to be. It's not always like this for me. I told you earlier, at least prayed about it.

I struggle with prayer a lot of times. Especially when it doesn't seem to be going exactly the way I want within about 30 seconds after the amen. I need patience.

But in the past several weeks, God in his kindness has given me several instances, some big, some small, where he's actually allowed me to see him answer my prayers so quickly and directly.

I've gotten to see it. He's always doing that. I just usually don't get to see it. And so a couple of people who've witnessed this with me have joked with me that they need to get me to pray for them more often.

[29 : 36] Boy, that really helped, Pastor. And we laugh that off. And ha, ha, ha. Because we all know here that I'm not any better prayer or any more holy than any of you. And so it's easy to laugh off.

But actually, it's important to do more than laugh it off. What's been so good for my heart is to say, no, this is a chance to remember not that God listens to pastors. God listens to his children.

I just happen to be one of them in that moment. He listens to you. He hears you. He loves to answer his children, me and you. He loves to hear our desperate cries and to come to our aid.

Several years ago, I read the story of a 16-year-old girl. She was walking through town to meet up with her father for something. And she was attacked by three young men who jumped out and they hit her.

They grabbed her. They threw her to the ground. They were beating her up and they were ganging up on her. And she cried out and screamed for help.

[30 : 47] Her father, still at a distance, heard these cries coming from the distance and he recognized the voice of his daughter. And he went running, running, following the sound of her voice to where she was, chased the young man off and was able to spare her from much worse abuse.

Now we'd like to think that this was a really great guy and that he would have responded like that to any cry that he heard, right? Hopefully he did. Hopefully you or I would.

But can you imagine for a second? Put yourself in his shoes. Can you imagine how he ran toward the cries of his daughter? How quickly did daddy run?

How committed was he when he got there to rescuing her? What do you think? A little bit? Will not God give justice to his elect, his dearly loved children?

This is the prayer hearing, answering God you can trust. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[32 : 10] He's inviting us to trust. We cry out to him. Keep praying to him. Even as our hearts fade, even as it feels like he's not helping and no one is helping and there's no hope and we trust that he holds on to us.

Remember when he tells this story, Jesus is going to the cross so that we can call his father our father.

That's the context in which he tells his disciples this. He's going to the cross so they can call his father their father and because our heavenly father chose to rescue us and bring us into his family at that great cost, that he would send his son.

Peter read it earlier. If he would send his son for us, how much more will he along with him graciously give us all things.

Friends, if he did that at your lowest point, you need never lose heart or think he will give up on you. Oh, how your father wants to hear what you need, how he desires to know your heart, how your father longs to come and rescue you.

[33 : 46] Let's pray. Father, as we consider that it could be possible that you could love like that, we confess that it's hard to find a reason not to cry out to our father.

For help when we're stuck, for relief from the sin and the evil and the angst that attacks us, for revival in our hearts and in our church and in our world.

Oh, father, hear your children. thank you that as much as we want to be like that, you want us to be like that so much more.

Thank you for showing me that this morning. Part of us wants to be a dependent child, but those of us who are parents know how we long for our children to come to us and tell us what they need, what's going on in their hearts.

Oh, how much more does our perfect father, thank you for inviting us back to you again this morning. Hear our prayers.

[35 : 22] In Jesus' name, amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.