

Instruction in Prayer

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[0 : 00] I came to Luke chapter 18, chapter 18, and I came to the section of Luke chapter 18, to begin with, over to you of these verses, and he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart, and so on.

Now, the ability to keep going, particularly in the face of difficulty, in the face of adversity, and in the face of opposition, in the face of great setbacks, is a grand quality, a very good quality, a great quality.

And it's certainly a quality that ought to characterize the Christian life, because persistence and perseverance are two things that the Bible speaks to us over and over and over again, because every Christian perseveres.

That's part of the nature of being a Christian. To persevere is to keep going. Jesus says, those who persevere to the end, the same shall be saved.

What he means very simply by that is that this perseverance, this keeping going, is an indication of the salvation that is there.

[1 : 24] And those who keep going, keep going, despite everything, keep going, keep going, keep going, right on to the end, those are the people who are to be saved. Those are those who have been saved.

Those who are showing the work of God, God's grace within their heart and within their life. So perseverance and persistence are essential in the Christian life, and they're essential in prayer, because that is really what has been spoken about in this particular part here.

Jesus is highlighting the importance of keeping going in prayer. Now, the purpose of this parable is stated very clearly and simply, that people ought always to pray and not to lose heart.

The parable itself is very simple. There's this widow woman, and she keeps coming to this judge. She is being dealt with unjustly.

But she will not take no for an answer. And she keeps coming back and keeps coming back and keeps persisting and keeps pestering this particular judge over and over and over again.

[2 : 40] It was probably a Roman judge, because normally the Jews had three judges in a Jewish court. But although for a long time this judge wouldn't take her on, he wouldn't listen to her, because he was the kind of person he had no respect for anything.

He didn't care anything for what anybody thought about him. He was the kind of person who wasn't going to be influenced in any way or shape or form by what people were saying or what people were thinking.

He was very much his own man. He had this independent thought, but he didn't really care about anything. And, of course, initially he wasn't going to even bother.

He wasn't going to listen to the case of this woman, even although her case was a real one, even although she was being dealt with unjustly, and justice demanded that she be heard, he wasn't interested.

However, in the end, he gave in to her. In the end, he listened to her case. Why? Why? Very simply, because of her persistence.

[3 : 42] Because she wouldn't take no for an answer. He couldn't get rid of her. And in the end, he said, well, look, he said, though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice.

I'll deal with her case. I'll sit down with her, and I'm going to take her case on board, and I'm going to give her justice. Not because he was a just man, not because he cared anything for the widow woman, not because he cared anything for her case, but simply because she wouldn't leave him alone.

And Jesus is saying, if an unjust and unrighteous man was going to respond to this persistence, this, as it were, this keeping going, how much more, he is saying, will the Lord, who is the righteous judge, who will always deal in righteousness, who will always respond to the pleas of those, particularly those who have been dealt with unjustly, how much more is he, is our Lord, going to hear and to respond to the cries of his people?

That's what Jesus goes on to say. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? He then says, I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

In other words, the actual language is very forceful, and what is saying here, God will definitely vindicate his people. That's really what is being said. My friend, if you today are being treated unfairly, and sometimes life can be unfair, I'm sure there's somebody in here today who knows all about life being a bit unfair.

[5 : 40] You may be hurting down in your heart because life isn't fair just now. You are not being treated by somebody or by a system or by something in a right way.

And there's nobody maybe who's hearing you or nobody's bothered about you or you feel nobody cares. Remember, there's one who does. And that's the Lord. You go to him and tell him.

Tell him how you feel. Tell him how things are. Tell him the issues. Tell him your pain. Tell him your sorrows. Tell him the way it is. He knows, but he wants us to come with these things and to pour out our heart to him.

And he will respond. This is what he tells us. He will. He will give justice. He will vindicate you. So Jesus is encouraging us towards perseverance in prayer.

And Jesus ties all this again into a second coming. We were looking at that last Sunday night. Jesus is talking here about his coming again. And this is all tied into prayer.

[6 : 52] You remember the importance of how we were to be watching and to be waiting, to be ready for Jesus coming again. Well, one of the ways we are to be found ready is to be in prayer. And Jesus, at verse 8, he talks about his coming again and he asks, Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

Now, Jesus is not here speaking in ignorance, saying, you know, when I come again, I don't know whether I will find faith or not. He's not questioning whether there will be any believers or not.

He is actually, I believe, posing this question as a spur to his disciples and to every generation to keep on praying, to keep on watching, to be vigilant, and to be on the ball, as it were, spiritually, to be vibrant.

Because, you see, prayer is the very breath of Christianity. Our Christianity will rise or fall according to our prayer life. Mark my words on that. And that's not my words, but that's really, it's very clear from Scripture, from personal experience.

It's the ABC, really, of our Christian life. If we neglect the word and prayer, we will not flourish, we will not develop, we will not grow, our growth will be stunted.

- [8 : 16] It is imperative, absolutely essential, that we be found reading and praying. And we need to heed Jesus' words when we hear what he's saying to us here.
- And again, just to encourage us the importance of not losing heart in prayer. Because, it's very easy to lose heart in prayer. I'm sure all of us have experienced that.
- And particularly if there's a delay in God answering. You know, sometimes you pray about something and there's no answer. You're waiting, there's no answer.
- And sometimes we come to the persuasion and conclusion that it must be our lack of faith. And we say, well, if I had the faith. You know, sometimes a believer can come to the place and point where they wonder if actually they have faith at all.
- It's not just that they have, maybe don't have a lot of faith, they're maybe saying to themselves, you know, I don't think I've got any faith. My prayers are not being answered. I pray about this and I pray about that and I pray about the next thing and there's no answer.
- [9 : 24] And sometimes Christians can get quite down and they're saying to themselves, I must be lacking in faith. I must be void of faith.
- But the Bible shows us that's not the case. Sometimes when we begin to pray things, have you ever discovered this? When you begin to pray over somebody or over something, sometimes things get worse.
- Have you ever discovered that? And again, there is a temptation sometimes to stop praying. You know, when things get worse, you're praying over somebody.
- It might be within the family or some situation or something at work or something that's concerning you, something of great importance. It's something that's really troubling you.
- It's filling you with anxiety day in, day out and you're praying over it. And you know, the more you pray, the worse things get. And there's the temptation will come and say, you know, I'm going to stop praying.
- [10 : 26] Since I've started praying, things have just got worse. My friend, this is the very thing Jesus is saying. Don't stop praying. Persist in it.
- Because remember something. You and I have an enemy of our souls. You and I have an enemy of our prayer life. You remember that?
- Every time you pray, there's an enemy who does not want you to pray. There's an enemy out to thwart your prayers. There's an enemy out to resist you in prayer and to muck up your life.
- You go to the book of Daniel and you find there how Daniel was wrestling in prayer and there was a delay in the answer to prayer through this very conflict in the spiritual life where the powers of darkness were at work.
- so let's not underestimate that power. So when things begin to get worse when you pray about them, don't take it as a sign that I've got to stop praying.
- [11 : 29] But I would say it's almost a sign that the Lord is intending to do something because Satan is out to try and spoil.
- Try. Satan is trying to stop you praying. so don't give in to the temptation to stop praying because it's a real one.
- And I'm quite sure that you today know what I'm talking about. You know these experiences where when you begin to pray things have got worse.
- Don't you know it? Of course you do. So remember it's a spiritual battle. There's a spiritual conflict. And Jesus is saying keep on.
- Don't give up. It's very easy to. Again, sometimes we stop praying or we lose heart in prayer because of ourselves.

[12 : 26] Because of the kind of person we are. Because of our sin. Because of our instability in our life. because of our sense of failure. And we say to ourselves how can God listen to me?

How is God going to respond to me because of who I am and what I've done and the kind of person I am? And sometimes we can begin to get very inward and downward over it.

And we might stop praying. No, says Jesus. Keep on praying. We'll see in a moment somebody who was so conscious of their nothingness and yet that person's prayer was heard and answered.

And again sometimes our prayer life can become choked because of the influence of the world. We live in a very earthly society in a very unspiritual climate.

There's so many things that cloud our thinking. That cloud and sometimes we can begin to lose the edge. It seems to blunt our spirituality and we just sort of go with the flow and we lose the urgency and the fire in our belly as it were spiritually to pray.

[13 : 41] If we find ourselves beginning to say, what's the point? Be on guard. Again, that's a temptation. This is a battle and we've got to take the battle to the Lord and pour out our hearts to him.

So here's Jesus saying to us, always to pray and not lose heart. Can I leave that with you this morning? Don't give up because he will vindicate.

He will come to your aid. He will answer you. Not necessarily in the particular way. He may. It might be different, but he will.

He will deliverance. He will give and bring deliverance. And then Jesus, having spoken about perseverance in prayer, shows us that there's a right way and a wrong way to pray.

And that prayer is shown very clearly by two different people. And this story, as we're told here, we see that in verse 9, he also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

[14 : 59] That was one of the signs, the marks of the Pharisees. It was an awful thing. Twofold. How good I am, how awful others are. Look at me, how good I am.

Look at these people. I'm glad I'm not like them. I'm so much better than them. It's a way to destruction. It's a fearful, fearful way of thinking.

And that's one of the reasons why Jesus was always hitting the Pharisees. Because of their self-righteous, smug attitude where they elevated themselves and they put down on others.

Looking at others with contempt. So we need to guard against that spirit because let me assure you, it's much more subtle and much more prevalent than we would ever dare realize.

guard against where you ever find yourself puffing yourself up a wee bit and looking down on others, judging others and saying, oh well, because of this, that.

[16 : 04] Our judgments are invariably wrong. We never know a full story. We never know the full picture. We make our assessments and judgments on the little bit of information we think we have or the picture we think we see.

And nearly always we're wrong. And that's why the Bible says don't judge. Because one day we will be judged by the one who knows everything absolutely right. Anyway, here are these two men.

This parable could be termed the parable of two prayers. And we see from these prayers two very different hearts. The contrast is not only in what is said, but in the approach that is made in both ways.

Two characters couldn't be more different. Here you have the religious leader. A person who was in the forefront of religious life. And on the other hand you have the tax collector. A man who was despised in society.

He was a kind of the traitor. He was an absolutely no gooder. The tax as we know they were held with disdain and hostility and dislike. Anyway, the Pharisee approaches God and he approaches with a sense of boldness.

[17 : 23] Now at one level that's not wrong. We're told to come with boldness to the throne of grace. And in fact, when he begins the prayer, you say to yourself, oh this is good.

He begins the prayer and he says, God I thank you. And you say to yourself when you read these first two or three words, you say, oh that's good. This man is beginning his prayer in the right way.

beginning with praise. God I thank you. But from then on it goes downhill. Because God is not the subject of his prayer.

He is. He's, all he's doing in his prayer is lifting himself up, telling God how good a person he is.

And thanking God that he's not like the other person over in the corner who's praying. That's what he's doing. So the attitude of the Pharisee is bad.

[18 : 22] His prayer is bad. Everything is awful. You know, it is one of the sad things about this man is that although he may have great, he might have had great language, people might have heard this man pray and say, oh what a gift in prayer.

He's so eloquent. Listen to the flow of words. He wasn't praying at all. That wasn't prayer. Saul was a great Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus.

And Saul who had sat at the feet of Gamaliel, he was a man who was obviously held in high esteem by the Pharisees. And when we read Paul's writing, we realize what a gifted man he was.

And I would imagine that in the early days of Saul as a Pharisee, when he would have prayed in his own way of it, it wasn't prayer at all.

God didn't term it prayer. You remember when Saul was met by the Lord on the road to Damascus and he was converted. And God spoke to Ananias and he said, you know, I want you to go and see this man Saul, Saul of Tarsus.

[19 : 29] And Ananias said, not Saul. He's a big persecutor of the Christians. And remember what the Lord said to Ananias? I said, you go and see him. Behold, he said, he's praying.

He prays. So you see, the Lord is now taking note. Here's this man and he's now praying. All those years where he was busy talking, he wasn't praying.

It wasn't real prayer. He was just talking about how good he was and all these kind of things. Maybe great gifts, but not spiritual gifts.

But then on the other hand, you have the tax gatherer. And he doesn't even stand up. There's no puffing out his chest. He can't even stand up straight.

He's as it were, they are just crouched down and he's beat. He's not puffing out his chest. He's beating it in pain and sorrow and repentance. And he's so conscious of his failings and his failures that he's hardly able to say anything.

[20 : 33] It's only a few words. My friend, if you're here today and you feel that you're saying to yourself, you know, I can't really pray because I don't have many words.

It's not words, it's heart. That's what counts. That's the reality. The Pharisee had loads of words, but there was no heart in it.

It wasn't prayer. Prayer is heart. It's what's real heart. And that's what the publican or the tax collector had.

He had heart. Oh, it was broken. It was a broken heart. He was conscious of his sin and he obviously had lived a sinful life. He had no doubt dealt dishonestly with so many people.

He was the kind of man, if he was anything like Zacchaeus, who had taken far more. He had been guilty of robbing people. And here was a man who no doubt had been made so aware of what he was.

[21 : 34] And in the sight of God, he couldn't even lift up his head. And he would say, Oh, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. This word mercy has the idea of covering. Cover.

Cover my sin. Cover me. Oh, Lord, have mercy upon me. And that is a prayer the Lord will always respond to. My friend, if you have never cried to the Lord for mercy, do so.

He will never close his ear against the heart that cries for mercy. Be assured of that. The word of God makes it so clear to us that this is a cry the Lord will always respond to.

You cry for this mercy. And we see that the tax collector, he goes home justified, pardoned, full of peace, God's peace.

The way to exaltation before God is a way of humility. Somebody said, the best way up is down and the quickest way down is to lift our shells up.

[22 : 42] And then we come to verses 15 and 17 just very briefly in a word there. And there's something almost unnatural here before us. Because we have these parents coming with these little children, these little infants to Jesus.

And the disciples blocking. Hey, no, no. Leave them. You're not taking these children to Jesus. You know, it's almost an, you know, you look at it and it's almost there's a sense of disbelief.

And you think to yourself, hey, what are you doing? But that's what the disciples were doing. They no doubt thought it was wasting Jesus' time.

Isn't it extraordinary the way that some people think? And Jesus rebukes the disciples. In fact, the rebuke, if you read Mark's account of this, the rebuke, the actual language is the rebuke was severe.

It was a severe rebuke from Jesus. We don't often find Jesus giving a severe rebuke, and particularly to his disciples, but this was an occasion when there was a severe rebuke.

[23 : 55] It was, as it were, their action went right into the heart of the Lord, and provoked him in a way where he saw what they were doing was so totally and altogether wrong.

Jesus gives us these great words where he says, Jesus called them to him saying, let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.

And then Jesus gave a very telling rebuke to the disciples. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

My friend, A, never ever think that children are too young to learn of the things of the Lord. They're never. Never too young.

When they're too young to pray, obviously, themselves, you pray over them. when they're too young to read, once they're able to understand, you read God's word.

[25 : 02] Read the Bible stories to them. Teach them to pray. We teach them many things in life. But my friend, please set out this way, this pattern for their life.

They may stray from it for a while, but you know how it says in the word of God, train up a child in the way that he shall go. When he's old, he will not depart from it.

Some of you just now might be in an in-between stage. Some of you as parents might today be hurting and saying, well, where's it all gone wrong? Where are my children now?

Well, remember what he says, train up the child in the way that he'll go. Sometimes there are the in-between years. But you bring, as we're talking here about praying, you bring them before the Lord.

And remember, as I said, if you're praying over them and things are getting worse, don't stop. Because Satan is trying to destroy your prayer life.

[26 : 04] He's trying to derail the fruit of what maybe God has planned in life for you. He won't, God will win in the end. So don't give up. Don't give up.

Bring your children to the Lord. Bring them if they've gone away from home. Bring them in prayer to the Lord. I know you're doing it. But don't give up. The Lord doesn't want us to give up.

Because he will avenge. He will vindicate. And he'll do so. He'll do it clearly one day. And Jesus is showing to us that the example of the little ones actually is the way of the kingdom.

You see, Jesus was talking about humility. Talking about humility in prayer. And he's saying the way of the kingdom is the way of the child. This little child is living in dependence.

This little child who cannot do anything for myself. You know, little children have no egos. You watch little babies who are dependent.

[27 : 05] They're not into ego. They're not into... It's just life is so in a sense so uncomplicated. It's so simple.

It's so trusting. And Jesus says, that's the way of the kingdom. And we can learn an awful lot as we look around. And Jesus, this isn't the only time he points to the child and says, look, this is the way.

This is the way it should be. Do we have that spirit? Do we have that attitude? Do we have that childlike faith? Where we're not seeking our own.

We're just living in dependence upon him. Oh, my friend, let us learn. Let us learn from these things as we read this morning. The importance of prayer.

The importance of keeping going in prayer. The importance of coming humbly, crying out for mercy. The importance of this childlike dependence upon the Lord.

[28 : 07] let us pray. Oh, Lord, oh, God, we pray that as we've considered the word, that we may take these things to heart.

Life can be complex. Life can be unjust. Life can appear unfair. Lord, help us to keep going in prayer, to keep going in the face of adversity and difficulties.

Help us, Lord, to put our trust completely in thyself and do us good. We pray, Lord, for those who are in need. We pray for all who go out with the gospel today.

And we pray that the gospel will flourish. We pray for congregations that have no minister, and we pray, Lord, to provide for them. We pray, Lord, for areas of this world that are, as it were, bereft of the gospel.

We pray for every missionary agency and all who go out to help. And we pray that it might be a day where the gospel will flourish, and that souls will be saved, and that there will be rejoicing in heaven.

[29 : 13] Take us all home safely, we pray, and do us good, cleansing us from all our sin. In Jesus' name we ask it. Amen.