

Sermon for October 2, 2016 – 20th Sunday after Pentecost*

Luke 18:1-8 (HCSB)

Theme: Pray

- 1) *Persistently*
- 2) *Confidently*

¹ *He then told them a parable on the need for them to pray always and not become discouraged:*
² *“There was a judge in a certain town who didn’t fear God or respect man. ³ And a widow in that town kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ “For a while he was unwilling, but later he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so she doesn’t wear me out by her persistent coming.’ ” ⁶ Then the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ Will not God grant justice to His elect who cry out to Him day and night? Will He delay to help them? ⁸ I tell you that He will swiftly grant them justice. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find that faith on earth?”*

Have you ever been tempted to give up praying – discouraged because you think your prayers aren’t accomplishing anything? I think we all have. I remember a woman at a former parish, whose husband was diagnosed with an aggressive form of colon cancer. She prayed and prayed that the LORD would spare her husband - only to see him die months after he was diagnosed. She asked me if there was something wrong with her prayers because they didn’t seem to affect any change what-so-ever.

If God (who consistently knows what’s best) always does what he wants, what point is there in praying? Can our prayers actually influence God?

Jesus addresses these questions in our sermon text for today, as he encourages us not only to pray, but to **pray** both *persistently and confidently*.

Part One: Pray Persistently

Our sermon text follows a discourse Jesus had with his disciples about the suddenness of his coming on the last day. Because of all the dangers that threaten to destroy Christ’s Church before his reappearing, *He then told them a parable on the need for them to pray always and not become discouraged*.

Like a weary soldier in the heat of battle, surrounded by enemies, we might be tempted to think that no one hears our call for help. Even Jesus acknowledges that we can become discouraged because of all the bad things we experience on this earth. But He says: “Don’t give up praying – even though you are tempted to think that your prayers aren’t accomplishing anything. Keep on praying - trusting that God hears you and will help.” By means of a parable Jesus now explains why we can have this hope.

“There was a judge in a certain town who didn’t fear God or respect man.

There are few things worse than a corrupt, godless judge. Who can get justice from such a man? Can we ever imagine him doing the right thing? There was no trial by jury or court of appeals in ancient Israel. There were no judicial review panels, who could investigate this man. This judge had all the power and seemed to only make decisions that would benefit him.

And a widow in that town kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’

The widow Jesus describes in this parable is the exact opposite of the judge. She has no power or influence at all, but lives at the mercy of others. Being poor, she could not bribe the judge. There was no reason that he should ever rule in her favor except one: she knew that the LORD instituted Israel’s judicial system to help people like her. Because of this fact, she expected the judge to do his job and grant her justice. And so, even though he kept turning her away, this persistent widow kept coming back to the judge: reminding him of his duty to her. She never gave up expecting what was right – what the LORD promised to provide for her through Israel’s judicial system.

“For a while he was unwilling, but later he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or respect man, yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so she doesn’t wear me out by her persistent coming.’ ” Then the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.”

Yes, listen to what the unjust judge says. Consider his words carefully and apply them to our relationship with God. The widow’s constant pestering wore the judge out. Her unanswered demands were like a constant public beating– revealing his merciless heart to all. The widow forced his hand. He had to grant her justice.

Now, if a corrupt judge such as the one in the parable will grant the request of a widow because of her persistence in asking, how much more, then, will the perfectly righteous and just judge of heaven and earth do the same? Or, as Jesus puts it: *Will not God grant justice to His elect who cry out to Him day and night? Will He delay to help them?*

Think about the argument Jesus is making: We are like the widow: in need of help. We are powerless to save ourselves. In fact, we are worse off than the widow in the sense that she had every right to demand justice. We, on the other hand, have no right to demand anything from God. Because of our sins, the only thing we deserve from the LORD is his eternal wrath and punishment.

But then consider our God. Unlike the selfish, unjust judge of the parable, the Lord has such a supreme interest in us that he left his heavenly home to take on human flesh and blood in order to save us. He - our righteous God - suffered and died for us: his unrighteous, rebellious creation. He did this in order to grant us a justice we don’t deserve. He paid for our sins in full on the cross so that all who believe in him might be justified from every wrong they have ever committed or will ever commit!

Jesus' point, then, is this: if a widow's persistent asking can sway a judge who doesn't love anyone, how much more will our persistent prayers influence our God who loves us so much, that he suffered death in order to save us? We have no reason to question whether or not our prayers are heard by God: they most definitely are! He loves it when we pray and promises to take them into consideration. Regardless of whether or not our prayers are answered exactly as we want them to be, we can have confidence that he hears us and will work in all things for the good of those who love him – just as Jesus promises in our sermon text: *I tell you that He will swiftly grant them justice.*

Yes, even before a word forms on our lips, our God has heard the desire of our heart. He is ready to answer and save. But he will do this in his good and gracious time since he knows not only what's best for us, but also when the best time is to give it.

In other words, the LORD may not answer our prayers right away. St. Peter once wrote: *Dear friends, don't let this one thing escape you: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.* (2 Peter 3:8-9 HCSB)

The LORD's patience might mean that God will allow us to suffer for a time. For example, St. John once had a vision of the suffering church crying out to God for justice: *They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer. . .* (Revelation 6:10-11 NIV84) Notice that God does not deny his suffering saints justice, but asks for their patience. A time will come, a time already determined and known by God, when he will judge Satan and this wicked world for all the suffering they have caused believers. On that day, the LORD will swiftly bring his deliverance.

But until that day, the LORD wants us to pray both patiently and persistently at all times and for all people. He wants us to pray that our enemies repent of their sins and come to faith. He wants us to pray that those who suffer will be healed. He wants us to pray for the success of his Gospel and that he comes again soon. Yes, God wants us pray persistently and never get discouraged. He also wants us to pray in all faith – confident that He will keep his promises!

Part Two: Pray Confidently

You see, whenever we are tempted to give up praying – thinking that our prayers aren't accomplishing anything - our discouragement usually stems from the fact that we are focusing more on ourselves and our problems than on our Almighty God and his gracious promises. This is why Jesus adds a thought provoking question at the end of his discourse on persistent prayer: *Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find that faith on earth?"*

Now, first of all we have to be clear: Jesus is NOT saying that there will be no Christians when he returns. The Bible clearly states that the Church will remain on this earth until he comes again on the Last day. There will always be believers in the world.

However, the Bible does say that a lot of people will abandon their faith in God as the last day approaches. Elsewhere Jesus himself predicted that *many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. . . For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible.* (Matthew 24:10-12, 24 NIV84)

So, when Jesus asks if he will find faith on the earth when He comes again, he is warning us that we will be severely tempted to doubt God's promises and fall from faith. This is all the more reason why we need to always pray and never lose heart or give up. Prayer is an exercise of our faith because it holds God to his promises. And God loves it when we do this. He loves it when we both confidently and persistently expect him to give us what he promises us in the Gospel. He loves it when we pray for forgiveness, life and salvation – not only for us, but for others as well. Our prayers matter so much to God that the Bible tells us we should always expect to receive everything we ask for in prayer without any hint of doubt.

But what if, after praying persistently and confidently, God doesn't give us what we ask for? What should we do then? We should remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He prayed more persistently and confidently than any other person on this earth ever has or ever will. Do you remember how God answered his prayer? He didn't give Jesus exactly what he asked for: deliverance from his suffering. He, instead, gave him what both he and we needed: strength to endure his suffering so as to win our salvation and glorify his name.

Whenever God doesn't give us exactly what we ask for, it's only because He knows more than we do. He will give us what we truly need. He asks us to trust him in this, and we Christians do. This is why we end every prayer same way Christ did in Gethsemane: *may your will, and not mine, be done O LORD.* And even if we don't understand now, we can trust that God's good and gracious will is truly what's best for us – just as it was for Christ.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ: don't get discouraged by all the evil you see around. Continue to pray persistently and confidently. Christ promises that He hears us; and that – in his good and gracious time – he will grant us the deliverance we so desperately need. Amen