

Be Merciful to Me, A Sinner!
Luke 18:1-17
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Read Luke 18:1-17

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

My father-in-law has a saying that he lives out whenever he has an issue with a company, business, airline, or restaurant: “Make it easier for them to say ‘yes’ than to say ‘no.’” In other words, when he doesn’t get service that he wants or an answer that works for him, he doesn’t get angry and rude, he just gets logical and insistent. He asks them to review all of their options with him, he suggests ways that they could help him without hurting their business. He keeps at it usually until they say, “Yeah, OK, we could probably do that for you.” One of the first times I saw this was when we were at a golf course that has a system where you enter a daily lottery to see if you can play that day. Our foursome put our names in the lottery but did not win a tee time that way, so we were not going to be playing the course that day. Most of us would have said, “Bummer, that would have been amazing to play that course, but at least there are five other courses around here that we can probably play on, even if they aren’t as nice as this one.” But not my father-in-law. He hung around the starter’s shed and made polite inquiries about getting our group on. At first the starter was annoyed at this group of American tourists, but he warmed up to us and eventually said, “If you don’t mind finishing in the dark, you can tee off after our last group.” “Yes, sir, thank you so much!”

It pays to be persistent. Some of us knew as children that we could wear down Mom or Dad if we just kept asking, pushing through their initial no when we asked for candy or a new toy or whatever it is we set our little hearts on. In today’s Scripture passage, Jesus examines the idea of persistently petitioning God and what that will get us. We’ll be looking at several ways that we approach God in prayer, with perseverance being one of them, but humility and childlike trust being the other two. Let’s look at the parable in the first eight verses that teach us about

I. Persevering Before God (vv. 1-8)

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

We know that this was not a Jewish judge for two reasons: 1) he did not fear God, and 2) if a matter was taken to arbitration among the Jewish courts there would have been three judges. This judge was most likely appointed by Rome, and those judges in Israel had a reputation for being corrupt, only willing to settle cases after being bribed.¹ He was free to decide cases however he wished, with no need to justify himself or worry about repercussions. Additionally, Jesus pictured the judge as a

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 222.

man who didn't necessarily care to do his duty; he's lazy and unwilling to do anything unless he is given more motivation to do it than to ignore it. Which the widow gives him just by bugging him. Now, the fact that she is a widow is important because she has no husband who will fight for her in a culture where women had very few rights and were often taken advantage of. We don't know how she had been wronged, but she had an adversary that she could not overcome without legal help. She HAD to keep bugging him because there was no one else, no other solution.

Just like in the case of my father-in-law's persistence, the widow wore the judge down and made it easier for him to say yes than no. He says, basically, "I just want to make her go away and stop beating me down!". So, is that what prayer looks like? Getting the attention of an indifferent, power-hungry Judge who doesn't want to be bothered, but if you just keep asking long enough He'll be annoyed and give you what you want?!? No, Jesus was not calling God an unjust, corrupt, lazy Judge, He was contrasting them. He was essentially saying, "*How much more* will God give you what you need?" He does not need to be nagged or manipulated. You're welcome to try to wear God down by continuing to ask, but know that you will be speaking to a Judge who already cares about you and wants to work things out for you.

And just as God is not the same as the judge, we are not the same as the woman. We are just as helpless, but we are not unrelated to God. We are, Jesus says in verse 7, God's elect. We are the ones that God has chosen to be saved in Christ, the ones that He has showered His grace, mercy, and forgiveness on, the ones He has adopted into His eternal family. This section ends with Jesus saying that when God's people exercise faith and persistence in prayer (crying out day and night), God will answer quickly. God will delight to answer you and give you what you ask in His name. Now, notice that Jesus doesn't say that God will answer quickly when you first ask, He says there must be perseverance. Does God just want us to beg and the only way He can get us to keep coming to Him is to threaten that He will only answer if we ask for a long time? I want us to take a mature view of this: perseverance in prayer refines our prayers and clarifies our wants and our needs. How many of our children ask for things that they don't really need or want? I remember one of my children being caught up in awe after watching a magician/an illusionist begging me afterwards to buy him an expensive magic kit they were selling in the gift shop. I had seen no interest before that and doubted there would be any interest beyond opening the kit and perhaps trying things out (and I didn't want to spend \$50). I said that if you learn two card tricks on your own, I will invest in whatever larger kit you want. I never heard a word about it after that day because that was not this child's passion by any stretch, it was a passing desire. As so many of the things we pray for are.

In a similar way, every day I have things that I want and so I will often send a quick prayer up to God for them. But they are not always the things that are best for me. The things that I continue in fervent prayer for are the things that I most likely need. Gary Inrig said, "Persistence can be part of a refining process. Delay helps me clarify what I really need. It filters out passing desires and intensifies heartfelt desires."² I labor in prayer for the salvation of extended family members; I labor in prayer for the spiritual formation of my children and my church. I do not labor in prayer for a new Jeep or a day off to play golf. Those are just quick, shallow whims that I think I want. Fervent, mature prayer will bring God's provision. The book of James adds that we must pray in faith, without doubting (James 1:6-8).

In addition to being persistent, we need to be
II. Humble Before God (vv. 9-14)

² Gary Inrig, *The Parables: Understanding What Jesus Meant* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1991), p. 157.

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man 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.”

Our prayers should spend time telling God how great He is, but the content of this Pharisees’ prayer was basically “God, look how great I am!” He was really impressed with himself, and he didn’t mind letting God know why. We look at that prayer today and think how ridiculous it is because we’re used to thinking of the name Pharisees as a synonym for hypocrite. But Jesus’ original audience did not think that, the Pharisees were held in great esteem; they were the answer to Israel’s long history of drifting from their obedience to God. They were deeply concerned with piety and obedience. And the tax collectors, as I’ve talked about in previous sermons, were despised by the Jewish people for being lying traitors and thieves. If these prayers had been social media posts, they would have each gotten thousands of like as people agreed that the Pharisee was blessed to be so wonderful and the tax collector was such a rotten sinner.

This Pharisee had a superiority complex that was fueled, even necessitated, by his theology, his view of God. What do I mean? If our theology is that we have to earn God’s love and achieve a high level of righteousness to prove how godly we are, then we will be “keeping score” in every area of our lives and making sure that we are measuring up well. Jesus didn’t indicate that the Pharisee lied about anything (he was morally upright, he did tithe and fast). The Pharisee not only didn’t think it was wrong to boast about himself before God, I he thought that’s what God wanted and expected! I’m not at all discounting the idea that we should be striving to be obedient, as though we should go to the opposite extreme and not care at all about our sin or growth in sanctification. We should even be grateful that we avoid serious sin, like he was. But we boast not in ourselves, only in the One who is truly worthy of praise.

The biggest differences between these two men is who they compared themselves to. The Pharisee looked around and basically felt that if he was better than the people around him (the singled out the “*extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even this tax collector*”), then he was justified before God. Luke began the whole section in verse 9 by telling us directly who the audience for this parable was: “*some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.*” Self-righteous pride and indignantly looking down on others usually go hand-in-hand, don’t they? There’s an old joke about what to do if you and a friend are being chased by a bear - you don’t have to outrun the bear, you just have to outrun your buddy (because then the bear will eat him instead of you). That’s the idea here: we don’t have to reach a certain level of godliness, we just have to do more good and be more spiritual than the people around us. But who does the tax collector compare himself to? He sees himself in light of God - *the infinite, eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful, holy Creator of everything*. And when he sees himself in that light, he can only cast down his head, beat his chest and acknowledge that he is a wretched sinner. The Pharisee did not compare himself with God, so he had no reason to be humble.

Which one of these guys are you more like? We all hope we’re humble and more like the tax collector, but let’s be honest that we’re probably not. We don’t usually say these things out loud, but we look around and compare ourselves to everyone else and try to reassure ourselves that

we're superior to them. We make lists in our heads: I'm smarter than that guy; I'm not smarter than that guy but at least I don't show off my knowledge like he does; I'm more godly than she is; my family is more faithful than theirs; I'm not a slave to money like that guy, I'm not vain like she is. We get caught up in comparisons so that we can justify ourselves. But God doesn't want us just to be better than those around us, He wants us to be like His Son, and we will always fall way short of that. Which the tax collector realized. The Pharisees' good works actually blinded him to his great need.

And Jesus says that we must approach a holy God with humility, brokenness, and repentance. And ultimately, our standing before God, our justification, our being saved and exalted in Christ depends on our understanding how deeply sinful and unworthy we are in light of God's greatness. It's not just that we need to be able to pray humbly, it's that we need to think and live with a true humility. Anyone can throw some humble words into a prayer, but God wants to do the deep work of rooting out pride inside of you and replace it with a humility that results in profound thankfulness for what He's done for us. Will you resist that work and cling to the ways that you keep score and justify yourself? Will the good things you do blind you to your need of a Savior? Or will you allow the Holy Spirit to transform you and show your great need for Christ? Will you humble yourself so that God can exalt you?

Our final section reminds us that we need to be

III. Childlike Before God (vv. 15-17)

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But 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. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

There was a custom in that day to bring infants to a rabbi to have him lay his hands on them and pronounce a blessing. It has been estimated that back then 30% of all babies died within their first year, and only half lived to their 5th birthday.³ So getting your child spiritually blessed was more than just tradition and sentiment, it was a desire for God's very real protection. But the disciples felt the need to shield and protect Jesus from this intrusion, probably motivated by concern for their Master. Maybe they thought He was too busy or too important, but Jesus is never too busy for His children. He said, "*do not hinder them,*" just as in the last chapter He said, "do not lead the little ones into sin or you'll be punished harshly."

Jesus said that receiving the kingdom requires being like a child. He does not want us to be childish, He wants us to be child-like. We certainly don't bear any naïve ideas that children are innocent and always obedient, but one thing we know about children is that they are dependent. They trust their parents to feed them, shelter them, clothe them, and provide for them. When a parent straps a child into a car seat and drives 70 mph on the freeway, the child just takes it in stride. Whereas when we get older we don't trust other people to do these things for us, we are weary and self-dependent. That's necessary, of course, we need independent, capable adults running the world. But we need to find the childlike wonder, joy, and trust when we come to God. Because spiritually we are not independent and self-sufficient; we are needy and reliant on God to provide for us.

I love what Kent Hughes reminds us about this:

³ Edwin M. Yamauchi and Marvin R. Wilson, *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Post-Biblical Antiquity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), p. 285.

“If Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will not be because he has personally preached to more people than any man in history. It will not be because he has remained impeccable in his finances when so many have failed. It will not be because he has been a faithful husband. It will not be because, despite his fame, he has remained a humble, self-effacing, kind man. When Billy Graham enters the kingdom, it will be because he came to Christ as a helpless child. It will be because of God’s undeserved kindness toward Billy’s helplessness.”⁴ So it is with us.

Conclusion

I heard someone (not someone in this church) recently say something to the effect of, “I go to church sometimes, but I pray and don’t really hear an answer, so I’m very frustrated.” This is a very common thought, even if not everybody says it out loud. I often feel frustrated that God does not answer my prayers quicker, or seem to make much progress on some of the things that I ask him for. What does verse 1 say that Jesus was trying to teach His disciples? *“That they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”*

Why do I put off prayer? Because I’m lazy? Yes. Because I sometimes lack the faith that it does much good? Yes. Because I put it off for other good things, like reading and writing? Yes. Because I put it off to waste time on movies and watching sports? Yes. Because I forget and things are going well enough that I’m not desperate enough to pray? Yes. All of those things and more. But the Scriptures command us to pray and Jesus tells us plainly to persevere in prayer. No matter how you feel - lethargic, depressed, anxious, angry, doubting, distracted – get alone and pray, bring all of that to God. Pray with faith, humility, and persistence. Approaching God with a childlike trust, in deep humility will help us have the right attitude in prayer. Acknowledging that God is the ultimate Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and that He is powerful enough to do anything that He decides to do should drive us to prayer in great hope and desire.

Reflecting again on the Pharisee and tax collector: one of the most important questions we can ask in terms of salvation is: Will God grade us on a curve, just accepting the top part of the most holy and righteous people? And the answer is: Absolutely not! We all fall short of His glory and of pleasing Him. No one is righteous, not one person who has been born of human parents. We are all, by nature, dead in our sins and unable to do anything good on our own. We can try to wrack up all these achievements in different areas like the Pharisee and point to all the people that we’re better than. But unless we adopt the posture of the tax collector where we admit our sinfulness and need, we will never find ourselves in the place where God saves us. Because it’s when we realize how helpless and lost we are that we can appreciate what Jesus has done on our behalf. What is required of us – obedience, never breaking God’s law in rebellion - was accomplished by Jesus on our behalf.

➔ Transition to Communion

Benediction - Ephesians 6:23-24 - *“Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.”*

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 644.