ALWAYS PRAY AND DON’T LOSE HEART

Luke 18:1–8

Key Verse: 18:1

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

How do you view prayer? A reluctant duty? Confusing? Maybe even a waste of time? When things never really change, when our prayers go unanswered, it might seem so. But in today’s passage Jesus tells a famous and vivid parable to wake us up about prayer. He relates prayer not merely to getting what we want, but to helping us live the right kind of life. So, what is prayer, according to our Lord Jesus? What did he mean by “always pray”? And why did he say we should? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word.

Jesus gave this parable of the widow’s prayer in a specific context. The Pharisees had asked him about when the kingdom of God would come (17:20). He told them that, in a sense, the kingdom of God was already in their midst, because he was there among them (17:21). Then he went on to explain more to his disciples. He equated the coming of God’s kingdom to “the days of the Son of Man” (17:22,24,26,30–31a). He meant the day when he comes again. So he says it again, here in 18:8a, “when the Son of Man comes…” Jesus’ Second Coming is one of the great truths of the gospel, and one of the key promises of the whole Bible. When he came first, he came humbly as a baby in a manger, for all the lost and lonely, despised and oppressed. But when he comes again, he said it will be in great power and glory (Mk13:26). Apostle Paul said God “…has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Ac17:31). That day is “the day of the Son of Man,” the day when God “will punish the world for its evil, and the wicked for their iniquity” (Isa13:11; cf. Ac24: 25a). It’s also when “he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mk13:27). The day of the Son of Man will be the day of glory and victory for those who were faithful to Jesus. But it’ll be a day of unspeakable horror for those who never repented.

Jesus went on to explain to his disciples how to live until that day (17:23–35). First of all, when people claim to know when that day is coming, Jesus said, “Don’t follow them” (23). He said that day’s coming won’t be a secret, but as obvious and sudden as lightning in the sky (24). He then described how the world will be right up until that day. He said people will be eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, just as they were doing in Noah’s day, until the Flood came and destroyed them all (26,27). He said they’ll be buying and selling, planting and building, just as they were in Lot’s day, until fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all (28,29). What a wrong focus and waste of time and energy! There’s nothing inherently sinful about eating, drinking, getting married, or making a living. The problem is when people are doing these things leaving God out, living as if God were not there. Jesus’ followers have always had to live in a godless world, a world obsessed with physical and material things, and such a world produces all kinds of sins and injustices. Jesus warned us not to become attached to earthly possessions, like Lot’s wife (31,32). He taught us not to preserve our lives in this world, but be willing to lose our lives for his sake (33; cf. Jn12:25). He went on to give some haunting words: “I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left” (34,35). Both persons appeared the same, but one had an inner life that was aware of God, living for him, hoping in him. With all the world’s distractions and enticements, it’s not easy to have such an inner life, a life ready for Jesus at any time. So Jesus tells us how to do so.

Read verse 1. His point is that we should “always pray and not lose heart.” What does he mean by “always pray”? Life can be so busy and demanding. But the Bible teaches us to seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God, and set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth (Col3:1,2). To stay in a heaven-centered mindset isn’t easy; so, we need to always pray, to remind ourselves of this hope and this promise.

Jesus adds that when we’re always praying, we won’t “lose heart.” The word means to be discouraged or to lose courage. Life also can be demoralizing. As believers we can feel so lonely. Experiencing the world under sin and curse and death can be brutal. Even among believers there can be things that cause discouragement. So our Lord Jesus told us, “But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Lk21:36). He said when we pray, our faith won’t fail, and we can even strengthen one another (22:32). He said when we pray, we won’t enter into temptation (22:40,46). Peter, who once failed to pray, and failed miserably, taught us: “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1Pe5:8). We can be sober-minded and watchful when we always pray.

Perhaps what might make us lose heart the most is when we try to engage in ministry. We can spend so much time and energy and devote so much of our resources, and it seems like there’s little to no results at all, and we wonder what’s the point, why try again? But it’s not about skills or strategies or techniques, but about being faithful. Apostle Paul said, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up” (Gal6:9). It’s the same Greek word here in verse 1 for “lose heart.” Ultimately, through constant prayer, each and every day, we need to be thinking of our Lord Jesus, who “endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Heb12:3). Again, the same Greek word. As the new school year is about to begin, we’re thinking about God’s call to student work. How can we possibly do it all over again? Before anything else, we need to always pray.

To awaken us, Jesus gives a parable. Read verses 2,3. The contrasting characters here are a judge and a widow. And what a contrast! As a judge, he’s in power, on top, in control. As a widow, she’s weak, on the bottom, and utterly helpless. The judge doesn’t fear God or respect people; it’s implied that the widow does. It’s a timeless contrast, still true in describing so many people today. Luke relishes in this contrast, which he pointed out in Mary’s song: “…he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate” (1:52). Our Lord Jesus said his disciples, generally speaking, are all poor and hungry now, they weep now, they’re hated, excluded, reviled and spurned because they love and follow him (6:20–23). In a sense we’re all like this widow.

It’s important to note what the widow is asking: “Give me justice against my adversary.” In Greek the expression “Give me justice” is literally “Avenge me!” It’s much more vivid and aggressive. This is no sleepy prayer! It’s known as “imprecatory prayer.” Does Jesus call us to pray against our enemies? He did come to deliver us from the hand of our enemies (1:71,74). But he also taught us to “love our enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (6:27,28). He himself prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (23:34a). Yet he was very aware of his enemies, that they didn’t want him to reign over them (19:27) and that one day God would make them like his footstool (20:43). The Book of Revelation gives us a vivid picture of those who’d been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cry out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev6: 9,10) And Revelation shows us that God indeed answers that prayer. So, while we’re asking God to forgive our enemies and all who abuse us, it also may be good to be asking him to avenge us. Paul taught us: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written: ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head’” (Ro12:19,20). When we do good to our enemies, it’s with a prayer for God’s justice to prevail.

The judge in the parable is also important to think about. Sadly he’s a pretty familiar figure. There are so many people like him who don’t fear God or respect those who are weak or vulnerable. It’s always been easy for those in power to ignore, abuse or oppress such people—widows, women, children, slaves, foreigners, outcasts, the poor, the sick, the elderly. But this powerful judge isn’t the focus of the parable; he’s only the foil who draws attention to the widow. It says this widow “kept coming.” The judge says she “keeps bothering me.” Literally in Greek the word is “beating, wailing, exhausting.” Intense! And the judge finally worries she might “beat me down by her continual coming.” The literal Greek says “give me a black eye.” This widow is like some people we know, small but mighty. She won’t give it up; she won’t let it go; she’s going to fight to the end. Jesus wants us to learn from her how to always pray and not lose heart.

So what’s the point of the parable? The good news is, Jesus himself interprets it. Read verses 6–8a. Jesus says the widow is like “his elect.” God in his one-sided grace chose them. And what are they doing? Jesus says “they cry to him day and night.” Here, “cry” is literally “scream.” When’s the last time you screamed in prayer? Why should we scream? Isn’t that too thirsty? Can’t God hear us? Of course he can. The screaming comes from the anguish of our souls, from what we’re suffering. The suffering might be about many things, but mainly it seems to be about persecution—when we’re being hated even by family and friends and strongly resisted. Hebrews 5:7 describes our Lord Jesus himself, who “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.”

To cry out to God like this, we’ve got to know who he is. And through this parable our Lord Jesus is showing us how different God is from this unrighteous judge. At the core of his very nature God is just. God also cares so much for his elect. He chose them, he’s watching over them, and he loves them as his own dearest children. When they cry, God definitely hears. When they suffer injustice, God is ready to avenge. In verse 7b Jesus asks, “Will he delay long over them?” Literally it means, “Will he keep putting up with this injustice?” Jesus says in verse 8a, “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” It means, “He’ll make it happen very soon.” This is why at the very end of the Bible Jesus says, “Surely I am coming soon” (Rev22:20). “Speedily” or “soon” means in light of eternity; it’s like just a day away (2Pe3:8). Jesus wants us to be aware that we’re praying to this eternal God who’s just, who’s in sovereign control of all things, and who loves us with a crazy love. As Abraham said in his famous prayer: “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Ge18:25) Like him, we can always pray if we have confidence in God’s justice. Faith in this just God enables us not to lose heart.

Jesus concludes in verse 8b, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth”? It’s the faith that keeps crying out to God to the very end, faith that keeps putting hope in God and in his promises. Jesus isn’t looking for many other things from us—he’s looking for our faith. How can we have this faith? Hebrews 10:24,25 reads, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” James 5:8,9 reads, “You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.” To have the faith Jesus is looking for, we need each other, we need awareness of Jesus, and we need one another’s patient encouragement.

So in light of today’s passage, what does it mean to pray to God? It means to believe that God is still the righteous Judge who sees and knows everything going on here on earth, and who hears us when we pray. It means not to lose heart or get discouraged, but to cry to him day and night, maybe sometimes even scream, with reverence. It means to ask God to give us justice against our real adversary the devil, and for God to deal with all who would harm us. It means to keep coming to God even when there seems to be no answer, when we feel as helpless and ignored as this widow. It also means to be crying out to God to keep us ready for when Jesus comes again.

In another sense, the widow’s prayer encourages us to pray for God’s justice to prevail on earth. Isaiah 1:17 tells us, “…learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause.” We should be praying for all “the fatherless” and “the widows” of our time and for all those who suffer injustice and oppression. Instead of getting angry or frustrated, we need to be praying fervently. The Bible tells us to be praying for all people, including “all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1Ti2:1,2). We should keep praying for what God wants most, for “all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1Ti2:4). We should be praying “without anger or quarreling” (1Ti2:8). When we’re persistent in prayer like this widow, when our lives are prayerful instead of discouraged, crying out for God’s justice to prevail, we can be ready for Jesus’ coming at any time. Let’s read verse 1 again. May God help us to always pray and not lose heart.