
Prayers

To God

Sing a song to the Lord expressing your heart, your feelings, and your hopes. Listen to His reply.

For myself

Weekly theme: Going the extra mile

Pray for your own church to have the courage to 'go the extra mile' in showing love to each other and to people beyond its walls.

For others

Dear Jesus, we are astounded at the sin we see each day in the world around us. People are dominated and abused, children are deprived of love, women are kept as slaves, and men are pressured into work of little purpose. Yet in the midst of distress there is hope, because You have planted the seeds of the Kingdom in this world. Inspire us to take up the cause of all who suffer and are oppressed, and preach to the world the Gospel of love and liberation. Flood this world with Your grace we pray:
AMEN

Meditation

God, You have touched our lives whilst we were little children,
And though we did not know right or wrong, You loved us.

You have touched us in our years of growth when we found faith,
And sought us out, to expose the truth to us; You loved us.

You touched us when we needed help and saved us, often,
And taught us more and more of all You did for us; You loved us.

You touch us now within the turmoil of our lives, each day,
And when Your healing balm is needed, it is there, You love us.

You always touch us as our lives move forward in the future,
And when or where or how the Spirit leads us, Your love remains.

Then, You will touch us at the end when there is nothing left to say,
And our lives will shout aloud our witness: You have loved us!

Bible Passage

Luke 18:1-8

¹ Jesus then told the disciples a parable about their need to be constant in prayer and never lose heart. ² He said,

"In a city there was a judge who had no fear of God and had no respect for people. ³ There was a widow in that same city who kept coming to him with this request, 'Give me justice against my opponent.' ⁴ For some time he refused; but he said to himself later, 'Though I don't believe in God and have respect for no one, ⁵ yet because this widow gives me constant trouble, I will give her justice, so that she does not wear me out by her persistence.'"

⁶ And the Lord said,

"Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will He delay long in helping them? ⁸ I tell you, He will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

Review

This parable is about the need for *'constant prayer'*, and encourage Jesus disciples to *'never loose heart'* (18:1). Jesus describes a persistent woman who will not let a judge get away with injustice. Most of us value this message and picture, but there is more. Jesus said this to His disciples so that after He left them they would stand firm in difficult days when persecution rained down on the church and some felt the Gospel was in peril; *'when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?'* (11:8). Do not worry, Jesus says, the Father is in control and He is a righteous Judge!

The Gospels contains many parables of Jesus and examples of His teaching. We value these immensely, but those who study the Bible have long known a secret that enhances our understanding of them. The small details written at the beginnings and ends of these stories often reveal essential insights, which can shed even greater light on what Jesus said, and this is particularly true of today's passage.

This passage contains one of Jesus' lesser known parables. In it, He describes a godless judge who lacks respect for God and society. The existence of such a man is repugnant, and if Jesus was aware of such a judge in his day, how much more should we be wary of the same today! Perhaps this story reflects a truth which is that in this world, justice is not something on which we can depend. More of this later, however.

Without identifying further details of her just case, Jesus describes a widow determined to get justice, whatever the opposition. We should now pause to think about this; a woman had little recourse to justice in Israel, a society heavily dominated by men. Without a spouse she had few means to fight for justice except by making a nuisance of herself, whatever her complaint. Widow's rights were difficult in those days, and the only hope a woman had after her husband's death was to retain his land, providing there was no relevant male party

entitled to inherit. If this was the case, she could make a just claim based on the famous Old Testament legal precedent of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 26:33f. and 36:2f.). This influential judgement allowed inherited land to be linked with a woman if there was no other way for it to stay within the tribal settlements agreed at the time of the occupation.

Today, we are more conscious of a host of other women's legal issues and rights, but most of these never came before the courts of the first century. The issue of inheritance must be our best guess. But we can still reflect on the fact that women have had to fight for justice for centuries, especially against ungodly and biased male judges. Given Jesus' prophetic wisdom it is probable that the lack of information He gives about the widow's case allows us to use the parable to help countless women who have fought injustice over the centuries.

The simple point of this' parable is that if the woman can gain justice from a dishonest judge simply by force of badgering, how much more will the Lord God deliver ultimate justice; *'will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cry out to Him day and night?'* (18:7). Now we might think this reassuring, given all Jesus has just said about the Kingdom of God, His righteous judgement, and the end of time (17:20-37). But we must look deeper. Immediately after this conclusion to the parable (18:7), Jesus says more, another 'conclusion' to this teaching (18:8). Then, when we look at everything he says in verses 7 and 8, we begin to get a picture of why Jesus said all this to His disciples. In order to understand this, we must now turn away from the text and look more broadly at the disciples and what Jesus was teaching them just before He died.

As we saw yesterday, the disciples wanted to understand what would happen when Jesus completed His mission, but they would soon find out. His' death and resurrection came true just as he prophesied; *'He must endure suffering and be rejected by this generation'* (17:25). Then, at the time Luke wrote his Gospel, the early church was several decades old and beginning to face some difficult questions. The early Christians held strongly to the belief that Jesus, having died and risen again, would soon return. So in almost every Gospel passage or New Testament letter dealing with this question, the Scriptures give a clear response. They teach that no one will know when Jesus will return, but His followers should be ready for this to happen at any time (Matt 24:42, 1 Thess 5:2f. etc.). The early Christians did not struggle to understand this, indeed they seem to have accepted it as the church grew vigorously. They did however have a different problem.

The early church was subject to considerable persecution, first from the Jewish authorities (see Acts 8:1, 11:19 etc.) and later from the Roman authorities (see Acts 18:12f. and other first hand evidence from early Christian writers, including martyrs). Under such pressure, many longed for God to come in judgement on Rome, and for Christ to return to bring to an end to what must at times have seemed a dreadful trial.

So it is likely that here in our passage, Luke has spotted a prophetic word of Jesus that speaks to the early church about its troubles, and the small words and phrases at the beginning and end of the passage point to this. This parable is given by Jesus just after He has spoken about His return (17:20-37), but He begins by giving a reason for it; it is *'about their need to be constant in prayer and never lose heart'* (18:1). This certainly sounds like a message for early Christians who expect Jesus' return, and longed for their dire persecution to end. Imagine what it was like for Roman persecution to take the life of loved ones or friends in martyrdom! Some were in danger of losing hope, so Jesus, prophetically, and by this parable, urged them first not to stop praying but to pursue justice vigorously, even with pagan judges!

The message here is that all God's people must be like women who refuse to give up seeking justice, and justice would prevail (18:7)! It is almost certain that Christians of later years believed this prophecy of Jesus fulfilled when the Roman Emperor and State was converted to Christianity in the fourth century AD under Constantine! But against this political

background, Jesus adds a firm reminder of what this was all about; not politics, persecution, judges or justice, but faith. His words *'when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth'* (18:8) remind us that there is no substitute for faith and a personal relationship with the God who will one day send His Son to establish His rule and bring this world to an end (Rev 21:1f.).

Our passage today leaves us with a simple message. We are to expect our Lord to return, and we are to fight for what is right within this world by prayer and by making a nuisance of ourselves, and lose neither heart nor faith. When the church is persecuted today, this reading from Luke comes to light to help us.

Going Deeper

Notes on the text and translation

V4 *'though I don't believe in God'*

Other translations:

'though I don't fear God' (NIV, NRSV etc.)

It is normal for Bible translations to have *'though I do not fear God'* at this point. But this is a slightly colloquial phrase that would have meant to a first century reader, 'this man does not believe in God at all!' I have therefore translated this accordingly. I have kept the idea of fearing God in the first verse, but made it more blunt here for the general effect of the parable.

V5 *'wear me out by her persistence'*

Other translations:

'wear me out with her coming' (NIV)

'wear me out by continually coming' (NRSV)

The Greek says something like this, *'wear me out by coming to the end'* but we all get the message whatever the translation. I prefer a simple paraphrase which sums up the rather odd Greek.

Further Comments

A parallel story

The passage for today is similar to Jesus' story of a friend at midnight, found in Luke 11 (11:5-8).

⁵ And Jesus said to the disciples,

"Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him."⁷ And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.'⁸ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

When we look at this parable, it is parable pure and simple. This quote from Jesus' earlier ministry is just like many other parables, in which Jesus delivers a story and offers little comment. We have to make what we will of the story from its context in Scripture and sometimes the setting of Jesus' ministry at the time. Here, Jesus seems to be commending persistence in faith and prayer, because this occurs just after Luke's version of Jesus teaching the Lord's prayer (11:1-4). The main difficulty with this parable is that it is by no means certain who the various characters of the parable represent.

Now if we compare this with what we have in our passage, it is obvious that there is a similar general theme of persistence in prayer and also application of faith. However, to concentrate on this would be to miss the point. While persistence is the main theme of the earlier parable, our passage here is far more about what this means for the disciples as they face Jesus' death and resurrection, and what lies beyond. My analysis above therefore concentrates on these themes, which are pointed to by Luke's comments at the beginning of the parable (18:1), and also the comments of Jesus reported by Luke at its end.

Another comparison between Luke 11 and Luke 18

If you look closely at Luke 11:1-13, and compare this with Luke 18:1-8, another interesting feature comes to light. Luke allows the story line to continue almost seamlessly, beginning with teaching about prayer (11:1-4) and ending with a promise of the Father's love (11:11-13). This section of the chapter connects together, for example, the talk of '*daily bread*' (11:3) is followed by the parable of a neighbour trying to get bread in the parable we have just noted above (11:5-8). But there is more. The prayer life of the disciple is one in which God is sought and ultimately found, so Luke reports that Jesus concluded this line of teaching with the famous words, '*ask, and it will be given to you, seek, and you will find ...*' (11:9f.).

Perhaps most potently, Jesus teaches the prayer request '*your Kingdom come*' (11:2) but if we read on through this chapter for a few verses, we find that at its conclusion, this prayer is granted with these great words of Jesus, '*how much more will the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask ...*' (11:13). So the request for the coming of God's Kingdom is met with the gift of the Holy Spirit!

In our passage today, the disciples are worrying about the future and the return of Christ, and the words of Jesus although quite different have echoes of what was said earlier in His promise of the Holy Spirit; '*will not God grant justice to His chosen ones who cry to Him day and night?*' (18:7). The connections show that Jesus wanted the disciple to be reassured by His words, and know that God was in control of their future.

Discipleship

Application

When things get depressing

I have had the duty to help some groups of worshipping Christians when they felt they had to close the chapels in which they worshipped. In one case the whole matter was dealt with awkwardly and with difficulty. They had held on for so long believing that God would come to their aid and either bring new members or return in glory (I am not making this up, I am reporting exactly the expectations and feelings concerned). In the end there was a loss of faith, communication and trust; the chapel closed with heartache even though a later minister re-established worship on the site and in that village. At another congregation nearby, an elderly member had died and it was no longer possible to hold services of worship; there

were no finances available to make it possible for these people to have their own building. So when I visited them, we sat down over a cup of tea and agreed the difficult decision; the chapel would have to close. Almost immediately, we said a prayer, and then one of the most elderly of those present said happily, well I suppose we could all go down and join the Anglicans! Well, on the very next Sunday they did, and the vicar was ecstatic because the six of them trebled the size of his congregation, and this fact enabled him to apply for a grant to completely redecorate the small parish church!

I tell this story because much is wrought by prayer and persistence. Both chapels had people who persisted in prayer and faith. But the second had those who were not able to face reality, and like the woman who harangued the judge, they faced some of their deepest fears to cross a church divide and find that their prayers were answered!

The woman in our story had a combination of prayer, spiritual righteousness and practical persistence. This is an example to us, in whatever circumstances we have to apply such a godly principle.

Ideas for what to do

- What do you feel that you must fight for within the world today? What do you feel you must fight for within the church today? Is there any substantial difference between the two, and why? Discuss with a friend why you feel these things so deeply.
- What comes into your mind as you think about God's justice? Do you feel threatened or do you look forward to vindication? Be careful about what you expect, and set these things before God.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What is the key message of the parable of the widow who seeks justice? How is this parable best understood today?
2. Can you share examples of the seeking of justice that are like this parable of Jesus?
3. How does this passage help us prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ?
4. How does prayer help us win battles in this world?

Final Prayer

Thank You Lord Jesus, for the wonder of Your presence. You can inspire us to hear Your Word in the most challenging of Scriptures; You can open our eyes to see You within the most amazing of sights within this world; and You can prompt us to speak so that Your Word is spoken within a critical situation. Keep us close to You, Lord Jesus, and willing to follow the inspiration, the clues, the guidance and the prompting of Your Holy Spirit. **AMEN**