

June 5, 2005

Series: Parables from the Master Story-Teller  
 Sermon: ***Prayer that Produces Results***  
 Scripture: Luke 18:1-14  
 Speaker: Pastor Dick High

### **Introduction:**

Last week Pastor Mike began a series on the parables of Jesus. Jesus used parables as one of his primary teaching methods. He taught parables in a variety of settings; sometimes in small groups and sometimes in large groups. In the coming weeks we will consider up to a dozen of the parables recorded in the Gospels. Those parables will address such issues as the cost of or commitment necessary for following Christ, the application of the Scriptural teaching to love your neighbor, and God's heart for those who are lost (who live apart from a personal relationship with himself).

At the root of the word "parable" is the idea of comparison. Jesus would use examples from nature or from the social, economic, and religious life of his audience. Those examples would purposely provide a comparison with spiritual truth that Christ desired to teach.

Today we will give our attention to two parables in Luke 18. I will take the time to read verses one through fourteen. These parables invite us to learn the value of persistence in prayer. They also caution us about inappropriate attitudes which undermine prayer's effectiveness.

### ***The Parable of the Persistent Widow***

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. <sup>2</sup>He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

<sup>4</sup>"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' "

<sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

### ***The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector***

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

<sup>13</sup>"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

<sup>14</sup>"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

One unusual feature about the first parable in Luke 18 is that the interpretation is given before the parable is stated. Often you will find that Jesus gives a parable and then, following the parable, he gives the interpretation. And sometimes he would not give the interpretation until he is asked to do so by his disciples. While either of those realities may have occurred here, the sequence of Luke's written record places the interpretation first. That is what is unusual.

Let's begin, therefore, with the interpretation of the first parable; "Jesus told his disciples a parable **to show them that they should always pray and not give up.**" With these words we are immediately faced with the declaration of an obligation related to prayer. Does the use of the term "obligation" in relationship to prayer make you uncomfortable? Do you object on the basis of an understanding that prayer is more of a privilege to which you are invited than a duty or responsibility to which you are driven?

I believe that an evaluation of the Scriptural teaching about prayer would lead us to conclude that prayer is both a privilege and a responsibility. Both aspects are addressed in Luke 18:1-14. However, it is the matter of responsibility or obligation that is addressed first. It is the use of the word "should" in verse 1 that is important to our understanding the focus of the first parable. The concepts of necessity, obligation, and compulsion underlie the background of that word. Jesus presents this specific parable with the intent to teach those who have committed to follow him, that it is necessary, even to the point of feeling compelled in doing so, to pray.

It is important to pause and let the impact of that single word, "should," swirl through our thoughts for just a moment; **to show them that they should pray.** But before we linger there too long, we need to recall that the actual phrase includes the word "always;" **to show them that they should always pray.** Are we willing today to accept that Christ desires for the believer at all times to look at prayer with a sense of necessity, obligation, or even compulsion? Of course, we do need to ask the nature of that compulsion. Is it the compulsion of guilt? Is it the compulsion of urgency? Is it a compulsion driven by need? I believe that as we examine the parable itself we can answer those questions. For now my interest is that we do not leave our consideration of verse one too quickly. Besides, there is another phrase that concludes the verse that we need to highlight.

We need to acknowledge a temptation that all face in regards to prayer. That temptation is to "give up." It is stated when we read the entire phrase that concludes verse one: **to show them that they should always pray and not give up.** On the night of his betrayal Jesus encouraged his disciples to pray for him. The gospel accounts tell us, however, that they fell asleep. They were physically tired. Further, they did not understand the depth of experiences that Christ would face in the coming hours. He would undergo tremendous physical torture and trauma. But he would also experience a unique spiritual trauma, that of bearing God's wrath against the sins of all history. They may have started to pray, but in a short amount of time they gave up. We give up in prayer when we stop or when we grow weary and lose heart or lose interest. One of the purposes of this parable is for Christ to teach us that we must learn to not give up when we pray.

Having already been given the interpretation of the parable, let's look at the parable itself. It is here that the principle about prayer that Christ wants us to learn and practice is illustrated.

In this parable there are three individuals, two of which are primary. There is a judge, a widow, and an adversary to the widow. What can we observe about the judge's character? That information is found in verses two, four, five, and six. We are told that he did not fear God. We are also told that he did not care about people. Further, we are told that for some time he refused to consider or give a ruling to a court case that is brought to him by a widow. Eventually he does consider her case, however reluctantly, because he is bothered. The final item to note is that he is called unjust in verse six. If I were to give a summary of what we're told I would say that this judge is atheistic, he lacks compassion, is self-centered, and is not committed to justice.

Faced with this judge, how does the widow act? She persists. According to verse three we are told that she “kept coming” to the judge. We are not told how regularly or how often she comes, but we are told that she “kept coming.” Her plea never varied. It is always the same six words; “Grant me justice against my adversary.” Her words are concise and direct, and she is persistent in stating them. I suppose, although we are not told, that the judge’s response is even more concise and direct. Likely all he said was “No!” Although she has faced repeated refusals (verse four) to hear her case, she repeatedly brings her case to the judge. The frequency and persistence of her coming to this very indifferent judge eventually produced a different response, one that addressed the widow’s need.

What eventually motivates the judge to hear the widow’s case and bring justice? What is the rationale behind his response? I suggest that the motivation is primarily selfishness. He would consider it to be a black eye to give any indication of weakness; either that he cared about this widow’s situation or that he was concerned about what God thought. The phrase “wear me out” in verse five literally means to strike someone on the face (under the eye) in such a way that a black eye results. And the earlier phrase in verse five, “bothering me,” speaks of a weariness as though one has been beaten. His concern is for his reputation. His concern is for his endurance. As strong willed or indifferent as he appears to be, he senses that he is in danger of demonstrating weakness. So he hears the case and renders justice.

One of the primary keys to interpreting this parable is to understand that this judge is a notable contrast to how God responds to prayer. Reflect on what the judge is recorded to have said (verses four and five). As already stated, his words reveal that he is not concerned about God, that he lacks compassion, that he is bothered by this widow, and that he responds only out of self-protection. In contrast God is one who is greatly concerned about His honor (and for all the right reasons). Beyond that, Scripture describes him as a God of compassion, as one who is attentive to all manner of our concerns, and who willingly responds to the needs of people out of mercy, grace and justice. He certainly does not need to be beaten into submission to receive an answer to our prayers. He and the judge are polar opposites! He will bring about justice (verse seven). He will not put people off (verse seven).

Let’s take the time to look at some supportive Scriptures regarding God’s character and actions as they relate to this parable. In I Peter 2:23 we are told about Christ’s response to the injustice of his arrest and subsequent trials prior to his crucifixion. The text states that **“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”** In the early verses of II Corinthians 1 Paul writes **“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comforts.”** When God reveals himself to Moses in Exodus 34, we read **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness...”** Isaiah 65:24 states **“Before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear.”** (Billy Graham is reported to have said, “The only time my prayers are never answered is on the golf course.”) In Daniel 9:23 we find these words from the mouth of the angel Gabriel, which are similar to the statement in Isaiah: **“As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given...”** Finally, I Peter 5:7 gives this invitation, **“Casting all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you.”**

God is significantly unlike the judge presented in the parable in Luke 18. God desires that we recognize that and rejoice. It is important to know and to be reminded that his response to our prayers is very different than what is represented by the judge. We are to anticipate that he will answer our prayers. We are to persist in prayer with that assurance. In other words, **“we should always pray and not give up.”**

Even as I state that, it is appropriate that we consider two cautions. The first caution is that we need to face the fact that persistence, even in prayer, has inherent dangers. The dangers that I will address are pride, blindness, and the confusion of stubbornness for persistence. First among those dangers is the fact that persistence can be viewed as the primary cause for our prayers being answered. That would be the danger of pride. That is not

what Jesus is teaching in this parable. We will address that issue a little later. A second inherent danger associated with persistence is blindness or what could be called “tunnel vision.” We can become so focused on a goal, in this instance the answer to a prayer, that we lose perspective.

According to one report, the end of Germany’s famous “Red Baron,” Manfred von Richthofen, came because he pursued an Allied airplane “too long, too far, and too low into enemy territory.” On April 21, 1918, von Richthofen, the celebrated World War I pilot who was responsible for shooting down 80 enemy aircraft, began chasing a British plane that was trying to escape the battle. As the Red Baron pursued his quarry behind Allied lines, gunfire from either machine gun nests on the ground or another British pilot who had come to help killed von Richthofen. He was “locked in” on his target, and he followed it with such an intense focus that he did not see some very real threats.

To hear this parable solely as instruction and encouragement that persistence in prayer will get God’s attention or even guarantee his (favorable) response is to be blinded by a self-focus that excludes God from the picture. That is deadly.

A third danger is that we may confuse stubbornness for persistence. Yes, Scripture does challenge us both through direct teaching and example to be determined and disciplined in our relationship with Christ. The Apostle Paul is certainly an example of determination and discipline. His writing in I Timothy 4 encourages the believe to discipline themselves for the purpose of godliness. Yet, prior to coming to a personal faith in Christ, he stubbornly persisted in kicking against God’s conviction of his sin. I would consider Balaam to be an example of stubbornness. He certainly persisted in actions which God was against. And the persistence observed in the lives of many of the kings of Israel is that of a stubborn refusal to live in obedience to God. It is difficult to determine the ultimate motive behind actions which appear on the surface to be persistence. This warning is not intended to cause us to back away from persistence, but to seek to be open to God about our motive.

A young man wanted to be a star journalist. However, he lived in a small town where the possibility of realizing his dream was remote. One day, due to heavy rain, the dam upstream broke and flooded the town. He got in a rowboat and headed out to look for a story. He soon found a woman sitting on her rooftop. He tied up the boat and explained what he was after. They both sat on the roof and watched as various items floated by. From time to time the woman would say, “Now there’s a story,” as an item of interest would float by. The response of the young reporter was “No, that’s not a story.” Finally, a hat floats by and then does a 180 degree turn. It goes upstream a ways and does another 180 degree turn. As this continues the young reporter says, “Now, there’s a story.” The woman replies “Oh no, that’s not a story. That’s my husband. He said that he was going to mow the lawn regardless of how much it rains!”

As we hear these inherent dangers in persistence there is something that I do not want us to hear. I do not want to discourage persistence. It has great value. It has significant impact even outside the spiritual realm. Who would not applaud the persistence and diligence in extensive physical training that has been a major factor in Jerry Rice playing in the National Football League for twenty years? Who would not applaud the persistent efforts of Anne Sullivan in working with Helen Keller to overcome the effect of illness that left Helen blind and deaf at the age of nineteen months? But if we conclude that persistence or determination alone is the critical factor in an effective prayer life, we are like the anonymous poet who wrote: Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not: unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are important.

Does the concluding statement of that anonymous poet correspond with Biblical truth? If anyone walks away from today’s service having concluded that our effort alone is the key to an effective prayer life, then we have

yet to understand what Christ is teaching. Yes, we “ought” to pray and not give up. Yes, persistence is important, even necessary for effective prayer. But, we must do so from an understanding and demonstration of faith and dependence.

I ask that we look again at the final verse (verse 8) in that first parable in Luke 18. From there we will transition into the second parable. Verse 8 concludes with a question, **“will he (God) find faith on earth?”** Hebrews 11:6 states that **“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”** I Timothy 4:1 gives this warning, **“The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith...”** I believe the question being posed by Christ in Luke 18:8 is this: As time progresses toward his return, with the knowledge that some individuals will step away from their confessed faith in Christ, will you (my disciples) continue to understand your absolute need of God’s strength, justice, grace, and power and express that need in persistent prayer? Let me ask the question in a different way: Will God find such faith (in us), demonstrated through a compulsion to pray with persistence, knowing him to be the only hope of an answer, if he were to return today?

It is this “little” question at the conclusion of verse eight that is essential to explain the motivation for the persistence in prayer required as an obedient response to Christ’s teaching in verse one! The widow’s realization that she had nowhere else to go, no one else to take her plea to is intended to reinforce our understanding of desperate need! She is faced with a legal matter. The judge has jurisdiction. He is her only recourse. The question is do I understand and live out the reality that I am in desperate need of God? And is that the compelling motivation from which I pray?

John Piper writes, “Prayer is the open admission that without Christ we can do nothing. And prayer is the turning away from ourselves to God in the confidence that He will provide the help we need. Prayer humbles us as needy and exalts God as wealthy.” (*Desiring God*, chapter 6)

With that background, I will read again the second parable in Luke 18.

### ***The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector***

<sup>9</sup>To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

It certainly is not accidental that this parable follows the one at the beginning of the chapter. What a powerful reinforcement that the urging to persistence in prayer must come from a clear understanding of the believer’s total dependence upon God. In some respect you have to work harder to understand that teaching in the first parable. However, with this second parable, at least for me, there arises an overwhelming awareness of my absolute need for God to give grace, to give strength, to bring justice, to give direction and guidance, and to answer prayer. Consider the seven words that come from the lips of the tax collector: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Interestingly, the Old Testament root to this request for God to have mercy comes from the words “Yom Kippur.” That literally means the day (Yom) of atonement (Kippur). It is the day of washing, the day of setting aside, the day when God pays the penalty for our sin. That is something that only he can do!)

Romans 3:23 is straightforward in its statement that everyone needs God's mercy: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." What does it mean to fall short of God's glory? It means that everyone "misses the mark" of the absolute, pure, and glorious holiness necessary to live in his presence. We all fall short or miss the mark when it comes to living up to that standard. There is an interesting word picture in the Old Testament that helps me understand the reality of missing the mark. Judges 20:16 tells about seven hundred left-handed soldiers among the military forces mustered by the tribe of Benjamin. In regards to these men it states that each one of them "could sling a stone at a hair and not miss." Have you ever tried to use a sling like that depicted on the screen today? Its design gives you incredible leverage so that you can hurl a stone with great force. Sometimes the size of stones used was as large as tennis balls! Imagine the peril you would be in today if I stood here and attempted to hit one of the hairs on your head! Everyone would be in danger because of my inability to hit the mark. The tax collector's statement in Luke 18 is an open acknowledgement that he misses God's holy standards and is in need of God's mercy!

I want to conclude today's message with three statements of application. First, these parables teach me that God knows we need to pray; are we willing to agree with him? Harold Phillips writes; "We are all weak, finite, simple human beings, standing in need of prayer. None need it so much as those who think they are strong, those who know it not, but are deluded by self sufficiency." It does not matter if I look at prayer as a privilege or a responsibility (or even, in the context of Luke 18, as an obligation). God desires that I agree with his awareness of my need for and my need of prayer. Am I willing to agree with him? Are you willing to agree with him? I won't take the time to read it now, but Hebrews 5:7 tell us that during the early life of Christ, he experienced this real need for total dependence upon God and expressed that through his prayers. If Christ, during his incarnation has this need, how much greater is our need.

Second, it is important to know, and even be reminded, that affirmation of the value of persistence in prayer is rarely experienced immediately. I know and have experienced occasions when God has graciously answered prayers quickly. That does occur. And sometimes the answer that has come quickly is "No," rather than "Yes." But there are other times when God's answer, or my awareness of God's answer, is delayed. Regardless, God desires that my faith and understanding of dependence would deepen. Admittedly, that is more likely to occur during times when the need is for me to persist in prayer.

Third, I would encourage all of us to ask God to regularly remind us of our dependence upon him. As God answers that request we will be drawn to pray with persistence. Frankly, if you think about it, that really is a bold prayer. While I do encourage us to ask this of God, I would suggest that we don't carelessly ask this of God.

I close with this quote from Zig Zigler; "The story is told of a little guy valiantly but futilely trying to move a heavy log to clear a pathway to his favorite hideout. His dad stood nearby and finally asked him why he wasn't using all his strength. The little guy assured his dad he was straining with all his might. His dad quietly told him he was not using all his strength, because he hadn't asked him (his dad) to help."