



THE GOSPEL OF
Luke

SESSION OBJECTIVE: LUKE 18:1-14

To understand more about the posture of proper prayer.

A Squeaky Wheel

Recently I read an article about a woman named Diane in South Dakota who had, to her friends' surprise, received a personal call from the governor. She posted an update on Facebook: "Had a nice surprise last night. At about 10:30 p.m. the phone rang. It was Governor Mike Rounds checking in with us to see how the road repair was going." The article went on to talk about how, though South Dakota is a relatively small state, it was still surprising. Even more surprising: this wasn't the first time Diane had received a call from a governor. Years prior, she had received a call from a different governor about an issue with some FEMA money in her area. She was in the middle perming her hair at home when her phone rang. She said in the interview: "I couldn't very well put the governor on hold while I rinsed my hair! That frizzy hair haunted me for weeks." How does a woman like Diane end up on the phone with not one, but two governors? She replied: "I have found that shaking the tree from the top gets the fastest results. When there is a problem, I usually become the 'squeaky wheel,' and I think they just want to get me off their case!"

In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus talks about the power of persistence as well. He speaks of a persistent widow who provokes an ungodly and uncaring ruler to act on her behalf, if for no other reason, to simply shut her up! This kind of persistence should be also applied to prayer. Though God *does* want to give justice and *is* good, He still tells us to persistently pray to Him.

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Chapter 18 begins with another series of parables, this time closely linked to Jesus' previous teaching concerning His second coming. The first parable in verses 1 through 8 concern a widow and a judge who "neither feared God nor respected man" (Lk. 18:2). Below is a breakdown of some key phrases and concepts.

THE JUDGE

Remember that in parables, they are simple stories that illustrate a major idea. In this parable, the judge serves as an opposite of who God is. This judge is someone who "neither feared God nor respected man" (Lk. 18:2). These are markers that are intentional in setting him up as a negative character. The "fear of the LORD" is a widely important concept to the Jewish understanding of a right relationship with God (Deut. 8:6; 1 Sam. 12:14; Ps. 2:11). Beyond that, "the fear of the LORD" is both the beginning of "knowledge" (Pr. 1:7) and "wisdom" (Pr. 9:10). That this judge did not fear God is indicative of His reproach of God as well as his lack of wisdom and understanding. Beyond that, his lack of respect for men is equally condemning. Men are created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27), and thus they are due dignity and respect on that standard alone. The *Imago Dei* (the image of God) is even the basis upon which the death penalty is built: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."

The respect for other humans on a general level is a woefully neglected concept within evangelicalism. Obviously racism is a clear violation of this concept, as is sexism, for "male *and* female He created them" (Gen. 1:27). However, there are lesser talked about and certainly more prevalent ways in which we violate this important theological distinctive. Often we are guilty of disparaging comments towards people in politics and the public square on the grounds that they are bad or immoral. Whether they are or are not bad or immoral, however, should not invite disrespect for an individual. Even the worst, most cruel, most awful people are made in God's Image and therefore deserving of dignity and respect. This judge typifies the worst kind of person in that he has neglected his duty to love both vertically and horizontally (Lk. 10:27 [Deut. 6:5]).

THE WOMAN

The woman in this parable represents any person, but that she is a female is important. Historically speaking, women were not listened to nor did they command the same kind of audience that a male would have. This should come as no surprise, especially given her audience was someone who didn't have respect for other people. Because of this, she is able to adequately represent any person to whom the parable is given.

THE INTERPRETATION

The point of the parable is, like most parables, quite simple: persistence matters. The judge essentially acts purely to shut her up: "Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." Jesus then makes the connection to prayer: "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" God is, unlike the judge, holy and loving towards people. If persistence works for an unrighteous judge, how much more will it work towards God? Note that Jesus refers to the ones who pray as, "the elect." This is an important distinction because it indicates that God has a unique relationship through prayer with the people of God that is different from just any person in the world. In other words, one could not rightly say that God listens and responds to persistent prayer with just any person, but with specifically His people. Verse 8 ends with a rather strange verse: "I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" The point here is that God will one day grant justice, but by the time the Son of Man comes, it might be that people have stopped being persistent in prayer because they are in despair. It's a warning to us to continue in persistence, trusting that God will act in His perfect time.

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

The second parable involves two people who held well-known occupations to the general audience, and who were represented in the crowds to which Jesus was speaking. The Pharisee was a specific sect of Judaism during Jesus's time that was interested in reforming Judaism to a law-bound approach (unlike the Sadducees who rejected all of the Scripture *except* the Torah). The Tax Collector was an occupation of Rome and despised by devout Jews. The public opinion of each of these occupations was starkly contrasted. People believed the Pharisees to be holy (Matt. 5:20), while they believed Tax Collectors were shameful (Lk. 18:11). Jesus uses these men to show how the way in which people view them should be challenged based on how these men act. For 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'" (Lk. 18:11). There is a deep sense of pride in his words and in his works (Lk. 18:12). The opposite could be said of the Tax Collector: "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!'" (Lk. 18:13).

Again, the point is fairly straightforward, but Jesus clarifies it to be safe: "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" (Lk. 18:14). The heart of these men is what matters, just as it matters to us. We can never put our hope in our works or our words, but in Christ who sees the heart and justifies.

What About Now?

One takeaway is the simple need to be persistent in prayer. We should pray, and keep on praying! Another takeaway is the warning against judging others based on their words or actions; it is the heart that matters. That applies to us as well. We should never grow so comfortable in our own perceived holiness that we think we are better than others. The more we draw near to a holy God, the more aware we should become of just how unholy we truly are apart from Christ's mediating work on the cross.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Luke 18:1. Why did Jesus tell them a parable?

2. Read Luke 18:2-3. Who are the two characters in this parable? What stands out about each of them?

Day Two

1. Read Luke 18:4-5. What led to the judge acting on her behalf? Why did he say he acted?

2. Read Luke 18:6-8. In your own words, summarize Jesus' teaching in this passage.

Day Three

1. Read Luke 18:9. Why did Jesus tell this parable, and to whom did he tell it?

2. Read Luke 18:10-12. Who are the two main characters in this parable? How did the Pharisee pray?

Day Four

1. Read Luke 18:13. How did the Tax Collector pray?

2. Read Luke 18:14. What was the point of this parable? Who of the two men was more righteous based on their posture and words in their prayer?

Week 64 Discussion: Persistent Prideless Prayer

In Luke 18:1-14, Jesus tells two parables, both of which deal with aspects of prayer. The first parable speaks to the importance of persistence in prayer, while the second parable deals with the heart and posture behind the prayer. Talk as a group about the importance of persistently praying, and the heart you ought to have as you pray.

1. Icebreaker: What is something you have prayed persistently for? Share with the group why you persistently pray for that.
2. How regularly do you pray? Weekly? Daily? Multiple times a day?
3. Does God listen to the prayers of people who have it all together more than those who are aware of their sin?
4. Do you ask people if you can pray for them? Why or why not?
5. Has anyone ever prayed over you? Share with the group a memorable prayer time when someone prayed for you. What made it so memorable?
6. How can the church better equip or challenge you to pray more often?

Takeaways:

1. Jesus tells a parable to express the importance of persistence in prayer.
2. Jesus tells a parable to express the importance of a humble heart in prayer.