“The Persistent Widow,” Luke 18:1-8 (Second Sunday in Lent, February 25, 2024)

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?”

PRAY

It’s always nice when you read through the Bible and come to one of the parables of Jesus and find you know exactly what the parable means. Some of the parables have generated a lot of debate among the scholars over the centuries because parables are stories used to make a point, but stories must be interpreted, and often there are several different ways to do so.

Our parable for this morning is not one of those, because Jesus tells us precisely what he means in verse one: “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

The point of this parable is to teach how to pray “always” or “continually” or “without ceasing.” There are at least a dozen references in the New Testament to this kind of prayer. I’ll mention a few of them. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 that we should, “**16**Rejoice always, **17**pray without ceasing, **18**give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” He commands the church at Rome to, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Romans 12:12). He tells the church at Colossae to, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2).

Now for much of my life as a Christian when I heard a preacher-type person like me stand up and say that followers of Jesus are to pray “always” or “without ceasing,” immediately all these objections flooded my mind. I thought, “That’s impossible; no one can pray all the time like that.” Or, I felt guilty, because even if I couldn’t pray all the time, I could pray more than I did. Or, it felt like a tremendous burden, because I felt obligated to pray more but I didn’t know how to do it.

My hope this morning is to get you to pray more (that’s certainly the point of this text) but without feeling hopeless, guilty, or burdened by it. From the text, I want to show you two keys to continuous, constant, at-all-times prayer.

*First, this prayer is fueled by recognizing your helplessness.* *Second, it’s encouraged by remembering God’s faithfulness.*

First, constant prayer comes out of recognizing your helplessness. We are introduced to two characters in this parable. We first meet a judge. Every town in Judea would’ve had at least a few judges. They decided civil disputes between individuals, disputes involving broken contracts or land sales, and they had the power to grant monetary damages.

Jesus doesn’t paint a pretty picture of this guy. He says that the judge “neither feared God nor respected men.” That’s not a compliment. In 2 Chronicles we read that King Jehoshaphat appointed judges throughout Israel, and he admonished them to have “the fear of the Lord” on them. To not fear God could only indicate one thing: wickedness.

This judge didn’t respect his office or its purpose. Rather than impartially applying the law, he was only looking to enrich himself.

The second character we meet is a widow. She’s involved in some kind of dispute, she’s been wronged, and wants the judge to do his job and give her justice. But the judge is almost certainly looking for a bribe, and the widow either won’t do it or, more likely, doesn’t have the money.

But the very fact that this woman is arguing her own case is a sign of how desperate her situation is. Under normal circumstances in that culture, a widow would have a kinsman (a son, a brother, a cousin) argue on her behalf.

But since she brings her own case, it means she is all alone. Widows had no power, they could not own property, they rarely had money, and they had no voice when corrupt judges like the one in this town wouldn’t even bother to hear her out. Widows in the Bible are virtually a synonym for helplessness.

Have you ever noticed that the protagonists in so many of Jesus’s stories and the examples he so often uses are stereotypically helpless people? It’s always a widow, or a child, or a beggar covered in sores, or the blind, or someone who can’t walk.

Why? ***Because Jesus is trying to tell us that we are every bit as helpless as they are.*** And if you know you’re helpless you will pray all the time.

You know what I call someone who knows they are helpless (I mean really knows)? I call them “mature Christians.” They pray all the time because they know life in this fallen world is too much for them. They are keenly aware of their helplessness and that they don’t have the wisdom to make decisions on their own, raise their children properly, or be trusted with money. They don’t know how to love their spouses, or tell other people about Jesus, or be a good friend to someone who is hurting, so they pray all the time. For them prayer is like breathing. It’s a constant flow of saying to God, “Help”, “What next?”, “Forgive me”, and “Thank you.” Sometimes it’s just “Father, Father, Father” or “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”

If you know you’re helpless and pray like that, you don’t need to listen to the rest of the sermon. You get it, you do it, you understand. If fact, you probably need to come up here and preach the sermon.

But I want to talk to everyone else, probably 98% of us in the room, who don’t pray all the time. And I count myself in this group. I was convicted writing this sermon of my own prayerlessness.

If mature Christians navigate life by constantly praying, what do the rest of us do? I think you can break it down into two activities. *First, we try to control the situation.* If we aren’t praying, then at a heart level we believe that our talents, or intelligence, or effort, or money, rightly applied, will solve the problems we face.

Paul Miller in his book *A Praying Life* (which has taught me more about prayer than any other book, and on which I relied heavily for this sermon) tells a story about his adult daughter Kim, who has autism. She started waking up every morning, 4 or 4:30, and paced up and down the hallway of their house. The problem was she slept in a bedroom on the second floor, Paul and his wife Jill slept on the first floor, and Kim’s pacing was more like jogging. Kim woke up, which in turn woke them up. Paul had prayed for Kim for years, but it didn’t occur to him to pray that Kim would stop pacing. He said he didn’t pray because he thought he knew how to control the situation: tell Kim to stop pacing. He thought, “It’s so easy, so simple,” so he didn’t feel helpless, nor did he bother to pray. But after telling Kim for years to stop pacing (which, from downstairs, is more like yelling at Kim to stop pacing), nothing changed.

We are all guilty of thinking we know how to control the situation. We think, “I don’t need to pray about this issue at work or school. I know what I need to do. I just need to get up earlier, stay on the job later, and study harder.” “I don’t need to pray about my marriage. I just need to read this book my friend recommended and schedule a date night once in a while.” “I don’t need to pray for my children. They just need more discipline, perhaps a tutor, and maybe some medication.” “I don’t need to pray about my money. I just need to set a budget and stick to it.” And we certainly don’t think we need to pray about our hearts and how sinful they are and plead for God to change us, because if we make up our minds we can will ourselves to be better people.

Now, mind you, none of us consciously think those things. No Christian would ever say, “I don’t need to pray for my children” but at a heart-level that’s what we believe when we do all these things instead of sitting down and praying to the Lord of the universe to get to the one place we all know we can’t get … inside the souls of our children … and change them. No Christian would ever say, “I don’t need to pray how jealous and angry I can get,” but at a heart-level that’s what we believe when we don’t take the time to ask God to change us.

We try to control the situation or, *second, we carry around anxiety.* I don’t want to paint with too broad a brush here. There are different levels of anxiety, some far more severe than others. What I have in mind in what I’m about to say is the anxiety that 90-95% of us experience. I don’t have in mind extreme anxiety and depression, though I won’t go so far to say that nothing in this sermon applies to even those severe situations.

The Bible says we should use our anxiety as a springboard to prayer. That’s Philippians 4:6-7: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

When we find ourselves anxious, it should lead us to pray. But instead of praying we find ourselves trying to suppress our anxiety, manage it, medicate it, or smother it with pleasure.

One pastor said that when we don’t pray over the things that worry us, we create an unused prayer link. Instead of connecting with God through prayer, our spirits flail around like severed power lines, electricity shooting out of them, scorching everything they touch.

Anxiety means being unable to relax in the face of the chaos of this world. It means constant tension. It means short-tempers and lack of understanding of other people’s troubles. And it can get to the point to where anxiety cripples you and you find you can’t get out of bed in the morning.

But if you recognize how helpless you are, that this world is too much for you, that your talent, intellect, work ethic, and money (great though they may be) are not enough to get you through this life and certainly not enough to help you love the people around you … if you will recognize how thoroughly helpless you are, then instead of trying to control everything and instead of carrying around all this anxiety you will set it down at the feet of Jesus and pray.

Second, after we recognize our helplessness, we remember God’s faithfulness. The thing that has shocked a lot of people over the years is that God in this parable is represented by a criminal. Jesus uses an unscrupulous judge as the God-figure in the story! Why? Why not compare God to a kindly grandfather who always has peppermints in his pocket, sits on the front row of church, so that children flock to him because they know he will give them candy? Why have God represented by someone who does not care about people at all?   
  
You want to know why? Because it will often, at least for short periods of time, ***feel like God does not care about you at all.***

The Psalms are full of testimony about this. Psalms isn’t a happy-go-lucky book of the Bible, but relentlessly realistic about how distant God can feel. “My eyes long for your promise; I ask, ‘When will you comfort me?’ **83**For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes. **84**How long must your servant endure? When will you judge those who persecute me?” Psalm 119:82-84.

“I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, **5**like one set loose among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. **6**You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. **7**Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves.” Psalm 88:4-7.

In our helplessness, we will feel like the widow in the parable and God will seem for a time like the judge in the parable: uncaring and uninterested, and those feelings can cripple our faith.

So, what can we do? How do we counter that? ***You must respond by letting facts drive your faith, not your feelings.*** If you let feelings drive your faith, you’ll give up. You won’t pray. You’ll think, “There’s no point in praying because God obviously doesn’t care. This situation has been going on for months or years, nothing’s changed, so why bother?”

Those are our feelings. But what are the facts? “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?” Luke 18:7-8.

No matter how you feel, the fact is that the Son of Man will come! That means God does care. God does love you.

Friends, God is concerned with even the smallest amount of the suffering you go through. Jesus tells us that not a hair falls from your head without the Father’s express approval. And we can be sure that God cares because of Jesus. In Jesus Christ, God became a man and lived in this broken world to share our suffering with us. And beyond that, he went to the cross to endure the suffering we deserve for our sin, rebellion, and faithlessness.

Whenever I’ve discouraged and am tempted to think God doesn’t care, I remember this quote by John Stott in his book *The Cross of Christ*: “I could never myself believe in God if it were not for the cross … In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many Buddhist temples in different Asian countries and stood respectfully before the statue of Buddha - - his legs crossed, arms folded, eyes closed, the ghost of a smile playing round his mouth, a remote look on his face, detached from the agony of the world. But each time, after a while, I have had to turn away. And in my imagination, I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross -- nails through his hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn pricks, mouth dry and intolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me!”

We can know, ***we can be certain***, that God cares for us because of Jesus. No other religion, philosophy, or life management scheme can say that. That Jesus died for our sins, he rose again on the third day, he ascended into heaven, and one day he will return (that’s what verse 8 is referring to: the return of Jesus Christ) and when he comes justice will surely be given. Suffering will certainly be stopped. And in the meantime you’ll find God answering prayers in ways you never expected, and far better than you could have hoped.

I didn’t tell you how the Paul Miller story ended. On most mornings for years, he yelled upstairs at Kim to stop pacing up and down the hallway at 4:30AM, and nothing changed. But one morning as he started to get out of bed, Jill (his wife) asked him, “Are you going to yell at Kim?” he said, “That hasn’t worked for ten years, so I thought I’d try praying with her.” He went upstairs, realized he had no control and that nothing he could say would make Kim stop pacing, sat on her bed (Kim had gotten back into bed and was pretending to be asleep, because she knew she wasn’t supposed to be up that early), placed his hand on her covers and prayed. That morning, God answered Paul’s prayers. Kim fell asleep and didn’t go back to pacing.

But that wasn’t the only way God answered, nor the most important. Miller writes, “As soon as I started praying, a thought came completely from left field: I had underestimated Kim’s ability to pray on her own … My view of her had been too narrow … I’d looked at her as a disabled person and not as a young woman made in the image of God, able to communicate with her heavenly Father. It created a new expectation in my heart for her, a new hope that she can grow spiritually … Instead of fighting Kim’s problems with anger, I can focus on a new vision of her learning to pray.”

Now it wasn’t like Kim never paced again after that morning. She kept doing it, and Miller reports that about every other morning he’d drag himself out of bed to pray with her. But four months later they moved, and Kim’s pacing stopped completely. It turns out they had lived across the street from a factory, and the diesel trucks driving up and down the road in front of their house early each morning were waking her up. God finally and fully answered Paul Miller’s prayer.

The cynical among us will be mightily tempted to say, “God didn’t answer the prayer. It was all a coincidence. Kim’s pacing would have stopped anyway.” But 98% of the time that’s how prayer works. An angel is not going to show up and fix everything in thirty seconds. Why not?

Look back at verse 8: “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, ***will he find faith on earth***?” When we go through hard times, we ask, “Where is God? Why isn’t he fixing this? Why is God letting me go through this suffering?” But Jesus turns the question around on us. He says, “God knows, and God cares. You will get certainly get justice. Your suffering will one day stop. ***But will you be ready when it happens?”*** What does he mean?

He means, “Will you receive God’s blessings and answered prayers as gifts from him or will you totally miss it? Are you going to allow yourself to become cynical? Will you say, ‘This isn’t from God! It would have happened anyway’?”

The way you can be sure you don’t become cynical is by ***watching in prayer***. Miller says, “When you stop trying to control your life and instead allow your burdens to bring you to God in prayer, you shift from worry to watching. You watch God weave his patterns in the story of your life. Instead of trying to be out front, designing your life, you realize you are inside God’s drama. As you wait, you begin to see him work, and your life begins to sparkle with wonder.”

When we pray, ***we find ourselves ready for God’s grace, we look out for the answers to our prayers, we see God work in our lives, we praise his name, and the Son of Man will find faith on earth when he comes.***

We’ve been talking about “constant” prayer, or “always” prayer in this sermon, because that’s the point of Jesus’ parable. But “always” prayer, prayer that responds to circumstances and worry, while good and necessary isn’t the only kind of prayer and should not be confused with focused times of prayer. ***You might call this “communion prayer.”*** A married couple who only talk in little snippets throughout the day will have a shallow relationship. If you are going to grow in your relationship with God, you need time with him without an agenda where you can get to know him more fully.

So, as we close, here are some tips for how to spend time with your heavenly Father. *First, take baby steps.* Don’t start off with impossible goals. Shoot for five or ten minutes to begin. *Second, go to bed.* Mornings are when we are most alert so they are the best time to pray, but morning prayer must start the night before. If you fail to get enough sleep you won’t pray the next morning. *Third, in the morning, get awake.* Maybe have a cup of coffee or take your shower before you begin. *Fourth, find a quiet place.* That’s another good thing about praying early in the mornings. Everything is more likely to be quiet. *Fifth, find a regular place.*  It’s amazing how much simply looking for a place to pray early in the morning can deter you from doing it. *Sixth, get comfortable.* I know there are ministers who talk about their prayer stools and how they have callouses on their knees from all the time they spend in prayer, but nowhere does the Bible say you have to pray in a certain position. You probably don’t need to stay in bed (because you’ll fall back asleep!) but you don’t have to be uncomfortable either. *Seventh, keep at it.* When it comes to prayer, consistency is more important than length. If you pray five minutes every day, then that length of time will slowly grow. Before you know it, you’ll find that twenty minutes have gone by because you’ll enjoy being with God.

***If you give God the space, he will show up.*** You will find that you come to know him personally, as much as you know your friends and family on earth. Therefore, always pray and don’t lose heart. Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). PRAY