

Why keep praying?

Luke 18:1-8

'I gave up praying a long time ago, because nothing ever changed.'

'I *still* keep praying, but nothing ever changes!'

'I prayed, and then things got worse.'

Can you relate to any of that? Sometimes as a minister, people talk to me like they're putting God on trial, and they expect me to stand up for Him. They want me to explain what God thinks He's up to; to make a case on God's behalf. And one of the areas where I find that to be true is when people say, 'I kept praying, and nothing good came of it. Explain *that* then!'

Let me tell you what I'm not competent to do: I can't explain to you why God says yes or no to any given prayer; or what His purposes are in the timing of His answers (which very often come about after a far longer time than fits our expectations of an acceptable RSVP). Like everyone else, I can't do more than speculate about that, and I've found that to be a pretty useless exercise.

What I hopefully can do is what I'm called to do: Share with you what God says in His Word about prayer, and how He would have us shape our lives in the light of that. And here in Luke 18:1-8, Jesus unambiguously teaches us to 'always pray and not give up.' The point of the parable is spelled out right there in v.1, before the parable's even spoken: *Be persistent*.

When it comes to prayer, your will and mine might be pretty up and down. 'I want to pray... I don't feel like praying anymore...' But God's will is that we *keep praying and don't give up*. That's part of the 'why' for us being persistent with our prayers: That God wants us to. He *tells* us to. Jesus spurs us on here, 'Go on, keep praying, don't give up...'

Jesus tells this story of an unjust judge who doesn't give a stuff about the glory of God or the welfare of people. Someone who is completely the opposite to God in his character, then. But *even the unjust judge* will see the pleading person in distress get what they need rather than have this nagging wearing him down all the time.

How much more then, says Jesus, will God - who does care about His glory and about your welfare - give you what you need as you persist in prayer! In Jesus' story, it's still in the judge's hands what provision the widow will get. It

might not be what she imagines or asks for. Or it might. But it will be what she needs to see things right. Likewise, it's in God's hands to say yes, no, wait, or to give you something a bit different to what you asked - but He *likes* that you kept asking.

That's what strikes me as really odd about God, because He's a different kind of father to me. He's a far more patient a Dad than I am. I can't think of anything worse than listening to my children nag me over and over for the same thing. Parents, you know the feeling... Every time they repeat themselves, the patience wears thinner and thinner until I end up exclaiming 'Stop asking!!!!'

But God... well, Jesus teaches us here, 'Keep asking!' God *invites* you to nag Him! Rather you than me, God. But how glad I am that He is the kind of Father who doesn't just not mind me praying the same requests over and over, but actually invites that and likes that expressed dependence.

Sam Smith, in his song *Pray* from his recently released album *The Thrill of it All*, sings 'Everyone prays in the end.' I reckon there's something in that. At least, everyone *begins* to pray some time. But how many people drop it quickly - either because they don't get what they want, or because they do?

Bishop J.C. Ryle commented that: '...it is far more easy to begin a habit of prayer than it is to keep it up. The fear of death, - some temporary prickings of conscience, - some excited feelings, may make a man begin praying after a fashion. But to go on praying requires faith. We are apt to become weary, and to give way to the suggestion of Satan, that 'it is of no use.'

There's a couple of 'hows' for us in persistent prayer here, and one more 'why.' *How* do we keep on praying for something that we've prayed about for weeks, months, years, decades even? As Bishop Ryle says, it requires genuine faith to do that. It's faith in God's goodness, power and wisdom that makes us able to keep asking Him over and over.

I believe in God's goodness, so I trust that He'll give what's best whether I understand it or not. And I also trust that He won't blow a fuse when I keep asking over and over. I believe in God's power, so I trust that He is perfectly able to heal, provide the money, bring about the job, change the relationship, transform the person, open the door, if He decides to say yes. And I believe in God's wisdom, so I think that He'll make a better decision than I will with more of the facts in front of Him than I can see.

So our faith in God fuels our prayers, and actually in turn, our prayers fuel our faith in God. Isn't it true that when your faith in God wanes, so do your prayers? And when your prayers tail off, so does your faith?

Another way of seeing the indissoluble connection between faith and prayer is to put it like this: To express faith in God *is* to pray. It's by praying that I purposefully say, 'God, this is better in your hands than mine. I'll let you drive, and trust where you direct us with this. I was hoping we might go this way? And I'll probably keep asking if we're nearly there yet. And honestly, I don't always understand why you take the scenic route. But you drive.'

We'll keep praying when our faith in God is strong. And that tends to happen when we look to Him, listen to Him, remember who He is and what He's like. And *that* happens with simple repeated rhythms of what sounds like Sunday school answers - Read the Bible. Worship together at church. These are the places we become conscious again of the kind of God we pray to.

Here's another 'how' for persistent prayer, and for this we dart back to Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with God (which is often what prayer feels like). Jacob and this stranger (who turns out to be God) are locked in a struggle through the night. God wounds Jacob in the experience! He puts his hip out of place; Jacob will limp from that time on, he'll never be the same.

But Jacob *refuses* to let go of God. 'I will not let you go until you bless me' says Jacob. Now *there's* a way to pray. 'I will not shut up and stop asking until you give something in response.' Sometimes we sing FROG - Fully Rely On God. It's one of those acronyms that Christian youth in the 90s wore on wristbands. Another one was this: PUSH - Pray Until Something Happens.

Refuse to let go of God. Keep pleading the same thing with Him. Express your faith in Him in this way. Be persistent. Even if you're wounded by the experience and will never be the same again, do not stop wrestling and pleading in prayer until you see God give you the answer. Because God tells you to. Because He's happy to hear your nagging. And (here's the other 'why' that Bishop Ryle hinted towards) because it's more useless to stop praying than to keep praying.

Remember Ryle's words? 'We are apt to become weary, and to give way to the suggestion of Satan, that "it is of no use."' God and humanity have an enemy that wants to disarm us and pick us off by whispering 'prayer doesn't work.'

Two responses to this attack though - 1) Most of us who are followers of Jesus can look back to times where things *did* change *because* we prayed and 2) Even if you're tempted to think that praying isn't going to change anything, you might as well keep praying, because *not* praying *definitely* isn't going to change anything.

What did you used to keep praying for that you've given up praying for? Will you start praying for it again?

If Jesus' parable teaches us the 'how' and 'why' of persistent prayer, it also teaches us something about the 'who' and 'what.' v.1 tells us who this teaching is for. Jesus is addressing 'His disciples' here. Those who identify as His followers. In v.7, Jesus talks about God responding to the cries of 'His chosen ones' - those who actually belong to God, are adopted into His family through faith in Jesus.

Sam Smith may be right to sing that 'everyone prays in the end.' But how are Jesus' followers - those who really know and belong to God - how are *we* to pray? Something about being God's family and learning His ways is to shape not just how we choose to talk and act and think, but also how we pray.

I don't know what the repeated themes of your most heartfelt prayers are - often for Western suburban Christians it's stuff like 'please let me... get a pass / get a good grade / get the job / get better soon / get the girl or boy / get more, have more, experience more...' In our better moments, we pray not just for ourselves, but for other people and their situations.

But what is it that the widow pleads for from the judge? And what is it that Jesus says God will give His 'chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night?' What's the word woven four times through these eight verses? It's... *justice*. Not so much getting things that we *don't* have, as restoring things that we *should* have. That we would see God put things right - for ourselves, like the widow pleads. And for others, too.

So many of the things we pray for aren't really to do with justice. They are things that we consider would make life better for us or for others. But they can be a world apart from the desperate, guttural cries of hopeless and persecuted people 2000 years ago in Palestine, or those in our world and even in our city today who experience a genuinely unjust life.

What kind of things do you repeatedly plead for with God? Are they to do with seeing things put right that just aren't right? Is that honestly a more

persistent theme in your prayers than asking for things to change in ways that you think might just improve life a bit?

When a house is getting rebuilt, it's the calls to the workmen who can stop the beams falling in that are more persistent and nagging than the calls to the decorator about when he can splash a little more colour on it. But when it comes to our life and others' lives, we're too busy praying for home improvements to plead for structural change.

'Seeing things put right' is the preoccupation of the prayers of Jesus' followers. Think about how the followers listening to Jesus saying this stuff were living; and the people who first heard Luke's gospel read to them in the first churches.

They were people living in the shadow of oppression - ruled by and invading Roman empire. They were people persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Not just with a mean joke or exclusion in social circles, but with imprisonment and the threat of death. Talk of praying for justice was not a hypothetical thing, or something to feel vaguely guilty about not doing before enjoying another safe Sunday afternoon at home.

Jesus' teaching here to His suffering, persecuted followers was: Keep faith, and keep praying. Keep asking God for deliverance from the things that threaten both your life and your faith in Jesus. Do not stop depending on God in prayer for these absolutely foundational essential needs. It was to pray that they would *persevere* in faith and in life, and experience vindication.

Read through the New Testament, and you'll see this pattern of continual prayer instructed and modelled throughout. Acts 2:42 - 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' (That's what a church *is* - the community that keeps doing these things). Colossians 4:2 - 'Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.'

1 Thessalonians 5:17 - 'Pray continually.' Ephesians 1:17 Paul says, 'I *keep asking* that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better.' Ephesians 6:18, after Paul talks about putting on the full armour of God to stand firm in faith in the midst of danger and oppression: 'And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.'

The whole New Testament, from Jesus onwards, teaches: Keep praying, not only for people to come to faith, but to grow in faith and stand in faith. To persevere to the end in faith. That's worth praying for, because our passage ends in v.8 with Jesus telling us that when He comes back, He's looking for those whose faith endured through difficulty and injustice right to the end.

What do you pray for most frequently and most desperately? Does this thing square with Jesus' teaching to pray for things to be put right?

So we've looked at the 'why' and the 'how' of persistent prayer, and the 'who' and the 'what.' The end of our passage, v.8, teaches us something about the 'where' and 'when' of prayer. I'm not talking about where and when you can say your prayers. We can wrap that one up in a sentence: Thanks to Jesus giving us access to God the Father, we can pray to Him any place and any time, and God will listen.

I'm talking rather about the 'where' and 'when' of all these persistent prayers being *fulfilled*. Jesus has told this story to explain that God *wants* to hear our prayers and that He *will* give us what we need to see things put right. In v.8, Jesus even says that to His people who keep crying out to Him, He will bring justice *quickly*.

The problem is, a lot of us find that hard to swallow. Because it doesn't feel like 'things being put right' is coming any time soon to the one who has been falsely accused and lives in the shadow of that; or the one whose relationship fell apart and who suffers the stigma; or the one who lost someone too young; or the one who keeps getting overlooked because they're overqualified; or the one who lost the job because of their faith in Jesus...

...Or the one whose body was sold into slavery by others to be used by people who give nothing but money, and not to them; or the one whose city and its people have been blown up by the government and forgotten about by the world. When will God put *these* things right? Will He bring justice quickly?

Look again at v.8. Jesus says, 'When the Son of Man comes...' He's talking about Himself. And He's talking about His return to this world. Jesus implies here that God bringing justice quickly, and Jesus' return to this world, are of a piece. *That* is when God will set things straight, put things right. *That* is the 'when' we are praying towards. The Kingdom of God that is completed with Jesus' return is the 'where' we are praying towards.

We are to *keep* praying, stubbornly, passionately, red-blooded-ly, with language honest and free, 'crying out day and night' as Jesus puts it in v.7, until the day that the skies part and the noise of our prayer-screams is dwarfed by the glory of the risen Jesus melting injustice in a moment.

No more polite prostrate buttoned up 'excuse me, God?' No more whispered 'I was just wondering?' No more hands folded up and heads hanging like it's all a waste of breath. Bring us a generation of hands stretched out to Heaven grasping for the Lord we want to come back. A generation of mouths that will yell out, 'How long, O Lord!' Open up the floodgates of prayers that will not quit, prayers that will not be silent, prayers that justice will come, prayers that Jesus will come!

We pray towards a day - a day that we don't see coming, and we don't have in the diaries. A day when Jesus returns and justice will roll in this world like a mighty river. We pray on without ceasing until that day because God told us to, because He likes us to, because it's more useless not to, and because of one more thing...

'When the Son of Man comes... will He find faith on the earth?'

Jesus hasn't suddenly changed the subject here. This whole thing has been about praying without ceasing. I said earlier, to express faith in God *is* to pray. That's how we say and show and mean, 'God, I depend on you.' So here's the question: When Jesus returns to this world, will He find us still praying?

And this all puts a new spin on praying without letting up. The weary old model of prayer that we're used to, amongst those who know Jesus as well as those who don't, is that we pray when things are really terrible or really wonderful, and the rest of the time, we crack on without a conversation without God. Maybe there's times we begin to pray, but we could never describe it as a habit, a rhythm of living, a way of life.

But this is not faith-prayer. To have faith is simply this: 'Depending on Jesus.' Continually, daily, completely. And prayer to God through Jesus is how we express that. To quit prayer is to quit faith. When Jesus returns, He won't look around and ask, 'Who's been naughty and who's been nice?' He'll look around and ask, 'Right - who's still praying?'