

Knockin' On Heaven's Door
By Jason Huff
Psalm 86:1-7, Romans 12:9-12, Luke 18: 1-8

Our final Scripture reading today is from Luke 18: 1-8. Listen now to God's Word. "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, 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!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. 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? 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?"

Have you been catching the Winter Olympics? We have, and amidst the victories and defeats, the tragedy and triumph, are the stories. This week, two stories caught my attention. The first was the story of snowboarder Lindsey Jacobellis. In the 2006 Torino Olympics, she lost a gold that should have been hers...leagues ahead of everyone else in the race, instead of making it straight to the finish line, she did a trick move and lost her footing. This time, what was to be here comeback ended with a wipeout and 5th place. The other story is that of a married Chinese couple – figure skaters Shen and Zhao. Retired after three world championships and two bronze medals at previous Olympics, they came back to attempt the impossible – to take the gold in an event that Russian skaters had won every single time since 1960. Now they're part of Olympic history. What is it that links the two stories? It's perseverance. Are we going to make it to the finish line, to not stop until we've achieved victory, or will we always be remembered for what might have been had we just gone a few steps farther?

Jesus' parable today is about perseverance in prayer. In its day, it was one of the funniest parables Jesus ever told, which we'll get to in a minute. But Jesus is completely serious about making sure we know that we should be turning to God on a regular basis. The lessons we learn from this parable aren't just to convince us to spend more time in prayer, though, but to help us understand why God asks us to pray in the first place.

When Jesus tells this story, you've got to imagine how this sounded to His hearers. There's a widow. She's coming to the judge to receive justice. The fact that she is the one coming before the judge means that she is really in dire straits. In that day, no woman would do this unless she had to...she would have had a male relative, an uncle or a cousin, speak to the judge on her behalf. It tells us that she is alone in her quest for justice...there is no one else to stand for her. She has no power, no authority, nothing. Then there's the judge. Jesus describes him as a man who doesn't fear either God or men, and that phrase would have instantly brought up the stereotype of a corrupt official. This guy had clout and he knew it. At first, he doesn't care about the widow because he can't profit from her; she has nothing to offer him as a bribe.

But then comes back, over and over again, saying, “Give me justice!” Finally, the judge says to himself, “This is crazy! I’ll make sure she gets justice.” The translations don’t tell us the *real* reason why; they explain it as something like, “She’ll wear me out.” It’s an OK explanation. But do you know what he literally says? He says, “I’ll make sure she gets justice, or otherwise she’s going to give me a black eye!” The picture Jesus paints is one of a tiny woman with a big purse smacking a huge guy in the head over and over until he gives up! It’s like an old cartoon, and the disciples would have been sitting around laughing!

Then Jesus moves the story forward. Contrast that judge to God the Father, the eternal Judge. He is the total opposite of the picture that Jesus has painted. He’s loving; He’s kind; He wants justice for His people. If persistence got through to the unjust judge, how much more true is it going to be when we continually approach our righteous God? And God isn’t going to make His people wait forever. God is going to bring His justice right away.

Now this story *sounds* good, but there are some unexplained questions. Truth is, we don’t see God working quickly. We don’t always get answers. Can we really take Jesus’ teachings in this passage seriously? I believe we can, but we have to understand everything the story Jesus is telling teaches us. The parable teaches us to persevere in prayer, but it also brings up the *what* and *when* and *why* questions of prayer for us.

The first question the parable answers is this: *what is it we pray for?* Most of us really don’t know. We pray for health and safety because we figure God is in charge of those things. But beyond that, we aren’t sure. But what we’ve learned in our study of Luke makes it clearer. The widow in the story is asking for “justice.” She doesn’t want retribution; she simply wants what belongs to her. What is it that belongs to Christians? As we’ve been studying in Luke, we know that the Kingdom of God is coming, and children of the King may ask Him for that Kingdom. It belongs to God, but it also belongs to us. Outside of our relationship with God, we have no right to ask for anything; if we aren’t in relationship with Him, we don’t have a share in His Kingdom. But when we believe in Jesus Christ and follow Him in faith, we become God’s children, and as His children, we have the right to ask God to bring about His Kingdom. Every week in this service, in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray, “Your kingdom come.” As God’s children, we ask for the Kingdom to come in our lives and in our world.

What does that mean in a practical sense? It means that we are free to ask for *anything* that is within the realm of God’s Kingdom. Health and protection barely scratch the surface of it! Think again with me about the Lord’s Prayer. We can ask for God’s provision, that we would have what we need to live without shame – “Give us today our daily bread.” We can ask that God guide our steps each day – “Your will be done.” We should ask for forgiveness and the power to forgive others the same way. We can request that God keep us close to Himself and strengthen us through His Scripture and through prayer so that we may not be tempted. We can pray for those around the world who are believers that they might be strengthened and encouraged, that they might be free to worship without fear of persecution. We can pray that God would heal the hearts of nations and governments so that they might follow Him. We can ask God to lead those around us to Himself through us. As Christians, brought into God’s family through the water of baptism, these are our birthrights! God is pleased to give them to us!

When we hear of all these things, it makes us wonder...am I bugging God if I ask God for things that aren't related to His Kingdom? Are there things that don't belong to us in the Kingdom of God? God isn't going to grant things that violate His holiness, but there are many things that are within a grey area. I think, honestly, that we are to lift *everything* to God and let Him determine how things do or don't fit into His will. We pray that His will be done, and then share our hearts with Him. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus presented His will to the Father, that He didn't want to die, and yet He prayed that His Father's will be done rather than His own. There are times when our will is in line with God's will and He is happy to provide. Other times, God will tell us "no" because He knows what is best. Is it God's will that my taxes are lowered so that I might give more to God's work? Maybe, maybe not. I don't know. I can't know. But God knows how that will work out. We simply give those things on our hearts to God and say, "Your will be done."

This can be hard sometimes, especially when it comes to our prayers about health. We pray for someone to be healed of this or that disease and they aren't, and it bothers us. We bring it to God over and over again and either He's said "no" or He isn't listening. But we have to remember that God is in control of His Kingdom. He has total knowledge of everything, and He knows His plans. Isaiah 61:3 says that God is the One who comforts those who grieve, the One who brings beauty for ashes. We can't understand His plans, but we can pray that we will accept that His will is perfect. Many times, we make requests without having even really thinking them through. How many times in our lives have we been able to say, "Boy, I'm glad that what I asked would happen didn't happen!" When God has reason to say "no" to us, that "no" is a blessing to us, not a curse.

This brings up the second question that bothers us: *when will God do what He promises to do when we persevere in prayer?* The passage says that, unlike the unjust judge, God is going to act quickly for His children, those who come to Him regularly in prayer. So why don't we see instant results from our prayers? We're asking for good things, Godly things, Kingdom things. Why don't they happen right away? There are a couple of ideas I want us to think about here.

Imagine with me that I took Jackson out to my car after the service this morning and he turned to me and said, "Dad, can I drive home?" I pull out the keys and hand them over and say, "Sure...hop on in and have at it!" What do you think? If I did that, you'd have me locked up! You'd have my head examined! (You might still want to do that, but still!) The point is, in ten years, maybe, Jackson will be ready to get behind the wheel of a car. Maybe. Now I love driving. Driving's a good thing. Gets us to where we want to go. I love taking long trips and driving the whole way. But a seven-year-old can't drive! He doesn't have the coordination and the capabilities it takes to do it yet. In ten years, maybe. But a good thing given at the wrong time can be a dangerous thing. God knows what we can handle and what we can't. Sometimes, God delays because what we are asking for is something good for His Kingdom, but not yet. We have to trust God's timing is going to be just right.

I also want us to consider something else about the question of when God will bring us justice. Imagine once again with me that we're out by my car. You see it, all washed up, looking shiny, and I say to you, "Tell you what. Want to buy my car? You can have it for a hundred bucks." Now a couple of you out there might run to the bank and take out a hundred dollars and hand it over and say, "Thanks!" But I know what the vast majority of you would be thinking. You wouldn't be sitting there saying to yourself, "Hey, what a steal!" You'd be thinking, "What the heck's wrong with that car??" Even if you did buy it, you'd be cautious about it for an awfully long time, just expecting that you'll be going down the road and all of a sudden, clunk, and there's the motor sitting ten feet behind you. People would be sitting around honking at you, all upset, one couple pulls by, "What do you think happened, dear?" "I think he must have bought that hundred dollar car."

The things that we ask God for in prayer are serious business. We ask Him to do things that are impossible for us, not just healing the sick but bringing peace and justice, bringing others into His Kingdom, strengthening the weak, giving hope to the suffering, giving us justice in our own lives...it's big stuff. God wants us to realize the value of what we're asking of Him. When we persist in prayer, we show we understand the nature of what we're asking for. But it also means that we can think big and ask big. Nothing is impossible for God. Replacing the church roof is not a problem for God. Growing this church so that hundreds of people come to faith within these doors? Not a problem. When we think small and pray small, we get small. We get the hundred dollar car we really don't trust. But God wants to give us justice; He wants to give us our birthright as His children in His Kingdom. Not necessarily material wealth; God doesn't want to give us stuff that will ultimately distract us from Him. But He does want to give us eternal riches; He wants to give us those things that will last. He wants to give us things that have permanent value, things that won't depreciate like joy and grace and peace. When we pray for God's Kingdom to reign in our lives, we will see the riches of that Kingdom in us.

That brings us to the last question: *why should we persevere in prayer?* If God knows everything, why does He want us to keep asking? The answer is in Jesus' question that closes the parable: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" The purpose of prayer is ultimately not what gets accomplished, but the building of faith, of relationship with the One to whom we pray.

Imagine you've got a neighbor who comes by every time he wants something. He borrows your tools, your snowblower, your golf clubs. Eventually, each time you see him, you start to cringe. Why? Because you're only good to him for what he wants. You're not his buddy; you're not really even his acquaintance. He can't even say "hi" to you in your driveway unless he wants something from you. Finally, when it comes to the big stuff, when he wants to borrow your car, you say "no." He gets upset – "why not?" What's the answer? "I don't really know you." Now imagine another neighbor. But this one has you over for breakfast every week. He invites you to the big game party. He shares with you his worries about work and his excitement about his kids. You become friends. You talk on a regular basis, not because there's anything to talk about but because friends check on each other. Then something big strikes – his house burns down, he goes into the hospital, he needs money, he needs a car, he needs whatever. You'd bend over backwards for him, do whatever it takes, take care of his family. And why? Because you know him. He's your friend. You know he'd do the same for you.

That's what perseverance in prayer is really about. God is going to answer those who call out to Him consistently. James 5:16 tells us that the prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective. But it's not about changing God's mind. Romans 8:28 says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." 1 Corinthians 2:9 says, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him." Our prayers are effective because we are coming together in agreement with God's plans. The point is not to change God's mind because He already is bringing everything together for our ultimate good. When we pray, we start seeing the world from God's perspective, and that creates in us a love for Him that is overwhelming. In the process, we become the people of Romans 8:28 and 1 Corinthians 2:9; we know are called by God and chosen by Him. God is preparing us for eternity with Him. When all is said and done, when this life is over and we've swept the floors and turned out the lights, we want to know God and for God to know us. Perseverance in prayer and faith in Jesus Christ makes this a reality.

Honestly, prayer is not something we have focused on a great deal at Church of the Covenant. We have Bible studies, programs, fellowship, plenty of good things to learn about God and get to know Him, but we have not been a body that comes together just to pray. I'd like to see that change. If God puts it on your heart to be part of a group that would consistently come together and pray, let me know so that we can truly become a house of prayer together. God is calling us to persevere in prayer. Will you heed His call as His son or daughter and make it your business to be in prayer with our Father and King?