

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

⁴ "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, ⁵ 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!'"

⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ 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? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. (Luke 18:1-8a)

Keep on Praying!

Why do we keep on praying when God doesn't seem to be listening? Have you ever wrestled with that question? I recently did a search of the internet on prayer for adult Bible class and I found a number of video clips that address this issue. One was from a man who said he used to be a Christian but he doesn't believe anymore. He has asked his Christian friends about this and he's never gotten an answer that satisfies him. From what I can see, this is a big question on the minds of many people, believers and unbelievers alike. And I'm sure some of us, at least, have thought about it. Well, Jesus talks about that issue today. His response is quite simply, **Keep on praying!**

I. Keep on praying because God is listening!

II. Keep on praying because God will answer!

I.

Now, in the gospel lesson for today, Jesus told a parable, a story designed to teach us a truth about God. In a certain town, there was a judge who didn't fear God. That means he didn't believe. And he didn't really care about people either. He did what he wanted to do. A widow came to him looking for justice. She had a real case and she really had been wronged. But the judge didn't care. He wasn't a believer so he didn't worry if he was sinning or not. And he didn't really care what people thought about him, so he didn't feel any pressure to give this woman justice. But she kept on him. She bugged him and bugged him and bugged him and finally, he gave in, not because it was the right thing to do, but just to get her off his back! With that story, Jesus teaches us to **keep on praying because God is listening.**

In this parable, Jesus compares his father to that unbelieving, unjust man. Now, he's not saying that God is unjust or that he doesn't care about people. Jesus' whole point is that if nagging at that heartless man finally caused him to do what was right, how much better off are we if we keep praying to God who does love us and who even invites us to bring to him all our sorrows and cares? God loves us so much that he's willing to be compared to a man like this so that we understand that he wants us to bring our hurts and sorrows to him.

God is listening every time we pray. But you've heard me say that many times before. Why bring it up again? Because it's for us to trust that promise. It's hard because we don't get to see God. When we talk to him, it's not like when we talk to each other. God does not come and sit next to us and have conversations with us. If one of my children comes to me and says, "Dad?" he or she usually expects some kind of answer. If they ask for something, at the very least they expect that I will say, "No" or "Let me think about it."

But it doesn't work that way with God. We pray to him. We storm the gates of heaven with our hurts and our fears. We may pray day after day for the same things. But he doesn't whisper in our ear, "OK, I heard you." To get his answer, we have to wait and see what he does. Sometimes, that means that it feels like he's not listening at all. Especially when the situation is like the one that Jesus pictures for us in the parable: a situation when we come to him again and again and again, asking him to grant us relief from some long and heartfelt difficulty, and we don't see any progress.

When I was 23, I got discharged from the army and I went to college. I was at a point in my life when I was starting to think about wanting a wife, a companion to share my life. I wanted her to be someone who shared my faith. So I started praying that God would provide me with that wife. That was when I was 23. I didn't get married until I was 30. God didn't grant my prayer for seven years. Now, that may seem like a fairly trivial thing compared to some of the things that other people pray for. In my ministry, I've served Christians

who live with pain and sorrow for years – chronic illnesses, divisions in their marriages or families, children who wander from the faith and pierce their parents’ hearts. That all seems like a much bigger deal than me having to wait for the Christian spouse that God finally did provide for me. And I wouldn’t argue that point. But all the same, God was listening for all those years, even when it didn’t feel that way to me. And God has been listening for all the years that you have been praying about your ongoing hurts and sorrows.

But it might not feel that way. As the years pass, it may feel like we’re talking on and on to someone on a cell phone long after the call has been dropped. It may feel like there’s no one on the other end. And if God determines that his answer is “no” and he doesn’t give us what we asked for, that might even reinforce that impression. Why do we have to feel that?

Because we live in a sinful world. While we do, God hides himself. He doesn’t open up the heavens and let us see him listening to our prayers. He doesn’t send flashes of lightning into hospital rooms and cure sick people. He doesn’t beam down Christian spouses to lonely men and women who desperately want Christian companionship and families. God works behind the scenes because right now, we live by faith and not by sight. God says, “**Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.**” God calls us to be sure of what we don’t see – to trust that even when it feels like he’s not listening, he’s hanging on our every word. Even when he says “no,” even when he calls us to endure hardship and pain and loss, in spite of our prayers that he take it all away, he calls us to trust that he loves us. It’s hard to see it at that moment. But it is true.

How do we know it’s true? Not by weighing in the balance what God has and has not done in our lives. Not by counting up how many prayers he said “yes” to and how many he said “no” to and how many are still pending. We know that God hears us and we’re certain of all of his promises, when we go back to the cross and the empty tomb. On the cross, God sacrificed his one and only Son to get us out of hell. Jesus suffered hell itself and then died so that we will live. And on Easter Sunday morning, Jesus rose from that tomb. God opened it and sent an angel to announce that he had risen. There God proved that he keeps all his promises. God proved that his love for us overwhelms all the sorrows of this life. God proved that he will never hesitate to deal with our concerns. We speak to God in prayer. God answers in his word – the word that points us back to Christ living and dying and rising for us. The more we see him there, the more we trust God’s promise that he is listening. The more we renew our commitment to keep on praying to him.

II.

One day, God won’t hide himself anymore. When Jesus comes back, we’ll see him and all that he does for us. But until then, prayer is more than just getting things off our chest. It’s taking all the challenges and hardships of our life to God and placing them in his hands and trusting that he will deal with them. **Keep on praying because God will answer!**

But we do need to be careful here. We come to God with prayer after prayer – to heal us, to protect us, to provide for us. God does all those things, even when he works through doctors or police officers or our jobs. God doesn’t always do a miracle, but if you pray to be healed and a doctor performs surgery and prescribes medicines and you get better, God did answer your prayer! At the same time, it can be easy for us to think of God as Santa Claus. God has given us modern day Christians so much more than anyone ever had before. We can’t even comprehend all his gifts. And like rich kids all over the world, we can get an entitlement attitude. We can start to think of God’s gifts as something he owes us. When God doesn’t give us what we pray for, we might even grumble that he’s not listening.

In the parable Jesus told, the widow was asking for justice. In that time and place, widows were helpless. They had very limited rights. They had almost no ability to support themselves. The vast majority of them were one step away from living in the street. If the judge didn’t give her justice, she might starve. And nobody else was going to help her. Her only recourse was to stay on his case.

That’s far different from our “gimme” prayers. Sometimes, we treat God like we think his job is to fill our stockings with expensive toys. But God knows that getting everything we want is bad for us. Because he loves us, he tells us no sometimes, sometimes even when it hurts. But when it comes to real hardship, when it comes to the injustice we all have to suffer because we live in a world that’s corrupted by sin, when it comes to real pain and sorrow and hurt, Jesus tells us that God will give us justice – which in a sinful world means help and relief from all that torments us – and he will do that quickly.

Do you ever have trouble believing that? Most of us do, at one time or another. Why is that? Sometimes, it's because God's definition of "quickly" doesn't match ours. You may pray for years for relief from some deep seated sorrow or hurt. You may struggle with grief that never seems to come to an end. To us, it might seem like "quickly" is the last word we'd use to describe the coming of God's solution. But that's because we're measuring his response by the standard of life here. In this world, a year is a long time to wait. But God measures by the standard of eternity. To truly grasp Jesus' point here, we need to recognize that we too, can measure by the standard of eternity. God has promised us everlasting life. Compared to the endless centuries yet to come, even years of grief here – in fact, even grief that lasts for the rest of our lives in this world – is nothing.

But we still can't see eternity. We have to trust God's promise and be sure of what we can't see. For you and me by ourselves, that will always be impossible because we're sinners. Our sinful hearts simply cannot put aside what we see here and have absolute confidence in what God says is coming. Our sinful minds keep saying, "But, but, but ..." Our sinful hearts keep agonizing about how long and how hard this life feels. And even after God gives us faith in Jesus, the old unbeliever is still there and he never stops tearing down our faith.

What will we do? Our sinful heart introduces and reintroduces an agony of doubt into our lives every single day – doubt about God and his word and his gift of prayer. How can we ever be free? Christ has set us free. He died and he paid for our sinful hearts. He died and paid for the weakness and doubt in our prayer life. Before he did all that, he lived in our place. He was totally faithful in prayer and never doubted that God heard him. He did that for us. God now sees us as if we were always perfect in our trust because Jesus was and because Jesus died and washed away all our guilt. Because Jesus rose, God declares that we are free from sin. And every time we hear about Jesus, God injects the Holy Spirit into our hearts. He renews our trust. God works through the gospel and conquers our weakness and our fear. In fact, God even says that he uses our wrestling and our hardship to purify our faith. He uses them to teach us to let go of this life and trust in the life to come – and to pray for God's deliverance.

And he promises that he will hear and answer every one of our prayers. That promise has God's power built into it. Keep hearing God's promises! Keep coming back to the cross and the empty tomb! There God renews his promise that one day you will be free from all suffering and sorrow here. And keep on praying. Pray for years if that's what you need to do. Pray even when it feels like God isn't listening. Pray because you know that God hears you – that's what he promised. Pray because you know that God loves you – that's what he proved when his Son died and rose for you. Pray and trust that he will answer you. Amen.