

PRAY FOR JUSTICE

Luke 18:1-8

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

October 16, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 18, verses 1 through 8. In this gospel lesson, Jesus invites us to pray persistently. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 18, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ 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?"

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear Christians, your gracious heavenly Father invites you to pray. And he promises to hear you. He does this because he loves us, and he wants to give us good things.

Too often, especially regarding prayer, we think of God as being reluctant or withholding. We sometimes think that we really need to pray hard to get God's attention, or that we need to get a lot of other people praying too in order to reach a certain prayer quota, which is unknown to us, but which God requires in order to answer a prayer. These ideas are all wrong. God is not like that. He invites us to pray persistently, but not because he is withholding. He invites us to pray persistently, because he loves us. It's more like this: if you pray for something, and God does not answer in the way you think he should, keep praying for it as long as you think your request is good. God welcomes you to be persistent. He is not annoyed by your persistence.

He is our gracious heavenly Father, and he invites us to come to him as beloved children come to their dear father. Consider the Lord's Prayer. That's the primary biblical text on prayer. Jesus' disciples asked him to teach them how to pray. And how did Jesus teach them to address God? Did he teach them to say, "Dear God, I know you have billions of other people to watch over, so I don't know if you can hear me, and I don't know if you even care about little me, but if you do, please listen to my request"? Is that how Jesus taught his disciples to pray? Of course not! Jesus taught them to address God as "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2). Those two words are absolutely earth-shattering when it comes to prayer. "Our Father."

In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther explains this so beautifully. And I think this sentence is one of the true gems of his catechism. He says, "God thereby tenderly encourages us to believe that He is truly our Father and that we are truly His children, so that we may boldly and confidently come to Him in prayer, even as beloved children come to their dear father."

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Imagine a perfectly loving and attentive father. This is the kind of father that every earthly father should aspire to be. We fail, of course. And so we should confess our failings to God and to our children. And, tragically, some children receive little or no good from their fathers. If that's you, know that your Father in heaven is different. So imagine a perfectly loving and attentive father. And imagine a little girl asking for an orange; or climbing up on his lap, saying, "Read this book to me;" or falling down on the sidewalk, scraping her knee, and crying in pain. How does he respond to her? He doesn't always give her exactly what she wants. He may give her an orange, or he might say, "Supper will be ready in ten minutes." He may read a story, or he might say, "Let's pick up your toys first." But he will quickly pick up the little girl and dress her knee. Whatever he does, and however he answers her requests, is out of pure love. This is how we should think of God in prayer, because Jesus teaches us to address him as "Our Father."

And so we should pray persistently and not lose heart, not because God is distant from us and needs a lot of persuading, but we should be persistent and not lose heart because God is near to us, and he is attentive to his children. He invites us to be persistent.

This is kind of a strange parable. There are a few things that are just different from the rest of Jesus' parables. First of all, we get the meaning right away. Sometimes, Jesus never tells us the meaning to his parables. He just tells the story and then he forces us to chew on it for a while. Other times, when Jesus does give us the meaning, he saves it for the end. But here we get the meaning right away. "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (18:1).

And when it says that we should always pray, that doesn't mean we have to pray nonstop, twenty-four hours a day, like you're praying while driving your car, brushing your teeth, eating supper, doing your homework, and talking with your family. Some of that is sort of doable, but most of it is impossible. Rather, it means that we should pray often and regularly. Prayer should be our first response to any injustice we see, either in our lives or in the lives of the people around us. But I am afraid we more often use prayer as a last resort. We go to it when everything else fails. Instead, our first thought might be, "What am I going to do about this?" Or if it seems like an injustice out of our control, we might think, "The government really needs to do something about this."

Our first thought often reveals some kind of idolatry. What I mean by that, is that our first thought shows us who we really trust in. And that reveals who our god really is. So if our first thought is, "What am I going to do about this?" that reveals that we trust in ourselves more than anything else. Or if our first thought is, "The government should do something about this," that reveals that government is our god. Instead, our first response should be prayer. "God, save us!" "Lord, have mercy!" There is, of course, a place for us doing something or for the government to try to solve something, but prayer should be our first response. And we should expect prayer to be the most effective thing we do, because we are calling upon the all-powerful God of the universe, who also loves us personally and perfectly. And then God may use our actions, or our neighbor's actions, or even government to answer our prayer. But this is what it means to always pray: every time we see injustice, every time we see something wrong, we pray. And every time we see something good, we thank God. That's the point of the parable, and we get the meaning right away. We should always pray and not lose heart.

The other thing that's kind of strange about this parable is that Jesus compares God to an unrighteous judge. That's kind of weird. In other parables, God is compared to a positive

character, like a good king, a good master, a good father, a good farmer, etc. But here Jesus compares our Father in heaven to an unrighteous judge. But here's the thing: it's not a comparison of similarity, so much as it is a comparison of contrast. There are some similarities between the unrighteous judge and God, and those are interesting to notice, but ultimately, our heavenly Father is not like the unrighteous judge. Jesus says, **"Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily"** (18:7-8). God is different than the unrighteous judge. If even an unrighteous judge eventually gives justice, how much quicker does your perfectly attentive and loving heavenly Father give justice to his dear children. **"He will give justice to them speedily."**

Let's look a little closer at this widow and the unrighteous judge. The judge **"neither feared God nor respected man"** (18:2). This is why Jesus later calls him **"unrighteous"** (18:6). And to say that he is unrighteous means that he is unjust. In English we have two different words, "just" and "right," or "justice" and "righteousness." But Greek only has one word for this concept that we divide into two. To be unrighteous means that this judge was not just. He wasn't necessarily anti-justice, as if he thought justice is a bad thing, but it's more like he just doesn't care about justice. We see this when Jesus says he **"neither feared God nor respected man."** He didn't care what God says about something, and he wasn't worried about answering to God on the judgment day. Nor did he care what other people thought or what happened to other people. These are, of course, terrible attributes in a judge. He is a judge who doesn't care about anyone but himself.

But here's this widow who keeps coming to him, crying out for justice against her adversary. Eventually, the unjust judge gives in, not because he cares about her case, but because he cares about himself. She's bothering him. He's getting annoyed. But there's more to it than mere annoyance. He says, **"I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming"** (18:5). Another way to translate that would be, **"I will give her justice, so that she will not, by continually coming, give me a black eye."** Now what does that mean? It doesn't mean that he's afraid she's going to come up and sock him in the face. He's afraid she's going to injure his reputation. That's the thing about having a black eye: it's on your face, where everyone can see it. If you get into a fight and walk away with a bruised shoulder, so what? No one can see it. It might hurt the same as a black eye, but no one sees it. But a black eye is a mark of shame. So the judge isn't concerned about this woman striking him and giving him a literal black eye. He's concerned that her continual coming will leave a mark of shame on his reputation. He doesn't want to be known as the judge who does not give justice.

So the unjust judge finally relents and gives the widow justice. And we should see God's hand behind this. It's one thing if a just person acts justly. But when an unjust person acts justly, we should especially see God's hand behind that, because he has done something to compel an unjust person to do what is right. In the case of the unjust judge, it's the institution of government. God instituted government for this very reason: to serve justice in this world. And God has instituted it in such a way that even unjust rulers are compelled to do justice, because, if they don't, their reputations will suffer a black eye. So God invites us to pray persistently, because, if even an unjust judge eventually gives justice, how much quicker will God give justice to his elect children.

Now, if you've been listening carefully so far, you might have an objection or a doubt in your mind. There might be something that makes you think, *This doesn't quite add up*. And it's probably this: *If God has promised to give justice speedily, why is there still so much injustice in*

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the world? And “injustice,” broadly speaking, is anything that’s not right. Anything that is not the way God designed it to be is not right. Another way to say that is that it’s not *just*. That’s really what injustice is. It’s anything contrary to God’s design for the world.

Now, we notice those injustices that happen to us more than those injustices that happen to someone else. When someone cheats us or hurts us, or when we get sick for no apparent reason, that’s when we feel injustice. The justice alarm goes off in our consciences, and we say, “Hey! That’s not right!” Now this isn’t really a bad thing. This is actually a good function of our consciences to show us when injustice has occurred to us. And in those times, we should also awaken to see those same injustices done to other people. But our sinful natures are so curved in on ourselves, that we often fail to recognize the injustice that is done to other people. And we especially fail to realize when we are the source of that injustice. And we often are the cause of injustice toward those around us.

So the last statement of Jesus, which kind of seems disconnected from the rest of the passage, is really the bow that ties whole thing together: **“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”** (18:8). Jesus is talking about his Second Coming, when he comes to raise the dead, bring his believing children into the new creation, and cast the devil and unbelievers into hell. Until that time, God is patient with us. For him to come and put a final end to all injustice, would mean that the time for repentance would be over, and God does not desire for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). At some point, that will happen. But until that time, God is working. God’s greatest act of justice actually came very shortly after Jesus told this parable, because Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross. There, God laid all the sin of humanity on Jesus, and he justly condemned him there. Justice was done speedily. Your sin was atoned for there. All the injustice you have inflicted was judged there. And so God gives justice to us in the most merciful way. He is now faithful and just to forgive us, because those sins were paid for (1 John 1:9; 2:2). And Jesus himself received justice when he was raised from the dead. Another way to say that is that he was vindicated. To be vindicated simply means to receive justice.

So we should pray for justice. We should pray for justice in our lives. We should pray for justice in the world. And, most of all, what that means is that we should pray for forgiveness. Because it is just for God to declare us righteous. And we should pray for the justice, or vindication, that will come on the last day when Jesus raises us from the dead. That will be the ultimate vindication. That will finally be the moment when everything is set right. The new creation will be exactly how God intends it to be. It will have no sin, no death, no sickness, no fighting, and no poverty. In other words, it will be just, and there will be no injustice. This, really, is what Jesus teaches us to pray for in this passage. And so he says, **“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”** That is, will he find his children still worshipping the Triune God? Will we still be confessing our sins, confessing the faith, and trusting his forgiveness? Will we still be praying for the justice of the new creation to come upon us?

To us, this might seem slow, because this world is all we know. And the only thing we know about time is what we experience in this world. But God is working speedily to bring justice to us. And he knows that we are impatient. So he invites us to be persistent. He gives us permission to annoy him with our constant pleas for justice. And we should not lose heart, because he will answer. Our proof is that he already gave his Son into death for us, and he raised him from the dead. In the same way, he will vindicate his children by raising us from the dead. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.