

Luke 18:1-8

PRAY ...

Legal dramas are, it seems, a very popular form of storytelling. They must be, think about how many TV shows, movies, and books, are made around this form of entertainment genre. And when I think about the movies and TV shows we watch on our streaming services nowadays, and the books I like to read by authors like John Grisham, I realise that the most popular of these stories are those in which the underdog, with great persistence and often with someone who has skill and influence helping them, comes out in triumph to either prove their innocence or to be victorious over the company or government who aren't treating them fairly. Think of movies like *Erin Brockovich* (2000), in which Erin for many years fought for compensation against a power company for the pollution and sickness they caused in her town. And, of course, we can't go past our own Aussie classic, *The Castle* (1997), which gave us all those classic lines as Daryl Kerrigan and family took the government's attempt to compulsorily acquire their home, their castle, all the way up to the Supreme Court. Perhaps we like those stories because not only can they be entertaining, but because in the end they assure us that all people are treated equally in the eyes of the Law (in the stories, at least).

Maybe the people of Jesus' time also liked a good legal yarn, and that's why He used one here as the basis for a teaching on prayer. This parable involves a widow, who is merely seeking, 'fair treatment', coming to a judge. As a judge He is hard hearted, not caring about anyone but Himself. He doesn't fear God or care about people, we are told, so He certainly doesn't obey the Jewish Laws about caring for widows. He only listens to the widow in the end because her persistence wears Him down and He selfishly just wants peace and quiet.

As a parable it is different from many others. It doesn't start like many parables with Jesus saying, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is like ...', and we quickly see why. Also, in many parables we like to identify which of the characters represents God, but there is no way we want to see this judge as being like God in how our prayers are listened to. On this occasion, instead of giving us a picture of who God is and how He

relates to us, Jesus gives us a contrast. What seems to be a confusing parable is better understood when we look at how it is introduced, ‘Jesus told his disciples a story about how they should keep on praying and never give up’ (v. 1). It is a story about being persistent in prayer, and a reminder that if this hard-hearted judge finally listened to this lady because of her persistence, how much more then will God, who loves us so much He sent His Son to die for us. The message is, quite simply, pray.

In our first look at prayer last week, we looked at the ‘who?’ and the ‘how?’ of prayer. Using the teaching Jesus gives us in and around the Lord’s Prayer we thought about how we pray to our loving Father, with whom communication is important as it is in any relationship. We also thought about how, even though prayer is a very individual thing, there are some approaches and methods to prayer which can help people to be more focused and intentional in their prayer life.

Using the teaching Jesus gives us in this parable, and elsewhere in the Bible, this week is about the ‘what?’ and the ‘why?’ of prayer. The ‘what?’ of prayer is pretty straight forward: what is prayer? Talking to God. Bringing God our praises. Saying sorry. Handing over to God everything we are worried about for ourselves and others. Thanking God for what we have. Having a conversation with the One who loves us so much, praising Him, thanking Him, confessing to Him, asking Him. There is a lot to it, but on a surface that’s what prayer is.

But what about the ‘why?’ of prayer, how does that look. Why do we pray? It is about having a close and intimate relationship with God and, as in all relationships, communication is important in this. But if God is all knowing, all powerful, all loving, why do we have to bring our needs and the needs of others to Him? If we don’t believe that God is like the judge in Jesus’ parable, needing to be persistently asked in order to finally act, why does Jesus introduce this parable by telling us to keep on praying and never give up?

Last week we looked at Martin Luther’s introduction to the Lord’s Prayer from his *Small Catechism* when we were thinking about who we pray to, and again now this great teaching book helps us to understand why we pray, and pray continually. In response to some of the things Jesus tells us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, Luther writes; ‘God’s name is already holy’. ‘God comes to rule as king even if we don’t ask for this to happen’. ‘God does the kind and good things he wants for people even if we don’t ask for this to

happen'. 'God gives daily bread to all people, whether they are good or bad, even if we don't ask for this to happen'. A pattern there? God already knows, and is doing, what we ask because He is God and He loves all people. So, again, why does Jesus tell us to keep on praying for all these things? The way Luther puts this for us is really good. But in this prayer we are asking: 'Father, help us to keep your name holy'. 'Father, come and rule over us'. 'Father, do these kind and good things for us too'. 'Father, help us to see our daily bread as your gift, and to be thankful for it'.

What is happening in prayer? We are not changing God, or telling Him something He doesn't already know. It's not about us changing God, but about us opening ourselves up to being changed by Him. Being persistent in prayer is about us moving from treating God like the genie in the bottle who gives us three wishes to fulfill our desires, and instead seeking His will and His glory above all else. It's about us seeing everything we have as coming from God and being thankful for it. It's about us not just praying for God's kingdom to come, but accepting that with His guidance and strength we are part of making this earth His kingdom. Seeing ourselves as being a part of how God makes good and kind things happen in the world. Prayer is not about magic; it is about spiritual surrender.

It's often said that God answers all prayer, but that His answer might be 'Yes', 'No', or 'Wait'. And that is true, but there is a more to it as well. There are other answers we might receive to our prayers. When we pray, God's answer might be: 'Accept what has happened and lean on my strength and love; let go and let me help you through this.' He might say, 'That injustice you are upset about, that need of someone you feel is being ignored, you now act for me to correct that using the spiritual, emotional, material and physical gifts I have given you'. His answer might be, 'Allow me to open your eyes to see the ways you can play a role in my plan to bring others to know me, to make this earth my kingdom, to help everyone to treat each other with my love'. In responding to our prayer, God might be saying, 'Trust that even when things don't turn out the way you want, I am still there, caring for you'.

Why do we pray? To have a relationship with God, a relationship which is based on open communication. But going into that a bit more, a big part of prayer isn't about us changing God, but about opening ourselves up to God changing us. With the persistence in prayer that Jesus teaches us about here we open ourselves up to that slow and gradual change that we as people often have to go through. You may

well have experienced it: the amount of prayer it takes to forgive and move on from a hurt someone has caused you. The prayer needed to accept and live through the death of someone close to you. The prayer you're maybe still making to accept and deal with a situation in your life which isn't as you want it to be. Jesus says, 'Don't give up. Keep praying and allow God to work in you'.

And in your prayer, be prepared to be open to, and be a part of, the answer God gives to you. As an example: In a relationship of any level which isn't going how we want it to be, it's easy to pray for God to change the mind and attitude of that person, 'help them to be as open and compromising as me, and to see that I am right!' As people we've been created with this thing called 'free will', so God's not going to just magically change their mind. Instead, we can pray in an open, honest, and humble way, asking God to help us to see role we have played in this breakdown, to consider what we might change to bring healing, to ask forgiveness for any wrong we may have done, and then pray to be able to see and accept whether forgiveness, healing and restoration will happen here, or if it will be about forgiveness, healing and moving on. We pray so that we open ourselves up before God, and to His will and His love working in and through us.

Pray .. Persistently. Humbly. Confidently. Openly. Faithfully. In trust. With acceptance. Pray knowing God's power to do whatever He wills, and that you have the faith, hope and trust to allow Him to do His will in and through you. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Think about the things you pray for regularly. If you feel that God hasn't/isn't answering your prayers, is He answering them in ways that you are not open to seeing? Keep praying, and also pray for wisdom, openness and insight to see how God is answering your prayers.
- Think about the things you wish to pray for. Before you pray, think about how you will pray for a particular person/situation/event. Are you planning to pray for your will to be done, or for God's will? Are you going to ask God to help you to accept His answer and to allow His will to be done in and through you?
- If you can, go through the teaching on the Lord's Prayer in Luther's *Small Catechism* - you can find an online copy of it here if you need one: <https://catechism.cph.org/en/lords-prayer.html> . As you go through these teachings, ask God to open you up to a way of praying which is persistent, humble, confident, trusting, and open to His will being done in and through you.

Pray: Thank God for the privilege of coming to Him in prayer. Ask that as we bring our praise, thanks, confession and thanks to Him, He helps us to open to seeing His answers to our prayers and to being servants in His kingdom.

Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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