

SAY A PRAYER FOR ME
Luke 18:1-8

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A chaplain in a mental institution was walking down the hallway. A man was staggering down the hall with glazed eyes mumbling, “Betty, Betty, Betty.”

“What the trouble?” the chaplain asked.

“I asked Betty to marry me, and she turned me down.”

The chaplain muttered some words of comfort and proceeded down the hallway. He was amazed to discover another young man stumbling up the hallway chanting, “Betty, Betty, Betty.”

He had to ask, “My son, what happened to you?”

“I married Betty,” he replied.

Sometimes the thing in life that is worse than NOT getting what we have prayed for is to GET what we have prayed for.

Or perhaps you’ve heard the story about the young girl who said, “Lord, I’m not going to pray for myself today. I’m only going to pray for others.” But at the end of her prayer she added, “And give my mother a rich, handsome son-in-law.”

The older I get, the more I am convinced of the power of persistent prayer. I can lay before you case after case of those in our own church family who have been prayed for and we have seen the results of those prayers. I can’t exactly explain it – it’s certainly a mystery as to how prayer works and when it works and sometimes it’s working when we think it’s not – but, have no doubt about it, the longer you live and the wiser you get, the more you’ll believe in the power of prayer.

Let’s look at Luke 18:1-8.

I. Prayer is a sacred duty

Look at verse 1. Jesus says we *ought* to pray. “Ought” implies a moral obligation, a sacred duty. We are often told that prayer is a privilege – and it certainly is. But it’s more than that. **It’s a duty as well. And this duty is placed upon me and it’s placed upon you by none other than our crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. (Paul W. Powell, *The Complete Disciple*)**

Jesus tells us that we ought to pray because He, Himself, realizes fully what prayer can do for us. To be able to approach the throne of God in all of His power and majesty is an amazing opportunity to change the world around us. It's an amazing opportunity to change ourselves. Karl Barth said, "To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world."

John Quest said, "It is remarkable to think that God has given us partnership with Him in directing the course of human events. It is extraordinary to realize that our prayer can change events and circumstances in the world around us. But what is just as remarkable is that when we pray, "we" change. More often than not, we become the answer to our own prayers as we open up ourselves to God in prayer. ("Only A Prayer Away," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, No. 15)

Prayer causes us to live within the presence of God; that is, to find joy in His divine company, making His presence in our prayer a part of our daily life. Having Him close by our side at moments of temptation, moments of distress, moments of rejoicing, and moments of disappointment. (Brother Lawrence, "The Practice of the Presence of God," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 13)

The Apostle Paul endured many hardships as a missionary. His life was often threatened, and he faced constant danger as he preached the gospel of Christ. But he wrote to thank his Christian friends by saying, "You have helped us through your prayers" (2 Corinthians 1:11). That's interesting. Prayer is a way to help people. In fact, it might be the most effective way to help people. It may be much better for you to pray for your child than for you to do many other things you could do for him. Is it any wonder, then, that Paul urged us to pray for everyone? (1 Timothy 2:1)

It isn't any wonder that when Saul, the king, came to Samuel, the prophet, to beg him not to quit praying for Israel that Samuel answered, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (1 Samuel 12:23)... [P]rayer was not only a privilege, but also a divine obligation. We cannot escape the fact that we "ought always to pray." (Paul Powell, *The Complete Disciple*)

Sometimes to those who are entangled in the predicaments of life, to those who are enduring hardship and suffering, we say – almost with a tone of apology – "I'll pray for you, that's all I know to do." Prayer for a friend is no small gift. To bid God's attention to their hurt and need is perhaps the best thing you can possibly do. The reason that we feel as if we have done nothing when we simply state, "I'll be praying for you," is that we use the phrase so often that we really fail to act upon our promise.

I make a lot of hospital visits, and I can remember specifically making a visit several years ago to someone. Other church folk had been in to visit the patient, and the chaplain had been in, so I figured that they had been prayed over all day long. I don't know – I just wasn't in a mood to pray on that particular visit. And so I just said, "Well, it's good to see you. I'm glad you're doing better." And I turned to walk out of the room. To which the member of First Baptist Church said, with complete surprise and disappointment in her voice, "You mean, pastor, you're not even going to pray for me?"

Now, the shame was on me and not on her. And I said, “Of course I’ll pray for you.” And I proceeded to do so. She would not let me go without a blessing. Without a prayer. Without a petition before the throne of the Almighty.

Don’t ever tell someone you’ll be lifting their need before the Lord of lords and King of kings unless you intend to do it. If you really mean, “I’ll be thinking about you,” or “Good luck,” don’t say “I’ll be praying for you.” They are two different things. You can wish someone “good luck” – whatever that means – and not promise them that you will take the time to go to the Lord on his or her behalf. If you say you’re going to pray for someone, write it down. Remember it. And pray.

Those who attend Wednesday evening services receive a printed list of those in our church family who need our prayers. Some who are serving overseas. Others who have experienced a death in their family. Sometimes we share answered prayers and praise. We pray for those who are sick and in the hospital. And we hardly have a Wednesday on which we are unable to report an answered prayer, a change we’ve seen.

Perhaps some of you are looking for a ministry, an opportunity to make a difference, should seize this opportunity to really make a difference in the lives of your brothers and sisters in Christ by praying for them. Perhaps pick out a staff member of this church – a different one each week – and pray for him. Pray for her. Pray for your Sunday School teacher to have wisdom. Pray for your children. Pray for your grandchildren. Pray. Pray. Pray.

As you know, I do a lot of funerals. And I can tell you there have many times when sharing about a grandmother or grandfather who has died that a grandchild will say, “I can tell you this: I could always count on her to pray for me. I heard her praying for me, and I knew that she would carry my name before God.”

Now, I’m not saying you’ll always get the answer you want to your prayers. And I’m not saying you’ll always get the answer you want at the time that you want that answer. But I am telling you that prayer is powerful.

Frederick Buechner says, “When you call upon God, He will come. And even if he does not bring the answer you want, he will bring you Himself. And maybe, at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for.” (“Prayer,” *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker’s ABC*, p. 87)

Prayer changes you. It may change the outcome of the circumstances, but it certainly draws you closer to God. The very act of prayer acknowledges your need for Him.

Do you believe in the power of prayer?

A tavern was being built in a town that was previously dry. A group of Christians concerned about the temptation that tavern would be to those in danger of being consumed by a passion for alcohol began an all-night prayer meeting asking God to intervene. Lightning struck the tavern, and it

burned to the ground. The owner of the tavern filed a lawsuit against the Christians, claiming they were responsible for his loss. In response, the Christians hired a lawyer and denied any responsibility. The judge comments, “No matter how the case comes out, one thing is clear. It is the tavern owner who believes in the power of prayer – not the Christians.

When we were expecting our first child, Ryan, we received many notes of congratulations, but the one that meant the most was from my brother Bryan. He simply sent a note that said, “I am praying for your baby already.” Wow! How neat. Ryan is not even here yet, she doesn’t have a name. So small. But someone was already going to God on her behalf.

Prayer is a marvelous gift to give the families of our church.

I don’t ever do a wedding that I don’t call upon the congregation to pray for the bride and the groom, because never again in their marriage will that many people be focused upon them in prayer as on that wedding day.

When the late Dr. Russell Dilday was president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he received a lot of letters from young GAs (a missions organization for girls in grades 1-6). Although grateful for the correspondence, Dr. Dilday humorously realized that some were written out of a sense of obligation. They were called upon to do so by their workbook. This was best represented by the little Texan who wrote, “I am writing to you because it is a step in my GA book. I am supposed to pray for you – I will.”

II. Prayer is a constant need.

Jesus says we ought always to pray. Notice the word “always.” It means not only “at all times,” but “in every circumstance of life.” Nothing in your life ...[should] be outside the circle of prayer. We ought to pray about every circumstance and every need in our lives.

Oh certainly, we feel like we ought to pray at times when someone in our family is gravely ill or we have a son or daughter serving in the military overseas. Or when we’re having difficulty in our family. If we have some great fear in our life. If we’re waiting for some news. But Jesus is saying that if we only understood life correctly, we would know that we ought “always” to pray. Even at those times when we do not feel the need to pray, we still need to pray. Prayer is not based upon whether or not we feel like it. We must pray at all times. (Paul Powell, *The Complete Disciple*)

I was sharing the gospel with a little girl and I asked her, “If we ran to Jesus on any given day during His earthly ministry, what might we find Jesus doing?” Her number one answer was, “We might find Jesus praying.” It was a good answer. Jesus often withdrew to pray.

It was a regular habit of Jesus. It was His resort in every hardship. When pressed hard, Jesus prayed. And when hungry for fellowship with the Father, Jesus prayed. He chose His disciples and received His messages on His knees. If tempted, He prayed. If criticized, He prayed. If fatigued or wearied in spirit, He prayed. There was no emergency, no difficulty, no necessity, no temptation that would not yield to prayer in the life of Jesus.

D. L. Moody said if we have so much business to attend to that we have no time to pray, we can be certain that we have more business on hand than God ever intended for us to have. (*Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 1)

God's word is demanding. A life of discipleship is demanding. God will not be brushed aside like an unwanted visitor for whom we just barely crack open the door and try to dismiss as quickly as possible.

We ought always to pray.

III. Prayer is a persistent practice.

Notice how the story unfolds. There is a widow in a city who goes to visit a judge. The judge didn't fear God – didn't even have kind respect for humanity. He didn't want to do anything for the woman. Didn't want to hear her case. In fact, he said, "I don't fear God and I don't respect humanity, but this lady is bothering me. She's a pest. I'm going to give her legal protection because she's just wearing me out by continually coming to me."

Now, if an unjust judge will hear the petition of a woman because of her persistence, how much more will God take care of those who are His?

Luke 11:1

And it came about that while He was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples to pray."

He then gives them a prayer that sounds much like the Lord's Prayer – cousin to the familiar rendition in the gospel of Matthew. But then he says in verse 5, "Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he shall answer and say, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. And I say to you, ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you."

According to Luke 18 and Luke 11, the most important thing about prayer is to keep at it. You go to your friend at night, tell him that you have some unexpected company and you need something to feed your company. He tells you, in not so many words, to drop dead. But you go on knocking until he finally gives you what you want so he can go back to bed again.

God's like that in some ways, Jesus says. God might respond to our persistence.

C. H. Spurgeon once said, "Prayer pulls the rope down below and the great bell rings above in the ears of God. Some scarcely stir the bell, for they pray so languidly; others only give

an occasional jerk at the rope. But he who communicates with heaven is the man who grasps the rope boldly and pulls continuously with all his might.”

Edward Bennett Williams is one of those distinguished lawyers who comes from one of those blue blood families who end up heading up many foundations and trusts. He and some other friends were in charge of a very prestigious foundation which had funds to give to religious causes. Edward Bennett Williams says he has seen the widow in this story.

One day, Mother Teresa of Calcutta came to the foundation seeking money for a hospital she was building for people with AIDS. Edward Bennett Williams was not interested at that time in helping people with AIDS. But Mother Teresa explained to them her project and asked for a gift. They said no. Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.” She folded her hands and began praying. After her prayer she made her presentation again. Asked for more money. They said no. She said, “Let us pray,” and bowed her head and began to pray again. She made her presentation and asked for even more money. They said no. She said, “Let us pray,” and Edward Bennett Williams said, “Okay, okay, okay. Give me the check book.” (Rick Brand, “Faith on Earth?” *Preaching Today*, February 2003). He knew that Mother Teresa was like the widow of Luke 18.

IV. Prayer is a practical necessity.

Jesus says always to pray and – notice the next words – “not to faint” (verse 1). That means don’t grow weary. Don’t fall out. Don’t lose heart.

All around there are people who have been overcome by the pressures of life. Jesus suggests an alternative to defeat and depression. It is prayer – persistent prayer – that keeps us from having to faint.

It is good to believe in yourself, to have self-confidence. But sometime in your life you’re going to realize that you don’t have adequate resources. You can’t make it all happen. You need the help of others, and you need the help of God through others. Prayer is the link that connects us with the heavenly Father who can do all things.

But notice verse 8. It’s kind of inquisitive. Kind of troublesome.

I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?

Maybe there are not enough persistent widows here. Will He find faith on the earth? The question is not whether God has the power to answer your prayer. He will answer it – not always like you would like, but in a way that is best for you. But the question is do you have enough faith to offer up persistent prayers? The burden of proof is not upon God. It’s upon us. God has been answering prayers since the beginning of time. The issue of God answering prayer is longer up for debate. The real question is not God’s faithfulness or power, but our faith. The question is not “Does God have the power to answer?” but “Do you have the faith to ask?” And it’s not His willingness but our willingness upon which the equation hangs.

Let me ask you some questions this morning as we close.

- Has your prayer been persistent?
- Has it been faithful?
- Has it brought you closer to God?
- Are you praying for the members of your family?
- Could you give me a list of persons you prayed for this week?
- Are you praying for those who need to know Christ? There is no more important prayer than that.
- Are you praying for strength for you and for your family members and for those around you?
- If someone asks you to pray for them, do you take seriously that spiritual covenant you made with them to mention their name to the Lord?

Prayer. The longer I live, the more I'm certain that it really does make a difference.

So, next time you pray say a little prayer for me.