

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 5, 2018**

**FORWARD IN PRAYER:
LEARNING FROM JESUS**

Luke 18:1-8

You've probably heard about the guy who was late for a business meeting and couldn't find a parking space. So, in desperation he began to pray. He looked up toward heaven and said: "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life, and not only that, I'll give up drinking."

Miraculously, a parking space appeared. He looked up toward heaven again and said: "Never mind, Lord, I found one."

Bono, the renowned U2 theologian, has said: "God doesn't mind if we bang on the door of heaven sometimes, asking Him to listen to what we have to say." Bono is right. Unlike the guy in search of a parking space, however, we need to take prayer seriously. We need to take *God* seriously.

Two Sundays ago we began to talk about going forward in our lives as followers of the Lord Jesus by cultivating our relationship with God through prayer. If you missed it, or in case you've forgotten, we conducted a very brief survey of prayer and people who prayed in the Bible. Among other Scriptures, we looked at Philippians 4:6 where Paul urges us not to be anxious about anything, but to pray about everything. "In *everything*," he says, "by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (emphasis added).

Prayer, for the Christian, is not to be our last resort – what you do when you've tried everything else you can think of and you're at your wit's end. Instead of our last resort, we should make prayer our first resort. It should be the first thing you think to do. It should be your natural response in every circumstance and situation you encounter. As Charles Spurgeon pointed out in his devotional commentary on Leviticus 6:13, we must keep the altar of private, personal prayer burning at all times. We must not let the fire of our connection to God in prayer go out.

If you wonder if your prayers make any difference, take to heart the testimony of David in Psalm 55:22:

Cast your cares on the LORD
and He will sustain you.

Peter echoes this in 1 Peter 5:7, where he says:

Cast all your anxiety on (the Lord)
because He cares for you.

The Lord *cares* for you. And He will *sustain* you. That is one powerful reason to pray.

* * * * *

This morning I want you to look with me at Jesus to see what we can learn about prayer from Him.

PRAAYER IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

I'm struck by the centrality of prayer in the life of Jesus as we meet Him in the Gospels. The Gospel of Mark, for example, has barely begun before it says in 1:35 that "very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house [where He was staying – the house of Peter's mother-in-law] and went off to a solitary place to pray."

The Gospel of Luke emphasizes the prayer life of Jesus at critical moments. He prayed, for example, at His baptism (3:21). Luke 5:16 says that Jesus "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." The key word there is *often*. It was something He did regularly.

In Luke 6:12, it says that Jesus spent a whole night in prayer before choosing the 12 apostles. Have you ever spent a whole night in prayer? An *entire* night? I have never done it. I remember a conference I attended in college at which a famous Christian speaker challenged us to commit to spending a whole night in prayer. He put us on the spot and asked us to raise our hands if we would do it. I felt pressured to show how "spiritual" I was, so I raised my hand, along with hundreds of other students. I don't think it was fair for the speaker to put us on the spot like that. I won't do that to you. Maybe the Lord *does* want you to spend a night in prayer. I don't know. The point is not that you have to do it in order to prove how spiritual you are. The point is to see how important prayer was in the life of Jesus.

Luke 9:18 says that Jesus was praying before He asked the disciples who the crowds thought He was, which led to Peter's confession of Him as "the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:18). He prayed up on the mountain before He was "transfigured" in the presence of Peter, James, and John (Luke 9:28-29). In Luke 10:21, Jesus offered a prayer of thanksgiving to the Father after the return of 72 disciples He had sent out on a short-term mission. In 11:1, we are told that again Jesus was praying, and when He finished, one of His disciples asked Him to teach them all to pray. Because they saw that Jesus was a man of prayer, the disciples wanted Him to teach them how to pray. He prayed at the last supper, where He established the sacrament of communion (22:17, 19). Before His arrest, and prior to Peter's denials, He tells Peter that He has prayed for him, that Peter's faith would not fail (22:31-32). He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane as He agonized over the suffering that awaited Him (22:39-56).

Matthew (14:23) and Mark (6:46) both tell us that Jesus went off by Himself to pray after the miracle of feeding a crowd of 5,000 men (plus women and children), after which He went out to the disciples on the lake, walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21). By the way, I said something a few weeks back about pastors not being able to walk on water. Afterwards, Lloyd Andrew told me that someone had once told him that, really, almost anyone can walk on water ... if it's cold enough(!). True. But, as Lloyd and I both agree, when Jesus walked on water, it wasn't cold enough for anybody else to do it.

We can't overlook the prayer Jesus prayed in John 17 on the night before His crucifixion – praying for God to be glorified in and through Him, for His disciples, and for future followers (like us) who would come to believe in Him through the message of His disciples.

Put it all together and it is obvious that prayer was an integral part of Jesus' life. It was an integral part of His teaching, too.

PRAYER IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells His followers to “pray for those who persecute (Matthew 5:44) [or ‘mistreat’ (Luke 6:28)] you.” In Matthew 6, He teaches them (and us) not to be like hypocrites who pray in public places in order to be seen and heard and applauded by others (6:5-6), or to “babble like pagans” in our praying, thinking that the length of our prayers or the use of certain phrases will increase the chance that God will look favorably on our prayers (6:7-8). He gives us a pattern for prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. We call it “the Lord’s Prayer,” but it is really “the Disciple’s Prayer” – a sample prayer for disciples like us to pray.

Still in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7, Jesus says that we should ask, seek, and knock in prayer (7:7-8), and He gives an illustration to show that if even sinful people like us know how to give good gifts to our children, “how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!” (7:9-11).

Going through the villages and towns of Galilee and seeing the crowds, Jesus was filled with compassion, and told His disciples: “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. *Ask the Lord of the harvest*, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field” (Matthew 9:35-38; cf. Luke 10:2, emphasis added). It is still the same today. There is still a need to pray. And a need to go.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 56:7, that the temple in Jerusalem is to be “a house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). In Luke 20:47, Jesus warns His followers to watch out for religious leaders who “devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers.” Speaking of the tribulations to precede His return, Jesus instructs His disciples to pray that they may escape the trials to come, and for grace and strength to remain faithful (Luke 21:36). In the garden of Gethsemane, He urges the three disciples with Him to pray that they will not fall into temptation (Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46).

Jesus also tells three parables – three stories – about prayer. In teaching His disciples about prayer in Luke 11, Jesus tells the parable of the friend at midnight (11:5-13) – the story of a man who is surprised by the late-night arrival of a guest, and he has no bread in the house to offer his guest. There isn't time to look at this parable in depth today. For now, suffice it to say that the man's persistence pays off when he bangs on the door of his neighbor, who is understandably reluctant to get out of bed and disturb his family in the middle of the night. Like the man who needs his neighbor's help, Jesus wants us to be persistent in our praying, asking God for what we need in any and every situation.

The thing to understand about God is that He is *not* like the neighbor who doesn't want to be bothered. He is *not* reluctant to help us in our time of need. What Jesus gives us in the parable is not a comparison but a contrast. Unlike the neighbor who is reluctant to help, God is *not* reluctant to give us good things in answer to our prayers – though He doesn't always give us what we ask for, and He doesn't always answer our prayers according to our preferred timeline. God is not a cosmic genie who says: "Your wish is my command." Still, as Jesus teaches, He is a good, good Father who delights in our prayers and delights in giving good gifts to His children.

Luke 18 (verses 9-14) has the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector, in which Jesus contrasts the vain, self-righteous prayer of the devoutly religious Pharisee with the humble, penitent prayer of a man who knows himself to be a sinner and who cries out to God for mercy.

Before that, in Luke 18:1-8, is the parable of the persistent widow, or the parable of the unjust judge, depending on which of the two characters in the story you put the spotlight on. Maybe it is better to call it the parable of the persistent widow *and* the unjust judge.

The context of this parable is Jesus' teaching in Luke 17 on what the world will be like in the days leading up to the coming again of the Lord Jesus, which, if you read it, sounds a lot like today. Jesus tells this story in Luke 18 to show His followers (including us) that they (we) "should always pray and not give up" (18:1). The story, as we've noted, has two characters: A widow who has been wronged in some way, and a judge who has jurisdiction in her complaint.

The widow has four things going against her:

1. As a woman, she had little or no standing before the court. Women didn't have many rights in that time and were usually ignored by judges and other government officials.
2. As a widow, she didn't have a husband to plead her cause or support her in her plea for justice. Apparently she had no one to go to bat for her. No friend. No advocate. No attorney to take up her cause. As a woman and a widow, she was doubly disadvantaged.
3. She apparently didn't have the financial resources to, you know, grease the wheels of justice. The judge may have been amenable to a bribe. He probably was. But she didn't have any money with which to bribe him.
4. The fourth thing she had going against her was the judge himself. He didn't give a hoot about justice. He was not a good man. He didn't care about God. He didn't care about people. All he really cared about was himself. So, what does he care about a woman who thinks she has been treated unjustly? He doesn't.

But this woman, despite her disadvantages, doesn't give up. What does she do? She keeps on showing up at the court. Day after day. She keeps on pestering the judge. She keeps on pleading her cause. She wears him down by her persistence. She wears him out. She gets under his skin. Until ... Finally, he relents. Not because he cares about justice. Not because he cares about her or her cause. He just wants to get her out of his hair (if he has any hair, that is). He wants her to leave him alone. So he gives in and gives her justice.

The point of the parable is that since even an uncaring, unjust, unscrupulous judge will sometimes respond to pleas for justice, *how much more* can we expect and trust that the righteous God of the universe will do right for His people who cry out to Him for help.

While the context of the parable is a time of tribulation, of moral decay and ungodliness, the teaching of Jesus here is really timeless in its application. It applies to God's people in all times and places, including ours. Jesus is saying: "Don't stop praying. Don't get discouraged. Don't give up. Keep on keeping on."

As with the earlier parable in Luke 11, Jesus is *not* suggesting that God is like this unjust judge who must be badgered into hearing our prayers, and granting our requests. No! The point is *not* that God is like the judge. The point is that God is *not* like the judge. You don't have to cajole or pester or argue or bribe God into answering your prayers. Unlike this uncaring, self-absorbed judge, God is a loving Father who is always attentive to your cries, always generous in the gifts of His grace, always ready to answer when you call on Him, always wise in His answers, with your eternal good and His glory in view.

If the Lord declines to give us what we ask for, or delays in giving it to us, we must trust that He knows what is best for us and will do what is best. The question is, will we persist in faith when life gets hard? Will we continue to trust Him when His answers don't come *when we want* or *in the way we want*? Sometimes we just have to wait.

When He comes again, will He find us persevering in faith? Will He find us faithful? Faithful to the end? Trusting Him *in* all things, *with* all things, and *for* all things? Will He find us going forward, growing in our relationship with Him through prayer?

It doesn't matter where you are, where you go, or what you are going through. Your Heavenly Father is always just a prayer away. Jesus *knew* it. Jesus *lived* it. Jesus *taught* it. He wants us to know it, too. He wants us to live it. And He wants us to pass it on to our children and our children's children.

Cast all your cares on Him – on the Lord. Why? Because He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Don't let the fire of private, personal prayer ever go out in your life. Kindle the flames daily. Learn from the example and the teaching of Jesus. Go forward in a beautiful relationship of trust in God and dependence on Him in prayer.

What a friend we have in Jesus! It is true. May it be so in us, to the glory of His name. Amen.