

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2017**  
**Jesus on Prayer Luke 18.**

Introduction.

The account of the parable in Luke 18, the parable of the persistent widow is a well-known and much loved story. We are not told many details about the hero of the story. We probably imagine her to be a small elderly lady, perhaps like our grannies, but we are not told her age and she may well have been young. In fact, those details are not germane to the narrative, but the story possibly endears itself to us because we like the prospect of a stuck up judge being bested by a little lady! The story appeals to our sense of justice and fair play.

The narrative is unlike many other parables that Jesus taught. Often we read of the disciples coming to Jesus after the event and asking Him what the parable means. In Luke 8, the parable of the sower is told, and the text tells us that after Jesus had finished teaching, the disciples asked Jesus what the story meant. This is as much for our good as the disciples, because what Jesus taught He did so for a reason, and it is important that we understand the teaching and the reason.

In the middle ages, the parables were often interpreted as if every word of the story had a deep meaning. In the early Church, and since Reformation days, the parables are understood to be mostly teaching one main lesson, and the incidentals are secondary.

The Parable of the Widow is unusual in that Dr. Luke gives us the lesson of the story before recounting it. People explain this in different ways, but the certain thing is this, that we are left in no doubt as to what is being taught. The meaning being stated in priority above the narrative shows that the lesson is deemed very important indeed! We must acknowledge that Luke does not want anyone reading the story to be in any doubt as to what is being presented.

So, what is the lesson of Luke 18 v1? Look up the words in Greek or Latin, and guess what? The real meaning of the words are these – Jesus taught them a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up! It is exactly like the advert that says that it does what it says on the can! To put it another way – Jesus is telling all disciples in all places and all ages, to pray and not give up! Let's try it one more time. We are to pray. We are not to give up praying.

1. Prayer.

This parable tells us to pray and not give up, there I have said it again! I do so because by and large, Christians only pay lip service to prayer, and we often give up praying before we get a response from heaven. It was C.H. Spurgeon commenting on Matthew 7 v 7 forward, on asking, seeking, and knocking, said that the goal of prayer is to gain God's ear. To ask so as to receive, to seek so as to find, and to knock until the way is opened. I confess that I have often given up before receiving, finding, or the door being opened, and be honest, so have you!

Matthew 6 v5 introduces the passage that recounts what we call the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is often said verbatim in Church of Scotland services. I do not do this all that often for this reason. The Lord's Prayer is a model of prayer given to the disciples to teach them how to pray. I know it is a much loved passage by many, and for others it is an integral part of a liturgy they have grown up with, however the fact remains, it is a model of what to pray for when we pray, not an end in itself. To repeat it over and over is not its intended use. This prayer model is precious beyond price, but is so often traded cheaply, when it should be pondered and be a launch pad for a body of prayer. I do understand people's disappointment at these words not being used every week, but if you came to a prayer meeting, then it would often be found that we would pray in this way, not just in these few words.

Matthew 6 v5 starts in this way, 'When you pray,' not 'if you pray.' Throughout Scripture, and in Jesus words, it is taken as a given that Christians will pray. This is not the common practice in much of the West, and indeed in the Church of Scotland. Ask any minister which is the best attended meeting, and it will be a social. Ask which is the worst attended meeting, and it will be the prayer meeting. I say ask the minister, because I have come across elders and office bearers and members over the years who do not even know if their congregation has a prayer meeting, never mind ever attending it!

Jesus expected His believing people to pray, alone, in small groups, together and at church meetings. This was certainly Paul's understanding. He tells Timothy, his best disciple, in 2 Timothy 2, that when the congregation gathers to worship, prayers of all sorts are the first priority. Singing was done, but it did not have the place it has in congregations today. Imagine a service that had one song and five prayers. That would be a shock to us!

## 2. Evidence of the centrality of prayer in the believers life

Jesus prayed. Mark 1 v35 Very early in the morning. Matthew 14 v 19 Jesus lifted His eyes to heaven and blessed the bread before feeding the multitude – He prayed. Luke 11 v1 Jesus was praying and His disciple asked Him to teach them to pray as John had taught his disciples to pray. Note this well. Prayer is not a natural gift some people have. We all need to be taught to pray, and we do this by praying, and doing so with others. Jesus spent the night in prayer before He chose the 12 Disciples who would be closest to Him. Then, don't forget about His prayer in Gethsemane. I wonder today if present day believers do cast themselves wholly on God in the extreme situations of life? I suspect we are more skilled at getting up petitions, writing to our MP's or whatever else we think we can do ourselves, and only turn to prayer as a last resort. Someone has said, I forget who, that we can do things after we have prayed, but we can do nothing before we have prayed.

The Apostles prayed. Acts 1v 14. The 120 were at prayer when the Holy Spirit fell on them at Pentecost. There is a lot said about being Baptised in the Spirit, and it is important, but less is said about being filled again and again on a daily and moment by moment basis with the Holy Spirit. Whatever you may have heard, read or experienced, the testimony over all the ages is that if we desire to be filled more and more, and regularly by the Holy Spirit, then as the old Puritans would have said, 'be much in private prayer, do not neglect the prayer closet.'

This was not only the practice that led up to the Pentecost outpouring, but the practice of the early Church is recorded in Acts 2.42. The whole Church devoted itself to, 'the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and to prayer. Prayers could be sung, but that is not how many of us treat hymns. Try reading the hymns, there are many wonderful hymns in the old books, use them as prayer food!

However, there is more. In Acts 6 v4, when the Church is expanding in numbers, read what the Apostles said – they would give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. It was not that a development of structure was not useful and needed, but prayer and the word was the core, not structures. What do we have in churches today? Lots of structures, but little prayer, and little desire for the word.

History has many examples where revivals and great outpourings of the Holy Spirit began with a handful of people or less, who gave themselves to prayer. Here are a few starters for us to look up if we wish. The New York Prayer Revival of 1859. It spread all over the world. Then there was the Revival in the Islands in the 1940's, two praying sisters, and a small group of elders. The Pentecostal movement also featured prayer in large measure.

The Old Testament is full of prayers. Abraham prayed for Sodom. Genesis 18. What do you make of v 27? We will come to that later. Moses prayed for the people after the Golden Calf incident Exodus 32. What do you make of v32. We will also come to this later!

The prophets prayed, Hannah prayed, Daniel prayed in extreme danger, but Daniel 6 v 10 says that prayer had been his practice. Paul prayed. Indeed, the proof of his sincerity was that he prayed Acts 9 v 11. Our forefathers prayed. John Knox's famous prayer was, 'give me Scotland or I die.' I wonder did he learn that from Moses? Another worthy has commented that the Church advances on its knees, and old Leonard Ravenhill complained that in his era there was, 'more organizing and not enough agonizing.' I think that Ravenhill's words are as relevant to our day as his! Another has said that, 'prayer is the currency of heaven.' I think we should add, it is the currency of heaven only if spent.

I hope that this is enough to begin to persuade us that when Luke tells us that the purpose of the Parable of the Widow is to teach us that we are to pray, that he means it!

### 3. Why is persistent, importunate prayer necessary?

This is disputed by some. They read some of the statements about prayer in the Bible, but do not bring all the passages together. The argument goes like this. We are to pray in faith. If we pray in faith, then we have assurance that our prayer will be heard by God and answered. Therefore to keep on praying for something, rather than praying and then thanking, indicates a lack of faith. However, if this was so, why would there be a parable like Luke 18?

Now I fully agree that there are some prayers that get a speedy answer, indeed there is an Old Testament passage that says that God will answer even before the people pray, so there is a validity in some of the above, but it is far from the whole story. Paul in Ephesians 1 v17 talks of, 'keeping on asking,' and there are a number of passages that speak about praying day and night until.

There are two reasons why prayer must be persistent and importunate. Firstly because of the gravity of the issues we are to pray for, and Secondly, because we are resisted by powerful foes.

1. Firstly, the issues we are to pray for are serious, weighty, and impinge on eternity. That may sound grand and scary, but let me direct you back to the first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer. I wonder do we realise the weightiness of what we are instructed by Jesus to pray for.

'Hallowed be thy Name.' This has to do with God being recognized and acknowledged to be the High and Holy one who inhabits eternity. The Majesty in the heavens, the Holy One, righteous and true, eternal, boundless and infinite. He is a God whose Name we do not take in vain or use as an expletive, but say it with reverence, awe and fear. Until we have begun to regard God as such, and reverence Him as such, we have never really begun to pray the Lord's Prayer. God is not the big man upstairs. He is not a God that a minister can ask for a sunny day for a wedding! – usually said as a joke! If you want a sunny day for a wedding, you pray for it and I will happily say Amen! To regard God in this way is like saying 'puss, puss,' to the lion in a cage, but that is not how we would speak if we came face to face with a lion in the open. Why do we treat the Lion of Judah as if He were a tame lion! He is fearfully wonderful, awesome in praises, doing wonders, with none like Him in heaven or earth. Reverent fear is to hallow God's Name.

Paul says it more clearly in Ephesians 1. We are to live to the praise of God's glory, to live in such a way as we bring credit to God, to honour Him by our living. To hallow God's Name is not a little thing, but a big thing. Not something we do once in our lives, but is to be our mode of living! Gulp!

'Thy Kingdom come.' This is a prayer for the rule of God through Christ, to be manifest in the cosmos, and the world in particular. What it means is this, that all peoples, rulers,

governors, governments, states, banana republics, gun runners, drug barons, diplomats, technocrats, industrialists and whoever else is left will be subject to the rule

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of God whether they know it or not. Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 that prayers have to be offered for kings and governments as a first priority. Tell me this, is this a small thing or a large thing, a one off prayer, or prayer that must continue? Let's put names on some of these. We are to pray for Mr. Putin, for Mr. Trump, for the chap in North Korea, and for all the other dictators and Presidents of the African nations. An easy task, right? Well not for me, I am stretched here, but still do it. It's a project of life, not just a one off! Not only that, we are to pray out of love, not sentiment, or hatred, for these people! Some are harder to like than others.

The third petition is, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' I will not go into this, or I will keep you all day! But consider this. This petition completed the circle. We are to pray for God's will to be done, and what is God's will? For His Name to be hallowed, His kingdom to come and His will to be done, which brings us back to praying for His Name to be Hallowed – it never ends, because His Name is never ending!

2. Secondly. We are confronted by powerful foes, within and without! Scripture speaks of our enemies as the world, the flesh and the devil. These often combine to increase the assault on our souls. The Scripture speaks of temptation to sin arising from our own evil desires, and we all know about that. However it also speaks of falling into temptation – the phrase used by Jesus when speaking to Peter before his denial, also the Scripture speaks of the evil day. We find that in Ephesians 6 v13, 'the day of evil.' This is where the devil, Satan jumps in and cranks up the power of temptation until we are caught in a whirlwind that threatens to blast us away. I hope fewer of us know that one by experience.

Then there is the world. The poets talk of the world being ever present, which I take to mean that the world is in our faces all the time. The world try's to press us into its mold, and this we face continually. When we hear people say, or we justify our actions with words like, 'everyone does it,' or when we think that we have improved as a species so that 'old ways,' are no longer relevant in these days, or that we adopt the values of today's world as advanced and modern, then we are in the worlds mold. I have often pointed out that from the earliest chapters of the Bible we are faced with murder, greed, family conflicts, jealousies, and every sort of immoral practices, sexually, business and whatever. The world's mold is just the same as ever, and the solution is the same as ever, faith in Christ!

We live in a world where two Kingdoms are in conflict. The Kingdom of God is in-breaking, and the kingdom of Satan is being degraded, and we are influenced by both. Prayer will play a major part in which Kingdom has most sway in each of our lives, in the life of our parish, community, nation and the world. Hence we should, 'always pray and not give up.'

4. Why is the Parable framed with a widow as the central character?

To be a widow in the Near Middle East of Jesus day was a most desperate state to be in. The implication is that she is alone, no husband, no family, and on her own

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completely.

The thrust of the Parable is that if a powerless widow woman with no earthly resources, wealth, position or power, can overcome a godless judge, (he neither feared God nor regarded men), then how much better off is the one who comes to a good, kind God who is our father. Is it not certain that the just request will be granted? The hearers of the parable would answer yes to this, but still the phrase exists, not to give up!

I think that if Jesus had used Moses or Abraham or Daniel as an example, we would have excused ourselves from the demands of this passage on the grounds that we are no Abraham's or Moses! I am challenged by the words in James where it says that Elijah was of like nature with ourselves, and he prayed and was heard. I do not feel like an Elijah. However, Elijah who bursts onto the scene in 1 Kings 17, was already a man of prayer when we hear of him. Do you remember the verse in Daniel 6? It says that in the crisis Daniel prayed, and it had been his habit to pray. He had grown in prayer to be able to pray in the crisis. By praying, we learn to pray and grow in faith.

Jesus uses the widow to express the weakness of her situation and abilities, and to show the value of persistent, importunate praying.

However, there is another reason why the widow is spoken of. Prayer is most potent when the one who prays is most weak, and the type of weakness God delights in is the weakness of a child. It is a truism that women pray more than men, not because they are the 'weaker sex,' but because they are not as proud as men who like to regard themselves as masters of their fate, self-made, self-reliant, and all these other 'self' attributes which are actually self-sins! Most men are too proud to pray because they associate it with weakness. Some even use this parable to prove their point – who wants to be as weak as a widow?!

However, it is the type of weakness that matters. It is the weakness of a child before its parent. How does the Lord's Prayer begin? It starts in this way, 'Father in heaven.' It is the coming of a child in need to a God of all sufficiency. It is the relationship or owning our inability and recognizing God's super ability that lies at the entrance to real prayer.

A child has a high view of the parent. Any need, any fear, run to mum and dad, she is loving and will soothe away any pains, he is strong and will stand and drive off any foe or danger. So it is with God. He is the one we come to in humility and trust.

I said that I would say something about that verse in Genesis 18 v27. Abraham says that he is but dust and ashes. This refers to what he was made of, and to what his body would return to. What can dust and ashes do to prevail with God? Is he just being self-depreciatory, I think not! He is coming to God in humility as a child to a parent, not with

any claim of merit, but taking his place as creature before the uncreated, and he is heard.

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Then there is Moses in the Exodus passage. He pleads for Israel and adds that he would rather have his name blotted out of God's book, than see Israel destroyed. Is he threatening God? No, he is so moved by a desire to see God's name hallowed that his case is that if God destroys the Israelites because of their sin, the surrounding nations will misunderstand and regard God as a weak God. Exodus 32 v12. In other words, his prayer was motivated by the petition, 'hallowed be thy Name!'

Weakness, in the form of humility, knowing our poverty of spirit, meekness, not faintness, fear or flabbiness, is the key to prayer. To be strong in prayer, is to know the weakness of the being a child. There seems to be a contradiction here, but there is not. We have said that the Lord's Prayer begins with the words, 'Our Father in heaven.' This is not a curtesy, this is the owning of a relationship with God. He is our Father, we are His children, His kin, His family.

#### Application

- (a) That we should always pray and not give up – but we need to start praying first!
- (b) Prayer is not an ability we have by nature. Everyone has to learn to pray by praying.
- (c) Prayerlessness is a form of pride and indicates self-reliance.
- (d) All the important events in the Bible are awash with prayer. God rules His world by the prayers of His people.
- (e) A consequence of (d) is that the condition of the Church will ebb and flow according to the sincerity of the prayers of believers.
- (f) The congregational prayer meeting should be the most important and best attended meeting.
- (g) All church meetings, house groups. Etc. should have prayer as an integral component.

Finally, Luke 18 v1 says that we should always pray, and not lose heart. This is a matter of obedience. By the way, the word always means, guess what, always.