

## ALWAYS PRAY AND NOT GIVE UP

Luke 18:1-14

Key Verse: 18:1

"Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus was approaching Jerusalem, where he would die for our sins and rise again. Then he would leave this world and turn gospel ministry over to his disciples. They traveled with him toward Jerusalem, but they did not understand what was happening. They had a false hope that Jesus would establish a glorious kingdom on earth. Jesus knew that these false hopes would soon be dashed to pieces; then they would be disoriented. They would also face persecution and trials. In order to prepare them, Jesus imparted truth through a simple story to teach them to always pray and not give up. This is a most fitting study for us as we begin a new year. We may have dreams and expectations for 2013 that will not be fulfilled. We face challenges that are beyond our capability to handle. We have problems that only God can solve. How can we reach the other side of 2013 victoriously? Jesus tells us, "always pray and not give up."

What do you think when you hear the words, "always pray"? To some it sounds like a demand for more work. To others it evokes feelings of guilt, for they think they did not pray enough. Others are burdened by a sense of duty, imagining lists of requests they should recite over and over again, and they feel bored before even beginning. These negative thoughts hinder us from experiencing the joy and power of prayer. As we study verse 1, let's consider what it really means to pray and what it means to "always pray and not give up." In verses 2-8, Jesus teaches us about persistence in prayer and the character of God. In verses 9-14, Jesus teaches us humble repentance in prayer and more about God's character.

First, "always pray and not give up" (1). Verse 1 says, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." Prayer is coming into the presence of God for fellowship. Jesus gives us this privilege through his blood shed on the cross (Heb 9:14). Moreover, Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and testifies with our spirit that we are children of God. He enables us to call God "Abba, Father" (Ro 8:15-16). So our coming to God in prayer is like a royal prince or princess approaching our Father, who is also the King. On the one hand, we are entering the presence of the Almighty Creator, who knows all things, and can do all things. He is the Eternal God, who existed before time and space. He is the Holy God, who is absolutely perfect in his divine attributes. He is the Sovereign Ruler who raises leaders of nations and humbles them. On the other hand, he is our Father who loves us and is happy to welcome us into fellowship with him. Prayer is the union of our deep innermost being with our Father God, who is our source of life, love and light. It is enjoying his presence, appreciating his magnificence. He is our Rock, our Fortress, and our Refuge. He is our Redeemer, our Savior and our Deliverer. In him our souls find peace. In him we find wisdom to help us in our time of need. In him we find strength to live holy and powerful lives. In him we find love that enlarges our hearts and delights our souls, and joy that thrills us in any circumstance. In him we find the grace to be a blessing to others and to do great things. Prayer is a journey from the toils and troubles of this world into the loving arms of our Heavenly Father through faith in Jesus Christ.

What does it mean to "always pray"? Should we stay in the church 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and pray? Let's look at Jesus. A theme of Luke's gospel is Jesus' humanity--he shows us the perfect man. Jesus obeyed his parents, shared in community life, and grew in humanity and spirituality. Another theme in Luke's gospel is Jesus' prayer life. Jesus' first recorded prayer was at his baptism which inaugurated his ministry (Lk 3:21). After that, Jesus prayed frequently in lonely places and sometimes spent the night praying to God (Lk 5:16; 6:12). Jesus prayed before making important decisions (Lk 6:12; 9:18, 29). Jesus prayed for strength to obey God's will, especially at Gethsemane (Lk 22:41). Jesus even prayed from the cross for the forgiveness of sinners (Lk 23:34a). Jesus' prayers were frequent and intense. Jesus' prayer was not just activity, but intimate personal fellowship with his Father. This prayer continues. Even now, as Jesus resides at the right hand of God, he is constantly in prayer, interceding for his people (Ro 8:34). In this way Jesus always prays and does not give up.

We learn from Jesus that there are times we need to be alone with our Father God and to pray privately. We should be intentional in making a time and place for regular prayer. Yet our prayer should not be limited to this. Jesus told us to "always pray." Paul echoed this when he said, "pray continually." Jesus wants us to have fellowship with our Father God all the time. Brother Lawrence lived a monastic life in 17th century France. He spent 15 years in kitchen duty. At the beginning of his service, he resolved to make dwelling in the presence of God his goal in all things. Whether it was time to work, time to eat or scheduled community prayer time, he tried to think of God and express love to God. For about ten years, he struggled to overcome temptations and distractions, and give his heart and mind to God. At times, he became conscious of sin. Then he simply repented, accepted Jesus' grace and continued to commune with God. The Holy Spirit helped him. Gradually he formed a lifestyle of living in the presence of God. He wrote, "In the noise and clutter of my kitchen, while several persons are at the same time calling for different things, I possess God in as great tranquility as if I were upon my knees in Blessed Supper."<sup>1</sup> This helps understand what it means to "always pray." It is constantly remaining in our Father's presence.

By combining the words, "always pray" and "not give up" Jesus tells us that prayer is a decision to persevere through a state of tension. In order for our prayers to be heard, we may need to overcome some hindrance. This hindrance may be within. It may be unbelief. One father repented before Jesus, saying, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief." Then Jesus drove a demon out of his son (Mk 9:24). It may be fear. Jesus told a synagogue ruler, "Don't be afraid; just believe" (Mk 5:36). When the man did so, his daughter was raised from death to life. We may need to confess sin in our lives. Psalm 66:18 says, "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened...." We may have to let go of grudges. In the context of teaching prayer, Jesus said in Mark 11:25, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins." Perhaps our motives must be purified. James 4:3 says, "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." Our prayers may be hindered by sour relationships, even with our spouses. After encouraging husbands to be considerate of their wives, Peter says, "...so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Or the hindrance may be spiritual forces in the heavenly realms. The prophet Daniel once prayed to understand a vision, and was heard right away. But the answer did not come to him for 21 days because the angel messenger was detained on the way (Dan 10:13). Our prayers may be put on hold, so to speak, as God works out his salvation. Then we need patience. Many of us are praying for loved ones - family members or Bible students. Though we have prayed for several years, we should not give up. Monica prayed 17 years for Augustine; then he was converted. George Mueller prayed for sixty years for two of his friends to be saved. One of the men was converted shortly before Mueller's death. The other was saved within a year of his death. Praying for our campus or our nation is a spiritual struggle. This should not surprise us. Let's remember that we are in a spiritual battle and "always pray and not give up."

Second, the parable of the persistent widow (2-8). In order to encourage us to pray persistently, Jesus told a parable. It contrasts a powerful judge with a helpless widow who kept pleading, "Grant me justice against my adversary." There was no compelling reason for the judge to pay attention to the widow. So he refused her request for some time. But the widow had two things in her favor. Her cause was just, and she kept on coming. The first time she may have visited his office. He made her wait, thinking she would give up after a while. But she never left. Every time he peered through a crack in his door, she was sitting there ready to see him. Finally he snuck out the back door. The next day, he worked from home. But when he went to his favorite restaurant for lunch, she followed him through the door, pleading, "Grant me justice against my adversary." He had her removed for disturbing the peace. Yet, when he went home, she was there in front of his house with a picket sign, "Grant me justice against my adversary." He went inside and tried to ignore her. She sent e-mail's, text messages, tweets, and posted on Facebook. And when he turned on his television, there she was on the local news, being interviewed. At one point, she looked into the camera and said, "Judge, grant me justice against my adversary." Wherever he turned he was confronted by her pitiful cry for justice. Then he began to have nightmares. He felt so harassed that he developed stomach ulcers and high blood pressure. He really felt that she was attacking him. So, at last, he decided to grant her request as an act of self-preservation. This teaches us that perseverance in a just cause can overcome obstacles to bring about justice. Jesus teaches us to persevere in prayer like this widow.

However, God is not like the unjust judge. First of all, God loves justice and works to bring it about. Isaiah 61:8a says, "For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity." God does not need to be persuaded to work for

justice. It pleases him to do so. Moreover, God loves his people. Jesus calls them "his chosen ones." Ephesians 1:3 says, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph 1:3). He knows each of us by name and favors us. He has bound himself to us with cords of love. When we feel the pain of injustice and cry out, our cry goes straight to God's heart. The moment he hears, God is eager to satisfy our cry for justice. Jesus assures us that ultimate justice will be done when he comes again in power and great glory. Jesus' question to us is, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Prayer and faith are closely related. Prayer is the expression of our faith in God, not a mere expression of willpower. Though we are weak, God is mighty. God is wise. God is able to do more than we can ask or imagine. No matter how difficult the problem or the situation, God can give his people victory. Jesus taught us that everything is possible for those who believe.

After Jesus' ascension, the early Christians were like the widow in this passage. They were persecuted by Jewish religious leaders and Roman authorities, who held all political power. These ungodly leaders conspired against Jesus and his people. At that time, the early Christians raised their voices together in prayer to God. They acknowledged him as Creator and Sovereign Ruler of all. They prayed that he would enable them to speak his word with great boldness. Then the place where they met was shaken. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and preached the gospel with great power (Ac 4:13-31). In the most helpless situation, God worked with supernatural power to spread the gospel. When we see our national leaders acting irresponsibly and even immorally, we need not be discouraged. It is time to raise our voices in prayer to God. Our God can shake our nation and send the power of his Holy Spirit upon us once again.

Third, humble and repentant prayer (9-14). Hearing that we should always pray and not give up emboldens us in prayer. However, this boldness needs to be balanced by a sober view of ourselves and God. So Jesus told another parable. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get'" (10-12). This man was morally upright, willing to deny his bodily appetites, and sacrificed his money for God. But he had no idea that he needed anything from God. He did not acknowledge that he was a sinner; he was self-satisfied. His prayer was like a moment of self-appreciation before God.

On the other hand, the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (13). This man had nothing to offer God. He felt unworthy to stand in the presence of God. He pleaded for mercy, acknowledging that he was nothing but a sinner. Jesus said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (14a). It means that his sins were forgiven and he was accepted as God's child. Then Jesus taught a most important principle: "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (14b). The spirit of humble repentance characterizes effective prayer.

We can find the quality of persistent prayer and humble repentance in the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 18. When Abraham perceived that the Lord was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness, he began to plead for the salvation of the righteous on the basis that the Lord must do right. He began by asking God to spare the city if fifty righteous people could be found there. Then he began to reduce the number little by little, asking God again and again to spare the city, until he got down to ten righteous people. Though Abraham was bold and persistent, he was also humble. He acknowledged that he was nothing but dust and ashes before the Lord. Let's decide to have this attitude in prayer and to always pray and not give up in this New Year. Then God will surely bless us, our families, our campuses, our nation and the world in 2013.

1 Lawrence, Brother. "The Practice of the Presence of God"