

## Humility, Honesty, and Prayer

Jeremiah 31:27-34; Luke 18:1-8

October 20, 2019

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Humility. And honesty. Those are two important words to incorporate into our conversations about prayer. Humility and honesty require us to admit that prayer, even after decades of praying, is still mysterious. Prayer not like the proverbial drink machine where we drop in our coins and out pops a Diet Coke, exactly what we requested. No, many of us have prayed—earnestly, passionately, and with much faith as we could muster—and still have not received the request of our heart.

The late preacher and homiletics professor, Fred Craddock, once wrote about a gathering of people who were discussing a certain unfair issue. Some wondered why God had not intervened. Person after person expressed their concern about this issue and God's apparent disinterest. Finally an elderly black clergyman stood. He opened his Bible and read the parable from Luke 18, the one about the widow and the unjust judge. Then he gave this one sentence interpretation:

*Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is.*

*(Interpretation, Luke, p. 210)*

Humbly, honestly some of us have been knocking for years at what appears to be a locked door. Some of us have been knocking for so long our knuckles are bleeding. We know for certain that prayer is no drink machine where you drop in your coins and out pops exactly what you requested. In fact, we take offense at such glib depictions of prayer. So allow me to ask humbly and honestly an important question. What was Jesus telling us about prayer in the parable from Luke 18?

This parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow is unique to Luke's gospel. It is short and has only the two characters. The first character is a judge, a man we probably wouldn't want to have as a neighbor, and certainly not as a judge. Jesus described him this way: he "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Judges were highly

regarded figures in the Jewish community. Their role was to maintain harmony by adjudicating disputes between neighbors. Maybe you thought your neighbor was infringing on your property. You and your neighbor couldn't resolve this matter, so you would take your dispute to the city gate and the judge would decide for you. Now, this is important. Judges in that day judged without a jury. It was entirely the judge's decision, and it was binding. We call that a bench trial today, where a judge makes a finding without a jury. So back in the time of Jesus, if you had to take a matter before a judge, you really wanted to have a fair and impartial judge. The Law of Moses gave this charge to their judges:

*Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether citizen or resident alien. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; you shall not be intimidated by anyone.... (Dt. 1:16-17)*

Now, that's what the judges were *supposed* to do. But what if you got a judge who "neither feared God nor had respect for people"?

The second character in this story is a widow. Widows were on the opposite end of the social spectrum from judges. Their society had no social safety net for widows. They received no support from their deceased husband, of course. And they could not inherit their husband's estate. By law it went either to his sons or his brothers. It's hard for us to imagine the kind of destitution that could occur for a widow back then because our society is so different from that. We all know widows today who are financially secure and live fulfilled, meaningful lives. Not so long ago.

The widow in our text did have something important. She had a grievance. We don't know what her grievance was, but the text leads us to assume that it was legitimate. A third party likely owed her money or property, and she knew she was in the right. So what did she do? She took her grievance to the judge at the city gate. But remember, this judge "neither feared God nor had respect for people." Jesus said he refused to hear the widow's grievance. Maybe he was waiting for a bribe or the third party was putting pressure on him. We don't know exactly why, but he refused her case.

But this widow would not take no for an answer. She was persistent and kept returning to the judge insisting on justice.

I can picture this judge stopping at the local café for breakfast in the mornings. Just before he digs into his scrambled eggs and grits, out jumps this widow. “Give me justice!” she demands.

A little later in the week, when the judge gathers at the No. 1 tee box with his buddies for a round of golf, this widow slips up behind him and shouts, “Give me justice!”

Then on the weekend, when the judge and his wife arrive at their friends’ house for dinner, the widow jumps out of the shrubbery and demands yet again, “Give me justice!”

You get the picture, right? She was persistent. She knew she was in the right, and she wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

Finally, Jesus said, the judge relented. He said to himself,

*Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.*

It appeared that she was before a locked door, an unjust, stubborn judge, a judge who time after time turned her away. This widow’s knuckles surely were bleeding from all the knocking. But she was persistent. She refused to lose heart. And in the end, she received justice.

So what was Jesus telling us about *prayer* in this story? Of course, you already know it’s not about a widow and a judge, right? It is about you and me and our prayers. Remember what Luke said, “Jesus told them a parable about their *need to pray always and not to lose heart.*” This parable is about *our need* to pray always and not to lose heart, even when it appears we’re making no progress, when it appears the door is locked. So I need to ask, “Why? Why do we need to pray always, especially when it appears we’re making no progress?”

Why? Because praying turns our lives toward God. Praying turns us away from Facebook, depressing news from CNN, the latest tweet from the

president, and whatever problem is claiming our attention. Praying turns us away from all that and back to God in whom we live and move and have our being. Let me be real clear about this. The purpose of this story is not to say that God is a mean judge who must be hounded day after day. No, that would contradict everything Jesus said about God. The purpose is to remind the disciples of Jesus that we need to pray. We need to connect with God always and not lose heart.

Humility. And honesty. They must be a part of this conversation. After your knuckles start bleeding, you might want to lash out at God and accuse God of not caring. That's actually okay, if that's what you feel. That's the honesty part. God can handle it. But when we also speak with humility, we must admit that there is a better reason for a locked door than "God doesn't care." Everything else in our experience tells us that God does care.

Humility causes us to consider what would happen if God actually granted all of our prayers. If God granted all of our prayers, few people would ever die because someone would be praying for them to be spared. The world's climate would be thrown into disorder because children would be praying for a sunny day while farmers would be praying for rain. The nations of the world would be in chaos because each would be praying for the success of their armies. What in the world would happen to college football?

Humility also causes us to admit that we sometimes miss God's answers. Have you ever prayed for patience? Then you found yourself in a situation that required patience. Did you get upset with God? Or did you thank God for an opportunity to develop patience?

Humility also causes us to accept that sometimes the answer is simply "no." "No," we sometimes tell our children. Not to be mean. Not to deprive them of something. It's because we know of something better for them.

Humility. And honesty. They force us to admit that prayer is still mysterious. After years of praying. After decades of praying. And nevertheless our Lord invites us to pray, always, to turn our lives toward God, especially when it appears we're making no progress. He challenges us to continue to pray earnestly, passionately, and with as much faith as we can

muster, for it is in God that we live and move and have our being. So pray,  
Weatherly. Pray always. Pray with humility. And pray with honesty.

### Closing Prayer

Lord, we trust your teachings, even though we are tempted to lose  
heart. Strengthen our flagging spirits. In humility and honesty, we give  
ourselves completely unto you. Amen.