

## **Pray and Don't Lose Heart** **Luke 18:1-8**

As we saw last week, Jesus has just explained to the Pharisees that in looking for the kingdom of God to come with political, revolutionary power, they had missed the fact that the kingdom had already arrived with Jesus coming – it's in your midst already, Jesus said. And that's the 'now' of the kingdom of God. People can be forgiven now, lives can be transformed now, people can enter the kingdom of God now. But then, to the disciples, Jesus went on to explain that the Kingdom is not yet here in all its final, full, consummative power, and that won't happen until Jesus, the King, comes back on the last day. And that's the 'not yet' of the kingdom.

So, there is this gap between Jesus' first coming in humility and suffering, and His final coming in glory, at the end of the ages. And you and I, just as much as these first disciples, live in that gap. We live in this period of the now and the not yet of the Kingdom, when we see partial victory over sin and sickness and satan but not the full victory, not the fullness of Kingdom power and the new creation that we will see when Jesus returns.

And having said all this, Luke tells us in v1 of chapter 18 that Jesus 'told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.' That they should hang in there in prayer and not quit the race. And then Jesus closes off the parable with a question in v8, 'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

So Jesus clearly sees stuff about living in this tension of the intervening period of the now and the not yet of the kingdom, living in this gap between his first and second comings, that could make disciples, including you and me, lose heart and give up. He understands that there are dynamics at play in this period before He comes again that could make us throw in the towel.

### **Losing Heart and Keeping Faith**

What are some of the things that might make a disciple of Jesus, you or me, lose heart? What sort of things to do with living in this tension of the now and the not yet, could cause you to throw in the towel and quit the race? Now you may think, I'd never do that, but Jesus clearly thinks some things might make you lose heart, or give up or else He wouldn't feel the need to tell this parable.

Well, as we saw last week, before He even tells the parable He's already given us one area – and that's simply being taken up by the normal things of life, eating, drinking, buying selling, marrying, planting, building. Just becoming absorbed by life and getting sucked in by the surrounding culture, as Lot's wife was, can result in you being ill-prepared and unprepared for his coming. And the stuff Jesus lists that people will be doing when He returns are in no way bad – marriage and food and drink and work are all blessings from God. But when His gifts become greater in your affections than the Giver then it can kill your heart. Your heart can become cold towards Jesus, because this other thing is more important to you than Him. And then you are well down the line to quitting the race. Of course someone in that position would never say that, they would still count themselves a Christian, but the fire has all but died out. All the fuel of their heart is being chucked on another fire.

So the fullness and the blessings of life, if handled wrongly can do it. They can work to make your heart cold to Jesus.

But Jesus' emphasis in this parable is different. Here, it's not when everything is going well and you get sucked into prosperity, but when things are not going well, when life isn't dealing you the cards you want, when you are on the receiving end of injustice, when you're in the now of the Kingdom but you desperately want the not yet of the kingdom to be here now, and it's not happening; and that can be a real cause for discouragement and losing heart.

As we saw last week, Jesus told the disciples, (17:22) 'The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.' And when you long to see God intervene in power and it isn't happening, it can knock you down. For these first century disciples, and for other Christians across the globe today, if you are suffering and dying from persecution and you want Jesus to come back and that's not happening you might be tempted to lose heart. As one commentator says, "A thousand years go by in one short hour waiting for the lions."

But it doesn't have to be as dramatic as persecution. The steady drip, drip, drip of the troubles and hardships of life can cause you to lose heart. When you're praying hard for something or someone, for some outcome and it doesn't happen the way you wanted and hoped and believed it would, and it seems as though God has failed you, that can cause you to lose heart. When you see your friends falling in sin, falling in the battle, or you watch as they quit the race, that can seriously discourage you. When your life, your family or your career doesn't go the way you want it to go, or thought it should go, and you're stood in the middle of life, overwhelmed with disappointment and you think 'it shouldn't have been this way', those things can undermine the foundations of your heart. When you see society going the way it is, and the battle for righteousness and truth in the public square seems all but lost, or you contemplate the time delay in Jesus' coming, you can begin to question, is all this really true? And if that runs its course, you can begin to wonder whether it's worth it and wouldn't it be easier to just throw in the towel.

But what's interesting about Luke's little introduction to this parable is that he doesn't say 'Jesus told them a parable so they don't lose heart', he says 'Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they *ought always to pray* and not lose heart.' You see, whilst Proverbs 17:22 says that 'a crushed spirit dries up the bones', a crushed spirit dries up prayer as well. And the problem of losing heart is it saps your will to pray. As St Augustine wrote, 'When faith dies, prayer dies.' And the danger of that is that prayer is one of the chief means of God's grace in our lives to strengthen our faith. Prayer is the means by which you can come into God's presence and hear Him speak to your heart; it's the means you have of connecting with Him, of drawing the power of the now kingdom down into your life, it's the channel through which we can be filled once again by His Holy Spirit. Prayer is like the straw, the tube to the high-energy drink that will keep us in the race.

So if you're on the verge of losing heart, and prayer dies, you can find yourself in this vicious downward spiral. The very means that God has given us to connect and grow and receive His power slowly disappears from our lives. And before we recognize it, we are all but out of the race. And so recognizing the danger, Jesus tells us this parable, so we ought always to pray – so we grasp the non-negotiable necessity to pray, and not lose heart.

So let's look at the parable:

### **The Widow and the Judge**

V2, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.' This judge has the kind of reputation no one should have. Public opinion means nothing to him; he doesn't care what other people think of him; he's not moved at a gut level, at a compassion level by the plight of the poor; and he's certainly not moved by God's law. He is his own little king, in his own little kingdom, ruling as he wants from his courtroom. And tragically, of course, you don't have to be long in this world before you meet people like this, who have no fear of God and no care for others. And whilst it's not the point of this parable, let's make sure we're not like this man. Because it's possible to have it together on a Sunday, but your reputation on a Monday is not much different from his. So just examine yourself – and ask, would anyone say these things about me? Would anyone say or you: 'He doesn't fear God, look at the way he treats people'? And if that could fit for you, confess it and repent, and come to Jesus for grace to change.

Well, he's the first character in the parable, but the second one is the widow. And Jesus doesn't choose a widow for no reason. In that culture this lady is about as weak and powerless as it is possible to be. She is female, her husband is dead, she appears to have no relative to fight her corner, no money to offer an attractive bribe and no powerful friends to argue her case. She's got nothing. But what she does have is an adversary. On top of all the other issues that make her seemingly powerless, someone has done the dirty on her, someone has treated her unjustly, and most likely that someone has diddled her out of what little money she did have.

And this woman is a picture of these first disciples Jesus is talking to: vulnerable and powerless in a hostile world. But she's also a picture of you and me. You are this widow, with an adversary standing against you. And for you that adversary could be the situations and circumstances you are facing either now or in the future that could cause you to give up hope and lose heart, or satan, whom Peter calls 'Your adversary the devil' who 'prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8).

And she comes to the judge seeking justice. And it was the responsibility of judges to defend widows like her, not ignore them. This judge should have had compassion on her, and acted for her, and ensured justice was done for her, but he's not that kind of guy. This man's textbook, his guidebook when it came to matters of the law should have been the Old Testament, which makes very clear what God's heart is for the powerless. In Ex 22:22-4 God says, 'You shall not

mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn.' You don't want to go there, God says. Then in Isaiah 1:17: God says, "Seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." But this judge wasn't going to do any of those things.

But the widow kept on coming. She refused to be put off. She kept coming back demanding justice. She had one weapon in her armoury and that was persistence. So this seemingly helpless, powerless woman keeps on appealing to the one man who has the power and authority to vindicate her, and give her justice. She comes knocking on his door while he's having breakfast, she's standing outside when he goes to his offices in the morning, she dogs his steps, asking him, as they walk, to look again at her case. When he takes a break from court to go to the bathroom, she's waiting for him, telling him it's not right and it's his responsibility. When he stops for lunch and goes to the restaurant, there she is waiting for him at the adjoining table. He finally goes home at night, crawls into bed and there's a tap, tap on the window. In her search for justice, she just won't let him rest.

And Jesus says in v4, 'For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' He finally gives in because he doesn't want to be worn out, she's beating him down, literally, she's giving him a black eye! She's got under his skin, she's getting on his nerves. Her persistence has done it. As one preacher (Mark Driscoll) says, this woman is like 'a cage fighting granny'.

But just notice how Jesus applies all this to us. V6 'And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry out to him day and night.'

You see, when it comes to application, Jesus doesn't put His initial focus on the widow. This widow is coming to the judge because he has the power to transform her situation. And for us, the only one with that kind of power is God. And Jesus says, listen to the unrighteous judge, because he is in stark contrast to God. And whilst you and I are like this widow, with all these reasons now or in the future why we might lose heart and throw in the towel, while we are like the widow, God is not like this judge.

Jesus' point is that if this godless, unrighteous judge is finally moved by the widow's persistence, don't you think God your heavenly father hears your cries to Him? You see, ultimately, as well as being about the widow's persistence, this parable is first of all about our heavenly Father's character, which far outstrips that of this judge. Because the judge isn't a picture of God, he's a contrast to God. He's the darkness to God's burning light. He's an unrighteous judge, God is *the* righteous Judge. He has no regard for men; God loves men, He loves you so much He sent His son to die for you; He cares for you, He deals with your sin that separates you from Him, He forgives you, adopts you, brings you into His family and then promises that He will never leave you nor forsake you. This judge

would have happily washed his hands of this woman, but God, Paul tells us, is for us, and if God is for us who can be against us (Rom 8:31).

And if this sinful, unbelieving judge finally responds to the widow's persistence, how much more quickly will the loving, merciful, compassionate God respond? You see, in the end, Jesus says, your ability to stay in the race, to cross the line, to keep the faith, to not lose heart, does not depend on you, it depends on the One who is so much better than this judge. God *will* give justice to his elect, Jesus says.

He will give justice, He will come through for, He will vindicate His chosen ones. And it is knowing that God has chosen you and that He will vindicate you, He will save you from your adversary, that can give you the hope and courage for the dark days when it feels like He has abandoned you. If you thought that either His choosing you, or your ability to stay in the race and not lose heart was dependent on your goodness, or your having your act together, or your moral grit, you would have reason to worry when things get bad, and you don't handle things well. But when you know He has chosen you out of His love and His grace, you can know He will keep you and hold you and will not let you go, however weak you feel.

So Jesus says in v7 that God 'will give justice to his elect', He will defend His chosen people; He will judge those who persecute them. And in v8 Jesus says he will 'give justice to them speedily.' So God hears it when you pray. He may not always answer it the way you want, even a half-good parent like me knows you don't say 'yes' every time. Sometimes it's 'yes', sometimes it's 'no', and sometimes it's 'later'. But however long God waits, He hears it. And it's knowing He hears you when you pray that can sustain you in those time when you feel like quitting.

But to be heard, you've got to pray.

### **Pray and Pray Again**

So Luke opens this parable by saying that Jesus tells it so we 'ought always to pray and not lose heart' (v1) and Jesus closes it by asking, 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?' (v8). So, in the words of one commentator (Bock), when Jesus comes He'll be looking for those who have been looking for Him. He'll be looking for those who have kept walking by faith, kept trusting Him even when all the circumstances have been against them.

And the way to do that, Jesus is saying, is to pray and pray and pray again. In the words of verse 7, to 'cry out to him day and night.' To be dogged and determined in prayer. To be like Jacob wrestling with God: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me' (Gen 32:26). You see, when Jesus says we 'ought always to pray', that means that there is no place or time or situation when it's inappropriate to be sending up quickie prayers to heaven.

You're stuck on your maths or physics homework – pray. Afterall, you've got the creator of the universe at your shoulder. You're facing a critical decision at work – pray. You need to tackle some issue with the kids – pray. You're dealing with an awkward relationship at work and you know it's your problem just as much as

the other person's and you need help for you and for them – pray. You want to see your friend come to know Jesus – pray.

And keep on praying. Elsewhere Jesus tells us that we're not heard for our many words – so this isn't about jabbering on endlessly, but it is about keeping on coming back to God. The widow could have given up after the first few visits – 'o shucks, this isn't going to work, I give up.' But she doesn't and it is the fact that she keeps on coming back, that she gives this guy a black eye, she keeps on bothering him, that means she gets justice. And you and I, we might be tempted to quit praying when the first few goes don't yield the answer we want. But the lesson from this widow who on the face of it seems so powerless, is don't do that. Keep knocking, keep coming, keep bothering, because you're knocking on the door of the One who has the power.

Now, no other Jewish rabbi would have told you that. In Judaism it was commonly taught that you really did not want to weary God by too much praying, because that would just bore Him, so three times a day was considered the absolute maximum! Well, Jesus has no such limit. He's looking for those who keep on coming to God in faith, persistently praying that His kingdom will come and His will be done on earth as in heaven.

And it is that faith that keeps on coming back to God that is rewarded. Now, the answer may still be 'no' – God may use the waiting and the praying and this circumstance that doesn't shift, to work on your character. You might find that as you keep on praying it's your perspective on this issue, whatever it is, that changes: you start off thinking and wanting this outcome, but as you keep bringing it before God and you keep coming into His presence, you find that it's your view that's changing, and you're beginning to see this with God's perspective and not your own. And still for other things, we aren't going to see everything come right in this life. That is the tension of the now and the not yet. Some things won't come right before He comes again. But He still calls us to pray and pray and pray until that day comes.

In his book 'Why Pray?', William Evans wrote, "Prayer is the attitude of a needy soul flinging itself upon God as its only hope and help." And that is the kind of follower Jesus is looking for, who knows God is their only hope and expresses that in not-going-to-give-up prayer. Because that kind of praying doesn't put any trust in yourself: you know you don't have the power to change what needs changing. But you know who does have that power, so you keep on coming back to Him. And it is that keeping on coming back, looking to Him in faith, that will mean you won't lose heart. You won't drop out of the race. You won't throw in the towel. You will cross the finish line.

And then, unlike Lot's wife, you won't be looking back when Jesus returns or you die, whichever is sooner; in faith you'll be looking up, to the King who vindicates you.