

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said, “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming.’”

And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.

However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

This parable contradicts something science has placed in our minds. We see these photographs of deep space taken by the Hubble telescope. We hear about distances between galaxies we cannot imagine. The universe is expanding outward and has been for millions of years. Its magnitude makes us feel small and makes God seem far away. We don’t often say that, but we feel it down in the low bottom of our souls.

The parable of the persistent widow breaks the spell. We don’t measure worth by placing a person side-by-side with the diameter of the universe. The Creator of this vast universe pays attention to the pleas of a nobody.

The Parable

A nobody is the heroine of this parable. Her power lies precisely in the fact that she has no power. She is a woman. Therefore, she is disenfranchised, as were all women until the early 20th century. She is also a widow. She is dependent for her social security on the benevolence of other people. The third strike against her is the legal system she lives under. It should treat her fairly, but the judge she looks to for help is a man, who **“neither feared God nor cared about men.”** (Luke 18:2) He won’t give her the time of day.

More thoroughly, more relentlessly than the other gospels the Gospel of Luke delights in episodes from Jesus’ ministry that focus on the poor, the suffering, the disadvantaged, the underdogs, the people who just had the rug pulled out from under them, the people who have come down in the world, and who are feeling their loss. Christ is on their side. He is their Angel of Mercy in deprivation.

He has given this widow a voice. Her social liabilities don’t define her. He presents her as strong and determined to seek justice for herself, and He enshrines her as a paradigm for Christian prayer as long as the world shall last.

Verse 1 states the purpose of the parable. **Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.** Have you ever said, “I know I need to pray, but I just can’t find the time, and I don’t know how to pray,” and you give up before you start? This parable is for you. Have you prayed for a while, a few weeks or even a few years, and then you just stopped. You gave up. This parable is for you. It is also for people who have never stopped praying, but who feel like their prayers never reach the ceiling. “Pray,” says Jesus, “and keep praying. Never give up. Never give up.” That’s the purpose of the parable.

Mrs. Atkinson

When I came home at Christmas during my freshman year in college, my parents had joined a new church. I sat with them on Sunday. A woman sat several rows in front of us. Her name was Margaret Atkinson. Her son, Lee, always sat with her. One time I asked my mom, "Where is Mr. Atkinson?" My mom said, "Oh, he doesn't come. He doesn't believe. She prays for him to believe."

Thirty years later, I was visiting my mom, and as we always did, we went to church on Sunday morning, and we sat together. My dad had died. As we worshiped, I saw Mrs. Atkinson sitting, as in the olden days, several rows in front of us. Her son, Lee, had grown up and gone away. But there was a man sitting with her. I asked my mom, "Who is that with Mrs. Atkinson?" My mom said, "Oh, that's Mr. Atkinson. He became a believer a few years ago, and now he comes all the time. Margaret is so happy." For 30 years she worshiped God without fanfare, and for 30 years she prayed for her husband. And there he sat, the long-awaited answer to her prayers.

A parable is a word picture that helps us to spot God's presence in the world. When we see people persist in praying when they don't feel like it, or when they aren't sure God is listening; and when we see with our own eyes the answers to their prayers, we can say with confidence: "That's the kingdom; God is there; God is at work."

But 30 years is a long time to wait. Praying for the same thing for one year can seem like a long time to wait. The experience of waiting is central to the parable. Verse 4 says of the judge's response to the widow's plea: **For some time he refused.** Her need was urgent. Verse 3 says she had an adversary, who was treating her unjustly. She could not manage by herself. She needed help from the courts, and for the longest time she couldn't even get a hearing.

The parable reminds us that the Creator of this vast universe pays attention to the pleas of a nobody. Now, we learn that He may pay attention, but He is not in a hurry. We are in a hurry, but He is not in a hurry. If you pray and don't give up, you will ask God sooner or later, "Why do you wait so long to answer my prayers?" Jesus does not answer that question in this parable. God's silence forces us to raise the question and to answer the question on our own or in the company of other people who pray.

Here is one possible answer. God's silence puts a stop to frivolous prayers. I am appalled by what I have sometimes asked God for. In retrospect it was a good thing God did not grant what I asked. God's silence also put a stop to frivolous attitudes. You have to think that a person who doesn't get what he asked for and then stops praying was not serious about God in the first place. Frivolous attitudes are like young plants without water. They don't last.

God pays attention to our prayers, says the parable, but He is not in a hurry to answer our prayers. The parable teaches us one more thing about God that is designed to help us pray and not give up. Verses 7-8: **And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.** God, who pays attention to our prayers, when He does answer, will see that we get justice, and quickly. We may not get what we ask for, but what God gives us will be just.

Several years ago, my wife had to sell family property in Maryland. The market was slow in 2010-2011. In August 2010 I began to ask God everyday that we would sell

the property by December 31, 2010 at the asking price. The Bible verse that says: **“All things are possible with God”** (Mark 10:27) loomed large in my thoughts and prayers.

December 31, 2010 came and went with no prospective buyer in sight. So, how was I to pray on January 1, 2011? Another Bible verse, Genesis 18:25, began to loom large in my thoughts and prayers: **“Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”** I continued to ask God everyday to provide a buyer. But I no longer had a timetable. Instead I determined to see how God would use His power to do all things to do what was right. Nothing happened in the first four months of 2011.

The agent called in early May to say she had received an offer on the property. The buyer offered an acceptable price, but he was making demands that Carole thought were unreasonable. She countered his demands. We had parked at curbside for her to go to the BVBC workroom and fax her counter offer. The real estate agent called to tell her the buyer had backed out. It was the only offer we had received in a year. We were both relieved, but we were also back to square one. I prayed through my frustrations the next morning. Within 24 hours, the agent called to say another buyer was interested. After a year of nothing except one futile effort, the right buyer appeared, and caught us completely by surprise. The appearance of that buyer hard on the heels of our frustration with the first offer was God’s way of saying, “Pray and don’t give up. Trust me to do what is right, but don’t tell me how and when to deliver what you ask.”

God pays attention to our prayers, and He is not in a hurry to answer our prayers, but when He does answer, His answer will be just.

It’s easier to ask God for something than to adore God. We are such needy people. The Parable of the Persistent Widow encourages us to ask, and it moderates the way we ask. The Church teaches the same lesson in one of the ancient prayers of the Church. “Almighty God, Fountain of all wisdom, you know my necessities before I ask and my ignorance in asking. Have compassion on my weakness, and mercifully give me those things, which for my unworthiness I dare not, and for my blindness I cannot ask.”

Ask, Seek, Knock

Last July, we reflected on Jesus’ teaching about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Let’s put that teaching side by side with the Parable of the Persistent Widow. The two passages shed light on each other. Look at Matthew 7:7-11.

“Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8) Jesus knew we could be tongue-tied and talk nonsense when we pray. He remembered our weaknesses, and still He made this generous promise.

“But wait! His promise is too generous. What’s the catch? Ask for what? Seek what? Is this a bait-and-switch routine: I ask for one thing and get what I don’t want or get nothing at all?” Jesus speaks to our suspicions when He says: **“Which of you, if his son asks for bread will give him a stone? Or if he asks for fish, will give him a snake?”** (Matthew 7:9-10) And you say: “Well of course I’ll give him bread and fish. But you don’t know my kids. They ask for stones and snakes like they were bread and fish. I don’t give them everything they ask for; it’s not good for them.” Jesus simply says: **“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”** (Matthew 7:11)

Did you hear that? He just called us evil, but He did it so nicely and without any edge in His voice. I can't object. He is comparing us with God, and measured that way, I am definitely lacking. At the same time He said that I do good things for my kids. I'm not all bad. I like that He said that. But I get it. Compared with God I am lacking. But our heavenly Father is not lacking. Can we not trust Him to be as discerning about what we ask Him to do for us, as we are discerning about what our children ask us to do for them?" We try to teach them about the real world. Our heavenly Father does the same. He is the ultimate Realist. So, ask God for what you want. He will give you something good, and it will be just.

Take Aways

The last line of this parable is our first take away. **"However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"** Praying is an act of faith. To pray to God and not to give up gives evidence **that he exists and that he rewards those who seek Him.** (Hebrews 11:6) The Lord's question is sobering. It's a reminder that faith is fragile.

Our second take away is simple. Will you pray and not give up? Don't be ostentatious about praying. It is insufferable humbug, it is unbecoming to the majesty of God, and it gives the wrong impression about what a righteous person you are. **"When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then, your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."** (Matthew 6:6) And keep praying.

Be thoughtful about what you ask. Be patient in the asking. Be joyful and thankful in the receiving. When the Son of Man comes, let Him find faith in Brandywine Valley Baptist Church.

Would you who are moved by the Holy Spirit join me here in the front of the sanctuary before God and the congregation and pledge to pray at least three times a week for God to prepare BVBC to receive its next senior pastor, and to prepare that next senior pastor to come to BVBC?