

Persistence

Opening

Hymn “Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying”
(*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 752)

Text

READ LUKE 18:1–8: The Parable of the Persistent Widow and the Unjust Judge

Prayer

Merciful God, we thank you for this summer season, for times of rest and renewal, fellowship and fun. Guide us as we study your Word that we might follow the examples of your faithful servants and learn to persevere in prayer. We ask this in the strong name of our Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Overview of the Sessions

Jesus expects his disciples to pray. Whether first-century or 21st century followers, we pray so we might connect with God through speaking and especially through listening. Theologian M. Shawn Copeland said it well in *Practicing our Faith* when she wrote, “Prayer requires our attentiveness, our readiness, our active and watchful waiting to hear, to receive, to cooperate in what God imparts to us. For our conversations with God are never one-sided”.

In this Bible study, we will explore three aspects of prayer. We will learn some about what Jesus and the early evangelists thought and taught about the importance of being persistent in prayer. We will look at passages in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) that exhort us to “wait upon

the Lord” and we will explore the relationship between prayer and waiting. And, we will seek to understand the power of prayer to change us and perhaps our circumstances too.

The goal of this study is to deepen our relationships with God, ourselves and one another by attending to the word and will of God for our lives and our world.

As we bring our authentic selves to these studies—our hopes and dreams, our fears and failures, our histories and cultural heritages, may we be reminded that each of our lives is indeed a prayer, as Jesus lives and serves through us.

We Need to Pray

Many of us grew up learning to pray. We remember being children seated at the kitchen table with hands folded learning the familiar table grace: “God is great, God is good and we thank God for our food...” Or maybe your memories lead you back to bedtime, kneeling on the floor or lying snuggled under the blankets as your mom or dad taught you the evening prayer, “Now I lay me down to sleep...”

When we were little we were taught to pray because we needed God’s protection or to express our gratitude to the One who gave us food, family, and friends. But do we still hold to these notions today? How many of us say grace at mealtime anymore or seek God’s protection as we close our eyes in slumber? Is it busyness that has distanced us from those faith practices of yesteryear or don’t we believe we need to pray in these ways anymore?

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Do these questions ring true for you or is your prayer practice different than described? Take a few minutes and talk together about how you pray now.

Context before Text

So often when we read the Bible, we rightly ask, what is this text saying to me? While this is a very important question, we Lutheran Christians also want to know about the context in which a particular text comes to us. What was happening in the world when the passage was written? And are there any other scriptural references that may pertain to these verses? What was the writer trying to tell us about God? Answering questions such as these often helps make our Bible study richer and helps to deepen our understanding.

On Judges and Widows

The parable that Jesus tells in Luke 18 has two unnamed characters whose roles were quite familiar within Judaism: judges and widows. Like the image of God as shepherd that sets the stage for our Christian understanding of Jesus as the Good Shepherd or for pastors as “shepherds,” words like “judge” and “widow” evoked certain common understandings.

In ancient Israel the duty of judges was to maintain harmonious relations and to decide legal matters between Israelites. Establishing *shalom* among God’s people or peaceful and right relations was the ultimate goal. Widows were often deprived of their husbands’ support and could not inherit their estates, which passed on the deceased man’s sons or brothers. So disputes involving widows were fairly common. It was the responsibility of judges to hear complaints fairly and impartially; a role that was especially important because there was no such thing as “jury duty” in ancient Israel.

Care of widows was an important expectation within the covenant community. There are many biblical passages that speak of God’s expectation of mercy in the treatment of widows, orphans, and foreigners.

► WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Take a few minutes and look at some of the passages below to get a fuller grasp on how judges were expected to treat widows in the Old Testament: Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:16–17; 2 Chronicles 19:6–7; Psalms 7:11; Psalms 68:5; Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:17–18; Zechariah 7:9–10.

Luke on Prayer

More than any of the other Gospels, Luke has a greater emphasis on prayer. Most biblical scholars consider Luke to be the “Gospel of prayer.” Indeed, in several different stories in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Luke makes observations about Jesus praying that is not found in the other gospels. These include the stories of Jesus’ baptism (Luke 3:21); his choosing of the Twelve (Luke 6:12–16); and in Luke 11:1, Jesus even prays before the disciples ask him to teach them to pray! Keeping the Old Testament context in mind and Luke’s emphasis on prayer, let’s turn now to our chosen passage.

The Testy Text

The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18 is unique to Luke’s Gospel. Most of us have had someone in our lives who kept on badgering us until they “got on our last nerve.” Perhaps it was a child who repeatedly asked you for a toy until she finally wore you down. Maybe it was a congregational member who wanted you to serve on a committee and wouldn’t take no for an answer.

Regardless, most of us have known what it’s like to have someone bother us endlessly until they get what

they want. And that's precisely the image that Jesus uses to describe how he expects us to pray in Luke 18.

This parable appears to be a response to questions regarding when God's judgment will come and God's faithful be vindicated. For the Early Church, the delay of Christ's second coming was not just a chronological problem, it was a life problem. The concern was not solely that Christians were dying under various persecutions, but they were dying with no end in sight, even while the wicked seemed to prosper. "How long, O Lord?" was probably not an uncommon question.

It's a very human tendency for us to ask questions about when circumstances are going to change, especially during times of trial or persecution, whether individually or in community.

What do we do while we're waiting for things to change—particularly when suffering doesn't lighten or injustice seems so rampant? Jesus' response is that we pray—always! We pray night and day, expecting that God will grant justice to us just like an unjust judge will grant what the widow is asking for just to get her off his back.

▶ WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Can you think of a time in your life when you wondered how long you were going to be in a trying situation? Maybe a relationship was unstable or a loved one was diagnosed with a terminal illness. How did you respond to the ongoing crisis? Was constant prayer among your reactions?

Digging Deeper

The parable is introduced by a single sentence: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." We know from the previous chapter, that Jesus is still speaking with his disciples and encouraging them to constancy and perseverance in prayer. There is no geographical specificity in this passage either. We are told only that in a "certain" city there is a judge "who neither feared God nor respected

people." Given the kind of behavior expected of judges (as noted earlier) the parable makes it very clear that this judge can hardly be trusted to implement justice or have the slightest bit of compassion for the widow.

The widow is introduced next, but again we know nothing about her except that she is in need of justice. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." While we don't know the nature of her complaint, it is likely that she is asking the judge to make a third party give her what is owed to her, probably money or property or both. The judge is her only hope of getting a just settlement. Thus, persistence is not optional, but mandatory!

While the unjust judge may be callous, he is not stupid. He can tell from the widow's behavior that she will not stop bothering him until she gets what she wants. So the judge does the right thing, even if for the wrong reasons and the widow gets what she needs.

Persistence Pays Off

Remember how the parable started: Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. In effect, he was telling his disciples, that prayer for them should be as constant as their breathing. They were to pray always and not to get discouraged, even when it seemed like the wrongdoers were winning.

What a powerful message this can be for us today. With unemployment on the rise, wars raging around the world, people losing their homes, and sickness abounding, how can we attend to Jesus' message of persistent prayer? How can we model ourselves on this widow who through her tenacity and endurance finally got what she needed? Indeed, won't God give God's children what we need when we come before the throne of grace with our pushy and unrelenting prayers?

Not long ago the beloved wife of a dear colleague died of pancreatic cancer. Throughout her illness she

was daily lifted up in prayer by thousands of people around the country. The day she was to begin her chemotherapy, her spouse, a Lutheran pastor, began to receive calls from people, some of whom he knew and some whom he did not know.

Each caller said something like this: “I’m a friend of Pastor Johnny and I’m calling to pledge 5,000 prayer warriors. We will daily be in prayer for you, your wife, and your family.” While the numbers of pledged prayer warriors varied from caller to caller, the commitment to daily and persistent prayer was solid. One of the last callers even shared the content of his congregation’s prayers: “Lord,” we said, “Hold her or heal her and you know what our preference is.”

What a powerful witness to the persistence of prayer. Throughout their ordeal, my friends felt carried and upheld in prayer—by their families, their congregation, and by prayer warriors from near and far. And while the outcome was the ultimate healing that comes through death for believers, the “hold her” part of the warriors’ prayers were as real as if our God were embracing them in the flesh. Jesus is calling each of us to pray always and not to lose heart. Let’s continue our practice today!

▶ WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Have there been times in your prayer life when you have been like the persistent widow? What enables you to remain “pushy” in your prayers? What keeps you from being constant? How can your women’s group or congregation help?

Closing

One of the most beloved hymns in the Christian church was written more than 150 years ago by a man who knew tragedy and loss as well as the enduring comfort of persistent prayer.

Joseph Scriven was born in Dublin, Ireland,

in 1819, and came from a prosperous family. He graduated from Trinity College, Dublin. When he was 25 he decided to leave Ireland and immigrated to Canada. His departure seemed to be influenced by his religious beliefs as well as by a personal tragedy: the accidental drowning of his fiancée the night before their scheduled wedding. Later when he was settled in Canada, Scriven fell in love again but tragedy came the second time when his fiancée contracted tuberculosis and died.

Originally a poem, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” was never intended for publication. But when he learned of his mother’s serious illness and couldn’t visit her in faraway Dublin, Scriven wrote her a letter of comfort and enclosed the words of his poem which he called, “Pray without Ceasing.”

To close this session, sing, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” (*ELW* 742) and as you do, pray in your hearts for those who have or are experiencing tragedy or loss in their lives, for those who need the persistence of a prayer warrior, and for yourselves that you may be like the widow in our text and be constant before God’s presence in prayer.

Coming next session

In addition to being persistent in our prayer life we also need to be patient, to wait upon God, who as St. Paul assures us in Philippians 2:13, “Is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God’s good pleasure.” God desires that which is in our best interest, even if it’s not what we ask for.

The old joke about patience says, “Lord, give me patience and I need it right now!” For some of us, that’s what our prayer life is like. We pray and expect God to answer in our time, not God’s time. For our next session we will look at what Scripture has to say about waiting upon God who hears and answers prayer, but in God’s own time. Stay tuned.

Persistence

“Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel...” (EPHESIANS 6:18–19)

Thank you for agreeing to be a leader for this Bible study series on prayer.

As you prepare to lead others in these Bible study sessions, remember that you don't have to be an expert on prayer or the best intercessor in your congregation, circle, or group. You need only open your heart to God's will for those who attend, read the materials carefully, and be ready to experience the gifts God has in store for all who participate, including you!

Overall Structure

While these studies may be used individually, they are designed primarily for small groups. Before each session, take time to read the various biblical texts assigned in the session. You don't have to know each Bible passage by heart, but a minimal awareness will be useful as your group discusses the questions in the “What About You?” parts.

Since each session begins and ends with a devotion and closing, it will also be important to either familiarize yourself with the suggested hymns or

to try and have a musician or song-leader present to assist. Be sure to have copies of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* on hand. Should your congregation not be using *ELW*, check other hymnals like *Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW)* or *With One Voice (WOV)* for the suggested hymns. And if all else fails, feel free to change the selected hymn to suit the needs of your group. Flexibility in leadership is vital.

Creating a safe and relaxing space is important as you think about these studies too. Always keep your audience or participants in mind. Who will be coming—older women, college-aged students, mothers of young children, widows? Knowing who your participants are may help you think about room requirements. Some like to sit on sofas in lounge areas; others may prefer to be seated around tables with Bibles a plenty at hand. Still others may prefer to bring their own Bibles to the study. Mainly it's important to think ahead about those whom you will be leading so you can adequately prepare for their presence.

Helpful Homework

In the first session it will be helpful to take some time to do simple introductions after the devotions. Some may be attending Bible study for the first time or may not be acquainted with others in the group. The “What About You?” sections will certainly help the participants get to know one another better and develop a sense of group cohesiveness, but be sure that everyone feels welcome in the beginning.

It’s also important to encourage as broad a level of participation as possible. It may be difficult to know in this first gathering, but you’ll soon discover those who like to share and those who tend to be a bit shy. As the studies progress, do your best to ensure that everyone who wants to participate gets to do so. You might even suggest that those who tend to speak a lot “step back” to enable others to get into the discussion and that those who are more reserved “step up” and take a risk.

As you read the study together, explore the questions. Additional questions might emerge; feel free to pursue where the group is leading and don’t feel bound to cover every aspect of each study from start to finish. It’s important to remember as well that just as you don’t have to be an expert on prayer, you also don’t have to have all the answers to questions that may come up. It’s fine to say, “I don’t know” or “I’ll have to ask the pastor.” Sometimes it helps to simply sit in silence and let others respond if they feel so moved.

What Did We Learn?

After most programs or activities I try to include some sort of evaluation. Feedback is useful because it helps us understand what worked—and what didn’t—as we prepare to lead another session. Before you close with devotions, you might consider including a short feedback opportunity. Make it simple and fun. For instance, you could have a small stuffed animal or ball on hand

and toss it to someone inviting them to share something they liked or learned from the day’s session. After sharing they toss it to another person, until all have had an opportunity to contribute.

If you enjoy sharing leadership responsibilities, you may want to invite another participant to lead devotions for the next session. If so, be sure to extend the invitation to your group before you leave.

Finally, remember that God has something to say to each of us in and through Scripture. The United Church of Christ has a slogan that says, “God is still speaking!” Indeed, God is still speaking, and will do so through those gathered for these studies as well as through the biblical passages. Trust that God is present and do your best enjoy the experience of leading others into a deeper relationship with God, themselves and others. 🌸

The Rev. Gladys G. Moore (below) is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. For some 22 years she served as an urban pastor in Jersey City and Newark, N.J., and for 16 of those years she was also an assistant to the bishop of the New Jersey Synod. Pastor Moore now serves as Dean of Religious and Spiritual Life at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Mass.

