

Christians, what an amazing and mighty thing prayer truly is! Because through prayer, we come into the presence of God. And no matter how great the thing may be that we are asking for through prayer, God has promised to hear us through Jesus Christ, His Son! Think about what James says, James chapter 5: "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit." So if God through prayer can cause a drought and bring it to the end because of the prayer of that one man Elijah, how great prayer truly is! But prayer is not just something for the great saints of old like Elijah. Prayer is the privilege of every Christian. Prayer is the heartbeat of our faith. If you want to know the health of your soul, just look at how you pray.

But it doesn't take us very long before we realize just how difficult prayer can be. And I don't mean the act of praying. I'm not talking about the prayers you might've said this morning. Prayer is more than just one individual prayer. Rather, we're talking about being persistent in our prayers, to keep praying over the long haul. One pastor who lived in the 1800s put it very well when he said that it is far easier for us to begin a habit of prayer than it is to keep it up. Because we may feel moved to start praying, especially under some great distress. But to keep praying, to continue praying takes faith! Because all too often, Christians, we are tempted to give it up. The devil may convince us that we have no time to pray, that there are other things that deserve our attention far more. The devil may convince us that there is no use in our praying. What difference is the prayer of one person going to make? What difference will my prayers make in the grand scheme of things? The devil may even convince us that we can't pray that well, that our stumbling and stuttering prayers won't be heard for that reason. So all of these things and more get in the way of our praying, and they lead us to stop. They make us lose heart.

But Jesus tells us a parable today in Luke chapter 18, our Gospel reading, to lead us to always pray and to not lose heart. He says in verse 2: "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man." So the first person that we meet in this story, then, is a judge. But not fearing God shows us just how hopelessly corrupt this judge actually is. For example, in the Old Testament Jehoshaphat set many judges in the land of Judah, and he commanded them in 2 Chronicles chapter 19: "Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking bribes." So for a judge to fear God, then, means doing the things that are right: to give out justice, to deal with everyone fairly, to not take bribes, and so forth. But this man does not fear God, so he's doing all of those things. He is willing to be unjust. He's willing to hand out bad judgments if it meant a profit for himself. And even not respecting men here is also not a good thing, because it shows us that he's really just in this for himself. Picture the most corrupt politician that you can imagine, and you'd have a pretty good idea what this man is like. A man that you would never expect to do anything right or to do the right thing.

But Jesus goes on, verse 3: "And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary!'" So the second person that we meet in this story is a widow with a serious problem. And you have to understand that in those days widows didn't have any power of their own. We would normally expect a male relative to argue her case for her, someone like a son or brother and so forth. Boaz, for example, in the book of Ruth goes to argue the case for Ruth and Naomi. In Ruth chapter 3, we are told that Naomi says: "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest, but will settle the

matter today." So again, we would normally expect a male relative of some kind to be arguing her case for her. But the fact that she's arguing her case on her own shows just how alone and helpless she truly is. We're not told what her problem is exactly, but we can probably guess that someone is keeping something away from her, taking advantage of her powerless situation in order to keep something for themselves: food or clothing or money, whatever it may be. But because of who she is, all that she can really do in this situation is hope that this judge will give her the justice that she needs. But there's not much hope of that. The man seems hopelessly corrupt. What good would it do to plead with him? Why should she keep going back? It doesn't seem like it would do any good.

But yet this woman is persistent. She keeps coming back. She refuses to let go. You can imagine what it was like for that judge. You can picture him walking into the street, and all of a sudden, there she is, saying, "Give me justice against my adversary!" And then he turns the corner to go to the courthouse, and there she is again, saying, "Give me justice against my adversary!" And even when he's getting ready to go home, there she is again. "Give me justice against my adversary!" And he sees her standing by the door of his house. "Give me justice!" She finds him in the marketplace. "Give me justice!" Maybe she's even peering in his window as he eats. "Give me justice against my adversary!" Again and again and again she comes to him, always asking him for the same thing. He's able to ignore her for a while, but eventually it's all too much. And he says, beginning in verse 4: "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's willing to give her what she wants, if only to shut her up!

But the words that Jesus puts into the mouth of this judge are very interesting. They're humorous and instructive. Because "keeps bothering me" could also be translated as "keeps beating me." It's like she's tapping him over and over again. She's constantly striking him like dripping water. That's how persistent that she is. And "beat me down" could also be translated as "give me a black eye." She is a fighter who keeps throwing punches, who refuses to back down. So this judge is not just annoyed with her. He's a little afraid of her! It's like a cat running away from a mouse. "Fine, fine! I'll give you whatever you want. Just leave me alone!"

And yet, Jesus says, verse 6: "Hear what the unrighteous judge says." This unjust judge teaches us something about persistence in prayer. Not because God is unjust. That's not Jesus' point. Nor is it that we need to give God a black eye before he'll give us what we want. That's not what Jesus is saying, either. But rather, this widow shows us what it means to be persistent, because she had nothing to go on. She had no promise. She had no assurance. She had no way of knowing that this judge would ever do the right thing. And yet, through her persistence the judge does the right thing and gives her the justice that she needs. And if a bad judge does the right thing because of the persistence of this woman, how much more will our good God answer the prayers of those who call to him day and night? Jesus says, beginning in verse 7: "And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily." So God will hear you, Christians. He's not going to ignore you. He's not going to be too busy to listen. You are not wasting his time. God will answer you, and he will not delay.

So when you are faced with some terrible situation in your life--conflict in the family, trouble at work, whatever it may be--pray and keep praying. God will give justice to his elect. When you

are faced with all of the evil in the world around us--a society which is going downhill, whether it be troubles in Washington, or the promotion of sin in our media and in our culture--pray and keep praying. God will give justice to his elect. And when you're faced with the struggle of being a Christian, the hostility of a world that hates God, pray and keep praying. God will give justice to his elect. Don't give up because you think God won't hear you. He has promised to hear you through Jesus Christ, his Son. Don't give up because you think it won't matter. Think of all the great things that God did through the prayers of his saints. Don't give up because you think you can't pray. Prayer is never about the pretty words that we use. It is better for the one who stumbles and stutters and struggles with prayer every single day than the one who can say things beautifully, but never prays at all. The key to prayer, Christians, is persistence: persistent, constant, unwavering prayer. Ask and keep asking, because God will give justice to his elect!

But I know that's not easy. If persistent prayer were easy, then there would be no struggle in prayer. This is why Jesus says in verse 8: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus tells us that before the end of all things many will struggle. Many will struggle to be persistent. He even says in Matthew 24: "Because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold." Jesus knows our weakness, Christians. Jesus knows how hard it is for us to pray. Jesus even knows that this struggle of ours is going to be lifelong, that we're going to deal with it all of our days. But even our struggling, stuttering, feeble prayers should not hinder us from praying. Because God will give justice to his elect even without our prayers. The Son of Man will come and will bring all the evil that we see in this world to an end. He will come, and he will make things right. Nothing will stop him from doing that! And that too should lead us to pray, to know that God will not fail to do what he says he's going to do. So even though we start and stop, even though we stumble and stutter, even though we sometimes have to use all of our willpower just to pray, God hears our prayers, and he teaches us how to pray. Like Paul says in Romans chapter 8: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." God himself teaches us how to pray. So we need not fear to come to him!

So pray, Christians, and keep praying! Be persistent in your prayers. Even if it's hard for you to do, even if it's a struggle to pray consistently, pray and do not lose heart. Be like that scrappy, persistent widow, and God will hear you and answer you as he has promised to do through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Almighty Father, who gives justice to your elect, teach us to pray through Jesus Christ, your Son, so that we may not lose heart, but call always on you, because you are the God who hears; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.