

**2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4:5****Luke 18: 1 – 8****HOW TO PRAY**

**Introduction:** Sometimes Jesus' parables are not the simple stories they appear to be. The parable we heard this morning about 'the Unjust Judge' is one of them. The corrupt Judge and the bothersome widow are hardly the kind of characters Jesus holds up to us as role models.

**1. Hearing the Parable:** Truth is, this is a strange parable and some may find it puzzling or even disturbing in what it seems to say both about God and about prayer. But let us open ourselves to its message.

Luke's introduction to this parable says, "Jesus told this parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." So, is that Jesus' message to his followers then and to us now? Be persistent in prayer. Don't give up praying and bringing your cause before God. God will hear you and eventually give you justice if you just keep persevering. That is the first problem. Is that the God Jesus has been revealing in his preaching and teaching?

Of course not. There is something else going on here. The whole of Jesus' teaching is that God is not like the other gods and idols that humans create. The one we see in Jesus is like the Father Jesus reveals, who waits until he sees his prodigal son far off and runs to meet him and embrace him and bring him home. God is the one who acts in Jesus and goes the way of the cross in order to bring God's justice to the earth. God is the One who is with us in all our travails, sharing them through the travails of God's Son – yes, to hell and back. Jesus' story is not really about the unjust judge - it's not about the persistence of a widow. Their characters reveal a story about who the God of Jesus is through dramatic contrast. Jesus says, "If an unjust judge can be wearied into giving a widow justice, *how much more* will God (the gracious, generous God Jesus portrays in his life) give his children what they need? That is a scholar's interpretation of the parable.

**2. Lessons from the parable:** But there are two things that trouble me about this parable that are closer and more problematic to our living as Christians here and now.

They are both linked: "Who is the God we pray to?" and "What happens when we pray?"

The first problem for me is, when we bring our deepest needs to God, our just causes, even matters of life and death sometimes, what we expect will depend on who we think God is. Is God the distant, powerful, almighty, Supreme Being who can do anything He likes at the flick of a divine finger? After all, doesn't being all powerful is what God is all about? I shudder sometimes at the practices of prayer both inside and outside the Christian community that treat prayer as the means by which one gets access to the riches of heaven and the largesse of the doddery but divine heavenly Father.

I have a vivid memory of when I was a very young Christian, seeing this poster in a church foyer [Pic: *Prayer moves the hand that moves the world*]. I remember feeling very uncomfortable with those words and what they expressed. My prayers change God's will and purpose? I now feel nervous about the desire for power implicit in that belief and the way it has been manipulated by some Christians. Can I say it bluntly? Our prayers can not manipulate God and change God's will and purpose for people.

Our praying is not to an unjust judge that we, like a persistent widow, have to pester and pressure God into action. If we had a hundred, a thousand or even a million people praying, would God be impressed? Could God be cajoled into doing something God wouldn't otherwise do? When I hear people talking about prayer as though that gives them a direct line into the mind and heart of God that is their special privilege, I get nervous. The next step is usually for them to declare that they know what God wants not only for themselves, but for others, and often the rest the world. Here are the seeds of religious totalitarianism; the dictatorship of those who are sure their group knows God's will for everyone.

**3. How to Pray:** But Christian prayer does not come naturally. I prayed before I ever called myself a Christian. I think it was in Grade 4; standing outside the Principal's office, I offered prayer out of my Sunday School understanding: "O God, please don't let me get the cuts." Or, sometimes in desperation; "O God, if you get me off, I'll promise never to hit Glen Heckenberg again, no matter what he calls me." Remember, Jesus' disciples came to him and asked: **Lord, teach us to pray.** But Jesus' disciples were Jews. They knew how to pray. They had been taught to pray from childhood. But those disciples recognized that Christian prayer is different from the natural prayers, the spontaneous prayers that anyone can pray. Jesus' disciples were asking him, "How do we pray to the One to whom you pray?" So Jesus gave them a model prayer, **When you pray say, Our Father...**

How this is a model for us is another sermon or to be learned in a study group. But inherent in it are some quick principles. When we pray:

- The address of the prayer is simple, profound yet intimate, "Abba". We can approach God directly, simply, confidently and affectionately.
- Christian prayer is not addressed, "To whom it may concern". Jesus teaches us who God is. In Jesus, God comes into human life, in him we see God in the flesh. So we pray to one who knows us intimately, has shared our pain and knows from inside our human aspirations. Remember that, whenever you pray.
- We can be sure that this God has a loving purpose for the world.
- Our needs have their place too, and so Jesus teaches us to ask for bread and forgiveness. Concern for others, both near and far, can be offered to God in the light of what we believe, in the light of Jesus, to be God's purpose for the world.

Jesus told us "to pray always and not to lose heart." We persist in prayer because our faith is that God is faithful and God's way of dealing with the world's sin and injustice through the cross will be vindicated. That's why he asked the question at the end of the parable, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will he find people who pray, not as if God needed to be pestered and cajoled, but believing that, whatever the outcome, God is always the gracious and generous one who is more willing to give than we are to ask. "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Indeed!