

Ask, Ask, and Then Ask Some More

My name is Marcus, I'm a pastor in training here at CC. Excited to be with you guys this morning talking about unanswered prayer. Light, easy topic this morning. I'm guessing Kent didn't want to talk to you about that, so he put me up here. 'Preciate that Kent.

But if you've got your bibles, turn with me to Luke 18. That's where we'll be here in a bit. I was pleased to discover that this room didn't smell quite as much like weed this week as it did last week. So that's always good as a church: to be on a 'less-and-less-weed-smell' trajectory. We feel like that's the right direction for us as a church.

But this morning, we are continuing on in our series all about prayer. We're learning a lot about the ins and outs of prayer, how to understand it, and how to practice it well. We've even been participating in these prayer prompts where we've been spending a few moments of our day joining together to ask God to do certain things. Our hope is that it's been good for you guys and that you been able to pray more frequently than you had before. I know for me personally I've been praying more because of it.

So today, we're going to look at a parable, or a short story, that Jesus tells about prayer. Let's take a look at Luke 18, starting in v. 1:

*[1] And he [that's Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that **they ought always to pray and not lose heart.***

So right off the bat, the author Luke tells us exactly what this parable is going to be about. Which I love. There are plenty of times where Jesus' parables are not super clear to the audience he's talking to and they usually go over the head of his disciples. But for this one Jesus decides to throw them a bone so they can understand it. From the get go, Luke says here's the point of this parable Jesus is about to tell: "that we ought *always to pray*, and we ought to *not lose heart*." **So always pray, and not lose heart in regards to prayer.** And really, those are two sides of the same coin. Praying always means not losing heart in prayer, and not losing heart in prayer, means you pray always.

In other words, to get to the point where we are "always praying," we need to not *lose heart* in prayer. Unfortunately, I think a lot of us have done exactly that: lost heart in prayer. Here's what I mean: I think we've all been in situations where we've prayed for something to only have that prayer not answered. It could've been something small we prayed for—help studying for an exam, a raise, a friendship. Or maybe we prayed for something big—for healing for a family member with cancer, maybe it's another family member on their deathbed and you're asking the Lord to extend their time, maybe there is relational tension between you and your spouse and you don't know how to fix it. Whether it was big or small, a lot of us have probably experienced situations where we prayed for God to do something we really wanted him to do, and then he

didn't do whatever it was. And then, as a result, overtime, we become less inclined to ask him for things in the future because of that. We become less inclined to talk to him.

Because of what he didn't do, we've experienced a lessened desire to pray. We've been hesitant or even insistent on not asking God for things because it didn't seem like our prayer worked in the past. In Jesus' language, that is us "losing heart" in prayer.

And so what Jesus is going to do in this passage, is tell us a story to help us *not* lose heart in prayer. Make sense? So here's the parable, picking it up in v. 2:

*[2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who **neither feared God nor respected man.**"*

Aight, let's stop here. So character #1 in the story is a judge who it says, neither feared God, nor respected man." And so we're on the same page, this judge is a baaaaaaad man. And not in a good sense. This judge does not fear God, which means he doesn't get God's sense of justice. He has no moral compass guiding his decisions as a judge. And to boot, he doesn't respect man, meaning he doesn't like people. Not sure about you but for me, judges need to have at least two characteristics, 1) they need to get justice and 2) they need to care about people to some extent and he has neither. So again, this is a bad dude. Now here comes character #2 in the story, v 3:

*[3] And there was a widow in that city who **kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'***

So widows were really vulnerable back in Jesus' day. And because of that this widow might have had something stolen, or was maybe taken advantage of in some way, we don't know exactly, but we do know that she needs justice. So this widow has been wronged and low and behold, who does she ask for justice? Our friend, Mr. Judge. Recap. He doesn't fear God or respect people. And what does she do, she keeps coming to him, saying "Give me justice against my adversary."

So here's how I'd like to imagine this scenario. The judge wakes up in the morning, it's a normal morning. He wakes up at his normal time of 7am, checks the paper, starts getting his coffee ready, and when goes to look at his phone he sees that he's missed 20 calls. So he's a little frantic. And as he checks the voicemails, every single one of them is this widow pleading her case. He thinks it's a little odd. How did she even get his number in this made up story? He dismisses the calls and heads to work, well as he makes his way out, who's out there walking their dog past his house? You guessed it, the widow. And on and on, she somehow shows up everywhere he goes, even going so far as to show up at his job in a janitor disguise costume, sweeping the hallway, saying, you really should give that widow her justice. She's this close to being considered a stalker.

Now again, let's not miss this. What is this widow pleading the judge for? Justice right? She wants justice. So I say that to say, she's not asking the judge for some sort of handout or a new car. Or for a closer parking spot at Target, or for some model-esque spouse. She's asking that her wrongs be made right. She is asking for something that she truly needs, and is going right to the source that can give her this justice. And she doesn't beat around the bush, right? She point blank asks for what she wants. Give me justice against my adversary.

And she doesn't just ask one time. Oh no, the Bible says she keeps coming to him. She's asking day in and day out. Over and over and over again. She is wanting to make sure this judge does not pass her by, that her case is continually before him. So what is his response in v.4:

*[4] For a **while he refused**, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, [5] yet **because this widow keeps bothering me**, I will give her justice, so that she will not **beat me down** by her continual coming.'"*

So the judge finally caves in. And the reason why...so she will not beat him down anymore with her persistence. Now here's the funny part, that phrase is considered very violent language in the Greek. It means to literally "strike under the eye" or to "bruise." The judge feels like he's in a four-on-one WWE wrestling match, getting pummeled with a steel chair, and really it's just this widow being persistent. He feels physically threatened by this widow. And because of her persistence the judge gives in. He gives her due justice. A judge again that doesn't care about justice and surely nothing about this woman, and yet gives her exactly what she needs.

Now, here's the point Jesus wants to make from that story. Look at v. 6:

*[6] And the Lord said, "Hear what the **unrighteous judge says**. [7] And will not **God** give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? **Will he delay long** over them? [8] I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

Now I'm sure some of us will be like, wait a second Marcus, so the purpose of this parable is that God is like a crooked judge? That's a weird way to convince people to not lose heart bro. To which I would say, Nah dude. This is more like a "how-much-more-" form of teaching. The point is that **if the persistence of the widow works against a crooked judge who doesn't value justice and doesn't care about people at all, how much more will it work with God? How much more will it work with a God who cares about you so much. How much more will it work with a God who values justice because he made each of us in his image. He's not comparing God and the judge, he's contrasting God and the judge.** That's the point that Jesus is making: he's saying if persistence works with a crooked judge, it will surely work with God. Simple enough, right?

Now, if you're like me and think a little longer about it, you might be like, yah, it's simple, but why? Why does it take persistence for God to respond? Why would he not just respond

immediately? So the passage says God won't delay long, but why does he delay at all? If he cares about us infinitely and cares about the things we ask for, and cares about justice, why does it take more than one try to get him to respond? Simply put, **If God cares about us, why is there such a thing as unanswered prayer?** That's really the question a lot of us are asking right?

Now let's make sure we're not getting too ahead of ourselves. Unanswered prayer can be real tough and a huge obstacle for us, but unasked prayer can actually be a bigger problem. Some of us have crossed over into being cynical about prayer towards God and we don't stay in the game long enough to get to unanswered prayer. We just stop asking. So some of us need to wrestle with the reality that for us to get to *unanswered* prayer, there has to be *asked* prayer first.

With that being said, when we ask God for things, what do we do with the fact that sometimes it seems like God doesn't respond? Biblically, we're actually given a handful of reasons for why prayer sometimes goes unanswered:

1. ...because we ask with wrong motives.

So this one is straight out of James 4:3, where it says this:

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

So James says it pretty plainly that one of the reasons why our prayers go unanswered is because our motives are off. God may not answer because what we are asking is self-centered, selfish, or a veiled attempt at getting God to cater to our own selfish desires.

Here's a few examples:

- Maybe you're asking God to provide a better paying job for you so you have more money, but you're currently being driven by greed and materialism. You're spending far too much of the money you *currently* make on things you don't need, on superficial things. You're not seeing your money as being given to you by God to live minimally and generously with. So to be in that situation, and ask God for a better-paying job, is really just asking him to cater to your materialism right? I need you to hear me say this, **God very well may not want to appeal to your greed and materialism because he wants to heal you from it.** He wants to help you walk in freedom from it.
- Maybe you're currently praying for God to provide you with a boyfriend, a girlfriend, or a spouse. That's your one constant prayer. And praying for that isn't necessarily wrong, but what if you're praying for God to provide you with a romantic partner so *that* you don't have to deal with the things that He is using singleness to expose in you. **What if you're praying for him to provide you with a spouse so that you don't ever have to learn how to be content in who you are and who He is without one?** It may be that

God doesn't answer that prayer, or at least doesn't for now, because you're asking with wrong motives.

- I'll pick on the students for a second, what about praying for success on a test that you chose to blow off studying for? Think about what you're asking God to do there. You're asking him to cater to your lack of preparation. You're asking him to do what you refused to do. Now can God do the impossible? Of course, he can cliffnotes you the information directly into your brain if he wants to, but it may be that God doesn't answer that prayer. It might not be consistent with God's character to step in and orient himself around your refusal to study for that exam.

And the list goes on right? Hopefully you can see how this works. There may be times where our prayers go unanswered because what we're actually doing is asking God to orient himself around our selfishness and disordered desires. And God being the loving Father that he is, says, Hey I love you too much to just cater to your desires that actually aren't good desires. I love you too much to give you things that are actually destructive in your life. Does that make sense? Alright next...

2. Because it's not the right time yet.

Often in the bible, we'll see that there are times when we are asking for the right thing, but it's not currently time for it to happen.

So here's one *major* example of this from the bible. Think about how long God's people—the nation of Israel—prayed for a Messiah to come. Think about how many *hundreds* of years they prayed that this king would one day come and set things right for them and their nation. They were praying for the correct thing, but it just wasn't time for it to happen yet. Furthermore, Jesus will often respond to his disciples' requests by saying that it just isn't time for something yet. They're asking for the right things, but it just isn't time for it to happen yet. There are going to be times where we are asking for absolutely the right thing, but it's just not time for it to happen.

It's in these types of situations where we have to return once again to the idea that God is a *good father*. That he sees things from a different vantage point than we do. He has details that we don't. Which means that his timing is going to be better than ours, even if we don't always understand why. This is where we get to lean into the fact that God is faithful, he can be trusted, and he can be waited upon. It doesn't make it easy at all to wait for God to do something that you know he wants to do. But one of the things we have to remember is that God works in the waiting too.

3. ...because of unacknowledged sin in our lives.

It's easy to overlook, but all over the bible is this idea that when there is sin in our life that we're aware of, and are refusing to acknowledge or do anything about, God will often refuse to hear and respond to our prayers. So for example take Isaiah 59, he says it like this:

*[1] Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save,
nor his ear too dull to hear.*

**[2] But your iniquities have separated
you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you,
so that he will not hear.**

So Isaiah says “it’s not that God can’t respond, it’s not that he can’t act and move—it’s actually that your sin has separated you from him.”

Again in Psalm 66, the Psalmist says “if I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.” In 1 Peter, it says that men who don’t treat their wives with respect will have their own prayers “hindered” as a result.¹ In the book of Amos, God refuses to hear his people because they are living unjustly towards the poor and oppressed.² And there are plenty of others.

So the **idea is that there will be times where God refuses to hear and respond to prayer because his people are refusing to do things about their sin and any injustice they are committing.** And before you think, well that seems very spiteful of God doesn’t it, I’d say it actually isn’t at all. Think about it this way, if you’re a mother or father in the room you’ve probably seen this scenario played out before, you’re at the playground watching your kid play on the slide and then as he pushes a kid down so he could get him out of the way. You call your kiddo over over and ask hey, what just happened and they look at you completely clueless and then asks you for a snack. Now, what would any good father or mother do in this situation? They would be like, I love you and... no, first we need to address what happened between you and this other kid, before we discuss anything about getting you a snack. You want them to learn right from wrong, and in a way you want them to repent of what they did and reconcile with this kid, who apparently is still crying. Good fathers and mothers don’t let their kiddo change the subject when something is off or wrong.

So with all these passages about God not answering prayer when his people are in outright sin, God is simply saying “I’m not going to play the change-the-subject game. Let’s acknowledge and deal with the sin happening here, and *then* we can talk about other things.” So, with that in mind, is there any obvious sin present in your life that you’re putting off dealing with? If there is, that could be why you don’t feel like your prayers are accomplishing much.

¹ 1 Peter 3:7

² Amos 5:21-24

4. Because God is better than what we're asking for.

Now I know this one can be a little tough for some of us. Just know that I'm not saying "hey God's better than whatever you're asking, so you shouldn't care at all about that thing anymore!" Learning that God is enough even when he doesn't give us what we're asking for is often a grueling, painful, heart-wrenching process. It's one of the hardest, best, most frustrating, most helpful things to learn.

If prayer ultimately is to get us closer to God so then he is truly what we desire. Let me reverse it, **if God gave you everything you asked for, as soon as you asked for it, your relationship with the Lord would eventually be boiled down into God being no more than a genie in a bottle.** God would be just be a tool by which you get stuff, rather than being a loving Father who wants to just spend time with you. And here's the thing, God knows deep down that we need him more than we need anything we ask for, so sometimes, in his infinite power and knowledge of the future, he will not provide us with [fill in the blank], because he is better than the very thing we are asking for currently.

So in the Bible, we see this with Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. This is the somewhat well-known "thorn in the flesh" passage. So Paul says he has a thorn that's been in his life. We don't know what that is exactly, could be an ailment, could be a particular sin that he consistently goes back to over and over, could be anything. Either way, he has this thorn that he prays to God three times to take away—he's asking, asking, and asking again. He's persistent like the widow. And God eventually responds and say this...

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore [Paul says, "in light of that..."] I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

So here is what God told Paul and what Paul came to realize as a result: the grace of God was far more helpful and more meaningful and more lasting than a life *without* this thorn in the flesh. Let me say this another way, **The presence of God in the midst of his suffering was far better than the absence of his suffering.**

So there may be times when God doesn't provide what you're specifically asking him for because he wants to give you something better: he wants to give you *himself* instead. And that's ultimately the goal of prayer anyway: not getting *stuff from* God, but getting *God himself*.

So there are a number of reasons that God may not answer our prayers. And some of them are gonna be very easy to spot in our lives, and some of them are going to be a lot harder to figure out. Ultimately, we aren't gonna know 100% of the time *which* of those reasons is the reason

our prayers didn't get answered. We can do our best to ask God to help us see any selfish motives we have in our prayers. We can ask him to expose sin that we need to repent of and do something about. We can do all of that, but we aren't always going to know exactly what reason it is that our prayer isn't being answered.

So here's what I would suggest. When you run into situations where you are *persisting* in prayer—where you're asking, asking, and asking again and it doesn't seem like God is answering you, here's what I'd do: *work your way through that list*. Ask first, "am I asking for this with completely wrong motives? Is this primarily a self-focused, self-interested prayer?" Ask next, "am I trying to play 'change the subject' with God? Am I asking God to do something while knowing full well that there are obvious areas of my life that I'm refusing to address?" Then, ask "is this a time where God is just saying 'not yet'? Is this a good thing to ask for, but God wants me to keep asking?" And then finally, ask if this is a situation where God is wanting to give you himself because he is better than what you're asking for. Could be that it's one of those, could be that it's several of those.

And truth be told, you're gonna need a lot of help from the Scriptures, and from other followers of Jesus to help sort through which of those it is. You need the bible itself, and other people who know you to help you figure it all out. And even *still*, there are going to be times where at the end of the day, we don't know the exact reason why God isn't answering your prayers. So here's what I'd suggest in those moments—*keep asking*. Ask, ask, and ask some more. **Do not, as Jesus says, "lose heart" in prayer just because you don't understand it all or because you don't understand why God isn't answering. Don't. Lose. Heart.**

And here's why you don't have to lose heart. **Did you know there was at least one occasion on which God didn't even answer Jesus' prayers?** Take a look with me on the screen at this passage—this is Matthew 26. We are now within a day of Jesus' death on the cross. And Jesus knows that it's coming. And so he takes a few of his closest disciples to a place called Gethsemane so he can pray. He tells them that his soul is "very sorrowful, overwhelmed to the point of death," and at the same time he knows that people are out to get him, so he tells them to keep watch while he prays.

And here's what he asks:

"My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me."

Now, it's obvious from the rest of the bible that when he says "this cup," what he's referring to is his impending death. He can feel his gruesome horrible death approaching, and he asks God the Father, essentially, "if there's any other way to do this—if there's any other way to accomplish what we're about to accomplish, let's do that." And God gives no answer. So Jesus goes back to check in on his disciples, expecting them to be fervently praying I'd bet and lo-and-behold what are they doing—sleeping like some hooligans. Thanks guys. And then it says Jesus goes back and he prays again. Then he goes back to the disciples, they're back asleep. Goes back and

prays a third time, same thing. He's asking, he's asking, and he's asking some more. He's *persisting* in prayer. Then he comes back to his disciples, and he's taken into custody, to eventually be killed.

So I want you to notice in the story, **the disciples had lost heart, but Jesus had not**. Despite everything, despite his prayer going directly, undeniably unanswered despite him persisting in it, he did not lose heart. And he never would. All the way to the point of being nailed to a cross for the people who *had* lost heart. And it's **precisely because his prayer went unanswered by God in the garden, that he ends up dying for them**.

So here's my point: **no matter how many of our prayers go unanswered, no matter how many times we ask God for something and don't feel like we hear back, it's precisely because of the cross that we know his affections for us haven't changed. We don't measure God's love for us by the number of our prayers he answers. We measure God's love for us by the cross**. You see, *we* may lose heart, but *Jesus* never does. And it's because he *never* lost heart, that we can *learn* how to not lose heart as well. Because the prayer of Jesus went unanswered, we can endure in the midst of our *own* unanswered prayers. We can know, without a doubt, if we are followers of Jesus, that it can't be that he doesn't love us. It can't be that he doesn't care. And we know that because of the cross.

And practically for you, when you are persisting in prayer, here's what that means: ask, ask and ask again. You can be confident that God has not abandoned you, that he hasn't given up on you, and so you can just continue to ask.

So here's what I want to do as we close. Eric and musicians, if y'all want to come on up. We've been spending time each week praying in a specific way at the end of the teaching. Here's what I want us to pray for. Very simple: *where have we lost heart in prayer?* What is the thing (or *things*) that you have given up praying about? Maybe you've never prayed for it because you just don't think it'd make a difference. Maybe you prayed for it once and nothing happened and you just gave up as a result. Or maybe it was something you prayed about for months, even *years*—and eventually you just gave up because it didn't feel like it was getting anywhere.

Now, for whatever that thing is, here are the specific things I'd like you to pray through right now, over the next few minutes. We'll put these on the screen for reference. In prayer, ask God the following questions about that very thing. Again, you really need the Scriptures and other followers of Jesus to fully process through these, but I think praying through them this morning will be a start.:

- First: if I'm asking with wrong motives, would you reveal that to me?
- Second, if the answer is "not yet," will you give me patience and confidence?
- Third, if I'm ignoring sin in my life, would you grant me conviction?
- And then lastly, and probably most importantly: how are you better than what I'm asking for?

So those are the questions we want to pray through together this morning. So I'll give you some space to do that. We'll leave those questions up on the screen, and I want you to take the one thing or the few things that you feel like you've "lost heart" praying about, and pray through those questions.