**The Gospel of Luke**

**Lesson 15** Luke 18:1-17 The Persistent Widow/The Pharisee and Tax Collector!

**Questions:**

1. What important truth did you learn from the lecture, and how does it apply to your life?
2. Read Wiersbe pages 73-78.

How would you explain why God might delay in answering our prayers? Why is it important that we persist in our prayers?

1. Read Luke 18:1-8 along with the article below entitled, “What can we learn from the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge?”

The parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8) is part of a series of illustrative lessons Jesus Christ used to teach His disciples about prayer. Luke introduces this lesson as a parable meant to show the disciples “that they should always pray and never give up” (verse 1, NLT).

The parable of the widow and the judge is set in an unnamed town. Over that town presides an unjust judge who has no fear of God and no compassion for the people under his jurisdiction. In the Jewish community, a judge was expected to be impartial, to judge righteously, and to recognize that judgment ultimately belongs to God (Deuteronomy 1:16–17). Thus, the judge in this story is incompetent and unqualified for the job. Justice was not being served.

A needy widow repeatedly comes before the judge to plead her case. According to Jewish law, widows deserve special protection under the justice system (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17–21; James 1:27). But this unjust judge ignores her. Nevertheless, she refuses to give up.

Eventually, the judge says to himself, “I don’t fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!” (Luke 18:4–5, NLT). The widow gets the justice she was seeking. Then Jesus explains His point: if an uncaring, unfit, ungodly judge answers with justice in the end, how much more will a loving and holy Father give what is right to His children?

We do not always get immediate results when we pray. Our definition of swift justice is not the same as the Lord’s definition. The parable of the persistent widow demonstrates that effective prayer requires tenacity and faithfulness. A genuine disciple must learn that prayer never gives up and is based on absolute trust and faith in God. We can fully count on the Lord to answer when, where, and how He chooses. God expects us to keep on asking, seeking, knocking, and praying until the answers come (Matthew 7:7–8). Disciples of Jesus are people of persistent faith.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Provide at least two lessons you learn from this parable. What is the main lesson?
2. What do you learn from the following about God and prayer? (Read the article below entitled, “Does God hear my prayers?”)
* Matthew 6:5-7
* Matthew 7:7-8
* Matthew 7:9-11
* James 4:3
* 1 John 5:14–15

God hears everything, including prayers. He is God. Nothing gets by Him (Psalm 139:1–4). He is sovereign over everything He created (Isaiah 46:9–11). So the question is not whether God is aware of every prayer (He is), but whether God is tuning in to our prayers with an intent to answer them.

God wants us to pray. He has created prayer as a means by which we can enjoy Him (Revelation 3:20), confess our sin (1 John 1:9), ask Him to meet our needs (Psalm 50:15), and align our wills with His (Jeremiah 29:11–12; Luke 22:42). One kind of prayer is guaranteed to be granted. Luke 18:13–14 describes the prayer of repentance. When we call upon the Lord in humble repentance, He is eager to justify and forgive us.

However, when considering prayer, it is important to remember that most promises of God in Scripture were written to His people. In the Old Testament, those promises were for Israel and all who united with them. In the New Testament, those promises were written to the followers of Jesus. It is a misuse of Scripture to pull out isolated verses and try to apply them to any situation we want, including prayer. Even though the Lord knows and hears all, He has given some circumstances in which He will not listen to our prayers:

1. When we choose to hold on to sin rather than repent and change, God will not hear our prayers. In Isaiah 1:15, the Lord says, “When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!” Proverbs 28:9 says, “If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable.”

**Example:** A young couple is living together in sexual sin, yet they pray for God’s blessing on their home.

1. God will not hear our prayers when we ask according to our selfish desires.
James 4:3 says, “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.”

**Example:** A man is dissatisfied with his three-year-old Toyota, so he prays for a brand-new Mercedes.

1. When what we ask is not in accordance with His will for us. First John 5:14 says, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything *according to his will*, he hears us.”

**Example:** We pray fervently for a new job, but God’s plan requires that we stay where we are and be a witness to our coworkers.

1. When we do not ask in faith. In Mark 11:24, Jesus said, “I tell you, whatever you
ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.” However,
faith is not believing for something; it is believing in Someone. Our faith is in the character of God and His desire to bless and comfort us. When we pray, we should have faith that He hears us and will grant every request that is in line with His will
for us (1 John 5:14–15).

**Example:**We ask God to supply a financial need but continue to worry and make faithless comments to our families and coworkers, such as, “I’m probably going to go to the poorhouse. I’ll never get that money.”

God is holy and desires us to be holy as He is (Leviticus 22:32; 1 Peter 1:16). When He knows that we are seeking that holiness as well, He is delighted to answer our prayers in ways that continue our spiritual growth. Jesus said, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7). The secret to prayer is abiding in Christ so that whatever we ask is in accordance with His heart (Psalm 37:4). Only then can we have the confidence that God does hear our prayers with an intent to answer them.[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. According to the article above, when does God *not* answer our prayers
(Give scriptural reference)?

**Personal reflection**: How is your prayer life? Do you feel your prayers are not heard or answered? Could some unconfessed sin (Psalm 66:18) in your life hinder your prayers? If yes, confess your sins according to 1 John 1:9, knowing that God is ready and willing to forgive (He will listen to your prayers and respond).

1. Read Luke 18:9-14 along with the article below entitled, “What is the meaning of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?”

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple (Luke 18:9-14) is rich with spiritual truth. In fact, it contains the very essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As verse 9 tells us, Jesus spoke this parable to those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (NKJV). Jesus spoke often of the issue of righteousness, pleading with His hearers to understand their utter inability to be righteous enough to attain the kingdom of heaven. This knowledge was essential if they were to understand His mission on earth, which was to save sinners—those who knew they could not save themselves.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, thought their own goodness was so impressive that it could not fail to make them acceptable to God. They held rigorously to the ceremonies and traditions of the law, making a public show of their religiosity, all to be seen by other men, many of whom they despised as being beneath them. The Pharisee in the story is the epitome of one who is self-justifying. Notice that his prayer has no elements of confession. He does not ask forgiveness for his sins, perhaps because he believes he has nothing to confess. Nor is there any word of praise or thanksgiving to God. His prayer is all about him. Even the thanks he does offer is designed to exalt himself and place himself above others whom he treats with disdain. Going to the temple to pray with the condition of his heart as it was, he might as well have stayed home. Such a “prayer” is not heard by God.

Unlike the Pharisee, who stands boldly in the temple reciting his prayers of self-congratulation, the tax collector stood “afar off” or “at a distance,” perhaps in an outer room, but certainly far from the Pharisee who would have been offended by the nearness of this man. Tax collectors, because of their association with the hated Romans, were seen as traitors to Israel and were loathed and treated as outcasts. This man’s posture spoke of his unworthiness before God. Unable to even lift his eyes to heaven, the burden of his guilt and shame weighed heavily upon him, and the load he carried had become unbearable. Overcome by his transgressions, he beats his breast in sorrow and repentance and appeals to God for mercy. The prayer he speaks is the very one God is waiting to hear, and his attitude is exactly what God wants from all who come to Him.

The tax collector exhibits precisely what Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Being poor in spirit means admitting we have nothing to offer to God to atone for our sin. We come to God as empty, impoverished, despised, bankrupt, pitiable, desperate beggars. The tax collector recognizes his sinful condition and seeks the only thing that can bridge the gap between himself and God. “Have mercy on me,” he cries, and we know from the end of the parable that God heard his prayer for mercy and answered it. Jesus tells us in verse 14 that the tax collector went away justified (made righteous) because he had humbled himself before God, confessing that no amount of works could save him from his sin and that only God’s mercy could.
If we are truly broken-hearted over our sin, we can be assured of God’s boundless love and forgiveness in Christ. He has promised in His word to accept us, love us, and make us alive again through His Son (Colossians 2:13). No amount of good works, church attendance, tithes, community service, loving our neighbor or anything else we do is sufficient to take away the blot of sin and enable us to stand before a holy God on our own. That is why God sent Jesus to die on the cross. His death is the only “work” that is able to cleanse us and make us acceptable to God.

In addition, we must not make the mistake of comparing ourselves with others and gaining confidence from what we see in that comparison. In fact, Jesus specifically warns us against this attitude at the beginning of the parable. When we try to justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, we naturally end up despising them. Our standard for comparison is God Himself, and we all fall short of His glory (Romans 3:23).[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. Verse 1 states, “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else….”
2. Read Romans 2:17-24 and 10:3. Explain what it means to be self-righteous.
3. Why is this attitude so abhorrent to God?
4. What did the ‘prayer’ of this self-righteous Pharisee lack (see article above)?
5. Why is this type of prayer not heard by God (Psalm 66:18)?
6. How was the tax collector’s prayer different from the prayer of the Pharisee? What did his prayer include that pleases God?
7. Read Psalm 51:16-17. What does it mean to have a ‘broken and contrite heart’?
Why is this attitude so pleasing to God?
8. Mark 2:17 says, on hearing this (Pharisees asked his disciples why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners), Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Explain what Jesus means.

**Personal reflection:** Do you feel you are too sinful to come to Jesus? If yes, what have you just learned about Jesus’ willingness to accept sinners? Will you come to Jesus just as you are? [Jesus is always ready and willing to forgive. All we have to do is confess, repent, and believe (trust) in Him.]

1. Luke 18:15-17 along with the article below entitled, “Why did Jesus say, “Let the little children come to me”?

At one point during Jesus’ earthly ministry, some children were brought to Him so that He could lay hands on them and pray for them (Matthew 19:13). The disciples tried to turn the children away, but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (verse 14). Mark 10:14 (KJV) adds that Jesus was “much displeased” with His disciples for their actions. He then blessed the children (Matthew 19:15).

There are two potentially puzzling elements to this story. First, why did the disciples try to keep the children away from Jesus? Also, what did Jesus mean when he said, “Let the little children come to me . . . for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”?

It is important to remember that children in Jesus’ time were not necessarily regarded as special or particularly endearing, except to their own parents. Many cultures today look on children as especially sweet, innocent, and even wise. Jewish culture in that day probably did not see children in such optimistic terms. The disciples most likely rebuked those bringing the children to Jesus because they felt bringing children to Jesus was socially improper or because they thought the children would bother Jesus. It is likely that their move to hinder the parents from bringing their children to Jesus was motivated not by unkindness but by a desire to respect Jesus’ position as a teacher. But Jesus wanted the children to come to Him. He said, “Let the children come,” because He wanted to bless them.

It is wonderful to think of Jesus interacting with a child. **Children are needy and dependent, and they know almost nothing about life. They function mostly on emotion rather than reason.** Yet Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). Scripture often compares believers to children (e.g., Luke 10:21; Galatians 4:19; 1 John 4:4). In fact, Jesus told those following Him, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3–4; cf. Mark 10:15).

Jesus’ command to “let the little children come to me” reveals several truths: 1) Children need to be blessed by the Lord. 2) The Lord wants to bless children. 3) Parents should be encouraged to bring their children to Jesus at an early age and teach them His ways. 4) Jesus has regard for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. 5) No matter how compassionate Jesus’ followers are, Jesus Himself is more compassionate still. 6) Those who come to Christ must do so in childlike humility, faith, and simplicity.

Like children who implicitly trust their parents, believers trust God. Faith is not about knowing everything or doing everything right. It is about knowing that, no matter what happens, our Father will take care of us. That trust in Him, even when life is terrifying and sad and makes no sense, is what makes a believer like a child. “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (John 6:37). God loves His children.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. What is the main lesson you learn from these three verses about the special feelings Jesus had/has for children?
2. Verse 16 says, “But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to be, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”
3. Explain.
4. Read Matthew 18:1-4. What one characteristic of children is God looking for in a man to be saved?

**Personal reflection:** Do you possess this trait? What should you do if you are not one who truly trusts in Jesus (Mark 9:24)?

1. “What can we learn from the parable of the persistent widow and unjust judge?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 21, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/parable-persistent-widow-unjust-judge.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Does God hear my prayers?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 21, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/does-God-hear-my-prayers.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “What is the meaning of the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 20, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/parable-Pharisee-tax-collector.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Why did Jesus say, “Let the little children come to me”?” Got Questions Ministries, accessed July 20, 2022, [https://www.gotquestions.org/let-the-little-children-come-to-me.html] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)