

## **When God Reigns: His People will Pray**

When God reigns in believers' lives, His people will pray. This lesson will examine three very brief parables concerning prayer. All three parables appear in Luke. It is significant that Luke places a special emphasis on prayer in the life of Jesus and in the life of the early church in both Luke and Acts.

**The Parable of the friend at Midnight:** The context for this parable is a question which the disciples asked Jesus.

### **Luke 11:1-4**

*Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."*

Jesus had just finished praying. Prayer is so much a part of His life that one of the disciples asks, *"Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."* Jesus then provides them with a model prayer. The concern of the prayer is not so much what to pray, but how to pray – what are the elements of good prayers, what are the concerns.

The prayer here differs slightly from the one Jesus gives in the sermon on the mount in **Mt. 6:9-13**. In fact, it looks as though Luke may have abbreviated this version of the prayer. Jesus provides His disciples with a poem prayer that can easily be remembered. You will notice the request for personal things is very simple, *"Give us each day our daily bread."* *"Forgive us our sins."* The heart of the prayer is that God's name will be honored and hallowed, deemed holy, and that His kingdom, His reign, will come.

### **Luke 13:5-13**

*And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to*

***your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"***

Someone has gone on a journey and comes to a friend's home at midnight. This would have not been unusual in the first century A.D. Before the invention of air conditioning, it was cooler to travel at night. When he arrives at this friend's home, the friend, as is custom, wants to fix some food. But his cupboard is bare and he goes to his neighbors' house to ask for help. Friend, lend me three loaves. Such was the custom in the Ancient Near East. In the first century a loaf of bread was only about the size of a large muffin, three loaves would have been the normal meal for an adult male.

It was considered a great insult not to feed a new arrived guest, not matter the time or weather. This insult would have extended to the whole community since they were closely linked through friendship and marriage. It would also bring great shame to not only the family visited, but the village as a whole.

So he tells his friend, ***"I have nothing to set before him."*** But from inside the house he hears, ***"Do not bother me; the door is shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything."*** The word shut would probably be better translated, Locked. Jesus demonstrates he understood how poor people lived. A typical house for the common people in the first century in Palestine was about 12 square feet. The whole family lived in the same room. It was their living room, dining room, kitchen and bedroom. To be able to get food ready for his neighbor, he would have to wake up his wife, get the oven hot and have her bake bread, thus also waking up the children. It was a terrible inconvenience. (*They could not store large amounts of fresh food for very long periods.*)

Without sharing the neighbor's response, Jesus concludes, ***"I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, but because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs."*** (Impudence – shamelessness) Being a friend is not enough to get him to go to all bother, but he will respond to get rid of his bothersome neighbor.

The danger here is to misread the parable and to assume Jesus is telling His disciples that, if they bother God enough with prayers, He will finally give them their requests. **Jesus like to use greater than/lesser than arguments.** This was also a common first century teaching method. *Here, if an unwilling friend will grant a wish simply because of your persistence, what will a loving God do for those who persistently pray to Him.*

Jesus continues His explanation by telling his hearers ***"...ask and it will be given you, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened. For everyone who asks receives and he who seeks finds and to him who knocks it will be opened."***

He continues with another illustration: ***What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?*** The answer, "of course not!" ***If you then, who are evil, know how to give***

*good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* Even though earthly fathers are sinners and make mistakes, they would give their children what they need. Then surely a loving God will give you His Holy Spirit to dwell in you and to transform you.

The message of this parable is simple: If the friend, who does not want to help, will give up and help because of your persistence, surely a God who loves you and cares for you will answer your prayers if you are persistent. Jesus is concerned that the disciples will, as the days go by, give up praying. **He wants them to continue to pray diligently.**

### **The Parable of the Unrighteous Judge:**

The next parable is really a sister parable to the parable of the friend at midnight. This time there is a different context.

#### **Luke 18:1-8**

*And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘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.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 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. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”*

Jesus gives this parable because He is concerned that the disciples will face discouragement and persecution. This could lead them to lose heart and stop praying. This parable is designed to teach them not to lose heart.

Widows in the first century Near East had few rights. The unscrupulous would often take advantage of them. The widow in this parable is seeking legal protection from the city judge.

Once again Jesus uses another lesser than/greater than argument. The judge in this story is clearly a bad man. He is not righteous, nor does he care for justice for the poor, not even about God and His will for Israel. He gives in to the widow because she day after day continues to ask for help.

The judge admits to himself that he is a wicked man, ***“Though I neither fear God nor respect man.”*** It is the woman’s persistence that wears him down (literally, she gives me a black eye). We, however, have a God who is so unlike this judge. He cares for us, and He loves us. Surely, if the lesser judge answers a request for justice, the greater (God)

will do even more. God will surely bring about justice for His elect who cry out to Him day and night. He will not delay long over them; He will bring about justice quickly. Now for the believer seeking justice, it is never quick enough. The answer to prayers is not always as soon as we wish it were, but He does answer when the time is right. And He might answer in a way we did not expect. Paul received God's grace to carry the thorn in his flesh.

It is interesting that Jesus finishes the discourse with a dismal conclusion. ***“When the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?”*** Will there still be folks praying? Or will everyone have given up? Jesus is concerned that when he does not return as fast as the disciples wish, will they stop praying, will they lose heart, or will they in faith continue to pray?

The message here is appropriate for Luke's church. If one moves to the situation of the early church 30 or even 40 year down the line, and the Lord has not yet returned as many had assumed, the real danger is that they, too, will stop praying and lose heart. The message is simple, despite your misconception of how you think God should answer your prayers, and if doesn't answer it the way you want, “Keep praying anyways!” God really does care; and He will bring about justice.

### **The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector:**

This third parable falls on the heels of the second one. It is one of the best known parables on prayer in the N.T. The basic context is the teaching Jesus gave on prayer. Luke provides his readers a little more insight into the situation.

#### **Luke 18:9**

***He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:***

In His audience, Jesus has some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt. They were basically patting themselves on the back. “Look what good people we are. Much better than those over there.” They turn down their noses at others, proclaiming them unworthy of God's blessing. Jesus gives this parable to teach them an important lesson.

#### **Luke 18:10-14**

***“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For***

***everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.***

There were at least three times each day, when anyone who was able would go to the temple to pray. In the parable, two drastically different men had come to the temple to pray – a Pharisee, a separatist who called for strict adherence to both the Law and to the oral traditions which provided interpretation to the Law, and a tax collector, an employee of the Roman government, a part of a profession that was deemed dishonest and traitors to the Jewish nation.

The Pharisee stood and was ***“praying this to himself.”*** He was clearly praying for his own benefit. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice week; I pay tithes of all that I get.”*** He was probably a morally upright person. But he was willing to judge the heart and character of the tax collector, and more than willing to praise himself. It was like he was saying to God, ***“You’re lucky to have me on your side.”***

He proclaims, ***“I fast twice a week.”*** Although the law commanded a fast only one day each year, the Day of Atonement, this man followed the common practice of the Pharisees of his day. In the first century A.D., Pharisees would fast every Monday and every Thursday.

The Pharisee also says, ***“I pay tithes of all that I get.”*** This reminds me of the words of Jesus in **Luke 11:42**, ***“But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”*** The Law demanded a tithe of all the major crops – grapes, olives, and wheat. It made no mention of the garden herbs. The Pharisees went beyond what was required of them.

Most of all though, the Pharisee says, ***“The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’”*** It is important to know that in the first century A.D. people prayed out loud. In fact, when Hannah (O.T.) was praying for a son, she prayed silently causing Eli to assume that she was drunk (**1 Sam. 1:9-18**). Since the Pharisee was praying out loud, the tax collector standing around the corner would have heard him praying this prayer.

The second man in the parable was a tax collector. Tax collectors were hated by the Jews who saw them as traitors to Israel – they work in alliance with the hated Roman government. There were no forms to fill out, in fact tax collecting was farmed out. A man would bid on how much money he would collect for a certain region. He then hired others who would collect the taxes on the streets. They made their money in that anything over the sum they guaranteed Rome was theirs. Some were probably dishonest!

They were generally held in disdain, and their connection to the gentiles made them clearly unclean.

This tax collector is standing at some distance from the Pharisee. He did not walk to the front. He felt so unworthy that he was even unwilling to lift up his eyes and hands to heaven. The typical Jewish prayer stance was to raise your hands to heaven with your palms up, indicating that you brought nothing to God, and you also looked upward toward heaven. Here is a man who does not raise his head, he beats his breast and says, ***“God be merciful to me a sinner.”*** He recognizes his own lost state, he realizes that on his own, he has no value and no right to stand before a holy God.

Jesus’ response drives home His point: ***“I tell you; this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*** Once again, the context is that some are saying or thinking, *“We are just because we are such good folks. We are righteous. We look down at these other bad people.”*

It is easy to recognize the place a parable like this would have had in the preaching of Paul, Luke’s travel companion. The parable illustrates that the one who is indeed just is one who recognizes his own sin, who recognizes that he must turn to God for His grace and without that grace he would indeed be lost. The one who stands justified before God is the one who humbles himself. He will be exalted. The one who exalts himself will be brought low.

#### Discussion Questions:

- 1) Discuss the difference between “pestering God” and “being persistent in prayer.”
- 2) How does the view we hold of God and his willingness to answer our prayers affect the way we pray?
- 3) How does the Pharisee in our parable illustrate that good deeds and a holy life are not enough?
- 4) What do you learn of grace from the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?