

Talking with My Father

Jesus Teaches on Prayer

Ray C. Stedman

Talking with My Father
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Part One

For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing. If the Son of God felt such a great need for contact with the Father, how much more do we!

But *why*? Why do we need to pray? Certainly God, who knows everything, knows our needs. Why do we need to tell Him what He already knows?

Herein lies one of our most basic misunderstandings about prayer. We think the purpose of prayer is to give information to God: “Lord, I need this and I need that”—as if the Lord didn’t already know everything we need!

No, the purpose of prayer is not to inform God about our needs, but to conform us to His will. Prayer doesn’t change God. Prayer changes us. It changes our attitude from complaint to praise. It enables us to participate in God’s eternal plan. It makes us aware of our total inadequacy—and God’s infinite sufficiency.

The goal of faith is to bring us into direct, personal fellowship with God. If we do not move deeper into our fellowship with Him through prayer, we retreat from fellowship with Him. Prayer is active—not static. You cannot stand still in your prayer life. If you don’t move forward, you move backward. You either pray your way to a deeper relationship with God—or you lose heart and ultimately give up on faith.

That, as we shall see, is the first thing Jesus teaches us about prayer.

Why Pray?

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18:1-8

When I was in college, I had a roommate who was six feet, seven inches tall, and weighed two-hundred sixty-five pounds. His nickname, of course, was “Tiny.” Clearly, this nickname was not intended to *describe* my friend, but to *contrast* with his true description. This common form of contrast is often used to call attention to an outstanding characteristic—for example, when a bald fellow is kiddingly tagged “Curly” or a portly fellow is called “Slim.”

Though metaphors and comparisons can often give us a vivid word-picture (“as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs” or “as helpless as a trombone player in a phone booth”), contrast can often be effective in underscoring truth and making it vivid by surprising us. So it is this very form of teaching—the use of surprising contrast—that our Lord employs as He teaches His disciples about prayer in Luke 18:1–8.

Notice the context of Jesus’ teaching in this passage: His discussion of prayer immediately follows His prediction of His second coming (this passage in Luke parallels the Lord’s Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 and 25). He moves immediately from His words about remaining watchful for His coming to these words about prayer, so He directly links watchfulness and prayer.

The Lord’s teaching on prayer in Luke 18 uses three strong contrasts to focus our thinking on prayer. Let’s look at those three contrasts as Jesus presents them.

Contrast 1: A Contrast of Principles

Luke clearly and carefully shows us the point Jesus intends to make. Luke says, “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1)—or, as other translations put it, “not lose

heart," or "not faint." By this Jesus means most simply that we are to pray and not quit. He wants us to be persistent in prayer.

Here Jesus boldly confronts us with a vivid contrast and an inescapable choice: We must either pray or give up, move closer to God or "faint." We must do one or the other. Either we learn to cry out to an unseen Father who is ever present with us, or else we will lose heart.

Some would challenge this principle. "What about people," they ask, "who seem happy without knowing God, without being Christian? They don't pray, yet they seem to enjoy life and experience excitement in their lives. Maybe it is possible to find meaning in life apart from God." Who has not seen such people and wondered if perhaps they have found another alternative, another answer?

Yet when we carefully observe those who seem to have found the secret of life apart from God, those who appear to live in an exciting yet godless world of adventure and romance, we are frequently surprised to find a hidden underside to their lives, a private core of despair that they hide behind a public mask of happiness. Only when they are arrested, check into a drug or alcohol rehab center, or turn up dead of suicide does the public discover the utter emptiness behind the glittering facade.

The list of idols and icons of our society who fit this description is endless: Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Mantle, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison of *The Doors*, Elvis Presley, comedian John Belushi, Dennis Wilson of *The Beach Boys*, football player John Matusak, comedian Freddie Prinze, actor River Phoenix, Kurt Cobain of *Nirvana*, model Margaux Hemingway, billionaire Christina Onassis, billionaire heir Amschel Rothschild, and on and on. Outwardly rich,

successful, and carefree, they were destroyed by their inner emptiness and despair.

One poignant illustration of this principle is the story of movie mogul Louis B. Mayer, who once ruled MGM studios as if it were his own personal empire. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he possessed untold wealth and the incredible power to make and break careers, to control the entertainment choices of a nation, and even to manipulate the Academy Awards presentations. But at the end of his life, as he lay dying of cancer, his last whispered words were, "Nothing matters, nothing matters."

So Jesus was right when He said that only two alternatives exist: Either we pray or we give up. We move deeper into the heart of God—or we lose heart and faint. We are to cry out to Him in prayer, for in Christ His voice has already called to us. We are to answer like a child crying out to his father. For, like children, we do not always know and cannot adequately express what is wrong with us.

Children cannot always express in words what they need or where they hurt, but a loving parent knows. "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). When we cry out to God in prayer, we may not understand or articulate our real need, our real hurt—but the Lord knows us through and through. We can depend on Him to hear us, to act on our behalf, to work in our best interests. Even if we do not receive from Him what we want or what we cry out for, we know that we will receive from Him what we *need*.

Here we see the contrast of principles—a contrast between praying and fainting, between going on with God or giving up on God. This is the first contrast Jesus draws for us in this passage on prayer.

Contrast 2: A Contrast of Persons

Next, in Luke 18:1–8, Jesus tells a story that presents a contrast of persons. We see a contrast between the widow and the judge. Who is more weak and defenseless than a widow? And who wields more power over the lives of others than a judge—especially a hard-boiled and unrighteous judge? Here is a tough, self-centered old skinflint, with a heart as cold as the underside of a pillow. In the story, Jesus shows us exactly how harsh he is!

The widow had a persecutor, someone who was harassing her, and she appealed for help. But the judge couldn't care less. He was a godless judge who was utterly unmoved by her pleas, and nothing could reach him. He cared nothing about morality and conscience; he had no regard for persons, so no political pressure could influence him. Clearly, the widow's plight was hopeless.

Nevertheless, explained Jesus, she found a way to get to this unrighteous judge: She made life miserable for him! Day and night, she gave him no rest. She continually made a nuisance of herself before his court, hounding him, harassing him, plaguing him, until finally the judge was forced to act. To get rid of her he granted her request—and she got what she needed!

Here is the point of the story. Jesus says that this widow had found the secret of handling reluctant judges. She had discovered the key to power. She found the one principle on which even a reluctant judge would act, despite his formidable authority. That principle was *persistence*.

So what is Jesus saying? Is He comparing God to an unrighteous judge? No, He is *contrasting* the ungodly, unrighteous judge with the supremely righteous judge over all the universe, God Himself! Here, Jesus gives us a con-

trast of persons to show us the key to the heart of God, our loving Father. The key to the hard heart of the unrighteous judge was *persistent, perpetual pressure*. The key to the loving heart of God is *persistent, perpetual prayer*.

When we, like the widow, find life to be hopeless and futile, when we fall victim to forces greater than we can manage (and who of us has not been in such a situation?), Jesus says there is still one way out. There is a path to power, there is a solution to our crisis: *prayer*. When we cry out to a God we cannot see but upon whom we may rely, we reach out to a God who possesses a father's heart and a father's compassion. Persistent prayer, says Jesus, always stirs the heart of God. Prayer moves God to action.

Jesus states in no uncertain terms that God is not like the unrighteous judge, that He will not delay in answering our prayers: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?" (Luke 18:7). We do not need to pester God into acting on our behalf. He acts on our behalf because He loves us.

It is sometimes taught that Jesus is encouraging what is called "prevailing prayer"—that is, belaboring and browbeating God into giving us what we want. It's kind of like picketing God, marching up and down, carrying signs, shouting demands, until we finally wear God down. That is an unbiblical and unchristian approach to prayer.

Many years ago, the newspapers carried the story of a Missouri man who announced that he was going on a hunger strike because of the declining moral standards of the nation. He would fast and pray until God sent a great awakening to restore the nation to moral health. He announced that he would continue his fast until he died of starvation or until God acted. Day after day, the newspapers

covered the man's fast. His strength began to fail, he grew weaker and weaker, and he was finally confined to his bed. Bulletins regarding his condition were issued each day. Most of us would have quit after the third or fourth day—but not this man. He continued his fast until death. The funeral was widely covered and many lauded his persistence.

But was that truly prayer as God intended? No, it was actually an attempt to *blackmail* God. He held his own life as a pistol to the head of God, demanding that God bend His will to the will of one human being. This man insisted that God act according to a human time schedule. That is not prayer.

Jesus says that God is not an unrighteous God like the judge in the story. He is not grudging or hard-hearted, and we don't have to badger or bully God—nor could we if we wanted to. God hears the prayers of His children, as a father hears the cry of a beloved child, lost and frightened in the dark woods. The child may cry out to be led to an open road, or to be home safe in bed, or at least to see in the distance a light that shows the way to safety. But such prayer is not always answered the way a child demands, because God, our loving Father, already knows what we truly need even before we pray. And He will give us what we *need*, even if He does not always give us what we demand.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that we often do not know what to pray for, but God knows. He knows because He is a father, and He also knows when to answer in the particular way we have asked and when that may not be the best thing to do, or even the possible thing to do, under the circumstances.

From our perspective and in terms of what we want, God's answer may seem delayed. But if we could see our lives from a heavenly perspective, we would see that what

Jesus tells us in Luke 18 is true: God's answer to our prayers is not delayed at all.

In 1988, a massive earthquake shook Armenia, collapsing hundreds of buildings and trapping thousands of people in the rubble. Many were rescued from beneath the ruined buildings during the first few hours of the disaster, but after the first day, hope quickly faded that any others would be found alive. One man, however, refused to quit. Why? Because this man was a loving father.

Working feverishly at the ruins of a school where his own son and dozens of other children had been buried by the earthquake, he removed bricks and timbers with his bare hands, working all day and all night. Three days he worked without sleep. Then four days. Then five. People told him to stop, to give up hope. Finally, six days after the quake, he removed a fallen section of wallboard and found an air pocket. He called his son's name—and several young voices weakly answered, including a voice that said, "Daddy, you came for me! I thought you had given up!"

We sometimes think that God takes forever to reach us when we call to Him. Perhaps, at times, it is because our lives are cluttered with so much rubble and debris that He must remove it before we can see the daylight of His love. But He is never slow to respond to our needs. When we cry out in prayer, God answers immediately, instantly, speedily, without delay—and He never gives up. God, our loving Father, never leaves any of His children bereft and alone in a time of need.

God's answer may be the squeeze of His hand on ours, the quiet comfort of a Father's voice, the steady reassurance of a Father's presence even though the woods around us are dark and echoing with fearsome night-sounds. If we listen, we will hear an immediate answering reassurance that the

Father is with us and—in His own time and way—He will lead us home to a place of light and warmth, and He will put us safely, comfortably in our beds. This is what Jesus means when He says, “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly” (Luke 18:7–8).

Contrast 3: A Contrast of Practice

Jesus ends His story abruptly with a third contrast—the contrast of practice: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (18:8). Notice Jesus does not say, “When the Son of Man comes, He will not find faith on earth,” nor does He say, “When the Son of Man comes, He will find faith on earth.” He leaves it as an open question, hanging in the air.

But there is no doubt at all about the faithfulness of the Son of Man. He will come. He does not say, “*If* the Son of Man comes,” but “*When*.” The return of Jesus Christ is an absolute certainty. It does not rest upon humanity, upon human faithfulness or faithlessness. It rests entirely upon the sovereign determination of God. Never doubt that God is ready to do exactly what He says He will do in any circumstances at any time. There is with Him no shadow of turning. The uncertainty is entirely in the latter part of His statement. God is utterly faithful; it is people who are faithful or faltering.

Our Lord’s words imply yet another thought: Is it not possible that human beings actually *prefer* weakness over power? Could it be that we actually prefer anxiety over peace, frenzy over rest, doubt over confidence, fear over faith, malice over love? Is it possible that—because of these human tendencies—when the Son of Man comes, He will

not find faith on the earth? If our prayers seem to fail, it is not God's fault, it is ours.

Notice something further: Jesus does not ask, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find men praying?" He has been speaking of prayer but now His question is, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find *faith*?" (italics added). Doubtless, the reason for this change is that prayer is the expression of faith. True prayer is not begging or cajoling a reluctant God. True prayer is confidence, trust, and faith in God. Prayer is thanking instead of complaining. Prayer is rejoicing, accepting, appropriating, receiving.

Why Bother to Pray?

"Well," you might say, "if there is a Father out there, and He really knows what we need—why bother to pray?"

The answer to this frequently raised question is that the purpose of prayer is to bring us to an understanding of the Father's heart. Prayer does not always lead us to an answer that satisfies our wants, desires, and curiosities, nor an answer that solves all our problems. But prayer does lead us to a place where we can accept the fact that such answers are unnecessary to accepting and involving ourselves in the vast and mysterious purposes of the Father.

After all, a relationship with God cannot exist without communication. Everyone knows of couples who have stopped speaking to each other. A marriage in which communication has ceased is a marriage in which intimacy and fellowship have disintegrated. That marriage is headed for destruction. Human desires, needs, and feelings must be expressed. There must be an interchange, a flow of ideas and feelings, in order for a marriage relationship to be vital. The same is true of the relationship between ourselves and God.

Prayer is an absolute necessity in the interchange of a child's heart with the Father. This is why Jesus asked, in effect, "When I return, will I find people exercising this blessed privilege? Will I find people expressing themselves to the Father in a warm, living, trusting faith relationship? Will I find people expressing to God the Father all their hurts, joys, complaints, moods, triumphs, failures, and deepest emotions?" That is what a faith relationship with the Father is all about.

A story is told of a father and teenage son who lived in a Spanish village some years ago. One day, they had a terrible argument and both the father and the boy, José, said angry, hurtful things to each other. The son said, "I'm leaving this house, and I don't ever want to speak to you again!" And the father responded, "You won't have to—because you are no longer welcome in this house!" Young José stomped out of the house and was gone.

Years passed. The father regretted the things he had said in that moment of intense emotion. He longed for his son. Finally, the pain of separation became too much for him to bear. He left home and went searching across the length and breadth of Spain—but his son seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

Finally, arriving in the capital city of Madrid, he went to a newspaper office and took out a personal ad in the classified section. It read, "My son, José—I am sorry for the pain I've caused you. Please forgive me. I have forgiven you. I've looked everywhere for you and want only to see you again. I will be at the plaza fountain every day this week at noon. Please meet me there. Your father." It is said that hundreds of young men named José came to the plaza fountain that week, hoping to reestablish a relationship with their fathers.

That is the relationship we all long for, and Jesus has made it possible. That is what prayer is all about—fellowship with the Father. Prayer is the true expression of a living faith relationship. Without prayer, without talking to the Father and listening to Him, what kind of relationship is it? How can we claim to have faith in God while failing to communicate with Him?

One sign of losing communication is that we become obsessed with talk about God. When people only talk *about* God instead of talking *with* God, they demonstrate a deteriorated faith. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal touch with God. The mark of a decadent religion is that people become deeply engrossed in discussions about God, spending hours in lengthy, theological debate about the nature and character of God. As Martin Luther aptly put it, “You that manifest a concern about religion, why don’t you pray?”

Our goal, as we journey together through the Lord’s teaching on prayer, is not that we gain more theological knowledge, but that we experience a deeper faith relationship with the living, true God. So please join with me and pray with me this prayer from the heart:

Our Father, these words of our Lord Jesus have made us aware of the lack of faith in our lives. We cry out to you now in our weakness and our failure for the burning desire to exercise faith and move deeper into a living relationship with you. Father, teach us to pray. Teach us to be men and women who depend continually upon you, who pour out to you every aspect of our lives without hindrance or reservation, who tell you all things, and who listen to you about all things.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.