

## Persistent Prayer

Sermon for the 3<sup>rd</sup> to last Sunday in the Church Year

Sermon Text: Luke 18:1-7



*And He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup> And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' <sup>4</sup> For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'" <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? <sup>8</sup> I tell you, He will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"*

"Papa, can I get an iPad for my birthday?" the son wants to know. "No, my son... an iPad is too expensive and besides, Papa himself doesn't know how that thing works," is the father's answer. After a brief pause: "Papa, can I get an iPad for my birthday?" I don't need to repeat the whole thing again. You all are familiar with it. Children have boundless imagination when it comes to getting on their parents' nerves until their parents give in. They surpass the Vietcong, the Russian gulags, and the North Korean torture methods altogether when it's about rubbing their parents' nerves raw until they give in.

It seems to me that Jesus takes this practical example from life and applies it to our prayers before the throne of God. Jesus' example tells of a widow who has experienced injustice. This example is intended to shock us but ultimately to encourage us. We are amazed to realize that Jesus actually trusts people – yes, not only trusts us but even commands us to do exactly like this widow with the unjust judge. In other words, to put the heavenly Father through the wringer and annoy Him until He gives in. In doing so, Jesus turns some peoples' faith upside down. There are actually people who are of the opinion that God doesn't respond to our prayers. According to that image of God, God is absolutely sovereign and never changes His Will and certainly not because of a few snotty nosed people whining in His ears. According to the people who think this way, God's plan is above any human will and His Will remains sacred and unchanged. According to this view, when people pray, they are merely fulfilling a duty and can in no way expect God to change anything in the course of the wider world or in their personal destiny as a result of prayer. Even when people are eternally lost, an individual can't change anything with his prayers. Such a faith is not only depressing and sad, but also fundamentally false. Throughout the Bible, we get to know a God who, for His part, with great commitment, patience and many words, wants to persuade people to change the course of events. At the same time, He urges people to regularly share this commitment with Him and to constantly call upon Him in prayer that peoples' hearts are changed. If I believe that everything will go its own way anyway, then I don't need to pray at all. My prayers are at best empty chatter and forming words for the sake of words and not at all for my God, to whom I want to present my need. If everything just stayed like that, as it is, there would be no prophets who call for repentance nor would there be a Jesus Christ who gets involved in our everyday lives from the universe. There would also be no Martin Luther who reformed the church. I can't even look to the future with hope. God knows everything long before we ask Him. And people can't change anything anyway. If even the unjust judge gives in, Jesus tells us, how much more will our heavenly Father do so? This means that Jesus is telling us that the Father in heaven always responds to our requests and answers our prayers. We just have to ask Him enough!

But there is still a second misunderstanding about the way God responds to our prayers. Some people have altered parables, like this one from Jesus, in a different way. These people are of the opinion that God is completely absorbed in our human will. Whatever I want, I only need to present it to God and already God will change His mind. Such people shouldn't say: "Your Will be done!" in the Lord's Prayer but rather "my will be done" because that is actually their opinion. If one or more of the commandments don't suit their wishes or if God's clear words somehow scratch their conscience unpleasantly, they simply change these words. With this, God has just become a service station that we could exploit to our advantage at will. Then I can simply misuse God as an extension of myself. Everything that I do, God must also want. When Mohammed once again took a new wife at the so-called command of God, his favorite wife, Aisah, sarcastically commented: "It's interesting that God always wants exactly what Mohammed wants!" Yes, we could misuse this passage of scripture in the same way, and we should be aware of that. It doesn't just happen to Mohammed. None of us are immune to this. Sometimes, we merely begin our prayers with God's name and even after that first sentence, an unfortunate mix-up occurs in our minds. God's Will is replaced with our human will. What we then have is counterfeit. We just deceive ourselves. We only need to turn to the Old Testament to see how many thousands of burnt offerings ascended to heaven that were based on nothing but human cunning and deceit. Something like this cannot and should not happen with our prayers. But what should happen in prayer? Do we change God's Will, or do we have to change Jesus' parable so that the widow goes home with unfinished business?

Whenever we are confronted with such difficult contrasts, it is important to look to the one who is telling us the parable – Jesus. I notice how naturally Jesus explains this parable. He doesn't say something like: "This is how I imagine it" or "It could be like this." No, He says: "This is how it is." Jesus should know what it's about. After all, He is the only one who can truly look into the heart of the Father. And when we look to Jesus, then we see the Father. Let us also recognize the Father's Will. So we look to Jesus. It also occurs to me that Jesus didn't come into the world to show us a trick for when we pray that we can use to wrap God the Father around our little finger. His gift to us was even greater than we could imagine. His gift was and is Himself. Jesus includes us not only in His prayers but in His whole life and above all, into His death and resurrection. Through this, He shows us very clearly that our prayers can't be a reinforcement of our human will. No, but the opposite. We are merged with Jesus in our prayers! It's all about Jesus. And now we have to be amazed because Jesus' cause is once again entirely ours. He wants nothing else than for our salvation from sin, death, and the devil. Because Jesus has placed Himself so completely at our side, we cannot help but bring all our personal and daily needs to Him, just as the widow did. Do we know what kind of a legacy we have been given?

Lastly, Jesus asks: "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" We are here today because this question is still open! Yes, we want to be in God's ears, asking Him to give faith where it has not yet arrived! Asking God to strengthen our faith where it has become weak, asking God for it again and again, to really get on His nerves like children sometimes do with their fathers. No, we don't really annoy God with our prayers. He wants that! He wants us to pray! Amen.