

The Gospel According to
Luke

“You Haven’t Got a Prayer”

Chapter 18:1-14

Introduction

There are times when your prayers ***haven’t got a prayer!***

For example:

1. You haven’t got a prayer if you regard sin in your heart. You read in Psalm 66:18, **If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.** **Regard** means you know what you are doing is sin, but refuse to forsake it. You can’t really pray until you deal with sin in your heart.
2. You haven’t got a prayer if, as a husband, you do not show proper understanding towards your wife. In First Peter 3:7 you read, **Husbands, likewise, dwell with [your wives] with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as *being* heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.** You can’t really pray until you deal with your selfishness at home.

Sin and *selfishness* must be dealt with before you can enjoy a conversation with your heavenly Father. Jesus mentioned two other factors that can determine whether or not your prayers have a prayer:

1. Your problems can so overwhelm you that you **lose heart** and cease to pray. If you cease praying, your prayers won’t be heard.
2. Your prosperity can so influence you that you **lack humility**. You think you’re praying – but you’re so proud that you’re really only talking to yourself.

We’ll look at *problems* and *prosperity* with regards to prayer. We’ll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Haven’t Got A

Prayer If You Lose Heart In Your Problems, and #2 You Haven't Got A Prayer If You Lack Humility In Your Prosperity.

#1 You Haven't Got A Prayer
If You Lose Heart In Your Problems
(v1-8)

There are times when the general feeling of your life is that you are prospering. Things could be better, but they're not terrible.

Then there are those times when things are terrible. You've got problems. If you're a Christian, your problems put you on your knees. They drive you to prayer. You deal with sin, and selfishness; you storm the very gates of heaven – pouring out your heart in adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication to your Father.

What if your problems don't get any relief? What if they remain? There is a tendency for you to become discouraged. Jesus calls it **losing heart**. If you **lose heart** in your problems, you will quit praying; and if you quit praying, you will continue to **lose heart**.

Luke 18:1 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,

Before we comment on this story, we need to set it in its context. Jesus had just told His disciples that He was going to suffer and be rejected by the religious leaders of Israel. We know exactly what He meant: He would be crucified on the hill called Calvary. He would be resurrected from the grave, and ascend into heaven. After an extended absence from the earth, Jesus would return in His Second Coming to establish the kingdom. But the years of His absence; the centuries of delay; would be filled with problems for His followers – especially the last seven years just prior to His return.

The delay in establishing the kingdom on earth, preceded by the Great Tribulation, is inevitable. It is a fact of future history. Look at verse seven, where Jesus said,

Luke 18:7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?

Carefully note the words, **though He bears long with them**. In the future, believers will be in terrible trouble – even the Great Tribulation; but God will delay answering their prayers for deliverance from their troubles. The Great Tribulation must run its course.

You and I are believers in the Church Age. We are **not** going to be involved in the Great Tribulation that is coming upon this planet. We will be removed from earth in an event called the Rapture just prior to the Great Tribulation.

But we will have our problems in Jesus' absence; and some of our problems will not be removed. We have a tendency to lose heart and quit praying in our problems when God seems to bear long with us and not remove our trials.

We should **pray and not lose heart**. To illustrate, Jesus told the story of the widow and the unjust judge.

Luke 18:2 ... "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man.

Luke 18:3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.'

Luke 18:4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man,

Luke 18:5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'"

It seems as though Jesus was saying that if we persist in prayer, God must answer us favorably. **That's not at all the point of the story!** We saw just the opposite, in verse seven; God is not going to answer them until the proper time, no matter how persistent they are. Jesus is describing a situation in which God will delay answering prayer. So our first interpretation is wrong.

It might help to understand first century Jewish legal culture. A **widow** would never get a hearing before an unjust **judge**. She had no money to bribe the judge; she had no social standing by which to help him politically. In other words, she might as well say nothing about her problems.

But she persisted. She went up to the unjust judge in the marketplace; at his home; in the public square. She was always there – laying out her case before him.

You have to think about this the way Jesus' disciples would have thought about it:

1. The **widow** kept talking to the **judge**, even though it seemed as if it would do her no good.
2. The **judge** eventually answered her request.

Jesus made the application:

Luke 18:6 Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said.

Luke 18:7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?"

Jesus contrasted **you** with the **widow**:

1. You're not a **widow**; you are one of God's **elect** – a dearly beloved child of God.
2. The **widow** had little or no access to the unjust **judge**; you have full access to your Father in heaven.
3. The **widow** had no advocate to represent her; you have a representative – Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
4. The **widow** was appealing to a court of law; you boldly approach the throne of grace.

If a **widow**, in her problems, with no reasonable hope of being heard, persisted in talking to an unjust **judge**... **How much more should you – a dearly loved child of God – persevere in prayer, even though God bears long with you and your problems persist?**

Luke 18:8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily...

Remember the context: Jesus will be in heaven, and there will be great tribulation on the earth. Believers will be martyred for their faith. They will be crying out – both on earth and in heaven – for vengeance and justice. But God will **bear long with them**. He will allow them to suffer; He will allow their problems to persist – *until the*

Second Coming of Jesus. **Then He will avenge them speedily.** In a moment, at His return, everything will be made right.

...Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

It doesn't take faith to make demands on God. It takes faith to endure the demands of God. When God allows something in your life, and then asks you to **bear long** with it; **that** is where faith is required and revealed. Believers should not **lose heart**, even though their problems persist; they should **pray**.

Persistent problems can discourage you, and you can quit praying. If you quit praying, you'll get even more discouraged, because you cut yourself off from the very source of your encouragement.

This story is not about getting everything that you pray for. **It's about not getting what you pray for – but continuing in prayer, so that God can strengthen you in your trouble.**

You can't always get what you want; but you'll get what you need – the grace of God that is sufficient to strengthen you in your problems until you are with the Lord.

Problems seem to dominate your life; but there are times of prosperity – if not in your life, in the lives of others. How do you react to prosperity?

#2 You Haven't Got A Prayer
If You Lack Humility In Your Prosperity
(v9-14)

You have to be a little careful when things are going good. You have a tendency to take credit when you are prospering. Jesus told a parable about the perils of prosperity.

Luke 18:9 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

Luke 18:10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Luke 18:11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

Luke 18:12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

I remind you that the **Pharisees** were considered the cream of the spiritual crop. They were the spiritual giants; the leaders; the examples to follow. Before you judge this **Pharisee** for his attitude, check out his accomplishments:

1. He **wasn't extorting** money; he wasn't **unjust**; he wasn't committing sexual sin. In other words, he was keeping God's Law.
2. He **was fasting twice a week**, and **giving tithes of all he possessed**. The Jews were only required to fast once a year; they were not required to tithe on all they possessed. So this guy was doing more than required by God's Law.

The Pharisee was keeping God's Law, and doing even more than was required. He seemed to be doing pretty well for himself.

The **tax collector** was a despised social parasite. His very profession made him a traitor to the Jews, and put him in the category of a law-breaker. Up to this point in the story, *we'd rather be the Pharisee!*

But we know the rest of the story. We know that the Pharisee was a phony. Concerning his prayer, we read in verse eleven that **he prayed... with himself**. He didn't have a prayer because of his pride.

Do we ever act like this Pharisee?

1. First of all, he compared himself to someone else. We may not do this openly, but we can do it in our hearts. We can think of ourselves as better than others. It's only natural. But we are *supernatural*, if we're Christians. We need to quit comparing ourselves to others. Instead, compare yourself to Jesus. He is the standard; He is the Person we are becoming more-and-more like each day.
2. Second of all, we can put ourselves on a pedestal, thinking we are encouraging others by sharing our successes. If I seem to be prospering, then I tell others how I'm doing it. I tell them about my

regular, crack-of-dawn devotional times; my constant prayer life; my superior discipline; my benevolence; my dedicated service to God. **I can sound just like the Pharisee in the story as I promote my own prosperity.**

Here's the thing: Discipline, determination, and dedication are good and necessary for you spiritually. But you cannot take credit for them! If you are prospering, it is by the grace of God. Prosperity is not something you deserve or earn or merit because of your efforts.

We left the tax collector in the Temple:

Luke 18:13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'*

He had a totally different attitude towards prayer. His physical posture represents that he only had himself and God in mind as he prayed:

1. He didn't look around, to see if there was someone to compare himself to. He didn't even compare himself to the Pharisee, to establish how bad he was.
2. His **eyes** were looking downward – indicating he recognized God's holiness. He was comparing himself to God!
3. He **beat his breast**, indicating that he knew his problems were within himself; he was a sinner by birth and by action.
4. He appealed only for **mercy**. **Mercy** is not getting what you deserve. No amount of discipline, or determination, or dedication could merit mercy. It was by the grace of God.

The tax collector was a visual aid to teach you humility:

Luke 18:14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

Heart-humility is necessary if you want your prayers to be heard. How do you humble yourself in prayer? Remember that it's just you and God when you pray. There's no one to compare yourself to except Jesus. Anything you've achieved is a gift of grace. You don't deserve to prosper because of your discipline, or determination, or

dedication. You could just as easily have problems rather than prosperity. Don't take credit for your prosperity; don't blame God for your problems.

Applying the Word:

Christians need to think differently about their problems and their prosperity. Prosperity is not a reward for your righteousness; problems are not a punishment for your failures. Job put it best when, after suffering tragedy for no apparent reason, he said,

Job 1:21 ...“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”

For some of us, God will answer prayer by granting our request. Some will be healed; some will be delivered; some will prosper.

But for others among us, God will answer our prayer by withholding our request. We will not be healed - at least in this lifetime; we will not be delivered from trouble; we will have problems – right up until the time we are looking into the face of Jesus.

Your examples are a **widow** and a **tax collector**! If a widow, with no reasonable hope, persisted – then so should you. If a **tax collector** was heard; then so will you.

If you are not a Christian... Any prosperity you might enjoy is temporary. You should be planning, not for your retirement, but for your eternity.

Any problems you might endure are God's gifts to show you your emptiness, your powerlessness, your hopelessness, your loneliness.