

Psalm 34:1-8 (The Message)

I bless GOD every chance I get;
my lungs expand with his praise.

I live and breathe GOD;
if things aren't going well, hear this and be happy:

Join me in spreading the news;
together let's get the word out.

God met me more than halfway,
he freed me from my anxious fears.

Look at him; give him your warmest smile.
Never hide your feelings from him.

When I was desperate, I called out,
and God got me out of a tight spot.

God's angel sets up a circle
of protection around us while we pray.

Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see—
how good God is.

Blessed are you who run to him.

Luke 18:1-14 (NRSV)

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"⁶ And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

We come today to our fourth holy habit, praying. Praying regularly. Praying persistently. Praying trustingly. God created us to be a praying people.

The judge and the persistent widow

Even if we've been taught to pray, even if we earnestly pray daily, most of us will, at one time or another, be tempted to lose heart. We might pray day after day, month after month, that an important relationship would be healed . . . but then it's not. How long do we go on praying a prayer that seems futile? We believe that God answers prayers; a loving father would do no less. But still, it is not always easy to persist. Our passage from Luke is one of Jesus' parables about prayer. It is a parable about persistence. As is true for all the parables, a little background will help to make it more meaningful. The key to this story is appreciating the roles of the judge and the widow.

In ancient Israel, there were no juries and no prosecutors, only judges. A judge in the Jewish law court was to listen to the evidence offered by the plaintiff (the accuser) and the defendant (the accused). The judge was to apply the law to the case, stay impartial, punish sin as it deserved, and protect the powerless, such as widows and orphans. In the end, the

judge was to render a just verdict that vindicated the aggrieved party. If a judge did all these things, the judge was considered a good and righteous judge.¹

In Jesus' parable, the judge has done none of this! He doesn't obey God and he disrespects the people who come into his courtroom. To make it worse, a widow has come to him seeking justice. Widows were among the poorest, most marginalized people in all ancient cultures, including Israel. Nonetheless, rather than protecting the interests of the widow, the judge has ignored her. Yet, through her persistence, her relentless pursuit of the judge, the widow is finally granted justice. She is vindicated, powerless though she may be.

Jesus' point is clear. If persistence pays off with a cruel and unjust judge, how much more will God, our loving father, the good and righteous judge, hear the pleas and prayers of his children. Our prayers are never futile. We ask, we seek, we knock, we wait, we trust, we get emotional, we get frustrated . . . but we continue praying. Our persistence grows out of our trust that God loves us.

Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) was a humble German shoemaker whose writings influenced Christians across Europe. Seeking to live a life of prayer, Boehme composed a set of simple, direct prayers to be used through the day. Here are some samples. There is something to learn here about a life of 'unceasing' prayer.

'On Waking'

Living Lord, you have watched over me and put your hand on my head during the long, dark hours of night. Your holy angels have protected me from all harm and pain. To you, Lord, I owe life itself. Continue to watch over me and bless me during the hours of the day.

'On Rising'

Rule over me this day, O God, leading me on the path of righteousness. Put your Word in my mind and your Truth in my heart, that this day I neither think nor feel anything except what is good and honest. Protect me from all lies and falsehood, helping me to discern deception wherever I meet it. Let my eyes look straight ahead on the road you wish me to tread, that I might not be tempted by any distraction. And make my eyes pure, that no false desire may be awakened within me.

'On Dressing'

Merciful God, you clothed your Word with the pure and perfect body of our Lord Jesus. Clothe my soul with that same purity, that I may share his perfection . . . Dear God, destroy my sins, and so make me ready to put on the cloak of eternal life.

'On Going to Work'

Give me, dear Lord, a pure heart and a wise mind, that I may carry out my work according to your will. Save me from all false desires, from pride, greed, envy and anger, and let me accept joyfully every task you set before me. . . . Above all, remind me constantly that I have nothing except what you give me, and can do nothing except what you enable me to do.

'At Bed-time'

As I take off my dirty, dusty clothes, let me also be stripped of the sins I have committed this day . . . Now I come before you, naked in body and care in soul, to be washed clean. Let me rest tonight in your arms, and so may the dreams that pass through my mind be holy. And let me awake tomorrow, strong and eager to serve you.

Prayers built upon trust

The writer of Psalm 34 blesses God every chance he gets. He runs to God at every turn, just as we run to people we trust when we are in trouble. The psalmist knows that God is trustworthy in a way that you and I could never be. It is God who gets him out of the tight and desperate spots.

Prayer is simply conversation with God; conversation that is to be grounded upon trust. So, just as we strive to be sincere and forthright with those we trust, there can be no hypocrisy or deceit in our prayers to God. The psalmists are sometimes incredibly angry with God and they don't hesitate to voice their anger. Of course they don't hesitate; they trust God!

Indeed, with God, this is all much easier than it is with any other person we might seek to know and trust. My wife, Patti, knows me well; we trust each other as much as two people can. But she can't read my mind (though I wonder at times!). But God our Father knows what we need before we ask him (v. 8). God's Spirit lifts to God our deepest prayers, so deep that we can't even find the words (Romans 8:26-27).

It is in the context of this deep, abiding trust in God that Jesus' teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer. He points them toward God's kingdom and teaches them to rely completely upon God, even for the bread they eat. The disciples are to trust in God's forgiveness, even as they forgive others. Condemned by the Nazis, a modern-day disciple, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would pray, "I put my trust

¹In his letters, Paul often uses the metaphor of the Jewish law court to describe what it means when we speak of God as judge and of our own righteousness before God. "Righteousness" is another way of talking about our status when the court (God is the good judge!) finds in our favor because we have trusted in Jesus and his faithfulness to God's covenant on our behalf. In effect, Jesus takes our place in the docket.

in your grace and commit my life wholly in your hands.”

Whether we are praising God or thanking him. Whether we are confessing or asking. Whether we come to God with a peaceful heart or an angry one. In all this, we trust that God loves us and hears us and answers us.

Making a holy habit of praying begins with learning to trust God in all things. Without that, what sense do our prayers really make?

Coming Home

Why pray? The reason is simple. We pray because our heart seeks its true home and its true home is the heart of God. God longs for our presence. After Adam and Eve made their fateful decision to turn away from God, God came to the garden, calling for Adam, seeking him. In much the same way, God invites each of us to come to him, to come home, to return to the way of life for which we were made. Our hearts hear God's call, but we've turned so far away from God that the call is somehow muffled. It is a little like hearing a phone ring, but being unsure where the ring is coming from, much less who is on the other end of the line. We might search all over the house and yet never look in the right place.

Writing thousands of years ago, the psalmists expressed our hearts' seeking after God, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you. . . My soul clings to you . . . happy are those who take refuge in him. . . in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy" (from the psalms). The heart of the psalmists' prayers, indeed all prayer, is a loving relationship . . . between God and me . . . between God and you . . . between God and all those who seek, to use Richard Foster's felicitous phrase, their "heart's true home."

Foster uses familiar, yet powerful, imagery to describe this home:

"We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites us into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch . . . and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity . . . he invites us into the bedroom of his rest . . . where we are known and are known to the fullest. . . . The key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer."¹

You may not be in the habit of using the bible readings on the third page of these studies, but I urge you to make time this week. Each daily reading this week is a psalm, for there is no better place than the Psalter to begin our journey toward a life of prayer. Over the centuries, most Christians have learned to pray by praying the psalms. You might find it easier to see the psalms as prayers, even to pray them yourself, if you read them in a paraphrase such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. He has scrubbed away some of the polish and politeness that characterizes translations like the NRSV, enabling us to feel the emotion and the honesty of the psalmists. There is nothing "fancy" about the Hebrew language of the psalms and there need be nothing "fancy" about the language of our prayers. There is no secret to prayer; there is no insider vocabulary. We don't have to dress up our words. All God asks is that we be honest with him, as honest as we possibly can be. We ask no less of every important relationship we have in life.

1. from Richard Foster's book, *Prayer*.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JAN 27 – FEB 2

How do these passages inform our understanding of praying, the fourth holy habit?

Monday, Psalm 16 "You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy."

Tuesday, Psalm 23 "I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long."

Wednesday, Psalm 91 "My refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust."

Thursday, Psalm 128 "Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways." [To 'fear' God is to recognize that this is his world and entrust our lives to him.]

Friday, Psalm 107 "Consider the steadfast love of the LORD."

Saturday, Psalm 115 "Trust in the Lord."

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

This week: Hinduism. Next week: Buddhism

A Book Recommendation: *The Divine Conspiracy*

By Dallas Willard

From time to time, I'll make book recommendations that are related to the current sermon series. This book by Dallas Willard is certainly one of the most influential books on discipleship in recent decades. It will repay a thoughtful reading many times over.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the parable of the judge and the widow, Jesus could certainly have used a different character than a widow. The fact that he uses a widow draws our attention to God's compassion for the powerless and poor. In his commentary on Luke, Alan Culpepper asks, "How does such a God hear our prayers if they are self-centered, concerned only with petty issues, or irrelevant to God's redemptive purposes? . . . To those who have it in their power to relieve the distress of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger but do not, the call to pray night and day is a command to let the priorities of God's compassion reorder the priorities of their lives." Discuss how prayer could change or has changed your priorities.
2. I admit that I was a little amused when I came across the prayers of Jacob Boehme (see the page two text box in the study). A prayer for getting dressed?! But as I read and prayed Jacob's prayers, I began to appreciate his faith and his wisdom. Most of us probably don't use set prayers, that is, prayers written by others. What would be the value of using prayers like those of Jacob Boehme? How might they help us to make a habit of prayer? How can they help us to understand better our own hearts?
3. As we seek to build a habit of prayer, we must be open to the possibility (the promise!) that our prayers will change our priorities and our entire orientation to life. I guess I should know that a conversation with God could do no less. What is on your conversation list?
4. If someone said to you, "How can I make a habit of prayer?," what would you tell them?