
FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRUthe**BIBLE**

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF PRAYER

WHAT HAPPENS IN HEAVEN
WHEN WE PRAY ON EARTH

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF PRAYER

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WHEN WE PRAY ON EARTH

If we followed in Jesus' footsteps as He walked this earth, we'd be struck by the priority He gave to prayer. He not only talked about it, but He spent a great deal of time during His very busy ministry *in prayer Himself*.

Prayer today is the most neglected area in the life of the believer. It's the weakest member of the body of truth. In fact, our lack of prayer has weakened every vital organ in the church today. Without it, we're without strength. A steady erosion has worn away this strong foundation in the lives of believers. Most of our trouble and problems can be traced back to the poverty of our prayer lives. The neglect of prayer has affected all areas of the Christian's personal life and the total life of the church.

"Being alone with God and communing with Him is the strength of the Christian's life."

—A. C. Gaebelein

In the Gospel of Luke, our Lord uses a few brushstrokes to paint four portraits of prayer. They are simply snapshots to carry with you in your Christian walk, very practical. Put these snapshots together for a composite picture of prayer.

In Luke 17, the Lord talked about the last days and that He's coming back for us. He likened the last days to the days of Noah—difficult and not conducive to faith. So He talks to His disciples about how to live by faith in these difficult days:

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

Jesus' description makes us think we are living in those days when men's hearts fail them for fear. This makes prayer all the more relevant for this hour.

He then told them a parable on the need for them to pray always and not become discouraged. We have two options in difficult days: We will either lose heart or we will pray. These days will be filled with fear or filled with faith. During World War II, when the bombing on the city of London was so intense, a sign appeared in front of one of the churches that read: "If your knees knock together, kneel on them!" That is a practical restatement of the Lord's words: We always ought to pray and not lose heart.

Paul put it a little differently: "Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This does not mean you are to go to an all-day or all-night prayer meeting. Prayer is more an *attitude* of life than an *action* of the lips. Remember Paul also said to the Romans, "...the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). That is, they cannot be put into our *words*. Many times we do not have the words to pray, but we are praying nonetheless. Someone put it in this poetic language:

*Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear;
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.*

—Author unknown

Put your entire life behind your words—that's what makes prayer effective.


There was a famous preacher years ago who had many unusual expressions, including, "When a man prays for a corn crop, God expects him to say 'Amen' with a hoe." You can't just stay on your knees all the time and pray for a corn crop. That's pious nonsense. But to pray for the corn crop, then go to work, is what our Lord tells us to do when our hearts fail us.

PARABLE OF THE UNJUST JUDGE

In Luke's gospel, we hear Jesus tell a lot of stories with a divine purpose. "Parables," literally means "thrown alongside something," just the way Jesus threw these stories into conversation. I believe Jesus never told a fictitious story when teaching a parable. When He told a story about the unjust judge and the widow, it probably was well known to His audience. They knew exactly the situation He was talking about. The story begins like this:

...There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, "Get justice for me from my adversary." –Luke 18:2, 3

This judge was a godless fellow—an unscrupulous, scheming, cold, and calculating politician. Everything he did had to minister to his own advancement and satisfy his own ambition. God had no place in this man's thinking at all. And since he didn't fear God, he had no regard for man. He had no respect for this widow who was being treated unjustly and forced out of her little home.



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The widow went to this prominent judge for help. The secretary went into the judge's office and said, "There's a widow out there who wants to see you."

"Well," he said, "I can get rid of her in three seconds. I'm a politician, after all—I know how to handle people like this. Send her in." So the widow came in, he listened to her story, and then he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, but that's out of my realm. I'd *love* to do something for you, but I am unable to do anything. Good-day."

The next day when he came into the office, there was the widow. He hurried into his office, called his secretary in, and asked, "What's that widow doing back here?"

"She says she wants to see you."

"Tell her I'm busy until lunchtime."

"I've already told her that, but she brought her lunch. She says she will stay here as long as necessary."

The widow stayed all that day and didn't get to see him. He thought he had gotten rid of her. But the next morning when he came in, there she was again. She did that for several days, and finally he gave in.

Perhaps with a twinkle in His eye, Jesus tells us what the judge said to himself:

... But afterward he said within himself, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." –Luke 18:4, 5

The word "weary" is a poor translation. What he actually said was, "I must see her lest she give me a black eye!" I don't know if he meant a literal black eye, but the very fact that a widow was sitting in his office every day didn't look good. You see, he was thinking of himself. He had gotten into office by saying, "I'm thinking of the poor people," but he wasn't—he was thinking of himself.

So he told his secretary to let the widow in, and this time he promised her legal protection.

This parable of the unjust judge is a very simple story, yet it has been greatly misunderstood. I have heard many Bible teachers say this parable teaches the value of persistent prayer. But you don't have to keep praying—as though somehow God will hear if you hold on long enough. This is a parable by *contrast*, not comparison.

Listen to what our Lord had to say:

...Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? –Luke 18:6, 7

In other words, “When you come to God in prayer, do you think God is an *unjust judge*? Do you think He is a cheap politician? Do you think God acts for political reasons?” My friend, if you think this, you are wrong. God is not an unjust judge.

Why are God's people today so discouraged in their prayer life? If this unjust judge would hear a poor widow because she kept coming continually, why do you get discouraged in your prayers to God—who is *not* unjust but actually *wants* to hear and answer prayer? Don't you know, my friend, He is not an unjust judge? We act as if we have to hold on to Him or He will not hear us at all. We don't have to hang on to His coattail or beg and plead with Him. God *wants* to act in our behalf! If we would come into His presence with an attitude of knowing He *wants* to hear, it would transform our prayer lives.

PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT FRIEND

And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs." –Luke 11:5-8

Let's bring this parable up to date. Imagine it's midnight and you are standing on your neighbor's front step, ringing the doorbell. He calls out, "Who's there?"

"It's me, from next door."

"It's the middle of the night? What do you *want*?"

“I’m in a real jam. Remember I told you some family was coming in from out of town? Well, they showed up early, and they’re starved from their trip. But I haven’t been to the grocery store. Can I borrow some bread and maybe a little butter? If you’ve got a little bacon or ham, that would be nice, too.”

“Are you serious? I’ve already gone to bed! I’m not going to risk waking up the baby to get your aunt and uncle from Texas some bread. Come back in the morning and I’ll help you out then.” Thinking that ought to be enough, your neighbor turns over in his bed and pulls the covers up over his head.

But you put your finger down on the doorbell and rap on the door with your other hand. By that time the baby is crying. He yells out, “Look, *go home!* Leave us alone!”

“I can’t go back home without some food for those hungry folks who just came in from a long drive!”

Finally, your neighbor says to his wife, “Well, it sounds like this guy is going to kick the door down unless I do something.” So he gets out of bed, half awake and half asleep, goes to the refrigerator, digs out what he’s got, brings it to the door, and hands it to you.

Now what does all these mean for us?

Perhaps you can identify with the urgency. “I’ve been knocking at the door of heaven, but there has been no answer. God has not come to the door.” My friend, do you think God is asleep when you pray? He is not. “Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:4).

Do you believe God doesn’t want to answer your prayers? God *wants* to answer your prayers—and He will. That is what this parable is saying. It is another parable by contrast. You do not have to knock down the door of heaven to get God’s attention. He isn’t reluctant to hear and answer you. He tells us in Isaiah 65:24, “... before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear.” He knows what is in your heart before you ever put it into words.



GOD WANTS TO ACT
in our behalf!

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Perhaps you are saying, “But He said no.” Well, then, that’s His answer. We don’t like to take no for an answer. God *always* hears and answers the prayers of His own, and when He says no it is because we are not praying for that which is best for us. But you *have* been answered. The difficulty was you asked for ice cream and when He came to the door He gave you cornbread. It wasn’t what you wanted, but cornbread was the best thing for you.

When you go to the door of heaven and knock—and He says to come and knock—you are not coming as a neighbor from next door. You are a *child* who has come to your *Father*. My friend, He only hears His children’s prayers.

Are you God’s child? You can attend church, you can be religious, and not be His child. So how do you become His child?

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who [do no more nor less than simply] ***believe in His name.*** –John 1:12

When you receive Him as your own personal Savior, you become His child. So when you pray to Him you are knocking at your *Father’s* door. That changes prayer. You are not going to a God who is reluctant. You are going to a Father who wants to answer and *will* answer. You do not have to storm the gate of heaven to get God to answer your prayer. God has not gone to bed. The door is wide open, and He says, “Knock, seek, and ask.”

But I say this very carefully: When we come into His presence, we need to realize it is the Father’s will that must prevail. God is holy, we are sinners, and the most important thing in our prayers is not that we get something, but that God’s will might prevail. If you are His child and you desire the Father’s will, He graciously opens the door and gives you your request. Take everything to God in prayer, and He will give you His very best.

PARABLE OF FATHERHOOD

We come now to the picture of a son:

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? –Luke 11:11, 12

Jesus looked around at the crowd assembled that day and saw many fathers. He said, “*You there, you’re a father. If your boy came to you and asked for bread, would you give him a stone?*” Of course no father would do that. So where did we get the idea we are better than God? If earthly fathers want to be good to their children, don’t you know the One who put a parent’s heart in us has Himself a father’s heart? When you go to Him, you can expect Him to do the very *best* thing for you.

Before the Day of Pentecost, our Lord stated it this way:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him! –Luke 11:13

The highest gift any person can receive is the Holy Spirit. Writing to the Corinthians—and they were carnal folk—Paul said,

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? –1 Corinthians 6:19

Everyone who trusts Christ—that is, becomes a child of God—is *indwelt* by the Spirit of God today. He dwells *within* us! This wonderful transaction began in believers on the Day of Pentecost. And in order for the Holy Spirit to come and indwell every believer, God had to *give His own Son to die* for us.

God today has already done for you the best He possibly can do.

To the Romans Paul said again,

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

–Romans 8:32

He will give us *all* things that are needful in our Christian life. He didn't say He would give you everything you *want*, but everything you *need*.

Dwight L. Moody, in his inimitable way, used to illustrate this verse by imagining he went to Tiffany's in New York, and Mr. Tiffany himself gifted him with the biggest diamond he had, saying, "Take it, it's yours!" He'd close his illustration by asking, "Do you think if he gave me that diamond I would hesitate to ask him for a little piece of brown wrapping paper to take it home in?"

Listen, my friend, if God gave His Son to die for you—and now has given you the highest gift, the Holy Spirit, to indwell you—do you think He will withhold from you *any* good thing? No! He has already done the best. He will not withhold from you any good thing. Do you believe that? Not many Christians do. But if you are His child, He will do for you the very best He can. And the best He can do is *the best!*

PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Now, here's our final parable-portrait. Oh, what biting satire the Lord uses here! He didn't say it this way to hurt them; He did it to help them.

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." –Luke 18:9, 10

You couldn't get any more far apart socially than these two men. The tax collector was at the bottom of the religious ladder; the Pharisee was at the top. Tax collectors were grouped right down there with sinners; the Pharisees were considered to be the most acceptable ones to God.

This Pharisee went into the temple to pray and make his sacrifice. As he stood and prayed, his priest was in the Holy Place putting incense on the altar. In other words, this old Pharisee had it made. But listen to how he prayed:

The penalty has been paid, friend.

THE HOLY GOD HOLDS HIS ARMS
OUTSTRETCHED BEFORE HIS CHILDREN,
WANTING TO GATHER THEM CLOSE
AND HEAR EACH PRAYER.

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE



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 18:11

Isn't that an awful way to begin a prayer? Yet that's how many of us do it. We might not say it exactly that way—we've learned how to polish it up. But we have our own way of putting it: “Lord, I thank You I can give You my time and my service” What a compliment that is for the Lord! Friend, we don't get anywhere when we pray like that. God doesn't need our service.

The Pharisee said, “I thank You that I am not like other men,” and then he began to enumerate what he *wasn't*. “I'm not an extortioner”—evidently there was somebody around who was an extortioner. “I am not unjust, I am not an adulterer” Then he spied that tax collector way outside the temple, and he said, “And, believe me, Lord, I'm not like that tax collector—that sinner—out there.” Then he began to tell the Lord what he *did* do:

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

My, isn't he a wonderful fellow! Wouldn't you love to have him in your church?

The Lord said he “prayed thus *with himself*.” In other words, he was performing a Hamlet soliloquy. Hamlet went off talking to himself and saying, “To be, or not to be, that is the question.” This old Pharisee was in the temple talking to himself—he thought he was talking to God, but his prayer never got out of the rafters. All he did was give himself a pep talk. He patted himself on the back and went out proud as a peacock, but God never heard a word of his prayer.

Then there was the tax collector. Oh, he was a rascal! He was a sinner; he was as low as they come. When he became a tax gatherer, he denied his nation—and, as a Jew, that meant he denied his religion. He turned his back on God. He took a one-way street, never intending to come back to God. Why did he do

it? It was lucrative. He became rich as a tax collector, but it didn't satisfy his heart. We know from the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 that a tax collector's heart was *empty*.

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!" –Luke 18:13

This poor man who in his misery and desperation knew he had no access to the mercy seat in the temple, cried out to God. "God, be merciful to me a sinner" does not adequately express it. Let me give it to you in the language he used: "O God, I'm a poor tax collector. I have no access to that mercy seat in the temple. Oh, if You could only make a mercy seat for *me!* I want to come."

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. –Luke 18:14

Our Lord said *that* man was heard. Do you know why? Because Jesus Christ right there and then was on His way to the cross to make a mercy seat for him. John writes:

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. –1 John 2:2

"Propitiation" means *mercy* seat. Christ is the mercy seat for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the *whole world*.

Today you don't have to ask God to be merciful; He *is* merciful. Many people beg Him, "Lord, be merciful." My friend, what else do you want Him to do? He already gave His Son to die for you. He says to the very worst sinner, "*You can come. There is a mercy seat for you.*" I had to come to that mercy seat, and if you want to be God's child, you'll have to come to that mercy seat, too. It's where He died on the cross for your sins.


The penalty has been paid, friend. The holy God holds His arms outstretched before His children, wanting to gather them close and hear each prayer. You don't have to beg Him, you don't have to promise Him anything, you do not have to join something. You do not even have to be somebody. You can be like a poor tax collector.

All you have to do is trust Him, and He will save you. God is merciful.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are both gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a park-like setting.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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