

October 10, 2010

A Heart for God: Luke's Special Witness  
Sermon 4 – Prayer

a sermon on Luke 18.1-8 & Acts 4.23-31  
by David C. Mauldin  
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

I knew a Christian who stopped praying. “I don’t pray,” he told me, though he believed in God, believed in Jesus, in a way. He had been committed and active at one time. Then he stopped praying. He stopped because he became convinced prayer does not make a difference. Several things had led him to his conclusion. The heaviest was the death of a little girl in his church. A pretty, young preschool girl in his church had been diagnosed with a rare and deadly disease. Her parents prayed. The church prayed. Other churches prayed. They prayed their hearts out. After a long suffering the girl died. Now of course, the man knew such things happen. God’s Providence is inscrutable. You have to accept that you are never going to figure God out, or why certain things happen. This event was not the decisive factor, but it was an influential one, because it hit him in the gut with a fear that had already been bouncing around in his brain: What good does prayer do? If God is all-good and all-knowing, he doesn’t need us to tell him what to do. If God needs us to tell him, then he isn’t much of a God. Looking back, this man saw all of his prayers falling flat. They seemed to make no difference in his life, one way or another. So he stopped praying.

Can you sympathize with him? Have you ever felt your prayers were like a helium balloon—they soar triumphantly into the sky, only to end up back on the ground, shriveled and useless? Have you ever been tempted to stop praying?

Or has your experience with prayer been more subtle than that? Few of us make a decision to give up on prayer. That borders on blasphemy. We’d never offend God or the pious sensibilities of our neighbors like that. Instead, we pay lip service to the importance of prayer, but we don’t bother to pray much. We pray at church, right before bed, when there’s a crisis. We pray, either because we are supposed to or because we have some pressing need. But we do not know the power of prayer. We are awkward in prayer, uncomfortable. We pray, but we do not expect our prayers to change the world.

This is the final sermon in our series, A Heart for God. It has been a series about the special witness of Luke. After the first sermon, which was about how Christians are different from the culture around us, I told a friend about the series. I told him the last three sermons would be about women, money, and prayer. He laughed and teased me

that I know about prayer, but those other two sermons would be very short. I teased back, and we had a good laugh. We both know, of course, that sermons are about the Word of God, not what I know or don't know. His joke was ironic, though, because I probably know a lot more about women and money than I do about prayer.

All I really know about prayer is: Do it. Pray. My knowledge of prayer is like my youngest son's knowledge of electrical cords. He doesn't know what they are made of or what they are for. He knows nothing about electricity or voltage or the possible consequences of playing with a cord (other than that Dad will get upset). All he knows is: Don't play with this thing. All I really know about prayer is: Pray.

I have known prayer to effect miraculous healing. On the other hand, I have prayed for a person for months – even years – only to see her worsen and die. I have known handicapped people to find peace through prayer, even when they did not find healing. The blind prayed for sight. The deaf prayed for hearing. They did not get what they asked for, but somehow in the process they discovered what Paul learned when he prayed: God's grace is sufficient. One drug addict is set free in an instant through prayer. Another struggles for years, with dozens of people praying fervently for him, before he is finally free. Still another never gets free, despite the tearful prayers of his mother and the faithful prayers of her church. Who understands prayer? Who understands how and why God answers as he does? Do we even recognize the answers to our prayer when God sends them? Not always. We lack God's perspective. A young woman prays and prays for a husband. God doesn't deliver. And yet God works out his greater purpose in her life. How long before she recognizes God's answer? Will she ever?

I am no expert on prayer. I don't see how anyone could be. But I do know this much: Pray. Pray with conviction that your prayers are powerful and God will use them.

Luke knew more about prayer than I, and Jesus knew more than he. Our two readings this morning are just samples of all that they both had to say about prayer. Once again, Luke isn't going to tell us about prayer. He's going to show us. In his gospel we find Jesus praying all night sometimes. Jesus prays before he receives the Holy Spirit at baptism. He prays before choosing his twelve disciples. He makes prayer a priority in his life and ministry. He told two parables about prayer, this one and the one about the midnight visitor in Luke 11. Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion. He teaches his followers to pray, so we are not surprised to find, in the book of Acts, this is one of the main things they do. They pray constantly and in response to every challenge, and God answers their prayers in dramatic ways.

Our reading in Luke is a parable Jesus told. It helps to understand why he told it. His disciples were an impatient lot. They kept asking him, "When is God's kingdom coming? You've been going all over, saying, 'The kingdom of God is at hand.' You've

been working signs and wonders. Now you are going to Jerusalem. This is it, right? The kingdom is finally here? What, another couple of days? A week? How long?" Poor disciples, they didn't understand. They didn't understand Jesus' mission or why he was going to Jerusalem or why he had to die. Poor Jesus, he had to put up with them. He also worried about them. They would be tempted to give up. Once he was dead and buried, why wouldn't they give up? He wanted them to always keep praying and never give up. Those are two classic marks of a true disciple of Jesus: You always pray, and you never give up. Even if hope seems insane. We're not really crazy. We just believe that a God who can create everything out of nothing and who can raise the dead can do anything.

Jesus wants his disciples to be true, strong disciples who pray always and never give up. So he tells them this story. One of the characters is a widow. Why? Because in that society a widow was the most vulnerable adult in the community. Women in that time and place did not go to court, so we know this woman is completely alone in the world. She has no son, nephew, father, uncle, or other male relative to go for her and plead her case. She has to go herself.

Her cause appears hopeless, because the judge doesn't care about her, and she has no leverage to use. If he feared God, she could appeal to him in the name of God or mercy or justice. If he cared what other people thought, she could appeal to the standards of the community or fair play. But this judge doesn't care what God thinks, and he doesn't care what the town thinks. Is he taking a bribe? The implication here is that the widow has a just case. He should rule in her favor, but for some reason he will not.

In those days, court was fairly simple. You had a judge, or the elders of a village acting as judge, and you had two parties. No district attorney. If someone stole from you, you went to court and complained. If someone wronged you, not paying you for work, for example, you went to court and complained. This woman had a complaint, but the judge was not interested. She persisted. She never gave up. Day after day she kept coming, until he was sick of her. Finally he ruled in her favor just to get rid of her.

Jesus says this is exactly what God is NOT like. Most of his parables tell us what God is like. God is like a loving father who welcomes home his prodigal son. God is like a landowner who sends his son to collect the rent. This is one of those rare parables that works on the principle of "how much more." Jesus once said, "If you who are evil give good gifts to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give good things to you." If sinful human beings can do something good, our holy and loving God can do it better. If a persistent widow can get an answer from an unjust judge, *how much more* will God's children get an answer from him? The widow has to badger the judge. We do not have to badger God. God will act quickly and decisively.

Or will he? There are a couple of subtle clues here that trouble me. The first is something Jesus said, "Will not God grant justice to his chosen ones *who cry out to him day and night?*" ... Our church office has a maintenance contract on the copy machine. The company has a guarantee. If our copier breaks down, they will send a technician to fix it within four hours. Prayer is *not* like that. Prayer is more like crying out to God than filing a request for service. And God does not promise to respond within a certain time frame. Prayer requires patience. It demands waiting. It means crying out day and night. So on one hand, Jesus assures us prayer works. God is not an uncaring judge whom we have to badger if we want him to do what is right. On the other hand, the very fact that he tells this parable should warn us that prayer demands patient waiting. Luke gives us our second subtle clue. He wrote, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." If our prayers were answered quickly and clearly, the way we want, we would never be tempted to lose heart. We would only lose heart if prayer meant we cry out day and night, over and over, and we keep waiting, and "what is God doing, anyway?"

This parable both assures us and warns us. It assures us prayer works. God does hear. He does act. Our prayers do matter. But, God does it all in his own way and in his own time and for his own purposes.

I love Kenneth E. Bailey. He was a missionary and a New Testament scholar who taught at a seminary in Lebanon. He was there during Lebanon's civil war, and he has some amazing stories. Anything he writes about the New Testament is worth reading. He helps you understand the world of the New Testament and to hear the parables the way people back then would have. Commenting on this passage, he observed: "Persistence in prayer is appropriate for a believer up until there is an answer. If God denies the request or offers a solution other than the one requested, the faithful person is expected to respond with, 'Thy will be done'" [*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 267]. ... We pray patiently. We pray persistently. We pray ready to accept God's will, whatever that may be, because we know that he understands what we do not understand. We know that he loves us. So we trust him.

I chose the passage from the book of Acts because it balances the parable. The parable warns that prayer can be a matter of patient endurance. The story from Acts shows the power God can unleash because of our prayers.

In the book of Acts, Peter and John had been preaching in the temple. The authorities did not like this. They arrested them and tried to intimidate them. They ordered Peter and John not to talk about Jesus anymore. Peter said he was going to obey God, not the authorities, and he and the other apostles would keep right on proclaiming the Good News that Jesus is the Messiah and Savior. After threatening them further, the authorities let them go. Peter and John ran straight back to the other believers, the

church, and told them everything that had happened. When the church heard the report, they immediately prayed.

They did not pray for protection. ... They did not pray for circumstances to change. ... They prayed for boldness. Their prayer reminds me of a sign I saw at Wintzell's Oyster House: "Why do people always pray for a lighter load instead of a stronger back?" The church in Acts prayed for a stronger back. They prayed for boldness, and "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and *spoke the Word of God with boldness.*" What a powerful, dramatic answer to their prayer! God did not delay. Their request fit perfectly into God's plan, and they experienced his power – resurrection power, Holy Spirit power – in their lives.

I bet none of them ever gave up on prayer. Even if later in their lives certain prayers found no quick or easy answer, even if their prayers were answered only by the deafening silence of God, as if silence itself were a language. I bet they never stopped praying because after this they knew. They knew the power of prayer. They knew prayer changes the world. Prayers are never like a helium balloon that rises up into the sky only to fall down to the ground again as litter. Prayers are like water vapor, which evaporates into the atmosphere until enough of it has accumulated and conditions are right, and then it falls to earth again to nourish and give life to living things. Prayers rise to heaven, where God takes them and blesses them and sends them back to earth again with his life-giving power. We do not control this process. We simply offer our prayers to God. He changes the world, because he can do anything.

I want to end this sermon differently. We have come to the part where I usually ask, "So what? What difference does this make in our lives day-to-day?" Normally I would explain how this teaching is relevant and tell you how you should put it into practice. Today that's too easy. Luke told you already: Pray always and never give up.

Instead, today, I want to end with a prayer, a prayer like the one in the book of Acts. I hope you will join me in your heart, and that this prayer I offer for our church will be your prayer too. Let us pray:

God, our Father, we give you praise, for you have given us your words of life. You have loved us with a great love. Christ died for us. You have claimed us and made us your own. Rejoicing in your grace, we ask for only two things more. First, make us holy. Fill our hearts with such love for you that our most passionate desire is to please you. Make our love for you shine through everything we do – when we are at home or work or in our community, and when we are gathered together for worship. Second, make us bold witnesses. Pour out your Spirit upon us, as you did when the church in Jerusalem prayed for boldness. Shake this place. Fill us. And make us bold. We do not ask for prosperity or success as the world defines it. We do not ask for easier circumstances, for we know that you have made us a church for this time and place.

We your people must face with faith and courage the challenges of our age, just as your faithful people always have. Without your power, we are lost. By your power that raised Jesus from the dead, raise us up to be your bold witnesses. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To you alone, O God, be glory, now and forever. Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com