

WHY PRAY WHEN YOU CAN FAINT?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

Last week, I received a phone call from one of my lifelong friends, a man named John. We had served together in the Air Force, and he was a groomsman in my wedding in North Africa 35 years ago. He and his wife Pat were our house guests in December last. They attended our services and the couples class, and they really enjoyed themselves. John, a faithful Catholic layman, called to share with me how excited he was about a seminar he was taking at his church. The seminar was being taught by a priest who really knows the Bible, John told me. He said he finally understood why God had the Bible written by the prophets and apostles. The priest had shared with them an acrostic for the word BIBLE: Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. Since that phone call I have not been able to pick up my B-I-B-L-E without thinking of God's gift to us.

This is exactly what Jesus was teaching his disciples in Luke 17:20-21, when some Pharisees began questioning him. Assuming for the moment that Jesus was the Messiah of 2 Samuel 7, they asked him, "When is the kingdom of God coming?" Jesus answered, "Behold, the kingdom is among you." What he meant was, they no longer needed to place their hope in the future, for the kingdom they longed for was present, and the King was standing in front of them.

The Pharisees did not understand that God's plan of salvation and justice came in two parts. Here is Plan A: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." (19:10.) If they would place their faith in him as their Messiah, he would spiritually set up his rule in their hearts. This would be possible because of his willingness to go to the cross and die for their sins (an event prophesied in Isaiah 53), followed by his resurrection and his ascension into heaven. We don't know how long Jesus would have offered Israel the spiritual kingdom before he would set up his physical kingdom, but we do know that once they rejected him as their Messiah (Luke 11:14-20), he went to the cross and then arose from the dead and spent 50 days with his disciples.

Just before he was about to ascend into heaven, the disciples wanted to know if Jesus would restore the kingdom to Israel at that time. It was then they discovered he was still extending his offer of salvation to the Jews and Gentiles to accept him as their Messiah and King and enter into the spiritual kingdom of heaven. He told his disciples that Plan A was still in effect and it would continue through them when "the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."

Then, as Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels told the disciples of Plan B: "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven." (Act 1:6-11.) So until he comes again in judgment and sets up his physical kingdom, our risen Lord is still saying to the whole world, "the kingdom of God is among you."

In Luke 17:22-32, Jesus told his disciples, "The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it." (22.) He also told them that "...He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation." Therefore, from the cross until his Second Coming, when he will set up his physical kingdom, there will be many difficult days for the faithful men and women who preach the gospel of salvation and follow him into the Age of the Spirit. But in the end they will be with him when he sets up his physical kingdom.

In Luke 18:1-15, to which we come today, Jesus will share some more Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. In light of the difficult days ahead, our normal mindset is to faint and lose heart quickly. But Jesus will encourage his disciples that the cure for fainting is prayer. Thus, in the face of the many political, emotional

and spiritual stresses we face, one could ask, "Why pray when you can faint?" We should pray because...

I. Prayer will keep us in touch with God

Luke 18:1-8

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.' And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.'" And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

"Now He was telling them a parable...", says our text. Luke records sixteen parables in his gospel. Today, we will look at the eleventh and twelfth parables. A parable is taken from nature or some human condition in order to teach a spiritual principle within the Kingdom of God. Jesus shared parables with his disciples so that they could understand the deep mysteries of the kingdom of God and how he was working on the earth (Matt. 13). But with unbelieving crowds and the Pharisees, he taught in parables to hide spiritual truth as a form of judgment (Matt 13:34-35).

"...He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart." In view of the difficult days that lay ahead, not only for the Lord but also for his disciples, Jesus instructed them to go back to the basic truth about their relationship with their heavenly Father and his desire to bring the kingdom of heaven to this wicked and fallen world through his Son as well as these disciples. He had taught them earlier to pray: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven..." (Matt 6:10). This was followed by the encouragement, recorded in Luke 11:5-13, that if they would place their faith in their heavenly Father, not only would he hear their deepest needs, but he would also answer their request. "But I say to you [that you do not have to persist in your prayers with our loving heavenly Father] ask, and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; and he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks it shall be opened." And at all times you will be comforted by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

When he said they must "pray at all times," Jesus was not asking the disciples to pray like a Tibetan priest turning a prayer wheel. What he was saying was that, as we are confronted with rejection and injustice while ministering and waiting for his second coming, we should continue to ask God to protect us and other believers and ask him to provide all the resources necessary to confront our present realities. Jesus set the model for his disciples by demonstrating a lifestyle of prayer. Ray C. Stedman in his book, *Talking To My Father*, wrote,

"True prayer is an awareness of our own helpless need and an acknowledgement of divine adequacy. For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing, the very breath of life itself."

Jesus, on the night before he was betrayed, illustrated the value of prayer on behalf of his disciples when he said to the Father, "I have given them Thy word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one." (John 17:14-15.) He was encouraging them to pray for the second coming, and then to pray for themselves and others while waiting for that event. Thirty years later, the apostle Peter, who had heard these encouraging words, wrote to the Christian community in Western Turkey who were facing injustice and religious persecution under Nero, "The end of all things is at hand; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer." (1 Peter 4:7.) Prepare your minds and spirits by the power of the Holy Spirit

so that when you come before your loving Heavenly Father in prayer, your thinking will be sound and your spirit will not be drunk with anxiety over your circumstances.

The spiritual principle is clear: Within our present reality, our risen Lord is still saying, "The Kingdom of God is among you." Salvation is still being offered to mankind in the midst of a corrupt and fallen world. Keep in mind that as you go about as followers of Christ in this generation, you will face difficult days of rejection, persecution and injustice for his name's sake. We must develop a lifestyle of prayer, otherwise we will faint over the many difficult situations we are placed in by our risen Lord. "Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart."

Last Tuesday night I went to bed late. As I lay in the dark, I began to think of all the couples in this spiritual family who are facing problems that seem almost overwhelming. I tried to think through some of the ways I might be able to help them through their difficult situations, and I found my chest begin to tighten up and my heart begin to race. I realized how helpless I was at that moment. I knew I could not save them. I found myself fainting and losing heart and wishing his kingdom would come quickly. Finally, I began to pray for them, acknowledging that I could not save anyone, and the next thing I knew it was seven in the morning. "At all times we ought to pray and not to lose heart," said Jesus.

Next, Jesus shares his eleventh parable, the story of the wicked judge and the persistent woman. We need to look closely at this parable because many believe that it teaches a principle of spiritual persistence. But it does not, and neither does the parable of Luke 11:5-8, where Jesus told the story of the man who awakened his sleeping neighbor asking for three loaves of bread and finally succeeding because of his persistence. In this parable, the judge apparently was a Roman who was placed over a city by his government. This man was godless. He had no respect for, nor did he sense any accountability to the Living God and his commandments concerning justice. He had no respect for himself, so how could he respect his fellow man? He was completely self-absorbed, and he obviously needed to protect his space, as we would say today.

What do we see of the character of the widow? Apparently she had no family or friends in high places. Further, she was being sued, and her opponent was demanding an unjust settlement. It appears that the facts of the case were on her side, so she went to the court system and got permission to approach a judge. This only made things worse, however, as she was given a wicked and merciless judge. He was unwilling to grant her the protection she believed she was entitled to. It seems she returned to him day after day, and in time she bothered him so much that she wore him out. The judge agreed with God that "even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wears me out." He didn't grant her legal protection because he had heard her case again and decided, based on Roman law, that she had suffered an injustice; and that he would grant a retrial and set the record straight so that Roman justice would prevail. No! He was afraid that she would eventually "wear him out" (which had nothing to do with justice), so he ruled in her favor. Now here is the spiritual principle: "And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says'." And what was that? He said he was not interested in justice for this widow, but rather in his own personal comfort and peace, his space, and the dismissal of this bothersome woman.

Now in contrast, what is the character of the Judge of all the earth? Here is what Jesus said to his disciples: "...now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night and will He delay long over them?" Our heavenly Father, who is perfect in love, righteousness and justice, is nothing like this wicked judge. G. Campbell-Morgan wrote this concerning the character of God: "There are things He cannot do because they would deny the truth concerning Himself, His righteousness, His holiness, His justice, His compassion; and God cannot be unrighteous. God cannot be other than holy, God cannot be unjust, and God cannot fail in mercy." "...now shall not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?" Jesus was encouraging his disciples that the heavenly Father is interested in justice, and that if they came to him in prayer, asking for justice in the difficult days ahead, before he returned again, he would hear them because they were among his elect. But unlike the widow in the parable, they did not have to come to him persistently, day after day. Once they asked for justice, they should believe that the righteous Judge of all the earth would not only hear them, but he would not delay in establishing justice for them.

But, we must keep in mind the purpose behind any delay which might occur. Thirty years later, the apostle Peter wrote to some of God's elect in western Turkey, believers who were suffering unjustly under the hand of Nero. Peter said two things. First, while Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, was being led to the cross by the cruel Roman guards, he was being reviled, but "He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." (1 Peter 2:24.) Why? Because he was being sent to the cross for the sins of all of us so that all who place their faith in him would be given the gift of eternal life. And second, Peter encouraged the same believers who were hearing the mocking of men concerning the second coming. When these men asked, "Where is the promise of His coming?" Peter's counsel was, "Do not listen to them. The Lord has heard your cries. Understand why Jesus has not come at just the moment you want: 'But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...'" (2 Peter 3:1-13).

In light of the difficult days ahead, Jesus assured his disciples, as well as all who would follow them into the Age of the Spirit and the great tribulation, disciples such as Stephen, James, Paul, Peter, Clement of Rome, Martin Luther, Corrie Ten Boom, Jim Elliot (the list goes on), that in the midst of their trying times over the generations, God would hear their cry, and his answer would not be delayed in light of his plan of salvation. Peter wrote: "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily." Peter is thinking of men and women in every generation until Jesus comes again, rather than one person crying for justice night and day until he or she "wears God out."

"However," says Jesus, "when [not if] the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" In view of the difficult days that lay ahead for the Lord's disciples, as well as his disciples in the Age of the Spirit, when he finally does come again 1) in an invisible coming to the world for his church (when he will come as a thief in the night, just before the final great seven-year tribulation), or 2) when he comes again in glory, power and judgment for all the world to see at the end of the great tribulation, will he find his spiritual sons and daughters living victorious lives of faith, trusting in him for every circumstance they face? Or will he find those who love him fainting during those difficult days? Will he find Christians losing heart as they suffer injustice at the hands of wicked men, forgetting to trust him for justice and protection from their oppressors? Each man and woman must answer that question for themselves.

In light of the difficult days we live in before the second coming of Christ, we should be found praying at all times - praying so that we do not lose heart. In the immediate context, we should be praying about our Lord bringing justice in the midst of an unjust world system.

Jews for Jesus evangelists have been harassed by station managers in the Boston subway stations for passing out their famous "Broadside" tracts proclaiming Jesus as Messiah, even though they exhibited exemplary conduct while doing so. Two years ago, a Boston court banned the group from continuing their ministry. A request for prayer went out to their supporters, and then they hired a group called Christian Advocates to defend their right to free speech in the subways of Boston. As a result of prayer and godly advocates, when they came to court, according to a report, "Judge Zobel ruled that a ban on handing out leaflets in subway stations was an unconstitutional block to free speech, and she issued a permanent injunction barring the transit authority from enforcing regulations on literature distribution."

Why pray when you can faint? Because prayer keeps us in touch with God so that we will not lose heart in the difficult days before his second coming, and

II. Prayer will show God our heart

Luke 18:9-14

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like

this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

Our text tells us why Jesus went on to teach this parable: "And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt." The question that would be raised in the minds of the disciples, considering the fact that when Jesus returns again he will judge the wicked and reward the righteous, was, "Who then are the wicked men and who are the just men?"

The Pharisees had two basic problems in the sight of God: 1) they were self-righteous, and 2) they had contempt for others, despising all who were not like them. What is the definition of a self-righteous person? Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." (5:20.) That quality of righteousness could never be obtained by keeping a set of man-made traditions, or by trying to keep the law in the flesh. The Jews already knew from Genesis 15:6 that "...Abraham believed God [concerning all his promises] and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Abraham was declared righteous before God because of his faith, not his works, but out of his new life came good works. Paul would later write to the Romans, "There is none righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). Today, as in the days of Abraham, men and women are declared righteous by God when they place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior (3:21-23).

So what were the characteristics of this Pharisee in Jesus' parable? He went to the temple to pray to a God whom he imagined in his mind. He stood in the midst of all the others gathered to pray and, in effect, prayed to himself: "God, I want to give thanks to you at this moment. As I look around at the humanity in which I am forced to live because of the Roman oppressors, I want you to know I am so thankful that I am not like other people." Then he named the kind of people he had in mind: "swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or worse yet, like that tax-gatherer across the way. Now Lord, back to me. I fast twice a week, every Monday and Thursday [which was unnecessary because the law only asked a Jew to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement]". And then, instead of obeying the law concerning tithing, which required that he give a tenth of his grain and cattle, he gave a tenth of all that he had, including the smallest seeds, etc. But here is what Jesus said of this practice: "and yet [you] disregard justice and the love of God..." (11:42).

And what were the characteristics of the tax-gatherer? When we studied the life of Matthew (DP message #4129) we saw that this man was a tax-gatherer before he became a follower of Jesus (Matt. 5:27-32). Tax-gatherers were Jews who were hired by the Roman government to collect taxes from their fellow-Jews. Once hired, they were known as publicans or public servants. They were considered to be on the lowest rung of the social ladder because of their unscrupulous methods. Tax collectors would estimate the worth of merchants' good that flowed through the three major cities in Israel, Caesarea, Jericho and Capernaum. The estimated tax was usually much higher than the goods were worth, so in time the tax men acquired a reputation as extortionists. As Jews, they were hated by their countrymen and regarded as publicans, sinners and traitors. Their Roman employers hated them also. So the only friends a tax-collector had were other tax collectors.

In spite of how others thought of him, however, this man realized he needed God in his life. He had such respect for the "awesome God," the "Holy God," the "Merciful God" that was revealed in the Book of Deuteronomy that he was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven. In contrast to the Pharisee, this man was "beating his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me the sinner.'" In other words, "Let your anger, which I deserve, be removed. Cover me with the blood of the lamb, slain on the Day of Atonement, for the sins of your people. Dear God, forgive, please forgive me. I know I have sinned in your sight." We know, of course, that Jesus' words to such people are: "Blessed are the poor in spirit [those who are spiritually bankrupt] for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3).

Jesus next evaluates and judges the heart of man: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (18:14.) The tax-collector could go home knowing he was justified (declared righteous) by God, and await the second coming of Jesus Christ in confidence and peace. The Pharisee was not forgiven his sins

because he thought he had no sin, and he exalted himself before God and man. Unless he changed his attitude from pride to humility he would be judged at the second coming of Jesus Christ.

I watched a wonderful program on TV the other night about the life of John Newton, the former slave trader who became a Christian and then a pastor in England in the 17th century. John Newton wrote many hymns, but perhaps the the most famous of them all was "Amazing Grace." As I read the words of that great hymn again last week, I couldn't help but think how much John Newton reminded me of the tax-collector in the temple. Here in the words of his hymn is the heart of John Newton:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come,
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

In the difficult days between our Lord's first coming and his second coming he continues to give his disciples in each generation Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. As his disciples, let us continue to proclaim the message that the kingdom of God is still among us in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us be people who ought always to pray and not to faint, because

- 1) prayer brings us back to God, and
- 2) prayer reveals our hearts as we seek to serve our Lord.

It is in prayer that we sense our own helplessness in the age of the Spirit; the wonderful presence of our risen Lord; and his encouragement for spiritual resources to deal with our present realities. Why pray when you can faint? Because our Lord does not want us to live defeated, discouraged lives. He wants us to come to him in these difficult days before his second coming so that we can ask for all the spiritual resources necessary to continue to share the good news of Jesus Christ to all who will listen. "The Kingdom of God is among you," said Jesus. If we will place our faith in the risen Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we shall receive salvation and the forgiveness of our sins. Our shame and guilt will be replace by wholesomeness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, as men and women who love Jesus Christ.

"...at all times we ought to pray and not to faint," until he comes again in power and glory.

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