

SERMON SERIES: "Teach Us to Pray"
SERMON TITLE: "We Pray for Forgiveness"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 18:1-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 22, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

When I was the pastor of the Wesley United Methodist Church in Pueblo, Colorado, there was a member there named Shirley, who grew up in a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. Shirley told me that she decided to leave that denomination because their highly liturgical worship services had too many prayers of repentance and confession. Shirley said that every few minutes they were praying for God to forgive them. She didn't understand how you could pray for forgiveness 10 minutes into the worship service and need to be forgiven again at 30 minutes and then again at 55 minutes into the hour. Shirley would never have said she was an absolutely perfect Christian, but she didn't think she could sin that much during one hour of worship! What caused Shirley to decide to join our Wesley United Methodist Church was that, on the second Sunday she visited our worship service, we sang the hymn "Victory in Jesus." Shirley wasn't opposed to praying for forgiveness, but she very much appreciated an opportunity to rejoice that God had actually, and victoriously, answered her prayer.

All this month of September, we've been talking about prayer. We've been discussing some ideas about prayer and methods of prayer, and we've been making our way through the themes of The Lord's Prayer. For example, on September 8, the youth and some of us adults acted out the prayer positions that King Hezekiah used as he prayed for the holiness of God's will to come on earth as it is in heaven. And last Sunday, we talked about fasting and prayer closets as possible aids to praying for our daily bread and other human needs. Today, I chose this two-parable text from Luke 18 because it gives us some ideas about how to pray that we can then apply to The Lord's Prayer theme of "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Both these parables offer us great suggestions for when we pray for forgiveness.

1—PRAYER PERSISTENCE

The first parable, found in Luke 18, verses 1-8, tells the story of a widow who goes to a judge as she seeks justice against her opponent. We aren't told what went wrong. We don't know if the offense against her was criminal or civil. We don't know if she was hurt physically, like some kind of wounding assault to her body. Or, since the story tells us that she was a widow, maybe the assault was a mortal blow against her husband that left her in grief. Or possibly, the offense was material, like the theft of money or possessions, possibly the reassignment of an inheritance. And/or maybe her social and moral reputation had been smeared by her opponent telling lies about her. All we know is that some kind of injustice had occurred, and this widow needed to get it straightened out. She needed the judge to make matters right. Before she could move on to forgiving that person, she needed some level of justice to happen.

Unfortunately, the judge wasn't very just and didn't care about her case. Even though she came to him over and over again, he repeatedly refused to give her a hearing. Finally, though, the judge gave in because he realized that she was so persistent that she would never quit bothering him until he responded to her need.

Jesus told this parable not so we would think that God is unjust or uncaring, but so we would realize how important it is that we are persistent in our prayers. If we have a real and valid concern, then we should never give up praying about it. We should never lose heart. We should persevere always until we get the help from God that we need.

When I announced that I would be preaching for a whole month on the subject of prayer, Denise Carlson asked me if I had seen the movie *War Room*. Since I hadn't, she brought me her DVD so I could watch it. Thank you, Denise! It was really good, and the movie goes perfectly with our prayer topic in so many ways. If you haven't seen that movie, I suggest you do.

I have to admit, though, that I was reluctant, at first, to watch the movie because of the title *War Room*. It sounded too militant to me for a movie about faith. But one of the main characters in the movie is a little elderly African American woman who is very, very far from violent. Instead, she is assertively confident in God's ability to help those who pray. As Clara teaches the younger woman Elizabeth, our fighting against problems shouldn't play out in destructive conflicts between us and the people with whom we feel disappointments, angers, and hurts. Rather, we should take our struggles and battles to God in prayer. When we strategically apply that frustration energy to our heart-to-heart talks with God, then positive changes will begin to happen. Then imbalances will begin to right themselves, justice will happen, and forgiveness will be possible.

Will that process take time? Yes, quite likely it will. Will it take some effort on our part? Yes, persistence in prayer is hard work. If we've got little problems, those may be resolved with just a little prayer. But if our problems are really big, then we likely will need to pray often and for sustained amounts of time. We may need to develop a prayer style like speaking our prayers aloud, writing our prayers in a journal, or reading prayers written by other spiritual leaders—or a combination of all of those methods. We may need to develop a consistent prayer time of the day that we can dedicate ourselves to this cause. And we may need to create or claim a prayer space—like the idea of a private prayer closet—where we can really cry out our heart to God without worry about interruption or fear that others will perceive the depth of our emotions.

Of course, prayer doesn't always have to be done alone. We benefit from reading the promises of scripture and hearing the ancient biblical and contemporary stories of others who have struggled in faith and found that their persistence paid off. Praying with a spiritual partner, praying in a small Christian support group, and praying in the midst of a congregation are all ways that we can pray always, not lose heart, and persist in prayer.

2—PRAYER FORGIVENESS FROM PARABLE OF PHARISEE & TAX COLLECTOR

Of course, there's more to prayer than persistently seeking God's judgment on our opponents. While justice and consequences may need to happen, very often, the better prayers—or additional prayers—that we could and should be praying are for God's mercy for our own sins and our own forgiveness of others. In The Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught that we need to pray both that God will forgive *our* trespasses AND that we will "forgive those who trespass against us."

We see this forgiveness theme clearly in Luke 18, verses 9-14, where Jesus tells his parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. When the Pharisee went to the temple to pray, he condemned others as he bragged to God about his own spiritual superiority. In contrast, the tax collector humbly beat his chest and begged for God's mercy upon his sin. Jesus indicated that, of the two men, it was the repentant sinner who left the temple justified, because he realized and confessed that he was in need of forgiveness. Like our Chancel Choir sang last week, the tax collector's prayer song would have been, "It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my father, not my mother; not my brother, not my sister; not the preacher, not the deacon; but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

No matter who we are, we always have room to improve and grow spiritually. We always have some area of our lives that is lacking in strength or sensitivity. We always have some reason for which to be humble. Our task shouldn't be to compare ourselves against other people, but to compare ourselves against God. As Jesus said in Matthew 5:48, our goal is to "be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect." With that high standard, there's always something we have said or done or thought that needs to be forgiven. No matter how spiritual we are, we all need the mercy and forgiveness that God is so eager and willing to provide.

But, as The Lord's Prayer reminds us, our ability to receive God's forgiveness is intimately connected with our ability to forgive others. There's something about opening our hearts to mercy for

others that also opens our hearts to God's mercy for us. Sometimes it's a chicken-or-the-egg puzzle. Which comes first? I think, practically, it comes a little of this and a little of that, in many doses and layers, gradually increasing in each over time. Our experience of God's mercy for us allows us to be more forgiving of others. And our willingness to extend mercy to others makes it possible for us to comprehend and feel God's forgiveness for us. For sure, the two kinds of forgiveness go hand in hand and are essential to the other. And we need to pray for both. We need to pray for forgiveness.

CONCLUSION

I already mentioned watching the movie *War Room*. There's so much good information in that movie about prayer that it's hard to tell you just a little bit. But the forgiveness piece of prayer is really important in the story. Each of the characters had sin, resentments, and problems that they needed to overcome. They needed to be forgiven and to forgive others. Elizabeth needed to forgive her husband for his financial deceit and his flirting with infidelity. Tony needed to stop cheating and stealing at work, and take responsibility for his guilt. Both Elizabeth and Tony needed to seek the forgiveness of their little daughter, requests that they backed up by intentionally changing their behavior for the better. All of them needed to pray for God's mercy in their own lives and to pray for mercy for each other. And, when they did, a hurting family gained healing.

The good news is that God is willing both to forgive us and to help us forgive others. This is our hope and our promise as we persistently pray for forgiveness.