

# “Getting What You Want”

Luke 18:1-8

10/21/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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If this were not a parable, it would pose a serious moral problem for the thoughtful reader. After all, the judge has to be almost forced into tending to the needs of a wronged widow. It’s disappointing that the judge is also said to neither fear God nor respect people. So if the judge character is thought of as a direct analogy for God, it would be grim business to suppose that God answers prayer only because people nag and pressure God into doing so.<sup>1</sup>

But the parable was probably not told when someone simply asked about persistence in prayer. More likely, Jesus and His listeners had recently heard about a local magistrate who finally came through for a destitute widow, not because he cared, but only because she kept after him.

The point of the story was being made by describing a *poor* example of response in comparison to the *greater* reality of God’s actual presence in our lives when we pray. Here it is: if an insensitive and hardened judge will finally hear the pleas of a widow, how much more can we trust that God will hear our prayers when we cry out day and night for help.



Remember the parable about the dishonest steward? The star character in the story is a crooked but shrewd chief financial manager who was diligent in doing what he had to do in order to salvage his career. The point there was that even more so, God’s people ought to passionately do what they have to do for the sake of God’s kingdom. If people could be creative and motivated to save their jobs, Christians, even more so, should commit themselves to using every means possible to attend to their spiritual growth and life.

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<sup>1</sup> This parable is unique to Luke’s gospel as he was interested in Jesus’ teachings on prayer.

A little more discipline in studying this passage causes us to look at the context.



In the verses before this, the disciples are asking questions about the coming of God’s kingdom. Jesus tells them that there aren’t any signs by which they could start a countdown to the second coming.

When Luke was putting his writings together, it was probably in the 80’s of the first century and this third generation of Christians was starting to wonder about the supposed return of Christ. They worried whether or not Jesus was going to return and the delay was starting to cause some to have doubts. The gospel writers began putting the life of Jesus down on paper from the 60’s onward, ... Mark being the first, then Matthew ten years later, then Luke in the 80’s and finally John in the 90’s or beyond. No one had written about the life of Christ because most people expected Jesus to come back in the lifetime of this first generation of Christ followers. Many of the original followers had died or were dying and Jesus simply had not come back.

So the parable was saying that if this wretch of a judge could, at long last, be *driven* into action, imagine how much more responsive God will be to the requests we make in the face of our hardships. The troubles Luke might have had in mind, when writing this, may have been the Roman governors who were beginning to persecute Christians.

Like many of the other parables, this is a metaphor which shows the gracious nature of God in comparison to some commonly perceived patterns of human behavior. The passage also reminds us that God is no harsh judge who frowns down at us, bothered and impatient with our requests. Our God is compassionate and cares for us with the deepest of empathy.



All of us want things we don’t have. We realize that, at times, people and circumstances

have not come through for us and we were left wanting or in pain.

The people in the congregations, to whom Luke was writing, were probably wondering if and when Jesus might return, ... but like us, they were hoping for a lot of other things. Some of them flatly needed a job and were desperate for some financial stability. Some were earnestly looking for healing in their bodies or their relationships.

All of us here this morning are looking for other things to come into our lives. But one aspect of our faith should be a sense of expectation. It is expectation itself that brings joy into our lives. If you don't hope for something, ... you're hopeless.

Think about the people in your life. Some people you know have no hope and they are not able to live in the present. They're stuck back in the so-called "good old days" or they're constantly worried about the future. They have no joy. They are detached from the present and themselves. They don't know that joy, and a sense of being connected with the present, are what makes our tomorrows better. Unfortunately we often only bother praying to God when we want something.



**Perhaps you're a worrier.** We all are, to a certain extent, but some of us are more pessimistic than others. It's always the worst possible thing that first comes to mind.

*Worrying is a great thief of our time.* We can soar from distress to disaster in five seconds and it causes no end of sorrow.

When we stew, sometimes we even rationalize that our worry is actually doing something about our perceived problems. We think that if we don't worry, no one is so at least we are thinking about it. But when we are worrying, we are launching a downward spiral that can ruin an entire day for ourselves and those around us.

Instead of worrying, first **try ❶ having a conversation with God's Spirit within you.** Try simply asking for a blessing upon your

circumstances, whatever they are. Ask God for some improvement. Ask for a tap into some mysterious source of energy and joy. Ask for healing.

After praying about your worries, try **❷ writing out what is troubling you.** Write out the worst case scenario. What are your greatest fears? If they happened, what would you do? How would you cope?

Once you have an attempt at an initial survival solution, try to **❸ get beyond and accept that there is an "I don't know" part of it.** You know there are always unknowns in life. Fully face those unknowns about which you are powerless to control about your future.

When we figure out what we'd do if the worst did happen, the sense of hopelessness starts to fade. Mark Twain once said, "I have spent most of my life worrying about things that have never happened." Sadly, he said this at the end of his life. We all do this.<sup>2</sup>

**❹ As we mature, though, our accumulating sense of life gradually gives us the quiet courage to be more authentic with ourselves, with others and with God.** We find our true place in the world. We become at home with ourselves, with others and with God. In it all, we can discover joy.



We learn to live fully in the present moment but only after we become able to do a profound inner shift of our sense of reality. It's the cup that is half full, not half empty – it is a sense of gratitude.

You see, so many of us unconsciously create dramas in our minds, expecting the worst from a situation, only to have our expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies. Inadvertently, we become authors of our own misfortune. We are driven by schemas, the learned and automatic thought and feeling patterns and faulty

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<sup>2</sup> So says Sarah Ban Breathnach on the July 31<sup>st</sup> page of Simple Abundance, A Daybook of Comfort and Joy ISBN 0446519138.

interpretations of reality that bring about more hardships for ourselves.

But what if you **learned how to stop the dramas and started to trust the flow of life and the goodness of God**? What if you began to look for and expect the best from any situation? Isn't it possible that you could write new chapters in your own life with happy endings?

For many of us, this would be such a radical departure from the way we have been behaving, that it seems unbelievable. It *is* possible.

⑤ Suspend your disbelief in God and **begin to trust and have faith in what God can do**. Try beginning to do this today. Declare to the universe that you are letting go of the struggle, eager to learn more and be fulfilled in joy.<sup>3</sup>

⑥ **Consider how much you feel free to ask for help**. When was the last time you felt comfortable asking someone for something – for advice, for help or even directions? In our culture we're bred to be fiercely independent and self-reliant – even macho.

The biggest part of letting go of the struggle and expecting the worst to happen is *expecting to find joy* in life and *asking for it*. There's a bit of this thinking in the recent song "Drive" by the band Incubus:

"So if I decide to waive my chance to be one of hives

Will I choose water over wine

And hold my own and drive, . . .

It's driven me before, it seems to be the way

That everyone else gets around

Lately, I'm beginning to find

That when I drive myself

My light is found.

*Chorus:*

Whatever tomorrow brings I'll be there

With open arms and open eyes

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Ban Breathnach on the January 19<sup>th</sup> page.

Whatever tomorrow brings

I'll be there, I'll be there"<sup>4</sup>

You see, we won't gain an open-armed approach to life of accepting what tomorrow brings unless we *ask* for that ability. But asking comes with no guarantees.



For some of you, it's been a long time since you've asked God for something. Perhaps we've been afraid to ask. Maybe we're afraid of the "Great Silence"<sup>5</sup> In that great silence of facing our needs, we only hear our own sobs. But if we don't ask God, we don't have a prayer.<sup>6</sup>

① First, get in touch with what you need. ② Then get in touch with what you think you want. ③ Then be sure to ask the right question. Try asking God to unfold what's best for your life with a quiet sense of expectancy. Ask politely. Ask with passion. Ask, with a grateful heart, and you will be heard.<sup>7</sup>

④ Finally, figure out where God is in your life. Is there joy in your life?

Some of us cannot say for sure because something is causing us sadness and it could be that God's absence seems more real than God's presence. Whatever we intellectually think about the presence of God, we are often praying in one form or another, whether we know it or not.<sup>8</sup> God even reads your mind and the feelings of your heart.<sup>9</sup>

⑤ According to Jesus, then, **the most important thing about praying is to keep at it**. The images He used to explain this were sometimes comic, ... such as the time He said that God is like a good friend from whom you hope to borrow bread in the middle of the night. The

<sup>4</sup> "Drive" by Incubus 2001 (Epic/Immortal Label)

<sup>5</sup> A phrase used by Marjorie Holmes in her book "I've God to Talk to Somebody, God"

<sup>6</sup> See Sarah Ban Breathnach.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Ban Breathnach on the June 3<sup>rd</sup> page.

<sup>8</sup> See Frederick Buechner *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973, p.70f.

<sup>9</sup> As says Romans 8

friend tells you, in effect, to jump in the lake, but you keep knocking anyway. You keep pounding until finally your friend ends up giving you what you want in order to go back to bed.

As we said, our persistence in asking God *could* be thought to be like the woman in this parable who hounded the uncaring judge. Or in another story, even if your child were a real pip, would you really give your kid a black eye when he or she asked for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich? How much all the more will God come through when God's children ask?

⑨ Whatever else it is, **prayer is at least talking to ourselves** and that's not a bad idea in itself. Talk to yourself about your own life, about what you've done and about who you are and who you wish you were. Talk to yourself about the people you love and the people you don't happen to love. **Be present in your own life.** Be in tune with who you are as a beautiful person God has personally made.

Talk to yourself about what matters most to you because if you don't, you might forget what matters most to you. Even if you don't happen (at the moment) to believe that anyone's listening, at least you'll be listening.

But Someone *is* listening. Believe in miracles. That's what Jesus told the father who asked Him to heal his epileptic son. Jesus said, "All things are possible for the one who believes." And the father spoke for all of us when he answered: "Lord, I believe, ... but help my unbelief."



But what happens when we or our children are *not* healed? What happens if you *don't* get the job you thought would finally enable you to use all of your skills and talents? What happens when your best relationship is falling apart and no amount of prayer seems to be turning things around? What happens when your heart is broken and you know you cannot go on, ... and then things get even worse?

Jesus says: Remember the crooked judge who was dying for a good night's rest but kept hearing a knock at the door. Even if things are not

turning around, keep on beating the path to God's door.



The one thing you can be sure of ... is that down the path that you beat, with even your most half-cocked and fumbling prayers, you'll find that God was never far from you in the first place. And even if God does not bring you the answer *you* want, ... what you will receive is God's presence. Because that is what we are really praying for anyway. 🌹

