

Luke 18:1-8

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[0 : 00] Well, it really is great to be with you. Thank you for the warm welcome. And thank you very much for your prayers for us in Chester. We really do appreciate you praying for us.

We're looking at this passage that Paul read for us in Luke chapter 18. And do turn back there if you've got a Bible with you, Luke 18, and the Church Bibles, that's page 877.

I don't know whether you might follow professional boxing at all. It's an interesting time in professional boxing in the heavyweight division. There's the American fighter Deontay Wilder, who's got an incredible right hook, right punch.

There's Tyson Fury, who I'm sure you've heard of, even if you're not interested in boxing. And no matter what your assessment of him, everybody agrees he's an incredibly talented boxer.

And then you've got Anthony Joshua, who won gold at the Olympics in 2012 before he became professional. Everybody loves Anthony Joshua. But a couple of years ago, he was fighting what everybody thought was going to be a fairly routine fight. There was no big hype before it. It wasn't a big box office fight.

[1 : 09] He was fighting a Mexican boxer called Andy Ruiz Jr. And everybody thought Joshua would win. It wasn't really any question about it before the fight, but he went on to lose.

And with it, he lost his undefeated records. And it was interesting reading and listening to the pundits and the analysts as they wrote and spoke about the fight after it had happened and gave their reasons why Joshua might have lost this fight.

There were some people who were saying, well, something must have gone wrong in Joshua's camp in the week before the fight. There were some reports that he'd been knocked out in training, so he wasn't really fit for the fight. There were some people who had always doubted Joshua's boxing ability, and they were using the opportunity to say, we told you so.

Joshua really isn't that great of a boxer. But there were some people who were analyzing the last round before the fight ended. And they were watching Joshua. And he wasn't knocked out.

The ref didn't have to step in and stop the fight. He just walked back to his corner quietly, and his corner threw the towel in. And people were analyzing this, and they were saying, it seems like Joshua just gave up.

[2 : 20] He didn't have the stomach for it. Well, we don't know for Joshua whether the issue really was that he gave up. But we're looking at a parable this morning in Luke 18, in which giving up very much is the issue.

Luke tells us that in verse 1. It says, and Jesus told them, that's the disciples, a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart, not give up.

And so here is a parable Jesus told for his disciples, not for the Pharisees, not for onlookers. It's for the disciples, and its purpose is to encourage the disciples not to give up.

Luke tells us that explicitly in verse 1, but we also see it in the parable itself. This parable, it's become known in the parable as the parable of the persistent widow. Jesus describes in this parable a widow who does not give up in her petition for justice.

So here is a parable designed by Jesus to encourage Christians, his followers, not to give up. Now, before we get into the detail of the text, it's worth, at this point, just pausing to acknowledge that Jesus here knows that his followers will, at times, feel like quietly walking back to their corner and throwing the towel in.

[4 : 02] Why else would he carefully design a parable that would have the effect of encouraging his followers not to give up? In fact, the temptation to give up is acknowledged to be a very real temptation for Jesus' followers all the way through the New Testament.

Twice in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says that because of the great hope that we have in the gospel and because of the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

Why would he write that unless there is a very real temptation, a very real danger that we might lose heart? Lose heart. He writes, Paul writes to the Ephesians in chapter 3, verse 13.

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. Hebrews 12, 3 says, Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

And so again and again, the writers of the New Testament refuse to hide the fact that as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, we will at times feel like losing heart.

[5 : 13] Giving up. Some of you don't need much convincing of that this morning. You've been there. You've wanted to give up.

You've weighed it all up. You've wondered whether it's all worth it. But here in this parable in Luke 18, as Jesus acknowledges this reality, he doesn't respond in a number of ways that he might have responded in.

He doesn't respond, for instance, with a heavy hand. He doesn't say to his disciples, If you find yourselves at a time and you want to give up, then you've failed me.

And I don't want to know about it. He doesn't respond with indifference. He doesn't shrug his shoulders and say something like, If you feel like giving up, then what's it got to do with me?

I've done my part of the deal. No. He knows that his disciples are going to find themselves at times where they want to give up, and it matters. It matters so much to him that he wants to equip his disciples with the resources to persevere and to overcome the temptation to give up.

[6 : 23] He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. And so the main point of this parable, then, is to answer the question, What will keep us from giving up?

But before it answers that question, it answers two other questions. Firstly, what does it mean to give up? And secondly, what might cause us to want to give up? So first of all, what does it mean to give up?

Well, there are two things in the text that help us to answer this question. The first is in the context of this parable. Immediately before Jesus tells this parable to his disciples, Luke gives us a record of something else Jesus told his disciples.

The subject there is Jesus' return. And so look down at chapter 17, if you've got a Bible open, verse 22. And he said to the disciples, The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

And they will say to you, Look there, or look here. Do not go out or follow them. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

[7 : 34] But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. So Jesus is talking there about the day of the Son of Man.

The Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, he says. And this day that he's referring to isn't the day of his crucifixion, because he goes on to say, But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

And when he says that, it's clear there that he's talking about his crucifixion. And that is something which is going to happen before this day of the Son of Man that he's talking about. And so the day that he's referring to is the day of his return.

The day we sometimes refer to as the second coming. Which this world is still waiting for. The rest of chapter 17 makes it clear that he's talking about his return.

And then in the last line of this parable that we read, this passage in Luke 18 in verse 8, He says, However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[8 : 39] As Jesus' followers, we live out our short lives in between Jesus' two great comings. On the one hand, his incarnation, his becoming man, his death, his resurrection, his ascension.

On the other hand, his promised glorious return. And so we live in light of his first coming and we live in anticipation of his second coming.

And Jesus is acknowledging here that in between, as we live out our lives, there are going to be times where we want to give up.

And so we see how the context helps us to answer this question. What does it mean to give up?

When Luke writes that Jesus told this parable so that his disciples might not lose heart, he's not referring to Jesus' disciples losing heart in their efforts towards certain tasks or certain endeavors.

He's not saying that Jesus told this parable so that Christians might always keep their word and follow through on their resolutions and not lose heart with them. As good a thing as that might be. [9 : 49] Now the context helps us to see Jesus told this parable so that his disciples might not lose heart on a bigger scale. So that they might not give up before Jesus returns.

So that they might not stop trusting in him. So that when he returns, he might find faith on earth. That's the context.

The second thing that helps us understand what it means to give up is found in what Luke writes in verse 1. Luke tells us that Jesus wanted his parable to have this effect on his disciples, that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

And do you see how closely there losing heart is connected with prayer? That's interesting. And what Luke is doing here in his explanation, what Jesus does in his parable, which he implies in his parable, is that prayer and not losing heart go hand in hand.

They belong together. Prayer and not giving up are two sides of the same coin. One can't exist without the other. To pray is to not give up.

[11 : 08] To give up is to stop praying. That means that according to the teaching of the Bible, to give up as a Christian is not firstly to backslide into some huge moral failure.

To give up as a Christian is not fundamentally to stop attending church and to start cutting out all your Christian friends from your life. To give up as a Christian is to stop praying.

He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. Is that how you view what it is to give up as a Christian? When you hear of a professing Christian making a mess of their life, do you look at their moral failures and think to yourself, well, it's clear that that person has given up on their faith.

And when a friend who professes to be a Christian starts to pull away from church to cut out their Christian friends from their life, do you look at their withdrawal and think to yourself, well, it's clear that that person has given up on their faith.

Well, in a sense, that might be true, but what brought them to that point, what caused them to walk away, seemingly, from the faith they professed, one answer the Bible gives is that they stopped praying.

[12 : 34] And that's a sobering thought for us, isn't it? It causes us to reflect on our own praying. Have I stopped praying?

I mean, I pray when I come to the church service. I pray when I'm in a desperate situation. Do I really pray? And if we're going to know whether we really pray, then we need to know how the Bible defines real prayer.

And it's interesting, we didn't read it, but the very next parable after the one we're looking at today, Luke records Jesus' teaching on prayer. So we can read it from verse 9. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this, tax collector.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get, but the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[13 : 49] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. See, the prayer that Jesus holds up there as an example of real prayer is the prayer of the tax collector.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And we can break it down a little bit. What do we find in that prayer? What we find in that prayer is a simple expression of total dependence on God, exalting God, and humbling himself.

And that is what prayer is. A prayer is expressing to God how totally dependent we are on him with God at the center of our prayer.

God is the focus of our prayer, viewing ourselves in light of who he is. We could say so much more about prayer, but in one sense, there's no need to complicate prayer any more than that.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in Luke 11, we've prayed it already in the service, but when they asked him to teach them to pray, Jesus didn't enroll them on a 10-week course in how to pray.

[15 : 09] He simply instructed them and he gave them the Lord's Prayer, Father, hallowed be your name, and so on. And that was it. A simple expression of our dependence on God with God at the center, viewing ourselves in light of who he is.

And so as we come face to face this morning with this sobering reality that to stop praying is to give up as a Christian, this is what we're talking about when we talk about prayer.

Do you know, I think sometimes we're guilty of defining real prayer as something more than this.

Real prayer, we think, is full of passionate pleas and heartfelt cries.

Real prayer lasts for a long time. It's full of intense experience, we think. And perhaps sometimes prayer is like that and that's a great thing, but it's not to say that simple daily praying, even for just a few minutes, isn't real prayer.

God, have mercy on me as sinner. Father, hallowed be your name. If you're here this morning and as you reflect on this passage, you wonder whether you've stopped praying really recently, then don't go home this afternoon resolved to get up tomorrow morning at 5am and to spend an intense hour in prayer.

[16 : 40] Go home this afternoon resolved to spend just a few minutes, just five minutes in prayer, simple prayer, tomorrow morning, expressing your dependence on God, calling on his mercy.

And do the same tomorrow evening and tomorrow morning and the following evening. Keep going, keep praying, keep humbly calling on the Lord.

So what does it mean to give up, to lose heart? To give up is to stop praying before Christ returns.

Secondly, what might cause us to want to give up?

So stopping praying and giving up go hand in hand, but what might cause us to stop praying? Well, the answer that this parable gives is a specific one. What causes Jesus' followers to want to give up is experiencing a lack of justice in their lives.

Justice is a prominent theme in this parable. Jesus began in verse 2. In a certain city there was a judge. The role of the judge is to administer justice.

[17 : 56] In verse 3, the plea of the widow who kept coming to the judge is give me justice against my adversary. When the widow persists, the judge says in verse 5, because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice.

What might have caused this lady, this widow, to give up? Experiencing a lack of justice, perhaps for a long time. Justice is at the center of this parable.

And justice is at the center of Jesus' explanation of the parable in verses 7 and 8. Jesus says, and will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? What might cause God's people to want to give up?

A lack of justice. Experiencing injustice. Notice again that Jesus is assuming something here.

[19 : 01] In the same way that he assumed Jesus' followers would want to at times give up, he also assumes that his followers will suffer injustice before he returns.

He doesn't qualify what he says in verse 7 with an if. He doesn't say, and will not God bring about justice for his elect if they suffer injustice before the Son of Man returns. No, he sees it as a given that his followers will suffer injustice and that when his followers suffer injustice, they might well find themselves wanting to lose heart and give up.

Christians suffer injustice all around the world today, don't they? And some of it can feel quite far removed from us. A friend of mine was telling me that some missionaries were giving an update at a conference he was at recently.

These people were missionaries in India to a particular people group and they spoke of how because of their work to this people group their wives had been abused and they'd been imprisoned without explanation.

It's horrific and it can leave us wondering whether we here in this part of the world suffer at all for the cause of the gospel. But it would be a mistake for us to think that we don't suffer at all for our faith.

[20 : 24] There's the Christian at work who because of his faith he works with utter integrity and instead of being rewarded he's denied promotions and he's stifled in his career.

There's the Christian at work who feels unable to express her views on certain subjects because of how it would ostracize her from her colleagues and seemingly inevitably have a detrimental effect

on her career too.

There's the Christian who has been let down and messed around in relationships really through no fault of their own. There's the Christian who experiences a distance in relationships with family members and friends who they were previously closest to because they no longer share their faith. Then there's all the injustices that come with life in a fallen world. An unbalanced world in which the scales are broken. Unbearably ill health.

Inconsolable loss. Daily frustrations and struggles that sometimes mean we just don't want to get out of bed in the morning. And all of these injustices bring with them the power to cause us to sigh. [21 : 44] I give up. I give up. What will those need a need a need a need a need a need a need a need a need a need a