

19 October 2024

Sermon by Isaac De Jongh.

May I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the 19th Sunday after Pentecost.

Readings:

Jeremiah 31: 27-34; Psalm 119: 97-104; 2 Timothy 3: 14- 4: 5; Luke 18: 1-8.

What is our understanding of prayer?

Why do we pray or when do we pray.

Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Jeremiah 31:27-34 reflects on the promise of a new covenant, where God will establish a new relationship with his people by writing his law on their hearts, not on stone tablets. This new covenant will be characterized by internal transformation instead of external rules, leading to a deeper understanding and a complete forgiveness of sin, as God declares he will "remember their sin no more". Ultimately, it is a message of immense hope and restoration for a people who have failed to keep the old covenant, emphasizing a future where individuals are fully responsible for their own actions but are also fully forgiven.

The central promise is a new covenant that will be fundamentally different from the old one. It will be an internal, spiritual transformation, not just a set of external rules and regulations.

The core of the new covenant is that God will "put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts". This signifies a deep, personal, and internal relationship where the desire to obey God is not forced but is a part of the individual's very being, flowing from their will.

Psalm 119: 97-104

Psalm 119:97-104 emphasizes a deep love for God's law, finding wisdom in it that surpasses enemies, teachers, and elders. This passage highlights how meditating on scripture leads to purity, understanding, and a sweet, spiritual joy that helps one stay on the right path and overcome sin. The core message is that the consistent and devoted study of God's word transforms the believer through both wisdom and a deeper spiritual life.

Meditating on God's word is presented as a way to keep oneself pure and to hate "every false way". The word is not just for knowledge, but for a practical, life-transforming guidance that helps one live a righteous life.

The psalmist describes the promises and precepts of God's word as "sweeter than honey to my mouth". This highlights that the benefit of God's word is a deeply personal and satisfying experience, not just an intellectual exercise.

The passage portrays a virtuous cycle: love for God's law leads to constant meditation on it, which in turn increases one's love and devotion. This shows how familiarity with God's word can breed deeper affection for it and for God Himself.

2 Timothy 3: 14 – 4: 5

Paul's instruction to Timothy to "continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of" is rooted in his personal history with the sacred writings. Timothy received his earliest instruction from his grandmother Lois and mother Eunice. This foundational teaching, combined with the personal mentoring he received from Paul, provides a powerful testimony to the importance of godly mentors in the faith.

The central command is clear and urgent: "Preach the word". This is not a suggestion but a directive. The message of the Word is the centerpiece of Christian ministry, superseding human opinions or entertainment. Preaching the Word means faithfully proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture.

The culmination of Paul's charge is to "fulfill" or "discharge all the duties" of his ministry. This is an encouragement to press on until the end, like Paul, who could later say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

Luke 18: 1-8

The Gospel provides a call to persistent and unwavering prayer by using the parable of a persistent widow and an unjust judge. The main reflection is that if an unjust human judge will respond to persistent pleas, then a just and loving God will certainly answer His children who continue to pray without giving up or losing heart. The passage emphasizes that persistence in prayer shows faith and trust in God, even when facing hardship or feeling discouraged.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples a parable *"about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."* It is a rather strange little story, about a judge who neither fears God nor has any respect for people, and a widowed woman who is desperate for justice. She pesters this judge so much that the judge finally relents. *"And will not God,"* Jesus concludes, *"grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"* Indeed. God is no unjust judge. Our God loves this world too much to judge it. Our God loves this world so much that he gave his only son, who came to not judge the world but to save it.

But this parable raises an obvious question: Why did Jesus tell it to his disciples? Didn't they already know this? Didn't they already know that they should pray always? In fact, weren't they already doing that? Apparently not. You don't tell someone to get more exercise if they are already exercising daily. You don't tell someone to pray always if they are already doing so.

So, Jesus told this parable to his disciples to encourage them to pray always not to lose heart. Because even Jesus' disciples were not praying always, and even they would occasionally grow discouraged. It happens to everyone. Great saints, lowly sinners, you, me. We all struggle with this. We all struggle with prayer; we all get discouraged in life. So, what do we do about it? What does Jesus teach us? That is what I want to wrestle with today.

The central message is to pray consistently and not to lose heart. The parable encourages an ongoing, steadfast conversation with God.

The parable contrasts the unjust judge with a just God. The point is that if persistence can overcome a corrupt human, it should encourage us to persist with a God who is loving and just.

The parable can be viewed through the lens of resilience, showing the ability to achieve better-than-expected outcomes in the face of adversity through persistent, faith-filled prayer.

Jesus is not suggesting God is like the unjust judge. Instead, He is using a familiar human scenario to highlight God's infinite power and goodness. This offers confidence that God is not indifferent and is eager to be good to his children.

Widows in the first century were among society's most vulnerable people, lacking protection and economic clout. The widow's persistence was a desperate act for justice from a corrupt system.

Our concept of a quickly answered prayer is different from God's. The parable suggests that we should not let our expectations about God's timing become a reason to become discouraged.

Persistent prayer was not a cultural norm in the 1st century. The parable subverts this by promoting continuous faith-filled action as a pathway to better-than-expected outcomes.

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Let's think about the reason for today's parable: To pray always and to lose heart. What does Jesus mean by that? Two things, I believe.

First, Jesus means that these are connected. These are not two separate suggestions from Jesus. Praying always is connected to not losing heart. Why? Because when we give up on prayer, we inevitably lose heart. And when we lose heart, we often give up on prayer. So maybe this would be better translated as: *"Pray always so you don't lose heart."*

But what did Jesus mean by praying always? When I think of Jesus telling us to pray always, what I think that he means is not that we should pray every second of every day, but that we should not ever give up on prayer. Don't give up on God; don't give up on prayer. No matter how

discouraging our life gets, no matter how long it seems to take for God to answer our prayers, we should not ever give up on God. I think that is what Jesus means when he tells us to pray always. And he wants us to pray always so that we do not lose heart. So, with that in mind, let's see what we can learn about how to do this. Amen.