

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 19
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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
From our lips to God's ears

—Luke 18:1-8

450 people stood on a mountaintop in northern Israel. Overhead the sun beat down on them through a clear, cloudless sky. To the west the Mediterranean Sea shimmered in the distance. To the east their view from the mountain looked down on the Plain of Jezreel—normally green and flourishing with an abundance of crops (the breadbasket of Israel), but now dry and barren after three years of drought and crop failures and famine. On this mountaintop on this day the men prepared a sacrifice and prayed. They prayed that their sacrifice would be acceptable to the deity. They prayed fervently. They worked themselves up into a frenzy and prayed from morning until evening, but there was no answer from heaven, only silence. That's because the god they were talking to didn't exist. He was just a figment of twisted human imagination, and there was no chance whatsoever that the 450 prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel were ever going to get a reply from their nonexistent god.

When they had exhausted themselves, one man stepped up and prepared his sacrifice. His name was Elijah. After drenching his sacrifice and everything around it with enough water to make sure it could never be lit on fire by human hands, Elijah prayed to the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and in an instant fire fell from heaven and consumed everything. All the people watching cried out, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!" The 450 prophets of Baal met their end that day, and on that very day rain again fell on the land.

Today in our service we are back to the subject of prayer and God's promises to us that lead us to pray. Jesus, of course, invites us to pray, teaches us to pray, and encourages us to pray; he has lots of beautiful things to say about prayer. But sometimes even we might wonder if God's listening. Sometimes we might feel like our prayers are falling on deaf ears. Sometimes you feel like you're talking to yourself. Or maybe you never feel like that. Maybe it's just me. But I know that I do have times when I grow impatient and even wonder why God isn't answering my prayers. This is not a new phenomenon! *Jesus told them a parable about the need to always pray and not lose heart.* Jesus gets it! He understands how easy it is for us to feel discouraged and feel like our prayers aren't making it from our lips to God's ears. The parable Jesus tells us today teaches us an important lesson about praying courageously and persistently.

But before we talk about boldly and persistently sending prayers from our lips to God's ears, let's make sure that we're praying as God wants us to pray, because there are many situations where human prayers are going nowhere, and in those cases God is *never* going to answer prayers. Now, I seriously hope that none of these situations applies to anyone here, but conceivably they could—and they certainly do apply to some of our friends and neighbors and acquaintances. The prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel is a perfect example where human prayers go absolutely nowhere—when people are not even praying to God. There is a popular notion in our pluralistic and multicultural world today that God is whoever you want him (or her) to be. If you pray to Allah or Krishna or Shiva or Gaia or Mother Earth or the Great Spirit, it's all good and it's all the same. That's baloney! So people get together at gatherings and games, and these people are Christian, and those people are Muslim, and those people are Buddhist, so let's all bow our heads and pray, "God, bless America!" but everyone isn't even praying to the same god. Praying to a god that doesn't exist is sending a prayer to nowhere. Scripture says, "All the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens" (Psalm 96:5).

You see, false gods aren't always made of wood or stone. They can also be invisible inventions of the human mind. Many people pray to a generic god that doesn't even exist. Any god that is not the God who reveals himself in Scripture, the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the triune God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—any other god is an invention of the human mind. God is not whoever human beings think he is; God is who he *is*. Allah is not God. Shiva and Krishna are not God. Buddha is not God. Mother Earth is not God. The Great Spirit is not God. A generic god is not God. (Actually, Scripture says that all these false gods are really demons in disguise, pawns of the devil to lead people astray.)

Some people's prayers go nowhere because they pray to the Virgin Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, or to Saint Christopher or to Saint Jude or to Saint Whomever. Listen, these faithful saints, Christians of old, are resting in Christ. The souls of the saints are with Jesus in heaven. We can honor them, remember them, emulate them, and give thanks for them, but we don't pray to them because they are not listening. They are *not* taking prayer requests. Jesus is the one Mediator between God and men, Jesus hears our prayers, and Jesus makes our prayers acceptable to God.

That leads into another reason why human prayers don't make it to the ears of God: A person knows the true God and prays to the LORD, the true God, but God isn't listening. Why? Because there's a barrier between that person and God. God says through his prophet Isaiah, "When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you.

Indeed, even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15). "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). The person who prays with a perverse heart or a proud heart or an impenitent heart can jabber on till sunset, but their prayers are going nowhere because God isn't listening. This is perhaps one of the greatest deceptions in the church; it's the idea that people can continue intentionally to spit in God's face, to continue despising his Word and Sacrament, to continue intentionally lusting and fornicating and living an immoral life, to continue harboring a bitter and resentful heart, to continue to be greedy and idolatrous, to continue to gossip and slander and covet—and God is going to be just fine with that. God is not mocked! And God is not listening. Repent, turn from sin, and turn to God!

When we pray, we pray through Jesus. Jesus our Savior has broken down the barrier of sin and wickedness that separated us from God. Jesus took our sins upon himself and satisfied God's perfect justice by washing them all away. He trades us our sins for his righteousness, dressing us in garments of perfection. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). "If anyone sins, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1,2). God has reconciled us to himself through Jesus; he has made peace with us through the blood of his Son. When we approach God's throne with a penitent heart that trusts in Christ, there is no more barrier of sin; it's been removed. There is no more dividing wall of hostility; it's been broken down by Jesus. Now through Jesus Christ, God's dear Son, we have complete access to our Father, and we know he listens to our prayers because we bring them in Jesus' name, trusting in Jesus' merit.

This leads right into our service focus for today. Our "Cause and Effect" relationship today is that God's promises beget our prayers. We pray because the true and living God *promises* to listen to our prayers. You know the words that Jesus gives to us, his disciples: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; whoever seeks finds; and to whomever knocks the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7,8). Jesus promises, "If you ask for anything in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14).

But we still come back to the question: What about when it *seems* like God isn't listening? You're praying to the true God, not a block of wood or a figment of human imagination. You're praying to the LORD, the God of heaven and earth. Your heart is penitent and contrite; you're confessing your sin, not holding onto it and defending it. You're praying in the name of Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, who promises to mediate for you. But you're still not getting the answer you're looking for.

Jesus knows how discouraging this can be, so this is why he tells this parable—so we don't become discouraged and lose heart. He uses a secular example to illustrate his point. He tells us to imagine a scenario where an unjust judge—a vile human being who doesn't care about God or man, who disrespects justice and is only in business for himself—is confronted by a widow, who demands justice. Does the unjust judge care about her case? No. Does the unjust judge care about God? No. Does the unjust judge care about what others will think? No. So why does he even bother listening to the widow? He doesn't care about her case, she can't afford to offer him a bribe, so why does he respond? Because she bothers him! "Go away, woman! Leave me alone!" the unjust judge says. "I'll give you what you want. Just leave me in peace!" The unjust judge gives her justice because she is bold and courageous and persistent.

This is called an argument from the lesser to the greater. God is not like the unjust judge, but if even a lousy, scumbag judge can be induced to deliver justice through persistence and boldness, how much more will God, who *is* perfect justice, who *loves* the person pleading to him, and who *promises* to listen to their prayers—how much more will such a loving, gracious Father in heaven deliver for his people who come to him boldly and confidently in the name of his Son! Don't lose heart, Jesus reminds us. Keep praying. God *is* listening, but he's only going to give you what's good for you and in his perfect time. God knows what is best for you and me. God knows what we need, and he delivers—not to get you to be quiet and go away but because he loves you.

Sometimes we Christians pray foolish prayers. Let's admit it—sometimes even God's people don't pray for the best things. But do you know what we have going for us when we pray in Jesus' name? The Holy Spirit takes our prayers and makes them acceptable. Scripture says in Romans 8, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (v. 26). What a beautiful picture! We come to God with our fumbling, mumbling, confused, inadequate requests, and the Holy Spirit translates them into perfect prayers that are exactly what our gracious Father in heaven wants to hear!

So take home the lesson from Jesus' parable: Pray boldly! Pray persistently! Pray big! Be bold! Be audacious in your prayers! *You are coming to a king—large petitions with you bring. For his grace and power are such, none can ever ask too much* (Christian Worship '93, Hymn 409, st. 2). And your perfect prayers offered in the name of Jesus will rise from your lips to God's ears, so that he can answer them for his glory and for your good. Amen.