

A few weeks ago, I went to CREDO, a program hosted by the Presbyterian Board of Pensions to promote pastoral wellbeing. The goal of that week was to create a Rule of Life, which is an old monastic term for a set of commitments one makes to God to live our lives intentionally. A Rule of Life might include commitments to exercise more or pray more—that kind of thing. After a week of learning and reflection, I took a canoe ride around the pond at the camp to contemplate my Rule of Life. I'll be honest with you; I wasn't feeling inspired. I'm skeptical that any list of rules will make my life better. I've tried many such lists over the years, and I've failed them enough times to know that I'm not just one small click away from becoming a more holy me. I know that self-optimization is all the rage in business circles, but in my experience, I get all excited about some new routine, and after a month or two, I'm left the same old me, with all my body aches and grumpy parts stubbornly intact.

As a storyteller and as a teacher, Jesus of Nazareth was an undeniable genius. For 2000 years, many millions of people have studied his words, pondered every possible angle of what he said and what he meant. For all that work, we are still just guessing. That is a sign of true genius. A few weeks ago, I told you that Jesus' parable of the unjust steward was his most difficult one to understand, and today's parable of the unjust judge isn't much easier. Luke says Jesus tells this story about our need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. I don't know about you, but I hear that, and I already feel like discouraged, and the story hasn't even begun. Because when it comes to praying continuously, I'm not doing too great. For starters, I sleep every night, and I haven't figured out how to pray while I'm sleeping. When I'm awake, even in my most prayerful times, I'm not even close to praying continuously. Jesus' goal to encourage us seems like a fool's errand.

But let's give the man a hearing. He is Jesus after all. The story begins, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people." Right off the bat, we know we have a bad judge here. The Bible says repeatedly that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, so we know this man is unwise. The fear of the Lord is better understood as respect. It's not being afraid of God that makes us wise. It's recognizing we are not autonomous beings. To fear God is to know that we are part of a larger story, and our lives are accountable to a power beyond ourselves. This judge doesn't understand that, nor does he respect people. So, we should expect that he will be a really bad judge. It turns out, he is.

A widow comes to him looking for justice and receives none. At that time, widows were some of the most vulnerable people in society, which is why God continually tells Israel to give special care to widows, orphans, and strangers. God's justice makes special provision for the acutely vulnerable to ensure they receive what they need. This widow asks for justice, and is deferred, but nevertheless she persisted, and the judge finally grants her request, so as not to be embarrassed by her. He grants her demand not for justice's sake but for himself and his reputation. Jesus closes the parable saying, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? I tell you, he will give them justice quickly." This is not an easy parable to understand. It's clear that Jesus is contrasting this judge with God. Unlike this bad judge, God hears our prayers and grants justice quickly. God doesn't act out of fear of embarrassment or to stop our nagging. No, God is just and is eager to hear and answer our prayers. That much makes sense, but how are we to understand the widow?

Most interpreters recognize that while God is not like the judge, the widow is often understood as the one we are to emulate, that we are to persist in prayer like the widow persists with the judge. In this reading, the judge is understood as a contrast character—God is not like this, but the widow is understood as a comparison character—be like her and never give up. That’s the most common reading, and I don’t like it. If Jesus’ point is that we are to pray and pray and pray, and never stop pleading with God, then no matter how much we say God is not like the unjust judge, we end up relating to God as though God is. If we are to be like the widow, then prayer is understood as a struggle of perpetually asking God for what we want. God give me this. God give me this. God, please, please, please give me this. This vision of prayer doesn’t make me want to pray more. It just makes me tired. It makes me want to pray less. If prayer is about changing God’s mind, or showing God how earnestly I want something, then I’m not interested.

But what if we see both characters as contrasts? Just as God is not like the unjust judge, neither are we to see ourselves as disenfranchised victims who must scratch and claw to get what we need from God. Though the world may mistreat you and even victimize you, in God’s sight, you are not someone who must beg and plead to be heard. **You are God’s child.** Those of you who have children, if your child came to you begging and pleading when they are in need, wouldn’t you be saddened by that? Your child doesn’t need to beg to get your attention when they are in need. All you want is to be there for them, to hold them, and tell them that everything is going to be OK. It’s no different with you and God. You are a child of the Most High God, with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of royal sons and daughters. When you pray, you pray with this confidence and assurance that you will be heard.

Prayer is not about changing God’s mind, and it’s not about getting what you want. Prayer is about becoming aware of the divine presence, which is all around you, upholding you and sustaining you. **We pray not to change God’s mind, but we pray so that that the love of God might change our minds.** Prayer isn’t a struggle, as much as it is an ever-present invitation to be held by divine love—I raise my eyes, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. The life of faith often feels like a struggle, but in the end, the struggle is not with God. God is always on our side, sustaining us and loving us. Our struggle is to trust that love, to trust that no amount of prayer or service or Rule of Life is what makes us right in God’s sight. We are already right, already good enough. That’s what grace means.

As I floated around the pond in my canoe, I decided to not think about my Rule of Life. Instead, I just basked in the moment and enjoyed God’s loving presence—to be still and know the no-matter-whatness of God’s love. As I floated along, a song that I used to play for Asher in the car when he was a little boy came to mind. The song is a parent singing to their child saying, “You don’t have to believe. You don’t have to doubt. You don’t have to run around and figure it all out. You don’t have to do what people say that you should. You just gotta be who God made you, cause God made you good.” Suddenly, I realized the key to my Rule of Life, which is the key to life itself. God isn’t asking you to pray more, to believe this or that, to obey more, or give more. God is inviting you to see the gift that you already are and always have been, to trust that being yourself is enough. In fact, it’s more than enough. It’s exactly what God created you and calls you to be. When you rest in that assurance, then suddenly everything becomes prayer. When you live in the assurance of God’s love, then your work becomes prayer. Your

conversations become prayer. Walking your dog becomes prayer. Your emails become prayer. When you live in the awareness of God's abundant love, even your sleep becomes prayer. You rest in divine love and awaken to the same.

Friends here's the good news: you don't need to beg and plead before God, because God is not an unjust judge. God is a divine parent who is too busy loving you to bother with being disappointed in you. And you? You are a child of the divine, forever loved and cherished by the One from whom all things come. Be still and know this is who God is and this is who you are.