A while back, I had an interesting conversation with a woman who had come to my office for an appointment. She was a strong Christian, but she was struggling. She said to me, “Lon, when you pray, do you ever feel like sometimes nobody is really listening?” I said, “Yeah, sometimes I do feel that way. I think that every Christian goes through times when it feels like the heavens are made out of brass and all of our prayers are bouncing right back, but when this happens, it’s in those times that we simply have to walk by faith.” This is what we want to talk about today. We want to talk about prayer, and we want to talk about never giving up in prayer, and we want to talk about why sometimes God delays answering our prayers and forces us to walk by faith.

Remember, we’re in a series entitled “People Jesus Met,” and today Jesus is going to tell us about an unjust judge and a widow who were not so much two people that He met, but rather, they were the two main characters in a story, a parable that He told. We want to go back and see the lesson that Jesus taught His disciples in this story, and then we want to wind all of that forward and talk about what difference that makes for you and me. Our passage is Luke 18, and we begin at verse 1. Here we go.

“Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and never give up,” that is, in prayer. Now this parable of Jesus’ is a little bit unusual for His parables in the Bible, in that this parable tells us its purpose from the very beginning. The purpose of this parable of Jesus in Luke 18 is to inspire us to a prayer life that never gives up, a prayer life that just doesn’t quit, so let’s see what spiritual truth Jesus teaches in this story that He intends to result in a prayer life that never gives up.

Here we go in verse 2. “Jesus said, ‘In a certain city, there was a judge who did not fear God nor care about men.’ In verse 6 of this parable, Jesus calls this man “an
unjust judge, an unrighteous judge.” He was not a God-fearing man. He didn’t care about public opinion, and he didn’t care about giving people true justice.

Verse 3, “And there was also a widow in that city.” We need to understand, my friends, that in the ancient near East, widows were the epitome of helplessness and vulnerability. They were excluded from the mainstream of society. They had no legal rights in society, and they usually had little or no money.

So here we are. Here are our two key characters in the story. Number one, we have a self-centered, unsympathetic judge. Number two, we have a powerless, disenfranchised widow.

Verse 3, “And she”—that is, the widow—“kept coming”—those are the key words—“she kept coming to the judge and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’” Verse 4, “And for a while, the judge refused to act.” Well, hello! What else would we have expected from a guy like this?

But look, the woman never gives up. The woman refuses to cave in. Remember what it said in verse 3? It said, “She kept coming to the judge.” She comes to him day after day after day for who knows how long. She is there when he shows up in the morning for work. She’s there when he leaves work in the afternoon to go home. She follows him to lunch. He tries to sneak in the back door, and she’s there. He tries to come in at off hours, and she’s there.

Finally, he gets to the point where he’s seeing this woman in his sleep, and he breaks. Verse 4, “Finally the judge said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God or care about men, yet because this woman keeps bothering me, I will give her the legal protection she wants because she is wearing me out with her continual coming to me.’” The judge says, “This woman is driving me crazy! Give her half my kingdom. Give her whatever she wants, just get this woman to leave me alone!” Have you ever seen the movie “What About Bob”? Well, then you understand.

Now, let’s stop for just a moment and talk about what this parable means. Let’s interpret it up to this point. What is going on here? Let me say before we do that, that this parable is talking about only one aspect of prayer, which is petition, asking God for things. There are a lot of aspects that make up prayer, but this one is limited to just
petition. Knowing that, let’s interpret it. The most common interpretation of this parable focuses on the widow’s constant annoying of the judge until he finally capitulates and gives her what she wants. According to this interpretation, the lesson of Jesus’ parable is that the more insistent, the more persistent, and the more bullheaded we are in prayer, like the widow was with the judge, the more of our prayers God will answer.

Now let me say there is certainly a need for diligence in prayer. There is certainly a need for stamina in prayer, but folks, this is not the lesson of this parable, that the more we beg God, the more we bug God, the more reluctantly—like the judge—God will do for us. That is not the point at all.

As a matter of fact, the parable Jesus tells here is teaching the exact opposite. The parable is teaching that, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, God is more eager to answer our prayers than we are even to ask them. That’s why Jesus said in verse 1, “We should always pray and never give up.”

Now you say, “All right, Lon. Stop, stop. I love that interpretation. I like it a lot more than the other one. My question is that I don’t see how you got it. I mean, it looks to me at face value like the teaching of the story is to bug God enough, beg God enough, annoy God enough, and He will do what you want. How did you get your understanding, your interpretation out of this parable?”

Well, it’s all about the contrasts that are in this parable. There are three contrasts that Jesus presents here. Number one is the contrast between the unjust judge and God. The judge was a selfish man, a self-centered rogue who only cared about himself and nobody but himself, but God, on the other hand, is our loving, heavenly Father who cares about us so deeply that He went to the cross for us. The point is that no two people are less alike than God and the unjust judge.

Contrast number two is between the widow and us, as followers of Christ. This widow had no clout with this judge. She had no position, no standing, no status with him at all, but the Bible declares that as followers of Christ, we are God’s dear children (I John 3:1). We are co-heirs with Jesus Christ (Romans 8:17). We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 2:30), and we are Jesus’ personal sheep (John 10:27). The point is
that no two relationships are less alike than the relationship between the widow and the judge and our relationship with God our heavenly Father.

Finally is contrast number three is between the heart of this judge and the heart of almighty God. Remember the only person we said this judge cared about in his heart was himself. Even in answering the widow’s request, what did he say? He said, “Give this woman whatever she wants, because she is bothering”—who?—“me.” He didn’t do it for the widow; he did it for himself. That’s why he gave her what she wanted.

On the other hand, friends, the heart of almighty God is completely different. I Peter 5:7 says that as followers of Christ, we should cast all of our cares on Him, on God. Why? Because He cares about you and me. Folks, there is not a groan that we utter. There is not a pain that we ever feel that doesn’t move the heart of God. Followers of Christ, there is not a problem we face that God is not eager to help us with. The point is that, third, there is also a complete contrast between God’s eagerness to help His children and the judge’s unwillingness to help anybody but himself.

My question is, do you guys see all three of those contrasts? Yes? All right, because that is the key to interpreting this parable correctly. If you get that, you can get it right.

Verse 6, “Then the Lord Jesus said, ‘Do you hear what the unrighteous judge said?’” What did he say? He said, “Give this woman what she’s asking for.” Watch now. Jesus said, “And will not God respond to His chosen ones who cry out to Him day and night? Will He keep putting them off? I tell you, He will answer them speedily.”

Friends, this is the true point of Jesus’ parable, namely that if a selfish judge responded to an unrelated widow who meant absolutely nothing to him because she refused to give up asking, how much more—there’s Jesus’ point—how much more will a loving God respond to His dear children in Christ who mean so much to Him that He died on the cross for us if we will just not give up in prayer?

This is why the Bible tells us that we should never, never, never, ever give up in prayer, so long as Jesus is alive—and oh, by the way, that’s forever—and as long as
you and I are alive here on earth as His followers, the Bible tells us when it comes to prayer, it is always too soon to quit.

Now, that’s the point of our parable. That’s all we’re going to do in Luke chapter 18, because now we’re going to go on and ask our most important question. So we want all of you out on the Internet to be a part of this. All right, here we go now. One, two, three—SO WHAT? (silence) Can we try that one more time? Here we go, one, two, three—SO WHAT? Oh, now didn’t that feel better? (laughter) Yes.

All right, you say, “Lon, look. I understand how you got where you got with the parable, and that’s great, but what does all this mean to me? How does all this affect my life?” Okay, let’s talk about that.

On the front of our bulletin, when we ask people to fill out the response card, there’s also a place on there for prayer requests. Every week we get people who submit prayer requests, and I get mine to pray for like everybody on our staff does. Here’s one that I got a few weeks ago, and I quote. The woman writing said, “Please pray for my husband, an atheist who hates Christians and especially his wife. If you really have a heart for the unsaved, then pray hard for this man. I have prayed for him for 20+ years, and I can’t pray any more. Forgive me, Lord.”

I read that, and I thought, “You know what? I understand where this woman’s coming from. I mean, when you pray for something for twenty-plus years and don’t see the answer, folks, it’s easy to get discouraged! It’s easy to feel like you want to give up.”

You say, “Well, Lon, I’ve got to tell you. I honestly identify with this woman. I can understand how she feels too. I mean, there are things in my life that I have prayed for, for weeks, for months, for years, maybe even for decades, and I have never seen God answer that prayer, and I will tell you that I’ve got a question. My question is that if Jesus said God would answer our prayers speedily, then number one, how come He hasn’t answered this woman’s prayer and, number two, how come He hasn’t answered my prayer?” That’s a great question. I think we should answer it, don’t you? Well, it doesn’t even matter what you think; we’re going to answer the question!
All right, we’re going to answer the question, “Why is it sometimes that God delays in answering our prayers? Why does God sometimes not answer our prayers as fast as we want Him to or in exactly the way that we want Him to?” The Bible gives us three reasons, and I want to go over those with you before we quit today.

Reason number one why God doesn’t answer our prayers as fast as we want and in the way that we want is because sometimes what we’re asking for just isn’t good for us. James 4:2 says, “You have not because you ask not.” The next verse says, “And sometimes you ask,” James says, “But you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend it on your sinful passions.” Folks, God is not Santa Claus. God is not our personal genie in the lamp. God’s goal in life is not to give you and me everything we want the exact way we want it, especially when God knows that many of the things we’re asking for are things that will feed our sinful nature and will actually harm, damage us and cause us to self destruct.

Remember Samson in the Old Testament? Boy, he wanted Delilah, didn’t he? And you know what? He got Delilah, and then he was real sorry he did. Do you remember Lot in the Old Testament? He wanted to move down to the land around Sodom and Gomorrah. Well, he got to do it, but after he did it, he was really sorry he did. Do you remember King Solomon wanting all those wives? Well, he got them, but he was sorry he got them. I Kings 11:4 says that his wives turned his heart after other gods. Sometimes what you and I are asking for and what we are so determined we want God to give us, God in His love and mercy says, “No,” because it’s not good for us.

I wonder how many of us here have ever asked God in prayer to allow us to win the lottery. Raise your hands. All right, God bless you. There are a lot of people who have done it too, but they don’t have the courage to admit it, so God bless you. I appreciate you being honest.

You say, “All right, Lon. Let’s say I did ask God to let me win the lottery once. How could winning the lottery ever be bad for anybody?” Really? Okay, an article in USA Today entitled “Lottery Winners’ Luck Can Go Bad Fast” told about a bunch of people who have won the lottery and what happened to them afterward. Let me give
you just a few examples. There was Abraham Shakespeare, who won $30 million in the lottery. Three years later, he was murdered, and they still don’t know who did it. Then there was Billie Bob Harrell, who won $31 million in the lottery. Two years later, he took out a shotgun, turned it on himself and blew himself apart, committing suicide. Then there was Evelyn Adams, who won $5.4 million in the lottery. She gambled it all away, and today she is living in a trailer and is poorer than when before she won the lottery! Then there’s Victoria Zell, who won $11 million. Four years later, she killed a person while driving drunk and on drugs. As we speak today, she is actually in jail. Then there was Stuart Donnelly, who won $3.8 million and died this past year at the age of 29, under suspicious circumstances, after he became a recluse and refused to even walk out of his house because of all the people camped outside trying to get money from him.

Finally, we have William Post. Bud Post, as everyone liked to call him, won $6.2 million. Do you know what happened to him? First of all, his brother hired a contract murderer to try to kill him—this is true—so that his brother could get the inheritance. After he won the lottery, he had six divorces. He lost it all. He went to jail for assault. When he died several years ago, he was living on food stamps. Bud Post said, “I was much happier when I was broke!”

You say, “All right, Lon, okay. So maybe it was best that God didn’t answer that prayer for me to win the lottery.” Hey friends, maybe it was best that God hasn’t answered a lot of your prayers. Maybe it’s best that God hasn’t answered a lot of my prayers, because those prayers are harmful for us and, in our puny human logic, we don’t even understand that it’s good God delayed, so He could change our hearts and our prayers, so that we actually ask Him for something that benefits us instead of harms us.

Reason number two why God sometimes delays answering our prayers and not giving us what we want as fast as we want is because sometimes God is out to develop us spiritually, and what we’re asking for works completely against that. I don’t know what your experience is, but mine is that generally when stuff comes into my life that I don’t like and don’t want, the very first thing I do is run to God and say what? “Lord,
take it away. Get this thing out of here. Get this thing off me!” Well, I’ll bet you are a lot like that. You say, “No, no, I’m not.” Well, all right, fine. But you know what? You don’t need to be afraid to admit it, because the apostle Paul himself was like that. In II Corinthians 12:7, Paul said, “To keep me from becoming arrogant, there was given me a thorn in the flesh.” We don’t know exactly what it was, but most people think it was an eye malady, some kind of problem with his eyesight. Next verse says, “Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.”

Paul was just like us, but you know, if you read the rest of the chapter, what you find out is that three times in response, God said, “No, no, no, Paul. I’m not taking it away.” You say, “Why? Was Paul in sin? Was his prayer life weak?” What, are you kidding? You must be kidding! No, the reason was what Paul said right in verse 7. He said that the reason God gave him this was to keep him from becoming arrogant. The reason is that God had this in his life for a reason, for a purpose—to produce spiritual growth in his life, to produce humility in his life, and listen, folks. Humility and spiritual growth never come from the ease, the comfort, and the success that all of us pray for each and every day. Sometimes God has to put tough things in our lives, and this is why, so often, God can’t give us what we want the way we want it when we want it, because it would stunt our spiritual growth.

Remember, when we came to Christ, God’s goal for us became the very same it was for the apostle Paul. Ephesians 4:13 says, “God wants us to become mature.” Ephesians 4:15 says, “God wants us to grow up in all things in Him.” A lot of the things that you and I pray for, for God to take away sometimes are the very things God is using to accomplish this in our lives.

Brenda and I had the privilege of raising three boys. They’re all grown now. They’re all married, but when my boys were growing up, they had some certain things they wanted done. They all wanted to watch television all day, and they all wanted to play video games all night. They all wanted to lay around all day long and have Brenda and I wait on them hand and foot. Not one of them wanted to do a chore of any kind around the house.
You say, “Well, did you give them what they wanted?” Are you nuts? Are you crazy? Of course we didn’t do that. Listen, I want to tell you something. The girls who married our guys got guys who know how to wash the dishes, vacuum the floors, do the laundry, make their own lunches, set the table, clean the bathrooms, cut the grass, and put the bag back in the kitchen trash can after they take it out. (applause) Now whether their wives can make them do all this is another thing that I’ve got nothing to do with, but they know how to do it.

The reason is that, with the Lord’s help, Brenda and I were trying to raise godly men. We were trying to raise responsible men. We were trying to raise hard-working men. I’m proud to say, by God’s grace, they turned out that way, but we knew that there was no way we could do this by giving them everything they wanted and everything they asked for. In love, we had to give them what we knew would most accentuate their growth into godly men. Now every good parent understands that, and God understands that too.

So may I say, if God is not answering some prayer of yours where you’re asking Him to take this problem away or take this difficulty away, I’d like to suggest you go to God and ask, “God, what are You trying to teach me through this difficulty? Lord, help me learn the lesson!” I’d like to suggest that you and I both change our prayers and stop praying for worldly ease and start praying for spiritual growth.

Number three and finally, why doesn’t God always answer our prayers as fast as we want and in the way that we want? Because number three, God sometimes needs time to get the tumblers all lined up, as in a lock, so that everything is perfectly aligned so He can answer our prayers. Proverbs 16:9 says, “For the mind of man plans his ways, but the Lord directs his steps.”

So friends, what do we do? We go to God and pray and pray and pray about our plans, but God is the one who has to go behind the scenes and orchestrate all the individual little steps that have to get all lined up before He can answer the prayer. The problem is that we don’t see God behind the scenes doing all this; all we see is that nothing seems to be happening, so we say, “God’s not answering my prayers,” when folks, nothing could be further from the truth. God is answering our prayer, but He
needs time for us to wait, be patient and give Him the time He needs to get all the tumblers in a row.

So many times God says to us, “Okay, you’re ready. I’ve got you ready in your character, and I’ve got you ready in your maturity, and I can answer your prayer now, but I’ve got some other things I’ve got to line up. Just stay put. Just stay put,” and then God goes over here and works on all these other things until He’s got them just right and brings them over, but friends, that doesn’t mean God’s not answering our prayers because we’re staying put.

This is why the Bible says in Psalm 37:7, “Rest in the Lord”—and what’s the next word?—“and wait.” Wow, there’s an un-American word! What’s the word after that? “and wait patiently.” Oh, another un-American word! Wait patiently? Americans don’t do this! Well, God says you’d better learn how. “Wait patiently for Him.”

I have to tell you that, of all the spiritual disciplines that are in life, the number one most difficult one for me is this one. It’s not fasting. That’s number two. Believe me, it’s number two, because I have a love affair with food, so that’s number two. It’s not reading my Bible or praying or memorizing Scripture. This is the most serious and difficult and challenging spiritual discipline I have when God says to me, “Okay, Solomon. I’ve got you. Just wait, son. Let Me go over here and deal with this other stuff. I’ll get it back.” That’s hard for me! I’ll bet it’s hard for you too, but friends, that doesn’t mean God’s not answering our prayers. It just means that it takes Him time in His decisions about time and space to get things lined up.

This is why Psalm 27:14 says, “Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart.” Don’t sit over here going, “(murmurs unintelligible syllables in whiny voice)” It says, “Be strong. Take courage!” God’s at work. You may not be able to see it, but friends, that’s what walking by faith is all about, trusting God when you can’t see what He is doing. Be strong and take heart, and wait for the Lord.

And you know that woman who wrote that prayer request about praying for her husband for twenty years, she didn’t sign it, which was sad. She didn’t give me an address or an e-mail, because I would have written her back. Here’s what I would have said to her. I would have said, “Ma’am, I prayed for my father’s salvation for seven
years. I prayed for my brother’s salvation for fifteen years. I prayed for my mother’s salvation for 22 years. There were some days in there that I got really discouraged. There were some days in there that I thought, ‘God, You’re not doing anything!’” Right up to my mother coming to Christ at 21 years, 11 months and 3 weeks, it didn’t look like God was doing anything, but all of a sudden, when God had all those tumblers lined up, bingo! My mom came to Christ. My brother came to Christ. My father came to Christ, and I would have said to this woman, “Ma’am, don’t you believe God’s not at work! God is at work. Don’t you dare give up praying for your husband! Don’t you dare do that!”

Friend, I’ll say the same thing to you. There are a lot of things you may be praying about, and you may be going, “God’s not listening. God’s not answering.” Yes, He is. He’s not going to show you everything He is doing until He is done, and that’s when we’ve got to walk by faith.

We see all three of these principles that we talked about in the life of the great patriarch Joseph. Do you remember the story of Joseph? Let’s review just a little bit. If you remember, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. He went down and was sold to a man named Potiphar. He was a slave in Potiphar’s house. Potiphar’s wife got what we used to call in the South where I grew up a hankering for Joseph. Do you know what a hankering is? Well if you don’t, I’m not going to define it for you; read between the lines, but she got a hankering for him. Joseph said, “No. I’m not doing this. I’m not having an affair with you. This is disobedience against God. I’m not doing it.” She went to her husband and said, “You know, it was all his idea. He tried to do this to me.” They threw Joseph in jail.

Now friends, jail in Egypt 3800 years ago was not like jail in America today. They didn’t have exercise yards, weight rooms, DirecTV and the laundry service. No, no, no, this was a bad place. Do you know how long Joseph was in jail? He was an innocent man, and he was in jail thirteen years, from age 17 to age 30. Don’t you think Joseph prayed while he was in jail? Don’t you think he said, “Lord, I tried to serve You. I tried to do it right. I tried to obey You. I get thrown in jail. Lord, get me out of here!
Lord, vindicate me! Lord, get this off of me!” Don’t you think he ever prayed that? Uh, every night!

Why did it take God thirteen years to answer? When God answered, do you know what happened? Pharaoh had this dream that nobody could interpret. They brought Joseph out to interpret it. Pharaoh was impressed with him. Bada-bing, bada-boom, before you could shake your head, Joseph became the prime minister of the whole cotton-pickin’ country! He was second in command in the whole nation!

So why didn’t God do that sooner? Well, think about it now. Remember reason number one, sometimes it’s because things aren’t good for us right when we’re asking for them. Can you imagine giving that kind of power to a seventeen-year-old young man? He would have self destructed with that kind of power at eighteen or nineteen years old. It wouldn’t have been good to give him the ultimate plan God had then.

I love what Abraham Lincoln said. He said, “Almost anyone can withstand adversity, but to test a man’s character, give him power.” Hey, welcome to Washington, yes? Hello! All right, you couldn’t give this young man that kind of power right at first. It would have killed him!

Number two, remember we said that sometimes God delays in answering our prayers to work on our character, and that’s exactly what He did on Joseph. The Joseph who went into jail was a completely different man than the Joseph who came out of jail. When he came out of jail, he had the character, the wisdom and the maturity to run a nation; he didn’t have it when he went into jail.

Finally, number three, we said sometimes God delays answering our prayers, because He needs time to get all the other details in line so He can answer our prayers. So maybe there was a point where Joseph was ready in his character and ready in his maturity, but God had to go over here. He had to get a butler thrown in jail, a baker thrown in jail, give them dreams, give Pharaoh dreams, bring Joseph to Pharaoh. There were a lot of things God had to get lined up to bring over here to match up.

But hey, when God got everything lined up, did He answer Joseph’s prayer? When Joseph was able to handle it safely, number one, and when Joseph’s character was fully ready, number two, and when God had lined up all the tumblers perfectly,
number three, God answered his prayer in spades! That’s exactly what God promises to do for you, my friend, and for me.

So let’s summarize. What have we learned today? We’ve learned, number one, that the parable of the unjust judge and the widow teaches us that God is more eager to answer our prayers than we are even to ask them. Because of that, it is always too soon to quit in prayer. We’ve also learned today that if some answers to prayer are delayed by God, it’s for one of three reasons or a combination of them. Number one, it’s because we’re asking something that isn’t good for us, and God is trying to get us to see the danger and change our prayers, or number two, it’s because God is using whatever it is we want changed to produce spiritual growth and maturity in our lives. When He is done with whatever lesson it’s supposed to teach us, He will take it away. Finally, number three, it’s because God may be working to line up all the tumblers, and God wants you and me to trust Him and be patient and walk by faith.

So let me say today, if you’re here and have been struggling with unanswered prayers in your life—maybe you’ve been praying for the salvation of some loved one for years or decades, and it hasn’t happened. Maybe you’ve been praying about some need in your life, and God hasn’t done it yet. Maybe you’ve been asking God to take something away like the thorn in the flesh, and God is leaving it there—folks, what I want you to do is leave here today confident that God is eager to answer your prayers. I want you to leave here confident that God is in the process of answering your prayers, because He says He is, and I want you to leave here today motivated to resuscitate your perseverance in prayer.

Remember, as long as Jesus is alive, which is forever, and as long as you and I as His followers are alive here on earth, when it comes to prayer, it is always too soon to quit. Let’s pray together.

Lord Jesus, thanks for talking to us today about an area of life where every one of us struggles. Every one of us has had to deal with prayers that went on for weeks, months, years and seemingly You weren’t even listening. We’ve had to struggle with discouragement. We’ve had to struggle with a desire to throw our hands up and quit. I pray, Lord, that You would remind us today from the Word of God that You hear
every prayer. You feel every pain, and Lord, You are eager to answer our prayers, but there are good reasons why sometimes You don’t answer our prayers as fast as we want or exactly in the way that we want. Give us the wisdom, give us the biblical maturity to understand that, and Lord, to approach our prayer life with faith, trusting You even though we can’t fully see and understand. So God, encourage us in prayer today. Strengthen the weak knees and resuscitate the weak arms. Lord, give us a renewed passion to be strong in prayer, because we have a God who is more eager to answer than we are to pray, but He’s going to answer us in the way that is best, at the time that’s best and in the way that is most beneficial for us as His children. Help us trust You, Lord, and we pray these things in Jesus’ name, and what did God’s people say? Amen!