

Title: Persistent, Persevering Prayer
Date: January 10, 2021
Subject: Persevering in prayer
Scripture: Luke 18:1 - 8

Let's get right into the Scripture. Jesus gives the introduction to his parable.

READ Luke 18:1 – 8.

The parable is unusual in several ways. Jesus gives the intended interpretation...even before telling the parable. He doesn't do that always or usually or even a good bit of the time. The interpretation has a dual intent. The first is that people should always pray. The second is that they shouldn't give up. These two cross over so the Lord tells us we shouldn't give up when it comes to prayer.

The parable is also unusual because of the cast of characters. Many of Jesus' stories have interesting people. This one even more so. There's a judge who doesn't care about God or people and he readily admits it – "I don't fear God or care about men." That statement has the crowd going. They see the humor in the way Jesus presents the judge. The unjust judge speaks plainly about who he is – unfeeling, uncaring, only interested in himself.

The judge is the official to whom people come to settle grievances and arguments. Cases are often determined by the one who gives the most money under the table. The crowd also would have a visceral reaction to the judge. Their blood pressure would raise. Their hearts would beat faster. It'd be like the way the Jews responded each time the story of Esther was told. Whenever they heard the name Haman, the evil conspirator who wanted to wipe out the Jews, they'd hiss and boo. They wanted to hiss and boo the judge.

Enter the widow... a sympathetic figure, particularly in that time when they had few means of support as the husband was the sole bread winner. This left them vulnerable. Widows could be shoved to the edges of society and thrown crumbs...occasionally. The caring listener would feel sorry for her.

The meeting of the two goes something like this. The woman comes to the judge and wants him to side in her favor against her adversary. The judge may have listened to her first appeal for justice but when she didn't pony up a bribe, he dismissed her. Either she didn't know how the game was played or was unwilling to play the game according to the judge's rules.

One thing about the widow – she isn't a quitter. She figures the squeaky wheel gets the grease, the loudest noise from the nest gets the food from mama bird. She confronts the judge again and again at his judge's bench. She invades his space when he's walking to and from his home. She spots him in the market. She jumps out from behind a tree. She's unwavering in her pursuit.

The judge refuses each and every attempt by the woman. He dismisses her with a wave of the hand. He tries avoidance. If he sees her coming down the street, he goes on the other side and or takes a different route. He does everything he can to avoid bumping into her.

To the judge she's a nuisance. She's an annoying woman, a really annoying woman. She's a bona fide pest. She's like fingernails on a chalkboard.

The judge finally decides to give justice to the woman. It isn't out of the kindness of his heart. He hasn't seen the light of day and become a follower of God. He hasn't been moved by memories of his dearly departed mom.

It's all a matter of checks and balances. In the judge's thinking, "She wants some money. I want some peace and quiet. I want to get back to my normal business. The only way I'll get what I want is if I give her what she wants. If I don't, her nagging and constant barrage will eventually wear me out. Then where will I be? Good a reason as any to give her justice."

In the end the widow gets what she has been desperately and determinedly seeking.

One of the temptations in interpreting parables is to make each aspect mean something. We can't do that with this parable. The judge is used as a contrast and comparison with God. The judge is nothing like God. The judge wanted to keep the needy woman at a distance as she was an irritation. The Lord doesn't view people as irritations but welcomes all who admit their need and invites them to come to him. The judge didn't care about people, but God deeply cares for people and especially his children. He doesn't view us as strangers but as sons and daughters. His love is so deep, unending and lavish that he granted us the high privilege of being his children. "Just as a Father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him" (Ps. 103:13). The Lord describes his attitude toward people: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands..." (Isa. 49:14-16). The heavenly father cares about people and it was best demonstrated in the giving of his Son.

Jesus brings the parable to a close. It's emphasized in v. 6 by the way Luke writes, "And the Lord said..." Jesus is drawing the application. REREAD vv. 6 - 8.

First of all, the Lord says to listen to what the unjust judge says. It's not that the judge exhibits the proper attitude. It's not God will give us what we ask so we'll stop bothering him, much like a parent who caves to a child begging for candy 5 minutes before supper because he's in the way of preparation.

Jesus asks two questions in v. 7. The first one is phrased in such a way there's only one answer..."YES." "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?" The answer is most assuredly, "Yes. God will bring justice." If an unjust judge could bring justice, certainly the judge of the entire world who judges rightly and fairly will be able to bring real true justice.

The second question is also phrased so there's only answer. This time it's a resounding "NO!" "Will he keep putting them off?" No. God won't keep putting them off. God will give them justice and it'll be done quickly. This doesn't mean it'll be soon. Rather, it refers to something that happens speedily and unexpectedly when it happens. It's like the thief who enters a home at night when the homeowner is unprepared. The Lord's bringing of justice will happen quickly and catch unprepared those who are to be judged.

Jesus, the Son of God, says his people, his followers, those who've placed their trust in him, love and serve him, will get justice. It's nothing like what many people today talk about as justice which is justice determined by feelings and emotions. Jesus says God will bring about justice for his chosen ones.

When will this take place? When will prayer be answered? The giving of justice is tied to Christ's second coming. The end of chapter 17 Jesus teaches about the second coming. The first word of chapter 18 is "then" as it introduces Jesus' parable. It could refer to a later time, but it seems to closely follow the timing of the previous. At least it's thematically connected. The connection is reinforced through the last verse of the parable speaking about when the Son of Man comes.

Meanwhile, in the intervening period between then and now, God's chosen ones cry out to him day and night. They pray and pray and pray and pray. How can we be persistent and persevere in prayer? We're to learn from the widow. She's been described as brash, vehement, relentless and importune. Better put, she was persistent. Keep on praying and bringing our request before the Judge.

There's another story where Jesus addresses the issue of prayer (Luke 11). He tells it after giving the Lord's Prayer. He asks listeners to imagine "suppose you have a friend." People like to think they have friends and the face of one of their friends popped into mind. Jesus continued. You run over to the friend's house at midnight saying, "I need food because a friend of mine has showed up at the house, is starving and I've got nothing to feed him." The friend inside says, "Go away. It's late. The door is locked. The kids are all sleeping in our bed as a camp-in kind of thing. I can't be bothered right now. I don't want to get up and give you anything." The guy must have a Ring doorbell so he could answer from bed.

Jesus said the friend won't get up and share food because of friendship. Yet because of the petitioner's boldness, your boldness, he'll get up and give you what is needed.

Then Jesus says we should ask, seek and knock for everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds and he who knocks will have the door opened. Ask, seek and knock are continuous, repeated actions.

One man described what is meant this way: "Until you have stood for years knocking at a locked door, your knuckles bleeding, you do not really know what prayer is" (Fred Craddock). Persistent.

Jesus continues teaching on prayer by using an illustration of a father and son. If the son asks for fish, will the dad give him a snake or if he asks for an egg would he give him a scorpion? Jesus concludes, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Matthew's account of the parable says the father will give good gifts. Jesus reassures us the Father will give what is good and right.

Prayer is talking with God. It's a continual conversation, one that's based on our understanding of our need but more importantly, the knowledge we can't do it -- life -- by ourselves. It's also a repeated conversation where we tell the Lord the same thing, present our needs again and again. Our most basic needs are the same all year long, all life long.

In another place the call for persistent, persevering prayer is put in three words -- “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 3:17, KJV) or “Never stop praying” (New Living Translation) and even by two words: “Pray continually” (NIV). It’s one of the toughest commands to implement.

Just three or two words. But the words are packed. Unwavering. Incessantly. The word described a military tactic, a series of assaults – attack, withdraw to regroup, attack, withdraw and regroup, repeat until achieve objective. The word was also used for a hacking cough. It’s frequent and repeated but not all the time. Imagine what that would be like. The person usually has a break between coughing spells. When it comes to prayer, we’re connected with God at all times. Prayer isn’t just once a day and done. We should attack and cough throughout the day. We take time to talk with him about our requests and burdens as well as our praises. There may be times when the exercise is protracted, like when in great need and burden for others or self.

Also to be understood as praying without omission. Pray about anything and everything. Kids do that. They pray about anything and everything. It’s a stream of consciousness. The grandkids, “Thank you for food, family, papa and nana came, can have snackie lunch, got this for Christmas, thank it’s pink.....” Whatever comes into their minds, they tell God.

Somewhere along the line we stop doing that. We shouldn’t. Pray. Pray. Pray.

There are numerous reasons we are persistent and persevering. Steven J. Cole highlights some. “There are a number of reasons that we are prone to lose heart and quit praying. Sometimes we assume that we are competent to handle things in our own strength. This is especially a danger when it is a task that we do repeatedly. We hop in the car and head off on a trip without a thought of prayer, because we’ve driven safely for many years. We forget that we depend on the Lord for protection. We go to work every day and do our jobs without prayer because we know how to do our jobs. We forget that we are dependent on God to do our jobs competently. This can even be true of spiritual tasks, such as preaching or leading in worship or anything else that you do so often that it becomes routine. Or, if God has given you a strong natural ability, it is easy to do it without prayer because you know how to do it and you do it well” (bible.org/seriespage/lesson-81-persevering-prayer-luke-181-8).

There are other reasons. It may be because of perceived delays of God answering, in getting the answer we anticipate. It can be because of difficulties. Maybe it’s because we don’t think the Lord is concerned about the small and mundane details of life. Maybe it’s because we don’t think he’s listening to us. Maybe we just get forgetful and don’t take time to pray.

In his book *Prayer: A Holy Occupation*, Oswald Chambers wrote, “We can hinder the time that should be spent with God by remembering we have other things to do. ‘I haven’t time.’ Of course you have not time! Take time, strangle some other interests and make time to realize that the center of power in your life is the Lord Jesus Christ and His atonement.”

We can get into problems if we don’t see the doctor or go to the mechanic. Neglecting prayer sets us up for losing spiritual vibrancy and power.

Pastor Adrian Rogers put it more pointedly, “Prayerlessness is a spirit of independence from God.”

It’s hard to wait. Caitlin was 4. She was growing more impatient. Time was passing by. She was getting old. She’d been praying for a sibling and she wasn’t getting one. One morning she strongly suggested to her mother, “Maybe if we both prayed out loud, God would hear us.” They prayed together. No doubt it was a heart-warming moment for mom to pray with her child and hear her little girl pray. As soon as the Amen was pronounced, Caitlin excitedly asked, “What did he say?” Mom explained that answers aren’t always immediate. Sometimes they take a long time. Caitlin was indignant: “Do you mean we were praying to an answering machine?” (*Reader’s Digest* [12/94], p. 154). It can feel that way. We aren’t. Keep praying.

Golf is a curious game, one that I don’t play all that often. Son Nate and I hit the links rarely and I usually play what Tiger Woods called “army golf” – left, right, left, right as I make my way around the course not going down the middle of the fairway but to the left and right sides of it into the rough. Nate and I enjoy the time together though there are frustrations like when we feel we should have been able to hit the ball better than we did. But it seems like, in spite of a so-so round, there are enough good shots, at least, acceptable shots that make Nate think he’d want to play again and not permanently give up the sport. If we wanted to get really good – or slightly improve -- we’d have to devote much more time. We’d have to practice, play, work on our swing and follow through, exercise so won’t be so sore after playing, and play. By playing and playing and playing we’d have the hope of improving.

Prayer is the same way as golf. How hard can it be to hit a little white ball that’s sitting still for you? How hard can it be to put it into a cup on the ground? After all, it’s not like trying to hit 100 mph or 80 mph fastball hurtling towards you. The rules are simple hit the ball. Get it in the cup. That’s pretty much it.

The rules of prayer are pretty simple. Talk...to...God. How hard can it be? Here’s what one man said: “Anyone who has ever seriously and earnestly attempted the act of prayer has found that it is not nearly as simple as it first appears to be. The basic principles and doctrines of prayer are simple, but the execution and practice of those principles is far from simple and easy. The fact is that because prayer is such a challenging endeavor, very few of God’s people ever really reach the “effective and fervent” type of prayer life that regularly and consistently sees prayers answered. The reality is; it is not that prayer does not work, but rather that we will not work at prayer. The reason more of our prayers are not answered lies in the fact that we very often do not persist and persevere in our prayer lives. That is; we give up too soon....Prayer is an exercise. It is a work. It is tasking, it is toiling, it is testing.” (Terry Trivette, sermon *It’s Me Again*, Lord, pastorlife.com)

Max Lucado, “Do you want to know how to deepen your prayer life? Pray. Don’t prepare to pray. Just pray. Don’t read about prayer. Just pray. Don’t attend a lecture on prayer or engage in discussion about prayer. Just pray. Posture, tone, and place are personal matters. Select the form that works for you. But don’t think about it too much. Don’t be so concerned about wrapping the gift that you never give it. Better to pray awkwardly than not at all. And if you feel you should only pray when inspired, that’s okay. Just see to it that you are inspired every day” (Max Lucado, *when God whispers your name*, p. 143).