

Prayer: Its Problems and Possibilities

5. Persistent Prayer

Luke 11:5-13, 18:1-8

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Richard Mouw, former president of Fuller Theological Seminary in California has a story about an American tourist in Jerusalem who sees a devout Orthodox Jew praying at the Western Wall, more commonly known as the Wailing Wall. The man rocks back and forth with closed eyes, beating upon his breast, raising his hands and crying aloud. When he has finished, the tourist inquires of him, "What do you pray for?" The man at the wall said he prayed for the health of his family, for righteousness and peace.

"Are these prayers effective?" asked the tourist. And the devout Jew replied, "It's like talking to a wall!"

Well, sometimes it does seem that our prayers may go no farther than the walls and no higher than the ceiling. We pray for health and the biopsy comes back positive. We pray for the safety of our children and they fall into patterns of abuse and addiction or are victims of their own bad decisions. We pray for peace and religious fanatics kill and maim the innocent and create chaos. We pray for justice and the guilty go free, and innocent victims are ignored.

As children of the Enlightenment, living in a scientific and material age, we are almost conditioned to naturally question the value and the efficacy of prayer. We want clear evidence and proof that it is effective. Yes, prayer seems on an occasion a pointless monologue if one measures it by obvious results and, not surprisingly, people often cease praying in their disappointment. Even the great spiritual masters who teach us so much about prayer personally confess to going through long dry spells when God seemed silent or absent.

Among all my notes on this topic of prayer compiled in my research for this series, I wrote down a saying whose source now escapes me. "Prayer may be the one Christian discipline most universally applauded and ignored. Whoever said that is on target, I think. More of us praise the discipline of prayer than actually practice it. And the chief reason our practice falls short, I think, is because we are not fully convinced that our prayers make any difference.

And yet the Bible is clear that prayer does make a difference. “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective,” writes the apostle James. Well then, a person may conclude, I must not be very righteous because my prayers seem neither effective nor powerful. And besides if prayer is only effective for the holy and pious, neither of which is used to describe me, then prayer serves me no purpose. But the scriptures are clear that God does answer the prayers of all manner of people, sinners and skeptics alike.

So, you may ask, what might I do to enhance my prayer life, to enable my prayers to be more effective? That is the key question given our periodic or continuing struggle. Jesus gives us some profound wisdom and divine insight on this matter. In our last session we learned that we are to pray with expectation, confident that God is capable of doing any and all things but also confident that God will always do what is in our best interest and what is consistent with God’s good and greater purposes, whether we see his plan or not. So we pray confident that God can do what we ask and may yet do what we ask if our petitions serve his purposes and work for the good of all his children.

This morning I want to emphasize a second aspect of our Lord’s teaching on prayer. Our prayer should not be only expectant but also be persistent. The apostle Paul affirms this as well when he writes to the Colossians and charges them in Colossians 4:2: “Be persistent in prayer.” Jesus was teaching persistence long before Paul picked up this theme.

The two parables of Jesus we heard this morning from Luke’s gospel are both commending persistence in prayer. The context of these parables may seem somewhat strange to us but only because they come from a different time and culture. In *Luke 11* Jesus tells of a man who knocks on his neighbor’s door at midnight asking if he can borrow some bread. You and I would probably call 911 if someone came knocking on our door at midnight. But this was part of the requirement of hospitality in the ancient near east. A traveler had stopped to visit, we are told, and the man seeking bread from his neighbor was obligated to feed and care for him. But his cupboard was bare. At first the neighbor resists the request. After all, it is late at night; everything is locked up and his kids are in bed. Nonetheless, Jesus points out that even though this man balks at the request from his neighbor and friend, he winds up helping his neighbor because of the man’s dogged persistence. The man simply refused to take no for an answer.

The point here is NOT that if we hound God enough he might just give in. No, Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples that God is anxious to hear and answer their prayers. The point is that if a grouchy neighbor awakened from sleep in the middle of the night will eventually respond to an urgent request for bread, **how much more** will a loving and concerned God respond to our pleas. The point is not that God is like the bothered neighbor but rather that

God is dramatically different from the begrudging neighbor. So pray boldly. Pray persistently. Refuse to give up or to assume that no one is listening and that no one cares.

Likewise, in the second parable (*Luke 18:1-8*) we are to make a contrast between our heavenly father and the unjust judge in our Lord's story. Luke even offers the interpretation before he reports the parable. Verse 11 says: "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart." In this story we meet a bad judge, a judge who neither fears God nor has any respect for people. A poor widow comes to him seeking justice. Widows of course, were among the most vulnerable and powerless in that ancient world for without a husband a woman in that ancient culture had no status, no security, and no rights to speak of. Widows quite naturally played a prominent role in Jesus' ministry of compassion.

At any rate, the widow's only hope for justice is this scoundrel of a judge who is being bothered and worn down by her incessant cries for help. Finally, the judge relents and not because he wants to mind you, but because this woman is so relentless in her pursuit. Basically, the judge just wants to get rid of the woman.

So then, is our God to be compared to an unjust judge, stubborn and without compassion? Are we to keep nagging God until we wear him down and he finally does what is right? Absolutely not! We are intended to note the contrast and not the similarity between the judge and our God. If a dishonest, heartless judge would yield in time to the persistence of a widow, **how much more** responsive will our God be to our persistent cries for help or justice?

Ah yes, you say, but sometimes God does indeed seem to be delayed in his response to our prayers. True enough, but what may seem to us a slow response may simply be God responding in a way we could never imagine or even ask. And God is not ignoring us or putting us off but using even our limited and narrow requests to serve a larger good and a better purpose than that which we can conceive. "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day." (*2 Peter 3:8*)

I am reminded of that old prayer with which you may be familiar, one attributed to a confederate soldier and found sometime after the war:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve. I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey. I asked for health that I might do greater things. I was given infirmity, that I might do better things. I asked for riches, that I might be happy. I was given poverty, that I might be wise. I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men. I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God. I asked for all things,

that I might really enjoy life. I was given life, that I might enjoy things. I got nothing I asked for, but everything that I had hoped for. Almost despite myself my unspoken prayers were answered. I am among all men most richly blessed. Amen.

We may not understand why but Jesus tells us to persist in our praying. It is not because God wants us to beg or to nag. It is not because God is forgetful or distracted and needs reminding. But in thinking of reasons behind the wisdom and virtue of persistence, several benefits do come to mind. These are not exhaustive to be sure and you are free to add your own insights, but it seems to me from my study, from my reflection and from my personal experience, that persistence in praying does at least five things.

1. Persistence reveals our sincerity to God. How genuine are our prayers, how deep are our concerns if they are not prominent in our conversations with God?
2. Persistence deepens our faith in God. When we continue to trust in God and believe in God despite our disappointments we find our faith growing. It requires no faith after all, to believe in the things we see and to believe in the things we can prove. But faith acted on grows and matures and satisfies the soul.
3. Persistence in praying also underscores our need for God. When we continue to pray for the things uppermost in our hearts and minds we are reminded daily that we are dependent creatures with limits and liabilities and that apart from God we are helpless in man of those things that ultimately matter.
4. Persistence strengthens our bond with God. Persistent prayer keeps us in relationship with the one whose love for us and ours is unconditional and unassailable.
5. Lastly, our persistence in praying reminds us of our continuing work with God. I will expand on this idea of prayer as partnership next week but suffice it to say at this juncture that our persistent prayers remind us daily of those things for which we should be working as well as praying. After all, we dare not ask God for things that we are unwilling to work toward and sacrifice for. Prayer is no escape from work nor is it an avoidance of our own responsibilities and duties. To ask God for health while we continue to abuse our bodies and exercise little personal restraint is disingenuous, at best. To pray for peace in the world while we continue to harbor

grudges against our neighbors is offensive to God and indicative of our own corruption. To pray for the poor while we continue to live in extravagance and luxury with selfish disregard for others is not just disingenuous but diabolical. If we pray for the church's effectiveness and for the spread of the gospel but come to church only when it is convenient and contribute only that which doesn't interfere with our preferred lifestyle, then we may be fooling ourselves but we are most assuredly not fooling God. You see, God not only hears the words we speak when we pray but God listens to our hearts and reads our minds and watches our actions. This is how God measures the substance and the sincerity of our prayers.

So, if you struggle with prayer as many of God's children have done and still do, remember to pray with expectation first and secondly remember to pray persistently for this is the Lord's expressed will. And we can be obedient to the Lord's charge here even if we never have a satisfactory answer to our question: Why? So pray expectantly, pray persistently and in so doing God will know the deepest yearnings of your heart. And you will better comprehend your need of God, the necessity of your trust and faith, and the continuing work God would have you do to be part of the answer to the prayer you are offering.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.