

The Power of Persistence

Luke 18:1–17 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: For the third time in Luke, our Lord reminds us of the importance of persistence in prayer. In chapter 11, we saw the Lord's example prayer followed by his admonition to pray like the neighbor who had unexpected guests arrive in the middle of the night. He knocked on his neighbor's door until the neighbor helped him. Today, he is teaching a similar truth, but rather than the inopportune neighbor, we look at the persistent widow.

CONTEXT: Luke is shifting his narrative away from the kingdom language of the past few weeks and toward a series of lessons on how to approach God. Next week, we will see that we are to come like little children rather than the rich, young ruler. This week, we will learn the power of persistence.

TEXT: Luke 18:1–17 (ESV)

“¹And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

The gospel writers rarely reveal the intent of a parable. But this time, Luke helps us out. He tells us up front what the intended effect of this parable is, namely that we ought always to pray and not lose or give up.

So, we can know, upfront, that Jesus intends for us to be persistent in our prayer, especially when the answer doesn't come quickly.

Before we enter the parable, let me ask you: How is your prayer life? Is your family covered in your prayers? How about your business? Have you prayed over the third quarter profit margin? How about your church? Before you came today, did you implore God to speak to you, encourage you, and, if needed, rebuke you? Was there a season in your life when you were committed to prayer more than you are today?

4 REASONS PEOPLE DON'T PRAY:

1. **Disappointment** - When people feel that their prayers are not being answered or that they are not seeing the results they hoped for, they may become disillusioned and stop praying. At times, this can even manifest in anger toward God.

ILLUSTRATION: So many of us approach God as if He were a cosmic vending machine. We put in our 50-cent prayer, we make our selection, and if we don't get what we asked for, we kick the machine in protest. If that is your approach, you will quickly become frustrated with prayer. It didn't work, you will say!

2. **Guilt** - Unconfessed sin can halt the power of prayer life. Did you know that the Bible teaches, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me?" Have you ever felt like your prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling?

ILLUSTRATION: Sin can drive you from the presence of God. Remember Adam in the Garden; God came looking for them, yet they hid in a feeble attempt to cover their shame.

3. **Busyness** - A blessed life can quickly turn into a busy life. In fact, any time your work grows, you have to learn to stop and evaluate. You see, the enemy doesn't mind your business growing so long as it cuts into your prayer time and gradually chokes out your spiritual vitality.

ILLUSTRATION: Henry Blackaby, author of the best-selling Bible study, "Experiencing God," once met with a group of the most successful Christian businessmen in America. You know how businessmen are; they like to cut to the chase and get to the bottom line. So, they asked Dr. Blackaby, what is the one thing that I can do to make the most significant difference in my life as a Christian in business? He replied, "The one thing that would make the single greatest impact on your life in business, family, church, you name it... is an unhurried quiet time with God."

4. **Comfort** - There is something about comfort that makes me very uneasy. God doesn't let me get comfortable too long. It's not good for my soul. You see, scripture teaches that we are in the midst of a spiritual battle; the battle is over the hearts, minds, and souls of people - your kids, your grandkids. This demands a wartime mentality.

Our Lord knew that there would be seasons in life when we would fall out of the rhythm of prayer. That is why He gave us this parable.

"² He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.'"

Incidentally, those things go hand in hand. When a person in power does not honor God, neither will he honor the one who bears God's image. It should be the prayer of every Christian that God would give us a government filled with God-fearing people.

"³ 'And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'"

This widow had suffered an injustice of some sort. Someone had taken advantage of her. Widows in first-century Israel were in a dire predicament. They had no power, no authority, and no leverage in this kind of situation. They couldn't even testify in a court of law. But it says she KEPT COMING TO HIM. Every morning, at 8 a.m. sharp,

she was filing her appeal. He thought to himself, how long could she keep this up? A week went by, then another. There she was every morning.

NOW, when a man lacks the fear of God, he will typically, also lack patience. Perhaps this widow understood that. She knew that there was only so much a man could take. So, day after day, there she was. Think about her adversary! He thought they had gotten away with something.

You see, when judges don't do justly, injustices increase. Violators grow bold. When you see a spike in a city's crime rate, don't look first at the criminal; look to the criminal court. Someone isn't doing their job. Justice meted out fairly and swiftly is a deterrent to crime.

Whoever committed the injustice against this widow likely thought they could get away with it. They thought, "I know this judge; he will never even hear her case." But about nine days in, her opponent had to be getting concerned. Right? She knew, and her opponent knew, that eventually, the Judge would get exasperated and hear her case.

"4 'For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

Every morning there she was... "Judge I need to talk" ... it was like being nibbled to death by a chihuahua.

ILLUSTRATION: One of my favorite movies of all time was "True Grit" with Jeff Bridges; the soundtrack itself is worth the cost of the movie. Hailee Steinfeld played Mattie Ross, a young girl whose father had been killed in a robbery. Throughout the movie, she persists in getting justice for her dad and wears down literally every man in the film. Now, that's who I imagine playing the role of the widow in this parable. She has tenacity; spunk and quit are not in her vocabulary.

Eventually, this judge resorted to reasoning to himself. He says, "I don't care what God thinks, I don't care what men think, but what I do care about is my mental health. And if I don't get rid of this widow, she is going to drive me absolutely insane.

I have to think that this widow's husband is up in heaven enjoying the show. He dealt with this woman his entire adult life.

"6 And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. 7 And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? 8 I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.'"

So, notice:

1. The Commonality between God and the judge:

- A. **Both delay in answering:** The judge, out of evil motives, and God, in his divine perspective, will wait for the appropriate time.
- B. **Both will suddenly answer:** In other words, God will say, not today, not today, not today... then verse 8 says, **"I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily."**

What does that mean? NOT SOON, BUT SUDDENLY. You wait, wait, wait, then suddenly God answers.

J.R.R. Tolkien called this the eucha-tastrophe. That is the sudden turn in the storyline when it seems all is lost, all hope is gone, and then God shows up. Never forget that the God you serve has a particular flair for the dramatic.

2. The Commonality between the Widow and the Elect:

- A. **Both will benefit from persistence in prayer.**
"^{8a}Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"
 The idea is that if God's people are not like this widow, they will give up. They will cease to cry out to God and lose faith before the coming of the Lord. But if they persist, it will be of great benefit to them.
- B. **The widow persists because of the judge's predictable wickedness; the elect persist because of God's predictable goodness.**

This is the ARUMENTUM A PRIORI, one of Jesus' favorite modes of teaching. It is arguing from lesser to greater, that is - if we can all agree that exhibit A is self-evidently true, *HOW MUCH MORE SHOULD* exhibit B be true?

EXAMPLES:

- Lilies of the field - If God cares so for the flowers of the field that are here today and gone tomorrow... HOW MUCH MORE will he care for you?
- Sparrows
Matthew 10:29 (ESV)
²⁹ **"Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?"**
Luke 12:6 (ESV)
⁶ **"Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?"**

That extra sparrow is just thrown in - it's the ODD sparrow. Have you ever heard someone called an odd bird... that's where it comes from. Think about that 5th sparrow.... he is about the least valuable thing on the planet. Then Jesus says, "Yet not one of them falls to the ground without

your heavenly father knowing it... if he cares so for the sparrow...HOW MUCH MORE does he care for you?

NOW BACK TO THE PARABLE ABOUT PRAYER

Jesus is saying if persistence in the request eventually moved this wicked judge to grant her request... HOW MUCH MORE will God be moved if you persist in prayer?

2 Chronicles 16:9 (ESV)

“⁹ For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”

If God delays in answering your prayer, you should ask:

- Is it an appropriate prayer? James tells us sometimes we can ask, amiss.
- Is it the appropriate time?

Remember in Luke 11, our Lord said, we are to ask, seek, and knock.

THE PROPHET ISAIAH - Isaiah 62:6–7 (ESV)

“⁶ On your walls, O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen; all the day and all the night they shall never be silent. You who put the Lord in remembrance, take no rest, ⁷ and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.”

Give God NO REST. Do you have a child who is wandering from the faith... give God no rest! Cry out day and night on their behalf.

WHAT ABOUT ABRAHAM PRAYING FOR SODOM?

Then he continues, 45, 40, 20, 10...every time God complies, you wonder what would have happened if he continued down to ONE.

HOW ABOUT JACOB WRESTLING WITH GOD?

One like unto the son of God wrestled with Jacob all night...

Genesis 32:26 (ESV)

“²⁶ Then he said, ‘Let me go, for the day has broken.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’”

Remember the acronym PUSH - Pray Until Something Happens. God is honored by your persistence.

THIS WIDOW approached the judge every day as if she had never approached him before. That is the idea -

ILLUSTRATION: BEST POSSIBLE DAY - You see, every day when you are really praying for a breakthrough, you approach God as if you know for a fact, this is the best possible day for Him to answer your prayer. But He doesn't, you get up the next day as if THIS day is the best possible day to answer your prayer and you pray that way.

ILLUSTRATION: It's somewhat like Eve's first pregnancy. Can you imagine? She didn't have a book she could read, "What to Expect When You Are Expecting." This was the first... she didn't know when the birth would occur. She may not have even known that she was pregnant... had to be awkward for Adam... honey; it seems you've gained weight. But she would observe the animals and figure out what was happening, but she didn't know how long the gestation period was going to be. So, every day she probably thought, THIS SHOULD BE THE DAY. But it happened when the time was right.

Prayer is the same way. It's good to pray as if it's today, but if it's not, pray tomorrow without any loss of faith.

ELIJAH AND THE RAIN FROM HEAVEN:

1 Kings 17:1 (ESV) This was written at a time when Israel had become very idolatrous and God is about to discipline His people.

"¹ Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'"

Ok, so it's not going to rain... fast forward to chapter 18... which is 3.5 years later.

1 Kings 18:1 (ESV)

"¹ After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.'"

Now the Word of God said, "I'm about to send rain on the earth." Do you see that? This is the unalterable, irrevocable promise of God. It WILL happen.

Now you know the story - Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal and called fire down from heaven. Then he called for the executions of the false prophets. Now look at Chapter 18.

1 Kings 18:41–46 (ESV)

"⁴¹ And Elijah said to Ahab, 'Go up, eat and drink, for there is a sound of the rushing of rain.' ⁴² So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. And Elijah went up to the top of Mount Carmel. And he bowed himself down on the earth and put his face between his knees."

Now Elijah the prophet is calling on God - what is he praying for? He's praying for it to rain. How do we know?

James 5:17–18 (ESV)

"¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit."

QUESTION: Why pray for something God has already promised?

ANSWER: Because God has ordained PRAYER as the MEANS by which the ENDS of his promises are fulfilled.

The promises of God shouldn't RESTRICT your prayer life - they should RELEASE your prayer life.

Elijah knew the power of God; Elijah knew the will of God... so Elijah prayed.

Well, surely, it's a quick and easy prayer - I mean God promised...No look at verse 43.

⁴³ And he said to his servant, 'Go up now, look toward the sea.' And he went up and looked and said, 'There is nothing.'"

Now, that is where most of us give up. We say, "Oh well, maybe this is a spiritual interpretation, or worse yet, maybe the Word isn't entirely inspired."
Not Elijah...

And he said, "Go again," seven times.

Do you know what that means? That means Elijah fervently called out to God for SEVEN extended seasons of prayer. This may have taken hours.

WHY? Why does God wait for seven periods of prayer before answering? I don't know, but perhaps God isn't just doing work in the heavens but also in the heart.

⁴⁴ And at the seventh time he said, 'Behold, a little cloud like a man's hand is rising from the sea.' And he said, 'Go up, say to Ahab, prepare your chariot and go down, lest the rain stop you.'"

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: Have you given up on prayer? Have you given up on God? Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow to say to some of us, "Keep knocking."

Adrian Rogers said it this way -
The Devil cannot keep God from answering
Therefore, he must keep you from asking!

Remember the words of Paul in **Romans 8:32 (ESV)**

³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"