

PERSISTENCE PAYS

Luke 18:1-9

»*"This week, if you believe at all in opinion surveys, more Americans will pray than will go to work, or exercise, or have sexual relations."*«

If the opinion polls can be believed, talking to God is an extremely popular activity in the United States. More Americans will pray this week than will go to work or exercise: 78% of those surveyed say they pray at least once a weekly and over half (57%) pray daily. Indeed prayer is not all that uncommon even among atheists and agnostics (13% of the population) since 20% of them say they pray every day.

In the current edition of Books in Print, there are close to 2,000 titles listed under the headings of prayer, meditation, and spiritual growth--that's more than three times the number dealing with sexual intimacy.

"Talking to God" by Kenneth Woodward. Newsweek, Jan 6, 1992. Pages 38-44.

Popular book on prayer entitled: ***Sense and Nonsense about Prayer***. You don't need to study the contemporary church scene for very long to realize that there is a lot of nonsense floating around about prayer!

Hierocles, a 5th century philosopher of Alexandria, compiled a book of humorous stories which were meant to teach a lesson. One of these was about a man who made a vow that he would never go into the water until he first learned to swim. Many hold an equally foolish idea to postpone praying until they have learned to do it ***eloquently***.

God isn't watching for eloquence

God is looking for faith

Persistence is more important than eloquence!

A young woman was telling a counselor the mess she had made of her life. He stopped her and said, "Debbie, do you ever pray?" "No," she replied, "never." Then she added with a quick smile, "But sometimes I send a wish upward."

[Another bit of nonsense about prayer, very popular in Christian circles, says:]

"Pray in faith believing God will do what you ask." That's a heretical concept!

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of the bestseller *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, laments that our prayers too often end up being a list of complaints. Kushner says, "We've confused God with Santa Claus,"

The popular interpretation of our passage this morning: ***"Just pray persistently enough and God will give you whatever you ask Him for."***

Is that what this passage is about? Let's take a look.

[Concerning prayer in persecution] 18:1-8

Our Lord chats with His followers about prayer in the midst of rejection and persecution.

The parable grows out of the theme of the postponement of the kingdom He has described in chapter 17. It is not intended to apply to prayer in general, as though one needs to pester God for every need until He reluctantly responds! The theme is the vindication of God's suffering people (Cf. **Rev. 6:9-11**)

In the midst of the persecution which accompanies Jesus' rejection, God's children should trust Him to hear them when they cry out to Him. He will help them.

They can be confident He will repay appropriately. They need to trust Him, even in the midst of their suffering.

ILLUSTRATION: THE UNJUST JUDGE AND THE PERSISTENT WIDOW 18:1-5

The point of the story: Always pray and don't give up 18:1

"Give up" (KJV--"faint") is translated by some as "cave in". What causes a "cave in"--weakness on one hand, accompanied by pressure on the other.

Don't give up!! Don't throw in the towel!!!

The delay in the coming of the kingdom might cause them to give up in despair. When opposition grows and times get rough, it might seem as if an answer wouldn't come and we would be in danger of giving up. About the time you're ready to cave in to the pressure, remember the persistence of the widow. She didn't give up just because everything seemed to be going against her!

What we know about the judge:

18:2-5

The judge was unjust (v. 6). He didn't fear God. He didn't care about people.

In near eastern courts the judge did as he pleased. He only heard cases he wanted to hear, and that often took a bribe, unless you knew the right people!

[What we know about the woman]

The plaintiff was a woman. A widow at that. She had no influence, no ability to get him to listen to her, and no money with which to bribe him.

She had NO HOPE of ever convincing him to help her!

She only had one way to influence the judge--to appeal and keep appealing until he gave in to get her to leave him alone--***Like a child begging for candy in the grocery story***

She resorted to persistent nagging until the unjust judge finally caved in and gave her what she wanted.

How does the judge react to the woman?

At first, he refused to pay attention to her plight.

Nevertheless, because of her persistence, to get her off his back, he helped her.

"You can't get blood out of a turnip!" But she gets justice from an unjust judge.

He has no internal motivation at all, but because she keeps appealing to him, he gives it to her!

JESUS' INSTRUCTION: GOD GIVES JUSTICE TO THOSE WHO PERSIST IN CRYING OUT TO HIM

18:6-8

How is God like and unlike the unjust judge?

God is intrinsically just. That's His character.

No one has to pressure Him to be that way. That's His nature.

What difference will that make in His response to our cry?

If an unjust judge gives justice to a poor widow who persists in crying out to him, how much more will a loving Father, Who is just by nature, respond giving justice to His children when we cry out to Him? . . . when we keep appealing to *HIM*?

Will God keep putting us off?

We pray persistently, precisely because we know the nature of the Judge. He's on our side!!!

A poor woman in Spurgeon's neighborhood desperately needed some coal to heat her house. A friend ordered some and had it delivered. A few minutes later the woman's daughter came out of the house with a play shovel, picked up a scoopful of coal, and took it inside. Spurgeon saw her do this several times and asked, "Do you expect to get all that coal in with that little shovel?" Confidently, she answered, "Yes sir, if I work long enough." That's perseverance!

While the theology of applying this illustration to the issue of prayer is less than we would like. The little girl's example of perseverance is exactly what our Lord is talking about. We need not be frightened by the mountain of opposition. **Perseverance in prayer, even in the face of a mountain of persecution, will eventually lead to justice. Because we are trusting in the God of justice!**

On the subject of perseverance in prayer, Andrew Murray wrote, "Think of the instances among the Old Testament saints: Abraham, who renewed his prayer for Sodom six times, apologizing with the words, 'Let not the Lord be angry.' Abraham wouldn't stop until God granted his petition. And for his sake, Lot was spared.

"Think of Jacob when he feared to meet Esau. The angel of the Lord met him in the dark and wrestled with him. When the angel saw that he could not prevail, he said, 'Let me go.' And Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go.' That boldness forced a blessing from the reluctant angel.

"Think of Elijah in his prayer--first for fire, then for rain. In the first case, he claimed and received an immediate answer. In the second, he responded to his servant's report that 'There is nothing' with a faith-inspired 'Go again.' Only after seven glances heavenward was Elijah's perseverance rewarded."

How about Daniel's prayer because of God's revelation to him? He prayed continuously for 21 days, without eating bread or meat, and drinking no wine (the common drink of that day). That represents intense prevailing upon God with determination and persistence (Dan. 10)!

God responds to the persistent, unrelenting prayer of His children!

People who pray with that kind of persistence have already learned the importance of praying in conformity to God's own character and His plan for His creation.

If we don't recognize that He is in control of history and that His plan is best, we will be prone to give up long before it gets to that point!

[George Mueller, whose life we had a glimpse of in our worship service a couple of Sundays ago, explained that he lived in the spirit of prayer. "I pray as I walk, when I lie down, and when I rise. The answers are always coming. Tens of thousands of times have my prayers been answered. The great fault of the children of God is that they do not continue in prayer. They do not go on praying. They do not persevere."

When the Just Judge of all the earth does respond, He responds *quickly*. There won't be a long series of warnings. He acts quickly and severely towards those who persecute His people. His justice is swift!

What's the point of Jesus' concluding question?

18:8

"When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith?" Or, will His followers be characterized by murmuring and doubt? (like Israel)

"The reason worry kills more people than work is that more people worry than work?" Robert Frost

Ben Patterson: WAITING: Finding Hope when God Seems Silent:

"Modern Christians are afflicted with a "zap mentality." It's the idea that unless God "zaps" us immediately in response to our prayers, unless he does something that is immediately accessible to our five senses, then nothing has happened. The "zap mentality" approaches prayer as an experiment in a chemistry lab--you mix the substances and wait for the reaction. If there is no reaction then the experiment didn't work. To change the metaphor, praying is like farming. No farmer plants a seed and then stands over it waiting to see if anything happened. He knows the seeds must be planted and watered and cared for and waited on over time before they bring a harvest.

It is the persistence and tenacity of this kind that gets us through the troughs and low spots in our wait for God. How we deal with the low spots in the wait is crucial to the outcome of our wait. C.S. Lewis underscores this in his imaginary correspondence between two devils in *The Screwtape Letters*. Addressing his nephew Wormwood on the subject of temptation, the devil Screwtape gives some shrewd advice on how the "Enemy" (God) works with humans. He observes that at the beginning of our walk of faith, God often gives us powerful intimations of his presence. But that state of affairs usually doesn't last for long. There is a good reason.

He leaves the creature to stand on its own two legs--to carry from the will alone duties which have lost all relish. It is during such trough periods, that it is growing into the creature He wants it to be. Hence the prayers offered in the state of dryness are those that please him best. . . . He cannot 'tempt' to virtue as we can to vice. He wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there He is pleased even with their stumbles. Do not be deceived, Wormwood. Our cause is never more in danger than when a human, no longer desiring, but still intending, to do our Enemy's will, looks round a universe from which every trace of Him seems

to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys.

We are forged in the wait. The prayers we pray while in the forge are critical to the men and women we become.

CONCLUSION: What is the real issue in the story? JUSTICE!!!

If the unjust judge, who doesn't even fear God, gives justice to get the nagging woman off his back, . . .

. . . won't God who is just by nature give justice to those who cry out to Him day and night?

Prayer isn't a means we use to get our "wish list" filled!

You'll look long and hard, and force many a biblical quote far beyond its original significance before you will find proof of that thesis. That's certainly not what this passage is about. The issue here is JUSTICE! God is more concerned about that than we are, and when we cry out to Him in search of JUSTICE, we are crying out for that which God Himself longs for. We are praying in conformity with HIS character and HIS desire for HIS creation.

When we pray with intense, fervent spirit, crying out to God for that which He Himself is, how can He resist? You can count on it! GOD WILL RESPOND TO THAT KIND OF FERVENT PRAYER!

[But there's a more important issue at stake here--(18:8)--]

What is the more significant question?

When Jesus comes back to bring justice, will there be anyone left who still trusts Him, waiting for Him?

This is a lesson for the faithful abused--for those who trust God, in spite of adversity--who trust Him when everyone else rejects Him.

The question is: will there be ANY left who continue to trust Him when everyone else is turning away and trying to go it alone?

As in the days of Noah and Lot, there will only be a few, perhaps less than we imagine, waiting for Him and trusting Him.

*Will there be any who trust Him? Will we be among them?
Will the faithful throw in the towel?
Will we give up?*

Or, will we go on trusting Him, even in the midst of adversity, when life doesn't seem to make sense?