

“The Power of Persistent Prayer”

September 25, 2022

We will be in Acts Chapter 12 this morning, and we're gonna pick back up with the story of Peter. Before we do, I think what we are about to read is an interesting window into the lives of early disciples. We're about to read how these early followers of Jesus applied something very specific that Jesus taught them during his earthly ministry specifically about prayer. Before we get to Acts 12, I want to start back in Luke 18 because what happens in Acts 12 is actually a direct application of something that Jesus taught his disciples to do in Luke 18. So we will get to Acts 12 and how the early Christians applied what Jesus taught, but first let's look at the teaching itself.

Luke 18:1–8

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

Sometimes Jesus tells a parable and it's intentionally confusing, and the disciples have to ask him later, away from all the people, and basically say, “Hey, Jesus we have absolutely no idea what you were talking about back there.” Good news here: Luke tells us exactly what the point is of the parable that Jesus is about to tell.

Jesus told this parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Jesus has two goals with this parable:

1) That We Would Pray Always. That they would pray ALWAYS. In every situation. The good times and the bad times. In the times of joy, and the times of “meh”. In times of sadness, in the times of stress, and in times where everything feels just fine.

Prayer is meant to be the native language of the church. In the words of Martin Luther, “To be a Christian without prayer is no more possible than to be alive without breathing.”

2): that we would not lose heart in prayer. Because Jesus knows that in our broken world, losing heart will be our significant obstacle.

As we live in this in-between time where God's Kingdom is here, but also not yet here, where sin and brokenness still abound, the temptation to lose heart is all too real. We prayed and prayed and it seems like nothing happened. And we wonder, does any of this even make a difference? Or that feeling we get that God is far away and doesn't hear us, or doesn't care or has more important things going on than what's happening with you.

And I find this encouraging because Jesus knows. He knows prayer can be hard, which means he's never surprised when it is for you. He knows and He wants to help us. Here in Luke 18 His coaching takes the form of a parable:

[2] He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. [3] And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’

So there is a judge, and he's not a good one. He doesn't care what God thinks, and he's not interested in taking care of people. Exactly the guy you don't want to be in a position to be relied on to give justice.

And there was a widow. Widows in this culture were a symbol of helplessness. She lived in a time when it was very difficult for women to make an honest living. If her husband had died, she was probably struggling financially, had no one to take care of her, and was vulnerable to being taken advantage of in the financial and legal world. Something's happened to her—maybe someone stole from her or tricked her—but whatever it is, she wants justice. She knows the judge is the only one who can give her justice. No financial resources to bribe him with. She has nothing on her side, because this judge doesn't care about doing right by God and doesn't care that she's in need. She has only one thing at her disposal: she can ask, over and over and over again.

Verse 3 says she “kept coming to him”. She didn't give up. She didn't stop. She knew this judge deciding to grant her justice was her only shot. So she “kept coming to him”.

Quick note: some of us don't pray because we don't think we have the spiritual maturity, or the theological, biblical knowledge to pray well. Maybe you're a new Christian. Don't want to say something dumb. Here's a really encouraging part of what Jesus is teaching: you don't necessarily need all that. Jesus is saying “Can you ask for the same thing over and over again? Good. You've got a big part of praying down.”

Check out what happens:

[4] For a while he refused, So for a while, nothing happens 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.’”

This awful judge eventually gets to the point where he goes “I've gotta give this widow what she wants because she's never going to stop.” The judge acts in nothing but his own self-interest, says, “I could care less about her or what she wants, but I'm gonna give her what she's asking for just so I can go home and resume my life.”

Jesus gets to the point of the parable:

[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. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Just so we're clear, Jesus is not comparing himself to the unrighteous judge, he's contrasting himself. He's saying, if this is how the worst judge you've ever seen will eventually answer a widow because of her persistence—if a guy who hates God and hates people will respond this way to her persistence—how do you think God, who actually *cares* for you, will respond to yours?

The point is, unlike the judge, God is not indifferent towards you. He's way better than that. The scriptures are clear; if you've put your trust in Jesus, you're God's child. You belong to him. Because of Christ's work on the cross, God of the universe is especially inclined towards you. He cares about what you need. He cares about what you are facing in life, however big or small it might seem. And he delights for you to come to him with it, and delights in doing something about it.

So if a random kid at the park runs up to me, “Hey mister. Will you help me with my homework?” “No. I hated homework when it was mine to do; I'm certainly not doing it for a stranger.” If my

daughter comes to me, “Dad I’m really struggling with this math problem, can you help me?” I’m gonna say yes. Or more precisely I will say, “I don’t understand the new math they make you do but I will stare blankly at the paper with you.” Because she’s mine! I have a rooting interest in her life.

The Bible says that’s God’s heart toward His kids in prayer. He has an interest in you and the things you ask him for. Not because you’re amazing, but because by the blood of Jesus, you’re HIS. Adopted kids. That has to be at the very foundation of prayer: understanding that because of Jesus we can be God’s kids and He is our loving, good dad.

And this is precisely what Jesus teaches about prayer elsewhere, too. In Matthew 7:9-11 “[9] Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? [10] Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? [11] If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

When we pray, the context is always that of a parent/child relationship. When we pray, God is not a genie. He’s a dad. When we pray, we are not submitting service request tickets to the complaint office of heaven, hoping that God will get around to answering our complaint.

We are children speaking to their father, .to our perfectly good heavenly father. The invitation to a life of prayer is the invitation into the world of the persistent widow or the world of a child and persistently come to God your good father. Why? Because that’s what kids do. Kids with good dads don’t hesitate. They ask for things constantly. In my experience, it’s their native language.

The basic job description of a child is to ask for things. “Daddy, can you get me some water? Daddy, I can’t open this applesauce pouch. Will you open it for me? Daddy, will you read me this book?” They never stop asking for things. They don’t hedge their requests by saying things like “Daddy, now you don’t have to do this for me. And it’s ok if you don’t. But it seems to me that it would be really helpful if I had a cup of water right now to drink with my dinner. But if it’s not what you want, then that’s fine and I’m fine and everybody’s fine.

They don’t talk to me like that because even with all of my sin and flaws, my kids know that I want good for them. That I love them and am for them. So they just ask. They know I am not out to get them. I would never hear their request for water and, instead of handing a cup of water, just toss water at them.

And, certainly, that doesn’t mean I say yes to everything. Sometimes I have to say no, or not right now. But here’s the thing, even when I do say no, I say it because I’m factoring in things my kid doesn’t even know about. If I say no to the ice cream, it’s because I’m thinking about nutrition and the effects of sugar on small children and them being hungry for dinner. I’m still thinking of their good, and their good is something that I’m never going to withhold from them.

I love the way Paul Miller talks about this in his book, “The Praying Life,” which is probably my favorite book ever on prayer. He says in this way prayer mirrors the gospel. In the gospel, the Father takes us as we are and gives us his gift of salvation. In prayer, the Father receives us as we are because of Jesus and gives us his gift of help.

I was laughing as I was putting together this sermon because, just a couple weeks ago. We were at the grocery store grabbing stuff for my wife’s birthday dinner. So it was just me and the kids. I don’t know what your kids are like, but my babies are always trying to upsell me. “Hey,

you can grab a snack.” “Can I get two snacks?” or “Ok, y’all can have some screen time. You can watch one show.” “Can we watch a movie?!” No, I said a show. “Can we watch half a movie?!” No, you can watch a show-length portion of a movie. Stop hustling me! You’re gonna be a great salesman one day, but I need you to save it for then.

So we’re at the store and they’re doing it again. All three of them. “Daddy, can we get this candy, can we get this treat, can we get this snack, daddy look look daddy daddy daddy.” And finally, I was just like, “AAAAAAHHHH! I can’t think. Stop. I’m not getting you anything. This is for mom’s birthday dinner. I don’t need tips or suggestions or requests. Do not ask for another thing.” And I kid you not, it couldn’t have been 30 seconds later my son gets right in front of me and points at some cookies and nods his head at them. And my teeth were so clenched as I said, “Get the cookies” in the most angry and defeated tone of voice you’ve ever heard in your life. Which I think puts me somewhere in between a bad judge and a good God, which is accurate.

OK, so the big idea is that God is always interested in our good, because he is our good heavenly Father. And the question is, will we pray always and not lose heart? That’s what Jesus taught. OK. So what did his disciples think about that? Did they take him literally, at his word? Did they apply that?

Acts 12:1–19 “[1] About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. [2] He killed James the brother of John with the sword – if you’re familiar with Jesus’ 12 disciples, these are the brothers of the fisherman Zebedee, the ones Jesus nicknamed “sons of Thunder” – [3] and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. [4] And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people.

So he’s planning a bit of a spectacle for the Jewish community. [5] *So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.* Earnest. Without ceasing. Exactly what Jesus told them to do. I don’t know if anyone can relate to this. But I used to get a little bit hung up on a tension that exists in scripture that applies to prayer.

On one hand, the Bible teaches that God is sovereign. God rules and God reigns over every inch of creation. His Will, desires, and purposes will be accomplished. He can not be stopped. He ultimately has control over every detail of our universe. On the other hand, the Bible also teaches human responsibility. That you and I are responsible and accountable for each and every one of our actions. Just because God is sovereign and in control over every detail of our universe, doesn’t mean we aren’t responsible for our actions. Here’s where you could get hung up. “Well, God’s gonna do what He’s gonna do, so why do I need to pray?” God’s all-powerful and He’s gonna do His thing, you could lose urgency to pray or lose heart in praying.

But you could just as easily say, “If God is sovereign, then why eat?” The Bible says that God has pre-numbered our days. He knows and has set the exact number of days we will live. Nothing can change it. If that is true, then why eat food? If my days are set then why bother to eat? You might say, well, if I stop eating, and then I die, does that mean that that was the number of days that God had given me all along? And the correct answer to that question is, stop asking stupid questions; trust God and eat your food.

The truth is, we don’t lose heart in prayer because we believe too much in God’s Sovereignty. I lose heart in prayer because I’ve believed too *little* in His sovereignty. Somehow I’ve believed that his sovereignty isn’t big enough to include our prayers. When we understand God’s

sovereignty rightly, it quits being a reason *not* to pray, it's more of a reason *to* pray. A pastor named John Piper was once asked, "Why pray if God's sovereign?" His first response was, "Why pray if He's *not*?"

God's control over the universe should never cause us to lose heart in prayer. The fact that our loving Father wants good for us is in control of every detail of the universe should cause us to come to Him often with our prayers.

Yes, God does do what he wants to do, but He has decided that part of the way he will do what he wants to do, is in response to prayer. As in, there are things that God does, only when his people ask him to do them. And the inverse is also true: there are things God does not do because his people have not asked him to do them.

In Acts 12 there is earnest prayer for Peter, and watch what God does because of it.

[6] Now when Herod was about to bring him out, on that very night, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries before the door were guarding the prison. [7] And behold, an angel of the Lord stood next to him, and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his hands. [8] And the angel said to him, "Dress yourself and put on your sandals." And he did so. And he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me." [9] And he went out and followed him. He did not know that what was being done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. [10] When they had passed the first and the second guard, they came to the iron gate leading into the city. It opened for them of its own accord, and they went out and went along one street, and immediately the angel left him. [11] When Peter came to himself, he said, "Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting." [12] When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying. As in, *still* praying, they'd be going at it all night. [13] And when he knocked at the door of the gateway, a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer. [14] Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. [15] They said to her, "You are out of your mind." But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, "It is his angel!" [16] But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed. [17] But motioning to them with his hand to be silent, he described to them how the Lord had brought him out of the prison. And he said, "Tell these things to James and to the brothers." Then he departed and went to another place. [18] Now when day came, there was no little disturbance among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. [19] And after Herod searched for him and did not find him, he examined the sentries and ordered that they should be put to death. Then he went down from Judea to Caesarea and spent time there.

And so the answer to our question is obvious: yes, they took to heart the very things Jesus taught them to do.

- Whatever was in front of them, they prayed. It was *the* move for the things that were out of their control.
- And they prayed persistently... They knew it was God's will for the church to get the gospel to the ends of the earth. And right now, they have a real problem. One of their main leaders has been taken out; the other is about to be killed.
- They're not sure if Peter was going to make it or not—and they are at peace if he dies. But they know it is not God's will for Satan to destroy the church, or to impede the church's progress, so they get on their knees and say, "God, you've got to make

something happen! And we're not going to let you go until you open doors and bless our efforts and overcome our enemies." And they kept at it and wouldn't give up!

- And there was power in it. God moved. He responded and displayed his power.

Every time the church really prays in Acts, things explode!

- Acts 1: They pray in the Upper Room for 10 straight days; the Holy Spirit comes, Peter preaches, and 3000 are saved.
- Acts 4: they pray, and God fills them with such boldness that they turn the city of Jerusalem upside down. By the end of Acts 5, the church in Jerusalem is over 10,000 people big and some of the harshest critics (like the Jewish priests, and eventually Paul himself) are getting saved.
- Here in Acts 12: they pray, and God blows up a prison and strikes down Herod, their persecutor, with worms.
- In the next chapter, 13: they pray, and God raises up Paul to be a missionary, the greatest missionary the world has ever known. All these things happen because of prayer.

Every now and then I will hear someone say something that I think sounds spiritual but it's false. "Prayer doesn't change the situation, it changes me." False. Not that prayer doesn't change us; it absolutely does. But God could not be more clear, cover to cover in the bible, that prayer changes things. Sometimes it's almost like we see prayer as passive or maybe even weak or something only reserved for when you're at your most desperate. But, this story shows the exact opposite. The clasped hands of the church in earnest prayer move the hands of God to counteract all the power moves of Herod. Soldiers, chains, prisons? No match for the power of God.

"The one concern of the devil is to keep the saints from prayer. Our enemy fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, mocks at our wisdom, but trembles when we pray. Prayer turns ordinary mortals into men of power. It brings fire. It brings rain. It brings life. It brings God. There is no power like that of prevailing prayer."
-Samuel Chadwick, The Path of Prayer

You ever hear someone say something like, "Well we've done all that we can do. Now all that we can do is pray." Like, we've exhausted all of the good options, and now we're left with just prayer. What are you talking about? Prayer is not your last resort, worst option. It's your greatest weapon! Saying I've done all that I can do and all that is left is to pray is sort of like saying, "I've tried my best to cut down this tree by punching it. All that is left to do now is to use this huge chainsaw." If you had a chainsaw, then why were you punching the tree?!?!

Listen, I'm trying to reframe this because I've done this long enough now to know how many people react and respond to a sermon like this. It's with some sort of guilt. "Yeah, yeah, I know I should be praying more. Yet another thing I'm failing at. Add it to the list." I'd like to reframe that for you: I'm not interested in guilt per se. I want you to realize what prayer actually is, and I think everything will flow from there.

Like, if you understood the potential of prayer then prayerlessness would seem silly.

It's like you're drowning while holding an oxygen tank. You didn't want to use it?

It's like you're starving to death sitting in front of a feast. You didn't want to eat?

It's like you're dying of thirst while holding a tall glass of ice-cold lemonade. You're not gonna drink that?

It's like your kitchen is on fire, and you're holding a fire extinguisher. You're not gonna spray it? You're in a foxhole with a walkie talkie connected to reinforcements—you aren't going to call for them?

You're dying of cancer and holding a cure. You aren't gonna swallow the pill?
Your mid-range jumper isn't falling, and you have Michael Jordan's phone number. You aren't gonna call him?

It's like you're hosting an important event and have no clue what to do, and Martha Stewart is your aunt. You aren't gonna reach out?

You have something very heavy that you can't lift, and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson is your next-door neighbor. You aren't gonna ask him for help?

I don't want our prayerlessness to make us feel guilty. I want it to make us feel dumb. You have direct access to the god of the universe, and you don't wanna use it?

In Paul Miller's words, "Prayer is asking God to incarnate." I love that: prayer is asking God to come with power and get dirty in the details of your life. To be with you and involved in your very real, and often messy, stuff. In the place of your desperation, in the place of your need, your pain, your struggle, and even your apathy.

And the encouragement from Luke 18 and Acts 12 is to seize the corner of his garment and not let go. Charles Spurgeon once likened it to there being fruit high in a tree. And you have to shake the tree long enough to get that fruit to fall. Whatever you do, don't stop shaking the tree because there is good fruit up there and it will fall eventually. Keep shaking. Keep coming to God. Bother him.

Jesus has secured access for us, at any point, any time, about anything, to come to God about anything we need his help with. And God says don't just mention things to him in passing, but never stop coming to him.

So to respond together today, we are going to do exactly what Jesus taught and what the disciples modeled. We are going to do our best to bother God with our persistent coming to him. We're gonna have some time to pray. I'm gonna give you two options. If you'd like to pray along, that's totally fine. Any and everything going on in your life, take it to God. If you'd like to pray with someone, that's also totally fine. Tell them how they can pray for you and then pray together. If you'd like, we will have some people up front here who would love to pray for you and with you so you could come forward and meet with one of them.

Let's keep it simple today and do what Jesus told us to do. Let's keep asking. Keep shaking. Keep knocking. Keep bothering. Why? Because that's what kids do.