

“PERSEVERING PRAYER”

We have before us a teaching from our Lord about one of the prerequisites for the kind of prayer that finds acceptance with God. The Scriptures contain other such prerequisites: our prayers must be sincere, offered in faith, in accordance with God’s will, done in Jesus’ name, and prayed in the Spirit. Here, Luke states that Jesus told this parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Our prayers need to have the characteristic of perseverance, persistence, even impudence (or shamelessness), if they are to gain a hearing with God. The parable gives us the sense that we are to give the Lord no rest until he sees fit to answer our prayers. In that sense, its message is very similar to the parable, told by Jesus in Luke 11, about the man who asked his neighbor for bread at midnight. And it is also very similar to a passage in Isaiah 62, where the prophet looks for the salvation of Zion by placing watchmen on the walls of Jerusalem and instructing them to never be silent, but to “give [the LORD] no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it a praise in the earth.” (vv. 6-7) In all of these passages, the idea conveyed is that we are to be wearing God out by our prayers. As much as this might surprise us, it is what the Bible says.

From the standpoint of our own practice of prayer, it is easy to understand why Jesus had to instruct us to persevere in prayer. Though I do not have the statistics to back this up, I think it is safe to say that every Christian struggles when it comes to prayer. And that, in

and of itself, is something worthy of our reflection. You would think that prayer would be the easiest thing in the Christian life. After all, the essence of prayer is simply, in John Knox's words, "earnest and familiar talking with God." You don't need any special training or equipment or credentials to do that. And yet, the fact is that we find it agonizingly difficult to pray. There are scores of other things that compete with the call to pray, and, very often, those other things win out. And even when we do pray, so many of us find it extremely hard to concentrate, let alone pray for any significant length of time. And we so easily slip into mindless repetitions of the same old well-worn phrases that we always use. Were you to talk to the greatest prayer warriors that the church has ever produced, I imagine that most all of them would tell you that their life of prayer was something that cost them a great deal of struggle. Consider a few testimonies relating to the difficulty of prayer:

Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "Everything we do in the Christian life is easier than prayer."

John Newton admitted, "I find in my own case an unaccountable backwardness to pray. I can read, I can write, I can converse with a ready will, but secret prayer is far more spiritual than any of these. And the more spiritual a duty is the more my carnal heart is apt to start away from it."

Thomas Shepherd, one of the founders of Harvard, once wrote, “There are times in my life when I would rather die than pray.”

And C.S. Lewis says, “Well, let’s now at any rate come clean. Prayer is irksome. An excuse to omit it is never unwelcome. When it is over, this casts a feeling of relief and holiday over the rest of the day. We are reluctant to begin. We are delighted to finish. While we are at prayer, but not while we are reading a novel or solving a cross-word puzzle, any trifle is enough to distract us.” (*Letters to Malcolm*, 113)

The reason why prayer is so difficult for us is because it is such a crucial component of the Christian life. There is an almost inseparable bond between prayer and faith, a point that is brought out by Jesus in verse 8 of this passage. Prayer is the chief means by which we actively express our continued dependence upon God. It is the means by which we live in ongoing communion with God. It is how we walk with God. We see this at the very beginning of the Bible, where true religion is described as calling “upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26). In the language of our catechisms, prayer is one of the principle outward and ordinary means by which Christ communicates the benefits of his redemption to his people (WLC 154; WSC 88). Prayer is a God-given instrument for the effecting of his purposes in the lives of his people and in the world. As John Flavel writes, “I reckon that business as good as done, that mercy as good as if it were in hand,

that trouble as good as over, for the doing, enjoying, or removing of which we have engaged God by prayer.” (*The Mystery of Providence*, 183)

But if all of this is true, then why is persistence a necessary feature of prayer? If the prayer that is offered in faith is as good as answered, then why does Jesus instruct us to repeatedly bring our requests before God? Why this emphasis? Well, certainly not because God is like the unjust judge and needs to be subjected to endless nagging before he will give us what we want. Jesus does not tell us why we must be persistent in prayer, at least not explicitly. However, it is not really that difficult to see some of the reasons why true prayer needs to be characterized by persistence.

For one thing, the man or woman who keeps on bringing his case to the Lord is a man or woman who understands his or her need, who desperately wants that need met, and who believes that God is the only one who can meet it. But when we lose interest in praying for a particular request, we show that we do not really see the full extent of our need; or that we are not really dead set on having that need met; or that we think there are other ways to meet it. Persevering prayer is a test of our faith.

Also, persevering prayer is one of the principle ways in which we demonstrate our willingness to let God’s will be done. When we continually put a matter that we are concerned about into God’s hands, we are submitting our desires to him. We see this in

the life of David prior to his enthronement. Though David had been anointed as Israel's king, Saul was still on the throne and was trying to kill David. But when David was presented with opportunities to kill Saul, he would not do it. He would not lift up his hand against the Lord's anointed. He refused to take matters into his own hands, but he entrusted his case to the Lord, as we see in some of his Psalms.

And then there is the fact that persevering pray deepens our communion with God, as we learn to take him at his word when he says that the prayer that is offered in faith will be answered. Patient waiting upon the Lord increases our sense of our complete dependence upon him for everything.

It is not easy to persevere in prayer. But, by God's grace, it is not impossible either. Throughout the ages, the church has produced many examples of men and women who excelled in prayer. There is the example of Monica, the mother of Augustine of Hippo. In his *Confessions*, Augustine tells us how Monica persisted in pleading with the Lord, for many years, for the souls of both her husband and her son. And the Lord answered those prayers. Monica's husband professed faith in Christ at the very end of his life. And Augustine was not only saved, but became a bishop, and one of the greatest figures in church history.

There is the example of John Newton. Despite Newton's own admission that he struggled greatly to pray, a recent biographer reports that Newton spent at least five hours a day in prayer, and asserts that "[Newton's] prayers were at the heart of his ministry." (Aitken, 354, 199).

And then there is the example of a moderate-sized church in the city of Aberdeen in Scotland, Gilcomston South Church, a church pastored for over fifty years by William Still. One of the legacies of Still's ministry is a well attended prayer meeting that gathers to pray for three hours every Saturday night. That prayer meeting has been going on for almost sixty years now, and the saints that attend it pray for churches and ministers and missionaries all over the world. Rev. Robert Rayburn, a PCA pastor in Tacoma, WA, says that he still receives notes from members at Gilcomston assuring him that they pray for him and his ministry on a regular basis, even though nearly 30 years have passed since he worshipped there while pursuing his doctorate.

We need these kinds of examples to inspire us to persevere in prayer. We are so impatient, so quick to grow weary at having to ask the Lord for the same thing, over and over and over again. Alexander Whyte puts it well in these comments on how our sin and our failures often keep us from coming to the Lord in prayer:

“‘What a shameless wretch I am!’ you will say about yourself, ‘to have to ask such things at my age: to knock so loud after the way I have neglected prayer, and neglected and forgotten the Hearer of prayer.’... Yes: you are right...the shameful things you have to ask for. The disgraceful – the incredible things you have to admit and confess... Yes, - but better say all these things in closets than have them all proclaimed from the housetops of the day of judgment. Knock, man! Knock for the love of God! Knock as they knock to get into heaven after the door is shut! Knock as they knock to get out of hell!” (*Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, 176)

Notice Whyte’s emphasis upon the urgency of prayer. When our prayers are not immediately answered, we often lose our sense of urgency, but that doesn’t make our situation any less urgent in reality. We grow tired of asking, but it is only in continued asking that we become truly aware of the reality of our condition. Remember, in Jesus’ parable, the church is represented by the widow. In that culture, a widow was an extremely vulnerable and weak person. And this is how Jesus describes the church as it awaits his return – as vulnerable and weak. Such a portrayal stands in sharp contrast to the way many contemporary Christians think about the church: the church as a mighty, influential force in society. I am not denying that there are times and places when the church is able to exert a broader degree of influence upon its surrounding culture, nor am I saying that we should give

up trying to do so. However, it does seem that, in so much of the Bible, the church's growth and vitality and victory is unseen and unexpected. Just consider the Psalms, or 1 Peter, or Hebrews, or Revelation, where the church is consistently portrayed as a persecuted, pilgrim people. And then there is the witness of church history, with so many examples of how the church that gains influence in society ends up being a church that is in many ways conformed to the pattern of that society. The figure of the widow paints a picture of a church in dire need; a church that is opposed by the world and treated unfairly; a church that always needs to look outside of itself for help and vindication; a church whose only hope is to persevere in prayer.

Now, perhaps some of you will object, saying that this picture of the church is too bleak, too hard, too depressing. But don't you see? That is precisely why Jesus told this parable. He told it so that we would not lose heart. He told it because, whether we are aware of it or not, we really are like that widow.

But God is not like that unjust judge. Jesus is clearly employing an argument from the lesser to the greater here. If even this unjust judge, who shamelessly admits that he neither fears God nor respects men, if even he will answer the persistent pleas of this widow, then surely our Father in heaven will answer the persevering prayers of his children. In the words of one of Newton's hymns:

My soul, ask what thou wilt;

Thou canst not be too bold;

Since his own blood he spilt,

What else can he withhold? (“Behold the Throne of Grace”)