

LIFE-CHANGING PRAYER – PART 2

Prayer: Its Discouragements and Encouragements

Persistence in prayer is for our benefit, not God's!

Rankin Wilbourne says, “If we always got exactly what we wanted the first time we asked, we would inevitably begin to treat God as our genie, only summoned forth to give us our hearts’ desires. But that is precisely what prayer calls into question: What do you really want?”

Persistent prayer encourages us to be patient and wait to see what God is going to do. Persistent prayer provides fertile soil for spiritual growth! We don’t particularly like it, but delayed answers to our prayers can purge and purify our desires. Perhaps God desires to give us exactly what we have requested, but only in His time causing the answer to truly benefit us instead of harming us.

Sometimes our persistence in prayer changes how we pray so that we gradually come to pray closer to the heart of God’s will.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 (ESV) ⁸ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me.* ⁹ *But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* ¹⁰ *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Paul was persistent. He asked three times and then he **received** his answer. It was a wonderful answer: *My grace is sufficient for you*. David Legge comments that he believes that sometimes we use Paul’s situation as an excuse for not persevering in our prayer life. Don’t make the mistake of ‘giving up’ **before** the Lord has answered.

Wilbourne points out that Paul changed how he was praying. Instead of continuing to beg for the removal of his ‘thorn’, he learned to pray that God would help him to rely on God’s grace, God’s strength, God’s power, which was made perfect in Paul’s weakness.

Jesus tells us to persist in pursuing God.

Matthew 7:7-8 (ESV) ⁷ *“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.* ⁸ *For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened.*

This is a familiar passage and has given much comfort to believers through the ages. Nevertheless, we should not view it as a blank check signed by God so that we can receive any and everything that we want. Jesus has just been speaking about reforming ourselves and others. Now, He tells us how - ask - seek - knock. The Life Application Bible points out that knowing God takes faith, focus, and follow-through.. This commandment to be persistent in our prayer

life is a gift from God – not a ticket for our wants. Asking, seeking and knocking is the way to know God. As we come to know Him better our hearts are ready for His answers whether the answer is: yes – no – wait.

Let's turn to a passage where we can learn many lessons from one woman's persistence with the Savior.

Read Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV) ²¹ *And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.* ²² *And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon."* ²³ *But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us."* ²⁴ *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."* ²⁵ *But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."* ²⁶ *And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs."* ²⁷ *She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."* ²⁸ *Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Sometimes in our persistence we may feel as though our prayers are hopeless but human feelings lie unlike God's Word which is Truth. **John 14:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*

Matthew records that the woman was a Canaanite, a people group who worshiped many gods. The same story is found in Mark where Mark calls her a Syrophenician revealing she was a Gentile born in the Phoenician side of Syria. At this point in the story, this woman had two big things going against her when she came to Jesus – that is her nationality and she was a woman.

It is not totally clear if the disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss her or just answer her request to 'get rid of her.' He responded to their demand to send her away with these words: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* It is obvious that His words were not a rejection of the woman since a bit later He would fulfill her request. Jesus' mention of the lost sheep was a teaching moment for His disciples reminding them that He was the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. (Ezekiel 34:23-24)

Israel was composed of the 'sheep who had lost their way.' When Jesus spoke to another Gentile, the Samaritan woman at the well, He told her that salvation was from the Jews (**John 4:22**). There was nothing 'exclusive' in either comment. He was simply connecting His earthly ministry to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Obviously, the woman took no offense because she continued to press on with her plea. Even Jesus' lack of response in the beginning did not stop her. In fact, she was encouraged by His silence. She was looking on the 'bright side' – after all Jesus had not said NO!

Jesus' short delay in answering her led her to a response of faith. She immediately seized on His illustration about the children's bread, which was exactly what He wanted her to do. He knew He was the Bread of Life and Jesus wanted her to realize that too!

Read John 6:35 (ESV) ³⁵ *Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*

Wiersbe paraphrases her response like this, 'It is true that we Gentiles do not sit at the table as children and eat the bread. But even the pet dogs under the table can eat some of the crumbs!' What a tremendous testimony of faith!

We should note that the term Jesus used meant little dogs possibly household pets or puppies. The picture is that of a family meal at which the family's small pet dogs eagerly awaited scraps of food from the table. I think we can all picture that!

The first time she cried for help, she called Jesus the *Son of David* and Jesus made no reply. The Bible makes it plain that Gentiles are not saved by first becoming Jews. But, when she addressed Him as *Lord* she obtained an immediate answer.

Read Romans 10:12-13 (ESV) ¹² *For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.* ¹³ *For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

Her reply revealed that faith had triumphed. She did not deny the special place of the 'children' meaning the Jews in God's plan. You could say all she wanted was a few crumbs of blessing from the Master's table. This Canaanite woman – someone who was not brought up to be watching for the coming Messiah recognized Jesus quicker than the educated and religious Jews who were supposed to be waiting and watching for their Messiah. So what, if you were not raised in the church? So what, if you have just recently found Jesus? So what, if none of your family believes? You can still be persistent in your prayers and your faith will be rewarded.

It must have thrilled the heart of Jesus when she took His own words and used them as a basis for her plea! This is a reminder once again that there are many ways to use scripture in our prayers. We can quote a Bible promise to God as assurance of an answer. We can quote a scripture using it for praise. We can use Bible verses and apply them in our prayers to our current situation.

It is significant that the two times in the Gospel record when Jesus commended '*great faith*,' He was responding to the faith of Gentiles and not Jews: this woman and the Roman centurion. Great faith is persistent faith that takes God at His Word. **Hebrews 11:6 (ESV)** ⁶ *And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

A Parable of Jesus Teaches Persistent Prayer.

This short story with a heavenly meaning features a persistent widow and a worldly judge.

Read Luke 18:1-8 (ESV) ¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. 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.' 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.'" 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?"

In the ancient world a widow was defenseless and powerless. A widow with no adult sons had no social standing and no political power. The other character is a judge who has no respect for God or other people. Surprisingly when the widow brings her case before the judge, she triumphs. She does not win because she is influential or powerful and certainly not because the judge is honest or compassionate. Rather, her plea is successful because she is **persistent**. She keeps after the judge and finally wears him down. Because the widow will not take no for an answer, the judge decides to give her what she wants in the hope of getting rid of her. The point of Jesus' parable is clear. If a defenseless and powerless widow can wear down a corrupt powerful judge through her persistence alone, how much more can we expect that God, the just and merciful judge, will hear our prayers and answer them positively if we persist?

Understand that the unjust judge is not a picture of Almighty God. Our Father is the Righteous Judge. **2 Timothy 4:8 (ESV)** Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which **the Lord, the righteous judge**, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Whenever you find yourself questioning whether you should persist in prayer or give up, go back to this parable. Be like the widow! Be like the Canaanite woman that came to Jesus. Be persistent. This does not mean turning into a whiner/complainer. Be a person who prays with a heart that God can conform into His will. Keep appealing to your Righteous Judge. We never know what God is doing 'behind the scenes.' We may not realize at the time how our God is transforming our hearts to accept His answers. Just keep praying – keep talking to God. **Romans 12:12 (ESV)** ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Remember:

Persistent prayer doesn't change God!

Persistent prayer changes us!