

10. The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Luke 18:1-8

Warm-up Question: Share a time when you prayed and received what you asked.

Alternative Question: Did you have a parent or grandparents who would give into you when you asked for something? Do you remember what you would do to get them to say “yes?”

When you are in a tight situation, and you need help, do you pray? Sometimes prayer is our last resort, but often I have found it to be my only hope! After I left a very lucrative job working with my father as a commercial fisherman, I was faced with a challenge. God had spoken to me to leave my nets and come follow Christ and He would make me a fisher of men (Matthew 4:19). What would I do now? How would I provide for my family? All I knew was the sea and fishing. I was fit and could climb a ladder, so I started window cleaning for a living and gravitated to painting and decorating while I worked the evenings church planting. Window cleaning and painting gave me many hours alone to read the scriptures and listen to Christian teaching tapes on my portable cassette player. Now you know how long ago that was! Some of you may be searching the Internet for the words “cassette player.” After a few years involved in working for the church, I realized that I really needed to learn how to work in an office situation, a very scary proposition for me due to not knowing one end of a computer from another. At that point all of my sermon notes were written by hand. My wife, Sandy, was working at a company called Eurostar that had high-speed trains travelling from London to Paris in France and Brussels in Belgium. Sandy thought that due to my heart for evangelism, I would find sales an easy job. She thought I would make a good salesman on the phones selling rail tickets. How I managed to get that job I don't know.

When the two weeks of training in sales started I really lost heart due to the young people around with advanced computer skills—I was so intimidated and did not think that I would last. They were all so sharp and understood quickly how to sell over the phone and then use the complicated booking software on the computer to reserve tickets. When the training was over, I seriously didn't understand what I was doing! Desperately, I turned to my help—the Lord. Every day before I started work I prayed that God would help me to do this. Often in the sales conversation I would be asking the Father to help me. In my third month of being with that company, among two hundred other sales people, I broke the all time sales records by another third on top of the nearest sales record, giving me more money in bonuses than in my wages. No one was more amazed than me when they put my photo on the wall as an example to others! The young guy working alongside me asked how I did it. He knew that I was a Christian. I told him the truth, that I was a praying person and that I asked God to help me and give me the right callers to sell to. He responded with a deep sigh, saying, “I just gotta become a Christian!”

We really underestimate the power of prayer, preferring to rely on our skills, intellect and energy. We live in a culture that praises self-reliance. We have also become programmed by our culture to expect things right now, but the things of God are not given with the

same speed as our fast food. God is training us in eternal principles that only come to those who are willing to wait before God and see His help in overcoming the things of this world. I encourage you to begin praying for God's help in whatever work you are doing. Nothing is too trivial or unimportant. Jesus told a parable to illustrate the kind of praying that would overcome each and every difficulty we face:

¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' ⁴"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' " ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:1-8).

We don't know if this parable was from a real live case that people had heard about or if Jesus made up the story to illustrate the truth that He wanted those listening to learn about prayer. The purpose of the parable is very clear from the beginning verse—that we should always pray and not give up. We should not think that this judge is an example of our Father in heaven. No, this man is the very opposite of the Father. Rather, this is a study in contrasts.

What does this story tell us about the widow's character? What does it tell us about the character of the judge?

Let's take a look first at the judge.

The Unjust Judge

Judges should be impartial and, more than likely, this man had taken an oath before God to judge righteously, but he cared nothing for any oath before God because he had no fear of God. He thought that he could do and say what he liked and no one could question him. He was above the law, so he thought. Let all men and women in high office weigh up the thought that all of us will stand one day before the righteous judge, the Lord Himself, and have to give account for what we have said and done (Romans 14:12, Matthew 12:36). On top of that we are told that he cared not about his fellow man. His judicial decisions were not weighed by the howl of protest from the common man. This man had so seared his conscience that he witnessed against himself, saying, "**Even though I don't fear God or care about men...**" (Luke 18:4). Many people at the end of their days' work will think through their day and their conscience will tell them what they did right and what they did wrong, but this judge had so hardened his heart that he acknowledged within himself that he didn't care for God or man. There was no self-deception about him. He freely confessed within himself what he was like and did not

seem ashamed of it. The widow was standing up to a monster in human form in front of her. All he cared about was his own ease. The only thing that swayed him to do the right thing was that the widow bothering him shook him out of his comfort. He just wanted peace and quiet!

The Persistent Widow

Women in the time of Jesus did not have an equal social status to men and so were regarded as second-class citizens, and to worsen her case in front of an unjust judge, she was a widow and marginalized in society having no man to stand up for her. In scripture, the widow is the very epitome of a person who has no one but God to rely on. We are not told what her situation was, just that it was urgent enough for her to come to the only person in the city who could dispense justice on her behalf—the unjust judge. I notice that she had no lawyer pleading her case. There was no advocate at the bar to call for justice. Unlike each of us that are Christians, we have an advocate before the throne of heaven, Jesus Christ the Righteous One (1 John 2:1), and His ministry at this very moment is to make intercession (to mediate or intervene) for us to God (Hebrews 7:25). How did she pursue her case? We are told she kept coming to him. Here is the heart of the lesson that Jesus wants us to learn, that of persisting in prayer. Some would say that we should pray once and leave it with God—that is not the message that this parable is teaching. We are to pursue and persist in our prayers to God for the things that lie heavy on our soul.

We should not think for a minute that she set up an appointment or that she came into the courtroom while other cases were on. No, this woman kept confronting him at all times of the day. Perhaps she would even show up where he lived. Maybe she would follow him as he went around the market. Let's put this in today's terms; he would open his email and there was a message for him from her. He would go to Facebook and another message was there. He would put his phone to his ear and find a message from her. She would get past the guards at the courtroom and slink in saying the same thing every time, **“Grant me justice against my adversary.”** I notice that she didn't plead for justice on the basis of her widowhood, or because of her children. There was nothing said to describe her adversary to win her case. She didn't talk with him about God's judgment on wicked judges, which shows us that we should not rely on flowery words or the construction of our sentences. No, only six words describes the one thing she relied on—her persistence. It became embarrassing for the unjust judge, for when he wanted quiet time with his friends the poor widow would show up at the café and plead her case in front of his friends. He finally gave her justice because she was wearing him out. R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary, mentions that the judge used the phrase, “wear me out” (Luke 18:5) to describe how he felt at the widow's continual pleading. Hughes writes,

“The literal translation of “wear me out” (“blacken my eye”) conveys even better his frustration. This was a boxing expression (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:27). Her persistence had been “punching him out,” probably in the sense of public embarrassment, giving his reputation or prominence a black eye.”¹

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word Series*, Luke Volume Two, Published by Crossway Books, Page 186.

This kind of persistence speaks of desire. Her need was paramount before her. Prayer is not heard because of one's eloquence in prayer. It is the *desire, need* and *perseverance* that one expresses in prayer that is heard by God. When a person knows the promises of God and the character of God, he or she can persevere in prayer because his or her faith rests in a God who is the opposite of the judge in the parable. The judge was the only way that the widow could see to get through her situation, and since she saw him as her only hope, she continued to plead and would not give up. Too often the church plays the children's game of knocking on the door and then running away before the answer comes!

E.M. Bounds, a man who has written much on the topic of prayer, comments on this passage:

“God waits patiently as His elect cry to Him day and night. He is moved by their requests a million times more than was this unjust judge. A limit is set to His waiting by the persistent praying of His people, and the answer richly given. God finds in His praying child the faith that stays and cries, and He honors it by permitting its further exercise so that it is strengthened and enriched. Then He rewards it by granting its request in abundance and decisively.”²

There are some situations in your life and mine that have been designed by God so that they cannot be avoided. We are in the Holy Spirit's training school in overcoming. We are called to be overcomers. Since there is no way around the mountains to our faith, we must find a way through them. This teaches us dependence on God rather than through our own intellect, abilities and talents. That was the lesson I shared earlier as I began with my story about working in a sales office situation. God wants us to be quick to call out to Him in whatever situation we find ourselves in. We learn as children how to get our own way with our parents, how to cry enough, how to moan and manipulate, how to twist the truth to get what we want. But our childhood obstinacy needs to be left behind at the cross of Christ. We cannot use manipulation with our heavenly Father; He will not be manipulated, for He knows all. Henry Ward Beecher said, “The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one often comes from a strong will and the other from a strong won't.” Christian maturity requires us to persevere in prayer to God.

When King David's son, Solomon, came to the throne of Israel, God came close to him and said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you” (1 Kings 3:5). If the Lord did that with you, what would you ask Him for?

In some instances, we find ourselves facing situations that require more than a quick prayer before bed. How much do we want what we are asking God for? Hannah, a woman who was barren, reminds us of how her desire was expressed to God in prayer. When she began to pray in the Temple in Shiloh, she was so passionate and full of heart in her praying that she was accused by the High Priest Eli to be drunk. She responded to him by saying, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or

² E.M. Bounds, *The Classic Collection on Prayer*, Bridge Logos Publishers, Page 44.

beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord” (1 Samuel 1:15). What did Eli see that caused him to suspect that Hannah was drunk? She did not hold back in expressing herself to God. When there is strong desire behind the need, faith in God is expressed through prayer that touches His heart. Has your need touched your heart as it did the widow? How can we expect to touch God’s heart with our need if it has not touched our heart? A.W. Tozer once said, “When we become too glib in prayer we are almost certainly talking to ourselves.” In Hannah’s case it was her passion and desire for a son that got the answer.

One of the great mistakes that Christians often make is that we don’t ask God for specific things. God delights in giving us specifically what we have asked for showing us His power and His ability to be Jehovah Jireh, our Great Provider. In one place, Jesus said:

²⁴Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete (John 16:24).

A friend of mine that lives in Israel, Christine, told me of a time when she needed bunk beds for her two children. She went to the store and found out the price. Then she went to the Father in prayer and asked him for the specific amount in Israeli Shekels. Not long after her prayer, a check came in the mail with the exact amount of shekels. I can’t remember the amount but it wasn’t rounded up to the nearest ten, it was the exact amount she needed, the exact amount she was quoted for the beds in shekels. When she later talked to the person who gave her this gift, to thank them, the giver responded that the Holy Spirit had told them to give that exact amount, not a shekel more or a shekel less. Our faith is built up when God answers specific prayers.

When God wants to lead a person to great faith, He will sometimes test the person’s faith by silence. The delay in His answer is orchestrated for our greater good and our training in patience and persistence, which will ultimately build a greater faith. In such instances, His answer comes to us in His timing; a way that also builds qualities which are more priceless and enduring than the very thing which we are asking for.

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight

Passion and desire for the thing sought, and persistence obtain results in prayer. This whole idea of faithful persistence is so important to the Lord that He gave us another parable, hoping to encourage us to pray through any apparent obstacles. Let’s read the Parable of the Friend at Midnight:

⁵Then he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’ ⁷“Then the one inside answers, ‘Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet

because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs (Luke 11:5-8 Emphasis mine).

What happens when there seems to be no answer at all? When it seems as though your prayers of faith are being ignored? Jesus taught the above parable to encourage us and teach us as to what we should do in this type of situation.

In the passage of scripture above, we have the story of a traveler that had arrived at his friend's house in the middle of the night. During the summer months in the Middle East travelers often journeyed late to avoid the heat of the day. The traveler was on a journey and decided to stay the rest of the night with a friend as he passed through a certain town. Having no email or phone in those days, his friend was not expecting him and had no bread to feed him. It was a sacred obligation to give hospitality and to feed the traveler as well as give him some place to sleep. What should the house owner do? No bread to put before his friend was a big embarrassment to him. He did have a friend that he thought might get up and give him some bread so off he went to wake up his friend and get some bread. It was common in the Middle East at that time for whole families to sleep together in the same room. Even today, in some countries in Asia, this is not uncommon.

In 1976 I traveled overland with a friend across Europe and through the Middle East into Asia. At one particular town there were no regular hotels that we could find, and upon enquiry we were invited to stay where many other Asian people were staying. The time was already about 10:00 P.M., and we were exhausted from our travels on a rickety bus over mountain ranges. It seemed pretty cheap until we were shown the room in which we were to stay. It was a large room with about twenty other people sleeping on the floor on a very thick piled carpet, or a sleeping mat. Naturally, we were shocked to find that we were sleeping in the same room with many others already asleep on the floor. It was a communal sleeping room. There was no furniture in the room, just a wood fired stove in the middle to keep people warm. It was quite an experience to sleep with about twenty other people in the same room!

To Westerners, it seems odd that many people would sleep in the same room, but for people in the Middle East and Asia it was not abnormal. Jesus describes the man woken up after midnight who had a similar situation where his family all slept together. This would mean that to get up and be very careful not to step on his kids in the dark, find the lamp and try to light it, and then go and find the bread would probably wake up the whole household. We can imagine him speaking in hushed tones down to his friend, perhaps through a window, hoping that his friend would understand why he could not get up and give him the bread he needed. His response to his friend was ... *“My children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything”* (Luke 11:7). That sounds like a final answer. However, that was not the end of the story.

William Barclay in his commentary says:

“In the east no one would knock on a shut door unless the need was imperative. In the morning the door was opened and remained open all day,

for there was little privacy; but if the door was shut, that was a definite sign that the friend did not wish to be disturbed. But the seeking house owner was not deterred. He knocked and kept on knocking.”³

In telling this parable, why do you think Jesus chose to include in this story a man who was reluctant to get up and help his friend? What do you think Jesus was trying to illustrate by this character’s actions and the way he responded to his friend?

Andrew Murray, writer of the book *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, makes a very good observation regarding this passage:

“What a deep heavenly mystery persevering prayer is! The God who has promised and who longs to give the blessing holds it back. It is a matter of such deep importance to Him that His friends on earth should know and fully trust their rich Friend in heaven! Because of this, He trains them in the school of delayed answer to find out how their perseverance really does prevail. They can wield mighty power in heaven if they simply set themselves to it!”⁴

The emphasis is on the word *boldness* in Luke 18:8 in the New International Version (NIV) or *importunity* in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. The Greek word *Anaideia* is translated in the NIV into our English word “boldness.” This Greek word literally means to be without shame. The Key Word Study Bible says it means: “Shamelessness, unabashedness, audacity. The word describes the brazen persistence displayed in the pursuit of something, an insistence characterized by rudeness and a lack of compunction.”⁵

The King James Version translates *Anaideia* using the English word “importunate.” Webster’s New World dictionary says that the word importunate means: “urgent or persistent in asking or demanding; refusing to be denied; annoyingly urgent or persistent, troublesome.”

Why would Jesus use this word? What does He want us to understand about prayer by approaching God with shamelessness or audacity?

There is a faith and persistence that will not let go of God until one gets what he or she needs. This is a faith that pleases God. Surely the point of the parable is that the man kept on knocking on the door and would not let his friend fall back asleep until he had been given the bread he needed. What Jesus is saying in this passage is that if a grouchy friend can be persuaded to get up and give his friend some bread due to some shameless, brazen persistence, **how much more** will God, who longs to feed and clothe His people when they ask Him? Surely this story has been given to us to encourage us to prevail in prayer and not give up. If importunity and shameless audacity can be used to bring one’s needs before a man who was angry at being inconvenienced, how much more will God

³ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, Gospel of Luke*, Saint Andrew Press Publishers, Page 145.

⁴ *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray, Whitaker House Publishers, 1981, Page 64.

⁵ Key Word Study Bible, AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN 37422. Page 1585.

do for us? God is infinitely kind, willing and ready to do good to us. Our Father is not angry at our importunity but longs that we persist in prayer.

Jacob illustrated this kind of faith when he needed a breakthrough concerning his brother Esau's hatred of him. More than twenty years previously Jacob had managed to steal Isaac's blessing and birthright away from Esau. The blessing and birthright was supposed to go to the firstborn, who would have been Esau, but through deceptive means Jacob stole the birthright and blessing from Esau. Now Esau was looking for revenge as Jacob was returning home to Canaan. Esau was on his way with 400 men to do Jacob harm, so Jacob cast himself on God and an angel appeared in the form of a man and wrestled with him all night:

²⁴So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." ²⁷The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob," he answered. ²⁸Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because **you have struggled with God** and with men and have overcome" (Genesis 32:24-28).

I don't believe that we are being told here that we need to twist God's arm behind his back, so to speak, to get Him to give us what we need. God is ready and willing to give, but some things do not come without some energy, passion and persistence. Remember that God loves to see faith displayed and surely He is training us for eternity to exercise faith. Faith and trust in God is power in the spiritual realm. Not faith in faith, which will bring us nothing. Faith has to be in the right source—God Himself. The struggle is often against unseen spiritual forces that try to prevent our understanding. Paul the apostle wrote, "For our ***struggle*** is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12 Emphasis mine).

In this passage about Jacob's struggle, it is clear that Jacob was not struggling with demonic forces, but he was struggling with a spiritual being which scripture says was the Angel of the LORD—Jehovah Himself (Genesis 33:28, 30). It is interesting to note that the Angel of the Lord said that Jacob had struggled with God **and with men** (Verse 28). I take it to mean that Jacob's struggle was a spiritual conflict for God to overcome Esau's anger and hatred, otherwise why would the Angel say that Jacob had struggled with men? This striving with God was a life or death matter for Jacob. He knew that Esau was intent on destroying him. Even though it was God's will to bring restoration to these two brothers, the process of turning Esau's heart was contingent upon Jacob's prayer as well as the power of God to perform the miracle in Esau's heart. Jacob's struggling with the Angel of the Lord was physical, but it was also symbolic of wrestling in prayer. There are many things we may have to overcome through prayer and prayer alone. What do we wrestle or struggle with when we pray?

We may have to struggle with our own desires. Is what you are asking for in accordance with God's will as set forth in scripture? Does your desire contradict any scriptural principle? We need to be honest to search our own heart. Does this mean all prayers must be self-less, or that we cannot ask for anything for our own needs or desires? Absolutely not! Our Heavenly Father *longs* to give good gifts to His children. In His wisdom, however He may withhold an answer to prayer because of our motive or because it may be that the thing we ask for would prove harmful to ourselves or another person. Some things we may ask for are morally neutral, that is to say, they are things that are not harmful in themselves. For example, a person may have a need for financial provision and pray for a financial blessing. If that person were to be given a large amount of money, he or she could use it for good, or it could be a stumbling block if they chose to use it in the wrong way and did not have the spiritual maturity to handle the financial gift they are given. Our motives and desires are under our own control and we are responsible for them.

We may also have to struggle with opposing forces, such as demonic influences. For example, when we pray for a loved one or a family member to come to faith and knowledge in the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ, we know that we are asking for something that is accordance with the Father's will. However, that person may be willingly giving himself or herself to a sin that is holding them in bondage to the enemy through disobedience. This type of stronghold is one example of a need to struggle and wrestle with God in prayer. Through prayer, we partner with God in bringing His will to pass on earth as it (already) is in heaven.

We may need to struggle with our own physical and emotional weakness. How tired Jacob must have been! Surely he must have been tempted to give up, but he chose to persevere, and God honored that. How close are we to the answer when we sometimes give up? We may never know. Don't let weariness or discouragements batter you emotionally so that you cave in instead of continuing on in prayer. Choose to believe that *God wants* to answer you, and hold on as Jacob did until you see the answer.

We are called to persevere and prevail in prayer as Jacob did. Jacob's need was too great to give up. He could not give up the struggle to see his brother united to him. He had to continue to struggle with God over Esau's heart and I'm sure, his own heart too, for Jacob needed to have a heart change for what God had purposed in his life in the promised land of Canaan or Israel. Jacob's hip being put out of joint was symbolic of him no longer resting on his own resources, but on God's power. He was brought to a new place in God through overcoming prayer and intercession. Prayer was his only recourse. God loves to see us dependent on Him. It is a great lesson to learn how to cast our all on God and depend on Him for our needs. The Father loves to see us exhibit persevering faith in Him.

⁹“So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened (Luke 11:9-11).

Jesus implores us to ask first of all, and then to add action to our asking by seeking, but also to add knocking, which speaks of persevering in our asking and seeking. Our English language does not do justice to the Greek words in this passage. The Greek text actually reads “keep on asking, and it will be given you; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.” He is carrying on this thought of persisting in prayer, trusting and believing that you will receive the very thing you are asking for. What a promise this is! We are told emphatically that if we keep on asking, it will be given to us. God is true to His Word, and it is impossible for Him to lie (Hebrews 6:18). Do you truly believe that God the Father wants to answer you when you pray?

C. H. Spurgeon once said, “Because God is the Living God, He *can* hear; because He is a loving God, He *will* hear; because He is our covenant God, He has *bound Himself* to hear.”

Prayer: Father, please help us not to give up but to persevere in prayer that we may receive gifts from your hand. Teach us to pray, and not grow weary. Strengthen us through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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