

The Persistent Widow

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[0 : 01] Good afternoon, everybody. It is really fun to be here because, as Dan said, just in a few short months, our family of four, me, my wife, and my two little daughters, June and Sayla Rose, are planning on moving down to Richmond in order to plant a church.

And the church we hope to plant in many ways will be a lot like this one. And so, as I was just sitting here in the front row, listening to your voices sing, listening to you read, just observing the way that you worship, you all are a tremendous encouragement to me that the gospel can go forth in a city as complex and challenging as Washington, D.C.

It gives me hope for Richmond, which is slightly less complex and probably less challenging. So, you've spent a little bit of time this summer reading and listening to some of the parables that Jesus taught, and these are marvelous stories.

They're short and simple enough to teach a child, and yet nuanced and sophisticated enough to confound scholars for centuries. There is deep, deep wisdom about truth and beauty and goodness in these stories.

They're never outdated, a bit like the old-fashioned water pump that sits at the edge of the forest at my parents' house. You go over and you lift the handle, and no matter what time of year it is, it could be the hottest August day, the water that will gurgle up from down beneath is always cold.

[1 : 34] Like these parables, it never fails to refresh. Now, we're going to talk about prayer this morning. The story that you just heard from the parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow is a very interesting one and somewhat a surprising one.

You know, prayer is one of the most basic elements of a life with God. But for many of us, if you're anything like me, it's still oftentimes puzzling, discouraging, sometimes disappointing, most often elusive for many of us.

What exactly is happening when we pray? How should we go about praying? What should we expect to happen when we pray? I encourage you, if you have other questions that begin to come up as I'm speaking, I encourage you to go ahead and write them down.

Those could be good conversation starters with the people around you, perhaps after the service, maybe later this week. Now, before we tackle some of these questions, allow me to share a story. When I was six years old, I found myself in my grandparents' basement on a hot, muggy August afternoon.

My grandfather had promised to take me fishing, and I was pretty pumped. I had read all of the latest six-year-old literature on outdoor survival, how to survive in the woods with a pocket knife and a pair of tweezers, and I thought an afternoon of fishing would be a walk in the park.

[3 : 00] So, after all, my grandfather had just given me a high-performance fishing rod, all of two feet long, with my name monogrammed into the handle.

Fish beware. So as my grandfather gathered up the supplies, I was full of questions, as most six-year-olds are. What's that for? Can I carry this? Is that sharp? How do you get this hook out of my finger?

We finally set off walking for the pond. It's hot outside. We're sweating. And I'm rushing ahead a little bit, asking questions over my shoulder, and my grandfather is all smiles and gentle answers.

We arrive at the pond. And I'm really anxious to get started on the fishing, but he calls me over and quietly shows me how to put a worm on the hook, which is a terribly gruesome affair for a six-year-old.

But we got through it, and he's very patient with me. And eventually, we cast the line into the water. We sit there for one minute, two minutes, three minutes, and I'm done.

[4 : 00] Where are the fish? I have more questions. Are you bored? I'm bored. What's happening? Are there any fish in this pond anyway? Eventually, I hand the pole back to him, and I go off to skip rocks on the other side of the pond, yelling over my shoulder that perhaps he should be the one to catch the fish, since he's older and more experienced anyway.

And again, he beckons me over. I want to fish with you. Let's do this together. He said that probably 50 times that day.

Now, I'm not sure how alike fishing and prayer actually are, other than some people seem to just take to them so naturally, and others of us get bored after a few minutes. Now, prayer, no matter who you are, it's not a foreign concept.

Even if this is your very first time in a Christian church, you are no stranger to prayer. Out in the diverse ethnic and religious soup of D.C., there is simmering all different forms and types and methods of prayer.

Let's try a few on for size. Some of our friends think prayer as primarily a time for meditation and chanting in order to somehow connect with the divine.

[5 : 08] If you have a background in Hinduism, the Gayatri mantra is a perfect example of this, meditating on, repeating the same phrases over and over again in order to enlighten the mind and inspire the soul.

Others, perhaps those who live in apartments next to us, pray in order to connect themselves with the divine through centering and removing impurities from their mind.

The search for the divine here is not outwards, but it's actually turned inwards. And many forms of Buddhist prayer are good examples of this. In an entirely different way, our Muslim neighbors have a very rigidly formulaic process for prayer.

Five times a day at prescribed hours, you are obligated to pray in a very particular fashion. And on the complete opposite end of the spectrum from that, we all have co-workers or family members who do not ascribe to any such mainstream world religions.

Instead, they've opted for a more personalized spirituality. And here, there is not so much a search for a God out there or a God in here. The focus is more on health and awareness, becoming a less anxious, better person.

[6 : 24] The idea is that prayer is a pathway to inner peace and health. Now, if we're going to make any progress this afternoon in understanding prayer as Jesus taught it, then we must make an absolutely crucial distinction between all the different forms of and methods of prayer that are swirling about in our culture and prayer according to the Bible.

While both are called prayer, they are fundamentally different in many very important ways. But in one in particular that we'll focus on this morning, or excuse me, this afternoon. You see, prayer in nearly every single religious or belief system across the globe is essentially humanity's pursuit of divinity or prosperity or health or wholeness or peace.

Human beings taking the initiative to reach outwards beyond themselves or to look inwards within themselves. And this is completely contrary to the teachings of the Bible about prayer.

Throughout history, the people who have followed Yahweh God, the Hebrews in the Old Testament and then Christians in the New Testament and today, have understood their prayers not as a way of taking the initiative and reaching out to God, but rather a response to God taking the initiative and reaching down to them.

To pray as a Christian is to never have the first word. Prayer never happens in a vacuum. It's never abstract.

[8 : 10] It's never even spontaneous. Prayer always happens in the context and in light of what God has already revealed and what he's already done. That's what Christian prayer is.

God does not sit back and wait for us to come searching for him. No, no, no. He speaks first. He doesn't demand obligatory prayers in order to satisfy him.

Nor does he tell us to go sit in a corner and meditate while he takes care of our lives. Nor does he give us some sort of mantras or chants or prescribed formulas and then tell us to get on with it.

No. Prayer, according to the Bible, in the teachings of Jesus, is the touchpoint where God invites us to do life with him together.

And when we refuse, as we often do, if you're anything like me, we opt rather to do life alone. God, out of relational love and pursuit, comes after us.

[9 : 10] And we see this, of course, most clearly in the life of Jesus. God's initiating word to us wrapped in human flesh and blood. And this is the context, the setting for all Christian prayer.

So when it comes time to turn to this parable about prayer, what we find is an interesting little story that Jesus told in order to teach his followers something about prayer.

And Jesus uses this story to essentially say to his followers and to all of us, Look, God, this one to whom you are praying, he's actually nothing like this. This is a story that illustrates what God is not like.

In this story, there is a widow, and she has fallen on hard times. And in a day when women were often married very young, widows commonly outlived their husbands by decades.

I'm so glad that that is not a norm in our culture anymore. This left them some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. And some injustice has been done to this widow.

[10 : 16] We don't know what's happened, but perhaps her land has been forcibly taken away. She is desperate. How is she going to make it day to day? How is she going to survive? And so, even though her case is assigned to a corrupt judge, she plagues him day and night until eventually he cries mercy and he gives up and he grants her what she wants.

He grants her justice. Jesus then goes on to end this story by telling everyone that God is not like this unjust judge. Because God will not put off his people.

He will not reject them. He will not make them come back and just bother him until he finally gives in. No. God cares about justice. And will make sure that his people receive it.

Now, as Jesus told this story, his purpose was to encourage his followers to always pray and to never give up. We hear that right in the very first lines of the story.

And, you know, whenever Jesus gives a command, it's always worth looking at what he actually did with his own command. Remember, Jesus is not a corrupt boardroom CEO or some ivory tower intellectual throwing out mandates and laws for everybody that applied to everybody else except himself.

[11 : 35] No. Jesus prayed. He prayed every day. Sometimes for many hours a day. Jesus spent a lot of time praying to God the Father.

And this is initially a little bit puzzling, right? Because Jesus was God. So why on earth did he need to pray? Well, yes, Jesus was and is fully God and fully man.

And, as such, he wanted and needed to be in regular, daily communion with God, the Father, and the Spirit. Why? Why was it a need?

Why would he need this? Because Jesus understood that to be a human being meant to be made to do life with God together.

That was what the design is for. That life apart from God would be futile and hopeless. And Jesus knew this. And so even Jesus, in his full humanity, was not self-sufficient.

[12 : 38] And if he is not, then surely we are not. He needed to be with God every day. So when Jesus tells us a story designed to encourage us to pray and to never give up, he is encouraging us to do nothing less than to be like him.

So I have a question for you. It's not meant to elicit guilt or shame. It's just a question. Do we pray? Do you pray? When we sit down to eat, do we thank God for supplying our simplest and most basic needs?

When we scroll through the news feed and see reports of the drama of tragedy being played out all over the world, do we cry out to God for justice for the oppressed and for peace in war-torn countries?

When you cycle or take the metro to work, do we think of this city and her people? Do we pray for their livelihood and for their work? When you sit at your desks, do you pray for the prosperity of your employer?

Do you pray for the salvation of your co-workers? Do you pray for the good fruit of your hard work? When you're on your way home, do you pray for your neighbors, for those who are lonely or perhaps those who are hurting and might feel trapped in abusive relationships?

[13 : 56] When you dine at a restaurant or when you drink at a bar, do you pray for the misguided longings for romance that plague my generation and your generation?

Do we cry out, how long, O Lord, will we keep trying to satisfy our cravings and fill our emptiness with more human skin and self-centered sexuality?

When we retire to our apartments, do we thank God for shelter and safety every time we walk through the door? When we lie down, whether alongside a spouse or in the solitude of your own company, do we have the boldness to ask God for help?

The question, do we pray, could be rephrased, do we do life with God all throughout the day? You see, the injustice and the pain and the crooked lines of this world can feel totally overwhelming, and Jesus' response was to pray, to pray regularly all throughout the day, to do life with God.

He needed to constantly return to God for comfort, for refreshment, and for help, and so do we. The Bible says that a servant is not above his or her master.

[15 : 13] It's sort of one of those wisdom principles that is true all over the world, no matter what time it is, no matter what culture it is. It's always true, and we are certainly not above our master, Jesus.

We should always be in an attitude of prayer. That's what it means to live as a Christian with God, is to live your life in an attitude of prayer. Kind of like the knights in the Middle Ages, who would eat and sleep and work in their armor, so that they're always ready, always ready, in a moment's notice, to jump to the assistance of someone in need.

We're always ready to pray. To begin to pray again should only be to re-engage an ongoing conversation with God. Okay, time out.

I'm not sure how all of this sounds to you. It might sound somewhat lovely or perhaps wildly unrealistic. The idea of praying to God, like Jesus did, all throughout the day.

My own impression, even as I hear my own words, is that I doubt my ability to do this, and I have doubts about how effective my own prayers are or will be.

[16 : 23] In other words, the idea of connecting with God is somewhat appealing, but when we often ask God for things, it's because we really want them, right? This is not an exercise in abstract spirituality.

When we pray, it's about our real lives. So when we ask God for things, it's usually because we really, really want them. And to ask and to not receive can be so disappointing and so discouraging. And sometimes it feels safer not to ask, or perhaps to ask quickly and then move on before we feel too much tension. If you can relate to me on any bit of that, then this parable is for you.

Because in this story, Jesus reassures us of two things. One is God's character, and two is God's promise to act in response to our prayers.

Okay, what kind of God invites people to do life with him, to pray regularly all throughout the day?

This is no complex theology. It's very simple. This is what he wants. This is simply what God wants.

[17 : 27] It's his desire. He wants us to participate with him and partner with him in our hourly, daily life. A bit like a man who would rather choose the inefficiencies of going fishing with a six-year-old rather than do it all himself.

God would rather partner and participate in life with you than to do it all by himself. This is not a commentary on God's capacity. God is completely self-sufficient.

He doesn't need us one little bit, but it is a commentary on God's character, which is dynamic, relational love. He chooses to be with us, and so he invites us to pray.

That's his heart. Okay, not only does this parable reassure us of God's character, but also of his promise to act in response to our prayers. And this is tremendously encouraging because, after all, most of us know lots of nice people with very wonderful intentions who have absolutely no power to help us at all.

So what good are their wonderful intentions? Nothing. Not a bit. Not so with this parable. This parable ends with a promise that God will vindicate his people.

[18 : 41] He will bring justice to their broken world. How? When? This promise was made a really long time ago. What sort of hope could we possibly have right now that God will act in response to our prayers?

After all, we pray for peace, and then this week an ISIS sympathizer pulls out an AK-47 and a razor blade on a French train. We pray for justice, and then every month thousands of girls are kidnapped and forced into a life of degrading slavery.

We pray for healing, and still our bodies betray us, and still we attend funerals for dear ones. We pray for spiritual redemption for our friends and our co-workers and our family members, and yet they continue to walk away from God.

We pray for our futures, and then you get demoted or laid off. We pray for a husband or for a wife, and then yet we still end the day in loneliness.

We pray that God will take away temptation, and then we still awake each morning, it seems, to face the same cruel dragons. You'll notice here, I'm not talking about selfish prayers.

[19 : 51] We're not talking about prayer that is against other people or contrary to the character of God. Jesus makes no promises about God answering those sort of prayers. However, the prayers which are in line with His character, the prayers which are an appropriate response to God's initiating love, good prayers for peace, justice, healing, redemption, future, security, companionship, freedom, those, those have a promised answer.

The good news of the gospel is that in Jesus, God has already begun to answer those prayers, and this is not some trite, fancy pastor cop-out.

No. This is a very tangible, encouraging reality. 19th century pastor John Henry Jewett once wrote that often when we pray, we ask for a fruit, and the Lord immediately responds by planting a seed. In this case, God has already planted a seed that, when fully grown, will answer every single good prayer that you and I have.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus marks the beginning of the end for all pain and sickness and corruption in this world. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's stamp of guarantee to answer all of your good prayers, every single one of them.

[21 : 23] Your prayers for peace. God says, through Jesus, yes, one day peace will cover the earth. Your prayers for justice.

God says, yes, through Jesus, there will one day be vindication and justice for every single oppressed human being. Your prayers for healing. God says, through Jesus, yes, all of your bodies will one day be made whole.

Your prayers for companionship. God says, through Jesus, yes, in my country, you will never be lonely. Your prayers for temptation, to just leave you alone.

God says, through Jesus, yes, the day is rapidly approaching when the stress and strain of temptation will be gone, and in its place will be contentment and satisfaction.

And you and I live and pray in the in-between, in the tension in between the seed that God has planted and the good fruit that will one day heal us and the whole world.

[22 : 30] And we've got to remember this when we pray, because otherwise it becomes so easy to get discouraged. This is what gets us through life. This is what makes it possible to actually keep praying, praying even when you are not sure what is going to happen.

Knowing that so long as our prayers are spoken or thought in response to God's initiating love and in line with God's character, then the answer from God is a resounding yes.

Just by way of illustration, I have a friend who, as a child, suffered the amputation of a limb from cancer. And he told me that for him, the key to persevering through the pain of his treatments was knowing how long that pain was going to last.

And so before he underwent a treatment, he would ask the doctor, how long is this going to be?

And the doctor would tell him, and knowing that there was an end point in sight that helped him get through, he told me that he could endure any amount of pain as long as he knew that there was going to be an end to it.

That knowledge allowed him to continue to hope and to never give up. We know that an answer to our good prayers is coming. It's on the way.

[23 : 48] And this gives us what it takes to persevere and to keep praying without giving up. Okay. At this point, I think it would be rather disingenuous of me to just carry on with a lot of enthusiasm and not acknowledge the fact that waiting can be absolutely agonizing.

This is the hardest part. And this is where it becomes so crucial, so essential to live life with God. Because sometimes God chooses to answer our prayers sooner rather than later.

I mean, prayers for healing are sometimes answered quickly and miraculously. It's incredible.

Sometimes God answers our prayers for justice in astoundingly dramatic ways. The innocent are rescued and restored to freedom.

And these moments, these answered prayers in the here and now, they are a foretaste. They're an appetizer. And they're good. And we should keep praying for them because they're good.

But when the answer from God seems to be, no, not yet, then we cultivate perseverance.

Remember, when Jesus prayed, the answer was not always an immediate yes.

[24 : 58] Oftentimes, even when Jesus prayed, the answer from God the Father was, no, not yet. And yet, Jesus continued to pray. He continued to do life with God.

Okay, before we conclude, let's review where we've been. All Christian prayer, every single bit of it, is a response to God's initiating move towards us.

In this parable, the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge, Jesus encourages us to always pray and to never give up because that's what it means to live life with God.

And it's what he did. He tells us that this story should remind us what God's character is like so that we'll remember that life with God is a good thing and the pain and corruption of this world need not discourage us nor keep us from praying.

Jesus calls us to persevere in our life with God through prayer. And we can. It's actually possible because we can look forward to the day when the answer to every single one of our good prayers is a yes from God and it keeps us going.

[26 : 08] Okay, let's go back to that pond on a hot, muggy, sweaty August day. You know, my grandfather and I were laughing this summer about that fishing trip. It took place over 25 years ago and he was giving me a little bit of good natured teasing because now I have two daughters and I take them fishing and just like me, they want to run ahead and they want to do it all by themselves and I have to call them back and say, no, no, no, I really want to do this with you.

Then, when fishing requires more patience than their young minds can tolerate, they want to give up and they want to go play and do something else and again, I call them back and say, no, come here, I want to do this with you. I don't need their help any more than my grandfather needed mine but I want it and so did he and so does God.

God reaches out to us and he invites us to do life with him and the touch point for doing life with God is prayer. This parable gives us the encouragement we need to keep praying, to keep doing life with God.

So let's close by having another touch point. Let's re-engage the conversation with God. If perhaps you've drifted away from him recently and stopped praying, then he beckons you back.

Keep praying. Don't give up. Keep doing life with me. Let's keep doing life with him. Let's pray. Let's pray. God, thank you for initiating when we were not looking for you.

[27 : 44] Thank you for reaching out to us before we even thought to reach out to you. Thank you for partnering with us and inviting us to participate in what you are doing in the world even though you don't need our help.

Thank you for wanting us. And thank you for wanting us hour to hour, day to day, all throughout our lives. May we please keep praying and thus keep doing life with you.

In the name of Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.