

Persistence in Prayer

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- [0 : 00] It's great to be with all of you again and see your wonderful location here. I haven't been here since you moved in, but this is beautiful.
- We're going to speak tonight about persevering in prayer. But before we do so, I want to tell you a story about when I worked for the world's second largest brass and copper mill.
- So I worked in this gigantic factory for one summer, probably more than that, 12 years ago. And this was a huge, huge location that ran three shifts around the clock and had these enormous machines, employed probably about 1,000 people working around the clock to melt down and to process these heavy metals, brass and copper, and to all kinds of things, whether it's copper wires or bullets or all kinds of things like that.
- It was kind of a crazy place to be. So I worked there for this one summer. I worked with this man, Tom, on this one particular machine on a task that is not worth recounting.
- But the two of us worked together all summer on this machine. We would go out every couple of hours so that Tom and the other guys could take their cigarette break just outside of where we worked.
- [1 : 23] And we would go out there, and these guys would smoke, and they would talk about mostly women and cars. And, you know, to be honest, it was a place where someone like me did not feel totally in my element.
- So here are these guys, all of whom are 35 years older than I am. They've all been working in the same place for 35 years, inhaling these chemicals and impounding their bodies and having their eardrums blasted out.
- The guy I worked this job with, he was preparing to have carpal tunnel syndrome due to the nature of the job, which is the same surgery that the three last guys who had this job before him had had before they stopped that job.
- So this is where I was. I just finished my freshman year, and I already had more college education than all of them combined. And yet, day by day, they were educating me on how to do this kind of work.
- So this is what we're doing. And all summer long, we go out and we have these conversations. I'm mostly quiet. And one day, I don't know how this happened, but we started talking about prayer.
- [2 : 35] It had nothing to do with any other conversation that happened that summer. But we were talking about it, and I spoke up. And this one guy, whose name I can't recall, he always drove into this area, this outdoor smoke break area.
- So he drove his fork truck into the area and just sat on his forklift while the rest of us were down. And he and I started having this argument about whether prayer does anything. And I was arguing that prayer, in fact, accomplishes things.
- And he was arguing that, well, it's a nice thing to do, but it's actually not really, it doesn't do anything in and of itself. And so this is the weird thing. We were kind of going back and forth, wearing our hard hats.

And eventually, he gets down to the end of his cigarette, and we head out. And we had spent all summer talking mostly about the appearances of women and Hemi engines.

And then here was this conversation about prayer. And so I'm walking back to this machine that Tom and I operated. And Tom had been quiet during this conversation.

[3 : 38] And as we're walking back, Tom said to me, You know, I agree with everything you said there. When I go home at the end of the day, I read my Bible and I try to pray.

And as soon as he said this, you know, my first response is, What? What are you talking about? I mean, on the one hand, A, we've barely talked all summer, working on this machine together.

But B, you've given no indication all summer that you would think the least about prayer in any aspect of your life. And then here it is.

Suddenly, there's a conversation which you're not taking part, but it provokes something in you that really is core. You haven't known how to express in this context.

And I know that most of you don't work in the second largest brass and copper mill in the world, but perhaps you can relate to being part of a culture that doesn't know how to talk about prayer.

[4 : 45] Perhaps in your workplace, perhaps among your family, perhaps even among the particular Christian circle where you feel closest with people, praying is not something that comes naturally.

Talking about prayer is not something that happens automatically. And so that's what we're going to talk about tonight. Persistence in prayer. Maybe this isn't your cup of tea.

Maybe this isn't the thing in which you feel most comfortable in the Christian life. Maybe when you hear a sermon, you're riled up for the sermon about justice, for the sermon about faith and science. And we talk about those things here.

But we affirm in this church that the entirety of the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God. And so we proclaim all of them as things that should form us. And so maybe this is the square peg to your round hole.

Maybe this is something that has a hard time fitting. But if that's like you, if you are like Tom, if you have a hard time placing this concept of prayer in your life or in your culture, then I want to offer this sermon as hopefully a help to you.

[5 : 58] I want to offer as a challenge, as a challenge to form ourselves to this square peg, to find out where it fits in our lives, and then also to invite you into maybe some ways of viewing, persisting, continuing in prayer in ways you haven't thought about before.

So let's pray for a moment. Heavenly Father, thank you that we can connect with you through prayer.

You have ordained, you have allowed, you have created us for this means of communing with you, of being in your presence, of speaking with you, of hearing from you.

And this is a great gift to us. And we pray right now that you will open our spirits, which have been warped and damaged and dulled, to your Holy Spirit.

We pray that you will renew us and enliven us today in prayer. Amen. I'd like to begin with a quote about prayer from Pope Francis.

[7 : 00] He said this, The first task in life is this, prayer. But not the prayer of words like a parrot, but the prayer of the heart, gazing on the Lord, hearing the Lord, asking the Lord.

The first task in life is this, prayer. It's not simply, not simply, you know, spouting off, you know, word after word after word, and getting to like two hours, and accruing a certain number of brownie points.

But this, this, this wonderful, this wonderful presence of gazing on the Lord, hearing the Lord, and asking the Lord. There's a great Presbyterian pastor from about a hundred years ago, who wrote a book on prayer.

And he referred to as this, this man was named, his name was David McIntyre. He said, Prayer is the lifeblood of the Christian. Prayer is the lifeblood of the Christian. What flows through the Christian life for us, what brings life to every part of our bodies, is prayer.

And just like, just like the blood in our bodies, the blood is not actually the nourishment. It carries the nourishment to our feet, and our hands, and our head. And in the same way, prayer carries us to nourishment, and to life, and to renewal in God.

[8 : 20] If that's the case, why do so many of us feel like giving up on prayer? Why do so many of us get tired of prayer? I hope that this parable, this parable that Jesus told, can be an encouragement and a help here.

Here's again how the parable went. Jesus said, In a certain city there was a judge. So he's comparing this to a judge, who neither feared God nor respected man.

And there was a widow in that city, who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary. And for a while he refused. But afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down with her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says, and will not God give justice to his elect, who cry out to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?

Briefly, you may struggle for a bit as you read this kind of parable. The first question that may jump in your mind is, Does God say this about our prayers?

[9 : 35] Why are you beating me down with your continual coming? It sounds a little awkward. And this happens because there's this particular way of persuasion or logic that this culture used that is a little bit different from what our culture uses.

We use certain assumptions to get through persuasion quickly. And in their culture, one way that they did that was this process by which they said, How much more so with God?

So they would describe something like God, a judge who has power, and then eventually he does something good. How much more so with God, who is all-powerful, will he not do something good?

We do some similar things when we speak logically. We talk about human rights. And very quickly, we're all on the same page, right? We know that something, something has to be true about that, you know?

Something is violated when someone's human rights are violated. And so we have this kind of quick take on that. And I think that's a good thing, that we're able to agree on some of these things very quickly.

[10 : 41] We perceive these things quickly because of a certain progress that we've made in thinking about these things. In this culture, they had made a certain progress and a certain accrual in thinking about God.

They could just know. When we're talking about God, we're talking about someone who is all-powerful and all-good. Maybe you don't share those assumptions, but that's kind of what's going under the parable here.

And if you don't share that, if you're not sure about that, if that's hard for you to accept, let's just look at this as a picture for a moment. If that were true, then this is what it would look like in this parable.

So let's just take that for a moment. If it were true, here's what it would look like. Here is this unjust judge, someone who has power, and eventually he does the right thing because this person keeps on, this widow keeps on coming to him.

So how much more? God himself will be faithful. That's the first aspect of the parable. God will be faithful. God will come to the aid of our cries for justice.

[11 : 45] The opposite side of that is the widow. And this is the great line that this story ends on. Jesus says, I tell you, the judge will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? So there's a double aspect to this how much more logic.

How much more for the judge is he like, will God give justice? And then for the widow, this woman who came with her pleadings, how much more will you continue to come to God with your requests?

That's the question of this parable. The truth about God is definitely true. God is just. God is faithful to those to whom he has called.

How about you? Will you be faithful in your prayer? I think that's a difficult thing for many of us. Will we be faithful? We all have given up in prayer.

[12 : 47] We all have done it. We all have stopped. We all have walked away. We all have found better things to do. And this passage is about a woman, an individual, who continues in prayer.

And so I want to encourage you as individuals in prayer, but I also want to encourage us as a church and as a community in prayer. And I think that, and I think that what can happen is if we all take up together an attitude of prayer that will be so much more helpful so that we're not just individual islands of a tom out there, like this guy that I worked with, someone who has no context for connecting with people out prayer, with connecting with people in prayer.

If we can do this together, it will be such an encouragement to each other. And so for this reason, I want to draw out of this story a couple of attitudes about prayer. Sort of three strands. I have three attitudes about prayer, which will help us help us to develop a culture of persisting, continuing in prayer.

So here we are. The first attitude of prayer that this widow, this woman has, is this. Her first attitude is, the heart cries out for justice.

The heart cries out for justice. Prayer begins with your heart, from your perspective anyway. Prayer begins with your heart. When you bring your pain, when you bring your resentment, when you bring that dejection from that horrible situation with your boss, when you bring that broken hardness from the relationship that just ended, and you direct that God word, when you direct that to God, is the beginning of prayer for us.

[14 : 31] And I know that, you know, for many people, it's not that hard to think too much about that, about, you know, we have pains, and we complain about them all the time, so why not complain about them to God?

What is unique about prayer is not simply complaining to God, but this. The attitude of the heart crying out for justice works out something like this.

It is that, something is not right. We hold on to these two truths. Something is not right, and God desires to make it right. Something is not right, and God desires to make it right, and we don't know how those two things can go together, but that's what generates our prayer.

Something is not right, and God desires to make it right. We have, on the one hand, God's concerns, and we have, on the other hand, our heart.

And in prayer, what really gets going in prayer is when God's concerns and our heart begin to line up. And this happens in a number of ways. This happens by reading Scripture on a regular basis.

[15 : 38] This comes by worshiping together. This comes by immersing ourselves in Christian community. In all of these things, we begin to understand God's concerns and to apply them to our hearts.

And as these things line up, God's concerns in my heart, it's like, it's like two gears that begin to mesh and like, clink, you know? Then it starts to move. And the gears of prayer begin to go.

And so I want to encourage you in that. The heart cries out for justice. Study. Immerse yourself in God's concerns. And your heart will line up with those concerns in unique ways.

And prayer will begin. That's the first attitude of prayer that we see from this widow. Her heart cried out for justice. Something was not right. She knew that there was desire of God to make it right.

That in and of itself, I've got to admit, it's simply tension though, isn't it? Something is not right and God desires to make it right. There's another aspect. The widow expects it to be made well somehow.

[16 : 47] So next to that truth, that tension, something not being right, God desiring to make it right, we have a great hope. Anything can be made new and all things will be made new.

Anything can be made new and all things will be made new. This is, this is the great truth in a post-Jesus world. Now that Jesus has come and died and rose and ascended to the Father, right now, anything can be made new and eventually, all things will be made new.

This is our great encouragement in prayer. That God hears prayer now. Some things are going to be made well now. And we don't always know what those things are going to be, but some things will be made new and that depends.

What, what things will be made new depends in part on prayer. Now, we don't know which prayers will be answered all of the time.

We don't know which prayers will be answered in the short term all of the time. But, again, God has created us in such a way that he wants to answer our prayers. It depends, in part, on our prayer.

[18 : 04] There is a, there's a great quote from the 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, about this, about how God wants to respond to our prayers, how he wants to take something so simple as, as, as us coming down on our knees and whispering our concerns to him.

this is what Charles Spurgeon said. He said, prayer is the slender tendon that moves the muscle of omnipotence. Prayer is the slender tendon that moves the muscle of omnipotence.

We bring so little to prayer and yet what we ask for and what God wants to give is his great power of working as a creator and as a preserver and as an intervener in the universe.

This is what, this is what God wants to give to us. He wants to move the muscle of omnipotence in response to our prayer. Again, we don't always know which prayers will be answered now, though anything could be.

There is nothing outside of the realm of possibility in this post-resurrection world. And one day, all things will be made new. All those prayers for justice and for righteousness and for healing will be answered when Jesus comes and restores all things.

[19 : 25] And in fact, that's a lot of what this parable is about. You hear these words again and again in this parable. Justice, justice, crying out for injustice, an unjust judge.

And in the New Testament, when justice is talked about, much of the time, it's referring to God bringing his justice. That's the coming of the kingdom of God.

God bringing his justice, his righteousness to earth is the coming of the kingdom. And just in the same way, the parable refers to the coming of the Son of Man. Also, a way of talking about God's kingdom coming.

We can apply this teaching to our lives in many ways, many things about prayer, but there's a very particular way in which we cry out and we pray for God's kingdom to come.

This is really the core of what God wants us to persist in. Persist in praying for the coming of God's kingdom. What is that in your life? What is that in your workplace?

[20 : 29] What is the injustice where you work, among your co-workers? What is the horror and the pain in your family? Where is the brokenness in your group home?

anything can be made new in Jesus now and everything will be made new. That's the second attitude of prayer.

Let's move on to a third attitude that this widow has. Of course, this is the whole point of the parable. Not only did she feel injustice, not only did she hope for something better, but she persisted in prayer.

Her third attitude is this. This is a quote from basketball, but I think you'll get it. Quick guys get tired, but big guys don't get small.

Quick guys get tired, but big guys don't get small. Again, this is something that people talk about in basketball sometimes. You may have heard that tall people have an advantage in basketball.

[21 : 31] And even if you know anything about basketball, in recent years the sport has moved toward outside shooting and quickness that sometimes de-emphasizes size, but at the same time, the ultimate player in basketball is someone who can shoot from the outside, who can go quickly, who is also 6'10", 7'10", tall.

It's the big guys who have an advantage in basketball. And in the same way, in prayer, if we have a short-term vision, we can tire out, we will tire out.

What we need is a long-term vision for faithfulness, for growing into a big guy in prayer. We've been in the middle of this sermon series about the book of Daniel, and in the book of Daniel, these faithful believers are exiled into a foreign land, and the whole book is about ways in which they continue to be faithful in that foreign land.

In this parable, one particular way to be faithful is to continue in prayer. And that can mean a lot of things. Like I said, we typically have a one-week perspective on so many things in our life.

We start exercising. Within a week, we're either feeling great or ready to move on to something else. You start a new diet. Within a week or two, you're either loving it or you're hating it.

[22 : 54] I want to encourage you to think with a long-term vision. Think with a five- to ten-year plan for what it would be like to be a man of God, to be a woman of God.

What would that be like, thinking five to ten years down the road about what your path would be to be a faithful prayer, to be a person of character, to be someone who manifests the presence of Jesus around them, who seeks again and again over years for God's justice in their community.

It would actually give you a lot of freedom. We think about discipline and difficulty in developing a rule of life or regular spiritual disciplines, but this gives a lot of freedom.

You don't have to figure it out next week. You don't have to be a great prayer two weeks from now. Think long-term. Try new things out. Memorize a psalm.

Give yourself two weeks to memorize a psalm and I guarantee you can do it. Memorize one verse every day, a psalm that's ten or twelve verses, and pray that for the church.

[23 : 59] Pray that for your friends. On Sundays, take some time. Take some time to think about what you're going to pray about that week. Set out, take a piece of paper, I'm going to pray for these five or ten people, and pray for those this week.

Write the names of your friends on index cards, and pray for those throughout the week. Do three or four a day. Play a worship song while you're praying. Be creative. If you're having trouble thinking about this, I would love to talk with you more and brainstorm.

You can be creative in thinking about prayer if you have a long-term vision for persisting in prayer. It is so freeing, let me tell you. You do not have to figure it out a week from now.

So that's the third attitude that I want to tie together. So let's tie these things together here. These three attitudes, as they say, a cord of three strands is not easily broken.

We've said that the heart cries out for justice, that anything can be made new, and all things will be made new. This attitude of hope and this encouragement to persist in prayer.

[25 : 09] Quick guys get tired, but big guys don't get small. Why do we try to persist in these things? Why is this so important?

Why is prayer a lifeblood for us? Why is prayer so important? I think the key is toward the end of this story.

It says near the end that God will give justice speedily. He will give justice soon. And that can mean a few things. Soon. That's kind of nearness when Jesus talks.

And the most immediate thing that Jesus did soon after this parable was die on the cross, spend three days in death, death, and rise from the dead.

The most immediate soon and speedy thing he did was to voluntarily submit to injustice. He was swallowed by his enemy, death, and sin, and he snatched the keys and torpedoed the mothership of death itself.

[26 : 15] And death has been dying a long death ever since then. A long, slow, and wounded death ever since then. And that is the encouragement that we have in prayer.

We don't just have this desire for spiritual things whereby we sit cross-legged and we're really happy about how long we can keep our eyes closed and focused on a small dot on our eyelids.

No, no. We believe that when we pray we have this hope because Jesus has torpedoed the mothership of death and we are participating in its long, slow, obsolescence.

At some point there will be a final convulsion of death itself and all things will be made new. All things will be made new. And this is what gives us hope for all of these things.

When our hearts cry out for injustice, we remember this. We believe that anything can be made new because we can participate in that death of death, that renewal of all things.

[27 : 18] And we have faith that all things will be made new. There is a mortal wound to the enemies of God, sin, and death itself.

And so we persist in prayer. This is my conclusion here, but I want to end with a very specific encouragement, or a very specific request, I should say, as well.

We said that this parable in particular talks about God's kingdom coming. God's justice and the son of man coming is about God's kingdom coming.

And the most particular, the most specific, the most immediate way that we can pray for God's kingdom to come is to pray for this church, to pray for Church of the Advent.

Many churches have teams of prayers who pray regularly for their pastors, to pray regularly for what's going on in the church, the ministries of the church, to support those things in prayer, to be the slender tendon that moves the muscle of omnipotence in their church.

[28 : 24] And I want to invite you to be part of that. We're going to create an email list for people who want to pray regularly for Church of the Advent, emails that will go out to encourage you, to give you things to pray for.

So if you're interested, please email me, bwandel, B-W-A-N-D-E-L at adventDC.org. Find me after the service, and we'll get you on that list.

I want to encourage you, because this is something that God has given to us. This is something that the scriptures challenge us toward, but this is also the square peg around which we are formed.

As we are formed through prayer, it will become easier for all of us, as we develop this culture of prayer, to engage in God's mission. salvation. So let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that we get to be part of your kingdom. Thank you so much that we get to be part of your great work of destroying death itself, of bringing newness and life and redemption to the world around us.

[29 : 38] And we pray that you will make us faithful in prayer. Just like you, Jesus, we're faithful unto death, we pray that you will make us faithful through our whole lives by continuing in prayer.

It's in your holy name we pray. Amen.