

# Persistence and power in prayer

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading is taken from Luke, chapter 18, beginning at the first verse. And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not to lose heart.

He said, In a certain city there was 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. 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 by her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[ 1 : 22 ] Actually, a confession to me, I had a great plan to do a talk on power and persistence. I wanted to do five talks in this series on prayer, to be honest, but I couldn't do four.

And so I was going to do two for the price of one today, but I've decided in my preparation that actually I'm going to do one for the price of one and do it well. So we're just going to do persistence rather than persistence and power in prayer.

And we're just going to focus really on this one parable. So let me pray and we'll make a start. Good and gracious Father, thank you that you're always with us, even here right now.

You're amongst us and in us by your Holy Spirit. You hear all things, you know all things. And you are a good and gracious Father. So Father, we ask you for a good thing.

Please would you help us to understand your word, to perceive it and to be shaped and changed by it. We pray this for our good, but also for your glory. Amen. Now I'm going to take some questions afterwards on anything I say today or anything I've said in this series.

[ 2 : 25 ] So get your pens jotting down, scribble down thoughts if you're here, think of anything as we go through. And we will take questions afterwards. I'd love to help you think about prayer. I'd love to think about prayer myself a bit more.

So please do think of your questions for afterwards. And last week we were looking very much at asking God for things in prayer. Do you remember the two parables? God is more caring than a father.

God is more willing than a friend. And they were both arguments from the lesser to the greater. Do you remember that he wasn't a great friend, but he still gave him what he asked for. Even an evil father would give good gifts to his children.

It's an argument from the lesser to the greater. And we have exactly the same thing in this parable in Luke 18. An argument from the greater to the lesser. Thinking about persistence in prayer. Now, for some of us, asking for things in prayer is the hard bit.

The barrier in our faith, if you like, is just getting to the point of actually asking for things in prayer. Because for various reasons, we don't trust God. We don't think God will give us what we ask for. But for many others, the barrier in prayer, the barrier of faith in prayer, is not just at the level of asking, but it's further down the line.

[ 3 : 29 ] And it's when I've asked for stuff, but I haven't got an answer. And the barrier, the point at which we give up, the point at which we struggle, is down the line a bit further.

Maybe weeks or months or years down the line. Maybe you're someone who has prayed for something desperately. And you can remember it. You can think of it. Maybe you're praying for something desperately now. And you might have been praying desperately for a long time.

You might have been praying desperately for years. Maybe you've been praying for someone's healing. Maybe you've been praying for your own healing. Maybe you've been praying for a troubled relationship. Or someone's conversion.

And you might have been praying for years for this. I certainly have. There are a number of things I've been praying for for many years. And you do begin to wonder, don't you, after a while, does God even hear me? Does he care?

Is he listening? Is he there? Am I asking for something that's just too hard? Or too impossible? Or too unreasonable? And I think what Jesus wants to encourage us with this morning, and I'd like to encourage you with this morning, is to keep going in prayer.

[ 4 : 33 ] And don't give up. I think many of us realise that sometimes God doesn't give us what we want because he wants us to persist for some time in prayer.

And that's what I want to think about this morning. Have a look down at chapter 18, verse 1. You know when you read some parables and it takes you ages to work out what they're about? Look at verse 1. And he told them a parable to the effect that they were always to pray and not lose heart. So right there is a banner verse. The stress and worry, we've got it straight away there. We know exactly what it's about. Always pray and do not lose heart. Don't give up praying. That's what this parable is about. Let's read on.

He said, So we've got two people, a judge and a widow.

[ 5 : 41 ] Let me just think about the judge for a moment. He neither cares about, fears about God, nor cares about men. He's the ultimately awful judge, if you like. Because he's able to do whatever he has, the power to do what he wants and cares not a jot about what God thinks of him or what people think about him.

He's like a tyrant, effectively. He has power, but no concern about anyone other than himself. And the contrast is a widow. Now, classically, when you see widows in Scripture, you always think of the most helpless people, the most desperate people.

Widows in the Old Testament time didn't have state benefits, and she didn't have a husband to look after her. She was destitute. So here's the most defenceless person and the most powerful person. And of course, in the Old Testament law, God made it clear you should always look after widows in their distress, but not this guy. She comes to him and says, Give me justice against my adversary. Verse 4. For a while he refused, but afterwards he says to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps on bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by a continual coming.

[ 6 : 53 ] You see, without a husband to defend her, what's she going to do? She's only got herself. And like most widows would be destitute and defenceless, this widow actually is the opposite. She's actually defenceless, but she's rugged.

She's not going to give up. She's going to keep persisting. Banging on the door. He looks out the window. You know the sort of curtain switch? Oh no, it's that woman again. Ignore the door. Ring bell, door bell. I'll pretend I'm there. I'll hide in the other room. Anyway, emails keep coming through. The mobile phone is going off time and time again. It's that woman again. 15 messages. And it's beating her down, beating him down. Until eventually, he doesn't give her justice because he ought to give her justice. This judge gives her justice because she'd nagged him into submission.

Now, the point of this parable is not that God is a God that you need to nag into submission to get you to give you what you want. The point of this parable is if even an unjust judge will give justice to a widow if she keeps on asking, how much more your perfect judge, your perfect father in heaven, who loves to give justice, whose heartbeat is justice, of course he'll give you what you ask for.

[ 8 : 09 ] Look down at verse 6. And the Lord Jesus 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? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? What questions does this cause you to think when you think of this idea?

If you pray and if you ask your good father for justice and you keep asking him and you keep persisting, of course he'll give you justice and he'll give it to you speedily. Let me suggest two questions that might come up about this.

Firstly, will God bring about justice? I wonder if we think, will he actually do it? And secondly, will he bring it about speedily or quickly? Will God bring about justice is the first question I want to ask. The world is full of injustice. We were praying earlier, weren't we, for some people in this country who are facing the courts for injustices and they might not get justice. Recently in the world there's been two massive things that have come up which show there's injustice in the world and causes you to think, well, is God just?

[ 9 : 21 ] Just in Haiti recently, the guy who was the dictator there for many, many years who was responsible for the deaths of many people and he went off and hid in exile in France.

In the troubles in Haiti with the earthquake recently, he's just recently gone back there and it seems the courts are not going to bring him to justice at all. Not only was he all right in exile, he's actually gone back home and there's even a chance that he might even get some sort of power again. What? What? What is going on there? Or in Algeria, do you hear about the riots that have been going on in Algeria because of the oppression and the wickedness of the leadership there? The guys in power there have accumulated so much money for themselves while the people are in poverty and they fled and they're now fat and happy with lots of gold in Saudi Arabia. Untouchable and rich and wealthy. Where's the justice in that? And you might even think in your own life, where's the justice of what's going on in my own life? It's not fair is a kind of common thing you might think of, all sorts of things in your own life.

It's not fair that I'm not married. It's not fair that I'm divorced. It's not fair that I'm married to this person and not that person. It's not fair that I haven't got children. It's not fair that I've got these children.

[ 10 : 33 ] It might be that my boss is unfair to me and it's not fair the job I'm in or the way my life has turned out. It's not fair that I missed out on this opportunity or that that I regret and I think about all the time.

There's loads of stuff in life that, I mean, all joking aside, that can really grip you, can embitter you. And you think that's not fair. God, that is not fair. Two ways in which I think we might express this to God or think about God in prayer regarding the injustices and unfairnesses in our life.

Two problems. First is we might think God won't help me and secondly we might think God can't help me. God won't help me or God can't help me. In other words, it's questions about whether God cares, God's loving kindness, or questions about God's power and his ability to do things.

Let me give you some examples. One of the prayers I prayed for many years, I'd say about ten years, was for a wife. Now I'm now married. God answered that prayer. Praise the Lord. I do thank him very much.

But it was a long time before I was married and I used to pray. Whenever I prayed, I would always pray and ask God for a good gift for a wife. I prayed for many, many years and he did answer my prayer. One of my biggest temptations in those many years of persistent prayer was wondering if God wanted to do it for me.

[ 11 : 56 ] Does he want to give me a wife as I'm praying this prayer? Sometimes I wondered, maybe he's not giving me a wife because I've done something wrong. Maybe this is in some measure some sort of punishment for something I've done.

Maybe God isn't giving me a wife because I'm asking for the wrong thing. Maybe God isn't giving me a wife because maybe he thinks it's best for my ministry if I stay single, actually.

Maybe that's what he wants for me. And even though I didn't really want to stay single, maybe that's what God wants for me and is a better thing. Maybe that's what he wanted. The second thing, like I say, is that God can't help us.

It's too big a deal. So another of my prayers, which I've been praying for many years and still pray to this day, is for conversions. Both my father and my brother are not believers. And I pray for them all the time.

Father, Father, can you not see them? Please, please save them. Maybe you've prayed prayers like that for loved ones that you know. And I think one of the biggest temptations for me there is not so much that God doesn't care, but that God is just too hard.

[ 12 : 57 ] When I speak to them, they seem so far from God. They've been non-Christians or unbelievers for so many years. It just looks impossible. And it's really tempting for me just to give up praying for it because it's just too difficult.

I don't know if you've ever felt like that. Well, to encourage us to think, how does God care, will God or can God answer our prayers? One thing that really stays with me, that very encourages me, is a man called George Muller.

George Muller is one of my heroes in the faith. He is a man who was a great man of prayer, famous for his prayers, who lived in the Victorian times. And in his lifetime, he founded five orphanages which had a thousand odd kids in them with dozens and dozens of staff.

And he supported it all by prayer. He never took a salary in his life. He just lived by prayer the whole of his life. A man of extraordinary faith in prayer. And in one sermon I read of his recently, he encouraged me to think about these answers to this question, will God bring about justice, which is I think the natural question.

Does he care and can he do it? And let me just read this quote to you. I'll put it on the screen. He said, I've invariably found in the 54 years and nine months during which I've been a believer.

[ 14 : 15 ] He was quite a fastidious man. That if only I believed, I was sure to get in God's time the thing I asked for. I would especially lay this on your heart that you exercise faith in the power and willingness of God to answer your requests.

We must believe that God is able and that he's willing. To see that he is able, you only have to look at the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For having raised him from the dead, he must have almighty power. As to the love of God, you only have to look to the cross of Christ and see his love in not sparing his son, in not withholding his only begotten son from death.

See, with these proofs of power and love of God, assuredly, if we believe, we shall receive, we shall obtain. Now, what encourages me in here is when he's thinking about will God do it or can God do it, he looks to the Lord Jesus.

It's the gospel that shapes his faith and his hope, you see. Can God do it? Can God do it? Well, you just have to think about the resurrection. Look, if God can make a dead man come to life as he did in the Lord Jesus, and he did do it, and lots of people saw him, can he bring my dad and my brother to faith?

[ 15 : 30 ] Well, of course he can. And you see, I need to have that in my mind. The gospel is what drives me back to keeping praying. I know God can do it. Will God do it? Does he want to do it? Is he care enough?

Well, again, I just have to think about the death of the Lord Jesus. Hang on. If God would let his son die for me, why would he not want to give me good things? Is God willing?

Of course he's willing. We're going to do this, if you're in a growth group, in a few weeks' time. Paul says this in Romans 8. God, who did not spare his only son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Now, he's talking there principally about heaven. He will give us all things in the new creation with Jesus. But the point is, still stands. If God would give his only son, whom he loved for the rest, for the whole of eternity past, why would he not want to give you good things?

Of course he would. So let me encourage you. If you're thinking, when you read a parable like this in Luke 18, will God give me justice? Will God give me what I ask for?

[ 16 : 35 ] And you're thinking, will he do it or can he do it? Keep the Lord Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection in mind. That's what I do. And that encourages me to keep praying and keep asking so that the devil doesn't knock me down and make me stop.

A second question we might ask is, will God bring about justice quickly? Let me read to you again from verse 6. And Jesus said, hear what the unrighteous judge says, will not, hear what the unrighteous judge says, and will not God, i.e. the perfect judge, give justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Now in my experience, most prayers do get answered speedily.

Most prayers I find that we ask, God answers. And quickly. They often happen in the same day or the same week. Sometimes we forget, don't we, that he's answered the prayers or we don't notice. But sometimes there have been prayers, and you've prayed and I've prayed, which we have to pray persistently for longer weeks, months or years or even decades. Why is that?

[ 17 : 46 ] Why does God delay in answering their prayers? Why doesn't he, well we think, he says here speedily, why does it seem not speedy? Why does he not give us what we want quickly? Well one reason might be that he's waiting till our hearts are ready.

It might be that God is able and he's willing, but we're not ready yet. And actually God delays because actually we're not ready. We ask for something, but we're not actually ready for it. I certainly think that when I was asking for a wife in my younger years, I actually think, I look back now, and God's grace, I wasn't ready for a wife actually.

Even I wanted one. I wasn't ready at the time. And I thank God, I praise God actually, even though he made me wait. He made me wait for a right time and a good time. Besides, when I started praying, Lucy was a teenager, so that wouldn't have been a good thing either.

So actually he was waiting for a good time and a good and right time. But a second reason I think God might well be wanting us to persist in prayer is he wants to train us.

He wants to train us in our faith. So that when he answers our prayers, we are so abundantly aware that God has answered our prayers, our faith is strengthened and we realise how good our God is.

[ 19 : 00 ] He gets glory. Imagine the scenario, three people, A, B and C. Mr A. He prays for something he really wants and he receives it and he forgets that he prayed it and he says, oh that's good that happened.

How many times have we done that? Imagine the second man, Mr B. He really wants something so he prays for it and God gives it to him the next day and he realises God gives it to him and he says, thank you God for that.

That's really kind of you God. Thank you very much. Imagine Mr C. He's a man who really wants something and he prays for it and the next day he prays again and the next day he prays again and he prays day, after week, after month, after year and after five years, God gives him what he asks. Now what's the difference between those three people? In a sense, they all wanted something, they all prayed and they all got what they asked for. What's the difference? The difference is that third person is so absolutely overflowingly certain that it's God who's answered his prayers because he's petitioning him for five years that he knows that God did it.

Here is a man who will be absolutely thankful and praising and overflowing with joy because God has answered his prayer. Here is a man who's learned that God answers prayer whereas the other two probably didn't.

[ 20 : 25 ] I don't know how you find keeping going in prayer but it does seem to me that God wants to train our faith because that third man at the end of five years, his faith has just shot up because he sees that God answers the prayers that he's been praying for so many years and it shows God is a great God and that's exactly what God wants to show that he's a glorious and great God.

So will God give us justice speedily, quickly? I think most of the time, yes. I think in my life many of my prayers are answered very quickly I find but God also sometimes delays and it might feel not quick but he will always do that which is good for us in love because he loves us.

He is the good and righteous judge. Of course he'll give justice. Well those are two big questions we might ask of God but thirdly to finish Jesus has got a question for us.

Will the Son of Man find faith on earth? Let me just read that last verse to you again verse 8. I tell you God will give justice to his elect speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?

One day when the Lord Jesus comes back he will find some Christians have persisted in faith they've kept trusting him and others in waiting so long have given up.

[ 21 : 54 ] Do you see how faith and prayer are massively linked? You see prayer is the outward exercise of faith. A person who has faith prays. Prayer is the evidence of faith.

If you trust prayer faith just means to trust or to depend or to rely on someone. If you trust or depend or rely on God you'll ask him for things. You'll depend on him. You'll ask him for good things.

And the person who's given up their faith gives up praying. So what about us? Have we given up praying? Has our faith dwindled?

When Jesus returns will he find faith at Grace Church Dulwich? When Jesus returns will he find faith in your heart? For me like I said earlier one prayer I've prayed for many years is for the conversion of some people in my family and it's been massively tempting for me to give up to give up trusting God to be worn down by the seeming non-answer to that prayer.

And I'd like to encourage you to do exactly what Jesus did to keep praying and not lose heart so that when he comes back you will still have faith. And this is another quote a much longer quote again from this man George Miller.

[ 23 : 15 ] This is one of the things that really keeps me going in prayer and I think he's basically teaching exactly what Jesus is teaching here. Remember this man he's an old guy when he says these things I'm about to show you and he's a man who's world renowned for amazing miraculous answers to prayer.

This guy's on a pedestal in terms of answers to prayer and look what he says to encourage us ordinary folk. It's a long quote. If I say that during the 54 years and 9 months that I've been a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ I've had 30,000 answers to prayer either in the same hour or in the same day that the requests were made I should not go a particle too far.

Often before I've left my bedroom in the morning I've had prayers answered that were offered that morning and in the course of the day I've had 5 or 6 more answers to prayer. So that at least 30,000 prayers have been answered in the same hour or same day that are offered.

He was a German man and very meticulous and wrote down all his prayers. So he's saying I'm not lying if I told you that in my life I genuinely tell you I've had 30,000 or more prayers answered. It's extraordinary isn't it? But one or the other might suppose that all my prayers were thus promptly answered. No, not all of them.

[ 24 : 38 ] Sometimes I've had to wait weeks, months or even years. Sometimes many years. In November 1844, and this was in 18, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals.

I prayed every day without one single intermission, whether sick or in health or on the land or on the sea. And whatever the pressure of my engagements might be, 18 months elapsed before the first of the five was converted.

I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed and then the second was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the other three. Day by day I continued to pray for them.

And six more years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three and prayed on for the other two. And he says this as an old man. These two remain unconverted.

The man to whom God in the riches of his grace has given tens of thousands of answers to prayer in the self-same day or hour in which they were offered has been praying day by day for nearly 36 years for the conversion of these two individuals and yet they remain unconverted.

[ 25 : 45 ] But I hope in God I pray on and look yet for the answer. How encouraging is that? Now I read that in a biography of his written by a man called Roger Steer and the biographer Mr.

Steer says this. It's just after that quote he says, and of those last two unconverted people, one became a believer just before Muller died and the other one just after. Now what encourages me with him is that he's a great man of great prayer, very, very encouraging.

But what he wants us to realise is that exactly what Jesus wants us to realise is that prayer is actually a very ordinary thing done by very ordinary people, just like this ordinary widow who go to our God and say, God, please can I have justice?

Please can I have a good thing? And day after week, after month, after year, asking him for those things. Now why does he delay in any one instance? Why is he delayed in my dad not becoming a Christian?

And the actual answer is I don't know. But what this encourages me and what Jesus encourages us is to keep asking him because God isn't not caring and he's not not able.

[ 26 : 55 ] He's a just and willing and a great judge. So keep asking him and that's what I'm doing. I'm now in the decade plus of prayers asking for prayers for my dad and I'm going to keep praying for him.

I've got a George Muller 5. I'd encourage you to have a George Muller 5. People you pray for every day, I do that. And ask the Lord for good things. God, we saw last week, is more willing than a friend and more caring than a father and we've seen this week he's more just than any judge. he wants to give us good things and he wants to do it speedily. But as our perfect father and our perfect judge, he will give them to us in his own time.

He knows what's best. Let me finish with one question for you. It's the question Jesus asked. Will the son of man find faith well in you?

Will you keep going and praying? Will you keep praying and not lose heart? And I'll pray that you will. Let's pray as we finish. Father God, there are so many times we are tempted to give up.

[ 28 : 06 ] The devil is always on at us in our prayer. He longs for our faith to dwindle, for us to think negatively of you, hatefully of you, bitterly towards you.

Father, for me and for all of those here who are tempted to give up and some of us have, would you invigorate our prayer lives? Would you keep us trusting in you, our good and great judge, good father?

Help us to keep praying and never give up. And Father, we ask you for these good things. Please, please, we pray, would you give them to us? We ask them in accordance with the name of the Lord Jesus, who died for us and was raised for us.

Amen. Amen. Good., ■■■ let's inhale, good and do it.