

# Persistent prayer keeps our hearts safe

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 08 May 2016

Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     have your Bibles open at any of the three sections, it might be worth keeping them open first at Luke 18. As you're making your way there, let me remind you of what we learned last time from what Jesus taught us, and that is that to ask God for something in prayer is normal. Jesus is expecting us to ask God in prayer. So prayer essentially is coming to God and asking God, and Jesus thinks that's quite normal for us to be doing those things. Then he taught us the Lord's Prayer, or what we know is the Lord's Prayer, and in it he tells us to ask for seven things in particular. So the idea of asking God is not abnormal. It's neither something that we should be running away from either. However, this time we have to understand a couple of more things that are connected with asking, but in their own right are important to prayer. As I said last time, once you've been given the instruction to ask God for whatever in prayer, the instruction that follows is, well, what type of asking do we do? Are there any type of things that we can ask for that God's going to say no to? And is it the case that if we don't ask, we won't get the answer to the prayer? And quite obviously, if you don't ask God anything in prayer, God quite naturally has got nothing to answer, so you can see the problem immediately.

However, there's three things here that I want us to pay particular attention to that I think affects your praying life more than you let on. The first is persistence. What do we mean by persistence? The second is repetition? And the third is persuasion? Now, all these things are wrapped up in prayer, and sometimes we don't quite know how they fit together or whether or not they even belong in prayer at all. Are we to pray persistently, or are we to be persistent in prayer?

Well, there is a difference between the two. To pray persistently is to literally pray without ceasing, which in one sense is true, but does that mean that we're never to be mindful of anything else, or are we to be persistent in prayer? And if we're to be persistent in prayer, for what reason are we to be persistent in prayer? You know, when Jesus teaches us to be persistent, what reason does he give us?

And that's the thing that I want us to look at this evening. Is there a difference between the two? Also, what's the difference between being persistent and being repetitious?

In other words, can you tell the difference between a persistent prayer and a repetitious prayer? Is there a difference there? And I think there's a big difference there, because I think as you look at the stories of both the man who goes to his friend at midnight, he's doing the same thing over and over and over again. He's knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking, knocking.

[ 3 : 1 3 ]     And the widow that goes to the judge, he's doing exactly the same thing over and over and over again. Is that persistence or is that repetition? Well, I think we need to figure out which is which.

And are we doing these things to somehow persuade God into answering us? As though, is that what it's really about? That the reason we are to keep knocking is to persuade God to answer us? That the reason we're to keep going to God daily is to somehow persuade God to answer us? Because if we take those stories on face value, that's the answer that you're left with. However, I don't think that's the answer that the Bible wants us to have at all. Jesus knows that people, Christians, are going to be tempted to not pray.

They're going to be tempted to give up on praying. I think they're just going to be tempted to give it in all together. And so, have you ever considered what Jesus thinks of a person who doesn't pray anymore?

What do you think Jesus does think about Christians who don't pray? And so, it might be just worth stopping this moment and asking yourself the question, I'm not going to ask you to put your hands up, but have you given up on prayer? I don't mean have you given up praying as in, you know, you do your token bit maybe once a week or maybe once a day even, but it is only a token acknowledgement like, well, because I'm a Christian, this is something that I really ought to be doing, I guess. Or because I'm a believer, then reading my Bible is something I ought to be doing. That's more of a token.

But have you given up on praying? If you have given up on praying, why have you given up on praying? Well, there are three passages here, Matthew 6, Luke 11, and Luke 18, and the intention here is to convince you and to convince me, to convince us this evening, that we're to be persistent in prayer, but more importantly, to actually know what being persistent in prayer is for.

[ 5 : 24 ] In other words, just stop and ponder the question a minute. Jesus tells you to be persistent in prayer, prayer, and the question is, what for? And you answer, well, that's the answer that we're going to try and get at. So we're going to begin here in Luke 18, verse 1. In Luke 18, verse 1, Jesus says that I'm telling the parable before I explain the parable. I'm telling you what the parable means before I tell you what the parable is. And this is a bit like being given the answer, and then Jesus then going on to explain the question. And the parable that Jesus gives us is a widow who comes to an unjust judge for justice, and you ought to be able to see the problem immediately.

What's the point in going to a judge who is unjust for justice? It ought to hit you strikingly. You can see the massive problem. Where am I going to get justice from? An unjust judge? No.

You're faced with this massive issue already. A woman who wants justice is going to an unjust judge for justice, and well, you can see the problem. How are you going to get justice from someone who is unjust? And that's the problem that we're actually meant to see. And so, Jesus says, by her continuing to come, the only reason this unjust judge answers her is to get her to go away, is to get her to not come back again. Just give her what she wants.

It's a bit like we learned in Proverbs this morning, isn't it? The, you know, not to contend with a man for no reason. Well, this woman is contending for a good reason, and so it's a different kind of issue there, but he just wants to get rid of her. And so, the only reason he gives her what she wants is not because he's just, it's not because he's good, it's because he's acting out of a pure selfish motive.

I don't want to be bothered by her ever again. And so, the reason he answers her is for his own benefit, not for her benefit, even though she does benefit in the process. But actually, what he gets out of it is far greater to him. He's no longer bothered by this woman who keeps turning up all the time, persisting him just with the same thing day in and day out. Then over in Luke 11, you have a friend who comes to another friend at midnight, and then you'll notice he goes out and he starts knocking on the door of a third friend. And he's knocking and knocking and knocking, and he says, you know, I want you to open up. I want you to come down and give me some bread, because a friend of mine has come to me at midnight, in exactly the same way I'm coming to you at midnight, and I don't have anything to give to him. Can you help me out? And the man goes, go away. I'm in bed, the children are in bed.

[ 8 : 29 ] Leave us alone. It's late already. Just go away. And so now we've got two pictures, where both the unjust judge and the man on the inside of the house are not only reluctant, but they seem to be quite selfish. And so if these parables are to teach us about being persistent in prayer, you've got a massive problem, because the people on the inside are reluctant people who don't want to answer you. And so is what we're learning that the only reason to be persistent is to somehow persuade the reluctant person on the inside to give us what we actually want?

And if that's the case, what are you saying about God? I mean, is God like that? Is God some kind of ogre that needs constantly pestering so that you can persuade him to give you what you want? I mean, is God really like the man on the inside of the house who says, go away and come back tomorrow? This is totally at the wrong time. Is God really like the unjust judge who says, the only reason you're going to get what you want is because I want rid of you?

So what's the reason for being persistent if it's not for persuading or getting what we want? You can see the problem. If you read these parables, it's persistence, and you define persistence as keep doing the same thing over and over again until you get what you want. That is not actually what either of the parables are teaching. It is, however, that you are to keep coming to God, but in both cases in Luke 11, the illustration that Jesus gives says, well, if a father who is evil even gives good things to his children, how much more will God, who's not evil, give to you? And in case of the unjust judge, the parallel is that if an unjust judge is going to give justice, then how much more is God, who's the judge of heaven and earth, who's not unjust, going to answer you, Luke 18 verse 8, speedily. So in both occasions, that the emphasis placed on God is that he is not like the reluctant insider that needs persuading to get up and give you what you want. And so if God is not reluctant to give us what we want, and he doesn't need persuading to give us what we want, why are we to be persistent in prayer? If we can ask once and God answers once, what's the point of being persistent? The trouble is, is that we can end up thinking, if we're not careful, that the only reason to be persistent is because God is somehow withholding it until we've asked him 30 times.

And once we've asked him the 31st time back, here you go. Now I know you really want it, but is that what God's like? I don't think God's like that at all. I think if you think about it for a little bit, you'll soon come to realize that God is not like the unjust judge, and God is certainly not like a friend who won't get up at midnight to give somebody else what they need. But more importantly, you'll also realize that being persistent in prayer has nothing to do, absolutely nothing to do, with repeating the same prayer over and over and over again. It has nothing to do with that.

It's not about repetition, as if we're somehow trying to persuade God to give us what he wants to give us. And so if it's not about repetition, what is persistence about? What is Jesus actually teaching us here? Well, we need to be able to get to the answer of that, and before we do, we have to go through a few objections. Here's the first objection. This is my objection. This is what I used to say all the time growing up. It was my defense for not praying. Every time, you know, the pastor would say, so have you been praying? I'd say, well, I don't need to, and here's my defense.

[ 12 : 42 ] So my defense was, well, listen to me. Just hear me out. If God's in control of everything, right, why pray? I mean, if God has predetermined everything, why pray? God knows what's going to happen. Whether I pray or not, it's really not going to make any difference at all, because God is in control of everything. You ever been in that situation? Where you say to yourself, well, whether I prayed or I didn't pray, it wouldn't make any difference, because God is in control of everything anyway. Everything would have been just the way God wants it to be. Now, think of the alternative for a moment. Just imagine, just for a split second, that God isn't in control of everything.

Why on earth would we pray then? We'd absolutely have no reason to pray whatsoever if God wasn't in control of everything. For the very simple reason, the very thing that we could be praying about could be the very thing that God has no control over. So this idea that a God who's in control of everything leads to prayerlessness is true if you don't think it through. But a God who isn't in control means that our prayers are just a waste of time, because we're praying to a God who may not be in control of everything, and we could be praying about something that we want God to have control over, and he's just going, well, I can't. It's out of my remit. I've got a big problem.

And so a sovereign God who's in control of everything actually leads us to realize that our prayers are both powerful and effective. It's that sovereign God that gives prayer its true meaning. It's the sovereign God who actually says to us, yes, I am in control of everything, even telling you to pray, and I will answer your prayers. It is much more dangerous if we have a God who's not in control of everything, because whatever we pray for, we can't be certain that any of it will ever get answered.

There's no reason to be persistent in prayer if God is not in control of everything. The only reason for being persistent in prayer is if God controls everything. Prayer changes situations. It changes circumstances down here on earth as we pray to our Father in heaven. That's what God says. God has so organized his sovereignty in such a way that it encapsulates your praying life so that it makes a difference. And if we truly grasp that God is in control of everything, it won't make us pray less. If anything, it'll make us pray far more, because now we are certain that God can do something about the very thing that we're praying about. Absolutely certain.

Another issue that needs addressing is the issue of persuasion, and this is where we pick up in Matthew 6. In Matthew 6, Jesus is warning his disciples not to pray like the pagans do, because all they are doing is piling up words upon words upon words, thinking that they can somehow persuade God by asking him the same thing over and over again. If your praying life goes something like this, please Lord, please Lord, please Lord, please Lord, please Lord, I really, really, really want it.

[16:19] You're never going to persuade God. You know, you know, God is not a human father or a human mother that can be wrapped around a child's finger just by their constant asking. God sits there quite fine, ask away. He's not going to bend his will. And so if your praying life is a bit more like pagans, are you praying like a pagan? Please Lord, please Lord, please Lord, please Lord. Jesus said, don't do that. That's how the pagans do it. You are a believer. And so your praying life looks more like that than it does like what Jesus said. All you're doing is heaping up empty phrases, thinking that you can somehow persuade God by saying it a lot or by asking it a lot, and it doesn't make a dent on what God actually will do for you. A brilliant example of this would be, if you remember the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. Do you remember? It's a test of whose God is going to turn up and answer prayer. And Elijah says, well, the prophets of Baal, you go first. And there they are. They're praying. They're saying words upon words. It's like a praying mantra.

They're just constantly repeating a whole bunch of words to somehow persuade their God who doesn't exist to turn up and do a thing that he can't possibly do because he's not even there. They even result to actually cutting themselves and scarring themselves to say, come on, God, do something about it. And he doesn't turn up. And why doesn't he turn up? Because they're praying to a God who doesn't exist.

Elijah comes along and he says one prayer and God answers. And God demonstrates his power, his sovereignty, through the one prayer of one man against all the prophets of Baal. Elijah doesn't persuade God. He just asks God. And God does it according to his will. It might also be worth pointing out at this point that actually there is an issue with repetition, but as far as I'm concerned on the whole, the balance is one-sided, that you look at the repetitious prayers of Jesus in Paul. Jesus prayed for the thorn in his flesh to be removed, sorry, for the cup to be removed from him. And God the Father turned to Jesus and says, it's not going to be removed. I'm refusing your prayer.

And Jesus asked it again and he asked it again and the same answer came back from God, total refusal. Again, Paul prayed to God that the thorn in his flesh, it was a repetitious prayer, prayed it more than once. And the same thing came back to Paul. I'm not answering your prayer. I'm refusing your prayer. My grace is sufficient for you. The question that I struggle with or the issue that I struggle with is more with Jesus than I do with Paul. I can certainly figure out with Paul is the only reason I think why you would continue to pray repetitiously is if because you're unsure of whether or not you've received the answer. Or if you have received the answer, you're like, well, maybe it'll be different this time. Right? And so you're like, well, I've got the answer. I know it was no last week, but this is a different week, Lord. Let's, let me just, maybe you've changed your mind.

And so we repeat the prayer again because we think there's, God is somehow going to be persuaded because it's a new week. It's a, it's a new day where we're a week down the road. The issue here is, is why do you repeat your prayers? Well, if you look at the man who goes to his friend at midnight, the reason for the constant repetition is because he wants to see to the need of his friend, not his own need. When you look at the widow to the judge, she is actually looking for justice.

[ 20 : 31 ] She just wants justice. She's looking for that thing in particular. And so if you are repeating prayer, that's not a persistent prayer. You're repeating it. There's a repetition there, but for what reason are you repeating it? Are you repeating it to somehow persuade God to give you what you want?

Or are you repeating it because you don't actually believe the Lord has answered you or has answered you and you just can't handle no? I don't know too many children that have grown up and have been told no and accept no on the very first time. No. What? You're joking. What you really mean? No.

No. You know, I really mean no. And then they come back an hour later and go, can I? I said no. Yeah, but I thought it'd be different. No. We just, for some reason, because of the nature of sin in us, we just can't accept no, even if the no is the very best thing for us. So now we understand that the issues and objections to persistent prayer have nothing really to do with trying to persuade God against his will. They don't really have anything much to do with a list of repetitious prayers, and they don't really have anything to do much with God being in control or not being in control.

They are objections, but what does praying persistently mean if it doesn't mean repeating the same thing over and over again for that reason? What is persistent prayer if it is not for the reason of persuading God by our much asking? And so we're going to conclude by answering it.

Look at Luke 18 verse 1 with me again. And remember why Jesus tells the parable. Jesus tells the parable, Luke 18 verse 1, for this reason. And he told them a parable to the effect that they always ought to pray and not lose heart. In other words, pray without ceasing. Be persistent in your prayer. In other words, keep praying. But what is the reason for keep praying in Luke 18 verse 1?

[ 22 : 48 ] Is it to get an answer? No. It's so that you don't lose heart. And this is seen again as we go through the passage. So we have this woman who comes to an unjust judge for justice, and the only reason she gets it is because she has been persistent in one way, but she's been persistent against an unjust judge who wants to get rid of her. God, however, on the other hand, verse 6, says, hear what the unrighteous judge says, verse 7, and will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? Verse 8, I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. He'll give it to them right away. So here we have a God who doesn't take his time in answering the prayers of his people, but answers them speedily, straight away. And so again, the reason for being persistent is because not because God is somehow slow in answering. The reasons for being persistent in prayer are found in verse 1 and the very end of verse 8. On the one hand, we are to be persistent in prayer because it is the necessary protection against losing heart in an unjust world. The story is about a woman who has come under injustice. And the reason for her persistence is telling us that that is how she didn't lose heart. She kept doing it and doing it and doing it until she got her justice. But it was the persistence of her doing it, not the result that we're to look to, but by the fact that she kept doing it was the very thing that caused her not to lose heart. And Jesus says, 8 verse 1, the sole reason for you to be persistent in prayer is not to be persistent in prayer is not to be persistent in prayer.

But actually so that you don't lose heart in an unjust world, so that you don't give up, so that you actually keep going. The temptation is for you to give up. And by being persistent in prayer in an unjust world, you are actually protecting your heart. You're protecting yourself from losing heart. You're protecting yourself from giving up. So we're continuing prayer for that reason. But notice the other reason why we're to continue in prayer. Verse 8, it says that, I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.

Nevertheless, nevertheless, this is the connection. When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on the earth? In other words, will he find people who pray? In other words, what Jesus is saying is that to be persistent in prayer is to demonstrate your faith in God. Again, being persistent in prayer has got to do nothing about getting something. It's got more to do with about remaining stable in your heart and your faith towards God. Because when Jesus turns up, are you going to be that type of person who has not lost heart and who's strong in your faith? Or is it going to be the case that when Jesus turns up, he's not going to find anybody who's got faith? The reason here, or the challenge here, is pretty straightforward.

If you have given up on praying, if you have stopped praying, then where is your faith? If you stop praying, where is your faith? Jesus is come looking. Verse 8, and he's asking the question, if you're no longer praying, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

[ 26 : 41 ] In other words, will he find people continuing to pray? To be persistent in prayer, then, is not about getting something. It's not about persuading God.

To be persistent in prayer is about not losing heart. To be persistent in prayer is practicing your faith, so that when Jesus turns up, you're actually going to have some. To be persistent in prayer is not about repetition. It's not about persuasion. It's about not losing heart.

It's about not losing your faith. It's about continuing to pray. So, if you've thought for however long that the sole reason to be persistent in prayer is somehow to get an answer, the answer to being persistent in prayer is keeping your heart safe in an unjust world, keeping you full of faith in God. That's what being persistent in prayer does. Amen.