

PERSISTENCE, Pastor Phil Strong

Text: Luke 11:1-13; Luke 18:1-8

July 17, 2016



Growth Questions

How would you respond to the following statement:

“God protects you with the pretext of need so that you may concern yourself with him more closely...” John Chrysostom

“When do you consider it appropriate to “give up”? On prayer? On God? When do you stop asking? When do you stop pressing into God for an answer?”

“What things have you stopped praying about that you used to feel were ‘just’ (right) prayers? Why did you stop? Are you convinced those things are no longer right, or you are simply tired of hearing your own whiny voice?”

“What person or situation that you have ‘long abandoned’, do you find frequenting your thoughts? How might God be attempting to reinvigorate a prayer, a desire, that you have long forsaken?”

How would you respond to the following statement:

“You must be patient until your hands are completely open.” Henri Nouwen

Teaching notes

I notice these tendencies I have in prayer: **First**, I provide God with a brief review of what’s been going on in my life, while he has, obviously, been distracted with other, more pressing, concerns. **Then**, based on my extensive knowledge and experience with such matters, I propose a means by which he might arrive at a more timely resolution for me. **Finally**, I attempt to convince God that endorsing my will is a good PR move for him, after all, I simply want God to “get the glory”, right?

At its core, prayer will always involve “request”.

“So, let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.” Hebrews 4:16

“boldly” (Gr)- *the freedom to speak openly and frankly.* It’s a hallmark of deep friendship.

I think there is a boldness, we often purport, that borders on arrogance when it comes to prayer. Our insistence often feels, to me, more like self-centered demands than humble confidence. I have discovered that God doesn’t respond to my passive-aggressive ultimatums or my threats to “run away”. In fact, historically, he has been the one to hold the door open, but the first one to welcome us home [Luke 15].

We come boldly, not arrogantly, because our need has already eliminated any false sense of entitlement we may have. Our boldness is predicated not only by our need, but our relationship with and utter confidence in the one to whom we are making our appeal.

The challenge for us all, in prayer, is that our experience has not always matched up with the text and, when that happens, we feel compelled to provide some meaningful response beyond,

“Everything happens for a reason”, or “God’s ways are not our ways”. While there may be a measure of theological truth to those statements, they dismiss people’s feelings/struggles and expose our own discomfort.

Every time we come to one of these intersections, our tendency is to delve into some remedial review of people’s experiences [e.g. not long enough, not enough faith, sin in your life]. Such a posture, I propose, has *no so subtly* left people in quiet condemnation.

I think we would all admit that the, “**Just try harder**” campaign has not proven to be a helpful strategy for faith and certainly a less than appealing slogan for prayer (although we remain quietly committed to it).

At times, we persist in prayer because we have no reason “**not to**”. We have heard enough stories about the favorable results to keep us engaged (e.g. marriages healed, daughters delivered from addiction, etc.)

But, we are also aware that there are things for which people have prayed relentlessly (‘rightly’) and simply did not experience the corresponding answer. Cancer wins, marriages end in painful separations, the alcoholic relapses (e.g. my mother: persistent; pursued all of the recommended God-paths but, in the end, succumbed to cancer). We “*lose heart*”. We “*give up*”.

These thoughts on prayer come in the form of Jesus’ favorite modality for teaching: **parables**-- little stories with a big point--- which are not directed at our intellect, but provide a journey into our hearts. I think that the most detrimental thing we can try to do is “resolve” a parable; strip them down to a moral lesson or tidy outcome. At best, we ponder.

So, given the texts before us today, we casually conclude, the point is: in the one example, we are vulnerable, God has leverage and is not obligated to us in any way. He is sovereign, but completely insensitive to our plight and can’t even be shamed into a response. Your only chance for justice is to employ “persistent badgering”.

In the other narrative, given the immutable laws of hospitality in the ancient near east, you approach the house and call out. The motion sensor light kicks on and the “digi-dog” starts barking.

Your persistence pays off. God, the crotchety neighbor, steps over the kids, opens the door and, without a word, motions you toward the kitchen and tells you to “*lock up*” on your way out.

Apparently, the best time to pray is when God is just dozing off [but you’re going to have to work out the ‘time-zone’ issues], or if I annoy God enough, he will give me what I want simply so that I will “go away”.

In reality, these are “how much more”, principles. They contrast what we know with what we think we know about God.

The teachings of the scripture (especially the parables) insist that as much as we attempt to understand God by comparing him to ourselves, he cannot be “lassoed” and “domesticated” to fit our image of him. “*If you, being evil...*” (Luke 11:13).

Persistent prayer is not to be confused with annoying, empty repetition (Matthew 6:7). The ancients believed that the gods were fairly indifferent and easily distractible and we needed to somehow secure their attention.

He will respond, he will vindicate his people (faithful: most celebrated attribute) and he always does so out of a compassionate posture. We need not attempt to appease or manipulate him, but simply make our appeals and continue to make them until we are **satisfied in him and satisfied with him**.

My prayers demonstrate that I refuse to accept things the way that they are. I want the Kingdom to come!

It validates our frustrations. It says, *“Your supposed to feel that way at injustice and violence and bigotry”*.

What I pray for, persistently, reveals the condition of my heart and what I really value in life.

It's the prayers that aren't simply 'cathartic', but the ones that survive the initial flurry of objection. This is where the “just go with your instincts” approach fails us. Prayer becomes this “proving ground” for our desires.

Such realizations cause me to either 'alter' my request or it 'strengthens my resolve.'

There are certain prayers we are willing to abort with little struggle (“just seeing if you would”, prayers).

Then, there are other prayers which are not so easily abandoned. These are prayers that we believe resonate with God's heart, as well (e.g. prayers for God to eliminate injustice, or to show mercy or capture the heart of our loved one).

Sometimes the chief failure of prayer is that we stop praying.

I usually pray just long enough to get bitter and resentful. It's my frustration and fatigue that creates its own “statute of limitations” on prayer.

As long we awaken each new day to the daily news, as long as we face conflict, as long as we are engaged in spiritual battle, as long as we need forgiveness (and to forgive), we are reminded that our persistence in prayer is not indicative of a lack of faith in God, but is the deepest expression of our trust.

Keep asking for what you are convinced is right until God does what is right, either by giving you what you desire or by re-directing your desires.

I am discovering that even when everything's going wrong, you may be right! The presence of painful and unjust circumstances does not necessarily indicate that they're self-inflicted.

“If you suffer in a manner that is pleasing to God, keep doing what is right and trust yourself to the God who created you, for he will never fail you.” 1 Peter 4:19

If you're wrong... repent. If you have to suffer, suffer the right way!

Maybe the parables say something about the persistence of God? Perhaps God's persistence is the impetus for our own.

The OT is one, rolling-narrative about the infidelity of humanity and of the persistence of God. He is often depicted as the 'jilted lover' (Hosea) who persistently pursues his faithless wife, attempting to 'woo' her and win back her affection. God refuses to accept “no” for an answer.

As we pray, God is making us fit to receive what He is already willing to do.

Prayer changes us into the kind of people who can participate in the greater work of God without becoming spoiled and demanding, or feeling so polarized that we stop seeking. We learn to present our requests to God in a way that demands surrender. We ask. We keep asking, but we are postured to receive only what God is willing to give me.

“...give the Holy Spirit to those who ask...” (Luke 11:13)

Holy Spirit? I didn't ask for that! Jesus is giving us what we needed most: himself, personally and perpetually; listening, feeling, responding.

“the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We don’t know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us...” Romans 8

God, partnering with us in prayer. God persisting. God groaning with us at the place of our pain.

**The more you see suffering and injustice around and within you,
the more troubled you become.**

The more troubled you become, the more you pray.

The more you pray, the more personally connected you are to that frustration and brokenness.

**The more connected you are to that pain,
the more allied you are to the crucified and risen Jesus.**

**The more allied you are with the resurrected Jesus,
the more compelled you are to participate in the reconciling work
into which he is drawing you.**