

The Persistent Widow

Luke 18:1-8

11.6.2016

BIG Idea: Persistent prayer is both the means and the measure of not losing heart.

INTRODUCTION

- We HATE waiting don't we? I mean has there ever been a culture in the history of the world that hates waiting for stuff more than we do? A few years ago UMass researchers studied how long people will wait on a website for a video to load. They looked at 6.7 million internet users over at 10 day period of time. The users were responsible for a total of 23million videos clicks. It turns out people start leaving after 2 seconds. And by the 10 second mark, 40% of users will bounce from the site. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/12/tech/web/video-loading-study/>
- Some of you are the 2 second people, right? We are super impatient as a culture. We don't like waiting for our websites to load, for our food to come, or for traffic lights to turn green.
- What happens when that impatience spills over into our spiritual lives? When we go to God in prayer but don't get what we ask for? It may not be a big deal if we are praying for something small but what if it is something big? What if we are really struggling and are asking God to answer our prayer in a way to help us? What if we or someone we know is really suffering and we're asking God to heal and restore?
- We are tempted to give up if we feel like God doesn't answer our prayer.
- Jesus understood that when our prayers go unanswered we are tempted to become discouraged and just give up hoping God to come through. Unlike most parables, Jesus tells us exactly why he shares it. *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.* V.1
- The BIG IDEA for today is that "Persistent prayer is both the means and the measure of not losing heart." In other words, being consistent in prayer is one of the markers that we are walking in faith but it also helps sustain our faith.
- This parable doesn't really address WHY God doesn't answer prayers but that is one of the single biggest questions I have gotten in pastoral ministry so I want to quickly highlight a few before we focus on being persistent in prayer.
- Assuming you are a follower of Christ, what are some

Reasons God doesn't answer prayer

- 1. Not walking with God** – living in habitual sin or doing your own deal with Jesus so you can live the way you want. Can't pray for peace, for joy, for God to bring you a godly spouse, and expect God to answer those things. None of us is perfect but if we are knowingly ignoring God in one area of our lives we can't pray to him for another and just believe he will answer. The bible identifies things like failing to be reconciled to another person and a failure to be a loving husband as reasons God will not answer your prayer. God is not going to join you in your self-worship.
- 2. Not the right time** – Abraham in the early OT – was told that God would give him a child but he waited 25 years for that to happen. We see consistently throughout Scripture that God has HIS timing and people have their own. They don't coincide a lot. Sometimes we are praying for the right thing but it is not the right time. God is not saying "no" as much as he is saying, "not now." So, what seems like God not answering is God saying it is not the right moment. An old African American minister once said, "The Lord may not come when you want Him, but He's always on time."

3. Not the right thing – Sometimes we pray for something that is not the right thing. We pray for wealth, success, power, influence, or something else and we its not out of some holy desire to be able to boldly proclaim Christ when we get it. "God give me a Ferrari and I'll tell everyone how awesome you are." I'm being facetious. It may not be Ferrari but sometimes we pray for the wrong thing and we don't get it because that's not how God works. We aren't praying to walk closer with Christ, be faithful to him, and to live on mission, instead we are praying for something for US and our kingdom. Sometimes what we pray for is selfish so God doesn't answer that prayer.

4. Not the "right" answer - God does not always answer our prayers in the way that we desire. Indeed, we may never learn the how and why of God's will. Why we prayed for one thing and instead got something else. He didn't answer our prayer the way we thought he should. He gives us what we need but not what we wanted. Our faith is tested as we struggle to find contentment in the answer God gives us.

5. Not in line with God's sovereign plan – sometimes what we pray for, even though it is a good thing and we pray for it a lot, just isn't part of God's sovereign plan. This is the hardest one because while we can sometimes discern the other reasons God is not answering our prayer, this one is exceedingly difficult to grasp in the moment. Jesus, on the night he was arrested to be crucified the next day, he prayed "*God let this cup pass from me.*" He ASKED his father to take it away. But then he prayed, "*Nonetheless, not my will but your will be done.*" It is so hard to pray that when it seems the only good thing could be for God to give you what you ask for. But it is TRUSTING God. It is an act of faith and that's why its important.

- I wanted to hit this stuff before we dive into the parable because we all struggle from time-to-time in making sense when God doesn't answer prayer the way that we think is best.
- It is important to note that this prayer is not about prayer in general but in relation to perseverance. Jesus had been addressing his second coming in Luke 17. He is telling this parable to challenge us to "*pray and not lose heart,*" even when we struggle and doubt. Prayer is the means and the measure of not losing heart.

Don't lose heart because...

1. God is not like the unjust judge... He's Just and Gracious

•Let's look at the judge...

•v.2 *In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.*

•If we put ourselves in the position of Jesus' listeners it is helpful. The Jewish people who are hearing this story are saying, "Uh oh." If you are an attorney, if you are judge-shopping, this is not the judge you want to give your client justice and mercy. This judge does not fear God and does not respect people. Jesus' hearers would have thought, "Okay, whoever's going into this judge's courtroom is in trouble." And this is a story to encourage the disciples to pray and not lose heart??? Yes it is. Hang in there!

•Scholars believe that this judge may have served as a local secular administrative office. Because of that he would be approached by those who could not bring their cases to the high religious court. Being easily accessible and having the authority to make quick decisions, he would naturally be besieged by people such as the widow of the story.

•Now, God is like this judge in one sense... he has authority to bring justice. But the REAL point is that God is NOT like this judge. God is not slow to bring justice nor is he indifferent to you. The judge didn't really care about the widow. He didn't fear God nor respect man. He was an unjust judge.

- Jesus is saying, "Your God is not like that unjust judge." Look at how He says it in v.7 "*Will not God give justice to His elect who cry to Him day and night?*" Jesus is painting a contrast. If this judge, for his own selfish reasons, will give this widow justice, will not your God, your loving Heavenly Father, will not He give you justice?
 - God is far more interested in coming to us in our need than we are to go to him. He is more ready to hear our prayers than we are ready to pray them.
 - This judge had NO real concern for justice but God cares deeply about justice. Jesus is saying that one reason to pray and not lose heart is that God is NOT like this unjust judge, he's just AND gracious. He's NOT reluctant to bring justice to his elect.
 - In fact the picture we get of the end of the world is God bringing justice to the entire world. Revelation pictures God punishing the ungodly and restoring all that is broken in this world. It is literally global justice and God let the Apostle John see it so he could write it down and we could have it today.
 - One day in a moment God will speedily undo every injustice and justice will rule in God's eternal kingdom.
 - When you feel like injustice is ruling in this world or you are suffering under injustice at work or in your relationships, don't lose heart. Continue to pray because prayer expresses your faith in God's inherent Justness and will help you not lose heart.
 - God is NOT like the unjust judge... he IS Just and Gracious.
- 2. You are not like the persistent widow... You're dearly loved**
- Let's talk about what she is like and then you can see how you are like her but not really...
 - Life had dealt this woman a terrible blow. Her situation was similar to Naomi in the book of Ruth. Naomi had just lost her husband and her two sons. She told people, "*Don't call me Naomi.... Call me Mara ["bitter"], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi ["pleasant"]? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me*" (Ruth 1:20-21).
 - Widows were among the most defenseless in society during Jesus' life. The Old Testament refers to their being oppressed and taken advantage of. They were often legal victims, meaning people legally abused them, and this was the case for this poor widow Jesus tells the parable about. Later in Luke Jesus describes evil men who "devour widows' houses" (20:47). In her case, since her husband was dead and she couldn't own property someone may have been taking her home and all her husband's land away from her.
 - The poor woman did not want vengeance—just restorative justice, so she goes to the judge and does it over and over again!
 - You're supposed to be like that widow in her persistence. In fact, she's a picture of persistence in prayer. She was getting no answer and she kept pounding on the door until she got an answer. So Jesus is picturing her positively to us as an example of persistence in prayer.
 - There is also another important way in which you are NOT like that widow. You see, you are in a different position than you perceive yourself to be in when you are in despair. When you are without hope and you can't even get a prayer out of your throat, you think you're in the position of that widow with no resources and no influence, but you're not.
 - You may FEEL like the widow... you're feeling the weight of our broken world and you are praying and praying and praying but you feel you have no leg to stand on and you're not even sure God is interested in you or your prayer. You may look at your life, and your ongoing struggle with sin and wonder, "Why would God even answer me?"

- Jesus is encouraging us to persevere in prayer because if this uncaring judge ended up answering this helpless widow because she kept asking, how much more will God answer you as his child?"
- vv.7-8 *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.*
- There will be a day when Christ will bring justice to his children in the blink of an eye. It may not be immediate but it is imminent. "Speedily" doesn't mean from our perspective but from God's. It could be better understood to mean "suddenly."
- How can we know that he WILL come through and that we aren't just beating on a door with no one on the other side?
- Romans 8:31-32 *"If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* We may not understand why God doesn't give us in this moment what we are praying for but we CAN know that he has already given his Son for us!
- GOSPEL – Before the foundation of the world God chose you IN LOVE to be his child, to be adopted into his family. He then sent Jesus into the world in the fullness of time to give his life for you on the cross so you could be completely forgiven - fully, freely and forever. That sin and death would never have a grip on you again. And he did that to give you life WITH him forever.
- Romans and 1 Thess both begin with a phrase describing EVERY Christian and it is one that keeps rolling around in my head: *"loved by God."* Could we just say that OUTLOUD, "loved by God!" How many of us struggle to feel that at times?
- I KNOW we don't always feel that. I know we blow it or get anxious or discouraged and we struggle to feel it but the assurance is that we ARE loved by God... today in all your imperfections and your weaknesses, you are loved by God. Today with all your struggles and doubts, you are loved by God. And you can know it because of the cross.

3. Persistent prayer is an expression of faith... in Jesus and his return

- vv.7-8 *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?"*
- Jesus' last question gives a clue as to what he is saying right before it. When he returns will he find faith? Not faith in general but faith IN Him. What does faith on the earth look like prior to Jesus returning?
- It is those *"who cry out to him day and night."* They cry out because they BELIEVE. They believe he is king of kings and Lord of Lords. They look at world that screams at them "Jesus isn't real" and they believe. They live a counter-cultural life in this world because they are living for the world to come.
- They have faith in God and their prayers bolster this faith even if God doesn't answer in the moment. Like the widow they keep going to God because they KNOW justice is in his hands and that he CAN answer when he is ready.
- Jesus' point – keep asking! It shows your faith persistent prayer is both the means and the measure of not losing heart.
- Jesus said in Matthew 7:7-11 *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil,*

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

- Praying this takes faith but it also takes perseverance. The verbs are all in the present continuous form in the Greek - *Keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking...*
- Why do you have to keep doing it? Because the answer doesn't always come quickly.
- Some of the greatest characters in Scripture struggled in times when God didn't seem to answer them but they persevered in praying and those prayers helped sustain him.
- Job: *"I cry to you for help and you do not answer me; I stand, and you only look at me."* (Job 30:20) We know from a few chapters later in Job that it is not God delivering Job that gives Job peace. It is God revealing his character. Job just needed to be reminded of who God is.
- King David: *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest."* (Psalm 22:1-2)
- Jesus quoted these verses on the cross. God didn't answer him in that moment but 3 days later God did raise Jesus from the grave because death could not hold him. His victory over sin and death was complete. The greatest victory ever achieved in the history was achieved in a moment when our own Savior didn't get an answer to his prayer.
- Prayer is, in itself an act of faith and can build our faith even if we don't get the answer we want.
- The reason is that prayer is not simply telling God what's going on in your life. It's fundamentally communing with God. It is getting a glimpse of God. This is why we need to connect God's Word with prayer. God's Word is the field guide for seeing and communing with God.
- Persistent prayer demonstrates an abiding faith in God. It is believing that while he doesn't answer that doesn't mean he won't answer or that he doesn't care. It is TRUSTING in God's character, God's knowledge, and his power.
- I was in NYC this week. There is something utterly amazing about NYC but I am so grateful God called me to Boston. I was working a hotel lobby in midtown on Thursday morning. There were 50 people sitting within just a few dozen feet from me. I heard accents and languages from all over the world. Then I stepped back out on the street – hundreds and hundreds of people within a block or two on the street. IF I believe in a God that knows ALL of them on the deepest and most profound level imaginable, he knows their past, present and future, then I know a God who may have reasons for withholding something from me that I can't comprehend. And it will ultimately make sense when he returns.
- Important that we NEED each other in the meantime. We need to pray with other Christians and need to encourage each other's faith. For some of you, getting involved in one of our community groups is the first step. Others of you are in groups but not opening up fully about your struggles. Our faith grows best in Jesus' family. And as we walk with each other through sorrowful times, we together look to the awesome day of his return.

CONCLUSION

- ILL - Cubs - winning took 108 years. Officials estimate that 5 million people showed up to the Chicago Cubs parade and rally Friday, making it the 7th largest gathering in human history. It was an insane and awesome celebration.
- It really took endurance and faith from the organization and the fans but it was glorious wasn't it? Would any Cubs fan trade that moment? Weren't all of the 108 years swallowed up in that moment? That's a tiny, tiny picture of Jesus' return.
 - Will the Son of Man find faith on the earth when he returns?* Will we persevere in prayer and faith?
 - Communion is backward-forward looking act... back at the cross, forward too his return...

- *"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." 1 Corinthians 11:23-26*

COMMUNION

PEOPLE IN BACK TO PRAY WITH YOU

***Unless otherwise notes, all verses are taken from the *English Standard Version*, copyright 2000, Crossway Books;