

Persistence In Prayer

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Last week we talked about Psalm 46 and in particular reflected on what it means for God to be our refuge, strength, and very present help in time of need. I really hope that you have spent some time meditating on that passage of Scripture this week and that it has given you a measure of peace and confidence even in the middle of difficult circumstances.

Today I want to explore a topic related to Psalm 46, which is persistence in prayer. How are those two things related? When you truly believe that God is your strength, your refuge, and your help, then you're going to pray. If you're hungry, you go to the kitchen because you know that's where you're going to find food, right? If God provides your protection, then when you're in danger you'll go to him. If God provides your strength, then when you're weak, you're going to go to him. If God is your help, then you'll go to him when you're in need of help. So let's read Luke 11:5-13 and see what Jesus has to say about persistence in prayer.

Unexpected Company (Luke 11:5-8)

⁵Then he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread,'⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.'⁷"Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'⁸I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give

him as much as he needs."

In this story, we find two neighbors who have a good relationship, which is put to the test when one neighbor has a friend who arrives late at night and he has no food to offer his guest. The story doesn't tell us whether the man knew he had company coming and just didn't prepare, or whether the guest showed up unexpectedly. Either way, in a culture that made bread without preservatives and placed a premium on hospitality but didn't have 24-hour grocery stores, this was a really big problem. Rather than lose face by having his friend go to bed hungry, the man runs next door to his neighbor's house and pesters him for bread. "Hey, Joe, give me some bread."

As you would expect, Joe wasn't thrilled about being disturbed at that late hour. One, he already locked the door, which was far more time-consuming than the simple turn of a deadbolt. So he would have to undo whatever he had done to secure the door. Two, his kids were already in bed with him and they were asleep. Until very recently in human history, small children just slept in bed with their parents. A single family didn't own a three bedroom house. A three bedroom house was a three-family house. In order for the man to get bread for his neighbor, the neighbor would have to try to get out of bed without waking up his children, get the bread, unlock the door, open the door, re-lock the door, and then get back into bed with his by now wide awake children. Therefore, no one is offended or surprised when Joe says, "Leave me alone."

Being the master student of human nature, Jesus recognized that Joe, the neighbor, wouldn't get up and give his friend the bread because he was Joe's friend, but he would get up and give him the bread because he just kept asking. So what's the difference between having bread and not having bread to give to

your guests? The NIV says boldness. Let me give you a few other translations and I think you'll get the idea of what Jesus is saying.

The New Living Translation translates this quality as, "shameless persistence." The English Standard Version translates it, "impudence." Others translate it as shamelessness or persistence. In other words, this man's boldness led him to ask for bread, and his persistence kept him at the door arguing with Joe until he got it. TS: So what do we learn from that? I think there are several principles we can take away from this.

One, it means we persist in asking God to intervene on our behalf even when the door does not immediately open. In this story, the man had a need and he continued to make his need known, even when the door remained closed. When it comes to praying about personal needs, I sometimes think that the measure of our faith can be determined by the length of our attention span. When God doesn't immediately respond to our requests, do we just let it go and say, "well, I guess it wasn't God's will." Or do we double down on our prayers? Do we keep asking and keep knocking on the door? If it's not God's will to answer your prayer in the way you pray it, he'll show you and help you to pray according to his will and answer your prayer.

Two, this boldness shows itself in the humility required to set aside our pride and do whatever it takes to have our needs met. When the depth of our need outweighs our pride, we're willing to go asking, even when the door is locked and the kids are in bed and everyone else says, "I'd be way too embarrassed to do that!" It's like all the sick, lame, and blind people who came to Jesus in spite of everyone who tried to keep them away—their pride went out the window and they shamelessly pursued the one who could meet their need. Are you willing to shamelessly persist, even

when others with better manners, walk away with their needs unmet?

The point in this parable is not that God is hesitant to answer our prayers, or that he wants us to beg him, but that he wants his people to ask him for help and persist in their asking as though they really believed that he was their source of provision and protection and help. At this point, Jesus leaves the story behind and talks openly with his disciples about prayer.

Ask, Seek, Knock (vv 9-10)

⁹So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened."

Without getting into the weeds, let me point out that while the translation ask, seek, and knock is a legitimate way to render the Greek of Luke 11:9, it misses an important element of these verbs: they are not one time commands, but commands to repeatedly ask, repeatedly seek, and repeatedly knock. So, for instance, the New Living Translation reads, "And so I tell you, keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you." And of course that makes perfect sense when you remember that Jesus just finished telling the story of a man who received what he asked for because he kept asking, seeking, and knocking.

When Jesus told his disciples to "ask, seek, and knock," he wasn't giving them a one-time homework assignment. Jesus was actually commanding his disciples to be askers, seekers, and knockers—to persist in prayer even when they didn't see immediate movement.

To casually ask God for this, that, and the other, turns our prayers into a spiritual drive-thru where we come to expect prompt service and a bag full of exactly what we ordered. That's not prayer. If God is our refuge, strength, and very present help in time of trouble, then we should pray and keep praying until there is breakthrough.

Despite the struggle of persisting in prayer, Jesus offers hope to his disciples. He tells them that if they will persist in bold prayer, that God will answer their prayers. If they keep asking, they will receive—not always exactly what they thought they would receive or how they thought they would receive or when they hoped to get it—but God will provide for his people. So also for seeking and knocking. God is still God and as such he defies our best attempts to come up with a formula for what he will do, but he will provide for his people. God wants us to engage with him in prayer—to get serious about it. Before we bring this to a close, let me read one more passage of Scripture.

Unjust Judges (Luke 18:1-6)

Luke 18:1-6 says *“¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says.”*

I want to close with this passage because I won't have time to preach on it any time soon and it's such a great parallel to Luke 11. And I

also want to close with it because both of these passages on persistence can be taken the wrong way. Think about it, the neighbor gave bread to the man with unexpected guests only because of his shameless persistence. So if we keep knocking, God will get tired of us bugging him and give us what we want? The judge in this story only gave the woman justice because she was driving him out of his mind. She was at his house in the morning, along the road on the way to work, at the sandwich shop over his lunch break, back on the road on the way home, and so on. So if we ask God enough to make him want to get rid of us then he'll give us what we need?

Not at all. In these parables, Jesus is interested in the attitude and actions of the askers; he's not saying anything about God's attitude toward us. So, here's another way to say it: God wants us to ask him for help with the same persistence and boldness as the man with unexpected company or the widow trying to get justice. If we really believe that God is the source of our provision and protection (Psalm 46), and if we really believe that God will provide for us and protect us, then why would we not persist in bold prayer? Our trust in God's goodness and faithfulness can often be measured by our persistence and boldness in prayer.

Conclusion

So what do we conclude from all of this? First, boldly persisting in prayer requires confidence in God's goodness and faithfulness. As fallen human beings we often struggle to trust in God's goodness. We often struggle to believe that God will be faithful. If we are going to boldly persist in prayer, we must believe that God is good and faithful and that he will do what he said he would do. Otherwise, we'll toss up a prayer here and there but as soon as nothing happens, we'll go about trying to find other solutions.

Second, we should make bold, persistent prayer a habit. We can't experience God's provision the way he wants us to unless we're willing to persist in prayer until our needs have been met. Sometimes that will take longer than we would like. But God's ways are perfect and his timing is perfect and if we want to do things his way and experience his provision, then we have to continue to ask him for what we need.

Application

So my question to you is quite simple: what have you stopped praying for? What have you given up on? What have you decided God's not interested in? If faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, then you can choose to put your trust in God even when you don't have your answer yet. So don't quit praying. If you have, start again. And find someone to pray with you and for you.



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