

Prayer and Persistence

How to Pray

John W. Ritenbaugh

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*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

Most of us who have attended church or Sunday school have learned that prayer in our childhood days. Maybe after we learned that one, we advanced to the "Lord's Prayer." It is very possible that through much of our life we never got much of any other kind of prayer out to God, either that one or the "Lord's Prayer." I think we need to ask the question: Are they really prayers?

What is a prayer? I would have to say that yes they are a prayer, but hardly the kind of prayers, that I understand from God's Word, that He wants to hear coming from us. In reality, they are not much better than the prayer wheels and chants of the pagans.

Jesus said very clearly to avoid vain repetition. This is a prayer that never advances anywhere; they never go anywhere. It is the same thing over and over again. Maybe God appreciates that prayer on the level that they are praying to Him, that they are capable of; nonetheless, it is not the kind of prayer that if *you* were God you would want to be hearing all of the time.

The last three sermons have been on various aspects of prayer. The first one had to do with Faith in Prayer. And I want us to begin this sermon in Matthew 21: 20-22.

Matthew 21:21-22 So Jesus answered and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."

You might connect this to Hebrews 11: 6 where it says that he that comes to Him must believe that He is. Our relationship with God has to go beyond that. God has a personality. He is a real personality. He is a personality whose attributes are revealed by what He does.

All around us, in the Creation, we see evidence of His eternal power and Godhead. We see awesome beauty. We see power, loving concern in the way that He provides. Even from time to time we can see some humor. Who can look at a duck-billed platypus and not get a little bit of a smile? The animal looks confused. God was having a little bit of fun.

We are not praying to a cardboard cutout or an ephemeral blob, but an eternally living and

dynamic Being whose greatest creation is being performed in us as we yield to Him. He desires not just to have a family but a Family in His image. Remember this. Because prayer has to do with the purpose that God is working out. He wants to have a family that is in His image with which He can spend eternity living and working.

All the faith in the world will not get our request from God if it is not according to His will or if He does not care one way or the other whether you get the thing you are requesting. Do you think that cannot happen? I think it happens a lot.

We may pray to God, "I would like to work at such and such a place, and I would like to be such and such a thing working at such and such a place." But God may not care whether you ever work there or not. His purpose can be worked out in you whether you work here or you work there. And so He does not care, and so maybe He will not respond.

We wait for Him to respond when it is not within His province whether you work one place or the other. That is a decision you are fully capable of making yourself. He may not answer because He wants to see what kind of a decision you are going to make!

I think there are many times when we pray to God asking for things that are fully within our own ability to accomplish. God generally does for us what we are unable to do by ourselves, but many things that we ask of Him are well within our own powers.

Consider this. We cannot pay the penalty for sin unless we die. We do not want to die. God does not want us to die. So that is something He will do for us. When we ask for forgiveness, He very generously does this because it is something that only He can do.

We can ask that He grant us repentance. So God will very likely maneuver events in our lives so that we begin to feel a very deep sense of sorrow either about something that we have done or about something that we are. Maybe sorrow will begin to overwhelm us.

But did you ever notice in II Corinthians 7 there is a sorrow that is Godly and there is a sorrow that is of this world? God can lead us to the place where there is sorrow, but if we are unwilling to make the sacrifice required to make the change—from one who is sinning to one who is no longer sinning—has God been a failure—when He really did what we asked?

He led us to repentance, but because we were unwilling to do our part, then it is very easy for us to look upon Him as not having answered our prayer.

Let's look at something more positive than that. What if we asked God for love? That is a very legitimate, wonderful request to make of God. We might say it is His primary attribute. If there is anything God wants to give to us, it is His love. He tells us that His love is shed abroad in our heart by His Holy Spirit. That is a wonderful request to make of Him.

Unfortunately, humanly we are encumbered with a very strong concept about love that revolves around a feeling. The love of God also has a feeling with it, but the love of God is an action as well. It is feeling and action.

If we have the feeling, the desire for love, but we do not take the action required to actually put that feeling into operation, has God failed? Has He really answered our prayer? We have been unaware because we have not been willing to do our part in following through in doing the

things that will really cause the love to be working in our lives.

Suppose you ask God for more joy. Here is the second fruit of God's Spirit: Love, Joy. A wonderful thing to ask God for. He wants us to have a sense of well-being about ourselves. Not that we are giddily happy like a fool. That is not what He is talking about.

There is a steady sense of well-being to our life that everything is going to work out all right. One will have problems, yet there is a general sense of good feeling about life, about God, about the future. We have hope, therefore, a kind of joy. But what if your level of joy after praying never changes?

I have heard people say in response to something that came up in a conversation, "*But I do not feel like doing those things!*" (Those things that would spread joy.) "*I don't feel like doing it!*" That is the point. Of course we do not feel like doing those things. That is why we ask for them.

We say then in justification, wouldn't that be a lie to just put on a happy face and be up so we can make others feel up? No it is not. It is learning a new skill that has every opportunity to become a habit, and if a habit then part of our character and personality.

Since you know this joy is God's way, the way He wants us to be. And [you know] that joy is a fruit of His Spirit. You ask Him for it and understand that you never would have sought this, in the way that you did, except because of your relationship with Him, the dynamic for producing this joy, a fruit of His Spirit, is His grace. *His* grace. *His* gifts. Therefore, it becomes an extension of His nature, of His righteousness. (Righteousness merely means right doing.) It becomes an extension of His nature, of His righteousness in us, and it is not wrong to do this.

Did not Christ say that we must love our enemies? Sure He did. Have you ever loved your enemy? I mean, feel good about that person? Yet it is something that He says we must do, that is love those people.

It is still an act of faith, when we have requested something like this of God, to make yourself do what you can to achieve the very thing that you have asked for. God will supply the very things we have asked for as we make the effort. Please remember that. It is a part, an aspect, of His salvation. As we make the effort, God will answer the prayer. Faith works toward what it asks for while it waits. "Faith without works is dead."

If we ask God for love in faith, believing, then we better begin to take actions to love others. If we ask for joy, we better begin to fill our life with joy by working on making others feel up and positive and hopeful. And God will supply *while* you are doing it. That is what He does—until what He is becomes a part of us. It is His joy in us, and we have done it because of the relationship, because we want to please Him, and because we know that this is the way that He wants us to be.

The second sermon was on prayer and fervency. God wants us to put our hearts into our prayers. Much of this fervency arises because of love for Him and the brethren. The quality of our fellowship with one another influences this facet of prayer very strongly.

Remember how Paul said *twice*, in the Book of Hebrews, that we were to use our time together to stir one another up, to exhort, to arouse to love. If we do not walk by faith here, and we look

at each other as merely other humans with faults, prayers are not going to mean very much to God.

Our fellowship always has to be with the understanding that this person has faults, that person has faults, and I have faults. Therefore what we are concerned about, just like God is concerned, is the potential. That person has the potential to be a God-being just like God.

We are all in various stages of growth. We are all encumbered with sin. All of us have character flaws. All of us have failed to grow in the way that we should. So our fellowship has to be done with that understanding. But if we look at others carnally, I guarantee that you are going to find plenty in people to get upset about because the flaws are there—just like the flaws are in you. None of us stands perfect before God.

If we look at people carnally, I will tell you what we will do. Instead of looking at people for their potential, because Christ lives in them, and love them because of their potential, we will look at them as nothing more than competition for influence and leadership in the congregation. We will categorize them into boxes: those we want to fellowship with and those we do not want to fellowship with. We will categorize some people as being nothing—maybe not even dignified enough to be called a brother.

We will categorize other people as being nothing more than a bother, somebody who always seems to be causing trouble. We might say of others, "*Well, they are part of a clique and they are a stooge for somebody else*" We will, in all probability, do all that we can to avoid fellowship with those people. Here goes the effectiveness of your prayers.

How can we exhort one another to love... with that attitude or doing those kinds of things. We are not even showing the kind of love that we should toward that brother? Do you know what this is? It is using people for your own advantage. You only want to fellowship with those who make *you* feel good. That is selfish. It is self-centered. That is not the love of God.

Now look around you. Each person is somebody Christ died for and is living in. If they meant that much to Christ that He gave His life for them, then we ought to begin working toward being a real brother to them.

Our prayers will be affected positively if we do this, and because we love the brethren, God will respond. I can guarantee that on the authority of the book of I John. He said someone who does not love his brother is a murderer. And you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

Sometimes this can be very tough. Sometimes fellowshipping with somebody that we do not really want to fellowship with is very hard on the ego. It is worth it. What it will do is that it will create in us awareness of need, an awareness of their need, and an awareness of our own need to have the love to really fellowship with this person.

Now, what does awareness of need do? It creates desire. And the desire creates not just prayer but earnest, fervent prayer largely dependent on the quality of the fellowship with God and men.

Everybody is familiar with what is mentioned in James the 5th chapter in verses 14-15, [the verse] about the effectual, fervent prayer that Elijah made. If you want to read about that, it is

in I Kings 18 (I believe that is the chapter) right toward the end of the chapter. When he prayed that prayer that James is referring to there, he did not do it out of irritation. He did not do it out of petulance. He did it out of a sincere concern for God's people and for God Himself. He did it because he loved his fellow Israelites, and He asked for God to respond in a way that might bring about repentance.

In the one case, he prayed that it would not rain for three and a half years so that maybe people would be able to make the connection between God supplying the water—and His supplying it—so that they could live.

Then the next time he prayed, he prayed seven times. God did not answer him the first time, the second time, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, and finally the seventh time. Apparently each time it was just as fervent as the time before, and finally God responded.

The third sermon was on seeking God. This is especially important to us because we are in the midst of an age of apathy toward God. But we found that seeking God does not have to do with searching in order to find Him, but turning to Him that we might be like Him.

It is this step that is the primary one in creating the awareness of need. It is very easy for us to read His word and say, *"Yes, isn't He a wonderful person. I would sure like to be like Him."* (This is God I am talking about.) The chances are very great that this is as far as the awareness of need will go with most of the people in the world. Hopefully, it is not that way in the church.

But when we strive with all of our might to be like Him, it begins to become apparent how far we are from being like Him. And if we love God, we are going to make every effort to be like Him. It means seeking Him with all of our being because we want to please Him.

So awareness of need will be created. The need creates the desire to pray, asking for God's help. The prayer goes a long way in building the relationship. And the relationship continues the cycle by making us aware of more needs.

So when Amos said in Amos 5, "Seek God and live!" He meant live in two ways. First of all in the sense of Matthew 4: 4 that "man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds forth out of the mouth of God." Live is used there as a sense of Godlike quality available here and now. God's way adds a quality to life not available to us humanly. The second sense is in the sense of John 17: 3 where Jesus said, "Eternal life is to know God," thus to live eternally with that quality and even better. Let's go to Luke the 11th chapter as we move further into the subject for today.

Luke 11:5-13 And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'? I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many as he needs. So I say to you, 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 he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

This section contains instruction that is very important to praying effectively. Verse 9 is written in the present imperative tense. It means to keep on doing something that you are presently doing. *Keep on asking.* " *Keep on seeking.* " *Keep on knocking.* " That fits exactly with what precedes it with the illustration of the persistent friend. Let's reread verse 13.

Luke 5:13 "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Let's not misunderstand here. It would be very easy to assume from this that somehow or another we must be persistent in order to cajole God into giving things to us. That is not the lesson.

Notice, God is "much more" willing than a man is to give gifts to his son. If a man is willing to give gifts to his son, then God is even more willing to give gifts. God does not have to be argued into kind of opening up His hand and giving us what it is that we ask for. Being persistent means something else entirely. God is not unwilling to respond. Being persistent is not required because He is not hearing us.

You might remember another parable that appears in Luke 18. Let's turn there. And then we are going to return to Luke 11. In this parable, Jesus said that men ought always to pray and not give up. Let's look at the first seven or eight verses here.

Luke 18:1-8 Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, [The King James says, "and faint not," meaning do not give up.] saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

This parable is especially important because its purpose concerns those of us alive *right now* far more than it did to those people to whom He spake it. It has to do with people living at the end time. "When the Son of man comes will He find faith?"

Notice the verse right before that. "And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?" He is talking about people living at the time of the end, the worst period of time this earth has ever seen. The only other times that compare to it are the days of Noah. And you know what happened in Noah's day. God wiped every living soul off the face of the earth except for eight people and the animals that were there in the ark.

Only this time, because of His elect, He is not going to allow the earth to go through a destruction like that. But it illustrates to you and me the kind of times in which we are living. We are living in a time in which distraction is on every side.

We are living in times when there are invitations to sin coming at us from every direction—whether it is on television, in the movies, in books. All we have to do is walk out on the street. We are surrounded by it, immersed in it. It is everywhere we look. There are temptations to drag us away from God.

I am sure that Christ is looking forward here to the time—because the word says avenge, "take vengeance,"—that He is talking about a time when people may be even being put to death. If they are not being put to death, maybe their property is being taken away from them. If they are not being put to death, maybe they are being rounded up by the Christians' enemies and being put in detention camps somewhere.

Things are going on out there that Christ is warning us that we better be praying at the end. He says we better not be giving up in praying at the end—because we are going to be subject to forces that have never hit this earth before. These things are going to be trying, with all of their power, to rip us away from God, to rip us away from this way of life, to rip us away from God's truth. And our salvation is going to be through prayer—persistent prayer to God: that He intervene, that He provide for us, that He give us a salvation, that He make it possible for us to deflect all of the distractions that are taking place.

Again, the lesson of this parable in Luke 18 is not that we need to pester God, but we do need to learn to wait on God and keep praying all the while that we are waiting. We have to pray to Him knowing (and knowing that we know) that He moves in a different time frame from us. To Him, a thousand years is as a day, and a day is as a thousand years.

It is not that way for you and me. As I get older, it seems as though the movement of time is accelerating. It is going faster and faster. What that does is that we feel that our requests need to be answered quickly. Do you know why?

It is not a matter that we are just covetous and selfish, but I think that there is a justifiable feeling within us, a sense of not being in control. That life is reeling out, and we are helpless before the movement of events.

What we have to remember is that God, who moves in this different time frame, has everything under control. That even death is subject to Him. He proved that with Jesus. Nothing is ever out

of God's control.

Why does God delay? Why does He want us to be persistent while He delays? It is very important, brethren, that He delays. It is very important that we be persistent.

The first thing that we will consider just briefly is that He indeed might be saying "No" to our request. I think that most often simply because the request is either selfish or it is something that we can do for ourselves.

But assuming that it is a request that is according to His will and He is going to grant it, then He is either testing our faith or He is testing the sincerity of our request. Is this just merely a wish that we are just asking of a Genie or is it something that we really want? Or, three, it is simply something that He cannot do now because it would not be good for all concerned.

What Christ is doing in this parable is He is saying, "*Do not give up!*" He is trying to assure us that even though God is delaying, *He is hearing*, and He will take action. Be assured, He will do it! I will read you a Psalm, at least a verse in a Psalm, a little bit later.

Back to Luke 11. When we pray to God, God is not putting us off because we are irritating Him. He does not mock us, mock our prayers, by giving us a shabby substitute for what we have asked. God will not give a stone for a piece of bread. God will not substitute a scorpion for an egg. God will give us what we ask for!

Do we believe that? I can guarantee you that when He gives it, it is going to be more and better than we asked for—because He is generous that way. Do you know that in the Psalms that it says that He wants to give us our heart's desire? That is pretty broad. He is not trying to withhold things from us. He will never do anything that would be hurtful to His purpose for us.

God is not putting us off. And He does not mock our prayers by supplying a substitute. He tells us here through Christ that even ungenerous humans give good gifts. Actually, the word would be better translated "wholesome" things.

God gives gifts that will meet the need not only for the present but for all eternity as well—and it is most likely, Luke says, going to be something of His Spirit that we can carry through the grave and on into His kingdom.

So God will always answer our prayers in His way, but sometimes, brethren, we ask for things that would be ruinous to us. That is why He has to answer in His way. So He overrules us for the time being.

This section here in Luke 11:1-13 is devoted to one major objective—to do to instruct us concerning our perception of God the Father. Number one, He is not a reluctant stranger who can be bullied into bestowing His many gifts simply because of our many words. That is not the issue for being persistent.

Number two, He is not a malicious tyrant who takes vicious glee in the tricks that He plays on His subjects—by giving a scorpion rather than an egg.

Number three, He is not an indulgent grandfather who provides everything that is requested of Him. He does not spoil His children.

Number Four, He is our heavenly Father who graciously and willingly bestows good gifts when they are needed in answer to prayer. The key thing is "*the good gifts when they are needed.*"

Did you ever stop to think that the good gifts may come a little bit at a time? Sometimes, we are not even aware that it is occurring. Yet He has been supplying the very thing that we asked for. But somehow or another we are not sharp enough spiritually to see it.

That parable there makes clear one aspect of why we must be persistent in prayer, but there is another aspect of why we must be persistent. That has to do with our perceptions of God's power, His purpose, and how our requests fit into those two.

Unfortunately, we often misunderstand God's role as Creator and tend to think of Him narrowly as being our Benefactor. He is both. He is both Benefactor and Creator. However, we tend to emphasize the benefactor aspect while He tends to emphasize the creator aspect. So when we feel a need, and the desire is great because we feel that the need is urgent, we want the desire filled immediately because we see that as the answer.

Indeed, we may be absolutely correct that it is the answer, and what we are asking for is good in God's eyes, it is according to His will. But there is more to our request from God's point of view than from ours.

Remember what I said earlier. He lives in a different time frame than we do. Time does not mean the same thing. It is not only that. His perception of our request is different—because He is looking at it from the standpoint, or the vantage point, of His purpose rather than from the one you are looking. That is, to have relief, or to have this strength, or gift, or power so that you might be able to serve Him better. The request is good. It is justified. But God is still looking at it differently from what we are. Let's go back in the book of Proverbs all the way to Proverbs 2: 1-9.

Proverbs 2:1-5 My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you [This person is seeking God], So that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding [Now, obviously the person is praying. He is lifting up his voice, making a request to God, for wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and discernment], If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; Then you will understand the fear of the LORD...

Do you see what Solomon wrote there? It is not just a matter of asking for something that is well within God's will, but we not only have to ask for it but we have to begin to try to fulfill the very thing we asked for. Remember what I said? The faith of God works toward the objective. That objective is the very thing the person asked for, ...

Proverbs 2:5-6 Then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding;

Do you see how these things are linked together? We have to ask. We have to seek for it. And all the while we are doing that, God is giving it. He makes sure we find it. But we are working. It could almost be said, "*God did not give it, I was the one that achieved it.*" But that would not be fair to God. That would actually be blasphemy against His Holy Spirit—because we have asked Him for it and He has responded. But how has He responded? Little by little—as we seek, as we dig, as we meditate and think these things over, and compare.

Proverbs 2:7-9 He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; he is a shield to those who walk uprightly; He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, Equity and every good path.

We can make a conclusion here in regard to why we must be persistent in prayer. This is true. When we ask God for a gift, it is very unlikely that it is going to come as a completed package.

There is a reason for that. Whenever you are digging for silver or gold, is there any opportunity in the world that when you finally do find some that it is already going to be formed and shaped into a ring with a diamond sitting in it?

No. You are going to find it in terms of an ore. It still needs to be refined and then after being refined, it still needs to be worked and shaped into the object that we want it to be.

There is wisdom here. When we ask God for His gifts, it is going to come to us in the form of ore, not a finished product but in raw material. He wants us to think about, meditate upon, shape and form until it is, in working with Him, in His image.

Here comes a principle. When we look at this from God's point of view—In light of His purpose (Remember, He is Creator.), and our request to Him—God is most interested that we learn the process. That is, how to produce what we have asked Him for.

In today's technological society, it is possible for people to get answered without ever even knowing the process. For example, a child can get mathematical answers from a calculator without knowing how to add, subtract, multiply or divide.

That is the principle we are dealing with. You can get answers without knowing how to add, how to subtract, how to multiply, or how to divide. You can get answers today without understanding the process at all. God will never deal with us that way—because we are most likely going to be askin