

January 15, 2012

Persistent and Relentless Prayer

LUKE 11:1 – 13

Last week we looked at Luke 18 where Jesus answers the question of how will we endure until He returns and He told His disciples and He tells us, that at all times we ought to pray and not to lose heart. Persevering prayer is one of the means God uses to keep His people. Jesus had spent some time telling His disciples that until He returned, things would pretty much go along as they had – people will be doing all the stuff of ordinary life - eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building, marrying and giving in marriage. And He said, '*So it will be on the day when the Son of man is revealed.*' And on the day that the Son of Man is revealed, the state of our hearts will be revealed as well. And His question to the disciples was '*When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?*' In other words, will the warnings of Jesus to remember the fate of the people of Noah's day, to remember Lot's wife, to keep our hearts fixed on Christ, and to not love the world—will these warnings secure the faith of the disciples? Will it secure our faith? Will we endure to the end? Will the Son of man find us trusting Him, or busy securing our lives in this world?

And so we must ask ourselves: **How can we endure to the end?** How can we make sure that we don't become like Lot's wife, too much in love with this world to go all the way with Christ? How can we resist the relentless temptations of Sodom to be desensitized to God's kingdom by the ordinary pressures of daily life? The real danger we face is that our faith in Christ and our love for Him and for each other will be swallowed up either by opposition or by the sheer ordinariness of daily life. So how can we endure? How can we be found with faith and love? How can we avoid being like Lot's wife and like those who are left in judgment? **And Jesus tells us in this passage that the means to our enduring to the end is persevering prayer.** The pressures of everyday life – the pressure to conform to the thinking and the pursuits of this age – the pressure to succumb to depression and faint rather than pray – will become **greater, not less**, as the end draws near. So we must always pray and not lose heart. Prayer, persistent, persevering prayer is the means through which our faith is sustained, and the sign of those who are His is that they cry to Him day and night.

And so this morning we want to take a look at another passage where Jesus is teaching on prayer, also in Luke, which we just read – Luke 11:1-13. The first thing we see here is that we cannot just assume that people know how to pray. Jesus is responding to a request by His disciples to teach them to pray. *It happened that while Jesus was praying in a certain place, after He had finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John also taught his disciples."* Luke 11:1 It was the custom for prominent rabbis or teachers of that day to compose and teach a prayer or prayers to their followers that encapsulated their beliefs or theology as a way of identifying those who followed them. Evidently John the Baptist had done so for his disciples, although we have no historical or Biblical record of any prayers – and so Jesus' disciples wanted something for themselves that would identify them as belonging to their rabbi, Jesus.

And so Jesus responds to that request by giving them a prayer, a parable and some explanation. In other words, disciples of Jesus pray like this. *And He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation.'"* Luke 11:2-4 The first thing He taught them was that **prayer is intensely God-centered.** And there are two things about that we need to notice. Jesus says, '*When you pray...*' He is not offering them a formal prayer that they would recite now and then, but rather He was giving them the summery content of prayer. He was saying, '**Whenever you pray – pray like this!**' And the first thing He does is pray that His Father's name would be hallowed or literally made holy. And right on the heels of hallowing His Father's name, He prays that His Father's kingdom would come. He was praying that the kingdom would come into being, arise, come forth, show itself, find place or influence, be established, become known.

The content of our prayers should have as their focus the desire that **God's name would be hallowed and His kingdom would be established on the earth**— that He would be honored more and more in our lives, in the church, in the world – that His worth and glory would be magnified and valued and esteemed and He would take up His kingly rule more and more over us and over the world. **'Hallowed be Your name – Your kingdom come' is a prayer for passion in our souls and revival in the church and an awakening in the world.** That is the focus – all the rest of prayer is a plea that He will meet our physical needs and keep our hearts pure for the purpose of exalting His name and praying His kingdom come.

We pray for our daily needs in the context of wanting to see God's name hallowed and glorified through us and in the world. We keep our accounts short, forgiving and receiving forgiveness for the sake of His name and His kingdom. We pray for His power and grace to keep us from anything that would seduce us away from His purpose and steal our affections for Him, and keep us from anything that would cause us to bring shame to His name. There are a thousand ways to say this, but all of them point to the priority of prayer which is '**Father, glorify Your name – cause Your kingdom to come, cause Your will to be done, on earth, even as it is in heaven**'. Our prayer life needs to mature to line up with God's will in the earth. His name will be glorified – He will vindicate the greatness and the glory of His name – the nations will know that He is the Lord. But God has decreed that our prayers work to bring His will to pass. So pray, pray, pray – in as many ways and as many words as you can think – '**Father, let Your name be hallowed and Your kingdom come**'.

And then to illustrate the fact that prayer is not simply a one-time event, Jesus tells this little parable, and in many ways it is similar to the one we looked at last week with the widow and the unrighteous judge. *Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' "I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.* Luke 11:5 – 8

Here's the scene: you go to your friend's house around midnight, bang on his door and ask for bread. It's not an emergency. No one is dying. Your house is not burning down – you just had some other friends arrive late and you need to feed them. And you are banging on the door, until the poor guy asleep in the house, finally tells you to quit bothering him. Now in those days, midnight was really mid-night. In the days before electricity people usually went to bed fairly soon after sundown, so this guy had been asleep awhile. And he was not a rich man, because he told the guy '*my children and I are in bed*' – which meant that it was probably a one-room house and everyone slept in the same bed – and it would have been impossible for him to get up without disturbing the rest of the house. But Jesus says that while even friendship was not a motivating factor here – the fact that the guy kept knocking was the key. And just like the parable last week, the point is not that God is a grumpy neighbor whom you have to keep banging away at until He comes across. Rather the point is that prayer requires relentless and even shameless persistence. The point is that we should **pray relentlessly and shamelessly**.

The disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray – and Jesus says – '**Pray this way**'. The reason the guy finally gets up and gives his neighbor the bread is not because they are friends but because the guy knocking is shameless about his asking. He wants bread, and he's not going to go away without it and he doesn't care who he has to wake up to get it. This translation says 'because of his persistence' and that is right. But it is more than just persistence. The word really means 'impudence' or shamelessness. The man knocking has no shame about his request. It reminds me of that scene in 'What About Bob' where Bill Murray tracks down his psychiatrist where he's vacationing and shamelessly begs him to give him a session. He doesn't care who hears or sees him – he knows what he wants and he goes after it shamelessly. And Jesus says, '**Pray this way**'.

And built into this idea of praying shamelessly, is the thought that we should be relentlessly persistent about it as well. *"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.* Luke 11:9 – 10 To His admonition to pray shamelessly, Jesus says here to '**Pray persistently**'

Persistence in prayer will prevail where giving up won't. *Bill Hybels tells about an interesting experience after a baptism service in their church. He writes: "I bumped into a woman in the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, 'No, I'm struggling.' She said, 'My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I'm crying is because I came this close to giving up on her. At the 5-year mark I said, "Who needs this? God isn't listening." At the 10-year mark I said, "Why am I wasting my breath?" At the 15-year mark I said, "This is absurd." At the 19-year mark I said, "I'm just a fool." But I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith I kept praying. Then she gave here life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of prayer again."*

Again, Jesus is not saying that God is a grumpy guy you have to bully into granting your request. He is saying that the nature of prayer is such that it requires persistent asking, and seeking, and knocking. In other words, that is how God designed that prayer should be. Don't ask me why – ask God – He's the one that designed prayer this way. 350 years ago, Thomas Watson, a Puritan pastor essentially asks the question, 'Why would God ever keep us asking, seeking, and knocking when He could certainly respond sooner?' And he gives four reasons he thinks this is so. **First** of all God loves to hear the voice of prayer. He delights in hearing His children call to Him. He does not want people who are like the man who told his wife when she asked him, 'Do you love me' and he responded, 'I told you I loved you in 1957, why do I have to keep telling you?' God delights in the prayers of His people. **Secondly** Watson says that sometimes He doesn't answer us right away so that He might build humility into our lives. **He is not our butler** and too many people pray as though He were. The **third** reason he gives is that we may not yet be fit or ready for the mercy we seek. The trial or test may need to run its course so that what God intends to accomplish may be completed. And **finally** he says that God may keep us asking, seeking, and knocking so that the mercy we pray for may be the more prized and may be sweeter when it comes.

The reason we know that Jesus did not intend to leave us with the impression that God is a grumpy neighbor we have to bully into submission is that He moves from the the relationship of a neighbor to the relationship of a son: *"Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? "Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he?"* Luke 11:11 – 12 What Jesus is saying here is that God is our Father. He didn't tell us to pray this way, '**Our Friend, who art in heaven...**' God is our Father and we should pray secure in the knowledge that our Father loves us like sons and daughters, and longs to hear and answer our prayers and He will always give us just what we need. He will always give us what is best for us. In other words, **Pray like a child**. A father doesn't give what is evil, or harmful or dangerous to his child, and neither will God. If we ask for fish, we can be sure we won't get a snake. If we ask for an egg, we can be certain we won't be handed a scorpion instead.

And if you understand the way Jesus puts this, you begin to see that He is saying that sometimes children ask for fish and eggs but they don't realize that they actually have asked God to give them snakes and scorpions. Fathers, good fathers, **(and God is the best Father)**, always reserve the right to do what is best for their children, even if the children don't understand why and ask for things that will hurt them. **Our Father gives us what we would have asked for if we knew everything He knows**. Shortly after graduating from high school, Joni Eareckson dove into the waters of Chesapeake Bay. Her head hit the bottom, leaving her instantly paralyzed from the neck down. Family and friends joined Joni in praying for her healing, but in spite of those persistent prayers, she remained paralyzed. Her despair was so great that she begged a friend to help her commit suicide. Although Joni remains a quadriplegic today, she has an incredible testimony of faith and is a huge inspiration for people all over the world. Today, millions of people worldwide know her through her books and her paintings, which she does by holding a pen or brush in her mouth, and by the fact that she is in great demand as a speaker. She prayed for healing and God said, **'I'm not going to give you a snake – I'm going to give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything I know'**. I believe that our loving heavenly Father hears and answers every prayer His children pray – it's just that the answer may not be what we had in mind.

And then finally, Jesus brings it home by saying: *"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?"* Luke 11:13 This is incredible hope and security for every child of God. Jesus makes the comparison between sinful, evil, human fathers and a pure and holy Father and says, 'If evil fathers know how to give good gifts – **how much more** will a holy heavenly Father do that?' This not only tells us that our Father indeed answers our prayers, but that it is absurd to think that He would give anything but good gifts to His children. **Prayer is inspired and sustained by the confidence that our Father in heaven is more inclined to give what we need than the best human father.**

And here Jesus says something we probably do not expect. The answer to all our prayers, the answer to our relentless and persistent appeals to heaven's throne is the Holy Spirit Himself. We should **pray expecting the Holy Spirit**. And you are probably scratching your head right now saying, 'But I didn't pray for the Holy Spirit'. But Jesus doesn't tell us to pray **for** the Holy Spirit here, He says that He **gives** the Holy Spirit in response to our prayers. And you are no doubt saying, 'How does that help me when I pray for tangible things? How does that help me when I pray for wisdom and strength and healing and funds to pay the bills and for my loved ones to come to Christ? How does that work?

When you go to the Father to for whatever you ask Him for, whatever it is, He gives the Holy Spirit in response to your asking. You ask for strength – He gives you the Spirit of power. You ask for help, He gives you the Helper. You ask for comfort – He gives you the Comforter. You ask for wisdom – He gives you the Spirit of wisdom. You ask for love and joy and peace and gentleness and goodness and faith and self-control – He gives you the Spirit whose fruit is released in your life. You ask for the gift – He gives you the giver. You ask for the effect – He gives you the cause. You ask for the product – He gives you the source. Ephesians 3:20 gives a little glimpse into this: *Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.* Ephesians 3:20-21 Who is at work in us? It is the Holy Spirit. And all of our prayers work toward the end that God is glorified.

In the parallel passage on this in Matthew 7, it is recorded a little differently: *"If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!"* Matthew 7:11 Here it doesn't mention the Holy Spirit – it mentions 'good'. Your Father in heaven gives what is **good**. And no doubt the Holy Spirit is ultimate good. But I think the Bible is saying much more here. If you turn to Romans chapter eight, verses 26 – 28, you get a picture of what prayer looks like from God's perspective: *In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.* Romans 8:26 – 28

Paul says that the Spirit helps us in our weakness, and he has just outlined our weakness in the preceding verses. And if you look you will see that it has to do with our fallen condition. It has to do with the fact that all creation is groaning under the futility to which it has been subjected in the future hope of the revelation of the sons of God when it will be set free from the slavery of corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. And Paul says that we groan along with all creation, praying and waiting for that day when our bodies are redeemed. And then he links that groaning with prayer: *for we do not know how to pray as we should but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.* In other words, in our praying, the Holy Spirit Himself is praying. **And what He is praying, even in our praying, is all according to the will of God.** That's how He helps us.

But it is the content of His prayer that is crucial here. Paul says, 'We don't know how to pray as we should – or we don't know what to pray – we don't know **the specific 'what'** that we should be praying'. But, he says, **'The Spirit is praying the specific what that we would have prayed had we know everything our heavenly Father knows.'** Because then he says that in response to the Spirit's praying, 'God causes all things to work together for **good**...'. That is why in Matthew, the gospel writer could say, *how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!* Look at this. God is pouring **good** into our lives in response to our prayers – the Holy Spirit is praying the specific what that works to bring about the **good** that God intends for us – so what is that **good** that God intends and the Holy Spirit is praying for? Verse 29 of Romans tells us: *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren* Romans 8:29

I believe the giving of the Holy Spirit here in response to our prayers is a releasing of the power of the Holy Spirit to bring about all the good that God intends for us as His chosen, redeemed, justified and beloved children – that is to conform us to the image of His Son. The more we look like Jesus, the more our Father's name is hallowed and the further His kingdom advances in the world.

Pray relentlessly and shamelessly. Pray persistently – knowing that God delights in hearing and answering your prayers. Pray like a child – secure in the knowledge that because He is your Father and loves you as His child, He will always give you what is best for you. Pray expecting the Holy Spirit to be released in us to bring about the good that God intends for us. And make the focus of all your praying the glory of God and the hallowing of His name among the nations and the advance of His kingdom on the earth.

Our gracious God and Father,

Hallowed be Your name. May Your name be glorified in us and in the world. Magnify Your name through us. Father, we long to see You honored more and more in our church and our city, and in our nation and in the world. Magnify your worth and your glory in our midst. And let your kingdom come. Take up your kingly rule more and more fully over our church and our lives and our families. And hasten the day of Christ's final appearing. Meet our physical needs we pray, so that we can press on with joy in the work you call us to for your name's sake. Forgive us, O Lord, where we have sinned and fallen short of your glory. And keep us from entangling temptations that will trip us up and bring reproach upon your name. May we be among those who cry to You day and night, relentlessly and shamelessly asking, seeking and knocking on heaven's door until Your kingdom comes and Your will is done, until Your name is glorified on earth as it is in heaven, we pray in the precious and exalted name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.