

## **“Persistence Pays Off”**

### **Luke 18:1-8**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Everything about being persistent in prayer is like being a child, which really shouldn't surprise any of us when we consider Jesus' words about the faith of a child in Matthew 18:3-4, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” As children the idea of persistence is engrained in us from the beginning. When a child learns how to walk, they fall down...a lot! They fail time and again learning to ride a bike, falling time after time. They ask incessantly for a cookie, even though you've told them no ten times. And certainly, as they grow in the faith, they fail to live the life they should as Christians, just as we all continue to do in this world of sin. But the persistence of a child almost always pays off. They fall as they learn to walk, but they get right back up and try again. They tip the bike over and scrape their knees, but they refuse to give up until they are pedaling down the driveway. They won't give up until that cookie is safely in their mouth where they can savor it. They make mistakes and question the faith they've been given, but they still learn the truth of Jesus and the forgiveness He has won for them.

Persistence in prayer is much the same way. We are going to fail at it sometimes, and sometimes the answer from God is going to be no. But the question is what do you do in those times? Do you give up and claim that God isn't there for you? Do you throw your hands in the air and say, “I just don't ever use the right words, so what's the use?” The proper thing to do in those times is what the Lord gives us a perfect example of in our Gospel lesson. A widow seeking justice, pesters an unrighteous judge until he caves into her demands and gives to her what she asks. There's no secret formula. She didn't have to craft her words into an eloquent sonnet, but only ask repeatedly and persistently. Then our Lord says that this is how we ought to pray, knowing that the Father is always listening, and hears our cries even more than the cries of the widow who seeks justice from an unrighteous judge. Our righteous judge hears every word, and if even an unrighteous judge will grant a persistent request, you better believe that God the Father will too. Persistence pays off.

And the persistence that Jesus speaks of has nothing to do with whether or not you are “doing it right.” The modern idea is that if your prayers aren't being answered the way you want them to be, it's because you aren't doing it right, you gave up too soon, or, worst of all, you don't have enough faith. Whether you are doing it right, though, is not

contingent upon how many times you do it, the strength of your faith or if you are using the right words. Doing it right is simply about doing it. The Lord knows the thoughts and desires of our hearts, but He has told us to ask for them. Not because He won't give them to you unless you do it right, but because He seeks to give us His favor and ease our troubled conscience. That's what prayer is all about. We seek that which the Lord has promised to give, and what He has promised to give is our daily bread, and peace with Him through the forgiveness of our sins won by the blood of His Son.

Placing a burden upon the conscience is something the modern church is particularly good at doing. The words they speak are words of works, and even more than that they are words that demand perfect works. There is no margin for error in their eyes when you pray. You must pray in tongues, prayer language, hands in the air, locked in a closet, feeling the "spirit," and the list goes on. They ignore Paul's words in Romans 8, where he says in verse 26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." We can't put restrictions or rules on "proper prayer" that haven't been given to us by the Lord Himself, because we don't know how to pray as we ought! We are poor, miserable, selfish sinners who seek self-gratification at every turn. We ignore the promises of God in our prayers and seek earthly things that satisfy our own desires and selfish needs. And thanks be to God that the Holy Spirit fixes our prayers before they reach the Father, because otherwise we would never receive His precious gifts.

Our persistence in prayer also doesn't "change God's mind," somehow pestering Him into rolling His eyes and caving to your demands. This is not a call to pray for a million dollars, and if you ask enough times finally, He'll grant it to you. This is about persistently praying because He has told us to persistently pray in the way He has taught us to pray. It's why we put so much emphasis on the Lord's Prayer, because it is what He has told us is the proper way to beseech the Father for our needs. Yet, in our sinful nature, we continually ask for that which He has not told us to ask. That doesn't mean you don't ask for healing, a good job, relief from mental distress, or any other needs of mind, body, or soul. All those things are asked for in the context of what we see in the Lord's Prayer. Those are the things of our daily bread—the things we need in this life that show us His love. If you are concerned about whether you are praying correctly, don't look inward to your own ways and your own words. Pray the words that He has given you to pray.

Pray incessantly as the Psalmist does, saying, "How long, O, Lord?" Seek His counsel and His comfort in times of distress, calling upon Him to fulfill His promises to

you as His adopted son in Jesus Christ. If annoying an unrighteous judge will gain someone justice for the sake of the annoyance being gone, how much more will the One who loves you beyond measure answer you when you call to Him for help? Our prayers are answered according to His gracious will, though, and not because we badgered Him enough. Nevertheless, we seek His gracious will at every opportunity. And we seek His will no matter our perceived capability to “do it right.” There is no such thing as a perfect prayer, save for the one we have been given by God Himself. Prayer is not an artform that we must perfect, it is our direct conversation with our Creator, who loved us and gave Himself up for us. Persistence in prayer is not a sign of your faith or a tool to assuage your grief. Those things do come as you pray, but they are not the true purpose.

The ultimate purpose of praying to God is to be shown the forgiveness He has won for us in Christ Jesus, to speak to God through our Mediator and our Advocate. The Holy Spirit brings our prayers before the Father, for the sake of the Son, and brings us the answer to our prayers in the Means of Grace. In the hearing of the Gospel, in the waters of Baptism, and in the reception of His Holy Supper, we receive the answer to all of our prayers. We receive life and salvation in Him. Whether or not we know it, every prayer is answered in the water and the blood flowing from the side of our Lord and Savior. It is indeed the medicine of immortality which manifests God’s promises in His very presence before us. We never have to question whether or not He will be there or whether or not our sins are forgiven. We have the assurance of the answer to our prayers in a way that we can touch, taste, feel, hear, and see. Here at this altar you can always find the peace of God which He has promised to give.

When you pray, do it with purpose, and do it persistently. More specifically, do it with the purpose for which it is intended, to seek the promises of God and hold Him to them. We beseech God our Father to be true to His promises that He has made to us, and those promises are manifested in the divine mercy He extends to us here in Word and Sacraments. Praying persistently, like the woman in our parable persistently asking for justice, is good, right, and proper. Even when it seems like your persistence isn’t paying off, the Lord hears you and knows your every need. It is not our prayer that brings the answers from God, but His goodness and grace, because of our own free will we cannot pray perfectly or persistently enough. But thanks be to God that as we heard in last week’s Epistle lesson from 2 Timothy 2:13, “if we are faithless, He remains faithful—for He cannot deny Himself.” The Almighty God is incapable of denying you His promises, for in doing so He would deny Himself. He has promised forgiveness life and salvation by the blood of Jesus, and that has been fulfilled and given to all and received in faith by those who believe.

Pray for your needs of body. Pray for your needs of mind. Pray for your needs of soul. Sometimes God's answer will be "no", sometimes "not right now," and other times He will answer with a resounding "yes." Even if you feel like you are incessantly praying for the same thing over and over again, do not lose heart. God's promises for you will be yours as one who is in the faith. He may not always grant your request, but His answer is there nonetheless. And when His answer is no, again, do not lose heart. Continue to pray for your daily bread, for health, and for good things in this life. But most of all, continue to pray for the forgiveness of sins which He has provided by His gracious mercy for the sake of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Persist in your prayers, because the Father hears every one of them, and know beyond a shadow of a doubt, that He will fulfill His greatest promise for you—eternal life with Him in the light of His glory forever and ever. And therein lies the truth of what we just sang a moment ago:

6. Ah! hide not for our sins Thy face,  
Absolve us through Thy boundless grace,  
Be with us in our anguish still,  
Free us at last from every ill,

7. That so with all our hearts we may  
To Thee our glad thanksgiving pay,  
Then walk obedient to Thy Word  
And now and ever praise Thee, Lord. Amen.