

“Pray Persistently”

Have you ever had one of those customer service experiences? Do you know the sort of thing I'm talking about? I'm thinking of the times when you've spent hours on the phone, been transferred so many times that you've lost count, explained your situation again and again, and nothing seems to make a difference or solve the problem? And you get so frustrated that you just want to give up. But finally, finally after all that work, your problem is taken care of, and the issue is solved.

Now I know that there are good customer service experiences, too, but somehow we don't always remember those. The bad ones tend to stick with us, though. A bad customer service experience is frustrating and challenging. It would make anyone want to give up. But giving up doesn't solve the problem. I can't help but think of that sort of situation when considering the parable that Jesus told in our sermon text for today. It's far from an exact parallel to what Jesus describes, but it is the kind of situation that demands persistence in order to get results. And persistence was exactly what Jesus was encouraging.

Consider the story that he told to inspire his disciples to pray persistently. A woman lived in a particular town, and the judge in that town was corrupt. He didn't care what God said about justice. He didn't care what people said about justice. He was arbitrary and capricious. This woman was a widow who had no one else to look out for her, support her, or help her. So she went to the judge to ask for justice.

Of course, the judge didn't care. He wasn't concerned about justice, and this widow woman had nothing to offer him. He sent her away. She came back the next day. He sent her away again, and she came back again. Over and over it continued until at last the judge came to realize that the only way to keep this woman from driving him crazy was to help her and to give her the justice that she was asking for. So for no other reason than that, he did what she was asking.

Luke, in recording the words of Jesus, also introduces this parable with one of its major lessons. He writes, **“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”** Just like the widow woman who came back to the judge day after day after day, Jesus tells his followers to bring their requests to God time after time after time. That's what Jacob was doing in the First Lesson today (Genesis 32:22-30). He was wrestling with God and refusing to let go until God blessed him according to the promise he had previously given.

And we, too, have God's promises. We have his promises to guard and keep us, to make all things work out for our good, and to bring us at last to our heavenly home. We have seen God carry out his promise to send the world's Savior, and we have in Jesus the full forgiveness of our sins. We have the opportunity, no matter how often we have failed to make good use of it, to come to God with all our needs and concerns, and he promises to hear and to respond.

The context in which Jesus speaks this parable is important. Just prior to these verses, he had been encouraging his disciples to be prepared for the last day, which will come about suddenly after a time of suffering. Many will be unprepared for that day. In these last times, it is especially important for believers to pray. When at times we may be tempted to wonder whether God remains in control and whether his promises will be fulfilled, he urges us to pray as persistently as the widow who refused to take “no” for an answer.

So here is a strong encouragement for us to pray. We can hold onto the promises of God and insist in our prayers that he preserve us in our faith and keep us prepared for his coming. We pray that he would bring about the day when he destroys all of his enemies and those that resist his will and forsake his love.

But our prayers are not limited in any way. Though the parable is spoken in this end times context, the lesson is clear, that Jesus' disciples should ALWAYS pray and NOT give up. In every and any

circumstance, Jesus invites us to pray. Even if at times it seems that our prayers are not being answered, Jesus would have us pray again. Pray persistently. And have the confidence that God does hear and that he will answer.

This parable has at times troubled Christians because it almost seems as if God is said to be like this unjust judge. It is almost as if our prayers finally badger God into giving us what we really want. And if we aren't getting what we want, it's because we aren't praying persistently enough. But that is not the point of the parable at all. As Jesus explains this parable, he tells us that there is a major difference between the unjust judge who neither cares about men nor feared God, and God who dearly loves us and has chosen us to be his own.

The point of the parable is for us to be persistent in prayer, not because God is hesitant to answer our prayers, but because he is intent on answering them according to his own good timing. While it may seem that we wait long for his answer, the truth is that it will come quickly. Like so many things in this life, the way we see it or the way we feel about it doesn't always correspond with God's perfect judgment.

There will be times of trouble and suffering in this life. There will be times when it seems that unbelievers are getting away with their rebellion and that believers cannot get justice. But as long as that time may seem, it is brief when viewed from the perspective of eternity. Listen again to the words of Jesus explaining his parable: **"Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."**

There is so much comfort in these words. God's justice is assured to us, who are his chosen ones. God doesn't demand that we earn his favor or that we work to convince him that our cause is worthy. He has already chosen us, purely by his grace, his undeserved love for us. He has made us his own in our baptisms. And he strengthens us through Word and sacrament so that we pray confidently and persistently.

This is the same encouragement that God offered us in the Second Lesson today: **"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him"** (1 John 5:13–15). It is not our persistence or our earnestness that leads God to answer our prayers. It is his love for us.

The same love that sent his Son into this world to live for us and to die in our place, the same love that called us to be his own through faith, that is what leads God to answer our prayers. And because that is God's promise, we will pray to him at all times, in all circumstances, about all things. We will pray and not give up. We will pray persistently.

And God in his own timing will see to it that we get justice. He will see to it that those who oppose him and his goodness receive the judgment that their deeds deserve. We are soon entering into the End Times season of the church year, which focuses our attention on that fact. But he will also see to it that his chosen people are gathered to him in heaven, not because of their own merit but because Christ's merit has been given to them. Through him we stand innocent before the Lord and fit for his eternal kingdom.

And while we wait for that day to arrive, we will take God at his word and pray to him persistently. Persistence pays off in earthly matters, even with poor customer service representatives and unjust judges. How much more will our persistent prayer be answered by a loving God who has given us his precious promise.

The Text: Luke 18:1–8a (NIV84)

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, ⁵ yet 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!’ ”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.”