

Persistent Prayer  
Matthew 6:5–15; Luke 18:1–8  
Sunday, October 19, 2025

Let us pray: It is so easy, Lord, to *talk* but not *listen*; to *listen* but not *hear*. Still our bodies and our voices, our minds and our hearts, so that we might truly listen and *hear* the Word that you are speaking to us, in Christ. Amen.

We have been looking at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, talking about what it looks like to follow the way that is Jesus and live our lives with him. We saw in the Beatitudes how Jesus blesses the physical *and* the spiritual, the body *and* the soul, the poor *and* the poor in spirit, the hungry *and* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. So we don't have to *choose* between the physical and the spiritual. We need them *both*, and Jesus calls his followers to provide for both the physical *and* spiritual needs of people.

Then last week we heard Jesus call his followers "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." That, just as salt and light do not exist for their own purposes – salt exists to make *something else* better, light exists to help people *see* – in that same way, we do not exist for our own purposes. We exist to shine the light of God's love into the world, and we do that, Jesus says, by loving our neighbors *and* our enemies; by *giving* and *forgiving*.

And so this week, we heard Jesus talk about prayer in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount. That the lives of his followers are marked by prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God. It is not just *talking* to God, telling God what we need. That's *part* of it, but it's not *just* that. I mean, how tired would you get if your entire relationship with someone consisted of them asking you for things *all the time*, never once *listening* to you? Conversations, *relationships*, require talking *and* listening. So prayer is also about *listening* to God, discerning what God wants *for us*. And you can't really *know* someone or *love* someone if you do not talk *and* listen to them. Prayer is one of the primary ways that we grow in our

relationship with God. I think that it is one of the *most important* things that we do in our lives. As followers of Jesus, everything else about our lives and our faith comes from a place of prayer.

So it's interesting, then, that Luke's account of this sermon does not include what we heard in Matthew about prayer. In fact, Jesus' sermon in Luke's gospel does not even mention prayer *at all*. He does not teach his disciples how to pray until five chapters later. We have been looking at a part of the sermon from Matthew and a parallel part of the sermon from Luke, but we can't really do that here. We have to look elsewhere to see what Jesus says about prayer. And we find that in Luke 18:1–8:

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup>In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”

<sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

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A widow keeps complaining to a judge, until he finally gives in and gives her what she's asking for, just so she doesn't keep bothering him. *That's* the story that Jesus tells to teach us about prayer?! It reminds me of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, where Andy Dufresne is a convict in Shawshank Prison, and he decides that he wants to upgrade the prison library. So he starts writing letters to the State Senate, asking for funds. He writes one letter every week, for *six years*. Week after week, there's no response. Until one day a bunch of books show up at the prison with a letter addressed to Andy. It's from the State Senate, and it says, “In response to your repeated inquiries, the state has allocated the enclosed funds for your library, along with a donation of used books. We trust this will fill your needs. We now consider the matter closed. Please stop sending us letters.” To which Andy says, “From now on I'll write *two* letters a week instead of *one*!”

Is *that* how we're supposed to think about prayer? That if we just keep asking God over and over, eventually we will wear God down, and God will give us what we want? That doesn't seem like much of a relational conversation.

But it's important to note what Jesus says right after this story. He does not *equate* God to the judge and say, "If you keep asking, eventually God will just give in, just like the judge." He *contrasts* God with the judge and says, "*How much more* will God grant justice to those who cry out night and day? God will not delay long in helping them." When we look at this alongside our reading from Matthew, Jesus is saying, "You don't need to make a big show out of it and pile up many words and empty phrases in your prayers, just keep talking and talking and talking. God knows what you need before you even ask. And God will not delay in giving you what God knows you need."

Well, that *sounds* great. But it doesn't always match up with our experience of prayer. I don't know if you've noticed, but our prayer list here keeps getting longer and longer. Our cancer list has 17 names on it, some of whom we have been praying for for *years*. Sometimes people get better. Sometimes they *don't*. The same five names of people dealing with addiction or mental health issues for years. Some of them are in a good place right now. Some of them have relapsed multiple times along the way. For almost *four* years, we have been praying for peace in Ukraine. Things seem as bad as ever. For *two* years, we have been praying for peace in Gaza. Last week we gave thanks for the ceasefire and prayed that it would be the beginning of a real and lasting peace. But as soon as the hostages were exchanged, the bullets started flying again.

*And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them.* I don't know what Jesus' definition of

“quickly” is here – maybe it’s that whole “with the Lord, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day” thing – but it seems like some of the people we have been praying for have been waiting an awfully long time for God to give them what God already knows they need. What Jesus says here raises more questions than answers. And the main question for us today is, “What do we do when our prayers go unanswered?”

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Whenever I hear that question, I always think of my friend Rex. I met Rex 20 years ago. He was 70 when I met him, and he lived right across the street from us. I had just lost both of my grandfathers in less than a year, and Rex became like a grandfather to me. He taught me things that I needed to know as a first-time homeowner; how to *fix* things around the house, how to take care of my yard. He helped me renovate the nursery for our first child, and he was there for me when we lost that child. We used to rake leaves and take them down to the dump together. He was an absolutely wonderful man, a *dear* friend to me, and I loved him very much.

Rex was diagnosed with cancer in 2009, and I prayed for that man *every single day* for two years, that God would heal him. The church that I was pastoring at the time, where he and his wife were members, prayed for him at least twice every week for two years. But on May 5, 2011, Rex died. I was there with him as he took his last breath. And I remember later sitting in the empty sanctuary, pouring my heart out to God, saying, “I have never prayed harder for anyone in my life. And it didn’t work. He was *such* a good man. Helped everyone and never hurt anyone. We prayed *so hard* for him. Why didn’t you heal him?” And I remember hearing that still, small voice say, “I did.” *Yeah, okay, not the healing I was asking for, God. Perhaps I should have been a little more specific.* But I just kept hearing that, “He is healed,” and eventually, I begrudgingly accepted that the healing Rex needed could not be found here with us. It could only be found with God.

That experience changed the way that I pray. It opened me up to trying to see a bigger picture of what life and blessing and healing *is*. Before, when I prayed for healing, I always meant in *this* life. But this life is not all that there is. After that, when I prayed for healing, I would say, “Lord, give them the healing that they need. I *hope* that is here with us. But if that’s not possible, may they find the healing they need with you.” *Here is what I want and hope for, God, and I will badger you relentlessly with that. But in the end, may your will be done.*

When our prayers go unanswered, it’s easy to get frustrated, lose heart, and give up. “Well, this isn’t working...why bother?” Or even, “Am I not doing something right, God? Am I not good enough?” But look at what Luke says at the beginning of this reading, “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.” What this parable tells us about prayer is that prayer is not about badgering God until we get what we want. God is *good*, and out of that goodness, God will give us what we need. Not what we *want* or what *we* think we need, but what God *knows* we need.

Persistence in prayer is not about wearing God down by asking over and over again. God already *knows* what you need. It’s about *sticking with prayer*, regardless of the results. It’s about not giving up if we don’t get what we want or something doesn’t go our way. It’s about being faithful in our praying, as God is faithful to us. Back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a theologian named Origen said that we should think of prayer not as a way to gain some benefit, but rather as a means to become more like God. Prayer is not about the *results*...it’s about the *relationship*. It’s about *being with* God, so that we can *know* God, and maybe gain some bigger picture of what God wants for us. Persistence in prayer is about continually turning to God, directing our hearts, minds, and needs to the One who can do something about it.

What do we do when our prayers go unanswered? We keep praying. We keep bringing all of our hopes and needs and pain and fear and joy and thanksgiving to our Creator. We keep the conversation going,

not just *talking* to God, but *listening* to God. Because the answer to our prayers is *always* there. We just can't always *hear* it if all we're doing is talking. God knows what you really need. Do you?