

Sermon: Persistent Prayer
Scripture: Luke 11: 1-11
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People often say to me, “Prayer works.” Generally speaking, I hear this comment after someone has experienced a favorable answer to a prayer he/she has prayed.

- A loved one has been healed
- They have experienced reconciliation in a relationship
- Money showed up to pay a bill
- A wayward loved one has turned around
- A peace treaty is signed in a far-off land
- A shipment of food successfully made its way to starving children

I also spend a fair amount of time with people who haven’t had their prayers answered—at all, or in the way they had hoped. For them, prayer has seemingly not “worked.”

- A loved one wasn’t healed; she died
- The broken relationship remains broken
- Bankruptcy was the only alternative
- The wayward loved one committed another crime
- War continues to wage; the peace treaty never materialized
- The shipment of food was destroyed by rebels in the area; it never made it to the hungry children

In both types of cases—those in which prayers have been answered and those in which they have not, people have prayed persistently. They have all “asked, sought, and knocked.”

- Some have asked and received specifically what they asked for and more
- Some have asked and have not received that for which they asked
- Some have knocked at God’s door and the door has been opened and they have been given what they wanted
- Some have knocked at God’s door and it would appear that it has remained closed. Or, if opened, God chose not to give what they had requested

Today's scripture text (Luke 11: 1-13) would suggest that persistent prayer always "works." As the story goes, there is a hospitality crisis. Imagine this: A guest shows up late in the night. It's only right that you feed him. But you don't have any food in the house. (Of course we would pop out to an all-night Wal-Mart or fast-food place). You're on pretty good terms with your neighbor so you slip over to his house and knock on the door. He comes to the door in his pajamas and stares at you in amazement for coming to his house so late at night. Is there some kind of emergency? You explain your hospitality crisis. He says: Look, we've just gotten the kids down (last night, two of them were up all night with ear infections), my wife's asleep, I can't help you tonight. It will wake everyone up if I go scrounging through the kitchen to get you food and I can't take another night of no sleep. You beg, you persist, you offer your first-born and finally he relents. OK, take the food. Your hospitality crisis is solved, but you owe your neighbor big time.

Jesus then goes on to contrast God with the neighbor who was reluctant to help out. We are told that God is far more eager to help us than the stubborn, reluctant neighbor in the story. Further, Jesus says to the parents among his listeners: "If your children ask for fish or eggs, you would not be so mean as to give them a live snake or spider." (Maybe your brother or sister would do such a thing, but never a parent!) "You're at least decent to your own children."

Jesus says: ASK, SEEK, KNOCK, RECEIVE.

But, receive WHAT? Return to the text. "As bad as you are, you wouldn't think of such a thing (like giving your child a snake or spider). You're at least decent to your own children. And don't you think the Father who conceived you in love will give the HOLY SPIRIT when you ask him?"

I am struck by this last part. Could Jesus possibly be suggesting that the Holy Spirit is the only guaranteed answer to prayer? Would the presence of the Holy Spirit be enough for all our asking, seeking, and knocking? Would this then suggest that we are to forget about our other requests and only pray persistently for the Holy Spirit.

At first I thought the answer was "yes." But it doesn't seem that the other Scriptures support having to persistently beg for the Holy Spirit. Rather, we more often read of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon us freely, falling afresh upon us for the simple asking. We hear that the Holy Spirit comes like the wind, fire, and breath. The Spirit is promised

to us; He is not someone we have to beg for. The Holy Spirit is our counselor and advocate.

Fred Craddock, in his *Interpretation Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, says: “The parable . . . is about prayer. But the message does not lie in comparing God to a friend who responds only under pressure. Rather, the point is that if our friends answer ‘shameless, bold, persistent’ appeals, how much MORE will God who desires to give us the kingdom” (p. 154).

Craddock continues: “Prayer is to be continual, asking, seeking, knocking (these are present imperatives, which means keep doing it—continual action), but even so the persistence is within a parent-child relationship which assures good gifts. In Luke’s Gospel, it is the Holy Spirit which is the gift of God” (p. 154).

What if none of my prayers were answered as I had hoped? Yet, I had received the good gift of the Holy Spirit in my life and the knowledge that the Holy Spirit was present to those for whom I prayed? Would that be enough for me? Would I remain faithful? Would I continue to believe? Would I continue to pray persistently for all the specific needs and concerns? I hope so.

Philip Yancey in his book *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* says: “God is interested in the process I go through in praying persistently. Always respectful of human freedom, God does not twist arms. God views my persistence as a sign of genuine desire for change, the one prerequisite for spiritual growth” (p. 151).

Yancey also shares these thoughts:

“‘Why should I spend an hour in prayer when I do nothing during that time but think about people I am angry with, people who are angry with me, books I should read and books I should write, and thousands of other silly things that happen to grab my mind for a moment?’ Henri Nouwen posed that question in different forms, toying with different answers. Sometimes he fell back on the need for spiritual discipline, for being faithful even with no apparent reward: ‘We must pray not first of all because it feels good or helps, but because God loves us and wants our attention.’”

“In the end, Nouwen conclude that ‘sitting in the presence of God for one hour each morning—day by day, week after week, and month after month in total confusion and with a myriad of distractions—radically changes my life.’ He learned humility and dependence, and after hours

of persistent prayer with no obvious sign of fruitfulness, he realized that a small, gentle voice had indeed been speaking all the while” (p. 153).

Yancey quotes Augustine as saying: “A person prays that he himself may be constructed, not that God may be instructed” (p. 154).

Yancey concludes: “In prayer we present a request, sometimes repeatedly, and then put ourselves in a state to receive the result. We pray for what God wants to give us, which may turn out to be good gifts or it may be the Holy Spirit. From God’s point of view there is no better response to persistent prayer than the gift of the Holy Spirit, God’s own self” (p. 154).

Persistently pray? Absolutely. Ask, seek, knock . . . again and again and again . . . always remembering that your deepest prayer has already been answered—your most profound need has already been met. The Holy Spirit is with you. Christ has died for you and this broken world. He will return. All creation will be healed—indeed made new.

God is with us. We are called to knock on God’s door to praise God in the good times and the bad . . . when our prayers have been answered and seemingly when they have not. Ask, seek, knock.

Prayer “works” . . . in many ways.

**Play song by “Casting Crowns” titled “Praise You in the Storm”
words by Mark Hall/music by Mark Hall and Bernie Herms**

I was sure by now, God, that You would have reached down
and wiped our tears away,
stepped in and saved the day.
But once again, I say amen
and it's still raining
As the thunder rolls
I barely hear You whisper through the rain,
"I'm with you"
And as Your mercy falls
I raise my hands and praise
the God who gives and takes away.

Chorus:

And I'll praise you in this storm
and I will lift my hands
for You are who You are

No matter where I am,
Every tear I've cried
you hold in your hand
You never left my side
and though my heart is torn
I will praise You in this storm

I remember when I stumbled in the wind
You heard my cry to You
and raised me up again
My strength is almost gone how can I carry on
if I can't find You?
And as the thunder rolls
I barely hear You whisper through the rain
"I'm with you"
And as Your mercy falls
I raise my hands and praise
the God who gives and takes away

Chorus

I lift my eyes unto the hills
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth
I lift my eyes unto the hills
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth

Chorus