

Kingdom Persistence

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[0 : 0 0] Hey, good morning everybody. Welcome to City Grace. My name is Elliot. So good to be with you here.! We are winding our way kind of the home stretch of this summer series we've been doing where we're considering some of the parables of Jesus.

Kind of these short stories that are intended to give us practical insight into what the kingdom looks like and how it works in this world. And today we're going to hit what is truly one of my favorite parables in scripture, partly because it's just not the kind of story you would expect Jesus to tell to make a kingdom point.

And you're going to see that in a second. But also because I really do think it touches on some of the things that if you really want to flourish in kingdom life, there are things that are really important to that.

And so we're just going to jump right into it. The teaching text for today is from Luke chapter 18 verses 1 through 8. And it reads as follows. And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

And he said, In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary.

[1 : 1 6] And for a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night?

Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give them justice and speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth.

This is God's word to us. What a wild story, right? Short, but not the kind of story you would expect God to use to make a kingdom point.

There's a wicked and apathetic judge. Like, is that supposed to be God? I don't understand. There's a nagging widow? Like, what does that mean? And there's a request that is granted, not because of any merit of the request, but simply to get this lady to quit bothering him.

[2 : 2 6] So needless to say, a story like that, we could easily take some wrong turns into the wrong message. I mean, I'll just say, out of the gate, I don't think the message of the parable is, the squeaky wheel gets the grease, right?

Like, Jesus is not trying to say, just make yourself obnoxious to the point that someone has to deal with you, right? Like, now that may be practically true on some level in life that that can be effective, but I don't think it's the kingdom principle that Jesus is trying to get up here.

But thankfully, Jesus doesn't leave it to our imagination. In probably the most plain statement about any parable, he tells us at the beginning, I'm telling you this parable so that you will persist in prayer and you will not give up.

And then at the end, he really brings that home. You know, reading again, it says, And the Lord said, Hear what the unrighteous judge says, and will God not give justice to his elect who cry out to him day and night?

Will he delay longer of them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. So Jesus already effectively tells us this is the big point. Before we talk about persisting in prayer and how to do it, he says the point is, If this wicked judge who doesn't care anything about God and doesn't care anything about this woman will grant her request simply because she keeps asking, how much more will a loving God who's willing to die for his dear beloved ones hear and respond when his children cry out for the things they need?

[4 : 09] God wants us to know something about kingdom persistence. Now the idea of persistence, you know, keeping at something and never giving up, is again on one level pretty easy to understand.

Even if you're not a Christian, you could probably say one of the biggest predictors of success in our endeavors in life is oftentimes not, again, who is the most skilled or who is the most knowledgeable.

It's just the question, do you stick with it? Do you keep going when you run into any kind of obstruction or obstacle? Do you move through hard times in the belief you're going to get to something better?

And that dynamic certainly exists in God's kingdom as well. Oftentimes in scripture we're told to press forward, to keep going. In Galatians 6 verse 9 it says, And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up.

So God has this theme of persisting and pursuing the kingdom. But I do think it's an interesting fact that Jesus, when he gives this parable, says this is about a very particular topic, which is prayer.

[5 : 24] Which means at the very least, there seems to be some danger in Jesus' mind that we're going to be tempted to give up on prayer. Like persisting in prayer is going to be difficult.

And I think if many of us are honest, we would say, I agree. A persistent prayer life is not easy. You know, there's this reality in most churches and ministries that prayer events are often the least attended events in the life of the church.

And before we go any farther, let me say, like, I am not telling you that to make you feel guilty or ashamed or even goad you into action. I'm just, I'm noting it's an interesting reality. If you want to draw a crowd for any type of church event, you can do it, really, like a meal, a Bible study, a marriage seminar.

If you say we're going to go outreach and feed the poor, we're going to do hurricane relief. Even things that people say they're scared of, like evangelism. If you can see there's like this tangible, we're going and doing the stuff, then people will show up.

But if you hold a prayer night, it's just often sparsely attended. And yet, we know as followers of Jesus that prayer is supposed to be one of the important things.

[6 : 45] Like, we have heard Him say that. And in our minds, we agree with it, but yet we find ourselves neglecting it. Which is, I think, why Jesus speaks His parable into it.

So He gives us this parable to teach us to pray and to not give up. And that being the case, I think our task today is really just to peer a little deeper into what Jesus might be wanting us to see.

So, we obviously see that the parable wants us to persist, to keep on keeping on. But what does it tell us about prayer specifically that will help us to persist?

And I think the first thing we see is, again, probably the most obvious. If you're going to persist in prayer, the first thing to know is, it is important to ask. This parable starts with a lady making a request.

And it might seem like too simple a place to start, but just to say it out loud, like, you have to ask if you want to receive. The widow wants something, and she makes that request known a lot.

[7 : 57] And most of life, that's pretty straightforward. But with God in prayer, I think there's kind of this special issue that arises, and it goes something like this.

You know, if God knows everything, and He already knows what I need, then why do I need to ask? Why do I need to keep asking? That seems even sillier.

Years ago, C.S. Lewis wrote this fictional series of books called The Chronicles of Narnia. And in one of those books, The Magician's Nephew, it tells this story of how that magical land of Narnia comes to be.

And on the day of that world's birth, this boy Diggory is in that world, but he's made a mistake. He's done something that's introduced an evil already into the world, this witch.

And so Aslan, who's kind of the Christ figure in these books, sends him on this quest to get an apple in kind of this distant valley that will make this tree of protection for this new land.

[9 : 00] So he's sending him out on this adventure. So he sends Diggory and this winged horse named Fledge and his companion Polly, and they go on this journey. And there's this passage that not long after the journey begins, where C.S. Lewis really tries to tease out this idea about asking in prayer.

So in the text, it reads this, The valley in which they had come down was in the heart of the mountains, snowy heights, one of them looking rose red in the reflections of the sunset as it towered above them.

I am hungry, said Diggory. Well, tuck in, said Fledge. There's a big, taking a big mouthful of grass. And then he raised his head, still chewing with bits of grass, sticking out on each side of his whisker, saying, Come on, you two, don't be shy.

There's plenty of grass here for us all. But we can't eat grass, says Diggory. Hmm, well, that's, uh, I don't quite know what to do for you then.

It's very good grass, too. And Polly and Diggory stare at each other in dismay. Well, I do think someone should have arranged about our meals, said Diggory.

[10 : 06] I'm sure Aslan would have if you'd have asked him, said Fledge. Well, Polly says, wouldn't he have known without being asked? I have no doubt he would, said the horse.

But I have a sort of idea that he likes to be asked. You know, on some level, it does seem unnecessary to communicate to God a need that he obviously already knows you have.

Or maybe even more detrimental is the feeling that can arise in you of, you know, if God really did care, I wouldn't have to ask. He would just see it and move on it, because that's what you do when you see a need and you move in love.

But I think both of those thoughts kind of misunderstand prayer on a fundamental level. And a lot of that's because prayer primarily isn't about information exchange.

I mean, you are correct. God is not ignorant of your needs. There has never been a prayer in your life where you prayed and God's response was, thank you for telling me. I did not know that.

[11 : 20] But it's not information that God's looking for. It's your heart. He wants your mind. He wants the fixed gaze of a child who wants a relationship with their father.

And remember, we've already learned from other parables that God really wants to give you himself. He is not interested in being a cosmic vending machine.

Because he knows that what you need more than anything else he could give you, in any problem he could fix, what you need most is him. And so God wants you to ask.

Because asking is what is part of what drawing close to him looks like. I think God also wants us to ask because asking is a powerful part of relationship.

I think it's really interesting and honestly probably a little mysterious as well that God effectively says in this parable, there is power in persistent asking.

[12 : 32] He says it so bluntly as to say, the woman gets what she wants from the wicked judge who cares nothing about her just because she keeps on asking.

And on some level, I think we can feel the weight of that reality of asking in life, even if you didn't know it. So one of the biggest rites of passage, I think, for any young man is the first time you have to get up the courage to ask a lady out.

Right? Like you will, unless you're a psychopath, like ruminate on that forever. Right? Like, why is this so hard? And they'll think about it for weeks and months.

Why is this so hard? And I certainly think fear of rejection is part of that. Right? But, but I would say I don't think that's the whole story because not only is it hard to ask, it's hard to be asked as well.

Right? Like, I mean, is there anything more mortifying for a young woman than to be asked on a date by someone you're just not interested in? I mean, how do you say no?

[13 : 40] Like, like, unless you have zero empathy or compassion, it is so hard to look at someone who is effectively offering them yourself and say, no thanks.

And maybe don't talk to me again. It's hard. There is a weight to asking.

And so I would say, not unsurprisingly, if you're curious, that's why people actually gravitate towards doing business like that now online or via text. Right? Because it is a lot easier to say no or to just ghost someone when they're not standing right in front of you.

Here's another one. Why do companies still spend money on telemarketing? Right? Like, it seems like cold calls, door-to-door sales, seems like the silliest thing in the world to just roll up on someone that you have no idea what they want and be like, hey, can I interest you in a sham wow?

Like, why is that? Why is that going to work? Well, let me tell you, if it didn't work, they wouldn't put money in it. And it works because it's hard to say no.

[14 : 49] People hate solicitation because it's hard to say no to someone who's asked you something. Asking and receiving is an important and powerful part of how God made us to be with each other.

And like all things in relationship, there are ways that can get twisted and go wrong. But it is an important part. And it's no different than when you come to your father.

I think the parable also shows us that it's important to keep on asking. You know, we've already established that prayer isn't about information exchange.

So, it's not that God was hard of hearing the first time. And persistence in asking is, is again something that Jesus speaks of more than once. In Matthew chapter 7, he says this, What a bold passage.

There's also an interesting thing here. Like, if you look at the tense this is in the Greek, you could very literally read that passage. Ask and keep on asking.

[16 : 13] Seek and keep on seeking. Knock and keep on knocking. And so now we kind of get to the crux of it, right?

Because Jesus is telling us, like this widow, I want you to ask and keep on asking. And he says, if you do, you'll receive. Like, he's making that promise.

And yet, we don't. Like, we don't keep on asking. We don't keep on seeking. So, why is that?

Well, you know, unfortunately, diving into every reason would obviously exceed the scope of a single sermon. But I do, I do think we have to do a little work here this morning in terms of, if you're going to be persistent in prayer, if you're going to have a place to start, you're never going to get there if you don't start with just honestly wrestling with some of the things that impede your persistence.

Maybe to say it this way, these are things that, if you pretend they're not an issue, then you're never going to move through them to actually getting to persistent prayer. So, what are those things?

[17 : 23] Well, again, we could go in a lot of different directions, but I'll give you just a couple that I think I've seen as the most common in myself and in others who I've talked to over the years. One of them is simply this. How you feel about prayer will determine whether you persist in prayer.

I mean, I'd like to humbly offer to you that if you find persisting in prayer difficult, most likely the reason isn't because it's hard or it's boring or it's dry or I don't know what to ask to, though there is certainly a discipline to it.

Don't misunderstand me there. There is a part of spiritual discipline where you do the thing even when you don't feel it, but I would offer to you that's not the reason we don't pray. The reason you don't pray is because you don't think it works.

And again, I don't say that to scold you or to make you feel bad. It's just simply a reality. I mean, think of it this way. If I had an illness that was afflicting me or was maybe threatening me with death and I was really suffering through it and you told me, hey, I've got a medicine that is 100% guaranteed to fix you, but it tastes really awful and you're going to have to take it every day.

So every day, you're going to have this kind of awful routine where you take this medicine you don't like, but all of that pain you feel, all of that fear of death is going to go away. You would have no problem taking that medicine.

[18 : 51] You wouldn't enjoy taking it the time, but the discipline of the medicine isn't the bar because the joy of having the illness healed. You probably actually wouldn't even think about it. You would be so happy that you're not in pain from the illness anymore that this little thing, because you know it worked.

And so for a lot of us, I think you have to start at the honest place of just saying, you know, if I could say it out loud, I'm just not sure that prayer works, man. And sometimes that's born of a really, a very real disappointment.

Like there was some place or maybe multiple places in your life where you just really, really prayed for something important in faith and it didn't happen. Or maybe it's just like you're stuck in that place of, you know, I don't know, like I think all the stuff that we used to say was God, we've learned is just science and like modern agriculture and medicine and math.

They just, they're just more reliable than prayer. Again, there's a lot there that we can't work through in a single morning, but I think it's fair enough to say you can't persist in prayer if you don't believe it works.

I think another thing that hinders us in persisting in prayer is how you feel about yourself. I think this one kind of looks like, look brother, I hear what you're saying, but I'm kind of, I don't really think I'm a candidate for this, right?

[20 : 21] Like, you may not know about me, but I know about me. And God is just not gonna use somebody like me to change the course of the world through prayer.

Like, I've got too much in my past, I'm too scatterbrained, I'm too busy, I'm not sure I've got enough faith, like, like I'm probably just gonna ask for bad things, like I'm not the kind of person that God is gonna do God-sized things through.

If you're gonna persist in prayer, again, that's a common place you might be, but to persist in prayer, you have to have a right view of how God sees you.

Maybe the most important one to persist in prayer is how you feel about God. This one kind of looks like this, where you're at the place where you're like, I'm not sure if I can say this out loud, but I'm not really sure who I'm praying to.

I mean, like, I look out at the world and I just see so much evil, and wars, and exploitation, and natural disasters, and families torn apart by death, and disease, and I don't know how to process that.

[21 : 40] With a God that's gonna answer my prayers. Or maybe it looks like, you know, I read the Bible and I see some things where we say He's a God who loves, but it also looks like He let a whole civilization get wiped away.

Just not sure who I'm asking. Jesus actually speaks to that importance of knowing who you're asking back in those verses we just read through Matthew 7.

If we continue, He says, 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 the one who seeks, finds, and to the one who knocks, it will be opened.

Or which one of you, if his son asked him for bread, would give him a stone? Or if he asked for a fish, would give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, thanks for that, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more would your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him?

Like, Jesus knows that you're not going to ask if you don't trust. And it's interesting that He speaks right into that. He's, like, obviously He sees the problem of you're going to be tempted sometimes to think you don't have a good Father.

[23 : 02] But let me tell you, like, none of you would give bad things to your children. How much more would your good Father not give good things to you?

You're not going to persist in prayer if you don't believe you are praying to a good God. So, wow. How do we work through all of that, right?

Well, not in a single Sunday, I'm afraid. But so is not to leave us with nothing, to not leave us on a low note.

How about we ask this question as we kind of wrap up today. Where should I start? I've got all that stuff, some of those things, maybe all those things swirling around. Where should I start if I do want to be a follower of Jesus, I do want to persist in prayer?

And I would give you just two really quick, simple things. The first thing I would say is you have to start in prayer with what you have, not with what you don't have. Don't start with a view of prayer that looks like something highly religious or something that you heard the best prayer you've ever been around pray or something that the pastor prays or something that you don't feel.

[24 : 20] I heard another pastor say it this way one time. Just pray what you've got. Like, you can't pray what you don't have. So, if it is like, hey, I don't think I can pray for all night or like an hour, maybe just like five minutes.

Cool, do that. Pray for five minutes. Like, I'm not sure my motives are right. I'm actually, if I'm honest, I'm kind of mad at God about what's happened in my life.

I'm not sure I'm asking for the right things. Start there. Like, you can start with God, I want to talk to you, but I'm also mad at you. Don't try to gloss up what you feel or what you want to ask for.

It's the Holy Spirit's job to sanctify you into God. And God, what He wants most here is just for you to come and ask. The lady in the parable asked for what she wanted.

She stated it plainly. C.S. Lewis has one of my favorite quotes ever on this. He says about prayer, we must learn to lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us.

[25 : 33] You just start where you're at. And then you just keep going. You pray with persistence and humility. Persistence simply means you keep going.

You keep praying. You keep reaching out to God. Even if you don't feel like you're getting anywhere, God is probably not as anxious about your progress as you are.

You just keep going. And then humility means that you enter that endeavor with at least a hint of, maybe I don't see everything. Like it doesn't mean you can't feel frustrated or sad or want more or be disappointed when a prayer isn't answered.

It means praying with anticipation that God is going to do something but having enough humility to know that if He really does see it all then maybe the thing that's best for me, the next best thing is not what I would expect it to be.

You know, I've developed this phrase in my personal life for the past couple of years and I use it, I don't really know how it came to form other than I've learned that I use it when I detect that basically I've been stewing or worrying over an issue for too long, right?

[26 : 52] And you know what that's like, right? Like you're just rolling something around in your mind. You're thinking about all the ways it can go sideways, all the things you're worried are going to happen, what you're going to say if this happens, what you're going to do if that happens, you know, kind of worrying through all the possible outcomes and that's particularly egregious when like there's no good answer, right?

Like you're worrying about it because you don't see a clear path out, right? And I've learned whenever I get there and thankfully sometimes the Holy Spirit gives me a little prompt too to just pause and say well, I've done everything but pray about it.

To just stop in that moment and simply say God, that thing and if I could give you a little help here I wouldn't even repeat it like I wouldn't go back through it I would just say that thing that I just spent an hour worrying about help me with that.

Please make something that I can't anticipate enter into that. Your kingdom come your will be done. And honestly if you do that you might feel silly about it first because a lot of the stuff you're going to roll around in your head aren't going to seem like spiritual things, right?

Like does God really care that the refrigerator's broken? And I don't know how I'm going to pay for it. Like the temptation is to think I've got to pay for that I've got to do that myself, right?

[28 : 10] But a life of persistent prayer isn't fancy or sophisticated it's just persistent. It just keeps going.

And so yes I'll pray about my refrigerator and I'll pray about needing good weather and I'll pray about my kids' future and the world they're going into and I'll pray about my friend who has cancer and I'll pray about the war on TV that I don't think I could do anything about and I will pray for my city and I will pray for my church.

All of the things small and big that's what persistent prayer looks like that's what it means to pray without ceasing. It just means in every moment taking a moment to say God this thing right now I'm angry about this thing right now I'm feeling distant from you in this right now I don't know how I'm going to fix that and it's stressing me out in everything big and small and if you do that the promise that Jesus makes is that the Father is going to meet you in that place.

somewhere some way the Father is going to meet you in that place. As the band comes up today if you're not a follower of Jesus and you're here with us it's always just such a privilege to have you I know church is a strange place if you're not used to it or not your thing and I don't know if you came here intentionally seeking something or kind of incidentally you came with somebody but let me just say if you are seeking God if there is any part of you that wants to know is there something more Jesus says that those who ask for him receive him and those who seek him find him and he's made it possible for you no matter who you are or what you've done to come to the Father.

There's going to be a prayer on the screen that's a way you might could express that where you're at but if you'd rather just talk with someone about it we'll have some people down front again you don't have to you pray what you got God I'm not sure you're real if you're real you're going to have to make me a little more aware of it pray what you got if you are a follower of Jesus Jesus tells us we need to persist in prayer and maybe you're thinking man I'm thinking through some of those impediments that you just talked about and the honest truth is those are there and I've just not been honest about it that's a place to start you can start by just saying that to God God I am I'm sorry that I've not trusted your love enough to know that I can actually say what's in my heart not what I think you want to hear and then just ask Jesus to start helping you through it Father we ask you to come into this moment as we come and take communion be with us remind us of your great love

[31 : 30] Jesus Holy Spirit have your will in this place Amen Amen Thank you.