

## **“Pray and Don’t Give Up”**

Date: June 26, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: 1 Thess. 5:16-18; Luke 18:1-8 Occasion: Prayer, series

Theme: Un-answered prayer, perseverance

The preacher’s five-year old daughter noticed that her father always paused and bowed his head for a moment before starting his sermon. One day she asked him why. “Well, honey,” the pastor began, proud that his daughter was so observant of his messages. “I’m asking the Lord to help me preach a good sermon.”

“Then how come he doesn’t do it?” she asked.

Well, that’s a cute story and we can have a good laugh. But it’s no laughing matter when we’re praying for someone to get well, and they only get worse. When we’re praying for one of our children to come to faith, and our prayers go unanswered. When we’re praying for an end to violence and it only gets worse. No one’s laughing now.

Today we begin a sermon series on the theme of prayer, and today our topic is *unanswered prayer*. Both of our scripture lessons speak to this issue. Paul encourages the church in Thessalonica to pray continually, giving thanks in all circumstances. Why? - because God wants them, and us, to do so. He says, “It is God’s will.”

In a poll conducted by *Newsweek* magazine, it was found that most Americans say prayers every day, even though no one knows why only some prayers are answered. We still keep on praying. 54% say that when God doesn’t answer their prayers, it means it wasn’t God’s will to answer it that way. 82% say they don’t turn away from God, even when their prayers go unanswered. We don’t give up.

That is exactly the message Jesus was teaching in the parable of the persistent widow. A widow in a certain town had a case she wanted to be heard by the local judge. He wasn't a very honorable man and kept ignoring her request. She kept pestering him until he finally he gave in and granted her the chance to have her case heard.

The point is not that God is like that judge who has to be nagged continually before he listens to our request. The point is that we are not to give up in going to God with our requests, even when it appears as though God isn't listening. "Pray, and don't give up!"

But why pray in the first place? Why pray at all? If God is all-knowing, doesn't the Almighty know what we need even before we ask? Is God so uncaring, that we have to harangue the Lord before God will even hear our case? Why does *anyone* pray anymore?

A few thoughts this morning to guide our thinking on this matter: **First**, God invites us to ask for what we need. In Matthew 7 we are told to ask, to seek, to knock. Why? Ask and it shall be given; seek and you shall find; knock and the door shall be opened. God wants us to come to Him with our requests. It pleases Him to have us ask.

**Secondly**, we don't know what we really need. We think we do, but we don't. Or, to be more accurate, we know part of our needs, but not all of them. Our perspective is limited by our own experience, and our limited knowledge.

Romans 8:26 says, "We do not know what we ought to pray for." Rarely can we be absolutely sure what God wants to do in a particular situation. Which brings us to point number three.

**Third**, after we have made our requests known to God, especially in the crises of life, we must cry out, "But Father, I don't

know what you want. And I want your will to be done, even if it means my will is not done in this situation. I truly believe, and trust, that you know best.” Isaiah 55:8 says: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord.”

The highest prayer we can pray is “Thy will be done, not mine.” But we don’t have to rush to say that prayer. I like what W. Paul Jones, professor emeritus at St. Paul School of Theology says. He contends that prayer is a dialogue with God.

It’s ok to contend with the Lord, even to argue with God. “God, you know what I want. Hear my prayer. Are you even listening, God?”

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he pleaded with God to change his mind, not to send him to the cross. At least 3 times he begged God to change his plans.

But God doesn’t change his mind. And then, dying on the cross, Jesus even dares to charge God with abandonment. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” That is honest praying. The psalms are full of these kinds of prayers, multiple times crying out, “God, why do you hide your face from me?!”

Professor Jones says this kind of praying is born out of the Divine Promises, not out of prideful disbelief. To be able to argue with God is to remind God of his promises – to hear us and to have mercy, to be faithful to his people, to not abandon us or forsake us.

Prayer is a kind of dialectic, going back and forth – needing and asking, complaining and questioning, pleading and contending. And it happens on both sides of the conversation. If we can plead and

question and complain about God, God has the right to plead with us, to question and complain about our behavior as well. That's honest.

To have this kind of prayer is to test our friendship with God. Can we disagree without rupturing the friendship? Can we argue back and forth and still be friends? Jesus tells us, "Pray and don't give up. The friendship with God will endure."

Jesus praised the widow who wouldn't give up, who kept going back and pestering the unjust judge. And he tells us to be like that in our prayer life as well. Like Jacob wrestling with God at night, seeking the Lord's blessing and not letting go until he gets it, we are to keep in conversation with God, even if it gets a little heated.

Prayer with God is reduced to polite but empty conversation if it cannot at times become insistent, defiant, contending, intent on outlasting God. Friends, if you've got troubles, take it to the Lord in prayer. And don't quit praying if God seems silent.

Pound on the doors of Heaven. Keep going back. Don't be discouraged. Pray and don't give up. We all know from personal experience that not all our prayers are answered the first time we pray them. Some of them are, praise God. But many of our prayers seem to go unanswered. Don't quit praying because of that.

Ultimately we come to the place where we need to say, "Thy will be done." This is the highest form of prayer we know, acknowledging that we are not God. In essence, this is what Mary prayed at the Annunciation: "Let it be done unto me according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

This is what Jesus prayed in the Garden, "Not my will but yours be done." (Luke 24:42) But let's also remember, those prayers did

not begin there. Mary's prayer began in perplexity. Luke 1:29 tells us when the angel appeared to her, "She was greatly troubled." Then it moved to questioning, "How can this be?!" (1:34) Only then did she pray, "Thy will be done." Before Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done," he begged God "to remove this cup." (Luke 22:42) Only then did he pray for God's will to be done.

Like the prayer of Mary and Jesus, our prayers may not always begin with "Thy will be done," either. Our prayers may have to go through some other stages first. It's alright for the Christian to sit with God in perplexity, asking God questions, and begging God to give us what we see as good. Finally, we pray "God's will be done."

**My final word** on this topic, "Give him no rest." In the book of Isaiah I ran across this little verse. "You who call on the Lord, give yourselves no rest, and *give him no rest* till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth." (Isaiah 62:6,7)

"Give *him* no rest." Give who no rest? - God. The Lord invites his people to pray and asks them, commands them, begs them to pray. Then he says, "When you pray, give me no rest." 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, "Pray without ceasing; pray continually."

Give the Lord no rest when you pray. Bang on the door of heaven. Pray, pray, pray and keep on praying. Pray that God will hear and answer and move from Heaven. Don't put any time limits on God. Don't think you're a bother to the Lord. Don't think, "I've prayed about this long enough." Give him no rest. Wear him out.

- Do you need God's wisdom for a major decision? Wear him out
- Are you praying for revival in our churches? Wear him out!

- Are you praying for a son or daughter to come to faith? Wear him out. Give him no rest. God call us to pray. So pray, and do not give up. Give him no rest. Wear him out. Amen? Amen!