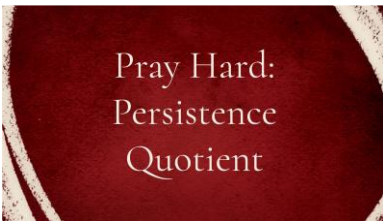


Pray Hard: Persistence Quotient

May 11, 2025

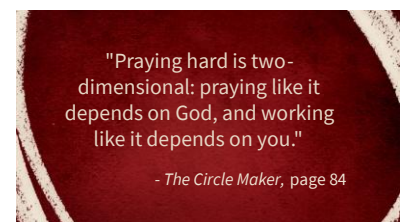
Luke 18:1-8

¹ Jesus was telling them a parable about their need to pray continuously and not to be discouraged. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected people. ³ In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him, asking, 'Give me justice in this case against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused but finally said to himself, I don't fear God or respect people, ⁵ but I will give this widow justice because she keeps bothering me. Otherwise, there will be no end to her coming here and embarrassing me." ⁶ The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give them justice quickly. But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"

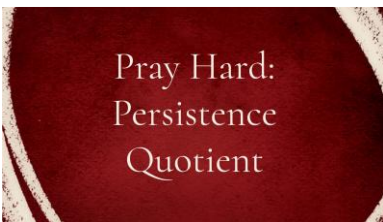


Over the past two weeks we have been studying and preaching on the "Circle Maker." In week one I shared the story of Honi the Circle Maker and looked at the Jericho miracle as a microcosm of how we are to pray. We were encouraged to draw a prayer circle around a person, situation, or place and to start praying. In week two we talked about our willingness to pray prayers that may cause us to look a bit foolish. This is how we learn to pray big prayers. Today we continue the series as we look at how to pray hard and how to pray through. Let us pray...

In *The Circle Maker*, Mark Batterson writes that praying hard is two-dimensional. On page 84 Mark writes, "Praying hard is two-dimensional: praying like it depends on God, and working like it depends on you."



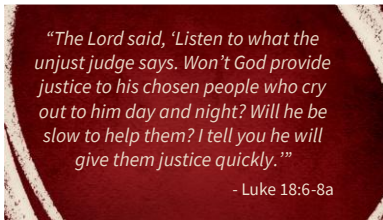
As I thought about praying hard and praying through, I came to the conclusion that this is also a two-pronged approach. On one level we have our personal prayer life, and we pray for the things we are thankful for, we pray for the things we and others need, and so on. But another level, we also have our corporate prayers - the prayers for God's direction and guidance for our church, for our nation and the world and its people, and so on. Both of these kinds of prayers require that we pray hard and that we pray through. I assume that we all know what praying hard means - we pray often and with intensity. But to pray through may be a bit more vague. Today we will share some illustrations and scriptures that show us both how to pray hard and how to pray through.



With prayer, it is a matter of quantity as well as quality. You see, I believe the more time we spend in prayer, the harder we will be able to pray. We see this idea in other areas of life. For example, in *The Circle Maker* they shared that scientists have discovered that to become an 'elite performer' - no matter what the field - requires about 10,000 hours of practice. It does not matter if you are talking about musicians, athletes, chess masters, criminals, or writers. They found that at 4,000 hours of practice, you are average. Once you log 8,000 hours of practice, you become 'good' at what you are doing. But once someone has logged 10,000 hours of practice, they gain world-class expertise. Now I am not saying to log your prayer time. After all, at one hour a day, if you started today it would take you just over 27 years to hit 10,000 hours. But I am saying that persistence pays off. Prayer is like any other habit. As Batterson points out, to pray hard takes time and it takes effort. It has to be cultivated. It has to be developed. It has to be practiced.

In today's scripture we see this as well. Jesus taught this parable as a way to show the disciples about *"their need to pray continually and not to be discouraged."*

In the parable, the widow did not ask once and go away. She kept coming to that judge who did not fear God or man and kept asking for justice. And finally, he relents. Not because she deserves justice or is even being treated unfairly, but because she won't go away. In verses six through eight, we learn the moral of the story and hear a question for us too.

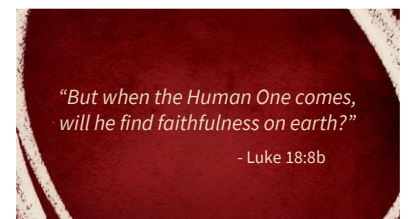


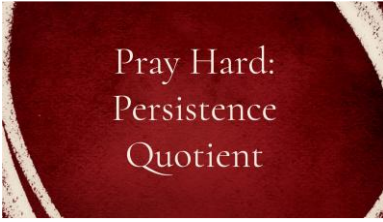
⁶ The Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ Won't God provide justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he be slow to help them? ⁸ I tell you he will give them justice quickly.

When we continue to cry out to God, we can trust that God hears us. In faith, we can believe that God will step in and work justice for us too. And unlike the judge, God won't drag His feet. Sometimes though it seems that our answers don't come right away. And it is hard to be persistent then, isn't it? But for the widow, there was holy desperation. She NEEDED God to answer her prayers. It kept her going back day after day. We have all prayed prayers of holy desperation before - don't let so-and-so die, make the cancer go away, bring that job that is so needed... In our lives and in the life of our church, what are we desperate for? Put another way, what do we NEED from God?

Jesus closes the parable by asking a question. At the end of verse 8 Jesus asks, *"But when the Human One comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?"* This question that Jesus asks in this

parable is for us too. When he returns, will he find persistent faith, persistent prayer? As we talk about and study praying hard and praying through, it is my hope and prayer that we as a church lean into and begin practicing these ways of praying. It is through persistent prayer that God reveals the plans that God has for us and for our church.





I believe that God has a plan for our church. I do not know what that plan is. I'd like to. For right now, I pray for God's direction and guidance for our church. I pray for the things God has placed upon my heart. I pray that our church is one that matters, one that brings people to Christ, one that deepens the faith of those that are already a part of our church. I pray other prayers daily too. One is a scary prayer because I do not know where it will take me or our church if it is answered. But I pray it anyway, with all of my heart, trusting that God has the plan already figured out.

There are reasons that I pray a prayer that sometimes scares me. As the people of God, we are called to make disciples of all peoples and to love God and neighbor. I truly believe we are called, as a church, to make a difference in our community as we seek to make disciples and to love God and neighbor. In Piedmont, the poor and others who are struggling are part of our community. God has placed it upon my heart to pray that our church would be able to increase our role in our community, to make a difference in these people's lives. I have no doubt that God placed that prayer in me. Perhaps this is a prayer some of you pray as well.

I am not sure what God's response to that prayer may one day be or where it might lead. But I continue to pray, seeking God's will and seeking to find discernment about what to pray for specifically. And, yes, I trust that God is at work as well. If we are faithful and persistent in our prayers, then God will open the doors and show the way that we need to go. As some of you find a dream or a vision or something else to circle in prayer, I invite you to join with me each day and circle that big prayer in your daily prayer life. Sometimes the Holy Spirit nudges us, planting a seed. I shared one such seed in the May newsletter. This summer we are going to try to reach out into our community by providing a free meal once a month. For families on the margins, maybe this will ease some of the burdens that summer brings.

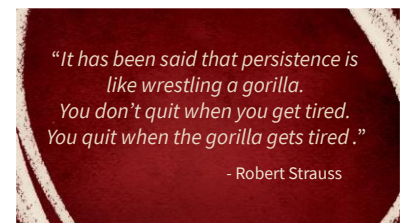
Maybe when you read about that idea in the newsletter or are hearing about it this morning, maybe the Spirit stirred or is stirring in you. Please pray about this stirring in your heart. Please seek God's blessing on this nudge of the Spirit during your prayer time. I hope that the Holy Spirit will move some of you to be involved in this outreach effort this summer.

Today I am not going to ask you to do anything except to pray hard for this effort. I am asking you to pray daily about and for this summer meal. As you pray about it maybe God will lead you to become involved in a greater way than simply praying for this outreach event. If prayer is as far as you go, then that is what God intends for your role to be. But maybe God will lead you to action - maybe as a person who volunteers to help with the event, maybe as a person who invites that neighbor who could use a free meal, maybe as a person who gives financially so that the event will be funded. But begin with prayer. Pray hard and pray through. May we, as a congregation, cover the summer meals in prayer. Dream for a minute with me - imagine what God could do for our church and our community through this effort! So, pray hard, please.

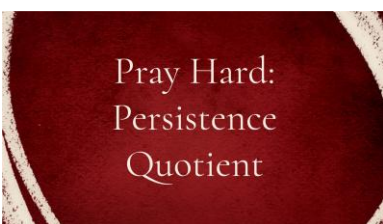
In today's scripture reading, the widow is the central character. In many ways, she is similar to many of the people we hope to reach with these meals. In the culture of her day, she had very little status. She had no one to speak for her, to represent her, to stand up for her. She existed on the fringe. Many of the people we hope to meet and begin to form relationships with through this event are like her. They struggle day to day. They feel like no one cares. They feel like they are on the outside looking in. They need to know they are loved. They need to know that someone cares, that we care. They need to have hope. Pray that we can love, care, and give hope to those in need.

Each of us have big dreams and hopes and ideas that live inside of us. God wants to respond to our prayers and to respond with big answers. Often it begins with a little poke from God. Feeling that little poke from God is just the beginning of starting to find our big answer. We need to be bold and begin to pray for discernment and guidance. We need to dig in our heels and pray hard. We need to continue to pray through until we begin to feel God in the prayer. And then we will begin to pray with a holy confidence, like Honi and like the widow, sure that the answer will come. We begin to circle that prayer like the Israelites circled Jericho - praying over and over as they circled, each time our confidence in God growing stronger.

I found this quote that I felt really illustrated how we are to pray this way: *"It has been said that persistence is like wrestling a gorilla. You don't quit when you get tired. You quit when the gorilla gets tired."* The widow wore out that judge like we are to wear out God with our prayers. We are to pray hard and to pray through.



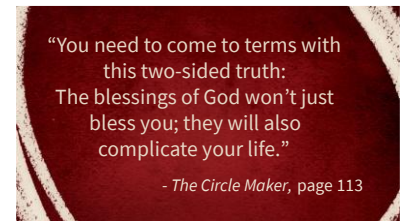
Shifting to the personal, I ask: What is the gorilla you are wrestling with? What is the prayer you are praying over and over and over? What prayer have you circled that you are refusing to let go of? What is the circle you are standing inside of, not willing to budge until God answers your prayer? What is the dream that God wants you to pray hard for and to pray through? Yes, I hope that you will join me in praying for our summer meals. But even more than that, I hope that you have people, places, and situations that you are circling in prayer. In faith and trust, may the Lord bless you in your persistence.



To close I would like to spend a few minutes on the content of chapters 10 and 11 from our book, *The Circle Maker*. To me, these two chapters form a great combination.

Chapter 10 speaks to answered prayers and chapter 11 speaks to unanswered prayers and to prayers whose answers feel like God saying “no.” When talking about praying hard and praying through, these two chapters offer challenge, inspiration, and a dose of reality.

In chapter 10, titled *The Cattle on a Thousand Hills*, Batterson writes of the “holy complications” that come when we pray hard and pray through. On page 113 Batterson writes, “You need to come to terms with this two-sided truth: The blessings of God won’t just bless you; they will also complicate your life.” Now, before you write off praying hard and praying through based on this truth, he does add that the blessings will complicate our lives in positive ways. When we are faithful with our prayers, God will keep putting us in situations that stretch our faith. This, in turn, will stretch our dreams, our visions, our hopes for our lives, for our church, and for our world.

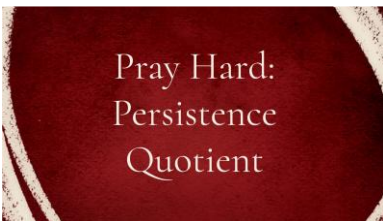


The Circle Maker also connects this to the idea of praying like it depends on God, and working like it depends on you. This second part is where we can get stuck. Batterson notes that the harder we pray, the harder we will have to work. He notes on page 114, “You can’t just be willing to pray about it; you also have to be willing to do something about it.” This is where many of us get stuck spiritually. Our book notes that we are willing to pray right up to the point of discomfort, but no further. We are willing to pray right up to the point of inconvenience, but no further. I would add, we are often willing to pray right up to the point of risk or looking foolish, but no further. If we want God to answer or to respond to our big prayers, then we often need to be willing to take a step of faith.

To illustrate I would like to share Lisa’s story. She left a good paying journalism job to work at the Dream Center in Birmingham, Alabama. She exudes joy, life, and energy.

The Dream Center does outreach to pimps and prostitutes. They mentor kids. They feed the hungry. They try and meet the needs of their community. The staff lives out a daily dependence on God because the needs of the community are overwhelming.

One morning as Lisa was circling the Dream Center in her prayers, she felt a Holy Spirit prompting to take her wooly socks to work that day. She shares that she thought she was losing her mind. She put them in her purse anyway. Sometimes we have to be willing to listen to the Spirit and to take a step of faith. When she got to the Dream Center, she found a prostitute, passed out on the front steps. Lisa carried her inside and held her as regained consciousness. Lisa recalled that she was shaking because she was so cold. When conscious enough to respond, Lisa asked her, “If you could have anything, what would it be?” Without hesitation the woman said, “Woolly socks.” Lisa pulled out the woolly socks and the woman said, “They even match my outfit!” Imagine if Lisa refused to listen to the Spirit or had been unwilling to take a step of faith.



Chapter 11 is titled *No Answer*. We touched on this challenge during our *Wrestling with Doubt* series. Some of the hardest moments in life come when we have prayed hard and the answer is ‘no’ or when there is no answer at all. Some of the time, though, in these cases it is God being far wiser or loving us too much to give us what we are asking for. And some of the time God’s “no” is God’s way of getting in the way in order to show us the way. An example of this in scripture is the story of Balaam and his donkey. The donkey could see what Balaam could not – the angel of the Lord barring his way. When the Lord finally opened Balaam’s eyes to see, the angel revealed the reckless path that Balaam was on. Balaam resets his course, choosing to be faithful over making some money. Like Balaam, we do not like detours, we do not like it when things get in our way, and we do not like interruptions to our plans.

But that is how God works some of the time. In the midst of the challenge or struggle or hardship, yes, it can be difficult to pray hard and to pray through. We are called to trust that God will be with us and that God will fight our battles for us, especially in these difficult moments. Trust and faith are what allows us to take our hands off the challenges, struggle, or hardships that we face, placing them in God's hands. We know that God can handle them. The hardest part is keeping our hands off and allowing God to be in control. When we are able to do this, to trust in God's plans for us or our church, then we find that peace that passes understanding. Let us pray...

Lord God, help us to be people of prayer and action. As we lift our prayers to you, instill in us a willingness to do what needs done, to take that step of faith that provokes a response from you. God, by the power of the Spirit, cultivate and develop in each of us a habit of prayer. Build up in us the inner strength to be persistent in our prayer life, especially around those prayers that contain the holy desperation shown in the widow's story and around those big prayers that we are wrestling with. Continue to stir up in our hearts the ways that you want to use Grace to impact our community. If it is around the idea of offering a summer meal, wonderful. If it is around some other way to connect with our community, terrific. And Lord, in those moments when our strength wanes, in those moments when we find it hard to keep praying, remind us of your love and care, of your provision and protection, of the good plans you have for us, plans often beyond our imagination or vision. Thank you, Lord. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have you prayed like the widow, keeping at it until you received justice or whatever you desperately sought? How did this grow your faith?
- 2) *Pray*. Have you ever had a “wooly socks” nudge? If so, pray for another and for the willingness to step forward in faith. If not, pray for one that you can respond to.
- 3) *Study*. Read Numbers 22:22-35. What lessons about correction and obedience do you take from this story? Where might they apply to your life in the current moment?