

## Persisting in Prayer

Luke 11:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Many of us here have friends or relatives who have long needed some change in their lives. Either they need to have their health turned around, or they need some change in the way they're operating, or in the way they're living. And probably you're like many of us over the years who have done a lot of talking and a lot of listening and yet years later they're just the same.

If you have experienced that, you know the way you feel. You feel frustrated about it because it seems that you've talked and they've at times listened and now they seem to have stopped listening. Or you keep on finding new remedies or new pieces of advice to give them but now you've run out of remedies and advice. You still love them and you want them to be changed and you want the thing to be better for them but you don't see where to go. It just seems you've run out of ideas and they've run out of any ability to follow your advice. You do feel frustrated, don't you? You feel there's something not right that we should both, they and we, travel on towards certain death and yet not have this thing changed or not have it remedied. It's hard really in that situation to know what to do.

Loved ones, the answer is just as solid as anything for us this morning. I don't know if you know the saying. "Man's extremity is God's opportunity." The problems that you and I can solve by our advice or by yet another human remedy that we pass on to our loved one or our friend, those aren't the real problems. They aren't. I mean we comfort ourselves by solving some of them and we think, "Oh we've really achieved something." But really those aren't the important problems.

The important problems are these that we've just been talking about: the frozen relationships, the hostility, the deteriorating physical state, the attitudes that will not change, the old habits that continue year after year to spoil a person's life. It's the way that we have of dealing with each other that just prevent a family or a marriage moving into any higher level. Those are the important problems. Those are the real problems. They are there in a fallen world like ours to do one thing and that is to drive us to God. That's why they are there.

I don't know if you have thought the same as I have at times. I've thought, "Why? Why are there problems like that? Shouldn't this world be happy? Shouldn't it be happy and shouldn't we be able to live and tackle things the way all the power of positive thinking people tell us to tackle them? We should just have this life by the tail. We should have it ordered and all our families and all our relatives and our friends, they should be happy."

Well, loved ones it was never meant to be that way after man had rebelled against God. Ever from that time, this has been a fallen world and God has allowed problems such as we're talking about to develop in order to drive us to God. So maybe the first, most important thing is, what Churchill said, "Whatever the difficulties, however great the enemies, however often you fail, however many disappointments you have, never, never, never give up. Never give up."

Just as you sit there today, first of all settle that, you're not going to put up with this thing; you're not going to give up. So step right back from all that cynicism towards your dad or your mom

or towards your relative or your friend, step right back from that and just give it a hardy kick in the right place and say, "I am not going to give up. I am going to do something about this thing." Loved ones, that insuperable problem is there to drive you to God, not to drive you to defeat. It's there to drive you to God.

Now how do you get God to intervene? No doubt you've tried. Well, let's look first of all at the basic verse and scripture. It's Luke 11:9. How do you get God to intervene? "And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." And then all of us say, "I have knocked. I have asked. I have sought and the person is no better now 15 years later." And that's really where we show that we don't believe Jesus' words here and we don't really believe what He said about our God. Because I'd point out to you, we're always doing what we in America specialize in doing.

Every time you go to Europe, you see that even the house in London where our group lives is older than our constitution here in America. It's more than 200 years old. We went to see a church one Sunday and it was founded in 1000 A.D. So, in Europe, you realize that things are not done in a second.

In America, if it doesn't happen tomorrow, we have no patience with it. And so we tend to say, "I've asked, I've sought." Loved ones, you haven't asked and sought until you've died asking and seeking. You haven't and that's where we let our friends and our relatives down.

We stop praying because we say, "Well, I have asked and I have sought." And we don't really believe God that His nature is to answer us. We tend to say, "We want His nature to answer us now." But it's His nature to answer us in His good time. We need to believe that God is like that. You'll find that in the chapter that we just looked at. It's Luke 11:1-13.

Luke 11:1-13

"He was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.' And he said to them, 'When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive every one who is indebted to us; and lead us not into temptation.'

And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him whatever he needs. And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

You remember in another piece he says, "How much more will your Father give good gifts to those who ask?" Jesus has told us our Father hears us. He hears us, so you keep asking. You keep asking. In other words, Jesus says, "Put your mouth where your heart is. You believe that God loves you and

that He will answer your prayers, then put your mouth right there. You keep on asking. You keep on keeping on, year after year after year after year, until you die, you keep on asking. But you don't step back from it because you've been at it 10 years."

See, you look at those situations, look at some of them. You know why they're like they are, because actually you've backed off. I mean, isn't that what we do? We all arrange in our lives problems that we can do something about and ones that we can't do anything about and these grow and grow as the years go by and we train ourselves to forget them. Actually what we do is we stop praying for those situations and we stop believing God for them and so they pile up as a growing, hard, frozen block of unbelief that makes it more and more difficult to believe even for the things that are easy.

So loved ones, when you think of your dad or your mom or the loved one who is an alcoholic or the frozen situation in that relationship or the attitude that will not change, loved ones, I say lovingly to you, you know why it's like that. It's like that because you gave up after a year or three months of prayer and actually what is needed is somebody there to hold steady and to stand with that, year after year after year. That's believing God.

To stop praying is not believing God. Brothers and sisters, you can't prove to me from that chapter that you are right. I can always answer you that God will do it. He said He will do it. All you can answer me is He hasn't done it inside my timeframe but do you see the promise is not inside a timeframe? See loved ones, where we're being deceived.

See, we're saying, "We've prayed for 5 years or 7 years or 10 years or 20 years or 30 years", and then we stop praying. Except that, who of us here has prayed for 10 years, 20 years, or 30 years -- a few of us maybe, but probably very few. Most of us have given up on the thing after maybe two or three years of prayer. Some of us who live with these situations in our home day after day have prayed for 20 years. But 20 years is nothing. 20 years is nothing in God's timeframe and His promise still stands here.

So there's no place in which we will be able to go to Him at the end of this world and say, "Lord, we did not respect you because your promises here were not kept." He will respond, "How long did you wait for me to fulfill my promise?" All we can answer is, "Well, I waited three years. Well, I waited 5. Well, I waited 7, well, I waited 10, well, I waited 20 and then I gave up." But loved ones, you see we haven't a leg to stand on. This chapter is very clear.

If an ordinary father will give his children fish when they ask for fish and won't give them a scorpion, then your Father will much more readily give you good gifts. And if some host who is called upon by a guest at midnight will get up just because the guest keeps irritating him by asking and asking and asking then how much more will your Father give you who loves you?

In other words, Jesus is saying, "Put your mouth where your heart is. Start being faithful in prayer day after day after day and be importunate. Keep on keeping on." Now, how far should you carry this? Loved ones, look at that wild story you remember that we've looked at before in Genesis 18 and it'll just startle you and set you back on your heels because Abraham seemed to go beyond the point of respect and reverence.

You remember God told him that he was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham had a nephew called Lot who was there and he knew Lot was going to be destroyed along with the others and so he prayed to God.

It's Genesis 18:23: "Then Abraham drew near, and said, "Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked?" And do you see that some of us are a bit reluctant to do it that way. We would say that's irreverent, "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked." I mean that's insulting God. It's trying God. It's tempting Him. But you see Abraham was saying, "You said the sinful soul will die and the righteous soul will live. Now Lord, that is your nature as I understand. Now, I am taking you at your word. Now I am calling to you on behalf of your own nature. Are you in this case, going to contradict your nature? Are you in this case going to destroy the righteous with the wicked?"

So God wants us to take His nature seriously. Too many of us are doing it as a compliment to God. We're asking because you're supposed to pray. It's a childish game. Do you see loved ones we're not being fair to the Father? It's a childish little game. Okay, we say our prayers; "Our Father who art in heaven" or "Gentle Jesus meek and mild." And then I said, "God bless my dad, God bless my mom." And so we say our prayers.

We say our prayers to God. It's like the prayer wheel turning, we turn our prayer wheel and then we go to sleep and we say, "Now Lord, you should answer us." Whereas God is saying, "Get to grips with me. I have said I am such and such. Do you believe me to be such and such? If I am not proving such and such to you, you have a right to charge me with that. Come, let us interact with each other. Let us put our arms around each other. You deal with me as a living, real live God who is your Father and stop playing games with me." See, that's what He wants.

So what to us seems impertinence is something that God desires us to do, to come to Him in terms of His own nature. And Abraham says, you see in Genesis 18:23:

"Then Abraham drew near, and said, 'Wilt thou indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt thou then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'"

Abraham is saying: "Lord, this is your nature. Will you not abide by your nature?"

"And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will spare the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Wilt thou destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, and said, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.'

I think Abraham was working down to Lot's family, that's what he was after, trying to get down to that number. "Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Behold, I have taken upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak again but this once. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place."

That's it, loved ones. That's praying. God wants us to plead with Him importunately, repeatedly, continuously for these impossible problems that we face.

Now if you say to me, "Why on earth and why in heaven does God do that? Why does He not answer us immediately? Why does He require us to keep on asking?" Well there are all kinds of reasons. Usually it's because there's something in your attitude that God is trying to remove before He is able to change that other person's life. Usually it's that. Usually it's something in our attitude. Sometimes it's for other reasons. It's to bring us more into His own nature.

For instance, the host did everything he could. He thought, "Now the stores are closed, I can't get any food from there. There's no other way I can do this. The only way is to go to this neighbor of mine." In other words, he tried everything else and there was nothing else he could do but go to his neighbor.

Often God is trying to bring us to that place. Often we are praying, "Lord will you heal this person? Father will you make their marriage better? Lord, will you smooth over this bad relationship?" And what God is trying to do is to get us away from all those other alternatives and get us to pray that this person will be confronted by God firmly and strongly and will see that the only thing is to give their whole life to God. And so the Father often holds back an answer because we're praying the wrong prayer and He is trying to get us to the place where we will leave off all the other solutions. And we will pray that this person will come into contact with God Himself. This host had tried everything else and then came to God.

Sometimes it's for another reason if you look at the story in Luke 11. You'll see what the host did when the guest came. Luke 11:5, "And he said to them, 'Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him.'"

The friend got up out of his bed, went out into the cold and did whatever was needed to get the bread for his guest. Sometimes the Lord knows that we lack love for our friends and our relatives. Sometimes He knows fine well that we're just slipping a prayer up there because it's an easy way out of a difficult problem. And the Father is trying to beget in us that willing love that is willing to die and willing to put itself out for the sake of the other person. That's what real willing love is willing to do. It's willing to die and to be lost to itself for the sake of the other person coming to God. Often God holds back from answering our prayers to beget in us that kind of love.

I don't know about you but it seems we talk a lot about love and yet so few of us really love, isn't that true? I don't know how all of you are who are married or who live with friends or who live with family, but are you not startled repeatedly at how little love you have for your friends and for your relatives and for your husband or for your wife. I mean we're all big talkers.

We talk love, love, love. I love you, I love you. But, we're not ready to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and suffer what they suffer. We are not ready to put ourselves out for them. We're not ready to put them first and us second. We're not ready to sacrifice and to lose ourselves so that they will gain and God often holds back answering our prayers until we come into that kind of love.

Here is that kind of love. It just boggles the mind when you look at it, but you'll find it in Exodus 32:31-32. It's Moses praying after I believe the Israelites made the golden calf and God

threatened to destroy them all. Exodus 32:31, "So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin - and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.'"

So we're big talkers and big prayers but that's what prayer is. It's where you put yourself in the other person's shoes that you'd rather die for them. That's the prayer that God answers. God often holds back our answers because He knows we don't really love. He knows if we go into heaven with the shallow, superficial love that we call love, it's going to be hell for us. And we're going to eventually end up in hell, which is the only place we'll be at home with all the other selfish people who are just talking love and not loving.

So for that reason the Father will often hold back an answer to our prayers to get us to come into this place where we ask ourselves, "Why is God not answering my prayer in regard to my mom or in regard to my wife, or in regard to my son or in regard to my colleague? Why is He not answering my prayer? What am I lacking? Holy Spirit, what am I lacking?" And often the Holy Spirit is trying to get through to us and say, "You wouldn't die in their place, that's what you are lacking, you wouldn't die in their place. You wouldn't go to hell so that they could go to heaven, that's what's lacking." God can only answer your prayer when you begin to love the way He loves.

One of the great privileges of preaching is that the Father preaches to you as you preach. So doesn't it dawn on you as it dawns on me? You have no excuse to stop praying. We haven't. Which of us here says, "Well brother, I am willing to die for that person", or, "I have spent such hours in prayer that God must know I am." Loved ones, I think we all have to stand before God poverty-stricken this morning and say, "Lord, what we call prayer isn't prayer at all. We've offered up to you little petitions during prayer in church or we've offered up a little wish to you as we've been sitting at the stoplights in the car or we've done things as we've talked a lot to our friends and our relatives but we haven't prayed this way. We haven't prayed with the kind of willing love that is ready to sacrifice itself for them. No, no, no I am not that anxious for them to be saved." It comes to our hearts that we are not praying loved ones.

We're not praying, yet do you see the tragic situation we put ourselves in? We put ourselves with those people who generally take a shallow superficial attitude to prayer and who say, "Well, yes God answers prayer on the whole, except for the 45 that He hasn't answered in my life." We put ourselves in that position.

So do you see, and I say it lovingly to you, because I know it's a hard thing to bear, but do you see that in a sense, we are God's enemies because we're not praying with the kind of prayer that He is able to answer. Yet we tend to be saying to other people, "Yes, we have prayed." But God doesn't just operate the way He used to years ago and so we end up being God's enemies primarily because we're saying, "It's not my fault. Whatever is the problem with this unanswered prayer is not my fault. It's not my fault. I have done....."

See, that self-righteousness has to freeze our tongues in our mouths. We have to stop saying, "It's not my fault, and I have done all that." That's terrible. We bow before the Lord God and say, "You are right Lord. All the time you are right. You are always right. This is your nature. This is what your son says is your nature, you're right. Show me what I have to do so that you will be able to answer my prayer." But don't stop praying, you don't stop praying.

Any other reasons? Sometimes it's to get us to stop our silly games. Sometimes it's to get us to see

our own impotence, our own inability to solve this problem. Sometimes God holds back from answering our prayers for that reason-- to get us to stop thinking another set of tapes will do it, or a new spiritual wave. We think if we could only get them to the Basic Youth Conflict Conference or to Campus Church or if we could give them another book. Just stop that. That's not what they need. They need somebody to pray for them with a whole heart and a self-sacrificing love. Often God refuses to answer your prayers to bring it to the end of all those human devices, which answer only the problems that can be solved by human power.

So often the Father holds back from answering our prayers to bring us into the kind of love and the kind of prayer that His Son prays. Loved ones there is far more to say but could I ask you to just stop for a moment now and identify again those things that you have prayed for in the past and that you have now given up praying for. Would you just identify again those chronic problems in your family or in your home or in your marriage or in your job, just identify those now.

Now, put them down in your diary again today and start praying for them. Start praying for them. There's another reason for this. If you don't do that, that whole defeated area that you know about acts as a cancer in your relationship with God. It acts as a cancer and you keep on allowing that to grow and grow and grow until it eats up all your faith. Because the truth is, our place is to pray. It is the Lord's place to answer. Our place is to pray. Our place is not to say, "He has not healed Susan yet." Or, "He has not healed my marriage yet." Or, "He has not put things right in my family." Our place is to pray and after the answer has come that we did not ask for, our place is to bow down to the Father as David did when his son died and to say, "The Lord's will be done."

Our place is not to judge God. Our place is to believe what His Son said that our Father is more anxious to give us good gifts than we are to ask for them. And we have a holy privilege and opportunity to pray for our friends unfailingly until the day when our tongue stops for the last time. Only then can we stop praying. Only then can we say, "God has not answered our prayer." So brothers and sisters, will you deal with God on those things and let's take back some ground from Satan here this morning. Let us pray.

Dear Father, we would first of all ask forgiveness Lord for the things that we have given up on, for the moms and dads or the brothers and sisters or the sons and daughters or the husbands and wives or the colleagues or the roommates that we have given up on. Father we know that hopelessness and despair dwells only in hell and nowhere where You are present because You are the God who raises the sun every morning.

So Father we repent of having given up and Lord we repent of having become cynical about prayer. Lord we see some of the things you're after in us. We see Lord that you love us first and foremost but above everything else you want to make us like Your Son Jesus so that we'll be at home with both of you in heaven. So Father we do thank You for your delay in answering our prayers. We see how shallow and superficial our love for our dear friends have been. And Lord we commit ourselves now to praying for them with a whole heart and with full faith depending on you only and believing that you are the God who answered Abraham as he pleaded for Lot's life.

Lord we thank you. We thank you for your faithfulness. We thank you Lord Jesus for Your plain words to us, "Ask, and it will be given you, seek, and you will find, knock, and it will be open to you." We thank You Lord Jesus that you didn't tell us how often we had to knock. You didn't tell us how many years we'd have to ask. You simply told us that if we ask, we would receive. Father we thank You for that.

We now Lord build our faith again on the basis of Your dear word and we take up the weapons of prayer on behalf of our friends and we now Lord ask You to mightily intervene in these situations and to change these dear hearts and to drive back this physical sickness. We ask You Father in full confidence to set forth Your own nature among us and among our friends by acting mightily to apply the victory of Calvary to these people's lives.

Father we thank You that you are a prayer-answering God and that we have not yet proven otherwise. Father thank you. Now the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and evermore. Amen.