

INTRODUCTION

A young man went into a drugstore to buy 3 boxes of chocolate: small, medium, and large. When the pharmacist asked him about the three boxes, he said, "Well, I'm going over to a new girlfriend's house for supper. Then we're going out. If she only lets me hold her hand, then I'll give her the small box. If she lets me kiss her on the cheek, then I'll give her the medium box. But if she really lets me smooch seriously, I'll give her the big box." He made his purchase and left.

That evening as he sat down at dinner with his girlfriend's family, he asked if he could say the prayer before the meal. He began to pray, and he prayed an earnest, intense prayer that lasted for almost five minutes. When he finished his girlfriend said, "You never told me you were such a religious person." He said, "And you never told me your dad was a pharmacist!"

It's a good thing to pray—whatever the circumstances! According to many public opinion polls, prayer is very important to Americans. In 2000 the Gallup organization found 90 percent of Americans pray. 86 percent said they believed in God—isn't it interesting more people pray than claim to believe in God? 83 percent said they favor prayer at graduation exercises. 70 percent favor Christian prayers spoken in school.

The title of this message is "P.U.S.H.," an acronym for Pray Until Something Happens! Jesus had a great deal to say about prayer. His disciples watched Him, and they said, "Lord, teach us how to pray." They never said, "Teach us how to do miracles, or to teach, or to love people." The one thing about His life that was so fascinating that they wanted to imitate Him was His prayer life. In Luke 18:1-8 He shared a parable about prayer: Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them they should always pray and not give up. You don't have to wonder about the meaning of this parable because the interpretation is given in the first verse.

He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the son of man comes will he find faith on the earth?"

The story begins with a widow who had an adversary who was trying to take advantage of her. It's likely someone was trying to cheat her out of money or land her husband left her. This was prevalent in Bible times, because women had few legal rights. In the wonderful Old Testament story of Ruth, she and Naomi returned to Bethlehem as widows. They had no legal right to claim the land had belonged to their husbands. Fortunately Boaz married Ruth and he became her kinsman/redeemer.

In Jesus' parable this widow not only had the hurdle of being a female, she faced a terrible judge. He didn't have any fear of God, nor did he care what other people thought about him. He was probably a Gentile judge designated by the Roman authorities. Judgeships were sold and bought, and a judge could make a good living from the bribes that were common. Our widow had no money to bribe this wicked judge, so her only recourse was to come before him repeatedly crying, "Grant me justice against my adversary! Grant me justice against my adversary!" He dismissed her claim, but she kept coming back, constantly begging him for justice. He must have thought, "Oh, no, not HER again!" In verse 5, he admits she bothered him. The word translated "bothering" literally means to "poke in the eye." He was upset because she was constantly in his face. This constant begging and nagging finally paid off—he ruled in her favor. There are at least three important prayer principles Jesus taught in the parable. They are:

1. DON'T WORRY–PRAY!

In the parable, the widow didn't sit at home wringing her hands about her problem. Instead of worrying, she got up and approached the only person who could help her—the judge. In verse one Jesus said we ought always to pray and not to give up. The NASB says, "Pray and do not lose heart." The Greek word translated "give up" is *enkenkao*. It literally means to "be filled with bad thoughts." Worry is filling your mind with bad thoughts of the worst that could happen. Worry is like water. It begins as a trickle of doubt that creeps into your mind. If it isn't stopped, it soon becomes a stream of fear which creates a pond of paranoia which overflows into a river of distress which develops into a raging torrent of tension. And before you know it, the flood of worry has carved a Grand Canyon of anxiety in your mind!

William Ward wrote this about worry: "Worry is faith in the negative, trust in the unpleasant, assurance of disaster, and belief in defeat...Worry is a magnet that attracts negative circumstances...Worry is wasting today's time to clutter up tomorrow's opportunities with yesterday's troubles." Worry is like rocking in a rocking chair—it gives you something to do, but you never go anywhere with it.

The Apostle Paul was stuck in a Roman dungeon facing the possibility of having his head chopped off. Instead of worrying about dying, he prayed and in addition to praying, he wrote some letters to encourage Christians to pray instead of worrying. Look at his word found in Philippians 4:6-7. Remember, these words were penned by a man sitting in a damp, dark, depressing dungeon: "Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worry into prayers. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down." (*The Message*)

When you face a challenging circumstance you have two choices. You can lose heart and let worrisome thoughts control your mind; or you can pray about it. You should pray and not worry because the God of the Bible loves you and cares for you. I recently read an interesting testimony from a Christian man who owned a construction company. He was losing sleep worrying about some financial problems he faced in his company. One morning, after another night filled with worry, he opened his Bible and devotional guide. That morning he was reading from Matthew 6 where Jesus commanded his followers not to worry. Jesus said, "Consider the sparrows, they

don't plant or harvest, or store in barns, but your heavenly Father takes care of them—and you are much more valuable to him than the sparrows!" His devotional guide spoke about how God cares for the birds so much when a single sparrow falls dead to the earth, God is aware and God cares. The verse at the end was I Peter 5:7 which says, "Cast your cares upon him, for He cares for you."

A few days earlier on the job site, they had been removing trees and the owner had noticed one of the trees had a bird nest with baby birds in it. He marked the tree and left word not to cut it down. But on this day, he realized the tree would have to come down because they couldn't delay the project any longer.

The owner used a bucket truck to lift him up to the bird's nest. When he looked in, the birds were gone—they had learned to fly. Since he was up there anyway, he removed the nest. You know birds use all kinds of scraps to make a nest. As he examined the nest, he discovered the birds had used straw, twigs, and even little strips of paper to make the nest. He removed one sliver of paper and what he read almost caused him to fall out to the bucket. Written on the fragment were these words, "God cares for you." He realized God was using that bird nest to reinforce his message. Today, the man's business is doing well, and he is prays more and worries less—and he keeps that bird's nest in his office!

2. DON'T QUIT—PRAY PERSISTENTLY!

In the parable, the poor widow *kept on* begging the judge to grant her justice. She didn't just ask once and say, "Let me know what you decide." She peppered his ears with persistent petitions. Have you ever asked God for something, and when He didn't answer your prayer immediately, you quit praying? That's a big mistake.

The most effective prayers in the Bible are those that were prayed persistently. In Psalm 55:16-17, David wrote: "I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." David wasn't one of those one-a-day vitamin prayers. He was an all-day pray-er!

In the Old Testament, Hannah desperately wanted a child. For many years she prayed and prayed to have a child. After her prayer was unanswered for years she didn't say, "Well, it must not be God's will for me to have a child." She kept on praying for years, and eventually God gave her a son—Samuel, the mighty prophet.

Even Jesus prayed persistently. On the night before the crucifixion, He was in the Garden of Gethsemane pouring out His heart to His Father. His prayer burden was so intense there were drops of blood, like sweat on His forehead. He prayed, "Father, take this cup from me—but not my will but yours be done!" He prayed it again and again. Three times He cried out to His Father—and His Father heard Him and gave Him the strength and resolve to face the cross.

Paul had some kind of painful affliction he called a thorn in the flesh. He begged the Lord to remove the pain. He asked not once, not twice, but three times before the Lord answered. And when God answered, it wasn't the answer Paul was wanting. God didn't take away the thorn;

instead He gave him the grace to cope with the pain, so Paul began to give God glory in the midst of his pain.

Persistence is an important factor in prayer. But persistence is a valuable commodity for every area of your Christian life, not just prayer. God blesses those who persist. So whatever you may be facing right now, *don't give up!* If you're ever tempted to give up, just remember the composer Brahms. It took him seven long years to write his famous Lullaby—I guess because he kept falling asleep at the piano!

One of the largest organizations in America is the Quitters Club. The reason you've never heard of the Quitters Club is because they never meet—the members quit coming. There are no dues—the members quit paying them. The Quitters Club is comprised of people who faced a tough job, a tough marriage, a tough sickness, or a tough failure—and they quit. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. But the going gets tough, the quitters get going...away. What we need in America and in the church are people who will exhibit good, old-fashioned “sticktoitiveness.” That's probably not even a word, but it needs to be!

God has always honored persistence. I have always appreciated Emmitt Smith. I was glad to see him set the NFL rushing record last Sunday. He isn't as flashy as Walter Payton or Barry Sanders, and he never possessed true break-away speed. But his strength lies in his ability to persist—he just kept on running.

He has run for 16,743 yards. That's 9.5 miles! It has taken him 13 years to run only 9.5 miles. What's the big deal about that? I ran more miles than that on the Rose Rudman trail this past week! The big difference is, I didn't have 11 huge defensive players trying to take my head off when I ran! Emmitt's average run over those 9.5 miles was 4.3 yards at a time. That means he has been tackled and knocked down 3,983 times. And do you know what he did after every tackle? He got back up and ran the ball again. Sure, he was injured a few times, but he always returned. I'm impressed that someone would be knocked down almost 4,000 times and still they get up and run again.

Event the best of people get knocked down in life, but what sets them apart from the quitters is that they get right back up. Life is full of adversarial people who will tackle you. You will face difficult circumstances that trip your feet out from under you. The poor widow in Jesus' parable had been knocked flat—but she refused to stay down. She got up and persistently made her request to the judge. You have an adversary who opposes you on every hand. The devil doesn't want you to pray and he'll do everything he can to make you stop praying!

One of the greatest men of faith in Christian history was the English preacher, George Mueller. He wrote these words about praying: “The great point is never to give up until the answer comes. I have been praying for 63 years and 8 months for one man's conversion. He is not saved yet, but he will be. How can it be otherwise? I am praying.” George Mueller died and the man was still not saved. But as they lowered Muller's casket into the ground, the man repented of his sins and trusted Jesus as his savior—that's persistent praying!

3. DON'T DOUBT—PRAY POSITIVELY!

In this parable, we are represented by the widow—she didn't worry and she was persistent in her requests. But is God like that crooked judge? Does He have to be pestered and coerced before He will answer your prayers? Not at all. Parables not only contain comparisons but contrasts as well. Jesus used the mean judge as the antithesis of our loving Heavenly Father. He said, "And will not God bring justice to His chosen? Will He not answer their prayers quickly?"

You must *expect* God to answer your prayers. If you doubt that you'll receive an answer, chances are you won't. In James 1, we are told when we pray for wisdom God will give it to us generously. Then James adds a powerful warning about letting doubt creep into your prayers. He writes: "But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord." (James 1:6-7) Compare that to the positive promise we find in 1 John 5:14-15: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him."

The difference is learning to pray positively, without doubting. Sadly, many Christians pray, but they really don't expect an answer. I heard about a Sunday School teacher who had her children write letters to a missionary they had been praying for. The teacher explained the missionary was very busy and wouldn't have time to send a reply to every child, so they should expect to hear back from him. One little boy wrote this letter: "Dear Mr. Smith, I am praying for you. I am not expecting an answer." Are you like that? You pray, but you aren't really expecting an answer?

I've known people who have quit praying because they didn't seem to get an answer. If I walk into a room and flip the light switch, I expect the light to come on. If it doesn't, I don't curse Thomas Edison and say electricity is a lie. I start looking for the problem. Maybe the light bulb is burned out, or a breaker has been thrown, or the power is out. If it seems your prayers aren't answered, don't quit praying—start looking for the reason. It may be the wrong request, or you may have unconfessed sin in your life, or the timing may not be right. *God always answers prayer.* But He answers prayer in different ways.

1. God may answer your prayer QUICKLY

Jesus used the word "quickly" in verse 8 to describe how God answers prayer. The word "quickly" is a relative term. If someone was injured, I would say, "Call 911 quickly!" But if a couple gets married only four months after they first met, I might say, "They sure got married quickly!" The word Jesus used means "suddenly." Your prayers may seem to be unanswered for months, and then BOOM! God gives the answer.

I heard about a lady who was rushing to the mall to buy something. It was pouring rain and she didn't have an umbrella. As she drove into the parking lot she said, "Please, please, Lord let me find a good parking place near the front door." Just as she said those words she saw the back-up lights of a car as it backed out the best parking space in the entire lot. She said, "Never mind, Lord, I've found one myself!" What a joke! God answered her prayer so quickly she didn't even have time to understand it was God at work.

2. God may answer your prayer **LATER**

My next statement may confuse you so read it carefully. God always answers prayer immediately, but sometimes it is later. When your prayer is heard in heaven, God acts on the request immediately, but it may take awhile before you *get* His answer. An example of this can be found in Daniel 10. Daniel prayed and the angel Gabriel was dispatched to give Daniel his answer. Gabriel reported Daniel's prayer had been heard and answered immediately, but the Prince of Persia (a demonic spirit) resisted Gabriel in delivering God's answer. The archangel Michael had to fight against the Prince of Persia so Daniel could get his answer. During the delay, Daniel hadn't stopped praying. So if it seems God hasn't answered your prayer yet, don't quit! The answer could be just around the corner. God's delays are not God's denials. Our sense of timing is flawed, but God's timing is impeccable. So pray persistently, and then wait patiently for His answer.

3. God may answer your prayer **BETTER**

Sometimes you don't get what you ask for because God has something better in store for you. Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of Billy Graham once said, "If God answered every prayer of mine, I would have married the wrong man seven times!"

I had a friend growing up who had the ugliest bicycle I'd ever seen. It was a hand-me-down made from the parts of other bicycles. It was so ugly it didn't even have handlebar grips. He was always complaining that his hands would slip off the slick handlebars. He pestered his dad to buy him some handlebar grips, but his dad kept refusing.

One day his dad took him to the Western Auto hardware store. Near the front door there were some new handlebar grips for sale. They were plastic and had long streamers hanging from the ends. He said, "Daddy, daddy, I've just GOT to have these handlebar grips! Please daddy!" His dad looked at him and said, "No son, you don't need those grips. Now come with me to the back of the store." As he followed his dad, my friend was bitter and frustrated. Under his breath he was muttering, "I never get ANYTHING. It's just a lousy three dollars! My dad sure is mean!" When they got to the back of the store the owner wheeled out a shiny, brand new bicycle—complete with handlebar grips with plastic streamers. My friend's dad said, "Here son, it's an early birthday present. I wouldn't buy you any handlebar grips because I ordered you this new bicycle!" My friend was ecstatic! As he wheeled his new bike out the front door, he never even gave those handlebar grips a glance. Sometimes when you ask God for something, He has something better in store for you!

But maybe you've been praying a long time, and you haven't gotten anything better yet—in fact things seem to be getting worse—just wait. God always answers prayer in the way and at the time that it will give Him the greatest glory. My late friend Ron Dunn wrote in his book *Don't Just Stand There, Pray Something*: "God answers prayer along the route that brings Him the most glory. And on the way to better, it may pass by worse for awhile." So don't stop praying—even if things seem to be worse right now.

4. God may answer your prayer NO

Sometimes you ask God for something and His answer is simply, "NO." But that's still an answer to prayer. Don't ever stop praying until you hear God say, "No." At that point, stop making that request and start praying in a different way.

When my mother was dying of cancer and living with us in 1983, I fasted and prayed and asked God to completely heal her. I didn't worry about it, I prayed about it. I didn't stop praying, I prayed persistently. I prayed in positive faith—I expected God to heal my mother. After months of praying for God to heal her, one day He clearly spoke to my spirit and said, "David, I'm not going to heal her the way you want her healed. I'm going to totally heal her by bringing her home to be with me." At that moment, I stopped praying for her healing. I changed my prayer to, "Dear Lord, keep her free from pain and help her to enjoy the days of physical life she has left—and God answered that prayer.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Prayer is request. The essence of a request, as distinct from a demand, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant them and sometimes refuse them...If God had granted all the silly prayers I've made in my life, where should I be now?"

CONCLUSION

Just two weeks ago, the Washington snipers had millions of people paralyzed with fear. About ten days ago, a truck driver named Ron Lanz found the sniper's car at a rest stop. He called 911 and then used his rig to block the exit ramp in case the suspects woke up before the authorities arrived.

Ron Lanz claims finding the snipers was an answer to prayer. A few nights earlier, Ron joined over 50 truckers at a prayer meeting where they asked God to help them find the snipers. Ron was nearing retirement and didn't even live in that area, but he felt compelled to attend the prayer meeting. After the prayer time, Ron told several of his friends he felt God was going to use him to catch the snipers. The rest is history. Ron has refused to be called a hero, and he insists he is a simple man of prayer. He has offered to divide the half million dollar reward among the families of the sniper victims. That's a class act—and it's a great testimony of the power of prayer.

Our praying should be like the story of Jacob wrestling the angel in Genesis 32. They wrestled all night and toward morning, Jacob had the angel in a full Nelson grip. The angel said, "Jacob, let me go." Now, I think it was like WWF, it was a fixed fight. The mighty angel could have tossed Jacob off in a heartbeat, but God was teaching Jacob (and us) a valuable lesson about the power of persistent, tenacious praying.

Imagine Jacob hanging onto that angel. He said, "I won't let you go until you bless me." So the angel said, "Okay, your name has been Jacob (which means "grabber"). From now on you will be named Israel (which means prince of God). What a great prayer lesson! Have you ever

grabbed onto God in prayer and begged Him saying, “I’m not going to quit praying until you answer me?”

What is God trying to say to you personally? Are you consumed with worry and anxiety? Pray instead. Have you stopped praying about a need in your life? Are you considering quitting in some area where God has placed you? Don’t quit—keep on praying persistently! Are you filled with doubt about prayer? Start praying positively, expecting God to answer. Every time you walk through a door that says PUSH—let God remind you to Pray Until Something Happens!

OUTLINE

1. DON'T WORRY–PRAY!

"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worry into prayers. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down." *Philippians 4:6-7*

2. DON'T QUIT–PRAY PERSISTENTLY!

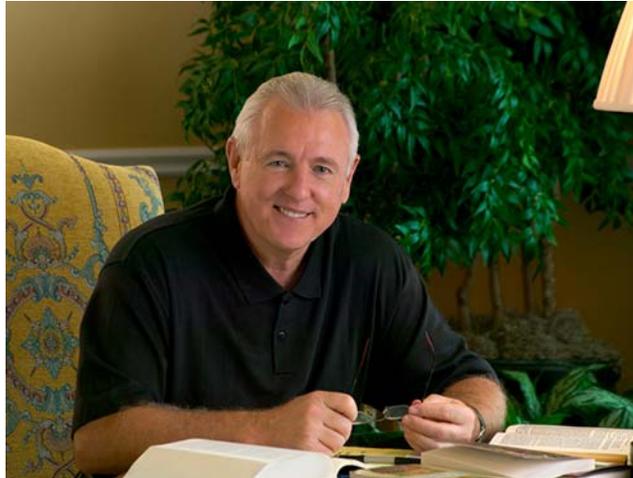
"I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning, and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." *Psalms 55:16-17*

3. DON'T DOUBT–PRAY POSITIVELY!

"This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him." *1 John 5:14-15*

GOD MAY ANSWER YOUR PRAYER:

1. Quickly
2. Later
3. Better
4. No



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes