



“Faithful Persistence”
Luke 18:1-8

Idea: Faithful, persistent prayer is both the evidence of faith and the means for building it.

Intro: The start of a new year serves as an opportunity to set new goals and commit to better habits, and many people do so. But what happens when the energy and excitement after the ball drops wears off? How many New Year’s resolutions fail to come to fruition?

A recent survey from Forbes Health polled 1,000 U.S. adults to better understand Americans’ attitudes surrounding resolution setting and what types of goals were prioritized. Interestingly, the study discovered that the most common resolution for 2024 was physical fitness, which contrasts with findings from the previous year. The most common resolution in 2023 was mental health. Regardless, the results were not overly surprising. The top five resolutions are:

- Improved fitness (48%)
- Improved finances (38%)
- Improved mental health (36%)
- Lose weight (34%)
- Improved diet (32%)

Whether or not you set a New Year’s resolution for yourself, I think we can all agree that most people fail to carry them out. Now, if you happen to be someone who resolved to make a change in 2024 but has already quit, you are only one week into the new year, so you still have plenty of time to start again and get it done. The reality, however, is that most people will fall off the wagon in just a few short months if not weeks into the new year. It is so common that people have come up with unofficial dates to commemorate such failures, such as “Ditch New Year’s Resolutions Day (1/17) and “Quitters Day” on the second Friday of January. The Forbes Health poll found that the average resolution lasts just 3.74 months. Only 8% of respondents tend to stick with their goals for one month, while 22% last two months, 22% last three months, and 13% last four months.

I have been joking with people at the gym this past week that I cannot wait till February. It was the first week in January, so the weight room was a little more crowded than usual. Yet I expect the number of people in the gym to slowly trickle down throughout this month.

Why do people fail to follow through on their resolutions? I believe it comes down to persistence, which is a firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action despite difficulty or opposition. This breakdown in persistence is also what handicaps the Christian life. Believers must be persistent in their faith. It has been said that today’s mighty oak is yesterday’s little nut that held its ground. Jesus calls us to not only hold our ground but take new ground for His Kingdom. To do that, believers must exercise faithful persistence.

Read Luke 18:1-8.

Inquiry: Jesus' disciples were citizens of the Kingdom of God. It was an already but not yet reality in their lives and world. The same is true of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ today. We can accurately say that the Kingdom has come in Jesus, and it will come in its fullness when He returns. Until then, believers must persist in the faith, which creates a relentless tension. To enjoy the now of the Kingdom while living in the not yet makes believers vastly different from the rest of the world. According to Paul, God has blessed us "*in Christ with every spiritual blessing*" (Eph 1:3) and seated us "*in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*" (Eph 2:6). Both are present realities. Therefore, we are commanded to set our minds on the eternal, the not yet (Col 3:1-4). This is a call to live out the radical ethics of the Kingdom while waiting for the King (Titus 2:11-14). If you have noticed, it has been two millennia since He ascended to the Father. Since, then the Church has prayerfully awaited His return. This is the point of Jesus' parable. Believers are to continue praying until Jesus comes back. His people are to trust and not to give up. From this passage, I want you to see that faithful, persistent prayer is both the evidence of faith and the means for building it.

Let me share with you five truths about faithful persistence.

1. Discouragement is a reality and a real threat. (vs. 1)

We see in verse 1 that the Lord Jesus wants to teach the disciples to persist in prayer. He is concerned they may lose heart or become discouraged. The term (ἐγκακέω) describes a person who becomes so discouraged that he or she wants to quit. Verse 1 is connected to 17:37. If a godless society is like a rotting corpse, then the atmosphere in which we live is being slowly polluted, which is bound to affect our spiritual lives. I often feel like we are as Christians running up hill with grease on the soles of our shoes. It seems impossible to make an eternal dint in the culture, so we can be tempted like Demas to run to the world (2 Tim 4:10). When we pray, however, we draw on the pure air of heaven, which grounds us and keeps us going.

Discouragement also comes easy when it seems an answer to prayer is not coming or coming soon enough. People waver and quit, assuming God must not be listening or will not give the answer being sought. Rightly does the Bible say, "*The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Matt 26:41).

Let us recognize the reality and the real threat that discouragement can be to believers and combat it. This brings us to a second truth.

2. Discouragement is checked by committed persistence. (vs. 3)

Jesus told a parable about an unrighteous judge and a widow. The judge had no fear of God or man (vs. 2). He recognized no universal ethic outside of his own self-interest, and his mistaken belief that he will never stand before God's bar relieved him of any burden to render just decisions. The widow was most likely very poor. She had no one to help and advocate for her. Her only options for justice in such a judicial system was a bribe, a threat, or a pathetic plea. She chose her only viable course of action, so she persistently pleaded outside the court for justice day after day. Her hope was that the judge would hear her case and bring justice, so she persisted.

Jesus' point was not to relate His believers to the widow or Himself to the judge. In fact, He states the opposite. He offers a contrast. Unlike the judge, Jesus fears God the Father and loves man. Similarly, the only thing the widow could do was walk around outside the court and make a nuisance of herself as she shouted at the judge, but Christians have a different position. As believers, when we pray, we have in heaven a Savior as an advocate (1 John 2:1) who is the great High Priest that constantly represents us before the Father (Heb 2:17-18). When we pray, we can open the Word and claim the many promises of God, but the widow had no promises to claim. We also have the presence of God's Spirit who leads us

into all truth and guides our prayer. Perhaps the greatest contrast is that the widow came to a court of law, but God's children come to a throne of grace (Heb 4:14-16). She pled out of her poverty, but we have all of God's riches available to us to meet our every need (Phil 4:19).

This poor widow persistently pleaded to the judge because. This was her hope. Believers combat the threat of discouragement by persistently resting in and revisiting the hope of God's promises. By praying we check the threat of discouragement. This brings us to a third truth.

3. God acts on behalf of His people because He is faithful and good, so Christians ought to trust Him. (vs. 6-8)

If we fail to recognize the contrasts offered in this parable, we will begin to think that persistent prayer is nothing more than a prescriptive argument or bribe to force God to act on our behalf. This interpretation overlooks and neglects the sovereignty of God. According to the Bible, He is not moved by anything outside of Himself. Theologically, we refer to this truth about God as His aseity. That is, God exists and works in the world without dependence on any of His creatures. Nothing outside of God constrains Him. In this way God rules as the perfect, impartial Judge.

His aseity compels us to ask why God would respond to the pleas of His people. The simple answer is because God is faithful and good.

If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! – Matt 7:11

Believers faithfully, persistent in prayer because God is good, gracious, and faithful. We do not do so to badger or shame Him into action. God acts because He chooses to do so. This brings us to a fourth truth.

4. God's actions are certain and swift. (vs. 8)

Again, many times discouragement comes when it seems God is not moving. We get discouraged when we see the culture around us deteriorating rather than the gospel transforming it. We get discouraged when an answer to prayer is not coming or coming soon enough. Biblically, what do we know with complete assurance in situations like these? We know God's actions are certain and swift.

Jesus said, *"I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily."* The term (τάχος) means "a short time" or "soon." It carries the idea of swiftness. Now, it does not mean "immediately," but oh, how we wish it did. Instead, the term means that when God acts it will be quick or swift. So, when we consider God's timing, we must keep in mind Peter's wisdom regarding God's promise.

⁸*But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.* ⁹*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness...*
– 2 Pet 3:8-9a

According to Peter, God's actions are certain and swift even though they do not operate on man's timetable. For this reason, we can and must faithfully persistent in prayer, trusting God with today and tomorrow. This brings us to a final truth.

5. Faithful persistence is cultivated. (vs. 1, 8)

Luke tells us Jesus told this parable so that His disciples would know that *"they ought always to pray and not lose heart."* Jesus finished by asking the question, *"...when the Son of Man comes, will he find*

faith on earth?" His question implies that this kind of faith will not be found on earth unless His disciples learn that they must persist in prayer and not lose heart.

Surely, you have wondered why the Lord does not immediately give you everything you ask for in prayer or make everything wonderful in the world. There are probably many reasons for that, but I believe one is so that you will learn to trust Him more. If God gave us every request when we wanted it, then He would be nothing more than our genie in a bottle. Instead, as a loving Father, He knows what is best, and we must learn to trust Him.

Sometimes the answer to prayer is a clear no. Paul experienced this when he asked for his thorn to be removed (2 Cor 12:8-9). Other times it is silence. The silence may be an answer of no, or it may mean that God has a bigger answer in store down the road. God does give the answer of yes. In all, we must acknowledge that left to ourselves, we are prone to be independent. Answers to prayer can lead us to self-sufficiency, pride, and greater autonomy. Therefore, there is no better way to cultivate a sense of dependence upon God than the engaging in faithful, persistent prayer.

Conclusion: Hopefully, here at the outset of this new year, many of you have desired and committed to developing your walk with God. You are committed to reading the Bible through in 2024, praying daily, or sharing the gospel weekly. These are good resolutions to make. Unfortunately, very few of you will finish in the win column on December 31st. The reason you will fail is because you will stop persisting in the discipline. Remember today's mighty oak is yesterday's little nut that held its ground. Thankfully, we are not to do this on our own. We have God's Spirit and God's people to aid and encourage us. As we seek to persist in the faith and deepen our trust in the Lord through prayer, let's recognize that discouragement is a reality and a real threat, remember that discouragement is checked by committed persistence, rejoice that God acts on behalf of His people because He is faithful and worthy to be trusted, believe God's action is certain and swift, and understand that faithful persistence is cultivated.