

Pastor Christa von Zychlin  
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 Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church  
 Hartland, WI 53029  
[pastorchrista@oursaviorshartland.org](mailto:pastorchrista@oursaviorshartland.org)

### **Persistence in Prayer**

Along the highway on my trip out to Ohio last week, I saw where some well meaning Christian had put up a big printed sign that said "God Answers Prayer."

As I got closer to the sign though, I saw that somebody had scrawled in a fancy red graffiti script: "Sometimes the answer is NO!"

This is what we have to deal with in any discussion of prayer, isn't it? Sometimes the answer is no.

Some years ago, an Englishman named Leonard Griffith\* wrote a book called Barriers to Christian Belief.

In that book he dealt with problems that have over the years been real obstacles for people in believing in the personal and almighty God of which the Bible speaks.

One of the barriers Mr. Griffith listed was "unanswered prayer."

Maybe, just maybe, some of you have had that experience.

You pray but it seems like the cell phone batteries are dead.

You pray but it seems like your e-mails to God must be getting caught up in the heavenly Spam folder.

You pray, but you don't even FEEL like there's anybody out there listening. And then you don't ... right away... see any results.

Is prayer really worth your effort?

I trust it's not going to surprise anyone too much when you hear me say, yes prayer is in fact "worth the effort." Let me briefly outline 3 ways of practicing, as Jesus urges us, persistence in prayer.

### **Make Prayer a Habit**

1. One way of being persistent in prayer is in making prayer a habit. When The disciples of Jesus came to Him one day and said, "Lord, teach us to pray!" Did you notice when they made this request?

Was it after Jesus gave a lecture on prayer?

Was it after Jesus led a seminar on prayer?

Was it after Jesus preached a powerful sermon on prayer? No... but remember how it is recorded in Luke 11. "*Jesus was praying in a certain place and when he finished, they said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.'*" They saw the power of persistent prayer in Jesus himself. They saw how important prayer was to their Lord.

For those of you with growing families at home, do your children know that you pray? For those of you with grown children or young people you are mentoring, or godchildren, do these people know that you are persistent in prayer for yourself & for them?

Jesus gave his disciples an example. In the Gospels we see that Jesus prayed in the synagogue each Sabbath as a habit. We know that he went away regularly to "a lonely place" to pray. And we know that as a good Jew it was his habit to pray before every meal... remember the words of institution, "*in the night he was betrayed he took bread and broke it and after he had given \_\_\_\_\_ he broke it and give it to his disciples...*"

Even with all hell breaking loose around him, Jesus was obviously in the habit of giving thanks before meals. I don't think you should be show offy about it, but if it's a natural part of your lives, then you will do it, whether you're in MacDonald's, or at the club, or at your own kitchen table.

Our own kids are at a stage where for some crazy reason they sometimes act as if they think I'm just being fussy to still start meals with a prayer, especially if it's one of those days where we've just picked up some fast food and half the family is at sports practice or still at work, but you know what? It's especially important to pray then, and remember that every bit of food we eat, even if it's fast food chicken, ultimately comes from God the Giver of life. Even if you're alone & you're going to eat a Lean Cuisine in front of the TV., the habit of prayer will remind you that you are not alone. You are never alone.

Be persistent in prayer by making prayer a habit, looking to Jesus who give us an example.

### **Honest to God**

2. Be persistent by being utterly honest in prayer. One of the most freeing things for me was when someone advised me that if you find yourself getting distracted in prayer, your mind drifting, then pray about that thing to which your mind is drifting.

Be utterly honest before God about the desires of your heart. It may do you an enormous amount of good to clarify those desires before God. Dare to even pray them out loud if you've got some privacy, or write them out on your computer or in a notebook. This Lord, is the desire of my heart for my career, for my love life, for the children in Africa, for my cousin in Iraq. It's easier to be persistent in your praying if you're not trying to fool either yourself or God. You'll both get bored if you pray only for what you thin you "should" be praying for. Be persistent in praying for the deepest desires of your heart, and then watch how God deepens and honors and sometimes changes those very desires.

When someone's got cancer, for example, I almost always pray for a complete physical healing. And sometimes God answers that prayer by doing exactly that, and sometimes God has a bigger picture in mind,

which involves facing death with grace, and an incredible hope in what lies beyond... I've seen both things happen and either way, I'm glad that I can pray for what I or the person I'm praying for, most truly desires.

Of course we do need to watch out for the "Tokyo syndrome" of prayer. What's the Tokyo syndrome? It's named after the case of the fifth grade boy whose mother sent him up to bed. In a few minutes she went to make sure that he was actually getting in bed. When she stuck her head into his room, she saw that he was kneeling beside his bed in prayer. Pausing to listen to his prayers, she heard her son praying over and over again. "Let it be Tokyo! Please dear God, let it be Tokyo!" When he finished his prayers, she asked him, "What did you mean, 'Let it be Tokyo'?"

"Oh," the boy said with embarrassment, "we had our geography exam today and I was praying that God would make Tokyo the capital of France." \*

That boy was persistent all right. And I'd even say it wasn't wrong for him to pray that way. After all, he got the most important part of prayer right... when you have a genuine need, take it to God, and when you're persistent in prayer, then God will most certainly either eventually answer your prayer positively, or, little by little perhaps, let you in on the bigger picture of what He's up to in our universe.

So, make prayer persistent by

- 1) making prayer a habit
- 2) be honest to God
- 3) and finally, says Jesus, just keep at it, like the guy who needs some food in the middle of the night and is not shy about knocking, knocking, on his neighbor's door.

### **Just Keep At It**

Here's a lesson from history...

Around 1870 New York City had one of the most hotly contested mayor's races in its history. The incumbent was Mayor John Tweed--Boss Tweed he was called. He was running for reelection. The Boss Tweed machine represented politics at its very worst. The entire administration was corrupt to the core. A number of dedicated people decided that they were fed up with this kind of politics and the good people of the city took on the Boss Tweed element. At first they seemed to make headway. But as the campaign dragged on they began to feel the pressures of machine politics. Many of these good people began to drop out. When the election was held and the results counted, to many people's disappointment, they discovered that Boss Tweed had been reelected. The next day the New York Times ran an editorial and analyzed what had happened. It said: "The good people quit being good before the bad people quit being bad" \*

Sometimes that's our temptation regarding prayer. We throw up our hands ... if we don't have instant results. We think, I must be asking for the wrong thing. God isn't really listening. God doesn't care... maybe He's not really there...

But in the Gospel today Jesus addresses exactly those of you who may think prayer is just not worth it.

"Pray again, and again," he says. And in time you will receive either your heart's desire, or watch, your heart's desire might change.

So, 1. make prayer a habit. 2. Be honest to God and 3. Keep on praying. And finally I want to leave you with a quote from St. Thomas Aquinas, as quoted in Catechism of the Catholic Church

St. Aquinas says this about the model of prayer which Jesus taught his disciples:

*The Lord's Prayer is the most perfect of prayers... In it we ask, not only for all the things we can rightly desire, but also in the sequence that they should be desired. This prayer not only teaches us to ask for things, but also in what order we should desire them.*

May the desires of your heart become the desires of God's heart, through the Holy Spirit who teaches us and gives us persistence in prayer. Amen.

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(\*some illustrations taken from Illustrations@clergynet)