

Shameless Persistence

by J. Oswald Sanders

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...because of his importunity.

Luke 11:8 KJV

WE come now to a requirement in prayer that is rather surprising, and to some, not a little puzzling. It seems that God is moved to answer our prayers in response to a persistence that will not take no for an answer—shameless persistence, someone rendered it.

Jesus employed varied methods of imparting truth to His disciples. Sometimes He employed paradox, sometimes parables. In some parables truth was taught by comparison, in others by contrast. He adopted the latter in enforcing the necessity of importunity and perseverance in prayer, and told two parables.

The Three Friends (Luke 11:5-8)

There are three persons in this parable—the one spoken for, the one who speaks, and the one appealed to. The Lord vividly contrasts the reluctance and selfishness of the friend appealed to, with the openhanded and openhearted generosity of the heavenly Father. The man appealed to was not concerned about his friend's distress. The argument runs: If even a self-centered and ungenerous human being to whom sleep was more important than his friend's distress and need will reluctantly rise at midnight and supply the need because of his friend's shameless persistence, how much more will God be moved by persistent entreaty to meet His child's need!

"Even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs" (v. 8).

The Unprincipled Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

The parable of the heartless and unprincipled judge, who had neither reverence for God nor respect for

men, teaches the same lesson even more strongly. If the defenseless but troublesome widow by her shameless persistence overcame the reluctance of the unjust judge to do her justice, how much more will the believer be speedily vindicated in the court of heaven, where he has a strong Advocate whose character is the exact opposite of the judge's.

"Shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily" (vv. 7-8).

In both parables, Jesus is careful to vindicate the character of God and to reveal His true nature and attitude. "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* shall your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!" (Matt 7:11, italics added). God is neither a selfish neighbor nor a crooked judge dispensing reluctant justice to a wronged widow simply because his comfort was being disturbed by her persistence.

The lesson is that lukewarmness in prayer, as in everything else, is nauseating to God, and comes away empty-handed. On the other hand, shameless persistence, the importunity that will not be denied, returns with the answer in its hands.

Do our prayers lack urgency? Can we do without the thing for which we are asking? Or is it something we must have at all costs? John Knox cried, "Give me Scotland or I die." The saint and patriot would not be denied.

Jesus encourages us to believe that this is the kind of praying that receives an answer. Importunity is an important element in answered prayer.

Adoniram Judson, the great missionary to Burma, was a man of prayer. "God loves importunate prayer so much," he said, "that He will not give us much blessing without it. And the reason He loves such prayer is that He loves us, and knows that it is a necessary preparation for our receiving the richest blessing He is waiting and longing to bestow.

"I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for any-

thing but it came at some time – no matter at how distant a day, somehow, in some shape, probably the last I would have devised, it came.”¹

Why Is Importunity Necessary?

Since God is a loving heavenly Father who knows all our needs better than we do, why should He require us to importune Him? Why does He not just grant our requests, as He is well able to do?

This is somewhat of a mystery, and the answer does not appear on the surface. We can be assured that there is no reluctance on God’s part to give us whatever is good for us. He does not need to be coaxed, for He is not capricious. Prayer is not a means of extorting blessing from unwilling fingers. The “how much more” of Matthew 7:11 affirms this with emphasis. The answer must be sought elsewhere. The necessity must lie in us, not in God. It is not God who is under test, but our own spiritual maturity.

Dr. W. E. Biederwolf makes the interesting suggestion that importunity is one of the instructors in God’s training school for Christian culture. God does not always grant the answer to prayer at once because the petitioner is not yet in a fit state to receive what he asks. There is something God desires to do in him before He answers the prayer.

There may be some lack of yieldedness, or some failure to master some previous spiritual lesson. So while He does not deny the request, He withholds the answer until, through persevering prayer, the end He has in view is achieved.

May this not be in part the explanation of some of God’s seeming delays? His delays are always delays of love, not of caprice. “Men would pluck their mercies green; God would have them ripe.”

An Athletic of the Soul

Canon W. Hay Aitken refers to prayer as “an athletic of the soul” that is designed to render our desires more intense by giving them adequate expression, to exercise the will in its highest functions, and to bring us into closer touch with God. It will also test the reality and sincerity of our faith, and save it from being superficial. Importunity rouses the slumbering capacities of the soul and prepares the way for faith.²

There may be other reasons why the divine response tarries and importunity is needed. Here are some suggestions.

1. We may be asking without greatly caring about the issue. If we are not in earnest, why should God bestir Himself? We shall find Him when we seek with all our hearts.

2. We may be asking for selfish reasons, and the discipline of delay is necessary to purge us of this. Selfish motivation is self-defeating in prayer.
3. We may unconsciously be unwilling to pay the price involved in the answering of our prayers, and our Father desires us to face up to this fact.
4. We may be misinterpreting what God is doing in our lives in answer to our prayers. This was the case with John Newton, the converted slave-trader. He gives his testimony in verse:

I asked the Lord, that I may grow
 In faith, and love, and every grace;
 Might more of his salvation know,
 And seek more earnestly his face.

 I hoped that in some favoured hour,
 At once he’d answer my request;
 And by his love’s constraining power,
 Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, he made me feel
 The hidden evils of my heart;
 And let the angry powers of hell
 Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with his own hand he seemed
 Intent to aggravate my woe;
 Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
 Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
 Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
 “’Tis in this way,” the Lord replied,
 “I answer prayer for grace and faith.

“These inward trials I employ,
 From self and pride to set thee free;
 And break thy scheme of earthly joy,
 That thou mayst seek thy all in me.”

God’s dual method with His servant was to reveal to him the inherent evil of his heart so that he would be motivated to claim importunately from God the blessing he was then fitted to receive.

5. Another possible reason for God’s apparent delay or denial of an answer is put forward to Dr. D. M. McIntyre: it secures our humble dependence on God.³ If He bestowed our desires as gifts of nature and did not want our solicitations, we would tend to become independent of Him. “Otherwise, you may say in your heart,

“My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth,” was God’s warning to His people. “You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth” (Deut. 8:17-18).

Our Part Not Yet Fully Done

For our encouragement, we should remember that the walls of Jericho did not fall until the Israelites had circled them a full thirteen times and then shouted the shout of faith (Josh. 6:1-20). We may have circled our prayer-Jericho the full thirteen times, and yet the answer has not come. Why? Could it be that God is waiting to hear the shout of faith? Perhaps that is the reason the forbidding walls are still intact. He delights to see us step out in faith upon His naked promise.

Unanswered yet? Nay, do not say unanswered,
 Perhaps your part is not yet wholly done,
 The work began when first your prayer was uttered,
 And God will finish what He has begun.
 Keep incense burning in the shrine of prayer,
 And glory shall descend sometime, somewhere.
 Unanswered yet? Faith cannot be unanswered;
 Her feet are firmly planted on the Rock;
 Amid the wildest storms she stands undaunted,
 Nor quails before the loudest thunder shock.
 She knows Omnipotence has heard her prayer,
 And cries, “It shall be done sometime,
 somewhere.”

OPHELIA GUYON BROWNING

Two Importunate Intercessors

Abraham and Elijah stand in contrast in two prayer engagements.

Abraham was an intimate friend of God. In one of his conversations with God, God revealed to him the impending judgment on Sodom. He interceded for his nephew Lot and the people of Sodom in a prayer of mixed argument, audacity, and humility.

It was a most remarkable prayer. Time and again Abraham enlarged his demand—fifty righteous, forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten—and then he stopped praying. There was no reason to suppose God’s mercy was exhausted. But while Abraham received a partial answer and Lot was delivered, Sodom was destroyed. His intercession was unsuccessful because of failure in importunity.

Elijah pressed his suit on behalf of his drought-stricken nation, and refused to take no for an answer. Seven times, strong in faith, he pled with God, and the full answer came.

Is it without significance that Elijah prayed seven times, the number of perfection and fullness—while

Abraham stopped at six times, the number of human frailty? Abraham stopped asking before God stopped answering. Let us become “seven-times prayers.”

Faith, mighty faith the promise sees,
 And looks to God alone;
 Laughs at impossibilities,
 And cries, It shall be done!

CHARLES WESLEY

¹ E. M. Bounds, *Purpose in Prayer* (New York: Revell, 1920), p. 54.

² W. H. Aitken, *The Divine Ordinance of Prayer* (London: Wells Gardner, 1902), p. 118.

³ D. M. McIntyre, *The Hidden Life of Prayer*, rev. ed. (Stirling, Scotland: Drummond’s Tract Depot, n.d.), p. 120.

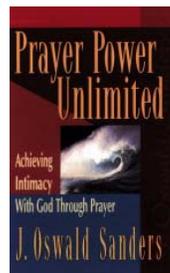


A native of New Zealand, the late **J. Oswald Sanders** (1902-1992) was a consulting director for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, the organization founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. He preached and taught in conferences in many countries and wrote over 40 books on the Christian life,

including *The Incomparable Christ*, *Satan Is No Myth*, and *Enjoying Intimacy With God*. He received the Order of the British Empire for Christian service and theological writing.

In his preface to *Prayer Power Unlimited*, Sanders writes:

The supreme importance of prayer is tacitly admitted by most evangelical Christians. It is accepted as an article of faith. And yet there are few areas of the Christian life in which there are more regretful confessions of failure and disappointment.



The author does not pose as an authority on the subject—only a fellow student in the school of prayer; he is very conscious of the heights yet to be scaled.

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