

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 20, 2015**

**GOD CAN FIX THIS:
A CALL TO PRAYER AND ACTION**

Luke 18:1-8

While the civilized world was still reeling from last month's horrific terrorist attacks in Paris, another terrorist attack took place not quite three weeks ago in San Bernardino, CA, as a husband and wife terrorist team opened fire at a county social service agency, killing 14 and wounding 17 more. The slaughter of the innocents in San Bernardino was the 355th time multiple lives have been taken in acts of gun violence on American soil this year. Roughly one a day.

The immediate reaction of many of us, beyond the now all-too-familiar shock and sadness, was to offer prayers for the families and friends of those who lost their lives, for those wounded or otherwise traumatized by the premeditated evil of the attack, for the community of San Bernardino, and for our nation and its leaders in these perilous days. Prayer may not be our only reaction to tragedies or atrocities like this, but it is often – and properly – our first response when bad things happen.

As would be expected, in the hours following the San Bernardino massacre, a number of presidential candidates and other prominent Americans tweeted that their thoughts and prayers were with the people of San Bernardino. Others wanted to meet the tragedy not with prayer but with action. Specifically, with new gun-control legislation intended to reduce the incidences of gun violence in our nation.

You probably read or heard about the front page headline in the New York *Daily News* the next day which announced that “God Isn’t Fixing This.” The newspaper blasted those who responded with “thoughts and prayers” which according to the newspaper, were nothing more than “meaningless platitudes” at a time when bold political action, in the form of new, more effective gun-control legislation, is what is really needed.

I’m not going to talk about gun-control or the politics of it today. No doubt some of you feel strongly about it one way, and others of you feel strongly about it another way. I think we can agree that the level of gun violence in America is a stain on our character as a nation. Agreeing on the best way to deal with it is a different matter, a matter on which we must be able to disagree with mutual respect and love.

The real problem, though, is not the adequacy or inadequacy of either our current gun-control laws or the “thoughts and prayers” of political leaders in times like this. The real problem, as James Emery White pointed out on his Church and Culture blog (churchandculture.org, December 7, 2015), is evil in the human heart. “Except for cases of mental illness,” White notes, “these acts of violence are perpetrated by evildoers” – by individuals or groups of people intent on doing evil. As much evil as they can. “The truth about American culture,”

he concludes, “is less that there is a proliferation of guns and more about a proliferation of violence unchecked by spirit or character.”

This proliferation of violence is not limited to mass shootings or other terrorist attacks. It is seen, as White observes, in the “hundreds of thousands of acts of road rage, bullying, rape, sexual harassment, child abuse, spousal abuse and schoolyard beatings,” as well as any other acts that spring from racial or cultural or religious prejudice lurking in our hearts.

Nor is the culture of violence limited to the U. S. It is not just an American problem. Of course not. Look at Syria or Somalia. Look at Iraq, Iran, Libya, Afghanistan. Look at Mexico. Look at Central America. Look at Europe, Asia, Africa. It is everywhere because it is a problem of the human heart.

In view of all this, is prayer the appropriate response? Is prayer the answer, or at least part of the answer? Or is prayer a cop-out?

Is the answer to be found in new laws or in better enforcement of existing laws?

Is the problem of violence something we have to fix ourselves, because, as the newspaper headline declared: “God Isn’t Fixing This”? I completely reject this idea, as I hope you do, too. I reject it because I believe God *can* fix this. I believe God and God alone has the power to fix what is wrong with us and with the world whenever and wherever we invite Him to do so. And He will, if we let Him.

I believe prayer is always an appropriate response to the tragedies and evils of life in this world. Always. You’ve heard me say it dozens of times before. There is never a time when it is not time to pray. I have to confess that I’m better at preaching it than I am at doing it. My prayer life leaves a lot to be desired. I am not nearly the prayer warrior that some of you are. My own shortcomings notwithstanding, I believe prayer is at least part of the answer to what ails our world, what ails our culture, and what ails each of us in the depths of our hearts. Prayer is an essential part of the answer. Serious times call for serious and persistent prayer. Even if our prayers don’t “fix” things. “Fixing” things is not necessarily the point of our prayers, depending on the circumstances. We pray for comfort. We pray for understanding. We pray for healing, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for protection from further violence or tragedy.

Is part of the answer to what ails us political? Possibly. Probably. But it is just plain wrong to think that public policy and prayer are mutually exclusive or intrinsically opposed to one another. It just isn’t so.

It is intuitively obvious, of course, not everybody believes in prayer. We should not expect unbelievers – people who do not share our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ – to believe in the practice or power of prayer. There is no shortage of people today who, like the New York *Daily News* editors, believe prayer to be a waste of time. Many people, like novelist Nicholas Sparks, disavow prayer “because it doesn’t work. Prayer,” says Sparks, “doesn’t fix anything. Bad things happen anyway” (Sparks, *Three Weeks with My Brother*).

Bad things *do* happen. Not always, but far more often than we wish, bad things happen even when we pray. In spite of our prayers. Which can depress our spirits and discourage even devout Christians from praying.

I've been reading a masterful book by Philip Yancey entitled *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?* Yancey faces the problem of unanswered prayers head on, acknowledging that it can form "a barrier that blocks any desire to keep company with God" (Yancey, *Prayer*, 216). When our most earnest, heartfelt prayers seem to go unanswered, the temptation to lose heart and to give up is strong. Probably all of us have experienced this temptation at one time or another. Some of you may be dealing with it in your life today. Why keep on praying when there seems to be no answer? Does prayer really make any difference?

Jesus addresses this problem in the story He told in Luke 18:1-8 about the persistent widow and the unjust judge. Luke tells us right up front the point of the parable. Look at verse 1: "Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them" – what? – "that they should always pray and not give up." That is the bottom line take-away from the parable.

To bring the point to life, Jesus describes a corrupt, unjust judge who turns a cold shoulder to a helpless widow whose persistence in pestering the judge to take up her cause finally wears him down. At first he responds with indifference. Why should he care about the plight of this widow? He has no sympathy for her. He has no regard for the justness of her plea for help. But, because she is making such a nuisance of herself and refuses to take "no" for an answer, because she is bothering him day after day and is making his life miserable, he finally relents and decides to act on her behalf, in order to get her off his back. Eventually, by her persistence, she wears him down and receives justice from him.

Jesus, we see, commends the widow for her persistence. He wants us to be as persistent and persevering in our praying as this widow was in seeking justice from the judge.

But, while we are to be like this widow in her persistence, Jesus is not suggesting that God is like an insensitive, self-absorbed judge who has to be badgered to respond to our requests. No. Unlike the judge in the story, God is ever attentive to the prayers and heart cries of His people, and He will, when the time is right, act quickly and speedily to make things right. Jesus asks in verse 7: "Will (God) keep putting them off?" He then answers His own question in verse 8: No, He will not keep putting them – us – off forever. He *will* act. Quickly. Decisively. Righteously. He *will*. In His time. Just as He acted quickly and decisively when the time was right to send His own Son into the world to save us from our sins. Just as He will act quickly and decisively when the time is right for Jesus Christ the King to come again and establish the fullness of His kingdom over the whole creation.

The widow had to wear down the judge in order to get the help she needed. We do not have to wear God down. God is not an uncaring judge. He is a loving Father who cares deeply about His children. He is attentive to our cries and generous with His gifts. And we come not to a court of law but, as it says in Hebrews 4:16, to "a throne of grace" where "we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

And yet, the problem of unanswered prayer remains, doesn't it? How do we explain it? The answer is that the Bible doesn't really explain unanswered prayer. Jesus doesn't explain unanswered prayer. He tells us to persist in prayer, to keep on praying and to not give up, even when the answers do not seem to come.

John Calvin had this to say about persistence in prayer: "We must repeat the same supplications not twice or three times only, but as often as we have need, a hundred and a thousand times We must never be weary in waiting for God's help" (Quoted in Yancey, *Prayer*, 245).

The New Testament contains numerous directives to pray and to keep on praying. Here are some examples that you may already know by heart:

Romans 12:12: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Here are three marks of a true follower of Christ: joyfulness in hope, patience in trials and troubles, faithfulness in prayer.

Ephesians 6:18: "Pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests."

Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Prayerful in everything.

Colossians 4:2: "Devote yourselves to prayer."

1 Thessalonians 5:17: "Pray continually." Cultivate an unceasing attitude of communion with God.

James 5:13-18 (This is mostly from *The Message* paraphrase): "Are you hurting or in trouble? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing songs of praise. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Lord. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven – healed inside and out. Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. Elijah, for instance, human just like us, prayed hard that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't – not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again."

So, God calls us to be people of prayer, to pray on all occasions with all kinds of prayers, to pray and keep on praying, to pray and not lose heart, to pray and not give up, even when our prayers seem to go unanswered or the answers seem interminably slow in coming.

But many of us, if we're honest about it, are much better at talking about prayer than we are at actually praying. And persisting in prayer. Oswald Chambers observed rightly that "we tend to use prayer as a last resort, but God wants it to be our first line of defense. We pray when there is nothing else we can do, but God wants us to pray before we do anything at all. Most

of us would prefer, however, to spend our time doing something that will get immediate results. We don't want to wait for God to resolve matters in His good time because His idea of "good time" is seldom in sync with ours." Isn't that the truth?

But pray we must and trust God to give the answers to our prayers in His time. In His way. It is a direct order from our Commander-in-Chief.

And we need to be prepared to take action as well. Corrie ten Boom, who knew a thing or two about prayer, some of it learned in a Nazi concentration camp, said: "We never know how God will answer our prayers, but we can expect that He will get us involved in His plan for the answer. If we are true intercessors, we must be ready to take part in God's work on behalf of the people for whom we pray."

In His wise sovereignty or sovereign wisdom (or both), God sometimes does miraculous things entirely on His own, without any help from us. Not that He ever needs our help! But God's more usual way is to involve ordinary human beings – people like you and me – in answering prayers. Which means that we are called to be people of action and service as well as people of prayer. The one is not in conflict with the other.

What I am trying to say today is this: There has never been a time when persistent, faithful, persevering prayer has been needed more than now for our nation, for our world, for the church, for our loved ones, for our neighbors, for one another, for the salvation of unbelievers, for the name of God to be glorified, for the kingdom of God to fully come, and for the will of God to be done here and everywhere on earth, just as it is in heaven. Never has prayer been more critically needed than now.

And there has never been a time when loving, grace-filled, winsome, bold, uncompromising, faithful, sincere, even risk-taking witness and service in the name of Jesus has been more needed than right now in the common life of our nation and the world. The unbelieving world, which seems to be growing stronger and bolder by the week, needs to see the beauty and power of the love of Jesus. And only we who have been transformed by His saving love can show it.

There has never been a time when it has been more important than today for us to live like we really believe that the child whose birth we celebrate at Christmas really is the true Son of God and Savior of sinners and Sovereign over everyone and everything. Never has it been more important than right now.

There is one more thing I need to point out from Jesus' story of the persistent widow and the uncaring judge. In verse 8, Jesus ends His commentary on the parable with a probing, haunting question: "When the Son of Man comes" – at His second advent – "will He find faith on the earth?" Will He find His people, His followers, still praying, still believing, still trusting in Him, still persevering in faithful obedience to His Word? Or will they – will *we* – lose heart and give up on Him?

When God seems slow in answering your most fervent prayers, when no answers seem to come or when God's answer to your prayers is not the answer you hoped and prayed for, don't lose heart. Don't give up on prayer. Don't give up on God.

We've got to keep on praying. With humility, remembering that God is God and you are not. With faith, believing that He is able to do immeasurably more than you can ever ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). In accordance with His will. Not our will, but His will be done. For His glory in all things. And we must pray with passion and conviction, in the name of Jesus.

Keep on praying, as long as it takes. Maybe you know about the acronym PUSH as it relates to prayer. It stands for: Pray Until Something Happens. Pray Until Something Happens.

Will you do that? Will you commit yourself to pray and keep on PUSH-ing in prayer as long as it takes until something happens? Until the answers come? Until God shows up and shows His glory and grace? Until His kingdom comes? Even if the answers don't come until after you're gone from this world?

Jesus told His disciples that parable to show that they should always pray and not give up (Luke 18:1). Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.