

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 23, 2007**

## **PREVAILING PRAYER**

### **Luke 11:5-13**

A businessman was late for an important appointment and couldn't find a parking space. Frantically circling the block, he got so desperate that – uncharacteristically – he decided to pray. Looking up toward heaven, he said: “Lord, please help! If You find me a parking space, I'll go to church every Sunday from now on – for the rest of my life. And not only that, I'll give up drinking.”

Miraculously, a parking space appeared.

The man looked heavenward again and said: “Never mind, Lord. I found one.”

I want to talk with you about prayer today. Not this kind of insincere, bargaining prayer that really doesn't take God or prayer seriously. But the kind of prayer that pleases God. The kind of prayer Jesus Himself commends to us. The kind of prayer to which the Bible calls us.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Question 98) defines prayer this way:

Prayer is offering our desires to God in the name of Christ for things that agree with His will, confessing our sins, and thankfully recognizing His mercies.

The kind of prayer that pleases God is prayer that humbly and happily acknowledges that God is God, and trusts in His sovereign goodness and gracious provision.

There are three qualities of prevailing prayer that I want you to see as we reflect on God's Word today. Prevailing prayer is *passionate*. Prevailing prayer is *persistent*. And it is *patient*. Let's look at each one.

### **1. PASSIONATE**

First, prevailing prayer is passionate. In the King James Version (KJV), James 5:16 reads like this:

The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

That is what it saith.

The apostle Paul, over in Romans 12:11, urged the believers in Rome to

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

To maintain their spiritual fervor – their zeal or passion for Christ – Paul instructed them in the next verse (Romans 12:12) to

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Their perseverance and joy in hope – even when going through hard times, their patient endurance in times of affliction, and their unwavering faithfulness in prayer would be evidence of the depth and quality of their spiritual fervor or passion for the Lord. May it be so in us as well. May those same qualities be consistently exhibited in my life and yours.

Fervent praying is passionate praying.

This past week I've spent some time with two new books on prayer that are rich and meaty. I've not spent enough time with them to mine their depths, but enough to whet my appetite for more. One book is simply titled *Praying*. It is written by J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom. Packer is a well-known evangelical Anglican theologian. Carolyn Nystrom is one of us – she is a member (and elder) of an EPC church near Chicago. The other book is the latest book by another Evangelical Presbyterian, Philip Yancey, who attends an EPC church in Colorado. Yancey's book is simply titled *Prayer*. I commend both of these books to you. I think you will be greatly blessed by them.

In their book, Packer and Nystrom make the case that “proper praying will always be earnest, enthusiastic, serious, passionate; it will be prayer from the warm heart and not just from the cool head.”

Do you hear that? Proper praying – prevailing prayer – is passionate. It comes not just from our “cool head” – not just from our rational understanding or the logic of our mind – but from our “warm heart” as well. Prevailing prayer engages both the mind and the heart. It exposes and expresses the passion of our hearts.

But Packer and Nystrom offer a caution at this point:

What ought to make us passionate is not just the pressure of our own needs (or the depth of our concern for others) but our passion for the glory of God. Then all of our petitions for particular things (whatever it may be) are offered because it will bring glory to God for Him to give what we are asking.

The glory of God, you see, is the bottom line. The chief end of our prayers is not getting what we want, but giving glory to God. And we are to passionately pursue God's glory in our praying.

Tony Evans, a popular pastor, author and radio Bible teacher, was in Columbia, South Carolina to speak at a service being held at the University of South Carolina football stadium. Thousands of people had come, but news reports indicated that a serious

thunderstorm was on the way. In fact, the storm was expected to hit right at 7:00 P.M., just when the service was scheduled to start.

As the sky grew darker and more ominous, the threat of cancellation became a definite possibility. A group of pastors and other Christian leaders quickly huddled for a prayer meeting. According to Evans, all of the pastors prayed what you would consider “safe” prayers. Prayers quite undemanding of God. Then a woman named Linda asked if she could pray. Her prayer went something like this:

Lord, thousands of people have gathered to hear the Good News about Your Son. It would be a shame on Your name for us to have all these unbelievers go without the Gospel when You control the weather and You don’t stop it. In the name of Jesus Christ, address this storm!

Wow! Is that a bold, passionate prayer, or what?

The prayer meeting ended, and they all took their seats under the dark, threatening sky. The leader of the campaign told the crowd: “We’ll go as long as we can.” Umbrellas sprouted up throughout the stadium. A man sitting next to Linda offered to shield her with his umbrella. Linda refused.

Tony Evans said that he and his wife watched as the rain clouds came up to the stadium and then spit in two. The storm dropped rain on both sides of the stadium – outside the stadium – and then came back together at the other end. Everybody in the stadium stayed dry.

“The effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous availeth much” (James 5:16, KJV).

“The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective” (NIV).

“The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with” (TM).

Prevailing prayer – the kind of prayer that pleases God – is not passive prayer but passionate prayer. It is prayer with an unwavering fervor for God and a passion for His glory.

Let me ask you: As you think about your prayer life, would you say that it is marked by passion?

## **2. PERSISTENT**

Second, prevailing prayer is persistent prayer. This is the point of the story Jesus told in our Scripture reading from Luke 11. In the story, a man opens his door to an unexpected guest late one night – an occurrence that would not be uncommon in the hot, desert climate of Palestine where travel after sunset would be more comfortable than in the heat

of the day. The man's pantry, however, is bare. He has nothing to offer his guest. Philip Yancey points out that in a culture renowned for hospitality, it would be unthinkable for a respectable person to turn away a weary traveler or put him to bed without feeding him. So the host goes to this neighbor's house to ask for bread.

The neighbor stubbornly refuses the man's request. He and his family are already in bed and the door is bolted shut. He says: "Don't bother me. I can't (which means I won't) get up and give you anything."

Those who heard Jesus tell this story would have been shocked by the lame excuse and rude behavior of the grouchy neighbor, regardless of the hour. But the man who is asking for help doesn't give up. And Jesus says in verse 8 that because of the man's boldness and persistence in asking, the neighbor will finally get out of bed and give him whatever he needs.

In the story Jesus is *not* comparing God to this reluctant neighbor. He is not making a comparison between the two but drawing a contrast between them. Jesus is not suggesting that God is like this unwilling neighbor. He is saying just the opposite. If a tired and cranky neighbor who doesn't want to be bothered will finally come to the assistance of a friend who won't give up, "how much more," Jesus says (verse 13), will your loving heavenly Father respond to your bold persistence in prayer and give what you need.

It is true, of course, that what we need is not always the same as what we want or what we think we need. God in His wisdom knows what is best for us, and what will serve to fulfill His eternal purposes and bring Him glory. Paul pleaded with the Lord three times, he says (2 Corinthians 12:8), to take away his "thorn in the flesh" (12:7). But Paul came to understand that God had a purpose greater than his physical healing. God would be glorified, the apostle discovered, by having His power revealed in Paul's weakness. God would be glorified in Paul's dependence upon His grace.

God is glorified in our dependence upon His grace, too, whatever our "thorns" or problems or heartaches or longings in prayer may be. What Paul learned in his suffering is true for us in ours: God's grace is sufficient for us (12:9). Though God does not always give us what we think we want or hope for in response to our prayers, by faith we affirm that the answer God gives is best. And His grace is enough.

The point of Jesus' parable is that we should pray with persistence. In Luke 18 Jesus told another story – this one about a persistent widow pleading with an uncaring judge to give her justice. He told His disciples this story, it says in Luke 18:1, to show them that they should keep on praying and not give up. Prevailing prayer is persistent prayer. It is prayer that humbly yet boldly knocks on the door of heaven.

That is what Jesus tells us to do. He tells us in Luke 11:9 to ask, to seek, and to knock. And He tells us what God will do in response to our prayers. He says that when we ask in accord with His will, we will receive. He will give. He will provide. When we seek

Him and His kingdom with all our heart, we will find. When we knock at the door of heaven in faith, the door will be opened.

If we do not ask, we should not expect to receive. If we do not seek, we should not expect to find. If we do not knock, we should not expect the door to be opened. But if we do these things and keep on doing them, Jesus says, God *will* answer. He will give good gifts, wonderful gifts, to His children, including the best gift of all: He will give the Holy Spirit to refresh and renew our hearts, to work in us and among us and through us to live lives that bring Him glory and to bring others to Him in faith.

That is what God will do if we are persistent in our praying.

George Muller was persistent in his praying. Muller was a prominent Christian social reformer in 19<sup>th</sup> century England who established a number of orphanages. His devotion in prayer is chronicled in his diary. Listen to what he wrote:

In November 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day without a single intermission, whether sick or in health, on the land, on the sea, and whatever the pressure of my engagements might be. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three. Day by day, I continued to pray for them, and six years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three, and went on praying for the other two. These two remained unconverted.

Thirty-six years later he wrote that these two, sons of one of Muller's friends, were still not converted. He wrote:

But I hope in God, I pray on, and look for the answer. They are not converted yet, but they will be.

More than fifty years after he began to pray, after Muller's death, these two men finally came to faith in Christ. George Muller's persistence in prayer is a picture of what Jesus meant when He told His disciples to keep on praying and not give up.

I wonder today: Do you, do I, do we have that same kind of persistence and faith in our praying? Prevailing prayer is persistent prayer.

### **3. PATIENT**

Third, prevailing prayer is marked by patience in prayer.

As Packer and Nystrom write:

We humans are always in a hurry, but God sometimes keeps us waiting

because He is not. God has His own time frame and His own plan. God knows the best time at which to answer our prayers as well as the best way to do it.

Remember what the Bible says in 2 Peter 3: “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise” (3:9). With God a thousand years are like a single day, and vice versa (3:8). God’s time frame may be different from ours, but He knows what He is doing. And though it may seem otherwise from our perspective, God is never late.

There is no such thing as unanswered prayer for those who pray in trusting faith. But God’s answer does not always come when we expect it, or in the way we expect it. So we must pray with an attitude of patience, trusting God for His answer in His time, not ours.

Most of us don’t “do” patience very well. We find waiting to be just about the hardest thing in life. I can’t tell you why it sometimes seems that God is so slow in answering our prayers. His ways, as it says in Isaiah 55:8, are not our ways.

What are we to do when God takes longer than we expected to give an answer to our prayers? Like George Muller, we are to keep on praying and not give up. We are to wait patiently, trusting in the sovereign goodness and wisdom of God, who causes all things to work together for good in the lives of those who love Him and have been called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28).

Prevailing prayer is passionate prayer. Prevailing prayer is persistent prayer. Prevailing prayer is patient prayer.

Let me share one last thought with you.

#### **4. PRELUDE TO REVIVAL**

Prevailing prayer is the prelude to revival. Throughout history, God has used the ministry of prayer – personal prayer and united prayer, passionate prayer, persistent prayer, patient prayer – as a catalyst for revival among His people and spiritual awakening in the world. Paul urges us in Colossians 4:2 to devote ourselves to prayer. One reason to do so is that God uses the believing, faithful prayers of His people to send the fresh wind and fire of revival to His church and to draw unbelievers to Him in faith.

A Christian from Ghana had come to America to study at a theological seminary. On one of his trips home to Africa, he tried to share the gospel with several people who lived in his community. Although they listened respectfully, no one came to faith in Christ. This Christian came to learn that they were intimidated by a witch doctor who lived nearby. The witch doctor kept a symbol of his power hanging outside his home. It was a lattice basket, filled with water, that never leaked.

The Christian decided to pray that God would empty the basket. He stayed outside the home of the witch doctor and prayed all night that God would demonstrate His power. At some point in the night he fell asleep. He was awakened in the morning by a great commotion. The basket was empty.

That community experienced a mass revival as the people learned about the God who caused the water to come out of the basket, and turned to Him in faith.

Prevailing prayer – passionate, persistent, patient prayer – is the prelude to revival.

May it be so in us. May it be so in this church. May it be so in our community, in our culture, in our nation, and everywhere in this world. May our hearts and lives be marked by a devotion to prevailing prayer. To the glory and praise of God. Amen.