

## 070 The Challenge of Persistent Prayer

### Romans 12:12

Message by Dr. R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 4/23/17

#### Introduction - "What's hot on Youtube"

The last month or so I've been checking out what is popular on YouTube. Underneath the thumbnails it shows how many views each video has had.

Three years ago posted one of CVRM graduation – have had 66 views in 3 ½ years. About the same time Posted one of the Grace Church Mimes performing "The Prodigal Son," and it has received 133 views.

Nothing to boast about! Looking at what's popular on You Tube some of them have been viewed thousands, hundreds of thousands, even a million times!

Among the YouTube videos that seem to be attracting the most attention, especially for young audiences, are "challenge videos."

Five of the most popular right now are:

**1. The Eat It or Wear It Challenge**

**2. Try Not to Laugh Challenge**

**3. The Whisper Challenge** Objective: Try to read lips and figure out what the person is saying while you wear headphones blasting loud music.

**4. Speed Drawing Challenge:** see who can draw the best picture in one or two minutes.

**5. Chubby Bunny Challenge:** Calls for each player to take a marshmallow, put it in their mouth (don't chew, eat or swallow), and say "Chubby Bunny" before moving on to the next person.

The goal is to see who can last the longest with the most marshmallows in their mouth before they inevitably have to spit them out.

**Currently down to #12** is the one that really started it back in 2014 – **the Ice bucket challenge** to raise awareness of and donations towards ALS.

Within 24 hours of being challenged, participants had to record a video of themselves. First, they were to announce their acceptance of the challenge, followed by pouring ice into a

bucket of water. Then, the bucket was to be lifted and poured over the participant's head. Then the participant nominated a other people to participate in the challenge.

It went viral on social media, with people, celebrities, politicians and athletes posting videos of themselves online and on TV participating in the event. Went all the way up to President Obama.

According to the *New York Times* people shared more than 1.2 million videos on Facebook between June 1 and August 13 and the phenomenon was mentioned more than 2.2 million times on Twitter between July 29 and August 17.<sup>1</sup> It raised \$115 million.

The challenge morphed into other forms in other countries. Starting in India and later spreading to other South Asian nations, partly in response to the Ice Bucket Challenge's wastefulness of water, was the "**Rice Bucket Challenge.**"

Jordanian comedian Mohammed Darwaza started **The Rubble Bucket Challenge**, which involved dumping a bucket of sand and rocks over a person's head.

There were a couple I wouldn't have minded participating in: the **Pie in the Face Challenge** and the **Coffee challenge** (assuming it wasn't piping hot coffee)!

Today I want to pass on a challenge is neither silly or just a fad. It is one that has been passed on through generations of Christians for roughly 2000 years.

And that's **the challenge of persistent prayer.**

It's actually one of **six challenges** Paul threw out in **Romans 12:11,12. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your**

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<sup>1</sup> The Ice Bucket Challenge was a successful campaign. Its combination of competitiveness, social media pressure, online narcissism, and low barriers to entry led to more than 2.4 million tagged videos circulating Facebook. Even though 40–50% of the new donors were likely to make one-time gifts only, the Challenge instigated large numbers of people, videos, and donations. The challenge also benefited from a unique balance of mass interest and individual identification. In using social media as its platform, it accessed many people worldwide.

**spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.**<sup>2</sup>

We've already talked about the first five, so today we're going to focus on this sixth one.

**Romans 12:12** *Be . . . faithful in prayer.*

Literally: *in prayer, steadfastly continuing.*

**J.B. Phillips:** *"steadfastly maintain the habit of prayer.*

**NKJV** *"continuing steadfastly in prayer"*

**ESV and RSV** *"be constant in prayer"*

**Living Bible** *"be prayerful always."<sup>3</sup>*

Get the idea no matter which translation you're using.

Our challenge is to **keep on praying**.

**SLIDE: Challenge of persistent prayer**

The problem *isn't* that we never pray. We all pray – at least sometimes. But we get tired of praying, our minds wander, we get discouraged or disappointed when our prayers aren't answered in the manner and timing we hoped for. And so we neglect prayer – often precisely when we need it most.

Jesus was of course aware of this. As you read through the gospels you discover that he had a lot to say about praying.

One of most familiar passages is **Luke 11**.

In response to one of Jesus' disciples request **verse 1** *"teach us to pray,"* Jesus taught them what we refer to as "The Lord's Prayer," but is properly the prayer for his followers to pray

**Pray together**

It's a great prayer. But Jesus doesn't stop there. He's not through teaching them about prayer, so he gives a parable and

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek construction for these six brief challenges for Christians is parallel. They all start with the preposition "in (or as regards)" then a noun, then an adjective or participle describing it. ***In zeal, not lacking (not slothful); in spirit, burning; (regarding) the Lord, serving; in hope, rejoicing; in affliction, showing endurance; in prayer, steadfastly continuing.***

<sup>3</sup> See also **I Thess. 5:17** *"pray without ceasing"* NIV: *"pray continuously."*

application (found only in Luke's gospel) to challenge his disciples to pray continually.

We'll look at the parable in a bit, but jump down to verses 9 and 10 first.

**Luke 11:9** *So I say to you," Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.*

**Luke 11:10** *For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

**Seek. Ask. Knock.** The three verbs *ask, seek and knock* increase in their intensity.

**Ask** implies admitting our need, humbling ourselves and asking for help– instead of boasting, *"I can do it on my own, thanks very much!"*

The next step **seek** involves action. We don't just express our need, but look for answers.

The final step **knock** adds the idea of persistence – keep on pounding on the door until it opens.

Adding to the stacking of these three verbs is that they are all both imperatives (commands) and continuous participles:

- **keep on asking** and it will be given to you,
- **keep on seeking** and it you will find,
- **keep on knocking** and it will be opened to you.

The challenge is to be **tenacious** in our praying.

I.e.: don't just come to God in midnight emergencies, but keep in constant communion with the Father

Human nature – when storms are raging, pray like crazy. Phone call comes in middle of night, boss warns you that the company's downsizing or outsourcing may have implications for you job, when the doctor says *"it doesn't look good,"* we **pray – fervently, repeatedly, hopefully, desperately.**

God proves himself faithful one more time, prayer fade begins.

Story of Israelites in OT – whenever got in a jam, prayed and God came through at 11<sup>th</sup> hour. Then, after storm passed, they "remembered him no more."

How do you think this makes God feel? Do you only like it when your kids come to you when they're in trouble or need something?

Is it really worthwhile to keep on praying when don't seem to be getting answers? Bill Hybels tells story about a baptism had a few years ago:<sup>4</sup> *I bumped into a woman on the stairwell who was crying. I thought this was a little odd, since the service was so joyful. I asked her if she was all right. She said, "No, I'm struggling."*

*She said, "My mom was baptized today. I prayed for her every day for almost 20 years. The reason I'm crying is because I came this close to giving up on her.*

*At the 5-year mark I said, 'Who needs this? God isn't listening.' At the 10-year mark I said, 'Why am I wasting my breath?' At the 15-year mark I said, 'I'm just a fool.' I just kept trying, kept praying. Even with weak faith I kept praying. Then she gave her life to Christ, and she was baptized today. I will never doubt the power of prayer again.*

Let's put this challenge of Jesus to **ask, seek and knock** in context, looking at the parable that preceded it.<sup>5</sup>

**Luke 11:5-8** *"Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.*

*Then the one inside answers, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.'*

*I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs."*

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<sup>4</sup> Preaching Today, 1998, tape 184.

<sup>5</sup> Jesus tells another parable about determination and persistence in prayer to his disciples in **Luke 18**. It is prefaced by the purpose **Luke 18:1 to show them that they should always pray and not give up.**

A key word is the man's **boldness** (NIV). This is a rare word in the New Testament – in fact only time it appears (Greek word **anaideia**).

Literally it means **shamelessness** (so the New English Bible translation) or **avoidance of shame**. A huge cultural value in Eastern countries is not losing face. You do everything you can to avoid bringing shame on your name.

It's interesting that it is not clear which man it is that this word is describing. It could certainly apply to the one knocking, who's trying to avoid the shame of not having something to give his guest to eat.

It could also apply to the man in bed inside the house, whose name would be besmirched for not extending the means of hospitality. Disregarding the time and inconvenience he will get up and provide for the needs of the one knocking. He will do it not because the man is his friend, but to avoid shame, to save face. His own reputation must be maintained.

Three reasons I think it probably refers to him:

(1) In the cultural world of Jesus, hospitality is so important that the man inside the house, his whole family, even the whole village would suffer shame if he did not help.

(2) the central figure is actually the man inside the house, not the man who comes to visit or the man who comes asking for bread. This parable is about God who readily responds to prayer, not about persistence in prayer.

(3) The man who comes is not really troublesome or persistent at all. Nowhere in the text does it say the man keeps on pounding on the door, making a nuisance of himself. Just once, actually, vs. 5 and 6. Is only doing what would be normal for a person in his situation to do.

Yes, God is our friend. But his response to our requests isn't based on his friendship. We're not asking him to give us a small favor in return for much we love him, or how much we've done for him.

And isn't based on our "nagging" God to death. *You know how diligently we've sought you, we've laid hold of the horns of the altar and won't let go!*

God's answers prayer not because we deserve it, or because we've bugged him to death, but because of God's shamelessness. It's because of his reputation, his honor, his name's sake.

He will not refuse your request (assuming it's in line with his kingdom purposes) because his honor's on the line!

Moses understood this aspect of God's character. In **Exodus 32** God says, "I've had it with these people. I'm going to wipe them out. I took them out of Egypt, but they're stubborn. I've had it. Let's start all over.

But Moses intercedes, and says "what will the Egyptians think about that? They will say you had evil motives in bringing them out. Your name will be tarnished! And God relents and doesn't bring about the disaster he had threatened.

David knows this about God.

**Ps. 25:11** "*For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.*"

**Ps. 23:1-3** "*He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*"

**Why does God the Father answer prayer?** Not just to meet his children's needs, but to meet them in such a way that it brings glory to His name. "*Hallowed be thy name.*"

Yes, the Father loves us, but something deeper is going on – it is that he loves his name. He has avoidance of shame – he will maintain his honor. You can count on that. When one of God's children prays, it is God's reputation that is at stake. The way he takes care of his kids is a demonstration to the world that He can be trusted!

John Piper puts it this way: *It was God's good pleasure to join you to himself in such a way that his name is at stake in your destiny. It was God's good pleasure to possess you in such a way that what happens to you affects his name.*"

We don't **seek, ask and knock**. to wear God down, but because when we ask, seek and knock something always happens that will honor God's name!

Get hold of this concept and it will revolutionize how you pray!

How are you praying? Be persistent, but not on your own "merits," or attempting to wear God down." Rather in full confidence that God will uphold his reputation, his character, his name.

**What of God do you need today?**

What of God do you need for yourself?

For your family?

For your kingdom-centered ministry?

What of God do you need to extend hospitality to your children, or your spouse, or the world?

The Father has "shamelessness."

You're not bothering him. He will rouse himself and give you as much of himself as you need, for the honor of his name.

**Ephesians 6** describes the armor of God, given for the Christian to **take your stand against the devil's schemes**. Dressed for battle. Run through our check list.

- Have put on the belt of truth, [check]
- the breastplate of righteousness, [check]
- feet shod with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace, [check]
- the shield of faith, [check]
- the helmet of salvation and [check]
- the sword of Spirit (the Word of God). [check]

All ready to withstand whatever evil comes against you.

Right? Wait – don't forget **Ephesians 6:18** ***And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.***

The other pieces of armor were just mentioned briefly. Paul gives more space to prayer than to any of the others.

**Praying** is a participle, meaning it should actually be applied to each of the previous commands:

Be praying as you put on the **belt of truth**

Be praying as you put on the **breastplate of righteousness**

Be praying as you put on the **gospel of peace**,

and take up the **shield of faith**

Be praying as you put on the **helmet of salvation** and

take up the **sword of the Spirit** which is **the Word of God**.

The battle is won or lost on our knees. Paul never gives any instruction about taking the armor off! Knights going into battle would sleep with their armor on.

A few quick observations and then we're done.

**1. We are to pray in the Spirit.**

Praying "in" or "directed by" the Spirit guards against our tendency to focus on selfish things, or pray in ignorance.

**2. We are to pray alert.** With our eyes wide open. As Jesus told his closest disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, *watch and pray*. Peter didn't, and a few hours later he denied the same Lord whom he had vowed to die for the previous day.

**3. Prayer is to be comprehensive and continual.** *All* or *always* (same word in Greek) appear four times in this verse. The verb Paul uses for **keep on praying** is an intense word, meaning to *persist obstinately in*. Many times we

Great to gather to pray at church, or pray before meals, or at bedtime. But as we've seen in today's challenge we are to pray **continually**.

It's certainly not wrong to pray when you're upside down in a messy situation. Should be your first response.

But Paul says pray on all occasions – pray when you're happy, pray when you're feeling down, when you're paying your bills, when you're sick, when you're well, when you are with friends. There shouldn't be a time when we aren't praying.

And pray with **all kinds of prayers**. Variety is the spice of life, and it gives spice to your prayers.

Maybe you've used the acronym **ACTS**

Prayers of

Adoration

Confession

Thanksgiving

Supplication.

**Poster Uncle Sam wants you!** By James Montgomery Flagg. Even more important, **God** wants you!

This challenge to pray is for everyone here. Young or old, working or retired. We are all called to do it!

Three specifics I would like to challenge you to do:

**For one month: increase the time you spent in prayer by yourself**

**Find a time to pray with at least one other person each week**

Four weekly church wide opportunities: Three on Tuesdays: 9:30 men in the morning and in the evening 7:00 p.m. open to all the church as well as in Spanish rotating homes; and Thursdays women's prayer at 10:00 a.m.

**Pray specifically for revival.**