PROBLEMS IN PRAYING PERSISTENTLY

Please take your Bibles and turn once again to Luke 18. You already know from your outline that we aren't going to stay here, but I do want to point out some things from last week to introduce the sermon for this am.
--Vs 6. "And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith." ***What*** did the unjust judge say?
--Mid of vs 4. "…Though I fear not God, nor regard man; Yet because this widow **troubleth** me, I will avenge her, lest by her **continual coming** she weary me."

So was Jesus saying that God the Father ***is like the calloused***, uncaring judge that needs to become ***so annoyed*** by our asking that He can't stand it anymore and ***finally gives in*** like the unjust judge did?
--***No;*** that is not what Jesus was saying at all! In fact, He was saying the opposite by ***painting a contrast*** between God and the unjust judge! It is a "so much more" argument from ***the lesser to the greater***. Don't persist in prayer because ***God is like the judge*** and needs to be harassed into answering. ***Persist in prayer*** because the One you are praying to is absolutely just, caring beyond comprehension, and does what is best for His glory—and our good!
--But we dare not let the emphasis on ***why*** we should persist in prayer overshadow the reason Jesus spoke the parable in the first place! And what is that reason? Vs 1 – "…that men ought always to pray, and not to faint."

Two weeks ago—while studying this parable—I was thinking about our congregation and the reality that we have a ***broad spectrum*** of pray-ers. Sadly, I'm sure we have ***non***-pray-ers. But we also have those who are ***new*** to praying…and those who have been pray-ers for a ***long time***.

And as I was thinking about that, I felt led of the Lord to ask—and answer—these ***three*** questions:
First, what ***does it mean*** to "always pray"?
Second, why does God sometimes—probably more often than not—***delay answering*** our prayers?
Third, why ***we don't persistent*** in prayer the way God wants us to?

First, let's consider… ***1. What does it mean to pray persistently?***
--So what does ***it mean*** that "men ought always to pray"? Are we all supposed to "quit our day jobs" (if we have one), become a nun or monk, and spend our entire day on our knees with our eyes closed talking to God? I'm fairly certain you know that that is ***not*** what it means!

First, let's see what we can learn from… A. An examination of parables
--What did ***the widow*** do in this parable? She asked once, went home, and waited, ***right?*** Wrong! She continually came to the judge—over and over again—with the same request. How ***long*** did she do that?
--We don't know, but verse 4 says it was "for a while." The point is that it was not a ***one-time*** request—nor - was it ***one long, drawn-out request*** that never ended! It was a ***frequently repeated***, persistent request. I can't help but think that every time she saw him, she asked!

We have ***another parable*** that teaches the same truth in Luke 11; please turn there.
--Vs 1 is interesting, isn't it? They are with Jesus—and He is praying—and when He is done, one of the disciples asks Jesus to teach them ***to*** pray. Not "***how*** to pray"—as in the proper way—but "***to*** pray"?
--In verses 2-4, Jesus gives them ***the model*** prayer, also known as the ***Lord's*** Prayer. I mentioned last week that this prayer been prayed for roughly 2000 years—by millions of people—and still hasn't been answered!
--Now, verses 5-13; please follow along as I read. We may come back to this parable in the future, but for now I just want to point out how this parable also teaches ***persistence in prayer***—praying and not giving up.
--In a nutshell, the picture is this: one man has a friend who unexpectedly comes to his house at midnight, but the host has no food to give to his traveling friend. So he asks another friend—presumably a neighbor—for bread so he has something to give to the traveler.

--Does he get up out of bed and give him bread? ***Yes!***
--Why? Because they are friends? ***No***; because of his ***importunity.*** What does "importunity" mean? Glad you asked! "Importunity" comes from a Greek word that appears only once in the Greek NT—here!

--It literally means "without shame"—a ***shameless persistence*** and ***unembarrassed boldness.***
--It is ***knocking on the door*** until the friend answers! Although Jesus ***is not teaching*** that God is like a sleeping neighbor that needs to be woken up, Jesus ***is teaching*** us that we need to be ***persistent in our praying*** and not be content until our prayer is answered.

--Jesus elaborates on this kind of praying in verses 9 and 10.
--Vs 9. "And I say unto you, **Ask**, and it shall be **given** you…" Pretty straightforward, right? You're at Culver's and ***ask for a scoop*** of the "flavor of the day." They tell you how much you owe, you give them the money, ***you receive your scoop,*** and away you go! Is that what Jesus is saying ***about prayer?***
--No; He's ***not—***not in this verse, anyway! The verb "ask" is in the ***present tense—***meaning it is something we are to ***continually*** do. In other words, it is not asking once—and being done! It is asking—and keep on asking!

--Think about the word "***seek***." The very word itself implies looking in ***more than one spot***—and looking ***until you find*** what you're seeking! I ***don't say***, "I'm going to ***seek*** for my car keys!" ***Why?*** Because I know where they are—most of the time, anyway! Instead, I say, "I'm going to go ***get*** my car keys!"
--"Seek"—just like the word "ask"—is in the ***present*** tense meaning "seek—and keep on seeking."

--And then there's the word "***knock***." If I approach the outside door of someone's house and "knock"—once—am I ***knocking?*** Not really! And the people inside won't think you're knocking either! By definition, to "knock" means to do it ***repeatedly***—not just once!
--And just like "ask" and "seek," the word "knock" is in the ***present tense*** meaning "knock—and keep on knocking!" And all three of these verbs are in ***the imperative*** mood—meaning they are ***commands!***

But ***are parables*** the only place in the Bible where God tells us we should be persistent pray-ers? Not at all!
B. The exhortations from Scripture
Here are several—of the many—exhortations from God's word that we are to be persistent in praying!
--Romans 12:12 "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; **continuing instant** in prayer;" (meaning devoted to)
--Ephesians 6:18 "**Praying always** with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto **with all perseverance** and supplication for all saints;"
--Colossians 4:2 "**Continue in prayer**, and watch in the same with thanksgiving;"
--I Thessalonians 5:17 "Pray **without ceasing**."

Lastly, let's consider… C. The examples of people
Here are several of the many Biblical examples of persistent pray-ers:
--***Abraham*** pled with God about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. 'What if there's 50 righteous people there…then 45…then 40…then 30…then 20…then 10?' Although God did destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, He wouldn't have if there had been 10 righteous people there.
--The ***Syrophenician woman*** kept asking Jesus to heal her daughter—even after He told her, "It is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Mt 15:26). Did she get what she wanted? Yes; she did! And Jesus commended her for her faith!
--***Blind Bartimaeus***—when he heard Jesus was walking by—cried out, "Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me." When the people around him told him "…that he should hold his peace…he cried the more a great deal" (Mk 10:48). Did his persistence pay off? Yes; it did! Jesus called for him—and healed him!

So God wants us to be people who persist in prayer until we have an answer to our prayer—even if that answer is "no!" And that brings us to… ***2. Why does God delay answering?***
--***Why*** does God delay answering our prayers? ***Why*** does He make us wait? I'm no means a prayer expert, but here are ***two*** reasons.

A. To strengthen our faith

--It takes ***faith to pray***, right? **Hebrews 11:6** "But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."
--Faith is a ***prerequisite*** to praying; it is what motivates us to pray in the 1st place. If we didn't believe God is—that He exists—and we didn't believe He was "a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him," we wouldn't pray!
--But we also need faith to ***keep praying***, don't we? We need a persistent, stubborn kind of faith to ***keep praying*** when God makes us wait.
--E.M. Bounds—the great pray-er and writer about prayer—wrote: "God waits patiently as, day and night, His elect cry unto Him. He is moved by their requests a thousand times more than was the unjust judge…. God finds faith in His praying child—the faith which stays and cries—and honors it by permitting its further exercise, to the end that it is strengthened and enriched." ("The Necessity of Prayer," Baker Books, pg 68).
--Abraham's faith was certainly ***tested***—and ***strengthened***—while waiting 25 years for his promised son! And God holds Abraham up as an example of someone who is strong in faith according to Romans 4!
--Romans 4:19-21 "And being **not weak in faith**, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was **strong in faith**, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform."
--Can faith ***grow*** if it isn't tested? If so, I don't know how!

So God sometimes delays His answers because He wants our faith to grow stronger. A ***second*** reason is…

B. To "straighten out" our praying

What do I mean by that? Sometimes we ask for the ***wrong*** things—or the right things for the ***wrong*** reasons!
--James 4:3 "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss [with the wrong motives], that ye may consume it upon your lusts [sinful pleasure]." One **commentary put** it like this: "They prayed **not for the good of others**, nor even for their **own true good**, but for the satisfaction of that which was basest in their nature, and which they, as disciples of Christ, were specially called on to repress." (Biblehub.com; Cambridge Bible)

So God withholds answers to prayer if it would ***be harmful*** to us—and ***dishonoring*** to Him!
--Along those same lines, take your Bibles and turn now to Matthew 26, beginning with verse 39. We have here Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane—a prayer that many of us are familiar with.
--In Mark 14:35, it says Jesus prayed that "the hour might pass from Him." So what is ***the cup***—***the hour***—that Jesus prayed to have ***removed?***
--Jesus—as the only 200% being—was 100% God and 100% man! The ***human*** side of Him—without an ounce ***of sinfulness***—dreaded the bodily pain and suffering He was about to go through. Not only that, Jesus also knew that the ***fullness of the wrath*** of a thrice-holy, sin-hating God was going to be poured out on Him when ***He suffered the penalty for our sin*** as our substitute. So He asked for the Father to remove this cup!
--Was that prayer ***answered?*** No; it was not! Let that sink in—a prayer of God the Son ***wasn't answered!***
--To which we should all reply, "**Thank you, Father**, for not answering that prayer!"
--So in this case a "***delay***"—which was really a "***no***"—was for the purpose of the pray-er—in this case, Jesus—***to align His will*** with the will of the Father!
--But I can't help but think that Jesus' example was ***primarily for us!*** God the Son knew—before man was even created—that it was the ***will of the Father*** for Him to come to earth to be our sin-bearer! And it was the ***will of Jesus***, too!
--Don't misunderstand me—I am not suggesting that Jesus is ***being insincere*** when He asks for the cup to be removed! What I am saying is this: one of the many lessons from Jesus' prayer in the garden is the reminder that God says "no" ***to change us***—to get our eyes off us and our will—so we focus on ***Him*** and ***His will!***

3. Why don't we persist in prayer?

I suspect that too few of us are like the widow who keeps "bugging" the judge—or the friend who keeps knocking on the door! But ***why?*** Why aren't we as ***persistent in prayer*** as we should be?

Why do we give up so soon? Rather than ***me*** answer ***this*** question, I'm going to ***pass around our hand-held "mike"*** and have you—one by one—tell us why it is so ***hard for you*** to personally keep on praying about certain things. Any ***volunteers?***

I'm kidding, of course! But I am going to share with you ***two*** reasons why I sometimes stop praying about things before I get the desired answer. Maybe they are true of you—but maybe they aren't.

A. Because I don't want it badly enough

--Correct me if I'm wrong, but if you really ***need*** something—if it is something you absolutely ***must have***—you go to great lengths trying to get it, right? ***The widow*** really wanted justice from the judge; ***the friend*** really wanted bread from his neighbor. And they wanted it badly enough not to take "no" for an answer!

--But if you only "kinda/sorta" ***want*** it—and if it really doesn't bother you if you don't ***receive*** it—there's a pretty good chance you ***won't keep praying*** for it, right?

--And—sadly, if you're anything like me—some of the things ***we should desperately want***—and should ***continually ask God for***—we don't!

--***Jacob***, when fighting with an angel of the Lord, said in **Genesis 32:26** "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me." Do we ***want*** God's blessing? How badly ***do we want it*** if we barely—and rarely—ask Him to bless us?

--***David***, in **Psalm 63:1-2**, wrote: "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary."

--Do we seek God? Do we desire to see God's power and glory? We don't desire it very much if we don't persistently ask for it?

--And ***Jesus***—**in Matthew 5:6**—said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

Again I ask, what about us? Do we hunger and thirst after righteousness—meaning to be more like Him? If this is not a daily prayer—if this is not a longing of our heart—it is because we really don't think it's important.

A ***second*** reason that I personally sometimes stop is… B. Because I think God has already said "no"

--Does God ***always say "yes"*** to every one of our requests? Sometimes He says "no," doesn't He? Not every person we pray for receives Christ as their Savior—and not every person we ask God to physically heal is healed!

--And because of that, sometimes we can wrongly think God is ***going*** to say "no"—even though He hasn't made that plain to us! So we can ***wrongly assume*** we know God's will—and stop praying because of that.

--We know from what we just looked at here in Matthew 26 that our attitude needs to be "Not my will, but Thine be done." But if we ***don't know God's*** will in a certain situation, ***keep praying*** until He makes it plain!

--And don't use "I don't think it's God's will" as a cover ***for unbelief!*** I believe it is okay for us to pray like the man did in Mark 9:24 "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

--So if you have a loved-one that you want to see saved, don't let the hardness of their heart discourage you from persistently praying for them! I heard on Crosstalk this week of a man who prayed for the salvation of his dad for 37 years and that prayer was answered 5 days before his dad died!

--And if my memory serves me right, Art prayed for his dad for a long time before he was saved, too!

Lastly, I want to bring to your attention***… 4. The prayer that gets a "Yes" the first time—every time!***

Take your Bibles and turn back again to Luke 18. For the sake of time, I'm going to move rather quickly.

--In vs 9, we see why Jesus told this parable—to correct those who trusted in themselves to be righteous.

--In vss 11-12, the Pharisee—the one who trusted in himself that he was righteous—rehearsed to God all the good things—in his opinion—that he did.

--Now vs 13. What was the prayer? "God be merciful to me a sinner."

--How many times did he pray it? ***Once!***

--What was God's response?

Jesus says in vs 14: “I tell you, this man”—referring to the publican who asked for mercy—“went down to his house justified”—meaning accepted and forgiven by God and saved from the penalty of his sins!

--What about you? Has there been a time in your life when you acknowledged your sinfulness…and stopped counting on what you could do…and came to God in humility…and asked for mercy?
--That is a prayer that needs to be prayed only once—and gets a “yes” answer the first time—every time!
--I prayed a similar prayer as a 12-year-old boy at a Bible camp. The prodigal son’s prayer in Luke 15 was “Father, have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.”
--The thief on the cross simply said to Jesus, “Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.”

It’s not the words of the prayer, it is ***seeing your need for mercy***—and coming by faith to the One who can grant you mercy—Jesus Christ. Have you done that?

So what would God have us do?

1. What kind of pray-er are you? Are you a ***non***-prayer? Can a child of God be a non-prayer? We should have a set time where we enter our closet, shut the door, and pray to our Father in secret! But we should also talk to Him all day long!

2. Are you discouraged because you’ve been praying for something—or someone—a long time—and God still hasn’t answered? Don’t quit; keep praying! God knows what is best…and does what is best…and is strengthening your faith—or trying to change you and your request!

3. Are you a born-again, blood-bought child of God? Has there been a time in your life that you’ve humbled yourself and come to God for mercy and forgiveness like the publican did…and like the prodigal son did…and like the thief on the cross did? If not, that is the number 1 thing God wants you to do!