



**17-21 Persistent Prayer-Part 1**  
**How NOT to Persist In Prayer**  
**Pastor Mike Fabarez**

Romans Chapter 12 would tell you that you need to be constant in prayer. Or as First Thessalonians says, and I'm sure you are familiar with this passage, that you are to pray without ceasing. Or the words of Colossians Chapter 4, you should continue steadfastly in prayer. Or just real simply in Ephesians Chapter 6, you ought to pray at all times. I mean the Bible is certainly big on getting us to pray persistently, this should be no surprise. It's a big theme throughout the Bible to pray and continue to pray and don't stop praying and that's certainly as clear as it could ever be in our passage that we've reached in our study of Luke Chapter 18, where we see Jesus tell a parable in Luke 18 verses 2 through 8 and he begins by telling us why we have this. In verse number 1 he says that this was told to his disciples so that they would learn to "always pray and never lose heart." Always pray and never lose heart. Now you take those kinds of words from the Bible and you combine them with words like you'll find in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says, you know, ask and it will be given, seek and you'll find, and knock and the door will be opened to you and you have a recipe for a lot of disappointment, a lot of frustration, and a lot of misunderstanding. Why do I say that? Well, because it probably not a Christian in the room who hasn't sincerely asked and sought and knocked and not received the answer that they wanted.

Surely there are many people that could take the microphone this morning and say, well I've prayed and persisted in prayer and I prayed and I prayed and I prayed and God didn't answer. Certainly not in the way I was asking.

I mean this is a common experience among Christians so we better understand what Jesus is getting at when he tells us to "always pray and never lose heart." There's got to be some context, there's got to be some fine print, there's got to be some stipulation, some qualifications. I mean there has to be and of course there is. And this particular passage that we are going to look at, we'll see next week the context and if you've been with us you'll remember where we've been and that is this great anticipation of the coming kingdom and the deterioration of culture. And then we have a parable about persisting in prayer and all of that fits the immediate textual context and gives us a sense as to what Jesus is meaning when he says to his disciples "always pray and never lose heart."

But as counter-intuitive as it may seem, this morning what I want to do is not look at the immediate context, we'll deal with that next week. I want to look at this principle that is not unique among statements in Scripture to have you persist in prayer along with the promise that, if you do, you know, God's going to give you what you ask for. We've got to understand that in its largest biblical context.

So this morning, something unusual for us as we usually go expositing verses, verse by verse, I just want to take a look at this verse and understand how in the world we're to understand, not only this statement, but so many statements like it throughout the Bible that are calling you and I to persist and persist and persist in prayer and combine that with all these promises to give us what we're asking for, and say, well, what are we supposed to understand that to mean? Clearly, it can't mean that we just ask however and for whatever we want and God will do it. Or just keep on asking, if you ask long enough God will do it. I mean, that's what it seems to say but there's got to be more to this.



So we're going to look at some context here. Not just the context in the text, that's next week, the context throughout the Bible when he calls Christians like you and me to pray and keep on praying and adding all these promises that he'll give us the answer.

So this morning I got five things that will create a short list for us of concepts, stories, narratives, principles and precepts throughout the Bible that will help you, I hope, leave this morning with a better understanding of what Jesus means when he tells you to persist in prayer and not lose heart, not just here but everywhere else in the Bible.

So if you have found your worksheet, you'll see I've got the text there for you and hopefully you've turned your Bibles already in Luke 18, but you'll see the rest of it greyed out because all I want to do is deal with this one statement and then we'll get to the context next week.

He says, he told them a parable to the effect that they ought to always pray and not lose heart and then he tells the story. A judge, a city, didn't fear God, widow keeps coming, give me justice, he refuses, she keeps at it, keeps bothering the judge and finally he says, well, you know what, I'll just do what she says, you know, "And the Lord said, 'hear what the unrighteous judge says, will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?'" Verse 8. "I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

He told them a parable to the effect that they should "always pray and never lose heart." Let's look at what God would expect us to know before we read a passage like this and reach the wrong conclusions.

First passage I'd like you to write down and I'll call it to your mind, it's short, I'll quote it for you, is First John Chapter 5 verse number 14. This should be in your mind, understood as the one governing principle of every call to prayer throughout the Scripture. If God is going to ask you to pray, clearly this ought to be in your mind and I'm glad it stated so succinctly in First John Chapter 5 verse 14 when he says this, "If," that's a conditional word, representing a conditional clause, here comes the condition, here's the fine print, "If we ask anything," now here's the qualifier, "according to his will, he hears us."

Next verse, "If we know he hears us in whatever we ask, then we know we have the request we've asked of him." So if you are going to get what you ask of him, and certainly the context is, throughout the Bible, asking, keep asking, seek and keep seeking, knock and keep knocking, well, then you'll have it. Now here's the caveat. If you ask according to his will. Now if we're going to know the will of God, the wishes of God, the wants of God, the intentions of God, there's one place I can go to get that. The unalterable, unchanging propositions in black and white, we have it, a translation of it, right there in your lap. It's called the Word of God. The will of God is going to be revealed in the Word of God. So the will of God, the Word of God, I need to know what the Bible has to say before I start asking and persisting in asking because if I ask for things that are unbiblical, well then that's just a waste of my time.

Number one, let's put this in these terms. How not to persist in prayer. Number one, don't persist this way. "Don't pray unbiblically" and that may sound like a no brainer but it's not as easy as you may think. Don't pray unbiblically.

If I want to pray according to God's will and persist in prayer and not make it a colossal waste of



time or a practice, an exercise in frustration, well then I better make sure that my prayer requests are in line with the will of God. The will of God is going to be revealed in the Word of God, at least by and large. We'll look at that objection that you are raising in your mind right now in a second.

But let's just start with this and indulge me in some silliness here. If I said to you, I've got in my prayer list, that I'm praying for everyday, that God would stop being holy. I hope you'd say, stop praying for that, right? Why?

Because you know: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of hosts." "He was, he is, he is to come," he's always going to be holy, he's the eternal, immutable, holy God. You should not pray for God not to be holy.

You'd slap me in the face and say, that's a dumb thing to pray for, Pastor Mike. And you'd want me to stop. And if I quoted Luke Chapter 18 verse 1, well, he said, "pray and not lose heart," so I'm praying, you'd say, stop it, that's a dumb prayer. Why? Because it's unbiblical.

If I said, "I'm praying that Jesus does not return. I don't want Jesus to come back. Once was enough. Don't come back." You'd say, that's dumb.

Indulge me in the silliness because it doesn't get so silly when I continue this discussion when I say things like this, "Well, I'm praying that the world would love me." I'm praying the world would love me. Now you may not put it that way, but how often... "I just want non-Christians to understand me. I want them to like me in spite of... I know they say I'm a Jesus freak. I just want them to like me." Well, if you're well versed in the Bible you'll say, oh, wait a minute, here was the promise, "If they hated me they're going to hate you." Why would you pray for that? I know it makes sense in your mind that it makes no sense to pray that God would stop being holy or that God would not send his son back a second time because that's what he promised.

But you are now asking for something I think we can all empathize with. I understand how you want to be liked by the non-Christian world.

I understand that too, but once that makes your prayer list, you are now praying unbiblically and that's a ridiculous thing to pray when Jesus has said just the opposite.

Or, let me start with a silly progression of things. "I want God to change his view on armed robbery. I can make a lot of money in this. Matter of fact, it is very lucrative for me. I'm just praying that maybe the old God of the Old Testament who was against arm robbery, I'm just praying he'll change his view of it so I can continue with armed robbery."

Or adultery. "Oh, I know that was kind of a puritanical season of God's life and I just hope that maybe it's probably not so bad in his mind. I'm praying that God would change his view of adultery."

Now again I started with silliness but we're moving into very contemporary headlines at this point. "Well, whatever God said about homosexuality. I mean that was Old Testament stuff. I mean let's just pray that God can be more understanding.

You can pray all you want about what you think God should want or approve or see as moral or ethical. But if God is revealed in his eternal word, here is clearly what I say is right and wrong, you



can hope, you can pray, you can persist, you can hope to reason with God but it's useless. That would be ridiculous to persist in prayer or any hope that God would change his view on morality because he's been very clear about that.

"I am praying that I won't have any problems. I don't want any problems. How about just this week, I don't want any problems?"

OK, we're moving now from what seems obvious you tell me not to pray for me but if I'm in a prayer meeting and I pray, "I don't want any problems today, Lord," you would go, "Amen, Lord, bless Pastor Mike, give him no problems with that." But at some point, you have to think biblically and say, is that even a biblical prayer for him to pray?

I need us to be much more mature in our praying and the only way to get more mature in our praying so we don't waste our time in persisting in prayer, we better understand the Bible because in the Bible we have the will of God revealed. And if I'm supposed to pray according to the will of God so that God hears and answers my prayer, I better make sure my prayers are increasingly biblical and not just reactive.

I understand reactive prayer and I reactively pray just like you do. When I hurt, I want it to stop, if it's bad, I want it to be good. If there's a situation that is crooked I want it to be straight, if it's rough, I want to make it smooth. I want all the natural things that you want and I reactively and impulsively pray to God. But at some point, the Scripture has to invade my mind and I have to say, well let me start to shape that prayer so that I don't sit here persisting in prayer hoping that I'm claiming that if I just ask God then will give it and if I ask long enough he'll give it. I've got to pray biblically.

There are times that people, heroes of the faith, were praying for something persistently and God had to step in and say you're praying for something against my will, stop praying for that. Case in point, this is a good homework assignment, study in Deuteronomy Chapter 3 when Moses tells a story autobiographically about himself in his prayer life, what he was praying for. And what he was praying for made complete sense and everybody in the prayer meeting would nod their head and Joshua would say, "Amen, Lord. Grant Moses' request," because here's what Moses was praying. "I want to go into the Promised Land." Does that sound like a reasonable prayer?

Of course. "Let me into the Promised Land. I just want to be... I want my sandals to get into the... I just, before I die, let me into the Promised Land." And he prayed that and he prayed that and he prayed that. And let me read from the Scripture.

Here is God's response to Moses' persistent praying. "Enough from you," verse 26 says. "Do not speak to me of this matter again."

Can you imagine? If God were to speak up about your prayer list. I'll bet there's some things in your prayer list God would say, "Can you stop praying for that?"

If you read Luke Chapter 18 verse 1 and you say, "Right there he says, 'always pray and never give up. Always pray never give up.' I got my list. I'm going to always pray and never give up." You have some things on that list, I'll bet, that if you thought about them in the light of Scripture you'd think long enough to say I don't know if I have any right to pray that, as a matter of fact, some things may be in complete opposition to the Scripture and what the Scripture has promised, then



you'll have to say, "That's a dumb thing for me to pray for."

And you know why, by the way, it was that Moses was not to keep asking and pestering God about entering the Promised Land? Because God's word had already told him, you are being disciplined and in your discipline, you cannot enter the Promised Land. And the discipline, Sunday school grads, was when he did what?

Struck the rock. And God said don't strike the rock, speak to the rock. You didn't show me as holy, you didn't honor me in front of all the people, you need to realize and learn your lesson, you're not going to the Promised Land. "Oh, please God, let me go, let me go, let me go, let me go, please, let me go. Please let me go into the Promised Land."

"Enough from you. Do not speak to me of this matter again." Stop praying that way.

Now it's a reasonable prayer request. It's a reactive prayer request. It's a prayer request that Moses and Joshua and Caleb might sit around and pray. And you might hear all them all go "Amen, yes, right." And God's going: "Stop."

Now is Moses as a godly guy? Sure. Is he asking for something reasonable? Yes. Is he asking for something viscerally in our gut we say, "That's a good thing. I want Moses..." But here's the thing, when it came to God's good plan, it wasn't that God was being mean to Moses. Do you know anything about the history of when this took place? It seems near the end but there were lots of things, Aaron was about to die, we had the entire transition of the worship system around Aaron. There had to be this transitional period and it took very wise and smart and godly decisions to be made during that time.

You had Balak hiring Balaam to come and curse the people. We need a leader that would circumvent that whole situation and be godly and persist and do the right things in the midst of that trial.

You had the people take that bronze snake that was held up in the desert early in the narrative and now it was being worshiped and bowed down to. There was idolatry in the camp and everybody said this is the right thing to do and it makes some biblical sense to us to exalt this to a place of worship. And here's what God needed. He didn't need a happy Moses, and that would have made him happy to go into the Promise Land. If God said, "OK. You're right. Your time out is up, you can come on in." That would have made him happy, but you know what God needed was a holy Moses.

And right then he knew that if he stuck to his guns and did not let Moses keep praying this unbiblical prayer and he could submit to the will of God in this, that Moses would come out of this and God's good plan is that Moses would be holy. He needed a holy Moses to get through the transition to the priesthood, to get through the idolatry scandal, to get through Balaam's and Balak's spiritual showdown as they traverse the desert.

We needed Moses to stop praying something that God had already said wasn't going to happen.

Prayer. I know it's easy for us to pray without the information that I'm giving you this morning and think we're doing the right thing and wondering what's wrong with God, he's not answering my prayer.





My wife likes candles in the living room, we have them in the family room. When we have our friends over, which seems to be the only time we light these candles, but that's when she says, you know, we're scampering around, "Honey, would you help me light the candles" and you go into the drawer and I get the little lighter and I go around and start lighting candles.

Well she started, unbeknownst to me, to buy some new candles that aren't real candles, they are electronic candles. They look real.

Well, I started lighting. I get to this one and I'm "ch ch ch ch ch ch ch ch."

Man, I was working it. She walks past from the kitchen and said, "What are you doing?" "I'm lighting the candles and this one's being a real beast about it, I can't get it lit." She said, "Pick it up, turn it over, there's a switch on the bottom, turn it on."

I had the right tool. And in some cases it worked perfectly. It's just that I applied the right tool, the powerful tool, to the wrong thing and it did nothing and all I did was frustrate myself.

"The effectual prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much." Prayer is powerful. But you're sitting there, perhaps, in some unbiblical situations trying to apply God's mechanism of prayer to something God is saying, "Would you stop that?"

Moses was a man of prayer. You know where we needed his prayers to be? In biblical prayers for God's will and instead he was wasting his time on his knees praying for something God said stop. Pray biblically, don't pray on unbiblically. That is the underlying, foundational, governing principle of all prayer in the Bible. We have to pray according to the will of God.

"But Mike, sometimes that's not clear, that's not clear. There's no chapter and verse. I can't go to a chapter and verse and see whether or not this is God's will." Welcome, you know, to real life.

So much of scripture, I don't see whether or not this should happen.

I see examples of both in the Scripture and sometimes God wants and sometimes God doesn't want. I don't know.

As I said most of our prayers start as reactive prayer, particularly when they relate to our own lives. There's something in our life that's an impetus for pain that I want that to go away. The Apostle Paul is a great example of this if you want a passage to put next to the second point that we're about to fill in, put down Second Corinthians Chapter 12 verses 7 through 9. Jot that down. And in this passage you might know the Apostle Paul was struck with something that was so bad in his life, he called it a physical ailment, he called it a messenger of Satan sent to buffet me. Now I get a lot of prayer requests from church congregants that say, "Pray for me, I'm sick." If I had one that came in and said I have a messenger from Satan that's tearing my life apart, I'm thinking you're in a lot of pain. You're saying this is a demonic, satanic attack on your physical body. This was so painful that you know that Paul would be totally understood in a prayer meeting, saying, "Would you pray with me that I would be healed from this ailment?" And he began to pray.

And if you know the passage, the Bible says he prayed and it gives us how many times he prayed. He prayed how many times?



Three times that God might remove this from me. And then there was a realization. You might claim special revelation.

Nevertheless, we often have these realizations when we do not persist in prayer as a godly man not persisting in prayer about something that viscerally we should all say, it makes perfect sense you would pray that you would be healed from this. He stopped praying that he would be healed from that because he saw a greater opportunity to glorify God through this ailment. And he said this: I understand that God's power is perfected in this particular weakness because I have a problem, a vulnerability in terms of my own conceit and here's what I've learned in this sickness, it has really become an aid in my humility and so I'm starting to see God's greater glory is manifested in my illness. If it stays because it keeps me where I need to be, because you know what God needs, a humble apostle, not a prideful, conceited apostle. Therefore, he says, I'm glad, more glad to be chronically ill for the rest of my life, even though people empathize with me and the Galatians want to gouge their eyeballs out and give them to me, it probably had something to do with his eyes and so he said, I'd much rather have this problem. I need an amanuensis I need a secretary to take dictation so I can write letters to churches. But you know what? I'm good with that. I've stopped praying for it. Now you, compassionate Christian, might put your arm around the Apostle Paul and say, "Oh, you shouldn't stop praying. You know, Jesus once said, you should always pray and never give up, never give up, never lose heart. Paul, you've lost heart here." And the Apostle Paul would look at you and say, "You don't understand here. When I pray about everything I need to pray," here comes number 2, "flexibly." And I would say this, he would turn that around and say to you, "Don't pray inflexibly." Don't pray unbiblically, got to learn how not to persist in prayer, don't pray inflexibly. And if you pray with flexibility, guess what, you may not persist in prayer because it becomes clear to you that God's greater glory is manifested in this world if that thing is not answered the way you initially, reactively wanted it to be.

Therefore, sometimes you have to say, "Hey, you know what, I'm realizing this would probably be better if it stayed in place, if I didn't get that promotion, if we didn't get that house, we didn't have that child, if I didn't get healed, if I didn't have this thing fixed, if I didn't have that lawsuit go away. I'm seeing God's greater glory played out and therefore I'm willing to say, I'm going to stop praying for that." Some of you need to stop praying for things, because you are praying in a very rigid, inflexible way, "God, you have to do it and you have to do it this way."

And it's not clear whether it's God's will for you to get over that illness. It's not clear whether you should have it. We don't know. Sometimes he relieves you of that, sometimes he doesn't. So you're going to have to make these decisions as you look for God's greater glory in your life. And I say that because of Romans 8:28 which you all know, that says that God's got a good plan but before we read 28 you should be reminded of 29 that says, "Those he's foreknown he's predestined to become conformed to the image of his son." And guess what, the image of his son was not conceited.

And so in Paul's mind, perhaps, he realized this: "If I'm going to be more like Christ I realize that not praying for this would make me more like Christ. I should be praying for the benefit and that is that the power of Christ would be seen in me through the weakness of my illness. I've stopped praying for that. I'm not going to persist in prayer that way. I'm going to persist in prayer with the flexibility that eventually says, you know, "not my will but yours be done." And where would Paul ever learn to pray a prayer like that? Jesus? Matthew 26 certainly taught us when it comes to our praying, we pray in a very flexible way.



That sounds like a copout. I told you this before, I'll go to a bedside in a hospital and "call in the pastor," you know, and "he'll pray a great prayer." I'll get there and someone is in a bed and I'll pray something and I'll pray flexibly and they'll open one eye and think I want my money back. Right? "I want my offering back. This guy is kind of fudging on his prayers right now. I want him to raise his hand and say, 'Be healed in the Lord!' And, instead, he's praying if it's the Lord's will. What's with that?"

I don't always know what God's will is for your health, my health, your job, your housing, my job, my health. I don't know. I need to start with some flexibility before I settle into persistently praying. I've got to be convinced it is the will of God. And I look to the Word of God. And one of things I learned in the Word of God is the goal of God is to work everything out for good, which doesn't necessarily mean my pleasure or my happiness or my satisfaction. Don't pray unbiblically and don't pray inflexibly. That's certainly not what Christ meant in Luke Chapter 18 verse 1.

This one is related. But I think sometimes, based on our Daily Bible Reading, I am reminded as we work through Job this week, that we can pray for things with a presumption that we know what's best. Follow me on this.

We introduced ourselves in our Daily Bible Reading again, as we go through the Bible again this year, in Job Chapter 1 through 3 was our reading yesterday and hopefully you read that, if not you can catch up today.

And we meet Job and he is so godly in Chapters 1 and 2. He's described that way by God. He responds and everything falls apart and our Lord gave, the Lord take away, blessed be the name of the Lord. Man, that's a godly man. But by the third chapter and I'm so glad on our Daily Bible Reading schedule we get 1, 2 and 3 yesterday, because when you read 3 in conjunction with 2 and 1 you recognize this: he's really fallen from that place of having this great humble perspective when he starts saying things like this in Chapter 1 of Job. He says, "I should have died when I was born. I should've been stillborn. Cursed be the day of my birth. It would be better if I were never born." I just want to ask you this question, as God looks from heaven at that statement, does God say, "Amen, brother. Better if you were never born." No. God says, "No. How dare you!" No it would not be better if Job was never born.

Matter of fact, Job, you are right now playing out a drama that is not only going to be for your generation, a hallmark case of understanding that the "good things" don't just happen to good people, that sometimes what we have is bad things happen to "good people" and you need to recognize something called the retributive principle in the Scripture that is going to be understood at a deeper level, not just in your generation but there will be people, I mean, thousands of years later, on the other side of the planet, learning from your life. No, it is a really good thing you were born, Job. But he was praying prayers about his life based on his presumption that he knew better. And I hate to, and with great deference to Job and great respect, he's a more godly man than I am, I understand this, but let me say this: you need to learn from that, number 3, not to pray arrogantly. Because that's all that really is, it's arrogance. "Don't pray arrogantly." And what is arrogance? "I think I know what's best, I think I have all the information." And that's the drama of Job, is it not? He didn't have all the information and we're let in from the beginning on all the information. He had no idea why his kids just died. He had no idea why he was ill. He had no idea why all of his herds were ripped off by the Sabeans. He had no idea.

We know why it happened because we're reading Job Chapter 1 and 2. We get the heavenly insight





on it. He's praying, though, without that knowledge and he starts to pray in a way that's very arrogant, and I use that word advisedly with great deference and very respectfully to Job. He didn't know everything.

And you and I pray sometimes and we start putting our fist down on our table saying, "God, do this for me. I know this is what you should do." And we persist in prayer. But what you need to see when we presume we have all the information is we're doing nothing other than praying arrogantly.

Jonah prayed arrogantly. He thought it would be best if the Ninevites just got destroyed. I mean how often is the book of Jonah become such an instructive tool for generations. But here is Jonah wanting them all to perish. They don't deserve a prophet, they don't deserve any warning, they don't deserve to have any information from Yahweh that they're going to be destroyed.

And he fought with God and God said, "No, no, I do know better. This is the right thing. Stop praying that you can get out of this assignment. As a matter of fact, the more you pray to get out of it, the more I am going to take extreme measures to get you to your mission field. You're gonna go."

He didn't know. Which reminds me in our recent study in Luke when James and John came to Jesus and thought what every Jew thought of the Samaritans, they're worthless and when they traveled through Samaria and they wouldn't give Jesus and his disciples a place to stay, you remember what James and John said. "How about a big mushroom cloud right now. Let's just... Would you... You got a direct line to God. Let's just all call down fire from heaven and destroy this group of people." And of course Jesus has to rebuke them.

There's a limited perspective. God knew what he was doing. He has all knowledge, he's not going to respond to our immature praying. I don't care how much we persist in it when we don't have all the information. I guess it relates to where we've just been. We certainly need to pray flexibly because we are praying humbly. We don't know everything. Remember the classic passage in James Chapter 4, would you turn there with me real quick? James Chapter 4. Humble praying is flexible praying because we don't always know the will of God. All these fit together in a nice little chain.

And James says, I know it's Bible talk, but you can see in the first two words of verse 13, I mean, it's kind of a slap in the face. Come on, come now, grow up, stop being that way. "Come now, you who say," James 4:13, "today or tomorrow we'll go into such and such a town and we'll spend a year there and we'll trade and we'll make a profit."

"Well, God is not for advanced planning? God doesn't want us to have any business plans?" No, of course not, he's all for that. This is the kind of stuff we teach our kids. This is the kind of stuff I think we should have a seminar at the church about that. I understand, God is all about planning, the book of Proverbs is full of it, full of those kinds of exhortations to you and I to have foresight and plan ahead.

It wasn't the plan that was the problem. It was the heart of the people making those plans.

And I'm sure they were Jewish, synagogue-going sabbath-keepers. They would say, "Oh God please, we want you to bless this." And, of course, in the New Testament era you could see them sitting there in church as the Apostle's letters were read and they're saying, "We just want God's blessing." I'm sure they were asked to pray for this trip. I'm going on a business trip, pray that it be profitable.



Verse 14. The Apostle basically saying, You're ignorant. You don't always know. "You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? You're a mist that appears for a little time and then it vanishes. Instead you ought to say," here's your mindset, this is how you ought to pray, sounds a lot like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "if the Lord wills," and I love this, "we'll live and do this or that." I don't even know if I'm going to be alive for my next business trip. But I'm going to pray with deference because it comes from a humble heart that has a great flexibility about my praying. And sometimes God is going to rearrange, substitute things on my prayer list and I know that whatever I pray for it needs to be with a very humble heart because I don't have all the information.

Do you see verse 16? This is why it's all about the heart of the matter in the praying. As it is, your concepts, your ideas, your planning, your prayers, "You're boasting in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

I would hate for God to look at my prayer list and say, "Hey, there's an evil prayer list." And all it would take for me is a presumption on God's grace, a presumption on God's future in my life. I don't know. So I'm praying very deferentially, very flexibly, very humbly, about the future. "Well, that leaves me thinking... I can't... I don't even know why... this is terrible. I don't even know how to pray."

Jot this one down if you would, we won't take time to turn there. Actually stay in James 4, I got more to say there, but Romans Chapter 8 verse 26 and 27. Here's the great encouragement if you're feeling very vulnerable, like I don't even know why I even waste my time praying. The Bible says this. You and I have a weakness.

We don't know everything. "Likewise the Spirit helps our weakness. We do not know what," we are to pray about or how we are "to pray as we ought." We don't know the things that we should be praying about and so we throw up our hands and say, "We'll forget it?" No, but the Spirit, capital "S" God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, he intercedes for us. Oh, I know, Christ is our mediator, he's our intercessor, I understand that, but here, the Spirit is our intercessor, not as the mediating qualification for me to talk to God on his throne, but now he's one who's translating my prayers. He's interceding for me.

"He who searches the hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints," here are the best words I've ever heard, "according to the will of God."

Not just the revealed will of God, but all the secret will of God I don't even know about tomorrow. God doesn't tell me when I'm going to die. But the will of God is that he's got to plan, all my days are numbered from the very beginning.

So the Spirit of God knows the future for my life. Therefore, he's interceding today for me, praying for the things that I ought to be praying for, even when I'm ignorant. And so now, all of a sudden, you've just taken a verse in Ephesians 6 that stops being so mystical and confusing and you've made sense of it, if you understand this passage and that is praying at all times in the Spirit. What's the point?

There's nothing weird about this. It's me trying to say, how can I align my prayers with God's spirit. And sometimes, I understand, there's conviction, there's freedom. You think Paul felt freedom when



he stopped praying for the thorn in the flesh? Absolutely. I'm sure the Spirit gave him that sense of, "OK, I feel good about no longer praying for that because I see God's greater glory here." And you and I need to try and align our prayer list with the Spirit's prayer list and you and I need to be much more humble about the reality that he knows and we don't.

When Simon got up in the morning and started praying through his list, which I'm sure he was encouraged to do by Christ because he got up before dark, he taught his disciples how to pray and late in their ministry he was praying every day, I'm quite sure.

But on one day he got up and said his prayers, he went off to do ministry with Christ and in Luke Chapter 22 verse 31, Jesus looks him in the eye and speaking for him and the rest of the disciples, he says, you know what, "Satan has demanded to have you and to sift you like wheat." Not just you, that's a plural you. Y'all. Satan wants to have y'all. Satan wants to sift you all like wheat. But Peter, "I prayed for you." Singular now, I prayed for you. "I prayed for you," and here's how he puts it, "that your faith wouldn't fail." There's a trial coming. You don't see it, you don't have it on your radar. The Spirit knows and I know and I'm praying for you.

"And when you turn back and you turn again that you'll strengthen your brothers." I'm praying for things that you don't even know about.

And I love the fact that you and I can have the confidence that the Spirit intercedes for us. And what I want him to do every morning saying, God how would you like to change my prayer list today? Help me understand what I should be praying for and even if I sit here and have no clarity about that, I'm grateful that you're praying for the right things when I might be praying for the wrong things.

Don't pray arrogantly, it's easy to do. I said there's more in James 4, for our fourth point, I want you to go up to the top of this passage, James Chapter 4.

You see there in verses 1 and 2 about quarrels and fighting and you got all these problems going on, you're fighting with each other. You can't obtain, you're coveting, you're fighting, quarreling. Verse 2, last phrase. "You do not have, because you do not ask." Well, there it is again, that promise we see all over the Bible, ask and you'll receive. Keep on asking, persevere, don't lose heart, God will give it to you. Hmmm, but you're asking and you do not receive.

I mean there are a lot of things on your persistent prayer list that you're not getting. And why aren't you get them? Because, very insightful, "you ask wrongly," and how is that, "to spend it on your passions." Now he's going to define what that is, verse 4. "You adulterous people!" Now that's a metaphor, it's not about their sexual... they don't have, you know, immoral, illicit things in their prayer list, necessarily. "Do you not know that friendship with the world," there's the standard, you're acting like the world now. And what does the world want? They just want to feel good, they want peace, they want comfort, they want convenience.

You're acting like them now. And when you act like them and you pray like them, you make yourself at enmity with God and God is not sitting there and going, "Oh, give me more of your prayer requests." You're praying like the world would pray. You want stuff just so that you'll feel better. "Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Do you suppose that it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, 'He yearns jealously over the spirit,'" small "s" "that he's made to dwell in us?" That's a tough, notoriously tough grammatical Greek



sentence, but I think they probably got it right here in the English Standard Version, if that's what you're reading from, that the spirit that he's made, who I am, God jealously wants me. It's not about me in this world, it's about me knowing him and glorifying him. That's why I'm here. My prayer list needs to reflect that, the world has no concern for that. The world is just praying that they'll have a great day, a great time and if they did pray, and some of them do, they would be praying just that they could have things to spend on their pleasures. They have their Christmas list and they want to bring it to Santa Claus and say, "Give me all these things. This is what I want."

You're acting like the world. What God wants is you. He wants you to be the person that glorifies God in all that you do. He gives grace, that's why it says, "God is opposed to the proud," verse 6, "but he gives grace to the humble." That connects us to the third point.

But let me just put it this way. You want to pray? And this is a very hard one, number 4, you need to "not pray selfishly." If you want to persist in prayer, make sure the things you're persisting in are not selfish prayers. "That's hard, because there are a lot of things on my list that are about me." Yeah, you're right, that's fine.

But be sure that when you're praying for things, you've extracted the selfish motive. Now think that through. I'm not saying play word games in your mind but I am saying try and extract that selfish motive. Sometimes that will change the request itself and sometimes it just changes why you're praying for that thing. There shouldn't be a thing on your prayer list you don't ask at some point, why is that on my prayer list? Why am I praying for that? And if the only reason you can get around to is what they said in First Samuel 8 and that is, I just want to have what everyone else has and they're having a lot better life than me so I want that stuff. First Samuel 8, what am I talking about? Israel came with a chronic, persistent prayer. And you know what it was? God, give us a king, an earthly king, we want an earthly king, here's why, like every other nation. We want a king like every other nation. They got kings, we want one, they got a house, we're in an apartment, they got a degree, we don't have money to go to school, they have a baby and we're infertile, we don't have one, they moved up in the ranks and they're coming, I haven't moved up in mine. These things just reactively get right onto our prayer list.

And all I'm saying is there may be a time to pray for a baby, there may be a time to pray for a house, there may be a time to pray for a promotion at your work, there may be a time to pray for a degree, there may be a time to pray for that. What you need to extract, though, and it may change the item on your list or it may change how you pray for it, is that you just want to spend it on your pleasures.

In other words you're asking for the same reason a worldly person would ask for it. You've got to change the reason you're asking for it and maybe even recognize, if I change the reason I'm not even really praying for it anymore. And it may be that God says, listen, you're about me and glorifying me.

It doesn't matter if you have that baby, doesn't matter if you have the house, doesn't matter if you have the degree, it doesn't matter if you have good looks, doesn't matter if you're really smart, doesn't matter if you have some of these things, because really all you want is to spend them on your pleasures.

It's interesting when we stop caring about our pleasures, how God seems to satisfy us with his goodness, sometimes through the very things we stopped praying for, because we finally stopped



praying for them with a selfish motive. I'm not saying that to manipulate God, I'm not saying that so you can play word games in your mind, I'm just saying that this is a big, big challenge for us to ask ourselves why am I praying on a daily basis for these things on my prayer list. God makes it very clear I'm not going to respond to selfish praying that is all about spending it on your pleasures. Don't pray unbiblically, don't pray inflexibly, don't pray arrogantly, don't pray selfishly.

Lastly, jot down, if you would, John Chapter 11. And not because they were praying this way but it's a great example for us that we don't, number 5, pray impatiently. "Impatiently.

And even before I reference John 11, I want to remind you of where we're at as a society. I had some people over, we were talking on Friday about the olden days and my daughter, I think, was sitting there with us rolling her eyes. But as we were talking about dial-up modems and the noises they made. One of my friends said, "Yeah, I remember at the end of the day, if I had to upload this big file, a video file, sound file, whatever, I'd put it on, I'd dial up the modem and before I left work I'd make sure it started, I'd go home and overnight, I come back in the morning hoping to get it all transferred. I'm thinking about how many hours it took to transfer these files on the old, you know, slow dial-up modems.

I came across an article that spoke of how impatient we've become because of our technology. We were willing to wait, then, of course, because it was important to get that information.

Today, it says, that if you have to wait two seconds for something to load on your web page, two seconds, we start to lose people and they don't stay on the web site.

As a matter of fact, if they wait five seconds, here was the article, if they wait five seconds, even for information they went to that web site to get, you will lose at least 25% of those people. And if you ever have to make people wait 10 seconds for something, you'll lose over half of the people who went to that web site to get that information. Think about that.

It would take me 10 seconds in the old days to get out of my chair, walk across to my bookshelf and pull an encyclopedia off and set it down and open it. And now, if I don't get everything I want within seconds, I give up, I quit.

Mary and Martha prayed that their brother would have the help of Christ, the healer. And when Jesus didn't respond in time, though they had great respect and love for Christ, you can hear the frustration when Martha asks about Christ and why he didn't come and, in essence, she says this, "You know, I know if you had been here, he wouldn't have died."

You know what Christ wants in our praying is the ability to be patient and therefore there is a kind of praying that will undermine everything we're going to talk about next week when it comes to this enduring, persistent prayer that is biblical, that is flexible, that is humble, that is something that we know is for the good and the glory of God, you and I need to learn to not pray, number five, impatiently.

With all that I've said, once you start to narrow that prayer list to where God should have it in your life, then you need to learn to be patient.

In our microwave culture, we need to learn to recognize that God's timing is not our timing. And now, this sounds like a traditional sermon, doesn't it? Because God's going to come on his time.





And God has a reason for it. And when Martha is going, you know, had you been here it would have been great, but you waited so long. And the text is very clear, when he heard Lazarus was sick, he did wait long on purpose. God is not slow in keeping any of his promises and he's not slow to react to your prayer list. He's got reasons for waiting. And even when you pray the right thing, in the right way, with the right heart, he may say, it's not the right time.

Continue steadfastly in prayer. I quoted that from Colossians 2 at the outset. Later, he speaks of Epaphras in that passage in verse 12, Colossians 4:12, and he says he is "always struggling on your behalf in his prayers." He doesn't give up in praying for you. It's the right thing, it's a selfless thing, it's a biblical thing and he's praying always "agonizomai" he's always struggling in prayer for you. What does that mean? He's always intent on praying and he gets up in the morning and prays again and goes to bed at night and he prays again.

It's why so many of the Psalms remind us of how to rightly pray for a God who is going to do things for his own glory through the instrumentality of prayer, but he's going to do it on his timetable and it's always for the greater glory of God when it's not immediate. God wants something, he's accomplishing something and even in the bad in our lives that we think took place because God waited so long to respond, he says I've got a reason for that and certainly Martha and Mary learned that that day. That's why when you read the Psalms, so many of them will say things like this, "How long, oh Lord?" There's the heart, plaintive cry of the Psalmist saying, "Where are you?"

As a matter of fact, one of the words that you don't often see associated with prayer in the pages of Scripture certainly is a combination of prayer. In other words, it is a synonym for prayer and that is this phrase, "Wait for the Lord." Why? Because prayer is usually that. It's asking and waiting and asking and waiting.

I give you one of those passages in your discussion questions on the back of the worksheet for your small groups this week, but let me read you another from Psalm 27. Psalm 27:7. "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me. You said, 'Seek my face.' My heart says 'Your face I will seek.' Don't hide your face from me. Don't turn your servant away. You've been my help," you've answered in the past, "now don't cast me off now; don't forsake me."

"Teach me your way." Which by the way is part of what he's doing often when he makes us wait. "O Lord, lead me on a level path because of my enemies."

Look, can't you see? "Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, they breed out violence. I believe," here's his resolve, even though he's made to wait, "that I shall look upon the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!" Martha and Mary learned that they should have thought that no matter how long it took for God to respond.

And then here's the verse. Verse 14. "Wait for the Lord." What do we need in the midst of that? Patience. "Be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!" Sometimes we're praying to make the shot and God's working on winning the game. And that's a different strategy.

Sometimes we're thinking, "Well God, I'm just praying we win the game" and God is saying, "I got something planned in the post-season that really requires we lose this game and you don't see that because you don't..."

So humble, flexible praying. But when you're praying and it's the will of God, just keep praying and



never lose heart.

Most of you watched my daughter grow up. My third child. She's of the age, I know, don't gasp, but I took her out driving for the first time recently. I know. I took her out driving. I found a really big parking lot and we went out driving. She was so happy and stoked and excited. You know, it's so different than teaching the boys to drive, you know, but it's just fun to see. "I'm driving!" And it's funny, I didn't say this, but when I thought about her behind the wheel and I saw her there getting ready to drive, I thought this isn't the first time you've been driving. Not the first time. Because, like most dads, I've had all my kids, when they were toddlers, plop on my lap because they all want to at some point get in that driver's seat. They get their hands on the wheel and they start bouncing. Right? And then, of course, I'm the kind of dad, and most of you are I would think, I take them into a parking lot and just let them steer. And they start going. And they get so excited, they're forehead over the wheel. Now, of course, they think they're driving and I guess they are. But there are some things down on the floorboard they have no idea what's going on down there. I'm controlling this thing. I'm letting you steer, but not even really fully letting you steer.

Because secretly I have my hands down on the bottom of the wheel, down here. And you're up top going, "I'm driving!" But you know when you start to steer it into the light pole, I start steering the other direction.

And it's funny to watch a little crinkle on their forehead, thinking, "Oh, it worked before. It's not working now."

Well, what's happened? Well, I just vetoed that prayer request. We need to go here. When I see something and there's danger on the horizon, I'm down here working the pedals and I just slow down and I come to a complete stop. And they think, if you bounce harder it goes faster, of course, which it doesn't. But again, they get a little frustrated. "I was driving, we were moving, what's going on?" Well, it's not time right now. We've got to stop.

I know, as God's kids, we'd all like to think we're expert drivers in this thing we call life. But we're not, and we have very limited perspective. And while we got our hands on the wheel called prayer and God does give us this great tool and the power of prayer and "the effectual prayer of a righteous man accomplishes much," please understand that there is a God who's working the pedals and there is a God that has the veto power and can override what we're doing down here when we start getting off course. And what we need to do as very humble, very respectful, deferential children, is learn that when sometimes God makes it clear this is not a biblical prayer, you're not being flexible, man, you're presumptuous on the fact that you think you know what's going on or, you know, really, this is about you and it should be about where we're going and the good of the church and the good of your family. When God starts doing those kinds of things, be patient. Let God move and shape and twist and replace things on your prayer list.

And when you got it all where you think it's lined up, it's probably going to change again, but if you think you're on the right course, keep going. And if it doesn't happen immediately and God slows this whole thing down, you just have to learn to trust him, because you're not doing this thing called life alone. Christians are going to pray well and it starts by taking verses like this and knowing the larger biblical context for this. And I hope that truth this morning serves you well this week as you pray to our kind God.

Let's talk to him now. God please help us to think more maturely about our prayer lists. Let us



understand what it is for us to pray in a way that brings you honor and glory which is never to pray in a way that is contrary to your will and sometimes that's easy to see because if we just knew the Bible better we'd see the Bible just would make that such a silly request to ever have in our prayer list. Other times it's harder and we just need to have some flexibility about the fact that you may have a greater glory to achieve somehow by not having that thing persistently prayed for. And maybe like the Apostle Paul, we'll only pray for it three times and we'll recognize, no, there is something better here, something better you're doing for the good of your own name.

Or maybe God, there's just like so many other people in this world who pray with a kind of presumption they know better than the God they're asking.

Not only that, but often it stems from a real selfish motive just to have things go their way like any worldly person would pray and I pray we would get past all that, so that when we get that prayer list, that is always seemingly influx, to a place where we know we're praying for the right and biblical things, that we would pray patiently, we would endure in our praying. And then when you don't come through and it seems like you delay that we would always pray and never give up. Now, God help us next time, as we get together and look at the larger context of this passage and understand the overarching eschatological concerns you have about the coming kingdom as it relates to prayer. But for now God, help us to pray well as we know we're committed to praying every day, we just want to pray the way we ought to. Encourage us in our prayer life. Help us to pray much more and much better this week.

In Jesus name, Amen.