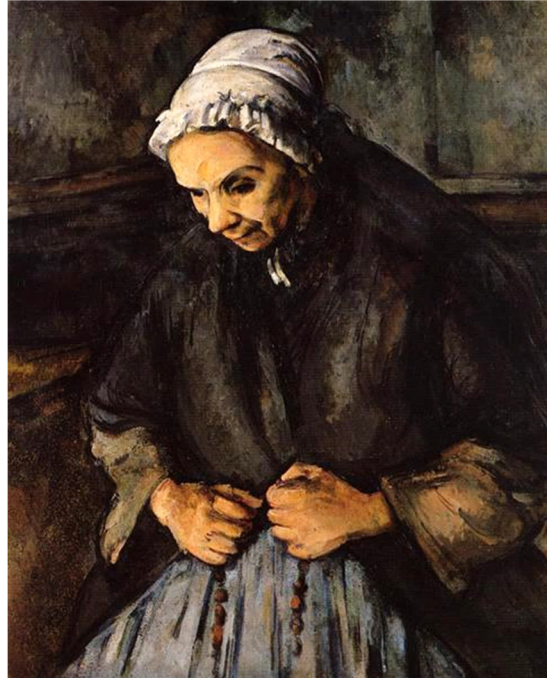


# Persistence is a Virtue

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



*Old Woman with a Rosary, Paul Cezanne, 1896*

## Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us.  
Yet we also are to pray for your kingdom to come in all its fullness.  
Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it, our hearts to hold it,  
and our hands to serve it, as we wait and long for  
your will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
This we pray in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## Background

There's a story about a sea captain, who was in the middle of a terrible storm and he feared the loss of everyone aboard the ship. He asked if anyone was willing to offer a prayer. There were no takers. So the old captain, prepared to do a captain's duty, agreed to pray. These were his introductory words, "God, I've never bothered you before, and if you help us through this storm, *I'll never bother you again...*"

According to Jesus' parable from our lectionary gospel reading, we *shouldn't* follow the sea captain's example of prayer. Rather, we're to look to a feisty, relentless widow on how to pray and have faith on earth. Let's see how she faces a different kind of storm in her life.

### **Scripture: Luke 18:1-8 (NRSVue)**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. <sup>2</sup> He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. <sup>3</sup> In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.'

<sup>4</sup> For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, <sup>5</sup> yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " <sup>6</sup> And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. <sup>7</sup> And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them?

<sup>8</sup> I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

### **SERMON – "Persistence is a Virtue"**

Bestselling author Ryan Holiday, in his new book *Discipline is Destiny: The Power of Self-Control*, tells about tennis star Arthur Ashe's father, who was a driver for William Thalhimer, a successful Jewish man who owned of a chain of department stores. It was the 1950s in the segregated South—a difficult time for civil rights for both Jews and blacks.

Ashe drove his boss Thalhimer to look at a piece of land he was wanting to purchase. Ashe saw firsthand the insults, disrespect, and bullying of a landowner who didn't want to do business with a Jew. Once they got back into the car after the deal, Ashe couldn't help but ask him: *Why did you put up with that?*

"I came here to purchase that piece of land," Thalhimer explained.

"I got that piece of land. It belongs to me now, not to him. That man can go on cursing me as long as he likes. I have that land."

He had the spirit of the persistent widow.

Arthur Ashe Jr. tells about how this experience shaped not only his dad, but himself personally to fight provocation with perseverance, steadiness, and self-control to provide for the family, and set his children up for success in life.

This is what Jesus was getting at:

- Be persistent. Persistent in prayer. Persistent in faith.
- Stay on the path of righteousness, in the good times and the hard times.
- Prayerfully stay the course— until your time comes to meet Jesus or until he comes back for us.
- Never lose heart, says Jesus: You're not alone. It's not all on your shoulders.
- God is just, compassionate, and caring. He will surely hear and answer our prayers.
- God provides for his children...because he wants to.
- God likes us. Listens to us. And will not abandon us.

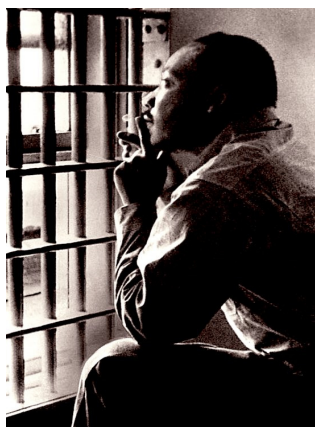
Jesus tells us *in a certain city there was a judge*. This judge lacked the two most important traits in judges—justice and compassion. He didn't give a rip about God or people—even vulnerable widows. You see, all throughout the Scriptures, and especially in Luke there's a steady refrain: love all, but especially the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow.

This judge ignored the command of double love:

Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

*Now in that same city* there was a widow who kept coming to the judge, day after day after day, demanding justice. Just common decency and respect. The wealthy had the means to pay off judges to win their case. But this widow had nothing. At that time widows didn't inherit their husband's estate. In fact, it wasn't uncommon that they'd be sold as slaves to debt. In all likelihood the little property she had was illegally taken from her. The only thing the widow had was her persistence and perseverance. Her only recourse was to be a nag and a nuisance. This widow took responsibility in her life. She chose to be a victor, not a victim—even with everything stacked against her. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

Kind of like Martin Luther King Jr. who said in his *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail*:



*"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."*

For a long time the calloused judge just ignored her. The widow didn't care—she just kept wearing down his resistance with her resilience. BUT AT LAST, it was the judge, *not the widow*,

who caved in. He finally rendered a just judgment. Not because he cared or even wanted to. He did the right thing for the wrong reason.

*"This woman's driving me crazy. Annoying me to death."* In the Greek, the term translated "wear me out" is borrowed from the boxing ring. It literally can be translated, *"she will give me a black eye."* And at the end of the match, it was the widow's arm that was lifted up—not the judge's.

After finishing the story, the Lord then said, *Do you not hear what the unjust judge has to say?* We can observe and learn from good examples in life. And we can learn from poor examples in life.

God is **not** like the unjust judge. And if the unjust judge gave the widow justice,

*HOW MUCH MORE will God grant justice to his chosen ones who keep crying out to him day and night?*

We're in a better spot than the widow. We can trust God's character. God cares and God is good and God acts on behalf of his children. God lovingly listens to his chosen people. God likes us.

We don't know why we have to wait so *long* sometimes, but we can trust God—even in the midst of postponements, cancellations, disappointments, and bad news. Keep praying and trusting God. We don't have to fearfully bother or badger God. God may delay, but he won't put us off forever. Press ahead in peace.

Jesus asks this penetrating question at the end of this parable:

*When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

God promises to grant justice to us. Now this is our part—to *have faith on earth*. Not a pie in the sky faith, but an earthy faith that persists no matter the challenges. *Will he find that in us?* Keep praying to help you keep the faith. What is it Jesus teaches us to pray?

*"... thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

I like these words of wisdom from the **Greek philosopher Epictetus**, who was also a slave:

*"Two words should be taken to heart and obeyed when exerting ourselves for good and restraining ourselves from evil—words that will ensure a blameless and untroubled life: **persist and resist.**"*

Resist evil, resist giving up. Persist in prayer. Persist in good. Persistence is a virtue. Resistance is a virtue.

Don't lose heart, keep the faith. Be like Jacob, who wrestled with the angel, and declared, *"I will not let you go, unless you bless me."* Or like the woman who grabbed for the hem of Jesus' garment so she could be healed.

I like how artist Charlie Mackesy put it:

*"Asking for help is not giving up, it's refusing to give up."*

Prayer is asking God for help. I can't do this God, but you can. It's also asking for help from our brothers and sisters. We're not alone. Hold out hope, no matter how dark it is. One day, you will look back upon this struggle, and see how God got you safely through.



King George VI faced a great crisis in December of 1939. War was on all shores as Hitler and Nazism spread like a plague and threatened to bring on a new dark age. The King needed to speak a word of encouragement to the commonwealth. He read over the airwaves the lines of poetry written by Minnie Louise Haskins. These are the words:

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,  
"give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."  
And he replied, "go into the darkness  
and put your hand into the hand of God.  
That shall be better to you than light  
and safer than a known way."  
So I went forth and finding the hand of God  
trod gladly into the night,  
and he led me towards the hills  
and the breaking of the day in the lone East.*

Faith is boldness, gutsiness—even in the darkness. Tap into your inner tireless and tenacious widow. Take and hold God's loving hand in the darkness. And he'll lead us home to his everlasting kingdom, Where death has no dominion.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *Old Woman with a Rosary*, Paul Cezanne, 1896

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