

Pray Always

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You can almost hear the sadness in the question Jesus asks, “when the son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” This is not a rhetorical question or a general question asked of a large group. This is a personal question that Jesus is asking every individual person. When He comes again, at the end of all things, will He find faith in you?

Jesus is something of a pragmatist. He takes the immoral realities of our world as a point of departure to teach us great truths. Here, it is the corrupt judge, at other times it has been the servant who defrauds his master, the prodigal son, the foolish rich man, the glutton, or the wicked vineyard owner. Beginning with the familiar, Jesus wants to raise our understanding of the laws of the Kingdom of God.

In the parable of the Unjust Judge, Jesus is pointing out that if even the wicked can do the right thing, how much more will God who is all good? God wants us to bombard Him with our prayers. He wants us to show Him that we trust Him enough to ask Him, beg Him, for everything we need.

We sometimes fail to learn from our older brothers and sisters of the Jewish tradition. But the Old Testament, which by the way is what St. Paul was referring to when he mentioned “all scripture,” is full of instances of the prophets seemingly arguing with God. It was not so long ago that we read about Abraham pleading with God not to destroy Sodom for the sake of the righteous, a number that Abraham argued

from 50 down to 10. It is not that God relented or changed His mind, God was testing Abraham's faith.

Whenever we pray in the Spirit of Christ, we will be listened to without exception. And, the Gospel adds, “without delay.” God does not take time to think about it and answer us at a later time.

It has become a common expression, “God answers all prayers, and sometimes the answer is no.” We may have heard it so often that it no longer has any meaning, a cliché that we brush off as soon as we hear it. So let me offer a rephrasing.

God answers all prayers. He will always give us what is best for us, in a way that best corresponds to our request.

Because Our Father in Heaven is all-wise, all-powerful, and all loving, there should be no limit to our confidence in Him.

So we are advised to pray always, pray without ceasing, pray without becoming weary, like the widow petitioning the unjust judge, or Moses interceding for victory in the battle against the Amalekites. And when we do become weary, we should ask others to help us and pray with us and for us. Let us be constant in our praise of God, constant in our repentance, constant in our thanksgiving, and constant in bringing to God our every need.

Jesus is asking us today if we are weak in our prayer life. Do we give up too easily when we do not get what we want right away, or are we strong and persistent in our prayer?

As a society, we are being manipulated to expect ever increasing immediate returns, with less and less effort. The triumphs of technology have created an unlimited confidence in the ability of science to solve all of our problems. If science and technology cannot provide us with something, such as forgiveness, grace, humility, miracles, or spiritual gifts, then those things are deemed unnecessary and unimportant.

This is the view that Jesus was an all around nice guy, a pious man with some good ideas, but basically a weakling. Now of course we do not agree with this view, that is why we are here at Mass today.

But because we live in this distorted culture, this distorted view of God and Jesus seeps into our minds and can subtly affect our prayer life.

If, in our prayers of supplication, we are not answered in the way we expect, then we tend to think that God is not answering us at all. And that displays a lack of faith on our part. We are imposing our own limited vision on a God who is infinite.

But the parable of the unjust judge corrects this view. The judge, though wicked, has real authority. He can render a decision that will have real world consequences for the widow. This is an image of Christ who has “all authority in Heaven and earth.” Jesus is the ruler of the universe and His will influences our world. But He has chosen to put this influence at our disposal. Just as the judge would not have acted without the widow pleading with him, God has decided to make His graces depend, at least in part, on our prayers. “Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find.”

Sometimes we wonder why God seems to answer some prayers and not others. We have all heard stories of people being healed of terminal illness, or receiving a windfall at exactly the right moment, but at the same time many of our prayers seem to go unanswered. Remember that although for us, things happen in sequence, “I pray for this and then this happens, or doesn't happen,” to God all things are happening at the same time. God is not limited by our perception of time. God sees everything at once, our problems, our prayers, and His response. Sometimes we think God is not answering our prayers when in fact He is doing exactly that.

Recall the story of St. Monica. Her son St. Augustine was a brilliant scholar with a promising future among the intellectuals of the Roman Empire. Monica tried to raise her son as a Christian but when he came of age he informed his mother that he had become a Manichean. This was one of several anti-Christian philosophical religions at the time. This news devastated her. It seemed like her son was a lost cause. But she didn't give up on him. She made every effort, taking him to meet with eminent theologians, arguing with him herself, discipling him by taking away family privileges, and always, day after day, year after year, praying for him. Many times she spent entire nights in prayer and then cried herself to sleep.

But nothing seemed to help.

Then after ten years of frustration, darkness, and unceasing prayer, her son came back to the church and became one of our most powerful and

influential saints. God heard every one of her prayers and answered them according to what was best for Monica, for Augustine, and for the world.

This experience taught Augustine the value of confidence and persistence in prayer. In his confessions, he wrote about the time he left home in secret. He didn't want his mother following him. She did anyway because she was afraid of the anti-Christian influences her son would encounter.

Reflecting on that incident Augustine wrote:

"That night I stole away without her; she remained praying and weeping. And what was she praying for, O my God, with all those tears, but that you should not allow me to sail!

But you saw deeper and granted the essential part of her prayer: you did not do what she was at that moment asking, that you might do the thing she was always asking."

So how do we follow Christ's instruction to pray always without becoming weary? First of all, each of us needs to find a few minutes every day to be alone with God, reflecting on a passage from the Bible, praying the Rosary, or praying for our loved ones. If Christ is truly important in our lives, then we will make it a point to spend time with Him.

But prayer is flexible, and we can fit it into almost any activity.

There is an old joke about two Jesuits who are arguing about whether or not they can smoke and pray at the same time. They decide to leave it to their superior and so they approach him separately and ask. The first Jesuit is told no, he cannot smoke while he prays, but the second is given permission to do exactly that. Later on when they are comparing notes, the first Jesuit is confused, “why did he tell me no, but told you yes?” “Because,” answered the second, “you asked him if you could smoke while you prayed, I asked him if I could pray while I smoked.”

We can really always pray.

Maybe not during the meeting, but certainly on our way to and from the meeting. Maybe not while we are writing the report but certainly on our way to and from work. Maybe not while you are actually running the play on the football field, but certainly while you are running back to the sidelines.

Our days are filled with a thousand little moments when we are alone with ourselves. Jesus wants to share those moments with us because He wants to share His life with us. So let us fill up all those moments with prayer, praising God, asking His forgiveness, thanking Him for our blessings, and bringing to Him, every one of our needs.