

"DON'T GIVE UP. HE HEARS!"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Some of you can probably remember when Clyde Beatty was the most famous lion tamer in the world. Back in the days when Beatty was performing with The Greatest Show on Earth, he was also operating a small circus in the off-season in Fort Lauderdale. Because the weather was good from December through March, he performed in the open air - without a "big-top".

One day there was a heavy downpour and Beatty was forced to call off the show. Only one person had come to the box office to buy a ticket - a little old lady with a big umbrella and a bigger voice. And when she was told that the performance had been cancelled, she asked to see the manager. She told him that she had paid her money and insisted on seeing the show. When he tried to refund her money, she refused it. She wanted to see the show.

DEVELOPMENT

The plot thickens. The manager called for Beatty. This little lady was growing more adamant. She told Beatty that she would be returning to Indiana the next day. She had tried to catch the circus several times when he would be appearing with the lions but had missed him each time. She had heard the ad on the radio that the circus performed "rain or shine" and she was not leaving without a complete performance. Beatty was left speechless. This had not been a light sprinkle. Water was everywhere. Like his manager, he tried to refund the lady's money. She would have none of that. She was so insistent, so adamant...and finally Beatty "caved in". (Amazing isn't it how a man can go into a cage of lions and then be intimidated by one little, elderly lady).

Well, the show went on in spite of the downpour. Beatty's performers weren't that happy with him. Imagine performing their acts and dodging pools of water. Imagine the time it took the clowns to put on their make-up to perform for an audience of one - and then to see that make-up smear in the steady downpour. Even his animals had a look of disgust on their faces, according to Beatty. The elephants loved the mud, but their keeper had to spend hours after the show hosing them down.

It was a terrible mess. They finally got through it all and Beatty felt pretty good about that. He had given this persistent little lady what she had asked for, even if he had alienated all of his performers in the process. Yes, he felt good about it until the little lady walked by him on the way out and said, "Humph...I thought there would be more to it than that!"

JESUS TOLD A STORY ABOUT A PERSISTENT WOMAN

Where is this taking us? It reminds me of a story that's in Luke's Gospel that Jesus once told about a little lady who was persistent.

Remember it? It seems there was a certain judge who neither feared God nor man. However, there was a certain widow who needed the judge to act on her behalf. At first he ignored her, but she kept coming to him with her request. And when he could no longer ignore her, he refused her, but she kept coming back. She was so persistent that finally he relented. "Otherwise" he said, "she will wear me out". Then Jesus said to her:

"Hear what the righteous judge says. And will not God vindicate His elect, who cry to Him day and night?"

The answer is, of course He will! He will hear their cry and He will answer. Now Jesus is not giving us a methodology for prayer. He is not saying to us that if there is something we want, just keep asking until we wear God down. He is not saying that. However, He is acknowledging some important truths or insights about our relationship with God. Let me point up three things to you in connect with this story.

SOME PEOPLE WHO ARE PRAYING NIGHT AND DAY

First of all, there are some people who are already praying night and day. They are desperate for God's help. Every waking hour they are silently petitioning His intervention. Some of you have been there. You know this. You know what it is to bang furiously on God's door. You may be there this morning. This may be the reason you're here.

Life is difficult. Life can be cruel. Remember how in "Oh God, Book II" George Burns, playing the part of God, is asked by a little girl why bad things happen. Burns thoughtfully considers her question and then replies,

"That's the way the system works...have you ever seen an up, without a down? A front, without a back? A top, without a bottom? You can't have one without the other. I discovered that if I take away sad, then I take away happy, too. They go together. (Then, with a smile, he adds) If somebody has a better idea, I hope they put it in the suggestion box for me".

We don't know why life is cruel, but sometimes it is. And the most frustrating fact is how silent God is in the face of our pain and our hurt.

I heard a terrible joke up at the 92nd Street "Y" this week that's making the rounds. It's about a television news team that was taping at Jerusalem's Western Wall (it use to be called the Wailing Wall). Every day they saw the same elderly man praying, morning, noon and night beside that famous wall. On their last day they got curious and approached him, asking "What is it you pray for so fervently?"

The old man thought for a moment and then said, "I pray for health. For happiness. For peace in my land". "I see" said the reporter. "You don't look that healthy. Are you happy?" "Not really" said the man. "And your homeland is in turmoil. Do you really believe your prayers are heard...that they are being answered?"

The man nodded and slowly replied, "Sometimes I feel it's like talking to a 'stone wall'".

Mature Christians can acknowledge that sometimes prayer is like talking to a wall. Sometimes we pray with great pain and deep anguish. We need an answer. We need it now. But no answer comes - at least no answer that satisfied us, and we ask, "Where is God? Does He care?" Have you ever felt that way?

BIGGEST BATTLE IS TO KEEP UP OUR FLAGGING SPIRITS

This leads to a second observation. Sometimes the biggest battle is simply to "keep up" our flagging spirits. And part of the reason that Jesus praised this widow in Luke's Gospel is that she did not give up!

One of the ironies of life is that our struggle with discouragement in a given situation is often a bigger battle than the struggle with the actual problem which confronts us. In other words, it is sometimes harder just to "hang in there" than it actually is to deal with the issue or the conflict that has us so stressed out. Let me give you an illustration from our history.

In 1777 when General George Washington wintered his troops at Valley Forge, the British soldiers turned out to be the least of his worries. For one thing, the Continental Congress failed to send him the food and the supplies that his rag-tag army needed. Food was available in large supply in other areas; but transportation problems, the shaky value of Continental paper currency and the lack of total support for the Revolution by the civilian population kept the food from reaching Washington's Army.

Of 11,000 American troops beginning that Winter, about 2,500 died, more than 2,000 deserted or refused to re-enlist at the end of their expired terms, and about half of the remaining 6,000 men lacked sufficient shoes or clothes to be able to go out to fight. During that famous Winter at Valley Forge, the real battle that the Americans fought was the inner desire to quit and to return home. They did not quit, of course. That is why we have an independent republic today - but the temptation was there.

So it is in our lives. Persistence and perseverance are often our biggest challenges. And that is true of some of the greatest saints the Christian faith has produced.

I was reading somewhere recently - in may have been the Upper Room - about the great missionary Judson...who wanted to go to India, but God sent him to Burma. His wife was ill. He prayed that she would live, but she died. Judson prayed that his children would live, but they also died and he buried them on the mission field. Judson prayed that he would be spared prison, but he spent years in prison. Every time he prayed about something significant in his life, he seemed to be talking to a brick wall... a stone wall. Later in his life, however, he said this:

"God did not always answer my prayers, but He answered me.
He gave me the courage, the faith, and the perseverance to
keep going, to keep believing and to keep on working."

This widow that Jesus told us about did not give up. Some of us are crying out to God night and day. Often just "hanging in there" is our most difficult trial. You know this. I know this. Walk the high road as you make your way through that dark tunnel and remember there is light at the end which brings me to the last thing that I would say.

GOD HEARS. GOD CARES. WE ARE NOT FORSAKEN.

Jesus wants us to know that
God does hear and He does care.

And we are not forsaken.

If a crochety judge who does not fear God nor man will give in to a little widow because she is persistent, will not a loving God hear the prayers of His children? That is the question that Jesus seems to be posing. He is not advising us how to pray. He is simply saying something about the nature of God. God does hear and God does answer prayer.

Perhaps some of you are Charles Osgood fans. If so, you'll appreciate what I'm going to say. Osgood - a veteran CBS reporter and commentator - on his program, the "Osgood File" told about an experiment involving prayer that was reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The study was done with 393 heart patients at the San Francisco General Medical Center's Coronary Care Unit. What they tried to test was the power of prayer. Does it do sick people any good for other people to pray for them?

Here's how the study was conducted. The patients were first divided into two groups. None of the patients knew whether they were in the group being prayed for or not. This was necessary to rule out psychological factors. Patients in both groups were equally sick when they entered the hospital. But here is what took place while they were being studied.

None of the patients who were prayed for needed tubes inserted for breathing or feeding. Twelve patients not prayed for, needed such tubes.

Two in the "Prayer Group" needed antibiotics while nine in the not prayed for group needed that intervention. Patients prayed for had fewer episodes of congestive heart failure, pneumonia and cardiac arrest than in the group not prayed for. In other words, it appears that, according to scientific observation, prayer did make a difference! Charles Osgood summed it all up this way,

"As we used to say about chicken soup,
'It couldn't hurt!'"

You and I - as believers - would say much more. Prayer does work. We know it works. We've seen the results. Many of us have "banged on" God's door late into the night and He has answered our cries.

CLOSING I came across a story this past week out of Charleston, South Carolina and the devastating effects of Hurricane Hugo. Ricky Gray, pastor of a Church inland from Charleston tells about that Wednesday night back in September in their little town. Trees were snapping, and the power lines were down. The sound of the rushing wind and the driving rain prevented them from getting a good night's sleep. Homes and barns and churches and schools were receiving heavy damage. People were frightened.

During the hurricane, Ricky recalls how he and his wife gathered the children in the cellar for safety. Among them was their ten year old son, Tim. During the frantic moments of the hurricane, Tim was overheard praying for their safety. He closed his prayer very emphatically, "...and Lord I do hope you're really listening."

Tim...it may not seem like it at times, but you can rest assured that God is really listening. For if a crochety judge who fears neither God nor man will give in to the pleas of a persistent widow, will not a loving God heed the prayers of His people.

They tell me that there were three ministers who died and tried to get in to heaven. The first one knocked on the door and St. Peter said, "I'm sorry you can't get in. You have a little drinking problem. Besides, your wife's name is Sherry".

The second one...the next minister...he, too, knocked on the door to heaven...several times...but St. Peter said to him, "I'm sorry, you can't get in either. They tell me you had your hand in the till. You have a little stewardship problem. Besides, your wife's name is Penny."

The third minister turned to his wife and said, "Let's go, Fanny...we don't have a chance!"

YES Yes, the message today is that you do have a chance. You've got to ask, seek, and knock. He's listening. He hears. And that can make all the difference. Be persistent. Hang in there. He does hear and answer!

PRAYER Make us sensitive, O God, to your lifting presence and your nearness in these quiet moments. Confirm within each of us the feelings and assurances stirring within our souls in this time of worship. Remind us each once again that "with You all things are possible"..and that there are no limits to what faith, trust, hope and courage can accomplish in this life. Help us to "hang in there" when the going gets tough. And may this story from Luke's Gospel about the persistent widow and the judge who responded remind us of the power of persistent prayer in our lives. In the spirit of Jesus, the "life bringer" we now pray. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: October 15, 1989

For reasons that we do not altogether understand, O God, it's easier for some of us to find fault rather than it is to give thanks. Grievances rest on the tip of our tongues...while blessings that ought to excite us to praise are often lost from our sight.

And so we thank you, Lord, in these moments of prayer for those many blessings that meet the eye:

The glow of health.
The welcome sight of a friend's face
in a crowded subway.
The carefree laughter of children
playing in the park.
The taste of well-cooked food.
The color of trees in the Fall.

But we thank You, Lord, even more for those blessings that are felt, but never seen:

Your grace at work in our lives.
Those invisible ties of faith that bind our lives
together in this Church family.
The courage that courses through our being when
danger confronts us.
The stamina that keeps us at it even when we don't
feel like staying with it.
The confidence in Your way...that saves us from
prolonged doubt and shields us from despair.
The memory of kindnesses done us by friends.

Move us, Lord, to speak the thanks we feel and forgive us for our much complaining - our grumbling, our griping, our pettiness, our fault-finding - yes, our failure at times to see just how truly blessed we are!

You are busy, O God, with every one of us - believing in each of us more fully than we dare believe in ourselves. Grant us now what we need to be more like Jesus:

A quiet mind...a forgiving spirit....indifference to wealth
and status...a readiness to pray...a clear vision of Your
purpose for our lives...the courage to stand for the right.

Command us.

Comfort us...for we need both direction and consolation.

Confirm what is strong in us. Fill what is empty.

And let your love so possess our spirits that whatever we are called to do in word or deed, we may do in Your strength and to Your glory.

In the spirit of Christ, we pray our prayers this day.

Amen

5. IT Miss Christina Kousi: 15 West 81st Street, Apt. 16 D
New York, New York 10024
Telephone: 496 -9088
- Pink card. Letter. 21ish. Chicago background. Slim.
Greeted at door by PC and Sharon.
6. IT Miss Margaret Dalbert: 525 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
Telephone: 737 -1173
- Pink card. Perhaps we should address her as Ms. rather than
Miss. Brick Church tie. In late forties. Coffee hour.
Came at the suggestion of Weelington Newcomb who was here two
week ago.
7. IT Ms. Ellen McGregor: 17-47th Street
Weekauken, New Jersey 07087
- Pink card. Letter. Ellen's an Ocean Park, Maine friend of
PC's as is her sister - whose name follows - on our list...
Coffee hour. Has a daughter...infant. May be back. 29 ish.
8. OT Miss Susan McGregor: 614 West 27th Street
Wilmington, Delaware
- No pink card. Friend of PC's from Maine...as is her sister,
Ellen. 31 years of age. Here to see Ellen. Send letter.
9. OT Mr. and Mrs. Hugh McCormick (Shirley): PO Box 060513
Palm Bay
Florida 32906
Telephone: 407 725 -6417
- Out of town visitors. Send letter. PC chatted with them before
the service. He's a Lay Leader of his church back home. Here
IN NYC to see son. Coffee hour.
10. IT Mr. Emmanuel Lewis: 352 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, New York
- Pink card. Letter. Here from Brooklyn with two or three small
children, I think. Greeted at coffee hour by PC, but I didn't
get his name for sure. Anyway, go with what we have and send
letter.

WORS: Sunday, October 8, 1989

Weather: cool, sunny and beautiful.

Attendance: 132 adults and 16 children. Total: 148

1988: 148	1982: 204	1976: 143
1987: 155	1981: 168	1975: 145
1986: 135	1980: 170	1974: 123
1985: 153	1979: 165	1973: 142
1984: 172	1978: 210	1972: 109
1983: 176	1977: 146	1971: 111

T Mr. Tom Condon: 52-45 39th Avenue
Sunnyside, New York 11104
Telephone: 718 899 -8761

Pink card. Letter. 30-34 age group. Coffee Hour. Met Lyndon and expressed interest in choir. Visitor card indicated a church interest. Follow up.

T Miss Mary Kathryn Holden: 314 East 78th Street, Apt. 13
New York, New York 10021
Telephone: 201 807 -4175

Pink card. Letter. River Road United Methodist Church in Richmond, Va. 23 ish. New to city. Coffee hour. Cute, slim and outgoing.

T Mr. Alex Lunn: 488 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10022
Telephone: 838 -0700 / Office
684 -4563 / Home

Pink card. Letter. Here two weeks ago (September 24th) Brick Presbyterian Church tie. Coffee hour. Madison Avenue look to him. Late forties ???

T Miss Jolenta Averill: 300 West 23rd Street
New York, New York 10011
Telephone: 989 -1138

Pink card. Letter. Came with someone and I'm trying to remember who it was. Eva Patton? I don't think so (PC). Wisconsin background. Blonde. Neat bands. Slim. 5'7". 21ish. Very pretty. Black jacket and skirt. (Sharon's description)

(over)

Back Again List

1. Julie Predmore: interested in "Hounds". Took book...coming on Tuesday. Short Hair now.
2. Glenn Rye
3. Wade Giddens
4. Eva Patton
5. Isaac Newton
6. Beth Osborne
7. Sandra Jung and Jerry
8. Steve Spicer
9. Bill Beeney: interested in membership. Transfer of letter, SPandA.
10. Priscilla Kotey
11. Walter Schmidt and friend from Germany
12. Darcey Henderson: to be married here on October 21.
13. Cynthia Koontz
14. Sam and Billy Wilson
15. Laura and Paul Moorefield
16. Vera Allick and mother.
17. Mimi - here with Reiko Ito
18. Mellanie Hannocks: back with us after six weeks away from NYC.
19. Miss Vivian Scarborough
20. Maria Allain

NOTES

1. Send for William Beeney's church Letter. Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew's United Methodist.
2. Judy Wilska Whelan and children - Stephanie and Michael - were with us.
3. Also Paul and Carolyn Peterson - UM from Minneapolis - whose daughter, Susan got married here on Saturday, the 7th of October.
4. Al Thomas - definitely wants to join church in December.
5. Missy Darwin was with us...all the way from Washington, DC.