

**Lent 3: “Hang In There!” (Persevering Prayer) Text: Romans 12:12      2/28/08**

It’s always nice when people remember something from your sermon. It’s even nicer when they quote it to someone else. And then there are those moments that go way beyond nice. Eli Barr provided one for me. All during his stem cell treatment at St. Jude’s, Eli clung to a phrase he heard in a sermon: “*Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!*” Well, after he got out of the hospital, he got to go to a Cubs baseball game and even got to meet his hero, Sammy Sosa. Unfortunately, the Cubs lost that day, but ever the encourager, Eli told Sammy Sosa, “It’s okay. Just remember what my pastor told me: *‘Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!’*”

Wasn’t that great? Of course, I can’t really claim credit for the words. They came from Winston Churchill. And I can’t really claim credit for the inspiration. That came from the Holy Spirit. Actually, I just happened to be at the right place at the right time saying the right thing. And even then, I didn’t know it. I was just doing what God had called me to do, and He took care of the rest.

It often works that way in the Christian life, doesn’t it? Rare is the moment when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt: *This is when and how God is going to use me!* Generally, we only see that after the fact – if then! So what does this mean? If we hope to be at the right place at the right time saying the right thing, it’s best to just keep doing what God has called us to do, and let Him take care of the rest. Do it, whether or not we see results. Do it, whether or not we feel effective. Just do what God has called us to do – and as Eli would tell us, “*Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!*”

This is especially true when it comes to prayer. In studying Scripture, it’s interesting how often we are encouraged, as in our text, to “**persevere in prayer.**” For instance, did you know that Jesus’ famous saying about “**ask...seek...knock**” would be better translated, “**Keep on asking, and you will receive; keep on seeking, and you will find; keep on knocking, and the door will opened**”? The message is clear: “**persevere in prayer.**” And think how many times we come across verses like “**pray without ceasing,**” “**be constant in prayer,**” “**continue in prayer,**” or “**devote yourselves to prayer.**” The message is clear: “**persevere in prayer.**” Then, of course, there is Jesus’ reason for telling the parable of the persistent widow, which we just heard – the “**need to pray always and not lose heart.**” Yes, especially when it comes to prayer: “*Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!*”

But one might ask: *Can’t God do whatever He wants just like that? Even answer prayer? Sure He can. So why this need of perseverance?*

One reason may have to do with the **big picture**. It may be that the timing is not right for God to do all the good He intends to do in a particular situation, or it may be that God is deepening our faith by requiring perseverance.

Another reason may have to do with obstacles within the person praying or deficiencies in how they pray. For instance, what if the prayer is just **perfunctory**, not sincere, much less fervent? If we don't take our requests seriously, why should God? The problem could also be that the prayer lacks **sufficient faith**. When we hear Jesus say, "**Believe that you have it, and it is yours,**" that sounds so easy. But when you actually try to maintain that belief...hmmm, it's not so easy; not so easy at all! And James' words are very clear, "**Ask in faith, never doubting...for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord.**" Another possibility is that the prayer lacks the **right motivation**. Again James says, "**You ask and do not receive because your motives are wrong...**" The obstacle could even be a **stubbornly maintained sin**. Scripture says repeatedly that God "**hears the prayers of the righteous**" – which doesn't mean we have to be perfect, but we do need to be right with Him. That's probably why, in connection with prayer for healing, James says, "**confess your sins to one another.**"

Of course, this may also pertain to the people being prayed for. They, too, could have some **stubbornly maintained sin** that gets in the way of prayer for them. Or the problem could be their lack of faith, even their resistance to God. Remember times in the Gospel when people's unbelief kept Jesus from healing them? Then, too, people may have faith but resist God in **some particular area** of their life – like the area being prayed for. If so, God is not going force His help on them, no matter how much they may need it; no matter how much He may want to give it. God simply doesn't work that way.

And I think this might be a good time to remember why He doesn't work that way. When we talk about God's will, we need to distinguish between God's **actual will** and God's **permissive will**. God's actual will is what He actually wants to happen. For instance, He wants us to love, He wants us to do good, He wants us to forgive. But, of course, loving is a choice, isn't it? You can't really say someone loves unless they are free not to love. The same with doing good or forgiving. These things are only virtues if we choose to do them – choose to do them rather than the opposite. Now, to be able to choose we need a free will, don't we? A will that is capable of making right choices...or wrong ones. So God has given us a free will, and that's why things get complicated. God's **actual will** is for us to do the right thing, but His **permissive will** allows us to choose otherwise. It's not that He wants us to do wrong. He wants us to do right. But even more, He also wants us to choose what's right. That is why He will not violate our free will. That is why He will not make us love or do good or forgive. God simply doesn't work that way.

Now, you can see how this has to affect His answers to prayer! For instance, suppose we're praying for our loved ones to be saved. What could fit God's will better than that? He "**desires that all should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.**" Yet even though this is His actual will, and even

though He offers salvation as a gift, and even though the Spirit will enable our loved ones to believe and receive the gift, still God's permissive will allows them to resist if they choose. He is not going to drag them kicking and screaming into heaven! So how do we pray for these loved ones? Maybe pray for God to work on their wills – to soften them up; to find chinks in their armor where the Holy Spirit can slip through. Or pray for God to put people and situations in their lives that will help lower their resistance. There are lots of ways we can pray, but none are likely to get snap results. It can take a lot of time for resistant people to open up to God. That is why we must **“persevere in prayer.”** If we're serious about our loved ones being saved, we need to pray for that with trusting prayer – for it is God's actual will – but also pray with **“persevering prayer”** that will *“Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!”*

St. Paul had a lot of experience along these lines. Most of what he faced required him to **“persevere in prayer.”** In fact, it could require such intense, long-term prayer that he referred to it as **“travail”** -- which, of course, is the old word for *“labor,” “giving birth.”* Travail! And when we don't get answers to prayer as fast as we'd like, that's a word to keep in mind! Travail! Forgive me if this sounds a bit graphic, but can you imagine an expectant mother at the hospital looking at her watch and saying, “Well, it's been five minutes, and no baby yet. Might as well give up!”? Some things just take a lot of time, and getting answers to prayer can be one of them. So remember that word “travail.” If somebody is worth praying for, they're worth travail in prayer. They're worth prayer that will *“Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never, never, never!”*

That said, let's talk about last week's homework assignment: praying that *every RLC member who could be in church last weekend would be.* Didn't quite happen, did it? Yes, attendance was up above average, and I was grateful to count at least 13 families or persons at church who hadn't been here in ages and would have had no way of knowing about our prayer. But folks, I went through our directory twice, praying for every person I could possibly expect to come to church. So I'll admit that I was disappointed with the outcome. In fact, I'll admit that afterward I had a real heart to heart with God. I told Him this would have been an excellent opportunity to encourage us all in **“trusting prayer,”** and I could not understand why He didn't come through. After all, His Word says that **“if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.”** And it is His will that we all **“remember the sabbath day to keep it holy.”** So...what went wrong?

No doubt you wondered the same thing. And from what I've already said, no doubt you've guessed some possible answers. *“Blame magnet”* that I am, I first thought of all the ways my prayers might have been deficient. Perhaps you did, too. But you know, even if our prayers had been perfect, that wouldn't have guaranteed a better outcome – because there was still the question whether those we prayed for would choose to come. The old free-will thing! And mind you, I'm not putting anyone down. We all know the temptations on Sunday morning. Yes, we're supposed to keep the sabbath day; we're supposed to be in

church. But maybe we're tired and feel we need our sleep. Or maybe there's just so much to do around the house. Or maybe we're in a bad mood; we just don't feel like going. Maybe we're even mad about something at church. There can be all kinds of reasons for staying home. Lousy ones, but reasons. And, of course, they didn't know we were praying for them to come. So there was the old free-will thing. And this being the case, God wasn't about to kick them out of bed, zap them into their Sunday best, plop them into the car, and auto-pilot them here to church. God simply doesn't work that way. However much He might want to, God simply doesn't work that way. Hence the disappointing outcome.

So do we just give up? I'm not ready to do that. If somebody's worth praying for, we need to **"persevere in prayer."** But maybe there are more effective ways we could go about it. How might we encourage the right choice, for instance? Last week I thought about just letting everybody know we're praying about this. Maybe that would encourage the right choice. But since we had focused on trusting prayer, I didn't want to do anything that might look *"un*trusting," so I held off. But now that we've had a chance to look at the role of choice, I figure: *Why not prime the pump a little?* So postcards are going to arrive tomorrow telling folks we're praying for every RLC member who can be in church this weekend to be here, and asking them to be an answer to prayer. We'll see if God gets through. For of course, some could just dismiss the card, or even get mad and do the opposite. So here's your new homework assignment if you choose to accept it. *Keep praying that every RLC member who can be in church this weekend will be, but also pray for a positive response when folks learn that we're praying about this, and also pray for specific members you know to choose to come to church this weekend.* After all, it is every bit as much God's will this weekend as it was last weekend. So let's keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking, and **"persevere in prayer."**

Folks, I have seen so many times how this makes a difference! One last story. Years ago I held a funeral for a man named D. K., and afterward one of the members lit into me: "You spoke as if he were a believer!" Now, she knew that for years this man had had nothing to do with church. For years, his wife and son had worshipped alone. He was a highly educated scientist, you see, and had a hard time believing things that couldn't be proven. But for years, his wife had prayed and prayed for him to come to the Lord, and before he died, her prayer was answered. What brought about the change of heart? He couldn't quite put his finger on it. He told me, "All I know is that somewhere along the line I went from doubter camp to believer. Somewhere along the line I realized I do trust that Jesus died for my sins on the cross and rose for my salvation. And the most amazing thing is I don't need to make sense of it. I just believe." That's what he told me. And that's what I told the lady who lit into me. And that's what I'm telling you, so that no matter how resistant a person may be, no matter how hard a situation may seem, you'll remember what God can do when we keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking, and **"persevere in prayer."** Amen.