

***The Annoying Christian***  
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Luke 18:1-8

*“And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?”*

Children are sneaky. They have many tricks, and I think we forget how devious they can be until we face those tricks again and again. It really is amazing to watch a child shape, effect, and control a parent in a variety of ways. From shouting, to pouting, to sitting on the floor, a child can be extremely persuasive. (What I really enjoy is watching grown people employ these same tactics.) The one tactic or method that I am particularly interested in today is the annoying, the persistent question. You know, the “can I, can I, can I, can I,” and on and on. There are variations in the question, but the delivery is always the same winy, demanding voice, and a response of some kind is always assured.

Today, believe it or not, we are called by the scriptures to be that child in our prayers – but in a special way. Today we are called to ask, and ask, and ask until it is annoying for me, you, and maybe God as well. Let’s try to understand this spiritual practice of being annoying.

First, we all want something, don’t we? That is where the annoying question comes from – our desire for something. We want a new toy, be it a car, computer, furniture, or whatever. We want a bigger yard, we want to be closer to family, or we want to be farther away from family, and on and on. I bet you can imagine yourself tugging on the hem of God’s cloak saying, “can I, can I, can I?” It is easy to get excited about asking for more money, possessions, or power. These desires point toward the material be it clothes, car, or whatever. But there are deeper wants, and deeper desires that we all have only we voice them differently. Imagine someone saying, “I want to stop drinking, I want to be happy and recognized at work, I want to feel welcomed by my family, I want to get out of the violent situation that I am in, I want to know that my life is worth something, I want feel safe when I walk down the street,” and on and on. The early Christians reading and hearing this Gospel found themselves saying, “I want Christ to return like he said he would, I want to know that joining this community was the right thing to do, despite the hardships, the family shunning, the threat of imprisonment that I must endure, I want to know that God is still with me.” These are deeper desires, these are desires that point directly to our state of being, who we are, and that which we really do care about. But can you see yourself tugging at God’s cloak saying, “can I, can I,” when looking for freedom from our illness, our malaise, our oppression, and the sadness of our lives?

Some who are in the darkness of their lives cannot even articulate their sadness, their desires, and their sickness, let alone ask for any help. Isn’t that why the first step of AA is to admit you have a problem? So often the desire for more things is an indicator of deeper issues. We have to look at our own lives and really evaluate what is going on. The theologian, Paul Tillich said that the action of asking questions, and questioning the answers drives to one’s deeper desires. Ask yourself if you are stuck in a downward spiral going deeper and deeper into darkness, or are you ready to cry out stop, and name the fact that it is not the material that you need, but the emotional, and the spiritual which is truly needed and desired? And then ask for that help. As a church, can we perform this

intensely personal and difficult task with a unified voice? Can we, as a community, look at ourselves and name what it is that is truly our shadow, our darkness, our problem, and then begin to claim what it is that we truly need? And I imagine what we need is not a projector screen, a rock band, or a well polished throne for your pastor. I imagine that what we need as a community is more on the spiritual and emotional level as it is with the individual's needs. After all, we all want something, don't we? The only question is if we are going deep enough if we are being honest enough when we name our wants.

So we turn inward, name our demons, and then what do we do? Hopefully, at this point, we look for help.

We start by trying to tackle our problems on our own, don't we? And there are a lot of ways to do it, but I imagine that the pattern tends to be the same. We have a short-lived effort with a lot of energy, face hardship of one kind or another, and then what – quit. If you ever watch info-mercials at 4:00am, this is one of the biggest critiques of “all the other” diet programs. They only get you so far, and then at the first sign of hardship, you quit (They are offering a program free of hardship – hard to believe). Or sometimes you find yourself briefly inspired after attending that weekend seminar on rebuilding your inner blueprint to your life, and your make lists, carry around a piece of paper with a positive saying on it, or perform some other kind of task which promises to lead toward happiness. And it works for a while. You wake up a changed person, for a time, and then the pressures of life, the routines, the distractions take you away from your earlier devotion, and you quit. Remember the parable about the sower and the seeds? Remember the seeds that let their roots grow into the ground a little and then withered? How often are we those seeds? We test the waters, we give something the “old college try,” but as soon as things get difficult, or static we move on, we forget, and we lose the spark that we once had. We may come up with many excuses why things didn't work out, but the deep down reason is, we stopped wanting to change and believing that we could. We didn't think it would work any more, we realized our human limitations, and we gave up on hope.

From the beginning of this movement of Christianity we have seen this kind of action; people are excited to be a part of this new movement, the jump in, but still hold onto the side rail so that with the first sign of trouble they can get out. But, do we ever really go in all the way? Do we ever fully commitment ourselves to change. We want to be rid of our demons, but perhaps because of fear of disappointment, fear of failure, or fear of change we don't want to fully commit to one plan or another. Can you imagine the widow in the story gingerly approaching the judge and asking for justice? Can you imagine her tiptoeing around so as not to be hurt by rejection? If children didn't really want things to go their way, they wouldn't be so persistent, they would relent with our first “no.” We don't want to be annoying, do we? Or is it that we don't really know or believe if things will change, turn around, and get better and we are afraid of making the commitment. I've seen so many churches say they want to change, attract new people, and spread the gospel, but the reality is, they don't. So they try a new program without putting their whole heart and soul into it – and of course it doesn't work. Or they try something new, and if results aren't noticeable immediately they give up and return to the status quo. It is a half-hearted, lip service, hand on the bar effort. Have you ever seen the movie, *Fargo*? In the movie, one of the main characters – a car salesman – is hustling a couple of more money than is appropriate. In an empty gesture of kindness he says he

will talk to the manager about the price. So he goes into the manager's office, talks about the game on TV, and then back to the people claiming that the manager wouldn't budge. He tried, he made some kind of effort, but not really.

But the problem is that when we stop trying to really change, really become something different or better, when we stop trying to rid ourselves of our demons, our addictions, and our shadow side, than we are rejecting what God has called us to be. When we attempt our half-hearted, gingerly efforts, we are claiming that deep down we are satisfied with the way things are. We are claiming that this is as good as it gets, and true change is not necessary. If the church stops trying to grow, or more importantly, if the church stops trying to share, spread, and experience the Gospel of Jesus Christ, they are claiming that we no longer want to be a church, but instead we want to be a social club.

Think of it this way. There are two hikers climbing a mountain, at the beginning the both are excited to get to the summit, but as soon as the climbing gets difficult, one of them sits down, and decides that is as far as he or she will go.

But Christ calls us to be that annoying child in our spiritual lives. Christ calls us to be persistent in an ever-present way. We are to be "Sam-I-am" in the classic work *Green Eggs and Ham*, constantly asking and trying every angle. Look at the story that we are given in Luke. A widow, someone with little social status and little rights in society, was constantly demanding justice from a judge. The judge refused again and again, and the widow continued to ask again and again. Can you imagine this - she was with him everywhere – at lunch, at dinner, in meetings, at parties, at other hearings, wearing and wearing on the judge. And eventually he cries, "Enough is enough!" and grants her the justice she deserves. Jesus urges us to be like that widow when we pray to God, when we ask God for help with our needs, and then gives us a special hope – God is not like that judge.

The judge did not care what others thought about him. The judge did not care about God's will or commands. The judge did not care about the widow's suffering, and plight. But an increasing amount of shame, pure exhaustion, and the knowledge that this woman would never, ever give up finally broke the judge down and he relented. God, on the other hand, cares for all of us. God wants us to be loved, respected, and cared for. God cares for and has great compassion for our plight, our suffering, our injustice, and our potential. God hears and God responds to our calls, our petitions, and our laments. The only problem is we are not always sure how and if and when God is responding. Oh you may be suffering right now and offer a prayer to God, expecting the suffering to end immediately. But the pain persists, it continues to haunt and plague you. So you offer your prayer again, and again, and again. And eventually we reach that point, that wall, mile 21 in the marathon when we consider giving up, losing hope that God listens and responds. But have faith that God is acting in your life. Here we read the God does listen, God does respond and God is with you. We are called to keep praying, keep hoping, and keep believing that God is with us despite the way things seem. The early community that was reading this gospel for the first time was facing persecution, was waiting for Christ to return and many were ready to throw in the towel and try something different. But others kept the faith, passed on the faith, and stayed true to Christ. They held on to the hope and faith that God was with them. The early martyrs prayed for God's intervention all the way to the lion's den. We can read the profound prayers and strong faith of Perpetua and

Felicity, some of the first women martyrs – as they believed God was with them all the way to their death. They held onto the hope and the faith that God was with them. We have hope in the darkest time – the time of the cross. So can't we have hope here and now as well?

So what does this look like, this annoying Christian? How do we go about praying constantly, day and night as the scripture calls us to do? And how will we change as we continue to ask God for help with our lives? The monastic movement offers inspiration for constant prayer, for they know how to pray constantly. The monks, specifically the Benedictines, work to pray constantly throughout the day. They have early morning, morning, midmorning, midday, mid-afternoon, evening, and night prayers. Add to that the prayers before and after meals, Mass, and spontaneous prayers. Needless to say, the monks pray a lot. They have shaped their life so that everything that they do is seen as an action of prayer - their work, rest, fellowship time, and on and on. And while the focus of the prayer may vary, the idea is something to work on, can you imagine being like the monks in the world? So how do you go about praying? There are a couple of ideas that I can suggest as practical starts. First, get into the habit of praying. Try saying a short prayer every hour, something that you have memorized. Or, I had a friend who worked at a summer camp and would quote a short passage from scripture every time he saw a squirrel. Put a small cross in your pocket, and every time you feel it, pray. Place a written prayer on your desk so you are reminded constantly. Wear something that reminds you to pray, be it a bracelet, necklace, or whatever. Keep your prayers short and simple and to the point. If nothing else, just acknowledge that God is present in that time and space, and leave it at that. After a while, you will begin to develop habits of prayer, and then you will be able to offer your needs, your concerns, and your desires to God. Your constant prayer will lead to constant hope that God hears and responds to your needs. There will be times when prayer is the last thing you want to do. There will be times when your plate is so full that even the five minutes for prayer are impossible. Make the pull for prayer, the need for prayer constant and insistent – and it will be annoying. It will be inconvenient, difficult, and burdensome, but it is what we are called to do – pray constantly, be aware of God constantly, be a Christian constantly.

And do you know what will happen if you do pray constantly? Unless you're really good at lying to yourself, or deceiving, or separating yourself from your reality, you will notice a difference. You will notice a greater awareness of God, you will notice your faith deepening, and you will notice your worship experience change drastically. Think about it, a young man who is torn with skepticism, with despair, and dangerous behaviors tries this out. He prays daily, just saying a simple prayer, "God, come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me." Every time he sees violence, sin, evil, darkness in the world he mutters those words. For two weeks he tries this out and finally begins to notice a difference. He no longer feels alone. He no longer feels helpless when faced with danger. He no longer feels as if he is a worthless person, but knows that he is a human being created, loved, and called by God. He no longer has to ask for help, for he knows that the help is always there. Could this be you as well? We all need to pray constantly, we all need the presence of Christ in our life. So start to pray, and pray constantly. Then the presence of Christ constantly in your life will lead to your life in Christ's presence. And then you can hold to the hope that God is with you. Then you can hold to the belief that Christ will return. Then you will hold to the hope that God hears and cares for you

and all of your worries. Your desires for the material will subside and your awareness of your spiritual and emotional desires will come to the fore. Pray constantly and your hope for Christ's return and salvation will grow. Pray constantly and your trust in God's protecting hand will flourish. Pray constantly and your willingness to follow the Holy Spirit will strengthen. Pray.

One other thing, how are we to do this as a church? After all, we are faced with a lot of desires, wants, and needs. Our community, much like the early community, is faced with persecution, despair, and is in danger of ending. So how do we pray constantly? Of course, it starts with you, the individual, but then grows to the community. We need to gather as a community for prayer. Right now, we gather once a week for worship and prayer – this is a good start. We have a prayer chain that works very, very well and this is good. But what if, what if we have a set time for all the members of the church to pray for the church? What if we meet mid week for a pray service? What would it look like if we had an all night vigil? What if we meet in small groups for prayer? What would that look like for the church, and how would that change the church? I don't know what would happen, but I do know our hope, our faith, and our sense of community would grow and strengthen. Do you want to take that chance as a church? So I invite you to take a chance, make a commitment, and call the community to prayer. I invite you as a church to be deliberate in gathering together for prayer. Let's be annoying in our prayer, let's be constant in our prayer, and let's be true to our hope, our faith, and our love for Christ in our prayer.

AMEN