

Persisting in Hope, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 21071021
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 and Luke 18:1-8
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After his arrest, Philippe Petit was taken to the hospital for a psychiatric examination. Authorities determined he was indeed sane. Petit was arrested in 1974 for walking a tightrope that he and his friends had shot from one of the World Trade Center twin towers to the other. When police asked him why he would risk his life and walk a tightrope strung between the two tallest towers in the city, he looked at them as if *they* were crazy. He said, "If I see three oranges, I have to juggle, and if I see two towers, I have to walk."¹

Mr. Petit is a tightrope walker and he has to walk tightropes. He has walked them over deep gorges and from the Eiffel Tower, but he does so without being able to really explain to others why. Tightrope walking is dear to his heart. Henri Nouwen says, "What is closest to our person is most difficult to express and explain. This is not just true for lovers, artists and tightrope walkers but also for those who pray."² What is closest to us, what is a part of us, does not need explanation, and often is most difficult to explain.

The twin towers no longer exist, but God exists. The tightrope cannot be strung across the chasm, but prayer continues. It is at the heart of those who are in an intimate relationship with God. Like Petit's tightrope walking, prayer requires persistence. I speak from experience here. I am a fixer, a tactile person. Give me a tool kit and a problem, and I'll be happy all day long. Whether it's fixing a fuel system on a car or repairing window blinds in a church classroom, I love the challenge.

I get tremendous satisfaction from solving the problem. When I sit down to pray, however, my mind races a mile a minute. "God, I need help developing this program. . ." and my mind goes racing off among the details of the program. "God, please hold so-and-so in your hand and give her healing. . ." and my mind goes racing off about how I need to telephone so-and-so and perhaps make an appointment to speak with her. Instead of settling with the first part of the petition, "God," I have moved on to doing something about the problem. I have moved myself into God's place, breaking the first of the ten commandments.

Persistently, I have to pull myself back from the fixing and center myself in the creator, the one who can provide the help. In analogy to the persistent woman of Jesus' parable, my mind is the unjust judge, and a praying spirit is the widow. I have to keep pestering my mind and saying, give me justice against my thoughts. Stop running on and settle in on God's spirit. Rest. Be at ease. I need to be persistent about taking the precious minutes out of my daily activities and centering them on God. It is too easy to allow a ringing telephone or a full schedule to rob my time from God.

When we are persistent in prayer, as Jesus teaches us, we find that God is far different than the unjust judge. The widow had to pester the judge to get him to listen to her. We find that God is already there patiently waiting at the center of our lives. In Jesus Christ, God has shown us how much God cares and waits and listens. All we have to do is look beside us. There, we will find God, through Jesus, walking with us. God has already taken our side. God is no stranger

¹*New York Times* Sunday, August 11, 1974, Section 4, p. 18, reported in *Reaching Out* by Henri J. M. Nouwen, © 1975, New York, NY, Doubleday, p. 115

²*Ibid.*

now, but someone who feels for us, and with us. Pray and do not lose heart.

Jesus told this parable in response to the disciples' request that he increase their faith. Jesus' response was, all you need is faith the size of a mustard seed—about an eighth of an inch in diameter. Then, be persistent in prayer, and your faith will be increased.

Persistence in prayer is only part of the story of faith. Not only are we to be persistent in getting at the depths of our faith, we are to be persistent in the proclamation of the faith. In 2nd Timothy we read, “I solemnly urge you: proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable.”³

Does that mean we all have to go to seminary to learn how to be preachers? No. The answer is found within the text itself: You've known it all since childhood! “Continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”⁴ Many of us grew up in the church. We went to Sunday school as children. We had special adults who showed us by their actions and their care what the message of Jesus is. We heard the sacred writings. What is your faith story? Write it down. What is the story of your faith journey? Who were the important figures in your faith development? Who were your faith heroes?

The writer of 2nd Timothy urges us to be persistent in doing the work of an evangelist. That word has negative implications for many of us because of the images we carry about evangelists. Jan Linn writes that unfortunately, “The church has chosen to preach a gospel of conditional salvation, trying feverishly to persuade people to accept Jesus in order to be saved.”⁵ It is that persuasion and manipulation that turns most of us off to the evangelism enterprise. God's salvation is not conditional. Salvation does not depend upon what is in our hearts, but what is in the heart of God. Linn says that gratitude, not guilt, has the power to inspire one to commit one's whole life to serve God because it is rooted in the good news that, in spite of sin, we are accepted by God.⁶ We call people to discipleship not so they might be saved, but so they may celebrate!

We have all been given the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is something to be grateful about. Be persistent in prayer, in proclamation, and in your expression of gratitude.

³2 Timothy 4:1-2

⁴2 Timothy 1:14- 15

⁵*Reclaiming Evangelism, a Practical Guide for Mainline Churches* by Jan G. Linn, © 1998 St. Louis, MO, the Chalice Press, p. 39

⁶*Ibid.*