

The Circle Maker Sermon 3

Text: *Luke 18:1-5*

Reading: *The Circle Maker*, chapters 8-11

## **Introduction**

In standardized math tests, Japanese children consistently score higher than their American counterparts. While some assume that a natural proclivity toward mathematics is the primary difference, researchers have discovered that it may have more to do with *effort* than *ability*. In one study involving first-graders, students were given a difficult puzzle to solve. The researchers weren't interested in whether or not the children could solve the puzzle; they simply wanted to see *how long they would try before giving up*. The American children lasted, on average, 9.47 minutes. The Japanese children lasted 13.93 minutes. In other words, the Japanese children tried 47 percent longer. Is it any wonder why they score higher on math exams? Researchers concluded that the difference in math scores might have less to do with *intelligence quotient* and more to do with *persistence quotient*. The Japanese first-graders simply tried harder.

That study not only explains the difference in standardized math scores, the implications are true no matter where you turn. It doesn't matter whether it's athletics or academics, music or math. There are no shortcuts. There are no substitutes. Success is a derivative of persistence.

More than a decade ago, Anders Ericsson and his colleagues at Berlin's elite Academy of Music did a study with musicians. With the help of professors, they divided violinists into three groups: world-class soloists, good violinists, and those who were unlikely to play professionally. All of them started playing around roughly the same age and they practiced about the same amount of time until the age of eight. That is when their practice habits diverged. The researchers found that by the age of twenty, the average players had logged about 4,000 hours of practice time; the good violinists totaled about 8,000 hours; and the elite performers set the standard with 10,000 hours. While there is no denying that innate ability dictates some of your upside potential, your potential is only tapped via persistent effort. Persistence is the magic bullet and the magic number seems to be ten thousand.

"The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve a level of mastery associated with being a world class expert—in anything," notes neurologist Daniel Levitin. "In study after study, of composers, basketball players, fiction writers, ice skaters, concert pianists, chess players, master criminals, and what have you, this number comes up again and again. No one has yet

found a case in which true world-class expertise was accomplished in less time. It seems that it takes the brain that long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery.”

Is prayer any different?

It is a habit to be cultivated. It is a discipline to be developed. It is a skill to be practiced. And while I don't want to reduce praying hard to time logged, if you want to achieve mastery it might take ten thousand hours. This I know for sure: the bigger the dream, the harder you will have to pray.

Text: Luke 18:1-5

*One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. “There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’ The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or care about people, but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!’”*

Context:

The parable of the persistent widow is one of the most pixilated pictures of prayer in Scripture. It shows us what praying hard looks like: knocking until your knuckles are raw, crying out until your voice is lost, pleading until your tears run dry. Praying hard is *praying through*. And if you pray through, God will come through.

The phrase used to describe the widow's persistence, *she is wearing me out*, is boxing terminology. Praying hard is going twelve rounds with God. A heavyweight prayer bout with God Almighty can be excruciating and exhausting, but that is how the greatest prayer victories are won. Praying hard is more than words. It's blood, sweat, and tears. Praying hard is two-dimensional: *praying like it depends on God* and *working like it depends on you*. It's praying until God answers, no matter how long it takes. It's doing whatever it takes to show God you're serious.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and there is no more desperate act than praying hard. There comes a moment when you need to throw caution to the wind and draw a circle in the sand. There comes a moment when you need to defy protocol, drop to your knees, and pray for the impossible. There comes a moment when you need to muster every ounce of faith you have and call down rain from heaven. For the persistent widow, this was that moment.

While we don't know what injustice took place, we do know that the persistent widow wouldn't take no for an answer. That's what made her a circle maker. Maybe her son was falsely imprisoned for a crime he didn't commit. Maybe the man who molested her daughter was still on the streets. Whatever it was, the judge knew she would never give up. The judge knew she would circle his house until the day she died if she didn't get justice. The judge knew there was no quit in the persistent widow.

Does *The Judge* know that about you?

How desperate are you for the miracle? Desperate enough to pray through the night? How many times are you willing to circle the promise? Until the day you die? How long and loud will you knock on the door of opportunity? Until you knock the door down?

Illustration:

Share an experience when you had to work like it depends on you and pray like it depends on God. Example from *The Circle Maker*: praying circles around a crack house that became Ebenezer's Coffeehouse (*TCM*, pages 97–100, 104–106).

### **Desperate Measures**

If you aren't desperate, you won't take desperate measures. And if you don't pray like it depends on God, the biggest miracles and best promises will remain out of your prayer reach. But if you learn how to pray hard, like the persistent widow, God will honor your bold prayers because your bold prayers honor God.

Like Honi the Circle Maker, the persistent widow's methodology was unorthodox. She could have, and technically should have, waited for her court date. Going to the personal residence of the judge crossed a professional line. I'm almost surprised the judge didn't get a restraining order against her. But this reveals something about the nature of God. *God could care less about protocol*. If He did, Jesus would have chosen the Pharisees as his disciples. But that isn't who Jesus honored. Jesus honored the prostitute who crashed a party at a Pharisee's home to anoint His feet. Jesus honored the tax collector who climbed a tree in his three-piece suit just to get a glimpse of Jesus. Jesus honored the four friends who cut in line and cut a hole in someone's ceiling to help their friend. And in this parable, Jesus honored the woman who drove a judge crazy because she wouldn't stop knocking.

The common denominator in each of these stories is holy desperation. People took desperate measures to get to God and God honored them for it. Nothing has changed. God is still honoring spiritual desperadoes who crash parties and climb trees. God is still honoring those who defy protocol with their bold prayers. God is

still honoring those who pray with audacity and tenacity. And the persistent widow is selected as the gold standard when it comes to praying hard. Her unrelenting persistence was the only difference between justice and injustice.

The viability of our prayers is not contingent upon scrabbling the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet into the right combinations like *abracadabra*. God already knows the last punctuation mark before we pronounce the first syllable. The viability of our prayers has more to do with intensity than vocabulary. That is modeled by the Holy Spirit Himself, who has been intensely and unceasingly interceding for you your entire life.

Long before you woke up this morning and long after you go to sleep tonight, the Spirit of God was circling you with songs of deliverance. He has been circling you since the day you were conceived and He'll circle you till the day you die. He is praying hard for you with ultrasonic groans that cannot be formulated into words and those unutterable intercessions should fill you with an unspeakable confidence.<sup>1</sup> God isn't just for you in some passive sense. God is for you in the most active sense imaginable. The Holy Spirit is praying hard for you. And supernatural synchronicities begin to happen when we tag-team with God and do the same.

Illustration: Share a story about desperate measures you have taken in prayer. Example from the Circle Maker: laying hands on the auto shop and praying that God would give us that piece of property (*TCM*, pages 167–168).

### **A Small Cloud**

Several centuries before the drought that threatened to destroy Honi's generation, there was another drought in Israel. For three years long years, there was no puddle jumping in Israel. Then the Lord promised Elijah He would send rain, but like every promise, Elijah still had to circle it via persistent prayer. So Elijah climbed to the top of Carmel, fell on his face, and prayed for rain. Six times he told his servant to look toward the sea, but there was no sign of rain. And that is when most of us give up. We stop praying because we can't see any tangible difference with our natural eyes. We allow our circumstances to get between God and us instead of putting God between us and our circumstances.

Like Honi who said, "I will not move from here," Elijah held his holy ground. He stood on the promise God had given him. I think Elijah would have prayed ten thousand times if that is what it took, but between the sixth and seventh prayer, there was a subtle shift in atmospheric pressure. After the seventh circle, Elijah's nearsighted servant strained his eyes and saw a small cloud the size of a man's hand rising from the sea.

I can't help but ask the counterfactual question: *what if Elijah had quit praying after the sixth circle?* The obvious answer is that he would have defaulted on the promise and forfeited the miracle. But Elijah prayed through and God came through. The sky turned black; heavy winds blew across the barren landscape; and raindrops fell for the first time in three years. And it wasn't a light drizzle. It was *a terrific rainstorm*.<sup>2</sup>

It's so easy to give up on dreams, give up on miracles, give up on promises. We lose heart, lose patience, lose faith. And like a slow leak, it often happens without us even knowing it until our prayer life gets a flat.

I recently realized that I had stopped circling one of the seven miracles I had written on my prayer stone during the ten-day Pentecost fast I did years ago. I once believed that God would heal my asthma, but I got tired of asking. It felt like God had put me on hold so I just hung up. Then a conversation with a friend reactivated my faith and I've started circling that miracle again.

Is there some dream that God wants to resurrect? Is there some promise you need to reclaim? Is there some miracle you need to start believing for again?

The reason that many of us give up too soon is because we feel like we have failed if God doesn't answer our prayer. That isn't failure. *The only way you can fail is if you stop praying.*

Illustration:

Share a failure—a moment when you gave up believing or praying. Example from *The Circle Maker*: when Mark stopped circling one of the seven miracles (*TCM*, page 87).

### **Hyperlink**

Illustration:

Share a story of a promise that you held onto during a difficult challenge. Example from *The Circle Maker*: John and Heidi holding on to Isaiah 59:21 during their son's medical challenges (*TCM*, pages 91–92).

Even after three years of drought, even after a severe bout with depression, Elijah believed that God could send rain *even now*.

I can't help but wonder if Honi the Circle Maker was inspired by the story of Elijah praying for rain seven times. I wonder if Israel's original rainmaker was Honi's childhood hero. And I wonder if Honi's persistence in prayer was hyperlinked to this miracle? *If God did it for Elijah, He can do it for me.* By the same token, I can't help

but wonder if Elijah's persistence in prayer was hyperlinked to the miracle of raining quail? *If God can send a quailstorm, He can certainly send a thunderstorm.*

One thing is certain: *our most powerful prayers are hyperlinked to the promises of God.* When you know you are praying the promises of God, you can pray with holy confidence. It's the difference between praying on thin ice and praying on solid ground. It's the difference between praying tentatively and praying tenaciously. You don't have to second-guess yourself because you know that God wants you to double-click on His promises.

There is an adage: *God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.* Here's a fresh take on that old truth: *God said it, I've circled it, and that settles it.*

It was settled on the cross when Jesus said, "It is finished." It wasn't just the final installment on our sin debt. It was the down payment on all of His promises.

*No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.<sup>3</sup>*

Remember the promise in Joshua 1:3 that I circled when I did my prayer walk around Capitol Hill? God promised Joshua that He would give him everyplace he set his foot, but there is a little addendum at the end of the promise: *just as I promised Moses.* The promise was originally given to Moses. Then it was transferred to Joshua. In much the same way, all of God's promises have been transferred to us via Jesus Christ. While those promises must be interpreted intelligently and applied accurately, there are moments when the Spirit of God will quicken your spirit to claim a promise that was originally intended for someone else. So while we have to be careful not to blindly claim promises that don't belong to us, our greatest challenge is that we don't circle the promises we could or should circle.

By the most conservative estimates, there are more than 3,000 promises in Scripture. By virtue of what Jesus Christ accomplished on the cross, every one of them belongs to you. Every one of them has your name on it. The question is: *how many of them have you circled?*

### **Circling Promises**

What I'm about to share has the power to revolutionize the way you pray and the way you read the Bible. We often view prayer and Scripture reading as two distinct spiritual disciplines without much overlap, but what if they were meant to be hyperlinked? What if reading became a form of praying and praying became a form of reading?

One of the primary reasons we don't *pray through* is because we run out of things to say. Our lack of persistence is really a lack of conversation pieces. Like an awkward

conversation, we don't know what to say. Or like a conversation on its last leg, we run out of things to talk about. That's when our prayers turn into a bunch of overused and misapplied clichés. So instead of praying hard about a big dream, we're left with small talk. Our prayers are as meaningless as a conversation about the weather.

The solution? Pray through the Bible.

Application:

What promise do you need to circle?

It starts with changing the way you read the Bible. In fact, the Bible wasn't meant to be *read through*. The Bible was meant to be *prayed through*. And if you pray through it, you'll never run out of promises to circle.

The Bible is a promise book and a prayer book. And while reading is reactive, prayer is proactive. Reading is the way you get through the Bible. Prayer is the way you get the Bible through you. As you pray, the Holy Spirit will quicken certain promises to your spirit. It's very difficult to predict *what* and *when* and *where* and *how*, but over time, the promises of God will become *your* promises. Then you need to circle those promises, both figuratively and literally. I never read without a pen so that I can underline, asterisk, and circle. I literally circle the promises in my Bible. Then I do it figuratively by circling them in prayer.

One of my treasured possessions is my grandfather's Bible. I sometimes do devotions in his Bible because I want to see the verses he underlined. I love reading his notes in the margins. And I love seeing what promises he circled. The thing that I love most about his Bible is that it literally had to be taped together because it was falling apart. It wasn't just well read. It was well prayed.

Closing Illustration:

Share a story about a promise that you or someone in your church has held onto. Maybe it's a corporate promise related to your vision. Example from the *Circle Maker*: circling 201 F Street, NE in prayer while circling Matthew 18:18 (*TCM*, pages 99–100).

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:26.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Kings 18:45.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:20.