

“The Parable of the Persistent Widow”¹

Luke 18:1-8

CXXXIII. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke

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¹⁸And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Prayer is difficult for us in the modern world. Our civilization is largely secular and materialistic in its outlook. It screams at us daily that all that is real, and certainly all that matters, is what we

¹ Portions of the following appeared in Johnson, *The Parables of Jesus*, chapter 23.

can see, handle, taste, and touch. Reality consists of the physical world around us. The material world is the only world that counts. Only with great difficulty can professing Christians rise above the spirit of our age, its *zeitgeist*, and affirm with the Apostles that “the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor 4:18). Instead we are sorely tempted to pour all of our time and energy into our houses, automobiles, clothes, food, and various recreations and entertainments by which we amuse ourselves. We lay up treasures on earth rather than heaven because, frankly, we can see and enjoy earthly treasures, but can scarcely believe that heavenly treasures exist (Mt 6:19-21). Little thought is given to the soul and the eternal. We live like practical atheists Monday to Saturday, even if we are in church on Sunday.

This pervasive modern outlook of our day is called “materialism.” Its prevalence explains why prayer is so difficult for us. Prayer is the consummate spiritual activity. To devote hours each week to prayer seems a waste of time. “What are you doing?” someone might ask a person engaged in prayer. “You’re just sitting.” We are talking to ourselves, it seems. Better to get up and do something concrete, something real. Prayer is difficult to sustain in the modern, secular, materialistic world.

Yet, Jesus assumes that His disciples will be devoted to prayer (Rom 12:12; Col 4:2). They will maintain at least a daily prayer discipline, praying, as He seems to envision at the outset of the day, “Give us *this day* our daily bread” (Mt 6:11; cf. Lk 11:3). The Lord’s Prayer is a *daily*

prayer. Daily praise, daily confession of sin, daily thanksgiving, and daily supplications for all things necessary are all a part of the regular prayer life of the believer (cf. Phil 4:6, 7).

Moreover, Jesus taught the disciples to persist in prayer. “Keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking,” He taught us (Lk 11:9-13; Mt 7:7-11).² Persist, like the persistent friend with his reluctant neighbor (Lk 11:5-8).

The Parable of the Unjust Judge is a companion of the Parable of the Persistent Friend (Luke 11:5-13), teaching much the same lessons. However, because it follows Jesus’ teaching in Luke 17 about the Second Coming, it has more particularly in mind the problem of unanswered prayer. The parable targets the prayers of the elect in the present age, the “long interval” before Christ’s return, as Morris calls it, or “the long weary interval between the first and second advents,” as J. C. Ryle describes it, when the pleas of Christ’s disciples seem to go unheard, when they might “lose heart.”³ That age, our age, the church age, is one of persecution and rejection. Yet God seems to hesitate in answering His people’s prayers. These long delays between requests and answers are characteristic of our age, and give rise to problems which the parable is designed to answer.

The introduction

“This parable has its key hanging at the door,” as Matthew Henry points out.⁴

² See T. L. Johnson, *When Grace Comes Alive* (Christian Focus, 2003), 205ff. for the implications of the verb tenses; see also the next chapter.

³ Morris, 262; Ryle, II:252.

⁴ Henry, *Comments on Luke* 18:1.

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1)

The “them” of verse 1 are the disciples. The purpose of the parable is given at the outset: “they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” “Always,” or “at all times” (NASB) means regularly, faithfully, whatever their circumstances. They “ought” (*dei*) means “it is necessary;” it is vital, crucial. Jesus is urging His disciples to keep up “the habit of prayer” and “a prayerful frame of mind”.⁵ Maintain your regular prayer routines whether things are going well or poorly. “The fear is that men will give up before they are answered,” Marshall explains. They may “lose heart” (*egkake* ) or “become weary” or “despair,” he adds.⁶ “It is far more easy to begin a habit of prayer than it is to keep it up,” Ryle warns.⁷ We pray for our children and our families; for our church and the nation; for healing or for salvation of a loved one. A day goes by without answered prayer and we become discouraged. A week, and we grow tired. A month, and we despair. Calvin comments similarly, “We know how uncommon and difficult a virtue is persistence in prayer.”⁸ There may be times when we are called upon to pray for years towards a given end. The parable is designed to buttress our commitment to consistency, frequency, discipline, and perseverance in prayer.

⁵ Ibid., II:256.

⁶ Marshall, 671.

⁷ Ryle, II:253.

⁸ Calvin, II:125.

The Parable

He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.

(Luke 18:2)

In small towns prominent men were often appointed to act as judges and settle disputes. This one is a corrupt judge. He neither "feared God" nor "respected man." What, then, motivates his action? Self-interest. Whatever is best for him.⁹ He defies both "Divine commands and public opinion," says Plummer.¹⁰ What does he respond to? The implication is: bribes. He does what suits him, what is in his own interest, what profits him. He doesn't care what anyone thinks, or even what God says.

"And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.'" (Luke 18:3)

The widow is the proverbial needy and helpless person.¹¹ As such, she is a special concern of God along with the fatherless, the orphan, the poor, and the foreigner (Ps 146:7-9; 68:5; Deut 10:18; etc.) Repeatedly she came to him to take her case. She "kept coming." Yet he refused. Why? "No doubt," surmises Marshall, "out of deference to a wealthy opponent and his bribes."¹² She had no money with which to buy his favor. Hence her repeated returns to his court. Furthermore, she had no protector, no male kinsman to bring her case to the court. "She was

⁹ He is "controlled only by his own ideas and inclinations," Morris explains (263).

¹⁰ Plummer, 411.

¹¹ She and the judge are "occupants of different ends of the continuum of power and privilege" (Marshall, 639).

¹² Marshall, 669.

armed with nothing but the fact that right was evidently on her side . . . and her own persistence,” Morris explains.¹³ “Give me justice,” or “Give me legal protection,” she cries, or literally “avenge me” (KJV).¹⁴ “Right the wrong of which I am the victim,” she is saying. She sought not punishment for her opponent in law but payment of what was due.

For a while he refused,” (Luke 18:4a)

Initially “he refused,” whether because of bribes, fear of her powerful opponent, disdain for a weak woman, or just laziness. He was “unwilling” (NASB). There was no money in it for him. Indeed, she would cost him time and money. The fact that God is the defender of the widow and orphan doesn’t faze him at all. “I neither fear God nor respect man,” he declares. However, her persistence forced him to reconsider. Self-interest led him to reconsider.

^{4b} *...but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’* (Luke 18:4b, 5)

He’s annoyed by her. She “keeps bothering me,” he says. He is afraid that she’ll *keep* bothering him and eventually “beat me down” (*hup ϵ riaz ϵ*), literally “strike (me) under the eye,” a metaphor drawn from boxing. It may suggest that she was about to take a swing at him. Or it is possible that the reference is to the blackening of the judge’s face, that is, the shaming of him for

¹³ Morris, 263.

¹⁴ But in this context the request means “to procure justice for someone,” says Marshall (672). It means to “defend” or “vindicate” (Zerwick, I:253).

refusing to hear her case, a view favored by Marshall.¹⁵ He feels badgered. She's giving him a verbal beating and he is worn out. Jesus may be employing a bit of humor, envisioning a fearless, powerful judge regularly cornered by this powerless, persistent widow who gives him a thorough verbal beating. He gives in, promising "justice" or "legal protection" (NASB), not out of concern for justice, but because of the widow's annoying persistence.

The lesson

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. (Luke 18:6)

Pay attention to the "unrighteous" (*adikas*), "unjust judge" (KJV), urges Jesus. We are to "hear what the unrighteous judge says," not because there is virtue in his response to the widow, but the opposite. Listen to the unjust judge because of the *contrast* between him and our just God.¹⁶ The point is, if even a corrupt man like him will eventually hear the cries of the needy, *how much more* will our righteous God. It is an argument from the lesser to the greater.

And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? (Luke 18:7)

Note the perspective. The return of Christ is judgment for the unbelieving (17:20-37). However, for the believer it is rescue. His return is vindication. Persecution ends. Yes, God does "delay."

¹⁵ Marshall, 673.

¹⁶ "Jesus is not, of course, likening God to an unrighteous judge. The parable is of the 'How much more . . . ?' variety," explains Morris (262). Jesus "intends a *contrast*, not a *comparison*," agrees Wilcock (164). Geldenhuys even calls it a "parable of contrast" (446).

But the delay is not “long.” God’s “elect” cry to him “day and night,” that is, with “unwearied persistence,” says Morris.¹⁷ The woman was a stranger to the judge. However, the elect are “His elect.” They are *His* own people. He loves them and cares for them. Yet they are in the position of having to “cry” out to Him “day and night.” They are suffering, hurting, afflicted. In pain they cry; as victims of injustice, they cry; oppressed and helpless, they cry. With nowhere else to go and no one else to turn to, they cry out to God “day and night,” persistently, continually.

Unremitting is their suffering, relentless are their pleas. This is the way that Jesus characterizes the church age, the period between the ascension and the return of Christ. This is the life of the believer. We will be like this widow, victims of injustice in an unjust world, crying out to God.

Jesus promises God will provide “justice” or “vindication” (*ekdikēsin*) for His chosen. There is considerable discussion of verse seven’s relation to time. Morris argues that “the use of the term implies that eschatological vindication is in view, and not a purely this-worldly answer to prayer.”¹⁸ “Eschatological vindication” would mean vindication at the end of time, at the time of Christ’s return. The final clause of verse 7 in the NASV reads, “will He delay long over them?” The old RV rendered it, “and He is longsuffering over them.” The RSV and ESV (like the NASB) render it as a question—“will he long delay?” “Will he keep putting them off?” the NIV translates it. One commentator lists eight possible interpretations of this clause. Marshall understands the sense to be,

¹⁷ Morris, 263.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 674.

The elect cry to God night and day, but he puts their patience to the test by not answering them immediately.¹⁹

Whatever the precise nuance, the main point seems clear: there is a delay, but it is not forever. Its length is determined by God's gracious purposes and according to His timing. "The general sense is clear enough," as Plummer explains, "that, however long the answer to prayer may *seem* to be delayed, constant faithful prayer always *is* answered."²⁰

"I tell you, he will bring justice to them speedily." (Luke 18:8a)

Jesus answers His own question. God will vindicate His people "speedily," meaning "soon" or "quickly" (NIV), or more likely, given the context of the Second Coming, "suddenly," even "unexpectedly."²¹ Yes, there will be a delay. Yes, the prayers will go on day and night. Yet suddenly God will defeat their enemies and secure their case. Time, of course, must be considered in relation to a God for whom a day is as a thousand years (2 Pet 3:8).

Application

How then, should we apply this parable?

¹⁹ Marshall, 675.

²⁰ Plummer, 414.

²¹ Marshall, 676; he cites four examples from the LXX and the scholars Zahn and Jeremias.

First, pray persistently. Don't trifle with prayer. Don't just say a quick prayer when you wake up and another when you go to sleep. Don't be content with a quick "grace" at meals. "Be devoted to prayer" (Rom 12:12; Col 4:2). To pray as Jesus commends, "day and night" means that we will have a persistent prayer routine. Our prayers will be regular and disciplined. Our prayers will be comprehensive and consistent. Provide time for prayer in your daily schedule. Set aside a chunk of time each day to pray. Use the acrostic: A—adoration; C—confession; T—thanksgiving; S—supplication, to guide you. Pray for victory over the enemies of the gospel who mock and ridicule Jesus' message and His cross. Pray for victory over the tormentors of Christ's disciples who scorn and ostracize, persecute, and, in many places in the world (e.g. Africa, the Middle East, and Asia), do much worse. It can be difficult to be a Christian in our schools and colleges and workplaces. Pray for vindication. Pray for victory over our own flesh and worldliness, that drag us down and degrade and threaten our own souls. Pray "day and night." Pray persistently. Is there a delay? Does no answer come? Expect this. However, pray on. Keep on praying. Like the watchman of Isaiah's day, "give Him no rest" until righteousness is established (Isaiah 62:7).

Second, pray confidently. Confidence in prayer is an important thrust of the passage. The widow gets what she seeks. Yet note the points of contrast between her petitions to the unjust judge and ours to God. This judge, as Wright points out, "is about as unlike God as possible."²²

²² Wright, 213.

1. *She was a stranger to the judge, whereas we are “His elect” or “chosen.”* We are God’s own people as Christ’s disciples. The judge had no affection for her, whereas God loves us.

2. *She was one and we are many.* She was a lone voice crying for help. We are many voices. We may seem few. We may seem outnumbered against the elite in the academy, the media, and among the entertainers. Still, we are many.

3. *She pled her own cause whereas we plead God’s cause.* Our great end in all our prayers is that God’s kingdom will come and His will will be done on earth and heaven. We are asking God to do that which He is already predisposed to do and promised to do.

4. *Her judge was hostile and ours is inviting.* He says, “Ask and you will receive” (Lk 11:9).

5. *Her judge was unjust and ours is righteous.*

6. *Her judge was provoked by her pleas and ours is pleased.*

7. *Her judge would hear her at certain times only, and our judge hears us at all times.*

And yet, she still got what she wanted. If she was able to persuade a dishonest, greedy, and unjust judge, *how much more certain can we be that our righteous God will hear our cries and vindicate us, protect us, and provide for us?* Our prayers *will* be heard and our prayers *do* make a difference. Our Father in heaven receives and answers them. “To give up praying would be calamitous,” says Gooding, for “it would imply that God, if there is one, is so indifferent to justice that we can have no reasonable hope for a coming reign of justice on earth nor of any heaven above worth going to.”²³ Our responsibility is to “pray at all times” and not “lose heart.” Persist. “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Keep on asking, seeking, and knocking and we will receive, we will find, and closed doors will be opened to us (Lk 11:9-13). What a difference it would make if the people of God would but pray!

Third, pray believing. This seems to be the implication of the final clause of verse 8.

“However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8b)

Note the continuing theme of the return of Christ, tying chapter 18 to chapter 17: “When the Son of Man comes.” Then comes what Marshall calls an “abrupt shift” in verse 8b. God will vindicate His people. However, will He find “faith (*tēn pistin*),” perhaps here meaning “faithfulness,”²⁴ referring here to persistence in prayer, when He returns? “The question as a whole presupposes a time of tribulation for the disciples in which they may be tempted to give up faith because their prayers are not answered,” says Marshall. That “time of tribulation” is

²³ Gooding, 293.

²⁴ Marshall, 676.

now. Trial and trouble are characteristic of the present age in which we live. Consequently, continues Marshall, “it is meant as an exhortation to take seriously the lesson of the parable that God will certainly act to vindicate them.”²⁵

Will we heed Jesus’ exhortation? Will we believe in prayer though answers are delayed? Will we be faithful to pray though God’s response is, from our perspective, slow? The pressure to quit praying is enormous. The cultural *zeitgeist* is against us. Our secular, materialistic, naturalistic civilization offers discouragement and disincentives aplenty. Unpraying, practical atheism characterizes much of the church, providing few role models of persistent prayer. Tenacious faith will be required. Yet the charge of Jesus, in our day and every day, is that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

²⁵ Ibid., 677.