

The Parable of the Widow and the Judge

Luke 18:1-8

Turn to Luke 18. Jesus urged us not to quit praying. If there is one thing the Lord is saying to his followers in this parable, that's what it is: "keep praying, my followers, praying is your lifeline, keep praying, it is how you will keep the faith."

To teach this, Jesus told us a story to explain show us how God responds to prayer. God responds more eagerly and quickly than we think, says Jesus. Our doubts about God's response are not the real problem. Giving up on prayer is the real problem. So Jesus taught us how God responds to prayer, BECAUSE he did not want us to quit praying.

Opening and Closing the Parable

18:1 *Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*

Most parables have a story around them, either before the parable or after, that helps us understand the parable. We must always pay close attention to the story around the parable. Otherwise the parable can mean all kinds of things. What I want is to understand what Jesus was teaching, and to do that we need to pay attention to the story around the parables.

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. What's interesting here is that Luke himself tells us the application of this parable. That's very rare. This parable will teach us that we should always pray and not give up. Luke is helping us out here, before the parable even starts.

Does Luke mean "always pray and not stop asking for what we want"? Or does he mean "always pray and not give up on prayer?" As it stands, I think the line could go either way. But I'm sure he means "always pray and not give up on prayer," because of what he says at the end.

18:8b – *However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?* At the end of the parable, Jesus asks if he will find faith on earth. Will his followers keep the faith until he returns? And this comes right at the end of a parable that teaches we should always pray and not give up.

So praying and not giving up is an important part of the Son of Man finding faith on earth when he returns. So it makes more sense to take verse 1 as "always pray and not give up on prayer."

Verse 1 and the second half of verse 8 are talking about the same thing: Jesus taught the disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up on prayer.

Giving up on prayer, in v1, means the same as Jesus not finding faith on earth when he returns, in v8. Not giving up on prayer (v1) means Jesus will find faith when he returns (v8).

Praying: When Jesus was in great distress, in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was arrested, he prayed. He walked away from Peter and James and John, and prayed desperately. He came back to them, and they were sleeping, and he said, “stay awake and pray!”

He needed to pray to survive, and Jesus knew it would be a hard night for them also, and urged them to pray. 1 Peter 4:7 - *The end of all things is near. You must be self-controlled and alert, to be able to pray.* It needs to be a normal thing that when we're in distress, we do all kinds of praying. That's a key to spiritual survival.

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

There will be faith, if we don't give up on prayer! For some this comes naturally, and for some it does not. If praying is not your normal response to trouble, work on that. That's not good for spiritual survival in hard times. If you are distressed to hear this, good, use this distress as a reason to pray. Always pray, don't give up on prayer. It is how we keep the faith.

And the paragraphs before the parable, Luke 17:20-37, are all about the coming of the Son of Man. They are sobering verses, they speak of hard times, and separation between the faithful and the others. One will be taken and the other left, and so on.

This parable continues that section about Jesus coming back to earth. He wants to make sure we're ready when he comes back. *When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.*

The Parable

Now, let's read the parable. ² *Jesus said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’*

⁴ *“For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!’”*

⁶ *And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”*

The Judge (vv2,4). The judge does not care about God, does not care about right and wrong, and does not care about people. This occurs twice in this story.

It is in the first line of the story, and in v4 we hear it again, this time from the judge's own mouth. He is a dark man, and knows it, and does not pretend to be anything else. He does not care about God or about right and wrong or about people.

The widow (v3). *And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary. Someone is stealing from her, or keeping what he owes her, or oppressing her in some way. What's important is that a judge could stop this, it the judge's job to make these things right.*

Justice (v5): *Because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!*

The good news is that he says, *"I will see that she gets justice."* The bad news is that he does this only to serve himself. He does this only to make his own life easier.

Two themes are tied together in this parable. One theme is: "God is NOT like this judge." This is real important; this is probably the more important theme overall: This judge does not care if he does the right thing, and God cares immensely if he does the right thing or not.

This judge does not care about people, and God cares immensely about people, especially his own people, who follow his Son. Jesus says at the end, *listen to the unjust judge.* This judge is unjust, God is always just, and is the measure of what that is. It is important for us to grasp how unlike God this judge is.

The other theme is "How much more?" If judge that was so unjust still eventually gave the widow justice, how much more will God do what is right?

Will God refuse for a time? (v7-8a) - *And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*

In the beginning of verse 4, we read that the unjust judge refused the widow for some time. In vv7-8a Jesus shows how God is not like.

My Bible translates the end of v7 like this: *Will he keep putting them off?* That nicely fits what this parable teaches, but if you looked at several translations you would see that they differ quite a bit on how to translate the last few words of v7. It is a difficult phrase in Greek.

So I am going to omit them. The meaning of the parable does not hang on this, and I will not build on what is unclear to me: ⁷ *And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? ... ⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*

The unjust judge was reluctant to act, slow to act, refused to act, because he did not care about justice, and he did not care about people. God is NOT like that judge. God cares about justice, and he cares about people. *I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly.*

Lament (v7): *They cry out to him day and night.* A lament is what we call a prayer where we tell God that something bad is happening to us his children, and he is letting the bad thing go on and on. “God, this bad thing is happening. Why do you let the bad thing continue? Why don’t you rescue your child, your children? Please help us!”

There are some that think lament only happens in the OT. Now that the Spirit is here and everything is new, we don’t lament any more, is what they say. Don’t you believe such teaching.

There are several NT texts that describe lament, and this is one of them: followers crying out to God day and night. “God, this bad thing is happening. Why do you let the bad thing continue? Why don’t you rescue your child, your children? Please help us!” Calling day and night to God.

Day and Night versus Quickly (vv7-8): In the first part of v8, Jesus is emphatic: *I tell you, God will see that they get justice, and quickly.* God is not like the judge, who refused. God never refuses such a request. He responds quickly.

And yet, they are crying out to him day and night. That does not sound like “quickly.” And we all know that we have prayed like this to God, “God, why do you let this dark thing continue?” and we have prayed it day and night and nothing changed for a long time!

The fact that Jesus describes his followers as crying out to God day and night means Jesus is NOT promising his followers that God will answer immediately. If God did that, there would be no need to cry out day and night. But then, what does “quickly” mean?

I am going to quote Habakkuk 2:3. Habakkuk the prophet asked God for an answer to a question, and the LORD respond to Habakkuk this way: *The revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.*

Habakkuk got this much as soon as he prayed. As soon as Habakkuk prayed, God said, my paraphrase, *I have heard your prayer and responded, my answer is on its way, it has an appointed time. Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come, and will not delay.*

The words of Jesus need something like this to make sense. On the one hand, the faithful are crying out to God day and night, and on the other hand, God responds quickly. How can both of those be true?

Only if God is saying, *I have heard your prayer and answered, what you want is on its way, it has an appointed time. Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come, and will not delay.*

We need to picture God hearing our lament. We pray like this to God: “God, this bad thing is happening. Why do you let it continue? Why don’t you rescue your child, your children? Please help us!” Sometimes we pray like this day and night.

And God hears warmly and kindly, and has the distress of parents when children suffer. And he says, *I have heard your prayer and answered, what you want is on its way, it has an appointed time. Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come, and will not delay.* It will not delay.

It will not delay. There is a “Gandalf the wizard” line at the beginning of the first Lord of the Rings movie. Frodo tells Gandalf the wizard that he’s late for the birthday party. Gandalf responds, “A wizard is never late. He arrives precisely when he means to.”

From God’s side, his answers to our prayers are never late. They arrive precisely when they mean to. *I have heard your prayer and answered, what you want is on its way, it has an appointed time. Though it linger, wait for it, it will certainly come, and will not delay.*

The Problem. The parable of the friend and midnight (Luke 11) and this parable both show us God as eager and quick to respond to prayer. It was important to Jesus to teach us that.

The problem is that God often seems exactly like unjust judge. By all the evidence available to us, God does NOT care about right and wrong, God does NOT care about people, he IS unjust, and he DOES keep putting us off.

The friend in bed at midnight would not get up because the man outside was his friend, and we suspect the same response from God.

I am reading in Isaiah these days. In Isa 49:14, God’s people say, “The LORD has forsaken me, God has forgotten me.” That is our experience when we cry out day and night and get no answer. The LORD has forsaken me, God has forgotten me.

The serpent from the Garden of Eden is always in our minds: “Has God said he cares about you? That he does not want your evil to continue? Did Jesus say God responds quickly and kindly to your prayers? No, God really just cares about himself and maybe some others, but not you.”

That’s the serpent, who is alive and well and in business. Listen, my brothers and sisters, when your doubts sound just like that, recognize the source. The Scripture tells us who talks like that.

Jesus understands about the serpent, and he’s teaching the truth. And so we have the Jesus voice about God and prayer, and the serpent voice about God and prayer. Understand the difference.

The Point. This parable has been taught that if we keep asking for what we want, we will get it. We will wear God out and get what we ask for. I do not get much of that from this story.

The parable itself is about lament and justice. When someone or something makes our lives miserable, and we call out to God, what happens with God? The parable tells us that God is NOT like the unjust judge. That judge made things right after a delay, just to save himself, but God will answer quickly because God wants things made right, and he cares about people.

But if we go back to the opening and closing lines, the parable is about prayer itself. *Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up... When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?*

Jesus urged us not to quit praying. If there is one thing the Lord is saying to his followers in this parable, that's what it is: "keep praying, my followers, praying is your lifeline, keep praying, it is how you keep the faith." How do we keep the faith through the care of life? Keep praying.

To teach this, Jesus told us a story to show us how God responds to prayer. God responds more eagerly and quickly than we think, says Jesus. Our doubts about God's response are not the real problem, though.

Giving up on prayer is the real problem. So Jesus taught us how God responds to prayer, BECAUSE Jesus did not want us *ever* to quit praying. It's how we keep the faith. Amen.