

The Parable of the Persistent Widow
Luke 18:1-8
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Introduction

This morning we are going to be looking at the Parable of the Persistent Widow (also known as The Parable of the Unjust Judge). This parable (a parable is an illustrative story) has everything to do with prayer. In fact, Matthew states Jesus' purpose in telling this parable even before he sets it forth. Thus in 18:1 Luke gives us the key to unlocking the meaning of the parable. He says,

He then told them a parable on the need for them to pray always and not become discouraged. (Luke 18:1)

So this parable has everything to do with illustrating the importance of confident persistence and perseverance in our prayer lives. I hate to ask the obvious, but why do you suppose Jesus would need to teach on the importance of not getting discouraged in our prayer lives? Because He knew that this was going to be an issue for us. How many of you would be able to say with 100% confidence that you have never grown weary in your prayer life; how many of you would be able to say that you have never questioned the effectiveness of prayer? How many of you have prayed and prayed and prayed about a certain matter for months upon months or for years upon years or for even decade upon decade to find absolutely no hint that God was at work in answering your request? We have all been there, and are probably all there this morning.

When God delays an answer to prayer in such a way, as He often does, we all have the tendency to at least momentarily question God's attentiveness to us. Even if we do not entertain doubts in regard to the attentiveness of God or of the effectiveness of prayer, we all know that battling those doubts is a daily struggle. Jesus knew that this was going to be one of the greatest battles that His people were going to face and so He told this parable in order to help us win in the battle of confident persistence in prayer. As Luke says, Jesus told them this parable so that they might not 'become discouraged' when it comes to pleading with the Father. The word translated "become discouraged" literally refers to losing "one's motivation in continuing a desirable pattern of conduct or activity."¹ Other translations render it as 'lose heart' or 'give up,' which I prefer. Or, to put it in modern day language, Jesus told this parable to teach us to not 'throw in the towel' when it comes to pleading before the Father.

This parable, then, is ammunition given by Jesus to fight against the seeds of doubt that Satan may sew when it comes to the effectiveness of prayer and the attentiveness and concern of God to our prayers in the face of the apparent lack of activity on God's part in response to our praying.

The Story

At this point I want to quickly reconstruct for you the mind picture that Jesus paints to illustrate the need for confident persistence in our prayers. It must be kept in mind that this is a

¹ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 272.

fictional story; Jesus is not here recounting an event that actually took place. However, it must also be noted that this sort of a situation was an all-too-common reality in Jesus' day.

2 There was a judge in one town who did not fear God or respect man. 3 And a widow in that town kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' 4 For a while he was unwilling, but later he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or respect man, 5 yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so she doesn't wear me out by her persistent coming.'

To help you get the big picture of the story I have laid it out in its chronological order: 1. This story consists of an unjust judge and a widow who has been taken advantage of. 2. The widow comes to judge seeking him to grant her justice. 3. Because the judge is the ancient equivalent of a modern day scum bucket he hard-heartedly refuses to do his duty by granting this widow justice. 4. In spite of the unjust judge's unwillingness to give attention to her case, the widow keeps coming. 5. In the end the persistence of the widow pays off, the unjust judge gives in and grants her justice (even if he did so only for selfish reasons).

Let's look at the story with a little bit more detail. In verses 2-3 Jesus introduces the main characters of the story: an unjust judge and a widow. Jesus identifies the judge as a man 'who didn't fear God or respect man.' Jesus here paints a picture of a scum bucket, a scuzzball, a slippery snake. The worst part about this whole thing is that he is unashamed of his own scuzzballiness. Just take a look at vs 4-5—he unashamedly admits to himself that he really doesn't care that he doesn't fear God or respect man. He is like a meathead of a man who will openly disclose to his girlfriend that he has no intentions on being committed—that he really doesn't love her—and that he is only dating her because of her good looks and sexy physique. He is the exact mirroring image of the Israelites during Jeremiah's day. Look at Jeremiah 6:13-15 with me.

For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is gaining profit unjustly. From prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated My people's brokenness superficially, claiming: Peace, peace, when there is no peace. Were they ashamed when they acted so abhorrently? They weren't at all ashamed. They can no longer feel humiliation.

This man had come to a place, as the Israelites did in the days of Jeremiah, where he could 'no longer feel humiliation.' The NIV helpfully renders it as 'they do not even know how to blush.' In other words, their hearts had become so calloused to the shamefulness of sin that they no longer saw a need to hide it from the eyes of the public. This is exactly what this man in Jesus' parable was like.

Here we have a widow, representing the most helpless and vulnerable in society, who had been ripped off; someone had literally taken what was rightfully hers right out from underneath her. This was a situation that was common in the ancient world. Unfortunately, women had very little say in the ancient world. They were completely dependent upon their fathers, husbands, or other close *male* relatives to speak up for them. Women in general had no voice in the public square; if they wanted to be heard or taken seriously, they had to have a male represent them. The widow described by Jesus in the parable apparently had no advocate; she had no male to represent her. The only person who could do her any good was this judge. The problem, of

course, was that the judge was just as corrupt and crooked as the scuzzball who ripped her off. It is quite clear that this woman was innocent, which is why she is coming to this judge.

He is her only hope and he knows it. He knows that apart from him advocating for her, she will be reducing to begging and will most likely be a victim to hunger, rape and violence. Yet, he is quite clear about the fact that he really doesn't give a hoot whether she thrives or not. This is the sort of judge that he is. He is the sort of guy who could walk by her cold starving body day after day after day without feeling a twinge of compassion whatsoever. Her future lay in his hands and he knows it, and yet he publicly and unashamedly says, 'No!' He was a crook—he only took up a case if he could benefit from it somehow. If a client could not give him great 'incentive'—financial compensation, sweetheart deals, under the table bribes—regardless of their need, he was not the sort who would do his civic duty by taking their case seriously. He was in it as a lucrative business with no concern whatsoever for justice or righteousness.

This woman realizes that the only one who can possibly do her any good is just as much of a scum bucket as her oppressors. The judge has completely neglected her cry for justice—for the law to be enforced. She knew that she had only two options; she could either 1. throw her hands up in defeat saying, 'It is what it is...' or she could 2. become a detestable nag to the point of driving him to the brink of insanity. She wisely chose the latter. She wanted to be the uncatchable fly that circled his head, driving him to the point of saying, 'Whatever it takes; I just want her out of my hair!'

Most people have the assumption that this widow was a sweet, meek old lady. I don't think so. She knew that he was her only hope of livelihood and she was willing to go to whatever end necessary to get him to take her seriously. And she knew that if she could convince him that she was never going to give him a break; if she could convince him that she was as stubborn and persistent as he was greedy and selfish, he would cave. I am sure that every time she saw him in public she reminded him of her hard-headed persistence; "Judge, I'm not leaving. I will be back tomorrow to thoroughly pester you again. And just in case you are wondering, I will be back the day after that, and the day after that, and the day after that!"

And we see that in the end her persistence paid off and the judge granted her justice.

The Point of the Story

So, the appropriate question at this point is this; 'How does this story of this unjust judge and persistent widow help us in our battle against giving up in prayer?' There is at least one obvious factor already noticeable; namely, that the woman sets an incredible example of persistence. However, there is much more to it than just the example set by the woman. Jesus goes on in Luke 18 and explains exactly how this parable helps us in our prayer lives. Look at what He says in Luke 18:6-8.

6 Then the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 Will not God grant justice to His elect who cry out to Him day and night? Will He delay to help them? 8 I tell you that He will swiftly grant them justice. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find that faith on earth?'

First of all, notice where Jesus puts the emphasis. Does He say, "Observe the great persistence of the widow!" No! Rather, He says, "Listen to what the unjust judge says." In other words, Jesus' focus is not on the persistence of the widow, but rather it is on the unjust judge. Jesus tells us to 'listen to' or 'consider' the words of the unjust judge. Well, what did the unjust

judge say? It would be a mistake to simply say that he granted the woman justice. No, you must take his whole statement into consideration (found in vss. 4-5). And what did the unjust judge say in vss. 4-5?

‘Even though I don’t fear God or respect man, yet because this widow keeps pestering me, I will give her justice, so that she doesn’t wear me out by her persistent coming.’

Really the unjust judge says two things: 1. he openly confesses his own hard, calloused heart and then 2. revealed the fact that the only reason he granted her justice was to get her off his back.

Now why would Jesus want to draw attention to the words of this unjust judge? This is the whole point of the parable; the parable is meant to highlight the character of the unjust judge so that the character of the judge would be set in stark contrast with the character of God. Here is Jesus’ point: if even a judge, as wicked as this judge was, is moved to act on behalf of this widow on the basis of her persistence alone, then **how much more** will God, who is infinite in love, grace, compassion, and mercy act on behalf of His people when they call out to Him? The whole point is the ‘**how much more**’ aspect. If you think that you can see a lot with one light bulb on, **how much more** do you think you will see if you turn two light bulbs on; if you think that you were able to catch a lot of fish with one fishing pole, **how much more** do you think you will catch with two fishing poles; if you think that an unjust, unloving, unmerciful judge is attentive to your plea for justice on the basis of persistence alone, **how much more** attentive do you think an infinitely just, loving, and merciful God will be to your persistent pleas for mercy and justice?!

Jesus’ point is that persistence in prayer, not giving up in prayer, flows out of a knowledge of the character of God. When you see the character of God set in direct contradistinction to the character unjust judge, and then you see that this unjust judge responded to this woman not because he felt compassion for her or because he loved her, but rather because he wanted to get rid of her, you begin to realize how responsive a God of infinite grace and love is to His people (his elect) when they persist in prayer.

God is a Giver

You see, the judge did not grant justice to the woman because He loved her—in fact, he didn’t give a hoot about her; in fact, he himself discloses the fact that the only reason he did anything for her was because she had become an absolute pest to him (he wanted her out of his hair, off his back, out of his life). The unjust judge is the kind of guy that you have to manipulate, cajole, or bribe—you have to twist his arm—to get him to plead your case. On the other hand, God is not the sort of God that you have to manipulate, cajole, or bribe—you don’t have to twist His arm to get Him to plead your case.

The one thing that this passage says about God is that God is a giver. What an amazing thought! God is not like us; He does not hoard all things for Himself and then give us the measly little crumbs that are left. I am so glad that God does not give like we give. So many Christians have this thought that God is reluctant to give. In fact, this is the very attitude that drove the pagans to approach prayer in the way that they did. They ultimately distrusted the character of their idols. Turn with me to Matthew 6:7;

When you pray, don't babble like the idolaters, since they imagine that they'll be heard for their many words.

You see, the idolaters had to heap up words to convince their idols that it was advantageous for them to answer their prayers. They heaped up words because they knew that their idols were reluctant to give. They were persistent because they had to be because the gods were reluctant to give. We are to be persistent, but not because we think that God will not hear us or because we think that we have to convince Him to be merciful to us, but rather because we trust Him and because we know that He is the only One who can do us any good. Where do you go when you have a need? You go to the one who has both the desire and ability to meet your need. God fulfills both of these requirements and that is why we persist. We persist because of who He is—He is both able and willing.

God is a giver. He loves to give good gifts to His kids. The greatest example of this is found in Romans 8:31-32.

What then are we to say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare His own Son, but offered Him up for us all; how will He not also with Him give us everything?

This passage teaches us two things: 1. God is for us. He is not like the unjust judge. The unjust judge was opposed to the persistent widow. He only answered her out of necessity. God, on the other hand, is good. Here we find that God is for us. He wants our good more than we want our good; He wants what is best for us more than we want what is best for us. 2. God is a bountiful giver. This reality is supremely evidenced in the giving of His Son. Jesus is the greatest gift that could be given. Jesus was God's only begotten Son. Here Paul is saying, in my own words, 'If God was not reluctant to give you His Son, what will He be reluctant to give you?' The implied answer is, 'Nothing!'

Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. In other words, if God freely gave us His Son (the greater) then surely He will with Him freely give us everything else (the lesser). And why did God give us His Son? Jesus says in John 3:16 (and Paul echoes the same in Romans 5:8) that it was His love for us that motivated Him to send His Son. God is completely unlike the unjust judge. God gives freely. Hopefully you will see from Romans 8:31-32 that your persistence in prayer stands or falls in relation to your understanding of the Gospel. Here is how it works: your persistence in prayer stands or falls on your understanding of the character of God and how He relates with you; however, your understanding of the character of God stands or falls upon the clarity of your understanding of how God has revealed Himself in His Son and your understanding of how God relates with you stands or falls upon the clarity of your understanding of what God has done for you through the death and resurrection of His Son. In other words, your understanding of the character of God and how He relates with you stands or falls upon your comprehension and apprehension of the Gospel. The better you know your God (and especially in regard to how He has revealed Himself and relates with you in the Gospel), the more you will persistently and confidently pray to Him.

Here is the point of the parable: if an unjust judge, who is unspeakably crooked and unrealistically reluctant to give, will respond to a plea for justice on the basis of persistence alone, how much more will an infinitely loving Father, One who is for you, One who did not spare His own Son for you—how much more will a God like this—respond to your persistent

prayers?! If even the wicked respond to persistence (albeit reluctantly) how much more will God, the One who freely gave us His Son and promises to freely give us all things (Romans 8:32)! The God of the Bible is not a reluctant giver; He is not like the unjust judge.

God is a Giver of Justice

Craig Blomberg suggests that Luke 18:1-8 has two main points;

“...is Luke 18:1-8 about persistent prayer (so Luke 18:1) or about God’s eagerness to vindicate the his elect (so vv. 6-8)? Those committed to the one-point rule of interpretation have debated endlessly which of these two truths is more central, but if the passage can make one point per character, the stalemate is resolved. The judge is a foil to teach about the character of God; the widow, about the proper response of his people”²

I do not see why Blomberg sees the need to suggest that the two main points of the parable must flow out of each individual character. I do not necessarily agree that the two points are persistence in prayer and prayer for God to vindicate the elect. It seems, rather, more appropriate to suggest that Jesus has one main point; namely, we are to confidently (confident in the character of God, that is) persistent in prayer for God to vindicate His elect. Thus, it is appropriate to break Luke 18:1-8 up into two sermons: the first focusing on persistence in prayer flowing forth from a correct understanding of the character of God; the second focusing on persistence in praying specifically for God’s vindication of the elect. This does not mean that the parable is broken up into two points; rather, it merely means that the parable can be faithfully dealt with in a general way and in a specific way.

There is no questioning the fact that this parable primarily has to do with confident and persistent prayer regarding the coming of King Jesus to vindicate His people. This parable must not be disconnected from its context. Luke 18, after all, is the continuation of the discussion that Jesus started in Luke 17:20. The word ‘then’ in Luke 18:1 is a huge tipoff that Jesus is giving this parable as a continuation of the discussion they have been having about the second coming. In Luke 17:22 Jesus tells His disciples,

“The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you won’t see it.”

Jesus is here telling His disciples that the consummation of the Kingdom would not come right away, but rather that tough days are on the horizon. While they wait for the consummation of the Kingdom of Christ they will experience all sorts of injustices. Part of the ammunition that they will need to stand strong in those days is persistent prayer. Because the consummation of Christ’s Kingdom will not come right away and because they will be at the receiving end of a great number of injustices, they will need to confidently persist with God in prayer for the final consummation of the Kingdom. Times will come when Jesus’ promise regarding His second coming will seem too little too late—because ‘with the Lord one day is like 1,000 years, and 1,000 years is like one day’ (2 Peter 3:9). This is why God is ultimately set in contradistinction to an *unjust* judge. The unjust judge of Luke 18 is explained to shed light on the fact that God is not just a giver, but a giver of justice—a giver of justice to those who are genuinely oppressed.

² Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), 260.

The disciples will be such oppressed people, which is why they will need to cleave to their just God's promises in prayer.³

God, the vindicator of His elect, is the one to whom this persistent prayer is to be addressed. Luke 18:8 is key to seeing how this prayer fits into the context of Jesus' discussion about His coming Kingdom. Luke issues a challenge to His hearers in Luke 18:8.

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find that faith on earth?

I have heard this passage be explained as a sad question; as if Jesus were sadly saying, 'I just don't know if I will find this sort of faith—the sort evidenced by the woman, the sort which is evidenced through confident and persistent prayer—when I come back. I hope I will, but I am just not all that sure.' But this is just not how Jesus intended for verse 8 to be taken.

Ultimately, Luke 18:8 is the challenge of the parable. The challenge is this; when Jesus comes back to consummate His kingdom will He find you confidently persisting in prayer in spite of the great injustice upon you at the moment, or will He find you dejected and doubting? Luke 18:8 is the point of application—after reading the parable (vss. 2-5) and considering Jesus' explanation of it (vss.6-7), we are left asking, 'How are we to respond to such a parable?' The answer is this, 'Confidently (confident in the character of God, that is) persist in praying for the consummation of the Kingdom, come what may.' We will persistently pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10), regardless of our circumstances. Jesus challenges His disciples by asking if they will be evidencing 'that faith on earth' when He comes back to get His church. 'That faith' is a reference to 'that sort of faith'—the sort evidenced by the persistent widow—an enduring, not-going-to-throw-in-the-towel-regardless-of-my-circumstances, sort of faith. The sort of faith which keeps you on your knees regardless of God's apparent lack of immediate action in the face of extreme injustice.

You find almost the same exact emphasis in Isaiah 62:1-7

¹ I will not keep silent because of Zion, and I will not keep still because of Jerusalem until her righteousness shines like a bright light, and her salvation like a flaming torch. ² Nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory. You will be called by a new name that the LORD's mouth will announce. ³ You will be a glorious crown in the LORD's hand, and a royal diadem in the palm of your God. ⁴ You will no longer be called Deserted, and your land will not be called Desolate; instead, you will be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ For as a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; and as a bridegroom rejoices over [his] bride, so your God will rejoice over you.

⁶ Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen on your walls; they will never be silent, day or night. You, who remind the LORD, no rest for you! ⁷ Do not give Him rest until He establishes and makes her Jerusalem the praise of the earth.

This passage consists of two sections; in Isaiah 62:1-5 God tells Israel everything that He Himself is going to do to reestablish His people (how He is going to vindicate them), and then from 62:6-7 He commands them to not let Him rest until He does all that He has just said that He is going to do (reread that last sentence again and again until you understand it). He has promised them that He is surely going to do all these things and yet He commands them to not rest and to

³ Just read any of the 253 passages in the New Testament which speak of the reality of earthly trouble, affliction, and persecution for those who follow Jesus (Matthew 5:10-12 and 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3 for example).

not give Him rest until He actually does it. The big question that God answers in this passage is, ‘How are we to live in this intermediate time—the time between the promise and its fulfillment?’ God has given the promise that He is *for sure* going to vindicate His people. However, there is going to be a period of time before the fulfillment of this promise is realized. In this intermediate period the people of God are to not rest and they are not to let Him rest until He has done all that He has said that He will do.

This is the exact same sort of a thing going on in Luke 18:1-8. How are the disciples to live in the in the intermediate time—the time between the promise (ultimate justice or vindication at the 2nd coming of Jesus) and its full fulfillment? They are to confidently persist in prayer—they are to give God no rest—until Jesus comes back to finally consummate the Kingdom. The promise of His coming has been given; God is *for sure* going to come back to vindicate His people, and a promise has also been given that they will want it to be sooner than it actually is (Luke 17:22)—when they come to this point of tension they are to persist in confident prayer that the Lord would hasten the day of His coming.

The big question of application that has been wracked my mind is; ‘Why do we not pray more often for the Lord to hasten the day of His second coming?’ We pray for healing, for jobs, for safe traveling, for the selling and buying of houses, but we never pray, “Our Lord Come!” (usually translated *Maranatha* from 1 Corinthians 16:22)? Can we really say that we are like the Thessalonians in that we are those who “wait for His Son from heaven” (1 Thessalonians 1:10)? Why is it that the second coming concerns us so little; why does it show up so infrequently, if at all, in our praying? I think that this is where we might all squirm a bit; the reason why passages like these seem so foreign to our own Christianity is because we are satisfied with the kingdom of this world. Our feet are so grounded in the kingdom of this realm that we see no real immediate desire for the kingdom of Christ.

In Phillipian 1 Paul actually says, “For me, living is Christ and dying is gain.” He goes on to expound upon this statement and actually asserts that it is far more preferable (at least in a selfish way) to ‘depart and be with Christ.’ This is not a statement advocating suicide (in the least), but it is an indication that Paul truly saw himself as a temporary resident on this earth; it is an indication that he really lived for the Kingdom to come. How deep are our heels sunk into the kingdom of this earth; is our store house of treasures here or there? I believe that our prayer lives may betray us—they may reveal that our treasure lies where it ought not lie. Or what about the sentiment of Peter in 2 Peter 3:12; ‘as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God...’ or of Jude in Jude 23; ‘keep yourselves in the love of god, expecting the mercy of our Lord Jesus for eternal life,’ or even of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:8; “In the future, there is reserved for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, ***but to all those who have loved His appearing.***”

So let it be clear that Jesus has a highly specific sort of prayer in mind in this parable—the sort of prayer that has everything to do with the hastening of the day of the Lord. Thus this passage must not be read as some sort of a proof text for prosperity preachers to ensure all the goodies that health, wealth, and prosperity have to offer. It has everything to do with seeking our true homeland, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 11). This is what Jesus is challenging us to here in Luke 18; when the Son of Man comes to consummate His kingdom, will He find a bunch of saints confidently persisting in prayer for His coming, or will He find a bunch of folk who have set up camp on this earth, having thrown in the towel, selling their soul for a bag of temporal goodies (like Esau—see Hebrews 12:16-17)?

Conclusion

Does our prayer life reflect a deep confidence in the good and sovereign character of God? Do we trust the word of men more than we trust the perfect promises of God? Jesus here sets forth a God who is a bountiful giver. He wants His people to lay hold of His promises. He delights in answering prayer. He is not the sort of God who is reluctant to bless or give, rather He is a present help in time of trouble (Psalm 46:1). We can persist and we must persist—we must never throw in the towel. To throw in the towel is to cast doubt on His character (ether on His willingness, His love and compassion, or on his ability, His sovereignty and omnipotence. Do we confidently seek His coming Kingdom? If we were to lose all our worldly possessions would we continue to confidently persist in prayer for the consummation of the Kingdom?