

Luke 18:1-8  
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### **Just Keep Asking**

(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

When I planned this series of sermons in the parables of Jesus (recorded in the gospel according to Luke), I chose to preach the one we just read (Luke 18:1-8) right on the heels of the parable we looked at last Sunday (Luke 11:1-13) because both start out being about prayer. They end up being more about something else ... but they start out being about prayer.

The parable in Luke 11, "The Friend at Midnight," or better named, as discovered last week, "The Shameless Father and His Extravagant Answering," is told in response to the disciple's request, "Lord, teach us to pray." The parable in Luke 18, "The Widow and the Unjust Judge," is told, says Luke, "... to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (18:1).

As I prepared to preach the parable in Luke 11, I had pretty clear sense of what it would do for us and in us, for I have known it well for years, ever since living in Manila from 1985 to 1989. But as I have prepared to preach the parable in Luke 18, I did not have a clear sense of what it would do for us and in us, for I have not known it well.

Indeed, this is the first time I have tried to preach it. ☺ I have tried to teach it in a classroom setting, but only once, in a Saturday morning seminar for expatriates in a hotel ballroom in Beijing in 1988. As I have been living and working in the parable the past weeks, I think I am beginning to get it. Underscore the word beginning: I am beginning to understand what Jesus is getting at. And the sign I am beginning to understand? I have come under deep conviction, a deep conviction about the quality of my faith.

As we work our way through "The Widow and the Unjust Judge," we are going to see that the parable is about faith. And we are going to see that faith, genuine faith, living faith, is revealed most clearly, is manifested most clearly, is expressed most clearly, in not giving up in prayer. As New Testament scholar Arland Hultgren concludes his study of this parable: "Only as persons persist in prayer will they persist in faith – a living relationship with God." [*The Parables of Jesus*, 253]

Living faith keeps on asking the living God to bring about the full realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. Living faith keeps on asking the living God to bring about the full realization of the Kingdom of God on earth, even when, or, especially when, faith does not see any answers to the asking.

Notice how Jesus concludes His interpretation of His parable. With a question:

"When the Son of Man ..." Son of Man is Jesus' favorite self-designation.

"When the Son of Man comes ..." Jesus tells this parable in Luke 18 right after teaching on His coming again in Luke 17, teaching in which He warns disciples that they may suffer injustice, as they wait for Him to come, and as result get discouraged and lose heart.

“When the Son of Man comes ... will He find faith on the earth?” (18:8). Literally, “the faith” – definite article.

“Will He find the faith on earth?” “The faith,” I think, referring to the faith of the widow imploring the unjust judge.

When He comes, will Jesus the Son of Man find disciples not losing heart, but passionately praying for the coming of the Kingdom, passionately praying for the coming of the King? Will He?

In Jesus’ question there is a little particle hard to translate: the particle *ara*. It is used, as the dictionary puts it, “to enliven the question” (DGAB). In particular, introducing a note of anxiety, a note of suspicion as to its answer. Will He? Will Jesus find people alive in faith on earth praying their hearts out for the coming of the King? *Ara* poses the possibility that He will not.

And that is why I say the parable has brought me under deep conviction. Do I believe, and therefore pray, as passionately as the widow?

Before we work our way through Jesus’ story, let me make two preliminary observations.

First of all, as far as we know, Jesus taught three parables that start out being about prayer. And interestingly they are all found in the gospel according to Luke: “The Parable of the Shameless Father” in Luke 11:5-8, “The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge” in Luke 18:1-8, and “The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-collector” in Luke 18:9-14 (“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax-collector” (18:10)).

I say “interestingly” found only in Luke, because Luke is the gospel that most consistently presents Jesus as the social activist, as the champion of the powerless, as the friend of the outsiders. Yet, more than the other three gospels, Luke presents Jesus as the Man of Prayer. It is in Luke that we find Jesus regularly slipping away to pray. The Man of Social Justice is also, primarily, the Man of Prayer, telling us that social justice and praying go together. The deeper we move into the heart of God in prayer, the greater the passion for social justice. The more we live out passion for social justice, the more we realize we have to pray – we are in over our heads and need help!

First observation: all of Jesus’ parables on prayer are found in Luke.

Second observation: the hero of the parable is a woman. The widow. Jesus chooses a woman as His hero. Not a normal thing for a first century teacher to do, but typical of the Jesus of Luke. More than the other gospels, Luke presents Jesus as elevating and advocating the role of women in the kingdom. Which, if you know the first century context, was scandalous!

In Luke 15 – which we will look at next Sunday – Jesus defends His eating with sinners and tax-collectors by telling three parables: “The Shepherd and His Lost Sheep,” “The Father and His Lost Sons,” and in between them, “The Woman and Her Lost Coin.” All three are clearly about the God of the Kingdom. A shepherd a metaphor for God? Sure, makes sense. A father a metaphor for God? Sure, with much Biblical precedent. A woman a metaphor for God? Unheard of! So too the parable before us today. The hero of living faith is a woman. But that’s Jesus for you!

So, let us make our way through His story.

A widow. A judge. What does the widow want from the judge? Why won't the judge give the widow what she is asking for? Why does the judge, an unjust judge, finally do it?

A widow. In the first century context, one of the most vulnerable persons in society. Widows in our twenty-first Canadian culture are not necessarily as vulnerable. Some are well off financially, some even in charge of their own business affairs. Not in the first century Middle-Eastern context – totally vulnerable.

You see, in that context, a woman's place in society was a function of her relationships with men. Her status, and therefore, her security, was wholly determined by the men in her life. If she was not yet married, she was under the protection and provision of her father. If she was married, she was under the protection and provision of her husband. If her husband died, she was left without protection or provision, unless she had a son, or a thoughtful brother-in-law.

You can see, by the way, how vulnerable Mary, the mother of Jesus was. When she, as a virgin, conceived the Son of God, she was engaged to her husband to be, Joseph. But they were not yet living together. Because she was engaged, she was no longer under the protection and provision of her father. But because Joseph had not yet taken her into his house, she was not yet under the protection and provision of her husband. She was in a kind of "no man's land" (Richard Mouw).

Which is why she sings what she does in her Magnificat: "My soul exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has had regard for the humble estate of His bondservant ..." (Luke 1:46-48). When she had no man to protect her and provide for her, the Living God became her protector and provider.

The widow in Jesus' parable is in a horribly vulnerable "no man's land." She had left the cover of her father years ago. She no longer had the cover of her husband who had died. And, apparently, she had no son.

Which is why she is in the court room all alone. She has no man to stand with her, to stand up for her. The cultural surprise of the story is that she is even there! That she is so committed to justice that she dares to stand alone. A woman before a man with no man to support her! This is one gutsy lady!

And she is there with no economic clout. If she had money, she could bribe the judge. That is just the way things are sometimes; the way through the courts is by paying off the court officials. That she kept coming, day after day after day after day, says she did not have the resources to pay off the judge, who clearly was a man who could be swayed by cash.

What does the widow want from the judge? Justice. Simple justice. Vs. 3 – "give me legal protection from my opponent." Literally it is, "do me justice." That is all she wants: "do me justice." The man is a judge. It is his job to just do justice.

She is not seeking revenge. She simply wants what is right. Had someone stolen from her? Had some distant relative worked the system to take what was rightly hers? Had she been evicted from her apartment by some insensitive, greedy landowner? We are not told. All we know is that she simply wants what is right. She does not want revenge. She is not seeking exorbitant compensation. Just, "do me justice." And she will not stop coming to the court until justice is done.

The judge. One very corrupt official. Vs. 2 – Jesus says he, “did not fear God and did not respect man.” The judge himself will say this of himself. Vs. 4 – In his soliloquy, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man.”

In the Bible “Fearing God” is a basic requisite for being a good judge. When king Jehoshaphat appointed judges throughout the land of Judah, he outlined their responsibilities, ending with the charge, “let the fear of the Lord be upon you” (2 Chronicles 19:7). This judge has no sense of being accountable to God; there is not even a hint that he has to give an answer for his rulings to a Higher Court. Which means the widow cannot appeal with the words, “For God’s sake.” It would do nothing in the soul of the judge.

In the Bible, justice is “weighted toward” the vulnerable. Again and again, God calls His people to honour the plight of the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Leviticus 19:9-10, 23:32; Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 24:19-22, 26:12). There is a “preferential option” for the widow. Societies are judged by how they treat widows. They stand or fall depending whether they care for widows. The judge does not care. God’s “preferential option” for the vulnerable means nothing to him.

And he does not care what people think about his rulings. “He does not respect man,” says Jesus. Kenneth Bailey points out that Arabic versions of Luke render the phrase as, “He is not ashamed before people.” As we noted last Sunday, and will again next Sunday, Middle-Eastern cultural is largely governed by shame; or more precisely, by avoidance of shame. A central cultural value is not bringing shame on my face; not acting in any way that shames my name or reputation. Yes, life is ordered by law; rules do have a role. But life is fundamentally ordered by the avoidance of shame. Thus when parents discipline their children, they do not say as parents in the West do, “That is wrong.” They say, “That is shameful.” So, says Kenneth Bailey, “One of the sharpest criticisms possible of an adult in the Middle Eastern village today is *ma jikhtashi*, ‘he does not feel shame’.” For the Biblical authors, society collapses where there is no longer any fear of God and where there is no longer any avoidance of shame before humans.

The judge in the parable is a “collapsed human” (dj). “For God’s sake” holds no weight. Nor does the cry, “Shame on you!” He can only be bribed.

But he finally gives the widow what she asks. He finally gives her justice. Why? Not because he comes to his senses. Not because the fear of God finally awakens justice in his soul. Not because the shame factor finally kicks in. They why? Because of the widow’s courageous and scandalous behavior.

We hear this in his soliloquy. This is a regular feature of Jesus’ parables: the key turning point comes in one of the character’s soliloquy, in their “interior monologue” (Hultgren, 254).

In The Parable of the Rich Fool – “What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops? This is what I will ...” (Luke 12:16-18).

In The Parable of the Un-Watchful Servant – “My master will be a long time coming,” so goes out and does what he wants to the other servants (Luke 12:45).

In The Parable of the Prodigal son – “I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men’” (Luke 15:18-19).

On it goes (Luke 16:1-8; 20:9-19).

The judge says to himself – Vs. 4-5: “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her justice, lest by continually coming to me she wear me out.” “Wear me out” is literally, “lest she hit me under the eye.” The word comes from the world of prize fighting, from the boxing ring. The word means “to strike someone on the face (under the eyes) in such a way that he [or she] gets a ‘black eye’ ...” or is disfigured in some way [TDNT, 8:590, Konrad Weiss, *hypopiadzo*].

Now, the word can refer to a metaphorical hit, a metaphorical “black eye.” The judge could be saying, “she will make me look bad in public.” “She will shame me.” Especially because I am ignoring God’s super concern for widows. ‘She will defame me.’ [Walter L. Liefeld, *Parables on Prayer*, in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker, 256]. But that is not likely given what the judge says about himself: no fear of God, no sense of shame.

So I take the judge literally. He is afraid that the widow is going to become violent with him! She will not; that is not her spirit. But he fears the possibility. “She might give me a black eye!” What a scene! Almost humorous. A judge with all the cultural and societal power ... and a widow with no cultural and societal power. Yet she is gaining the upper hand! As New Testament scholar Joel Green puts it: here we have an “image of the almighty, fearless, macho judge cornered and slugged by the least powerful in society” [Luke, 641].

The judge finally does what is right because of the widow’s surprising and scandalous behavior. She acts outside the culturally expected norms. She blows the judge away by not losing heart when justice is not being done. What a hero!

So, the point of the parable is to wear God down? Right? Pester God until He finally gives in. Right? Get a whole bunch of others to join you in pestering God. The more the better. Right?

No. Listen to Jesus. Listen to how He Himself comments on His story.

Remember the context. Just before speaking the parable, Jesus had been teaching about His coming again, and He acknowledges that we could become discouraged waiting. “The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and [but] you will not see it” (Luke 17:22). And we could lose heart.

So, Jesus says: “Hear what the unrighteous judge said.” And then He takes us into the reason He gives the parable – to call us to faith, to show us why we can keep going and not lose heart. Listen carefully.

A question – vs. 7 – “Now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night?” That phrase “day and night” takes me back to the beginning of Luke, on that day when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple for Dedication. They encounter two elderly saints who have not given up. Simeon, who Luke says was, “looking for the consolation of Israel” (2:25). Who, then, holding Jesus in his arms, says, “Now Lord, You can let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word, for my eyes has seen Your salvation” (2:29). And Anna, an 84 year old widow, a prophetess, who Luke says, “never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers,” (2:37), “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). “Shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night?”

The question uses a grammatical construction that emphasizes an emphatic “yes” answer. *Ou me + the subjunctive*. It is the strongest way of saying “yes God will bring about justice.” Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater. If the unjust judge finally does what is right, will not the great Just Judge also do so? If the unjust judge, who does not fear God and has no shame, finally does justice, will not the God Who keeps His word finally work justice in the world? Yes He will. It is a promise, and He always keeps His promise. Do not lose heart: He said He would come and rectify all wrongs, and He will not shame His name.

Jesus continues. Another question. Vs. 7 – “And will He delay long over them?” “Delay long” is sometimes rendered “slow” – “and will He not be slow over them?” So some of us latch on to the word “slow” and think, well, Jesus is simply reminding us that His sense of time is not ours. And our minds jump to texts like 2 Peter 3:8: “The Lord is not slow about His promise as some count slowness ...” “With the Lord one day is a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” All that is true; but it is not what Jesus is saying here.

The verb “delay over,” can also be rendered “patient with.” So some of us latch on to the word “patient,” and think, well, Jesus is slow to come on our terms because He is patient with the world. And our minds go to 2 Peter 3 again, verse 9. “But the Lord is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” Sometimes I think Jesus holds back on coming in order to win just one more; “Wait ... just one more ... just one more.” All true; but not what He is saying here.

The verb “delay over” is actually best rendered as “longsuffering over.” So some of us latch on to the word “suffer long,” and think, well, even as we suffer waiting for Jesus to come He suffers with us. Which is true; as we groan for the kingdom to come, He, through His Spirit, groans with us, in us (Romans 8:26).

But notice the phrase “over them.” “Will He not be longsuffering over them?” Who is the “them”? “Longsuffering over” whom? The elect. He will be longsuffering over the elect who cry out for justice.

Now, in the Bible, “longsuffering” means “put anger away” (*makrothumia*). “Slow to anger,” we hear over and over in the Torah and Psalms. God is “slow to anger.” “Will He not be slow to anger over them?” Over whom? Over the elect. “Slow to anger over the elect.” “Will He not put His anger away from the elect?” Yes! He will put away His anger from those seeking justice!

You see, the justice-seeker is also a sinner. All justice-seekers are also sinners. A just cause does not a just person make. There are no purely just justice-seekers. That is because there are no purely good “good guys,” just as there are no purely bad “bad guys,” except the ultimate bad guy himself, the evil one. I think it was Alexander Solzhenitsyn who said that “the line that divides good and evil goes through my own heart.” Do not lose heart: God will “put away” His anger against sinful justice-seekers as they cry out for justice!

Jesus continues with a great declaration. Vs. 8 – “I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily.” Speedily? Some believers cry out for justice for years, for decades. Speedily? The kingdom is coming speedily? Jesus is coming speedily?

Yes, when we understand that the kingdom and Jesus are one. Where Jesus is, the kingdom is; where the kingdom is, Jesus is. The kingdom and the King cannot be separated. Where the King is, there is the kingdom.

And where is the King? Not far away. Not at all. Very close at hand. When the Son of Man ascended to the throne He did not go far away. He is close at hand. And because He is close at hand He comes speedily. Do not lose heart.

This is what He declares in the last book of the Bible, in The Revelation of Jesus Christ. "For the time is near." Revelation 1:3 and 22:7. "For the time is near." Because the Lord is near (Philippians 4:5). Always near. He is not coming again from a far place. He is so very close at hand. Always near. Wonderfully immanent. Able to come speedily when we call His name.

"Bring about justice speedily." He does it, you know, very soon after speaking the parable. For in the next chapters in Luke, Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, and by the end of the week ends up unjustly judged, and then unjustly crucified on a cross, where in the mystery of things, justice is done for all time.

Jesus continues. His big question. Vs. 8 – "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" Literally, the faith. "Will He find the faith on earth?" Will He find the faith of the gutsy widow on earth?

In light of God being a perfectly Just Judge, Who hears those who cry out day and night. In light of being the merciful Judge Who puts away His anger from those who cry out. In light of the nearness of the Son of Man. In light of all that, when He finally shows up, will He find the faith of the widow who would not go away, who would not let go, who did not lose heart as she waited for justice to be done?

That is why I said "standing under" this parable has brought me under great conviction. Jesus is saying that living faith keeps asking. Not because we have to wear God down, but because that is what faith does: it asks God to do what only God can do. Faith knows we are helpless.

Living faith will not give up until God finally fulfills His promise. Living faith stays there – before God's face – until His great redemptive project is finished. Jesus is saying when we stop praying it means we have stopped believing. It means that we secretly think it is no use praying any more. It means we have secretly concluded that God does not care about justice, and there really is no hope for justice to be done. When we stop praying it means we have capitulated to the powers of injustice.

Theologian Ronald Goetz expresses it so arrestingly:

"We have a right and a duty to pray for the world and for ourselves, expecting to be vindicated, lest by our silence we would seem to abandon the world to the suspicion that any God who could exist, given a world as ours, is either utterly aloof, or cruel, or impotent, or perhaps all three." [*On petitionary prayer: Pleading with the Unjust Judge?* in *The Christian Century*, Jan. 29, 1997, p 99].

As I watch the widow in the parable, I think of how the writer of the book of Hebrews defines faith. Faith, he says, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). Faith is putting our weight on the unseen and the not-yet (Michael Kelshaw).

And what Jesus is telling us in His parable of the widow and the unjust judge, is that the clearest manifestation of faith, the clearest expression that faith is alive, is that it prays. And that it keeps praying until the not-yet is the now, and until the unseen is seen.

And we know from Jesus' other parable on prayer, the one we looked at last Sunday, that every time we pray something happens. "The one who is asking is receiving, the one who is seeking is finding" (Luke 11:10). Is receiving what? Is finding what? GOD! Every time we pray, the Father gives more of the Holy Spirit to us!

As we keep asking for justice to be done in the world, the God of justice keeps giving us Himself! So, let us keep believing by keeping asking. Let us keep asking our Father in heaven to cause His kingdom to come. "Your kingdom come!" Only You can make it come. So, please, do it.

And, "Come, Lord Jesus." You are the Son of Man. Who according the vision in Daniel 7 is given all the kingdoms of the world. So, come! Come, claim Your rightful place in the universe. Come, so that all the nations of the world are finally freed from sin and evil and death, and live in the glorious freedom and extravagant abundance of the Your Reign.