

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Luke 18:1-9 **“Why Prayer Is Like Oxygen”**

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(12th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

LUKE 18:1-8 "WHY PRAYER IS LIKE OXYGEN"

"In prayer we enter a new reality, we see from God's point of view."

1) v.1 INTRODUCTION: EXHORTATION TO PERSISTENCE IN PRAYER. → 11:20-37, L Only

Those Who Pray Have An Antidote To Discouragement, //11:1-13
1 Thess. 5:17, Meaning First, Keep Praying, "Thy Kingdom Come"
Pray Again And Again, dei = Divine Necessity, Laxity // 8:13
11:2, 21:36, Eph. 3:13, How To Live In The Challenging Interim
The Answer To Fear/ Doubt Is Simple Prayer = Speak To God

1 "And he (i.e. Jesus) told them a parable, to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart (grow weary)."

2) vv.2-5 PARABLE: THE JUDGE AND VINDICATION OF THE WIDOW.

Prototype in Ben Sirach 35:12-26 (Jesus Not Shift To Man)

a) v.2 Character Of The Judge (No Shame Or Conscience). Unsavory Stock Character

2 He said, "A certain judge there was in a certain city. God he did not fear (no awe), and man he did not respect.

Judge Corruption, Amos 2:6-7, 5:10-13
God Prov. 1:7
Man Cannot Be Shamed
2 En. 49:2, Antithesis Of Righteous Judge

b) v.3 Character Of The Widow.. Impossible Situation

3 And a widow was in the city, and she was coming to him saying (repeatedly), "Vindicate me from my adversary."

Widow No Protection/ No Bribe
Coming Isaiah 1:17
Vindicate = Give Justice, 2:22, 2 Thess. 1:7-8, Rev. 6:10, 22:20

a') v.4 Judge Passes A Verdict On Himself. He Waited A Time, Acted Quickly

4 He did not want to for a (certain) time. Then he said to himself, "Although I do not fear God and do not respect man,

No Shame In Hurting A Destitute Widow
Wis. 2:10-11, 2 Enoch 42:9
Soliloquy Affirms
Man
Courts Are The Realm Of Men: Shouting/Pushing

b') v.5 Judges Passes A Verdict On And For The Widow. Women Not Inherit

5 Yet because she troubles me, this widow, I will vindicate her, lest in continual coming she wear me out (pugilist term)."

If A Corrupt Judge, How Much More God! 2:37-38
Widow Lit. give me a beating
Vindicate Give Justice
Coming Attrition
World Of Bribes And Brutality = Our Word! Headache/ Black Eye!

2' vv.6-8 GOD AND THE VINDICATION OF THE ELECT.

Light To Heavy Argument: Court Cartoon To God

a) vv.6-7a Question About Vindication: Future. God Is Not Worn Down Like A Judge

Question 1 6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says (i.e. 'I will vindicate her'). Shall not God make vindication for his elect (chosen)

Prayer Is For God To Bring Justice
Jesus Is Lord
Rev. 6:10, Dt. 10:17-18
All Who Respond To Jesus Are Chosen, Our Hope Is In God Alone

b) v.7b Present Action Of Prayers. //Dt. 15:9

the ones crying to him day and night? (Yes)

Pressurized World, Pain, God's Timetable Is Not Ours
Present: Hears 2:37-38, 1 Tim. 5:5
Prayer Is Not Passive But An Active Quest For Justice

b') v.7c Present Patience Of God. Many Disputed Readings (12+) Of This Verse

Also he is slow to anger over them.

Lit. he is long to bear with them, A Right Cause + Wrong People
Present: Merciful Elect Are Sinners
God's Justice Inspires Our Steady Faithfulness

a') v.8a Answer About Future Vindication: Future. God Not Like Judge, We Are Not Like Widow

Answer 1 8 I say to you that he shall make vindication for them suddenly (speedily).

Misreading = God Is Not Unwilling, Not Worn Down
Future (Answer) Jesus Was Vindicated
17:26-37, 21:34-36, Acts 12:7, 22:18, 25:4
How Live Now? Is He Really Coming To Vindicate His Own?

1') v.8b CONCLUSION: EXHORTATION TO FAITH. Hab. 2:3, Problem Of Doubt Over His Delay

Question 2 Left Open "Yet, when the Son of man comes, will he find (the) faith(fulness) on earth?"

Prayer-filled, Faithful Living, James 5:7-9. 1 Thess. 5:17, Faith Is Fed In Prayer
Pray And Look For The Coming Of Son Of Man // 17:5, 19, 22, 24, 26, 30
Stay Faithful, Like The Widow, Persistence In Faith Is Looked For
God Knows, Cares, Hears, Demands Justice, Is Long-suffering, Acts Decisively, Sets Thinks Right

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 18:1-8

The next unit is 18:1-8, which with 18:9-14 forms a double unit on prayer parallel to 11:1-13. It is a logical extension of the previous unit, 17:20-37, with its questions on the coming of the kingdom of God and the Son of man, as highlighted in v.8, “Yet when the Son of man comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?” In the interim, however long, the challenge is to continue to pray, as Jesus taught, “Thy kingdom come,” and not grow weary or lose heart. In prayer we stay in touch with God’s point of view. Prayer is an ongoing conversation and listening post. We pray and converse with a God who cares and knows and listens and is patient with his followers until he acts decisively to change their situation. The final issue is not God’s character or ability to bring justice but our faithfulness (v.8b). The structure of the unit is a 4:2 concentric patters (1-2 // 2’-1’). In the introduction (v.1) the meaning of the coming parable (vv.2-5) is telegraphed to the hearers, and at the end (v.8b) the Son of man arrives to mark the faithful who prayed. At the center in 2//2’ are the Parable of the Judge and the Widow (vv.2-5) and Jesus’ application of the same (vv.6-8). Note how *vindication* is used twice in the parable (vv.3, 5) and twice in the application (vv.7, 8a). The unit is without Synoptic parallel and may be thus assigned to Luke’s Special Source (L).

It is unusual to receive the intent of a story before the telling, but here Luke does that, speaking of Jesus in the third person, “And he told them a parable, *to the effect* that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” When the pressure is on and your prayers are desperate but unanswered, what do you do? You keep going to God and yearning for the solution, the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. It is an encouragement to know Jesus appreciates how hard it is to remain faithful when answers don’t come. The pastoral challenge of the unit is to encourage the weary (v.1) to keep their eyes on the prize (v.8b).

The parable (2. vv.2-5) is framed in stair-step parallelism (a-b // a’-b’) with parts a//a’ about the judge and b//b’ about the widow. Each of the four stanzas has three lines. The first two set up the conflict between an immovable object: the judge, and an irresistible force: the widow. He is everything a judge should not be since he has no awe of God and cannot be shamed into acting on behalf of a widow, who in Jewish law and custom deserved preference. Into the court of men she comes every day; hers is the only female voice among all the shouts, “Vindicate me from my adversary.” Widows had very little protection, and the story assumes a family member is cheating her of either the rights to live in the house or the return of her bride price. Her persistence is rooted in the rightness of her case and her precarious situation. The third stanza (a’ v.4) adds little to the story but a note that he ignored her and testified to what was earlier said about him in v.2, “Although I do not fear God and do not respect man.” What will change his behavior? Nothing but nagging. She is about to *wear him out*, and the phrase is from the language of boxing. So he caves, “Yet because she troubles me, this widow, I will vindicate her.”

Jesus’ application (2’ vv.6-8) is from lesser to greater. If this widow persevered to a verdict from a wicked judge, how much more can God’s children expect a favorable outcome from One who listens, who is loving and just, who is patient with the flaws of those who cry out. To have a just cause, as the widow did, does not a righteous person make. God will act on our behalf, but not because we are beyond reproach, as Luke notes in v.7c, “And he is slow to anger over them.” The surface structure of 2’ vv.6-8 is a 4:2 chiasm (a-b // b’-a’) with *make vindication* (v.7a, v.8a) as an inclusion. Rhetorically, a first question (vv.6-7a) is answered in v.8a; the second (v.8b) left open-ended. One must be careful. God is not a reluctant judge to be worn down; our stance is not that of a widow who fights alone. Yet we must stay in relationship no matter what, and the way to do that is prayer and listening. This is the faithfulness God looks for. Jesus’ willingness to use vivid characters fixes this story in the memory of his followers.

PRAYER IS LIKE OXYGEN

“Yet, when the Son of man comes, will he find faithfulness on earth?”

Luke questions his church.

LUKE 18:8b

By missionary reports early 19th century African converts were earnest and regular in their private devotions. Each one had a separate spot in the thicket outside the village where he would pour out his heart to God. Over time the paths to these sites became well worn. If one began to neglect prayer, it was soon apparent to the others. They would kindly remind the negligent one, “Brother, the grass grows on your path.”¹

Corrie Ten Boom gets at the same issue with a question, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?”² Regular equipment, or only for roadside emergencies? John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, put prayer and action in the proper order with a well-balanced couplet, “You can do more than prayer *after* you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray *until* you have prayed.”³ Then there’s the counter-intuitive wisdom of our own John Wesley, “I have so much to do that I spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it.”⁴

Did you know that a prayer movement is growing across America? It’s been going on for three decades at least and having the same hidden effects as yeast. Prayer is moving up the priority list of local churches. There are magazines on prayer, conferences on prayer, prayer summits for pastors, newsletters and e-mail lists

¹ *Today in the Word*, June 29, 1992.

² *Christian Reader*, Vol. 22, No.2, PreachingToday.com.

³ sermonillustrations.com

⁴ www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/prayerquotes

on prayer. Prayer-walking is a new spiritual discipline.⁵ Prayer is primary research in the life of the Spirit; it is doing business with the God who hears and acts. If the church is to be restored and renewed from our present decline, it will not come through programs or personalities but through prayer, God’s people humbling themselves and crying out to God. A.C. Dixon wrote:

“When we rely on organization, we get what organization can do; when we rely on education we get what education can do; when we rely on eloquence, we get what eloquence can do. Nor am I disposed to undervalue any of these things in their proper place, but when we rely on prayer, *we get what God can do.*”⁶

When I came to Main Street two years ago, I had the deep awareness what I brought to the table was just not enough. I knew it before, but now it was dosed with a keen sense of desperation, even panic. Biblical peaching, good theology, quality pastoral care and hard work- which were the best I had- would not be sufficient. I’d led lots of prayer meetings in my life, but I’d never had an official weekly meeting schedule for prayer as if it were a priority, and I sensed this was crucial to the future of this church. I needed to relearn the skill of leading a prayer meeting, a skill we Methodist clergy lost decades ago when we decided that good will and human efforts and the world’s agenda mattered more than God. And that is what I and others have done every Thursday evening for two years: thirty minutes of structured and free prayer which requires no one to pray aloud, which is what people often fear.

I wish more would come and inspect what we do. It’s work, but with it comes a sense we’re doing important business before the throne of God, and each week there are reports from the field, some of them quite startling. We refuse to lose heart but press ahead because Jesus said so. “Keep talking to my Father,” he said, “keep praying *thy kingdom come,*” and so we do. Aware of our frailty, aware of our sin, aware of the forces set against us within and without, among them cancer and death and addiction and war and unbelief, we pray, and something strange happens to me each week. I often come in tired, even discouraged, then leave with new hope, a new confidence God truly is with us and using our prayers as raw materials to shape the

⁵ “How to Prayer Walk,” www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/prayerquotes.

⁶ *Evangelism, A Biblical Approach* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 1984), 108.

agenda in a highly interactive mode.⁷ Such is the dignity of prayer, an ongoing conversation with the living God. In the careful study of Scripture, and in offering you the fruits of that in sermons and teaching, my mind is delighted by the insights of truth, but prayer is more vulnerable; it stirs us at a different level. Scripture is always present, but here the encounter is less mediated; it is a face-to-face with the awesome, beautiful, holy mystery of our God who uses our prayers to change the world and the processes of prayer to change us.

When it comes to prayer, Jesus is the master practitioner and teacher. He lived in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit through constant conversation and awareness. His every word and deed were rooted not in independent initiative but in dependent listening and obedient action. In the simplest sense of the word, Jesus was a *mimic* in almost childlike simplicity. He once revealed that he *did* what he saw the Father doing and *spoke* what he heard the Spirit saying.⁸ He lived in the immediacy of divine revelation, whereas we only visit that exotic land in fits and spurts because we are so deeply damaged and so blind to our larger horizons.

Jesus publicly demonstrates what it is for a human being to live in constant communion with God and with a power of love that was magnetic to most and absolutely repellant to some others, most notably the religious and political leaders who found him such a threat as to kill him when they had the chance.⁹ He was just too disturbing to the way the world was being run. It's what the four gospels are all about. Love him or hate him if you will, but ignoring him once you'd been in his presence was not a option.

Jesus great advantage at ground level was that he was not infected with the systemic disease of sin as we are. He perceptions and faculties and emotions and

⁷ Ron Goetz writes, "If Jesus' confidence in petitionary prayer is well founded, we are led to an astonishing ontological recognition: that God rules the world in constant consultation with those who pray, that God's determinations are wrought in dialogue with those who call for help" ("On Petitionary Prayer: Pleading with an Unjust Judge?" *Christian Century*, 1/29/97, 98).

⁸ John 5:19, 30.

⁹ For an analysis of the gospel trial scenes that bring all the earlier confrontations to a climax, see Darrell Bock, *Who Is Jesus* (New York, NY: Howard, 2012), Chapter 11, "The Examination by the Jewish Leadership," 152-173, Chapter 12, "The Examination by Pilate," 174-189.

intuition were unimpaired. He saw God and the world with clarity. No static on his phone line with God. He was morally and spiritually and intellectually pure and unsullied, innocent in the best sense, and therefore profoundly unnerving as he saw into people’s hearts and minds. How did he know what I was thinking? How did he know my secrets? Well, I say, someone told him Divine speaking, when it occurs, startles us, but for Jesus it was normal. The flow of his human consciousness about everyday life was woven in with communication from above. Dare I say it? There were voices in his head, and he saw what others did not see. Not because he was psychotic but because he lived at two levels at once, and for him it was normal. The flip side is that Jesus in all his perfections and unusual capacities shows us how much we have lost because of the corrosive powers of sin and evil and ignorance and rebellion; we are severely debilitated and in need of God’s rehab.¹⁰

Jesus is God’s secret agent dropped behind enemy lines and hidden in Nazareth obscurity for three decades before the show began; he is God the Son taking on all the limitations of human flesh; he is the visible member of the Triune God walking around in the garbage heap of our misery with its stench constantly in his nose. We pray sporadically, but Jesus lived in and out of a constant communion that was unforced and natural to him as breathing. Whenever he needed something, it was there, so he could live simply and uncluttered and transparent and available and fully present to whatever came next. We walk by faith and occasional insights; he walked by faith and sight. To be around him was to be aware of the gap between who I am and who I was designed to be. Sin, shame, brokenness, rebellion stupidity, fear: the whole human package. It’s why the disciples almost always look like *The Three Stooges*. But to their credit, they’d rather get it wrong with Jesus than be thought competent anywhere else. He had them from the first *follow me*; that he lost only one to the Evil One is a miracle. And the reality he lived in, which was a communion and conversation with the Father and the Spirit, he invites us into a bit at a time, and the name for that conversation is prayer, and it’s why we must keep using the script he gave us as an outline, “Our Father, who are in heaven, holy be your name. Your

¹⁰ This is precisely the intent of our strong doctrinal United Methodist statement on original sin in our Articles of Religion, Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin: “Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is *very far gone from original righteousness*, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually.” It’s not intended as a compliment but as an accurate diagnosis of our common debilitated human state (ital. ad., *BOD 2012*: 65).

kingdom come....”¹¹

Whereas our immediate awareness of God’s presence is sporadic and severely impaired because the corrosive power of sin has so weakened our spiritual faculties, it was not so for Jesus who lived in and through an immediate awareness of the one who sent him and the Spirit who accompanied him. He was a *mystic* in the strict sense of the world, not otherworldly in an ethereal and unreal sense but able to live simultaneously in two realms, the visible and the invisible, bringing the resources of the one into the problems of the other. His faculties, fully human like ours, but unimpaired by sin, were always attuned to both the visible and the invisible realm. He lived out of a depth we rarely touch, so that when we do touch it- or rather are touched by it, we feel as if the bottom has opened up and we are about to be swallowed. It’s called *primary religious experience* and is characterized by awe and dread. We are touched by the holy and tremble in fear and wonder; *Jesus lived there*. We visit by invitation of the Holy Spirit; *he lived there*. We are like a distant short wave station receiving an occasional word amidst the constant static of sin and evil, but Jesus was always tuned in and clear. This is what makes his teaching on prayer so important. It is *for us*, but it emerges out of his own immediate awareness of the Father’s will and ways and of the Spirit’s illumination, gifts, and powers. So to follow Jesus is to learn the privilege of prayer. To follow him we must observe him, and to learn from him we must listen, and when we listen in order to follow the name for that is prayer, a walking conversation with God in Jesus’ presence.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

Luke’s Footnote (v.1)

You would think someone a bit odd if they explained a joke before telling it, or if they told the abstract meaning of a story before the tale itself. Jay Leno doesn’t do

¹¹ On Jesus and prayer the following are helpful: Daniel J. Harrington, *Jesus and Prayer: What the New Testament Teaches Us* (Frederick, MD: The Word Among Us Press, 2009); Ken Hemphill, *The Prayer of Jesus: The Promise and Power of Living in the Lord’s Prayer* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2001); John Koenig, *Recovering New Testament Prayer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004) For an introduction to a variety of prayer types, see Richard Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco 1992). On petitionary prayer, see Ronald Goetz, “On Petitionary Prayer: Pleading with an Unjust Judge?” *Christian Century*, 1/29/97, 96-97, and the reply of Roberta Bondi, “Prayer in friendship with God,” 99-100.

it, and neither does any skilled teller of tales. You either get it or you don't; the story itself carries the freight. But that is just what Luke has done in verse 1 for his Gentile readers fifty or so years after the ministry of Jesus.¹² Jesus would not have said, "Now let me tell you a parable about persistence prayer as the cure for emotional discouragement." The topic was prayer; Jesus told the brief story of the pushy widow, and the freight was delivered with a dash of humor. Everyone drew the correct conclusion: If even a corrupt judge can be made to render a just verdict, then *how much more* the God whose character is not like the judge and who delights to receive our petition! There may be a time lag, but be assured, God will act for his people. The prayer "Thy kingdom come" will be answered speedily, suddenly, all at once! But years later in a non-Jewish setting, Luke saw fit to add an introductory footnote about what the parable means: verse 1: "And he told them a parable *to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*" Jesus told a parable, *and this is what I think it means for you Gentiles who are just learning to pray*, said Luke. To move from trying to please the many powers of the Roman pantheon to dealing with the one God of the Jews, his personal agent Jesus, and the Spirit who links the Father and the Son requires some intellectual rethinking and some practical work to get the hang of it.¹³ A story told by a Jewish prophet fifty years ago needed the meaning translated, and so Luke did it.

This tells me that Luke, like any good pastor, knew his job was to encourage the discouraged through the use of Jesus' stories. The answer to discouragement is prayer; the answer to fear is prayer; the one who prays and does not quit demonstrates the faith in God which Jesus wants to see now and at his return. Persistence in prayer is a tough and necessary virtue. Prayer is both an obligation and a privilege. Prayer is the way we stay in touch with God's perspective on our world. It's how we catch glimpses of the kingdom that is our common future. Those who quit praying for any reason: because they don't think God hears or cares, because it's just too much work, because they feel stupid talking to an invisible person, because of their demand for instant results, because of their own unrepented sin and guilty conscience, because

¹² That v.1 is Luke's editorial introduction and pastoral comment is confirmed by the fact that the phrase "to tell a parable" as an introduction to a parable is found only in Luke (e.g. 5:36, 6:39; 12:16, 41; 14:7 et. al.). The call to continuous prayer is also found in 21:36, Romans 12:12, 1 Thess. 5:17. We are to pray, pray again, then start over.

¹³ This is a rough restatement of Augustine's model of the Trinity.

Luke 14:1-8 10

of emotional disappointment with God,¹⁴ those who quit praying for any reason miss out, says Luke. They enter into another mental world where only human actions count and there is no divine help. Their world gets much smaller and less expansive. They give up on the God Jesus represents. “So don’t quit,” said Pastor Luke, “and remember the story Jesus told about the pushy widow thrashing the judge with her purse while she screams at him to do his job.¹⁵ Let it into the gallery of your imagination because God is not like the judge and you are not like the widow.” The story is the opposite of the way things are, and for that reason sticks in the memory.

The Pushy Widow (vv.2-5)

Our vignette opens with two colorful characters, a judge who’s a scoundrel and a poor widow with nothing on her side but raw need and pure grit. The Old Testament had high standards of integrity for judges, who were always to watch out for the most vulnerable members of the Jewish family, and none was more vulnerable than a widow. It was likely a financial matter (some man, even a relative, ripping her off and thinking no one will notice), and since she comes alone it tells us she had no man to speak for her.¹⁶ No man, no son, no power, no status, no money for a bribe. No way to get what she deserved. The judge is a scoundrel in high office. There was just no way to shame the man. He ignored the demands of God and the needs of people. To say “For the sake of God” or “Shame on you” did not connect. There was nothing

¹⁴ Estimated by Dr. Gary Habermas to be 80-85% of the reason for doubt and unbelief, with intellectual issues being around 15% percent. Unbelief is often grounded in emotional disappointment with God. See his YouTube lecture on the emotional roots of doubt (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibQIKbZwkmQ).

¹⁵ I have found the following materials particularly helpful for literary and cultural insights: Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parable, Their Culture And Style* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980,” Chapter 8, “The Judge And The Widow,” 127-141; Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide To The Stories Of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), “The Unjust Judge,” 449-462; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables Of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), “The Unjust Judge,” 252-262.

¹⁶ On the cultural and judicial backgrounds, see David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 709-710.

good in him to which she could appeal.¹⁷ He simply didn't care about anyone but himself and anything but power and graft. He was secular, ruthless, pragmatic, no conscience whatever, and in a position of power at the city gate. Her constant cry, a female voice shouting over all the male litigants, "Vindicate me from my adversary," was ignored.

So what did she do? She kept at it like a broken record, "Give me justice." She was right, and she refused to be ignored. If a man showed such disrespect, he would have been disciplined, but in the Middle East a certain deference is given to widows. They can scream at a public figure and nothing will happen to them.¹⁸ A widow is easy to ignore but almost impossible to harm. So she has both disadvantage and advantage. But no one can stop her from coming, and no one can stop her from being loud and obnoxious. Every time he looked up, there was the widow, pushing, shoving, calling, repeating the same demand over and over, "Vindicate me from my adversary! Justice for a poor widow!" And that's the first half of the story, an infinite force meets an immovable object. What happens next?

The second half takes us from the public to the private sphere, from the court setting to the judge's inner thoughts. And the first surprise is that the man plainly admits he's a jerk: verse 4, "Then he said to himself, 'Although I do not fear God and do not respect man...'" Nothing has changed. Then you can almost see him smile, "Yet because she troubles me, this widow, I will vindicate her, lest in continual coming she *wear me out!*" Every time she screamed it felt like a left jab or a right cross. "She's a headache and a pain in the you-know-where. Get rid of her. Give her what wants and get her out of my face." In the war of attrition, the widow wins. Her apparently hopeless situation turns around in a moment because she did not quit! When her time came she was vindicated quickly.

¹⁷ The ideal judge is portrayed in Sirach 35:12-15 (Appendix: 16), and some scholars take this text as a source of ideas on which Jesus explicitly drew in the formation of this parable. I find Snodgrass (456) and Bailey (127-128) convincing, and if so, then Jesus stayed with the widow image, whereas Sirach shifted to a male, countered the Sirach teaching that God is not patient with the ungodly (see v.7c), and did not teach, as did Sirach, that the way to get your prayers heard was service that is "pleasing to the Lord." Jesus thus held up women as equals (and equally sinners!) taught that God exercises patience towards all, and that getting the divine ear is not purchased with good deeds. Jesus both uses and transforms his source material in light of his kingdom reality.

¹⁸ Dr. Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 135.

Our judge reminds me of the rancher in Powder Bluff, Colorado. It was time for his *National Geographic* subscription to be renewed. Because of a computer glitch in the Chicago company that handled renewal notices, the rancher in far off Powder Bluff received 9,734 separate mailings urging him to re-subscribe. He finally got so fed up he drove ten miles to the nearest post office, bought a money order for the renewal and attached a note, “I give up! Send your magazine!”¹⁹

It is a wrong conclusion to think the parable teaches that the purpose of prayer is to wear down an unwilling God into giving us what we want. No. The argument is *from light to heavy*, from lesser to greater, from an overdrawn courtroom cartoon to the God who wants to hear from us. If she got her way, and it was just and good, *how much more* can we expect to be heard and answered from the one Jesus says is our heavenly Father! When fear or discouragement or doubt grips the heart, keep praying. When God’s answer comes, and it will, it will be decisive. God does not have bad character, and you are not a pest. But be prepared to learn patience.

Jesus’ Expansion Of The Parable (vv. 6-8)

But don’t be mistaken, said Jesus, into thinking God hears because you are good. Though our cause may be just, it does not mean we are. A noble cause does not a noble people make. God is, in fact, slow to anger over *his own people*, as Jesus said in verse 7, “Also he is slow to anger over them.”²⁰ This is the reason God hears us. We are not immediately punished and held at a distance for every infraction. God overlooks much and withholds his wrath in order to show restraint and give us space to interact. God is like the king who chooses to station his calvary at a distance from a rebellious city so it will take time to bring them in. God gives us space to come to our senses. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s was a just cause, and God used it to move the country towards a higher level of justice, but all its leaders, even the most prominent, had deep flaws, and to mention them is politically incorrect in the extreme. God is not naive. You can be righteous on the picket line and wrong at home. To be on the right side of a just cause does not mean we are automatically in a right personal relationship with God or others. For the widow to have a just cause in the matter before the court did not mean she was not also a sinner in need of mercy.

¹⁹ “Keep Asking,” PreachingToday.com.

²⁰ For this reading, as one among ten possibilities (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker,1996], 1452-1453) I depend on Bailey, *More Lukan Parables*, 138-141.

All over this world Christian people are crying out in prayer for things we know from Scripture are the will of God. For the salvation of a spouse or child or friend. For peace. For provision for the work of God. For healing. For deliverance from evil and poverty. For the renewal of the church, and finally for the decisive and final inbreaking of the kingdom of God to change it all once and for all. We Christians are *the elect*, the ones God has chosen to stand in this world and send up a constant cry for the righting of all that is wrong. Being chosen is not so much about privilege as service, and our primary service to this world is not social service but prayer. The answer to Jesus' question is a resounding Yes! God shall make vindication for those who do not quit but continue to cry to him day and night. Another name for faith is *perseverance* and *grit* and *holy toughness* and *endurance* and *dogged determination* because the church is convinced the answers this world most needs can only come from God and only through the enduring intimacies of prayer. Our primary service is not feeding the hungry or clothing the naked or lobbying in Congress or building a homeless shelter. All good things, but not first. Our primary service, and the one most easily neglected among pragmatic United Methodists who love to make things happen, is to name the true needs of the world and to cry out to God for them week by week. Like the widow who had no hope save in her persistence, the church has no hope except in God and in the means God has appointed to insure our dependence, which is prayer- the bending of the mind and the heart and the emotions and the will and the body towards God in the confidence God will in turn draw near to us with the resources and wisdom of heaven. We cry out over and over, and when God chooses to act, it is swift and decisive. When God steps out of patience and into action, things change rapidly. And if you need an easy way to remember this teaching, the words of Bill Hybels come in handy:

“If the request is wrong, God says, ‘No.’
If the timing is wrong, God says, ‘Slow.’
If you are wrong, God says, ‘Grow.’
But if the request is right, the timing is right, and you are right, God says,
‘Go!’”²¹

No, Slow, Grow, and Go. Not the full truth about prayer, but a hook for your memory and a way to sort out your prayers. Verse 8a is a *Go* verse, “I say to you that he shall make vindication for them speedily,” but verse 8b is a *Grow* verse, “Yet, when the Son of man comes, will he find faithfulness on the earth?”

²¹ *Too Busy Not To Pray* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP), 74.

Is there faith here at Main Street? The kind that prays and does not quit? I don't think that's Jesus' question. I think it's Pastor Luke's question. He wrapped the parable (vv.2-5) and the subsequent question and answer of Jesus (vv.6-8) in his own interpretive frame (v.1, v.8b). Luke was preaching: *The church of Jesus ought always to pray and not lose heart.* Luke was interrogating: *Are we the kind of tough saints that cling to God and refuse to let go? Are we ready for his return?*

By his time the church had been living in the world and praying the coming of the kingdom for half a century already. The church was expanding, but the kingdom itself was still future. Energy was fading. Prayer looked like a waste of time amidst the pressing duties and alluring diversions of the world. Is this why the prayer meeting has died in most of our churches and why the people critique the Sunday service as if it was a Broadway show and they the theater critics? Have we forgotten who we're dealing with? The Living God who has ears and hears, the one who puts his wrath at a distance in order to give us time and space to cry to him for the salvation of the world. We can't quit. One day we will face the Lord, and on that day we will find it was not our smarts, not our giving, not our causes, not our committees, not our training and not our superior holiness that made the difference; it was our prayers, those times when we bowed head and heart and dared to address God with our hurt and the hurt of those around us. The poet Alfred Lord Tennyson was right, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

CONCLUSION

This faith of ours is more than Bibles and doctrines and sermons and words, though it is all these things. It's a living interaction with God, as in the following story. It was told by Dr. Helen Roseveare, missionary to Zaire:

"At our mission station a mother died after giving birth to a premature baby. We tried to improvise an incubator to keep the infant alive, but the only hot water bottle we had was beyond repair. So we asked the children to pray for the baby and for her sister. One of the girls responded, 'Dear God, please send a hot water bottle today. Tomorrow will be too late because by then the baby will be dead. And dear Lord, send a doll for the sister so she won't feel so lonely!'

That afternoon a large package arrived from England. The children watched eagerly as we opened it. Much to their surprise, under some clothing was a hot water bottle! Immediately the girl who had

Luke 14:1-8 15

prayed so earnestly started to dig deeper, exclaiming, ‘If God sent that, I’m sure He also sent a dollie!’

And she was right!”

Figure that one out!

God is still answering the cries of his people for the coming of the kingdom at the end and any previews that are available now. God is still putting aside wrath and exercising patience to give us space to pray and to receive and to learn faithfulness. It is our primary work as a church: to worship and to pray. How ineffective in the eyes of the world! How powerful in the eyes of God! So choose your audience.



