

The Unjust Judge

Luke 18:1-8

With Study Questions

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Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart,² saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man.³ Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Get justice for me from my adversary.’⁴ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man,⁵ yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’ ”⁶ Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said.⁷ And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?⁸ I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth (Luke 18:1-8)?

Introduction

Twenty-one years ago I attended my first “Elder’s Meeting” at the Branch of Hope. I remember asking the elders if they had any particular goals beyond the normal ministerial duties of preaching, sacraments, counseling, etc. There were two things: One was they would like to see some attention given to our youth. A strong youth group was something they wanted. It took some time but we eventually developed a healthy ministry for young people through dedicated workers who care about the young people in our church.

The second goal was that of a church building. We had been meeting in a school and had no access during the week. We ended up in our current facility by accident. I drove by to visit a pastor friend whose church met in this facility only to find they had moved. Within a couple of months we were here. It’s been a nice facility but we still hadn’t found a building of our own. The second goal has not really been realized.

This has not been a huge issue. We all recognize that the church is not the building. Ministry has taken place at the Branch of Hope—it hasn’t been put on hold because we don’t have an ideal facility. But I must say that the whole ‘church building’ issue has become tiresome for me. After scores, if not hundreds, of potential buildings I find it very difficult to get

excited about a possible church building. Conversations on the issue are laborious before they even start. I'm jaded and fatigued when it come to the issue. Thankfully we have a building committee with fresh enthusiasm but I have come dangerously close to losing heart when it comes to a church building.

The Stated Goal

This is a very tender-hearted parable. It's almost as if Luke doesn't want to leave the point of this parable to the sagacity of able expositors. He tells us why Jesus gave the parable.

Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).

"To pray and not lose heart" is that stated goal of the parable. Losing heart *enkakeo* means to lose one's motivation to accomplish some valid goal—'to become discouraged, to give up.'¹

Here Jesus directs this encouragement toward prayer, but it can refer to all sorts of things. More than once, the Apostle Paul encourages his readers: **"As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good" (2 Thessalonians 3:13; Galatians 6:9)**. Do you ever feel that way? You're just tired of making the effort?

Sometimes we see people extract themselves from the service of God in very short order—along the lines of the *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23) where **"persecution" or "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word."**

But the person to whom this parable is directed does not seem to be one who **"immediately stumbles" (Matthew 13:21)**. It may be closer to the person who is side-tracked by the cares of this world. But since Jesus is not addressing remaining in the faith (although toward the end He does seem to go there) as much as He is addressing those who have just run out of enthusiasm when it comes to loving God, loving their neighbor and seeking to advance the kingdom of Christ.

For years and years this person has faithfully served Christ. But he/she is older and tired and the environment is not yielding the

¹ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (318). New York: United Bible societies.

motivation necessary to keep them spirited in whatever service or ministry to which they might be called out. They're just not listening any more.

Jesus picks a character for this parable whose station in life is so desperate that as frustrated and fatigued as anyone might be, they would not trade places with her. And she interacts with a man of power who is wholly indifferent to her plight.

saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. ³ Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary' (Luke 18:2, 3).

An Indifferent Judge—A Desperate Woman

We are presented here with a judge who lives in that oblivious disposition which is diametrically opposed to the Greatest Commandment. He doesn't love or fear God, nor does he love his neighbor. His conscience is seared and the image of God in which this judge was made is all but eradicated. Whatever natural law he would ascertain from God's general revelation means nothing to him. Psalm 11 might be the song this woman would sing every day on her way home from her unattended appeals:

...for behold, the wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart; ³ if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do (Psalm 11:2, 3a).

The woman is a widow. Our 21st century minds don't immediately appreciate how Jesus' audience would understand this. The sorrow of having lost her husband would not be the primary flag by which we would observe this woman. It would be weakness and vulnerability. Women who had lost their husbands were at the mercy of others. There wasn't life insurance. Seldom were there nest-eggs. Begging was an option. We read an apt observation in The Pulpit Commentary:

A more desperate situation, as regards any hope of obtaining the object of her earnest prayer, could not well be pictured—a careless, corrupt judge of the lawless Herod period for the

tribunal in Israel, and a poor helpless widow for the suppliant.²

We are not told what the justice is and it apparently doesn't matter. She is a victim appealing to the stone-cold disinterest of a godless judge who simply finds her annoying and, little doubt, wants her out of the room. Widows, in Scripture, provide us with a scenario to expose weakness in the face of ungodly leadership.

Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not bring justice to the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them (Isaiah 1:23).

Would the judge respond to the widow?

And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man,⁵ yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me' (Luke 18:4, 5).

Wearing Him Out

What should strike us in this parable is that the judge, as the one to whom the appeal is made, is God! It is not as if God is unaware of our perception that He seems to slumber through much of our toil.

I recall a dialogue with an atheist who was asking for proof of God's existence. As is my custom I asked what would suffice for proof. He said "answered prayer." His observation was that God was like this judge. It does seem as if God and this judge are the same but, as we shall see, there is an eternity of difference.

Nonetheless Jesus presents the judge as one who does not respond "for a while." We are then reminded that unlike God, this judge is ungodly, nor does he care about people. And yet he will respond, if for no other reason to get her out of his hair. She had no money to bribe him, she had no power to threaten him and she couldn't rely on his good nature—persistence was her only weapon.

² *The Pulpit Commentary: St Luke Vol. II.* 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (107). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Persistence is an undervalued virtue. Sometimes people do grow weary of doing good. There is a great temptation to pull the car out of gear and coast. But when it's an uphill battle, coasting doesn't take us very far. It appears that it is the enemy who never sleeps. This week a member sent me a story from the L.A. Times on the motto "in God we Trust." It was an article on how unnecessary God is. It was the normal short-sighted arguments and I found myself losing momentum as I read it. Almost to spite my own flesh (I do pray I have loftier motives) I sent a request to my editor to write an opposing viewpoint.

Christians are called to have a dogged determination; especially as it relates to prayer:

"The whole life of the faithful," as Origen once grandly said, "should be one great connected prayer."³

Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. ⁷ And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? ⁸ I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth (Luke 18:6-8)?

Avenging the Elect

The prayers of the elect are not in vain. God shall avenge. Again, it is difficult for us to appreciate this in our current culture (though we're foolish to think that the blessings of our current society will continue to exist by their own momentum). In chapter 17 of Luke (just prior to this parable) Jesus taught of events that would take place in that generation. There would be about forty years between this parable and the events Jesus foretold in chapter 17 (Matthew 16:28; 24:34; Mark 9:1; Luke 9:27).

For forty years the church will have been persecuted. It would be just about long enough for people to lose heart. Long enough for...

"the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne...to cry (cried) out with a loud voice, 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before

³ *The Pulpit Commentary: St Luke Vol. II.* 2004 (H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Ed.) (107). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth” (Revelation 6:9, 10)?

God “bears long” with the detractors of that which is good, right and true. We often mistake God’s patience for God’s absence. The same people who are frustrated with God’s apparent absence enjoy God’s patience. We are upset because we think God slumbers, but there are times when we’re glad of that. My children are upset when I’m not there to discipline their siblings; but the same behavior on my part is something they enjoy when the patience is extended to them.

Let us also remember, amidst life’s great difficulties that the Judge of the earth is also a Father to the faithful—children whom He loves and trains. Calvin explains:

If at any time God winks at the injuries done to us longer than we would wish, let us know that this is done with a fatherly intention—to train us to patience.⁴

James writes to an impatient people:

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:7, 8).

In God’s timing we will see that all the prayers have been answered; and the answers will always be superior to the prayers themselves. So when Jesus asks, **“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”** it should provide a mirror for us rather than a scrutiny upon God. The question is not, will God be faithful to answer prayer but will people be faithful to pray?

⁴ Calvin, J., & Pringle, W. (2010). *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Lk 18:7). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study

1. Have you found yourself losing heart on certain issues in your life? What are they and why (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some things people are tempted to do when they lose heart (pages 3, 4)?
3. What can you tell us about the characters in this parable (pages 4, 5)?
4. Does God appear to slumber? Explain (pages 5, 6).
5. How does the widow get what she wants (pages 5, 6)?
6. Will God eventually answer prayer? Explain (pages 6, 7).
7. Is God's delay in answering prayer a sign of His disinterest in my current situation? Explain (pages 7, 8)?

8. Why did Jesus ask if He would find faith on the earth (page 9)?