

47. The Parable of the Persistent Widow

Luke 18:1-14

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

In the previous passage (Luke 17:20-37), the Lord Jesus had been warning His disciples that, prior to his Second Coming, they will have to endure through dark times. They are to encourage themselves in knowing that judgment will come on those who have no life, i.e. those that are spiritually dead and corrupt. He gave two examples from history. The first was from the time of Noah, when the hearts of men were totally bent on evil: “**Every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). In the second example, the story was given of the judgment that took place on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah where the people “**were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD**” (Genesis 13:13). God came suddenly in judgment in both examples while, at the same time, delivering those who were righteous before Him. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus also mentioned the time prior to His Second Coming in this way:**

¹²Because of the multiplication of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold. ¹³But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:12-14).

Jesus said that the one who endures or perseveres to the end will be saved (v. 13). The Greek word translated as *saved* is *sōzō* (from *sōs*, "safe, rescued." Strong’s 4982). It means to *deliver* out of danger and *into safety*. It is used principally of God’s *rescuing* believers *from* the penalty and power of sin – *and into His provisions (safety)*. These believers who are enduring through multiplied wickedness are only enduring because the Spirit of God is helping them. These are the ones who will persevere to the end of the age and the coming of the Lord. The Church will be delivered by the Lord snatching them out of danger and away from the wrath of Satan: “**Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!**” (Revelation 12:12). When Jesus said that the one who perseveres to the end will be *saved*, in my opinion, the word *saved* should be translated as *delivered*. The Church is delivered by the rapture or catching up of the saints.

For the Church to endure through the time of distress (Daniel 12:1), i.e. darkness and persecution at the hands of the Antichrist, the Church will need to be a people of prayer. We will need to listen and obey the Spirit’s voice and guidance. We will need His power to overcome satanic onslaught when Antichrist makes war on the Church (Revelation 13:7; Daniel 7:21). In Luke chapter eighteen, Jesus gives us two lessons on prayer to teach us to always pray and not give up (v. 1). Verse eight gives us the context in the form of a rhetorical question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

¹Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ²He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. ³And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' ⁴"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' " ⁶And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

How can we be effective in prayer? Doesn't a carpenter want to utilize every part of a tree to make as much out of it as possible? A fisherman mends his net so that no fish will escape and so that he can maximize his catch. A CEO of a company wants to use his employees to their maximum effectiveness in order to make a profit and accomplish the vision of the organization. In the same way, a Christian is called upon by God to be dependent upon the Spirit and to use prayer to maximum effectiveness. When the children of Israel were wandering in the barren wilderness of the Sinai desert, they would never have found enough meat for a conservative estimate of two million people, i.e. 600,000 men beside women and children left Egypt (Exodus 12:37). Yet, God brought so much meat to them that it was three feet deep for a day's walk in any direction (Numbers 11:31). The Lord can do in ten minutes what would take us years to do in our own strength. John Wesley, founder of the Methodist church, said: "God does nothing but in answer to prayer."

Question 1) Scripture records James as saying, "You do not have because you do not ask God" (James 4:2), but do you believe John Wesley is correct in saying that God does nothing but in answer to prayer? If it is true, why would God limit Himself to only act through prayer?

My view is that God can work without us, but He chooses, for the most part, to train His people through persevering prayer to bring about His will on earth. In eternity as well as in this world, God's power and authority is released through prayer to God. The Church is being trained while on earth in learning to overcome evil through persevering prayer. William Temple once said, "When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I do not, they don't." F.B. Meyer said, "The great tragedy of life is not unanswered prayer but unoffered prayer." In our day, the evil world system that we live in keeps us so busy through work and daily life that most believers are spiritually weak and have a need to learn how to persevere and persist in prayer. Jesus said that we should always pray and not give up (v. 1). If our eyes could be opened to the possibilities that prayer would bring, we would not hesitate to put more time into the practice of prayer.

The Unjust Judge

The picture Jesus gives us is that of a judge who has no relationship with God. He does not fear that he himself will be judged for his actions. In his own confession, he did not care about God or men (v. 4). The Greek word *entrepo*, which is translated in the NIV translation with the words *care about*, means to show deference to a person. This judge did not show deference to anyone. He did not have respect for the people he was appointed to judge. All judges in the land of Israel

would have been aware of King Jehoshaphat's warning to the judges that was appointed in the land of Israel. He reminded them that the Lord is watching every verdict that is made:

⁵He appointed judges in the land, in each of the fortified cities of Judah. ⁶He told them, "Consider carefully what you do, because you are not judging for mere mortals but for the Lord, who is with you whenever you give a verdict. ⁷Now let the fear of the Lord be on you. Judge carefully, for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery" (2 Chronicles 19:5-7).

This judge may have been a judge that they all knew in the area, one appointed by Herod or by the Romans. Israel had a policy that one man could not constitute a court. William Barclay the commentator, tells us that in New Testament times, Israel's legal system of justice had to be at least three judges, one chosen by the plaintiff, one by the defendant, and one independently appointed.¹ This judge's position gave him liberty to do whatever he wanted to further his own ends. It's certainly not clear from the text, but there had to be a reason as to why he would not give justice to the widow. We are told that she kept coming but did not receive justice from him. Perhaps, it was because the widow could afford no bribe, or, maybe, in giving justice to her, it meant that some wealthy person he knew would lose out. We are told in verse 6, that he was *unjust*. The Greek word translated as unjust is *adikia*, and means to be without justice, unrighteous, or the failure to abide by the lawful standard of appropriate conduct. It would have been obvious to others that he should never have been put in such a position based on his character; thus, he was known as an "unjust judge."

The Widow

Jesus then gives us the epitome of a helpless person in a desperate situation. She is poor and defenseless with no family to help her. Widows often experienced hardship as Luke 20:4 points out. The teachers of the Law would often devour their resources after the death of their husbands. We don't know how she was being cheated, but the judge was certainly on the side of her opponent.

Question 2) What was the widow's strategy for getting what she needed? How do you think she pursued her goal of getting justice? How is God different than this judge?

The widow had no resource in the pursuance of her claim. The only thing she could use was persistence. Her relentless pleading and begging was her only hope of obtaining the justice she deserved. Verse 3 says that she "kept coming." She would not be beaten down by constant refusal and rejection. I picture her coming morning and evening to the courthouse. Every time the magistrate went out to market, she followed him around, persistently arguing her case. The passion of her heart began to make people talk, i.e. wondering to themselves if she was being wronged by his injustice. I'm sure she was an embarrassment to him as people learned of her plight. Finally, the unjust judge gave in to her, not due to the strength of her cause, but because she kept bothering him. He was simply being worn out!

¹ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Luke*, Published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh. Page 222.

In verse 5, the Greek word that is translated “*wear me out*” is *hypōpiazē*, which literally means, “to give a black eye.” She was beating him up, not physically, but in a figurative sense, with her insistent passion and pleading words. The same word is used by Paul the Apostle in describing his habits of personal discipline: “**but I pommel [*hypōpiazē*] my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified**” (1 Corinthians 9:27). It could mean that the unjust judge thought that she might give him a black eye! More than likely, though, it was the fact that his reputation was being pummeled and taking a black eye. It also could be figurative of his losing sleep over it. He was so worn out, and it was easier to acquiesce to her plea.

This judge is a sharp *contrast* to the Holy God we serve. The application Jesus makes is that, if this unjust judge yields to persistent asking, then how much more will the Judge of all the earth render justice and quickly!

If we really would like to be effective in our times of prayer, we should pray bullet prayers rather than shotgun prayers. A shotgun will fire out many little pellets in a wide area, and it is not an accurate way of hitting a target. One hopes that some of those pellets will find their way and make some impact. Often, we fire off shotgun petitions to God. When we pray “God bless this person or that person,” for what are we really asking? The more specific your prayer is, the easier it will be to have faith and expectation of a definite outcome.

Passionate and specific prayer that comes from the heart wings its way to the target like a bullet. James tells us that Elijah was a man just like us, but the only difference was that he prayed earnestly (James 5:18). The widow won her case by her earnest and impassioned perseverance. Many words spoken to God do not make prayer effective, but there are two things that Jesus reveals to us about prayer: faith and persistence are honored by God. If we truly believe that God does hear and answer and can truly change situations, then our prayers will become more specific and more frequent. What could our lives be like if we were serious about prayer? What answers could be awaiting us that we will never obtain if we do not ask?

[Question 3\) How are we to understand Jesus’ words in verse 8, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”](#)

He is talking about the time shortly before the return of Christ. The words, “**When the Son of Man comes,**” refers to the last days. In my opinion, we are living at a time in which the Lord’s return is near, although how near, I would not like to predict. Many have made such claims in the past and have been proven to be wrong, to their embarrassment. However, there are some signs of the times that indicate that the time is not far off. We are living in a day when faith in Christ is under attack. In fact, people of faith in our Western culture are now being accused of being “politically incorrect” in holding to biblical values and challenging people that there is only one way to heaven—the way of Christ. Unless spirituality is seen in an abstract way or as a way of self-enlightenment or self-improvement, it is thrown out as archaic. Incrementally, over generations, we are being brought to a point where we are so consumed with making a living that we have no time to pray persistently as the widow did unless we are disciplined with our time management. Most of the Church get weary and give up before God can reward faith and patient prayer with the answer. That is why Jesus is giving the parable that men “**should always pray and not give up**” (v. 1).

When Edmund Gravely died at the controls of his small plane while on the way to Statesboro, Georgia, from the Rocky Mount-Wilson Airport in North Carolina, his wife, Janice, kept the plane aloft for two hours. As the plane crossed the South Carolina/North Carolina border, she radioed for help: “Help, help, won’t someone help me? My pilot is unconscious.” Authorities who picked up her distress signal were not able to reach her by radio during the flight because she kept changing channels. Eventually, Mrs. Gravely made a rough landing and had to crawl for forty-five minutes to a farm house for help. How often God’s people cry out to him for help but switch channels before His message comes through! They turn to other sources for help, looking for human guidance. When you cry out to God for His intervention, don’t switch channels!² Await His answer and keep looking to Him.

Jesus then went on to give us another parable about prayer.

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

This second parable about prayer concerns the inner attitude or heart of the person who is praying. Again, we have a contrast. In the last parable, the contrast was between an unjust judge and a righteous Judge, God Himself. In this parable, the contrast is between a self-righteous Pharisee and a penitent tax-collector; no two people could be further apart than these two.

Question 4) What things do you notice about the prayer of the Pharisee? What things do you also notice as to the location, content, posture, and attitude of the two who are praying? How was the tax collector’s attitude different, and why do you think he went home justified before God?

Both men were praying in the temple courts or precincts. We can picture the Pharisee standing up as close as he could get to the best position near the altar in the Temple Courts. His posture was that of standing up straight and looking up to heaven with no shame or fear on his face, certain in his belief that he deserved the best place in heaven when the Kingdom of God came. He was congratulating himself on his righteousness while at the same time making sure the tax-collector was nowhere near him in case his moral corruption might taint his soul. I’m sure that others nearby could hear how he so self-righteously lived his life. The posture of the Pharisee is that of looking up to heaven and proclaiming his own self-righteousness and self-importance.

² Edited by Michael Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching*, Published by Baker Book House, Page 279.

We find him praying “about himself” (verse 11). The literal rendering of the Greek is that he’s praying to himself, i.e. five times saying “I—I—I—I—I.” This man’s self-righteous attitude did not bring him into a true relationship with God. He had no appreciation for grace; in fact, he disdains it. He’s far too righteous to need the grace of God. His life is all about keeping various laws to earn his right standing before God. In his pride, he fully expects that his eternity is secured with a great mansion, but he fails to look deep within himself to see his own character flaws. In his self-congratulations, his boast was that he fasted twice a week. William Barclay goes on to tell us:

The Jewish law prescribed only one absolutely obligatory fast—that on the day of Atonement. But those who wished to gain special merit fasted also on Mondays and Thursdays. It is noteworthy that these were the market days when Jerusalem was full of country people. Those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in disheveled clothes, and those days gave their piety the biggest possible audience.”³

Like a good Pharisee, he even tithed on his spices, e.g. the mint, dill and cumin (Matthew 23:23), separating the seeds, one in every ten giving to the Lord. In his heart, he had no regard for the tax-collector riff-raff. In fact, he despised him as he looked back at the man who could not even hold up his head.

Let’s observe this man’s prayer, for it reveals his heart! When the Pharisee prays, he thanks God that he is not like other people who don’t deserve to even be in the temple courts! His thanksgiving is not directed to God because he’s done it all himself. He’s become so righteous in his own eyes that he sees himself as the perfect example for others to follow. He does not have need for the mercy or grace of God. He brags about his accomplishments, e.g. how he keeps the law, and he congratulates himself that he is not a robber, an evil-doer, or an adulterer. As Christ was describing this man, the Pharisees were priding themselves that all the sinners in the crowd were finally hearing about how righteousness according to works was being proclaimed by Jesus. However, Christ then started talking about the tax-collector.

The Lord said that the penitent tax-collector stood at a distance away from those that were supposedly righteous and stood close by the altar. So unworthy did he feel that, perhaps, he was at the back of the temple courts near the entrance to the outer court. He could not even look up to heaven, the normal posture of prayer. When called to prayer, most people in Western countries look downward, bowing their heads, but it was not the custom at that time. It is interesting to note that, when Jesus is mentioned as praying, Scripture records six times that He “looked up to heaven.”

The penitent tax-collector made his hands into fists and began to beat on his chest in shame and anguish at the way his heart had led him into sin. Only one other time in the New Testament do we find people beating themselves on the chest. That was at the crucifixion of Christ. After Jesus gave up His Spirit, great anguish was expressed by those witnessing the event: **“When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away” (Luke 23:48).**

³ William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, Gospel of Luke*, Published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Page 223.

Look at the posture of this man, the tax collector, as he prays, for even his actions and his posture reveals his heart before God. We find that he is broken over his sin and cried out in anguish of heart as he beat himself at the source of his sin, his own heart: “Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. These are the things which defile the man” (Matthew 15:19). He cried out in his anguish over his sin, and was heard by God. He says, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (v. 13). The Greek word that is translated as *mercy* means to propitiate, to appease, to make propitiation [the action of appeasing God through a substitutionary sacrifice], to make satisfaction. As the evening lamb is being offered on the altar, this penitent man is pleading to God that the sacrificial blood that was being shed would be applied to his own heart and that God, because of the sacrifice of the substitutionary lamb, would make His heart clean. This is what he said, “God, be propitious to me. God, be appeased toward me.”

Jesus shocks his audience by then saying that the penitent tax-collector went away justified before God rather than the Pharisee. I’m sure that there were many gasps at Jesus’ words that the tax-collector went home to his house and walked in the peace of God.

Pride is an ugly sin to God. “The devil is content that people should excel in good works, provided he can make them proud of them” (William Law). “Pride is the idolatrous worship of ourselves, and that is the national religion of hell” (Alan Redpath). To be full of ourselves is to be empty of God. Grace and humility bow the knee to a Holy God who alone can sustain us and keep us free from the corrupting influence of self. The highway of holiness is a valley trail in the direction of humility. The trail will lead you on a path of death to self. If we can see in the tests that we are experiencing an opportunity to humble ourselves, then we are on the right highway. “The higher a man is in grace, the lower he will be in his own esteem” (C.H. Spurgeon). Learn to welcome the opportunity to humble yourself and die daily to pride.

What is humility? “Humility is perfect quietness of heart. It is to expect nothing, to wonder at nothing that is done to me, or to feel nothing done against me. It is to be at rest when nobody praises me or when I am blamed or despised. It is to have a blessed home in the Lord where I can go in and shut the door and kneel to my Father in secret, and be at peace as in a deep sea of calmness, when all around and above is trouble. The humble person is not one who thinks meanly of himself, he simply does not think of himself at all” (Andrew Murray). William Barclay tells a great story about how we should all live as a Christian:

There is a story of a monk in the old days, a very holy man who was sent to take up office as abbot in a monastery. He looked so humble a person that, when he arrived, he was sent to work in the kitchen as a scullion [A servant assigned the most menial of tasks], because no one recognized him. Without a word of protest and with no attempt to take his position, he went and washed the dishes and did the most menial tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived a considerable time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took up his true position. The man who enters upon office for the respect which will be given him has begun in the wrong way, and cannot, unless he changes, ever be in any sense the servant of Christ and of his fellow men.⁴

⁴ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible, the Gospel of Mark*, Published by The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, Page 301.

God has gone to great lengths to make it possible for us to be a kingdom of priests to our God. He has given us His righteousness. We look to Him and not our own efforts. In true humility, we can boldly come before His throne of grace, knowing that we come not based on our own merit but because of His goodness and forgiveness! The Temple curtain has been torn in two for us to enter the very presence of God! We are free to come before Him, offering spiritual sacrifices of prayer. The graces of humility, persistence, and perseverance will bring the power of God through us to a needy world. Through prayer, we become a channel through which God the Father can work out His purposes in this world.

In looking at these two parables, Jesus shows us these principles about prayer that will make all the difference in our prayer life:

Persistence. “He who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). If we really get this truth, we will not give up but continue diligently in prayer!

Faith. Persistence also demonstrates faith that God will answer. When we persevere in the face of doubt and circumstances, we cling to God’s Word as the true reality. This is faith in action, and it is this type of faith that is pleasing to God! In fact, the very act of prayer is an act of faith.

Posture. We acknowledge who God is and who we are in Christ! We look to Him and focus on Him. We believe in His goodness. He will answer. If the unjust judge rewarded the widow’s persistent pleading, how much more can we be assured that our God, Who is merciful and gracious, will hear, and answer! We need to grasp the fact that God is for us! Unlike the unjust judge, our Heavenly Father desires that we come to Him and make our requests known. What is holding you back? God is waiting for us to approach His throne of grace. He is waiting for us to draw near and ask!

Prayer: Father, help us to learn from You to walk a grace-filled life of humility. Teach us to come often to Your throne of grace. Teach us to pray and not give up! Amen.

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