

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 9

God's Willingness

(Luke 18:1-8)

When we bring a petition to God, should we ask once, accept in faith that God has heard us and desist from bringing the same request to him over and over again? Perhaps we should turn our "Please" into a "Thank You" before there is any indication of an answer. Or should we keep on asking until we actually receive an answer? ("Yes," "No" or "Not yet")

We could cite passages such as Mark 11:22-24, John 14:13-14 and James 1:5-7 to support the idea that we simply have to ask in faith and God will hear us. At the one extreme, this line of thinking can degenerate into the awful "name it and claim it" approach in which the Almighty is expected to dance to our tune. At the other extreme, we could feel that we have to keep pleading and asking until we wear God down with our petitions. Perhaps if we muster up enough faith or enlist a sufficient number of "prayer warriors" or put in enough prayer-time, God will eventually hear us. We could quote many passages in support of the idea of persevering prayer (e. g. 1 Kings 18:42-46; James 5:17-18; 2 Kings 20:1-6; Neh 1:5-11; Mt 7:7-8; 1 Thess 3:10; 5:17).

We must, of course, realise that scripture verses cannot be quoted against one another. "Proof-texting" generally doesn't help us to *understand* the teaching of the Bible. Statements need to be read in context and we need to take into account the teaching of the whole Bible on any given subject. In any event, the very idea that we can speak directly to the Almighty and participate with him in the unfolding of his plan is nothing short of astonishing. In the very nature of the case, the subject of prayer is bound to be deep and wonderful and complex.

The story before us helps us to understand our great privilege. But we have to be careful to hear what it actually teaches and not to import ideas into it that are not in the parable. So let's hear its teaching.

WHAT?

1. The Parable

The parable is deceptively simple. Luke introduces it by explaining, up front, exactly why Jesus told it: "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."

The storyline is uncomplicated. A poor widow is being abused. She is destitute. As a rule, women in the Middle East do not go to court. But there are no men in her extended family to speak for her. Yet, in one sense, her predicament works to her advantage. If an official decided not to heed the (legitimate) request of a man, the plaintiff may well be brutally mistreated and banished. But although they might be ignored, women are not manhandled in public. So, if she was determined enough, she could make a nuisance of herself without the fear of suffering violence.

Unfortunately for this woman, who is presumed to have a legitimate case and who is obviously desperate, the judge to whom she has recourse is godless, conceited and callous. He is in it for himself. The fear of God, an essential quality in any judge, is entirely absent. His position in society is unassailable. He is not able to feel a sense of shame. Although we are not told that he was being bribed, this would have been presumed by the hearers. Here is a man who does not know how to blush. The point is just this: there couldn't have been a worse judge. "*Nothing* shames him. There is no spark of honour left in his soul to which anyone can appeal."¹

But the widow is so desperate and so determined that she pesters the life out of him. Eventually he can't take it any more and grants her justice for no other reason than that she is wearing him down (figuratively, "giving him a black eye").

In applying the parable, the Lord comments, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see they get justice, *and quickly* (my italics). However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 132.

2. The Interpretation

To interpret the parable correctly, we need to recognise that Jesus uses both *similarities* and *contrasts*. It is not that difficult to distinguish between them. The best way to do this is to look at the two main personalities in the drama.

The Widow

In the Old Testament, the widow is a symbol of the innocent, the powerless and the oppressed (Ex 22:22-23; Deut 10:18; Ps 68:5; Isa 1: 17; 10:2; cf. James 1:27). Here, the widow obviously represents someone who is petitioning God. We notice her perseverance. She knows that she has only one hope of receiving justice, but unfortunately the judge has no interest in her case. But she is so desperate that she refuses to take no for an answer. The emphasis here is on the **similarity** between the widow and the believing petitioner.

The Unjust Judge

Here is a despicable character. Of all people, a judge is supposed to dispense justice (2 Ch 19:4-6; Amos 5:10-13). But this judge is completely uninterested in the rights and wrongs of the case or in the widow's desperate predicament. He abuses his position but, for no other reason than that she is getting on his nerves, he eventually rules in her favour. The emphasis here is on the **contrast** between this *unjust and callous* judge and God, who is both just and compassionate. If a negligent and presumably dishonest judge dispenses justice to a widow *for whom he does not care*, how much more will a loving Father bring about justice for his *chosen ones*? And if the widow has to *keep coming* to him (because of his reluctance), those who cry out to God day and night will not be put off. On the contrary, God will see that they get justice, and *quickly*.

*What the parable does **not** teach*

The parable does not teach that there is any reluctance on the part of God to hear us. It certainly does not teach that we have to wear him down with our petitions or that a certain amount of prayer will tip the scales and incline him to answer us.

By the same token, we may not draw the inference that once we present our petition, we ought to desist from praying. Luke comments at the outset that the Lord told the disciples this parable "to show that they should always pray and not give up." Jesus referred to God's chosen ones "who cry out to him day and night." A purely "mechanical" view of prayer might conclude that a single request to a benevolent God is adequate. But there is more to prayer than that. If we limit prayer to petition, we may come to that conclusion. But prayer is an encounter in which God incorporates us into his plans. Instead of a mechanical view, we should

embrace a "mysterious" view. There is a great deal we don't understand, but so much is accomplished when we pray. Perseverance in prayer is not an indication of lack of trust in God. It is more likely to be an indication that we expect God to hear us. We keep at it because we are convinced that God brings about his purposes through persistent prayer. Andrew Murray put it so well:

(Prayer is) the highest and holiest work to which man can rise. It is fellowship with the Unseen and Most Holy One. The powers of the eternal world have been placed at its disposal . . . It is to prayer that God has given the right to take hold of him in his strength. It is on prayer that the promises wait for their fulfilment, the kingdom for its coming, the glory of God for its full revelation.²

What the parable does teach

It teaches us that we ought to persevere in prayer. One of the important reasons for doing so is that God is the exact opposite to the unjust judge. We may expect an answer from him. If there is a delay, as we know there sometimes is, it is not because he needs some persuasion. The fact that we might be inclined to "give up" is a hint, at least, that we may not always receive immediate identifiable answers. The concluding question: "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" has puzzled many. No matter how we interpret that question, we know that there will be believers on the earth when the Son of Man comes. William Hendriksen comments that "the question is asked not for the purpose of speculation but of self-examination."³

An interesting observation

I include this for merely for interest. It doesn't add to our understanding of the parable, so you are free to ignore it. In Ben Sirach 35:15-19 (or Ecclesiasticus, not Ecclesiastes),⁴ there is a passage that bears some resemblance to the parable. Jesus would no doubt have been familiar with this passage. We cannot say whether or not he was alluding to it. There are both similarities and significant differences so, if he was borrowing from it, he was certainly developing it and transforming it.⁵

² Andrew Murray, *With Christ in the School of Prayer* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1953), 16.

³ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 818.

⁴ This is one of the apocryphal books. The Apocrypha was never part of the Hebrew Scriptures and therefore does not have the authority of the Old Testament. These books are included in a separate section in some Bibles. While they were valued for private study, they were not accepted for public reading.

⁵ Do not the tears run down the widow's cheeks? And is not her cry against him that causes them to fall? ¹⁶ He that serves the Lord shall be accepted with favour, and his prayer shall reach unto the clouds. ¹⁷ The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds: and till it come nigh, he will not be comforted; and will not depart, till the Most High shall behold to judge righteously, and execute judgment. ¹⁸ For the Lord will not be slack, neither will the Mighty be patient toward them, till he have smitten in sunder the loins of the unmerciful, and repaid vengeance to the heathen; till he have taken away the multitude of the proud, and

The two most significant differences between the Sirach passage and Jesus' parable are:

- In Sirach, one's prayers are heard if one renders service that is "pleasing to the Lord." "None of this God-hears-you-if-you-serve-him theology is reflected in Jesus' parable.
- The figure of the unjust judge is a dramatic new thrust in Jesus' parable. It is bold and risky."⁶

SO WHAT?

1. What main point does the parable make about God?
2. About prayer?
3. Where does the similarity between the unjust judge and God start and where does it end?
4. Are you able to identify some important contrasts in the parable?

NOW WHAT?

1. What is the single most important truth you will take from this parable?
2. Are there people for whom (or matters about which) you pray regularly?
3. What do you make of Paul's comment in Romans 8:26, 27?
4. Comment on John Wesley's statement: "It seems that God is limited by our prayer life. He can do nothing for humanity unless someone asks him to do it."
5. If Wesley and Murray (quoted on page 4) are correct, what, if anything, do you intend to do about your prayer life?
6. Perhaps some in the group would like to share a personal story about an answer to prayer.

broken the sceptre of the unrighteous; ¹⁹ Till he have rendered to every man according to his deeds, and to the works of men according to their devices; till he have judged the cause of his people, and made them to rejoice in his mercy. *The Apocrypha : King James Version*. 1995. Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA

⁶ Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 128.