

The Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow

¹ Then he told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary. He said, ² “There was a judge in a certain town who neither feared God nor respected any human being. ³ And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, ‘Render a just decision for me against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a long time the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, ‘While it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, ⁵ because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.’” ⁶ The Lord said, “Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. ⁷ Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? ⁸ I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8)



Братья Белоусовы (Палех), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The Kingdom Among Us

On the 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time the story of the 10 lepers and the portions of Luke's gospel that precede those verses, dealt with forgiveness, faith and gratitude. There is a portion of Luke's gospel that is passed over in the Ordinary Time sequence – Luke 17:20-37. The passage is known in the New American Bible as “The Coming of the Kingdom of God” and “The Day of the Son of Man.” You can find the passage [here](#). At first read this somewhat apocalyptic text seems misplaced – aren't those readings located in Jerusalem just prior to the Passion? But Luke has a logic for inclusion of vv.20-37.

The disciples had asked that their faith be increased and they were told that they did not understand the nature of faith (17:5-6). As almost a counterpoint, the one leper who returns in gratitude to Jesus (vv.15-16) is told that his faith has saved him (v.19). The experience of the leper, seeing his healing and praising God, offers an apt illustration that the kingdom of God is *among you* (v.21) even as the Pharisees ask in v.20 *when the kingdom of God would come*.

It is worth mentioning again Joel Green's (*The Gospel of Luke*, 627) insight about Jesus words to the leper, *your faith has saved you*:

Here, something more than healing must be intended, since (1) the efficacy of faith is mentioned and (2) all ten lepers experienced cleansing. The Samaritan was not only cleansed, but on account of faith gained something more -- namely, insight into Jesus' role in the inbreaking kingdom. He is enabled to see and is thus enlightened, itself a metaphor for redemption.

The account of the ten lepers relates a typical pattern of God's activities throughout scriptures, namely, God acts first. Then our proper response to God's actions is praise and thanksgiving as we come to see God's hand in what has happened. The one leper has given evidence in his life and praise that the kingdom is indeed among us. The Pharisees, still blind, are asking about signs of the kingdom – about the when and where of the in-breaking of God's reign.

The Pharisees are told that the coming of the kingdom will not be preceded by observable signs, but also such phenomena will not even accompany the coming of the kingdom – indeed, the kingdom is already *among you* (v.21).¹ Lacking the eyes of faith they misinterpret the signs all around them and are blind to the presence of the kingdom. This brings about the judgment described in 17:20-39 and makes a particularly poignant verse from our 29th Sunday text: *But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* (18:8).

One context of these sections of Luke is the connection between gratitude-vision/faith-judgment. With this in mind listen again to the words of St. Paul:

¹⁸ The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. ²⁰ Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; ²¹ for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom 1:18-21)

Prayer and Hopeful Faith

Jesus' parable *about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary* (v.1) stands as a climax for the longer section on faithfulness at the coming of the Son of Man (17:20-18:8). Read against the horizon of 17:22-37, Jesus' teaching is particularly oriented toward the necessity of steadfast, hopeful faith in the midst of trials.

This parable is unique to Luke, as is the following parable on prayer (18:9-14, the gospel for the 30th Sunday in Year C). Luke has a greater emphasis on prayer than the other gospels. In the following five synoptic events, Luke adds a comment that Jesus is praying that is not found in the other gospels:

- Jesus is praying at his baptism before heavens open (3:21)
- Jesus spends the night praying to God before selecting the twelve (6:12)
- Jesus is praying before he asks the disciples, "Who do the crowds/you say that I am?" (9:18)
- Jesus is praying on the mountain before the transfiguration. (9:28, 29)
- Jesus is praying before the disciples ask him to teach them to pray. (11:1)

The following parables about prayer are unique to Luke:

¹ Some translations of v.21 take *entos* to be "within you" versus "among you" leading some to over accent the idea of God's indwelling as the location of the kingdom, thus a purely spiritual kingdom. Yet other text speak of the kingdom as objective and coming (21:31; 22:16,18). Given that in v.21 the pronoun "you" (*hymeis*) is plural "among you" or "in the midst of you" is a better translation – and thus more in-line with these other verses.

- The Friend at Midnight (11:5-8, following the Lord's Prayer)
- The Widow and the Judge (18:1-8)
- The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14)

Brian Stoffregen also points out that besides the topic of prayer, our text and the following parable are also connected by a number of words with the Greek root *-dik-* = generally referring to "what is right".

- *a-dik-ia* -- unjust (18:6)
- *a-dik-os* -- evildoers (18:11)
- *anti-dik-os* -- opponent (18:3)
- *dik-a-ios* -- righteous (18:9)
- *dik-a-ioo* -- justified (18:14)
- *ek-dik-eo* -- grant justice (18:3, 5)
- *ek-dik-esis* -- grant justice (18:7, 8)

Is this Luke's way to convey that the content of prayer must always address justice or the lack of it? Clearly the parable of the judge and widow is a case of justice that has seemingly been denied.

The Focus of the Parable: A Judge and a Widow

This parable is a twin of the parable of the neighbor in need (11:5-8). Both are used to illustrate the importance of persistence in prayer. Both present a person in need persistently pressing a request, and both parables call for reasoning from the lesser to the greater: If a neighbor or an unjust judge will respond to the urgent need and repeated request, then will not God also respond? It is an argument from lesser to the greater by which Jesus affirms the faithfulness of God – He will assuredly act on behalf of the righteous.

The widow's actions are a model of perseverance in the midst of wrong. The literal translation of v.8 is not "faith" as a general category, but is "the faith" – that is the manner of faith demonstrated by the widow. She is certain of God's justice and thus acts in resolute faithfulness in anticipation of that certainty. The parable is a metaphor for Jesus' followers who also will encounter hostility, look for the deliverance that accompanies the coming of the reign of God – and not finding it in their lifetime, may become disheartened. Jesus insists that adversity is integral to the process by which God brings salvation (*cf.* 17:25, 32-34) – and assures his disciples that, despite delay, they are always to be rooted in hope (18:1-18).

This same idea is captured in the Apostolic writing. At the beginning of his missions, Paul fervently prepared the Thessalonians for the imminent arrival of the Second Coming (*parousia*). There are aspects of his second letter to the Thessalonians by which it seems Paul began to understand that the *parousia* would be delayed. It did not diminish his fervor for spreading the Good News, but he ever more begins to preach perseverance as a model of faithfulness. Consider Paul's letter to the community in Rome written near the end of his life:

¹⁹ For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; ²⁰ for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. ²² We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; ²³ and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance. (Romans 8:19-25)

The Judge

More literal translation: *There was a certain judge in a certain town.* Echo of previous passages – a certain rich man who experienced an abundant harvest or a certain rich man (fool) who lived in purple garments and fine linens but never gave heed to poor Lazarus.

This judge is likely a local magistrate yet of notable status within the community. Despite his exterior bearing Jesus characterizes him as someone *who neither feared God nor respected any human being* (v.2). In the scriptural tradition *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge* (Prov 1:7) and the threshold of God's grace: *His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him* (Luke 1:50). Fear (holy awe) is the manner in which he disciples and others respond to Jesus' power (8:25, 35; 9:34, 45). Further, Jesus instructs the disciples not to fear their persecutors but to fear God (12:4-5). Luke portrays those who "fear God" in a positive manner (cf. Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26). It can be taken that a lack of such fear is a sign of one's thorough wickedness. The statement that the judge does not fear God points to 2 Chron 19:7, where King Jehoshaphat appoints judges in Judah, charging them, *"And now, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Act carefully, for with the LORD, our God there is no injustice, no partiality, no bribe-taking."* Without such fear, can one expect justice or impartiality except with a bribe?

The role of judge was to maintain harmonious relations and adjudicate disputes – while hearing all complaints impartially: ¹⁶ *I charged your judges at that time, 'Listen to complaints among your kinsmen, and administer true justice to both parties even if one of them is an alien.'* ¹⁷ *In rendering judgment, do not consider who a person is; give ear to the lowly and to the great alike, fearing no man, for judgment is God's. Refer to me any case that is too hard for you and I will hear it.'* (Dt 1:16–17). The judge's responsibility was to declare God's judgment and establish *shalom* among the people. Yet despite the emphasis on impartiality, the OT repeatedly speaks of the obligation to show special regard for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (see Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 14:28–29; 24:19–22; 26:12; cf. James 1:27; on widows, see also Exod. 22:22–24; Deut. 10:16–18; 24:17; Ps. 68:5; Isa. 1:16–17; 54:4; Lam. 1:1; Mal. 3:5).

We are not told why this judge seems to have so steadfastly refused to render justice to the widow. One is left to speculate that despite the instructions of Dt 1:16–17 and the covenantal obligations to give special place to the cry of the widow, our judge has motivations that have nothing to do with God's will or establishing *shalom* among the community.

The inner soliloquy of the judge is similar to those of the rich fool (12:17–19), the prodigal son (15:17–19) and the dishonest steward (16:3–4). The soliloquy affirms Jesus' initial characterization of the judge – and carries the same idea of "don't bother me" as present in the parable of the neighbor-in-need. In the face of the persistent widow the judge *"eventually...thought, 'While it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.'"* (vv.4b–5). It is unclear how long the issue has lingered without address – long enough for the judge to begin to feel badgered. Not motivated by his fear of God or sense of justice, his standing in the community – he simply fears this could escalate to bodily harm. There are translators who argue for a more literal translation of "give me a black eye."

Like all "black eyes," there is a double effect, representing both physical and social distress. That is, the judge complains that the widow's relentless badgering not only causes him physical harm but also risks publicly embarrassing him. For this reason, he says – perhaps justifying his actions to his wounded sense of self? – that he relents not because he has changed his mind but simply to shut up this dangerous widow. In this case, audacious, insufferable, even intolerable behavior results in justice.

The Widow

The entire parable rings with the echo of Sir 35:14-24 (note: depending on translation you find verse numbering slightly different – also, this is part of the OT reading for the 30th Sunday in Year C)

- ¹⁴ He is not deaf to the wail of the orphan,
nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint;
¹⁵ Do not the tears that stream down her cheek
cry out against him that causes them to fall?
¹⁶ He who serves God willingly is heard;
his petition reaches the heavens.
¹⁷ The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds;
it does not rest till it reaches its goal,
¹⁸ Nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds,
judges justly and affirms the right.
¹⁹ God indeed will not delay,
and like a warrior, will not be still
²⁰ Till he breaks the backs of the merciless
and wreaks vengeance upon the proud;
²¹ Till he destroys the haughty root and branch,
and smashes the scepter of the wicked;
²² Till he requites mankind according to its deeds,
and repays men according to their thoughts;
²³ Till he defends the cause of his people,
and gladdens them by his mercy.
²⁴ Welcome is his mercy in time of distress
as rain clouds in time of drought.

While the similarity is clear, where Sirach is concerned with God's retribution against the unrighteous, Jesus' emphasis is on praying and crying to God against injustices

In the ancient near-east (ANE) widows had no intrinsic standing within the community. Further the court system in ANE was a world of men – women were not considered stable witnesses and often had no rights of inheritance. It was typical for a woman's case to be represented by one of her kinsmen. In this parable the widow seems to lack kinsmen and resources (for a bribe), and thus pursues the case herself. As even this parable makes clear, in the tradition of Israel a widow is the ultimate state of vulnerability, deprivation and need.

Yet, a corrupt judge is not the unique element of the parable, rather the astonishing behavior of the widow. She is not the helpless victim, but takes the shocking initiative to continually return to the magistrate for justice. The disciples are certainly directed to the importance and persistent need for prayer, yet they are also directed to see the importance of engaging in the quest for justice – even when that quest requires that one acts outside the scripted provided for by an unjust world.

Jesus' Commentary on the Petition

⁷ *Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them?* ⁸ *I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

Jesus' comments make clear the intended parallels: from an unjust judge to God; from the widow to God's elect. The term "*his chosen ones*" (*hoi eklektoi*), used in Luke-Acts only here, echoes texts such as Isa. 42:1; 43:20; 65:9, 15, 22; Ps. 105:6, 43 (cf. Sir. 47:22), which use the term "chosen" in a context

that emphasizes election to serve Yahweh (also refers to Deut. 4:37; 7:7; 1 Chron. 16:13; Ps. 77:31; 88:3).

The expression “*call out to him day and night*” echoes Anna, the widow prophetess who prayed in the Temple “night and day” – anticipates the widows in 1 Tim 5:5 who also pray “night and day.” This parable echoes 17:22-37 wherein the faithful of God, the “chosen ones” will be the objects of unjust actions in an unjust world. Both are called to faithful constancy – as demonstrated by the widow

Having begun with a question from the Pharisees about the eschatological timetable (17:20-21), Jesus has changed the framework from when? And where? To the basic question – how will disciples respond in the face of the promised, certain coming of the fullness of the reign of God? What sort of faith will be found on earth? Will it be the faith that seeks justice?

...will He find faith on earth?

There is an interpretive path which emphasizes – and rightly so – that the question of whether Jesus will find faith is tied to a failure of persistence of prayer and belief in the face of our own expectations about what Jesus should be doing and about delays in the coming of the reign of God. Certainly one purpose of the parable is to encourage the disciples to call out to God “*day and night*” and to do so without ceasing.

What is interesting about this verse is that it is the only place in Luke that says (in the Greek) “the faith.” In all other places the word “faith” appears without an accompanying article. This has led many commentators to consider faith as having an “endpoint” of wholeness or completion. A faith that progresses towards maturity, completion, wholeness or some other term that admits of “stages” of faith might be described as a faith that is much more than just believing the correct things in our mind. You can believe all the right things and still be in bondage. You can believe all the right things and still be miserable. You can believe all the right things and still be relatively unchanged. Believing a set of claims to be true has very little transforming power. The same general comments could be made substituting “prayer” for “faith.”

The widow of the parable could be a faithful person, but remain passive. “I will stay home, away from the judge, and pray to God that the judge gives me justice.” Yet there is something transformative about the faith experience of the widow – something that compels her to act outside the script that society would force upon her as a widow. She is engaged in the quest for justice. The widow of the parable possesses faith, but it is a faith that seeks justice. One can rightly speculate that “the faith” that Jesus seeks is “belief that seeks justice.”

Many apologists use the *Letter of James* as a battleground for “faith vs. works” and the role each plays in salvation. “²² *Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves.* ²³ *For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror.* ²⁴ *He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like.* ²⁵ *But the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does.*” (James 1:22-25)

If one continues to read *James* one should notice that much of the works that James writes about are matters of justice, or said another way, working to establish God’s reign in this world, in this time. James speaks of the oppression of the poor, the failure of the community to provide even the most basic of necessities: “*If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day,* ¹⁶ *and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*” (James 2:15-17)

We should not let the meaning of this parable be restrained to “persistence in prayer” even as true as

that is. The parable exists within the context of the coming of the Reign of God which is not only a matter of faith, but also of justice. When the Son of Man comes, will He find a faith that seeks God's justice?

Notes

Luke 18:1 *becoming weary*: *enkakien*, usually translated as “to lose heart” or to “lose enthusiasm.” This word has two senses, “to act or treat badly” and “(wrongly) to cease.” In Luke 18:1, just after the apocalyptic discourse in ch. 17, the point is obviously that, with a view to the end, the disciples should not “wrongly cease,” i.e., grow slack in prayer. The meaning is the same in 2 Cor. 4:1: Paul will not let any difficulties cause him to fail or grow weary. In virtue of the eternal purpose of God, Paul in Eph. 3:13 asks his readers not to be discouraged by the pressures of his present situation, which are in fact their glory. Similarly, there is an exhortation not to grow weary in well-doing in 2 Th. 3:13; Gal. 6:9, with the promise of an ultimate reaping of eternal life (Gal. 6:8).

Luke 18:3 *widow*: *chêra* : this word, meaning “widow,” derives from a root meaning “forsaken.” The fate of the widow is bewailed (Ex. 22:25). Widowhood may indeed be a divine penalty (Ex. 22:22ff.). Widows are associated with others who are disadvantaged, e.g., orphans, aliens, or day laborers. They suffer wrongs (Is. 10:2) or loss of rights (1:23). They are held in low esteem (54:4); cf. their special clothes (Gen. 38:14). Like harlots or divorcees, they may not marry the high priest (Lev. 21:14), or, in the program of Ezek. 44:22, any priest at all unless they are the widows of priests. Some widows enjoy high regard (cf. Gen. 38), and the OT enjoins all the righteous to be kind to widows. God is their refuge, and he helps them to their rights (Ps. 146:9; Dt. 10:18). He threatens judgment on those who wrong them and promises blessing to those who assist them (Ex. 22:21ff.; Jer. 7:6). He witnesses in their favor (1 Kgs. 17:20). The supreme disaster is when he no longer pities them (Is. 9:16). Their vows are valid (Num. 30:10), they have a share of the tithe (Dt. 14:29), they may glean (24:19ff.), they participate in feasts (16:11), their clothes may not be taken as a pledge (24:17), and incidentally Levirate marriage grants them some protection (25:5ff.). [G. Stählin, TDNT 9:440–65]

Luke 18:5 *strike me*: *hypōpiázō* means “to strike on the face” with resultant disfigurement (i.e., from the Greek boxing ring – to give a black eye), then figuratively “to defame,” “to castigate” (with words). It may, however, be used here in the much weaker sense of “to wear one out.” [K. Weiss, *hypōpiázō*, 8:590–91]

Sources

Commentaries

R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke* in The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pp. 334-40

Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997) pp. 636-43

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) pp. 269-74

Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) p. 968

Leon Morris, *Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Vol. 3: (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) pp. 279-81

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007) p. 349

Brian Stoffregen, “Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes” at www.crossmarks.com

Dictionaries

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985).

G. Stählin, *chēra*, 9:440–65

W. Grundmann, *enkakéō*, 3:469-87

K. Weiss, *hypōpiázō*, 8:590–91

Scripture – Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. ©