

Sunday, February 18

LESSONS ON

prayer



Lk 18:1-2 — And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’”

We all know that prayer is a gift from God. But still, we have trouble maintaining a habit of calling out to him. There are many reasons why we neglect prayer, but they all arise from a single cause--pride:

- *Feeling that we are **good as we are** and therefore don’t need help. This comes from a prideful attitude that assumes we can do what we need on our own power.*
- *Feeling that we are **not good enough** and, therefore, won’t be heard. This comes from a prideful attitude that assumes we must, and therefore can one day, earn the right to be heard.*

So to inspire his listeners to trade pride for prayer, Jesus tells a parable. And in the story, we are introduced to two characters.

- *A judge: Judges were responsible for settling disputes like arbiters. Since their decisions were final, they held immense power in the community. For this reason, they were sternly warned to respect God’s law and his people without partiality. Dt 16:19–20 — “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Despite this and other such instructions, this judge respected neither God nor man.*
- *A widow: Widows had very few legal rights. Their testimony, if accepted at all, was often subjected to that of men. While they could own property under certain circumstances, this was not common. So, without a male heir, widows were extremely vulnerable. For this reason, God sternly warned his people: “You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless” (Ex 22:22–24). So this widow was totally helpless, and at the mercy of this unjust judge. She has no authority to leverage and no money to bribe. Can you pause and imagine how that felt?*

All she has is her voice. And she uses it. For a while, her voice falls on deaf ears. But eventually, the judge surrenders to the pressure.

Lk 18:4–5 — For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’”

Great story, good ending. But what is the point Jesus is trying to make? It obviously has something to do with God. But why is he being compared to an unjust judge? The judge in his story shares some attributes with God.

- *Like the judge, God hears the pleas of his people. Ps 145:18 — The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.*
- *Like the judge, God has the authority to declare what is right. Je 32:17 — ‘Ah, Lord God! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.*

But there are also some important differences between the judge of this story and the Judge of the Universe.

- *First, by his own declaration, the unjust judge did not fear God. This simply means he did not respect God’s standards or expect his judgment. But by God’s own declaration, “The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works” (Ps 145:17).*
- *Second, by his own declaration, the unjust judge did not respect men. The idea here is that he assigns no value to his fellow man. But by God’s own declaration, he valued human beings: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon, and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps 8:3–4)*

So, the unjust judge of this story and the just judge of heaven are very different. And if you are asking yourself, “Why would Jesus make this comparison,” then you are exactly where he wants you to be. Sometimes the meaning of a parable is found in its comparison. This parable is different, because the real power is found not in comparison but contrast.

Lk 18:6–7 — And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?”

When you pray persistently, your prayers do not meet the hard heart of a selfish tyrant. They meet the loving heart of a selfless Father. And he does not know us as some nameless widow who he wishes would go away. He knows us as his elect chosen from the foundation of the world (v. 18a). He aches to give us what we need. “I tell you,” Jesus summarizes, “he will give justice to them speedily” (v. 8a). And yet, in spite all that every prayer has going for it, Jesus wanders out loud: Lk 18:8b — Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

I know what you are thinking right now. “Hang on. I’ve been praying for months, and I am still waiting.” But it is important to remember that giving justice means giving just

what you need when you need it. You don't give children what they ask for; you give them what they need. In the same way, the Father protects us in ways we cannot imagine. He even protects us from our own prayer requests.

So we need to pray. We need to pray because, in spite of our pride (whether it is feeling we are good and don't need help or feeling bad and don't deserve help), we are as desperate as that widow. Think about it. How much can you actually do to guarantee a resolution to your problems? Answer: not much. You can offer your best argument, and the child will still not listen. Put up the best grades and still get the rejection letter. Do your best work and still get passed over for the promotion. Follow all the doctor's instructions and still not have a baby. You and I are more like that widow than we want to admit.

And in spite of our desperation and his invitation, when Jesus comes, will he find faith in our homes?



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