

Just Keep on Asking

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[0 : 0 0] Living God, we believe that you enable Luke to accurately write down the words of the Lord Jesus. And we pray in your mercy and grace that you would help us now enter into the reality these words are describing and enter in as never before.

For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. When I planned this series of sermons in parables of Jesus in the gospel according to Luke, I chose to preach the one we just read in Luke 18 right on the heels of the one we looked at last week in Luke 11 because both of them start out being about prayer.

Both of them end up being about more than prayer, but they both start out being about prayer. The parable in Luke 11, the friend at midnight, or as we came last week to see, it should be called, the shameless father and his extravagant giving, is told in response to the disciples' request, Lord, teach us to pray.

The parable in Luke 18, the widow and the unjust judge, is told, says Luke, to show that at all times they ought to pray and to not lose heart.

As I prepared to preach the parable in Luke 11 last week, I had a clear sense of what it was going to do in and for us, for I have known that parable in 1985 to 89.

[1 : 4 9] But as I prepared to preach the parable in Luke 18, I did not have a clear sense of what it would do in and for us because I have not known this parable very well.

Indeed, this will be the first time I've even tried to preach it. I tried to teach it in a classroom setting only once, in a Saturday morning seminar for expatriates in a hotel ballroom in Beijing in 1988.

Now, as I have been living and working in this parable through the past weeks, I think I'm beginning to get it.

Underscore the word beginning. I think I'm beginning to get what Jesus is getting at. And the sign that I'm beginning to understand, it is that I am being brought under a deep conviction.

A deep conviction about the quality of my faith. As we work through the widow and the unjust judge, we're going to see that this is a parable about faith.

[3 : 1 3] And we're going to see that faith, genuine faith, living faith, is revealed most clearly, is manifested most clearly, is expressed most clearly in not giving up in prayer.

New Testament scholar Arlen Haltren writes in his conclusion on the parable, only as persons persist in prayer will they persist in faith.

Only as persons persist in prayer will they persist in faith in a living relationship with God. Living faith keeps on asking the living God to bring about the full realization of the kingdom of God on earth, even when, or I should say especially when, faith does not see any answers to the asking.

Notice how Jesus concludes his comments on his own story. Verse 8. He concludes with a question. When the Son of Man, Son of Man is Jesus' favorite way of referring to himself.

When the Son of Man comes, Jesus tells the parable in Luke 18, right after speaking about his coming again in Luke 17, teaching in which he warns the disciples that they might suffer injustice as they're waiting for him to come, and as a result get discouraged and lose heart.

[4 : 50] When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? Literally, it is the faith. Definite article.

Will he find the faith on the earth? The faith, I think, referring to the faith the widow has in seeking justice. When he comes, when Jesus the Son of Man comes, will he find disciples not losing heart, but passionately praying for the coming of the kingdom?

Passionately praying for the coming of the king? Will he? In Jesus' question, there's a little particle that is hard to translate. It's the particle ARA, A-R-A.

And it is used, as the dictionary puts it, to enliven the question. In particular, introducing a note of anxiety, a note of suspicion about the answer to the question.

Will he? Will Jesus find people alive in faith on the earth, praying their hearts out for the coming of the king?

[6 : 06] ARA poses the possibility that he will not. And that is why I say, this parable is working in me a deep conviction.

Do I believe, and therefore pray, as passionately as this widow? Now, before we make our way through the parable, let me make just two preliminary observations.

The first is, that as far as we know, Jesus taught three parables that start out being about faith. And interestingly, all three of them are found in the gospel of Luke.

I say, interestingly, because Luke is the gospel that most consistently presents Jesus as the social activist, as the champion of the powerless, as the friend of outsiders.

Yet more than the other three gospels, Luke presents Jesus as the man of prayer. It's in Luke that we find Jesus regularly slipping away to pray. The man of social justice is also, primarily, the man of prayer, telling us that social justice and praying go together.

[7 : 19] The deeper we move into the heart of God in prayer, the greater the passion for social justice. And the greater the passion for social justice, the more we realize we need to pray because we're in over our heads and we need help.

So, first observation of all of Jesus' parables on prayer are found in Luke. Second observation, the hero of this parable is a woman, the widow.

Jesus chooses a woman as the hero. Not a normal thing for a first century teacher to do, but the typical thing for the Jesus of Luke.

More than the other gospels, Luke presents Jesus as elevating and advocating the role of women in the kingdom, which, if you know, the first century context was scandalous.

In Luke 15, which we're going to look at next Sunday, Jesus defends His eating and welcoming sinners and tax collectors by telling three parables.

[8 : 26] The parable of the shepherd and his lost sheep, the parable of the father and his lost sons, and in between them, the parable of the woman and her lost coins.

All three of these parables clearly being about the God of the kingdom of God. A shepherd, a metaphor for God? Yes. That makes some sense.

A father, a metaphor for God? Yes, with all kinds of biblical precedents. A woman, a metaphor for God? Unheard of. So, too, in this parable before us today, the hero of living faith is a woman.

But that's Jesus for you. So, let us make our way through His story. A widow, a judge. What does the widow want from the judge?

Why won't the judge give the widow what she's asking for? And why does the judge, an unjust judge, eventually give it? A widow. In the first century cultural context, she's one of the most vulnerable people in society.

[9 : 37] Widows in our 21st century Canadian context are not necessarily all that vulnerable. Many widows are well off financially and many of them are even in charge of their own business affairs.

But not in the first century cultural context. Widows are totally vulnerable. That's because in that context, a woman's place in society was a function of her relationship with men.

Her status and therefore her security were determined by the men in her life. So, if she was not yet married, she was under the protection and provision of her father.

Once she's married, she's under the protection and provision of her husband. But should her husband die, she has no protection or provision unless she has a son or a thoughtful brother-in-law.

father. You can see, by the way, how vulnerable Mary, the mother of Jesus, was. When she as a virgin conceived the son of God in her womb, she was engaged to her husband, Joseph.

[10 : 45] But they were not yet living together. Because she was engaged, she was no longer under the protection and provision of her father. But because Joseph had not yet taken her into his house, she was not yet under the provision and protection of her husband.

She was in a kind of no man's land, as Richard Mao says. Which is why she sings what she does in her Magnificat. My soul exalts the Lord.

My spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior, for he has had regard for the humble estate of his bondservant. When there was no man to protect and provide for Mary, God became her protector and provider.

The widow in Jesus' parable is in a horribly vulnerable no man's land. She left the cover of her father long ago.

She no longer has the cover of her husband since she's died, and apparently she has no son. Which is why she's in the courtroom all alone. She has no man to stand with her, no man to stand for her.

[11 : 58] The cultural surprise of this story is that she's even there. That she is so committed to justice that she will stand there alone.

A woman before a man with no man to support her. This is one gutsy lady. And she's there with no economic clout.

If she had money, she could pay the bribe. That's the way things sometimes are, right? You make your way through the courts by paying off the court officials.

The fact that she had to come day after day after day after day says she did not have the money to pay off the bribe, and clearly this judge was a man who could be bought with cash. Now, what does she want from the judge?

Justice. Simple justice. Verse 3. Give me legal protection against my opponent. Literally, it is simply do me justice.

[12 : 56] That's all she wants. Do me justice. The man is a judge, and a judge is just to do justice. She's not seeking revenge.

She simply wants what is right. Had someone stolen from her? Had some distant relative worked the system to take what is rightly hers? Had she been evicted from her apartment by some insensitive, greedy landlord?

We're not told, but all she wants is what is right. She does not want revenge. She does not want some exorbitant compensation. Just do me justice, and she is going to stay there until justice is done.

The judge, one very corrupt dude. Verse 2. Jesus says, he does not fear God, and he does not respect man. The judge himself will say that about himself in verse 4 in his soliloquy.

Even though I do not fear God, nor respect man. In the Bible, fearing God is the requisite for being a good judge.

[14 : 06] When King Jehoshaphat appointed judges throughout the land of Judah, he gave them their job description, ending with the charge, let the fear of the Lord be upon you.

This judge has no fear of the Lord. He has no sense of accountability to God. There's not even a hint in his soul that he might have to give accounting for his rulings to a higher court.

Which means that this widow cannot appeal with the words, for God's sake, man. Those words will do nothing in the soul of this judge.

In the Bible, you might know that justice is weighted toward the vulnerable. Again and again, God calls his people to look out for the plight of the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

There is this preferential option for the widow. Societies are judged by how they treat widows. They stand or fall depending on how they care for widows. The judge does not care about this.

[15 : 10] The preferential option for the vulnerable means nothing to this judge. And he does not care what people think about his rulings. He does not respect man, says Jesus.

Kenneth Bailey points out that the Arabic translations of this text render the words as, he is not ashamed before people. As we noted last Sunday, and as we will note again next Sunday, Middle Eastern culture is largely governed by shame, or more accurately, by the avoidance of shame.

A central cultural value is avoiding bringing shame on my face, avoiding bringing shame on my name or my reputation. Yes, life is ordered by law, there are rules, but life is fundamentally ordered by the avoidance of shame.

Thus, when parents discipline their children in the Middle East, they do not say what parents in the West say. They do not say, that is wrong. They say, that is shameful.

I tried that on my grandson yesterday out at UBC. We went to the Apple Festival, and towards the end, he had a meltdown in the parking lot. I didn't know what to do. And I said to him, this is wrong, and it didn't affect him at all.

[16 : 26] And then I got down and I whispered in his ears, and I said, you know what? If you keep doing this, people around you aren't going to think as highly of you as your grandpa does. It worked.

The kid has shame. He has avoidance of shame in him. I'm going to tell his parents maybe that will help out a little bit. So, Kenneth Bailey says, one of the sharpest criticisms possible of an adult in the Middle East is, he does not feel shame.

For the biblical authors, society collapses where there is no longer any fear of God and where there is no longer any shame before other human beings.

The judge in the parable is a collapsed human. For God's sake, holds no weight nor does shame on you.

He can only be bribed. But he finally gives the widow what she's asking for. He does finally give her justice. Why? Not because he comes to his senses.

[17 : 40] Not because the fear of God finally awakens justice in his soul. Not because the shame factor finally kicks in. Then why? Because of this widow's scandalous and courageous behavior.

We hear this in the judge's soliloquy. And by the way, this is the case in many of Jesus' parables that the turning point in the parable comes in the soliloquy of one of the key characters.

The judge says to himself, verses 4-5, even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her justice, lest by continually coming to me she wear me out.

Now, this word wear me out is literally lest she hit me under the eye. The word comes from the world of prize fighting.

It comes from the boxing ring. The word means to strike someone on the face, usually under the eye, in such a way that he or she gets a black eye or is disfigured in some way.

[18 : 50] Now, the word can refer to a metaphorical hit and therefore to a metaphorical black eye. The judge could be saying she's going to make me look bad in public.

She's going to shame me. Especially because I keep ignoring God's special concern for the widows. She's going to defame me. But I don't think that's likely given what the judge himself says about himself that he doesn't fear God and he has no shame.

So I take the judge literally. He's afraid that this widow is going to get violent with him. She is not. That's not her character. But he fears the possibility.

She's going to give me a black eye. Now what is seen? It's almost humorous. A judge with all the cultural and societal power and a widow with no cultural and no societal power.

And yet she's gaining the upper hand. New Testament scholar Joel image of the almighty fearless macho judge cornered by the least powerful person in the society.

[19 : 56] The judge finally does what is right because of the widow's surprising and scandalous behavior. She acts outside the culturally expected norms. She blows the judge away by not losing heart as she asks for justice.

She's the hero. So the point of the parable is wear God down. Right?

Pester God until he finally gives up. Right? Get hundreds of other people on your Facebook to also join in pestering God.

And God will finally give you what you're looking for. Right? No. Listen to Jesus because this is the interesting thing. He teaches the parable and then as he comments on it he takes it in an unexpected direction.

Remember the context. Just before speaking this parable Jesus is teaching about his coming again and he's warning the disciples that they could become very discouraged waiting for him to come.

[21 : 16] Luke 17 22 The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the son of man and will not see it and we could lose heart. So Jesus says hear what the unjust judge says and then he takes us into the reason for the parable to build up our faith to show us why we need not lose heart as we ask for justice.

He begins with a question verse 7 Now shall not God bring about justice for the elect who cry to him day and night that little phrase day and night takes me back to the beginning of the gospel of Luke when on that day Mary and Joseph come to the temple to dedicate the infant Jesus they encounter two elderly persons who have not given up Simeon who Luke says was looking for the consolation of Israel who then when holding the infant Jesus says now you can let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation in this little baby and Anna an 84 year old widow a prophetess who Luke says never let the temple but serve day and night fasting and praying looking for the redemption of Israel shall not God bring about justice who cry to him day and night the question uses a grammatical construction that emphasizes an emphatic yes answer it's um plus the subjunctive it's a way of saying yes

God will bring about justice Jesus is arguing from the lesser to the greater if the unjust judge finally does what is right will not the great just judge finally do what is right if the unjust judge who does not fear God and has no shame finally does justice will not the God who keeps his word finally bring justice to the world yes yes he will it's built into the question it's a promise and he always keeps his promise do not lose heart Jesus is saying he said he would come and rectify Jesus continues with another question verse seven and will he delay over delay long over them delay long is sometimes rendered as will he not be slow over them and so some of us latch onto this word slow and we think well

Jesus is simply reminding us that his sense of time is not our sense of time and our minds jump to 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8 the Lord is not about his promise as some count slowness now that is true but that's not what Jesus is saying here the verb delay over can also be rendered patient with and so some of us latch on to the word patient and we think well Jesus does not come on our terms because he's patient with the world and our mind jumps back to 2 Peter chapter 3 but this time to verse 9 but the Lord is patient towards you not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance sometimes I think Jesus holds back on coming in order to win just one more person it's as though Jesus says wait just one more just one more just one more and I say to him look at all the babies getting born you're going to have just one more for a long time all true but that's not what he's saying here the verb delay over is actually best rendered as long suffering over so some of us latch on to the phrase suffer long and think well as we wait for his coming he will suffer with us which is true as we groan for the coming of the kingdom he through his spirit groans with us and in us but notice the phrase over them will he not be long suffering over them who's the them long suffering over them who's the them the elect he will be long suffering over the elect who cry for justice now in the bible long suffering means put away anger makrothumia put away anger slow to anger as we hear again and again in the

Torah and the Psalms God is slow to anger will he not be slow to anger over them over whom over the elect slow to anger over the elect will he not put his anger away from the elect yes he will he will put his anger away from those who are seeking justice you see the justice seeker is also a sinner all justice seekers were all sinners a just cause does not a just person make there are no purely just justice seekers just as there are no purely good good guys and no purely bad bad guys except the ultimate bad guy himself the evil one I think it was Alexander Solzhenitsyn who said that the line between good and evil in the world goes right through my soul do not lose heart Jesus is saying God will put his away against the sinful justice seekers as they cry out for justice

[26 : 57] Jesus continues with a great declaration in verse 8 I will tell you he will bring about justice speedily speedily many believers have sought justice for years or for decades speedily the kingdom is coming speedily Jesus is coming speedily yes when you understand that the kingdom and Jesus are one where Jesus is there is the kingdom where the kingdom is there is Jesus the kingdom and the king cannot be separated where the king is there is the kingdom now where is the king he's not far away not at all he's very close at hand when the son of man ascended to the throne of the universe he did not go far away he is very close at hand which means he can respond speedily do not lose heart this is what he declares in the last book of the bible in the revelation of Jesus

Christ for the time is near revelation 1 3 and 22 7 for the time is near why is the time near because the lord is near always near he's not coming from a far place he's very close at hand he's always near always imminent so he can come speedily when we cry out to him bring about justice speedily you know as a matter of fact that's what he does right after speaking the parable because in the next chapter we find Jesus entering into Jerusalem then being unjustly judged and unjustly condemned on a Roman cross where in the mystery of things justice for the whole world was done Jesus continues his big question verse 8 however when the son of man comes will he find faith on the earth literally the faith will he find the faith on the earth will he find the faith of this gutsy widow in light of

God being the perfectly just judge who hears our cry day and night in light of God being the perfectly merciful judge who puts away anger against those who are asking for the justice in light of the nearness of the son of man in light of all of that when he finally shows up is he going to find the faith of the widow who would not go away who would not let go who did not lose heart as she waited for justice to be done that is why I say that standing under this parable has brought me under deep conviction Jesus is saying that living faith keeps asking not because we have to wear God down but because that's what faith does ask God to do what only God can do we're utterly helpless living faith does not give up does not go away does not give up until

God finally fulfills all his promises living faith stays right there in the face of God until God's project is finally finished in the world Jesus is saying that when we stop praying for him to come we have stopped believing that he will come it means that we secretly think there's no use praying anymore it means that we have secretly concluded that God does not care about justice that there really is no hope for justice when we stop praying it means that we have capitulated to the power of injustice theologian Ronald Goetz puts it so arrestingly for me he writes we have a right and duty to pray for the world and for ourselves lest by our silence we would seem to abandon the world to the suspicion that any God who could exist given a world as ours is either utterly aloof or cruel or impotent or perhaps all free now as I watch this widow at work in the parable

I think of how the writer of the book of Hebrews defines faith faith he says is the assurance of things hoped for the conviction of things not seen the assurance for things hoped for the conviction of not things things not seen faith is putting our weight on the unseen and the not yet and what Jesus is saying in the parable of the widow and the unjust judge is that the clearest manifestation of faith the clearest expression that faith is alive is that it prays and that it keeps praying until the not yet is now and the unseen is seen and we know from Jesus other prayer parable on prayer that we looked at last week every time we pray something happens the one who is asking is receiving the one who is seeking is finding is receiving what is finding what

[32 : 28] God Jesus says every time we pray the father gives us more of the Holy Spirit every time we pray to the God of justice to bring justice the God of justice gives us more of himself so let us not lose heart let us keep believing by keep asking let us keep asking the father in heaven to cause his kingdom to come your kingdom come Jesus teaches us to pray because only God can cause the kingdom to come do it God you have to do it and come Lord Jesus you are the son of man who according to the vision in Daniel 7 has given all the nations of the world come claim your rightful place in the universe come so that all the nations of the world can be freed of evil and sin and death and enter into the glorious freedom and abundant extravagant goodness of your reign so what this parable teaches me to do it says you just stay right there in the face of

God until the kingdom comes please dear Jesus help me do it