

Lessons from an Unjust Legal System

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 27th of January 2002. The preacher is Paul Dudley.

The sermon is entitled Lessons from an Unjust Legal System and is based on Luke chapter 18 verses 1 to 8.

Some of the most persistent people I know are children. I don't know if you've seen this scene before, but you walk into a shopping centre and there's a little kid standing in front of the chocolate bars.

Mum, I want a chocolate. Not now. Mum, I want a chocolate. No, no, no. We'll have someone when we get home. Mum, can I have a chocolate please?

Mum, can I have a chocolate please? I need one. Mum. And then you get to a point where you think, no, no, I'm going to come tough here.

[1 : 17] No, you are not having a chocolate. And just think when you think you've got the upper hand, they throw themselves onto the floor and start throwing their arms and legs around, going, Mum, I need one.

You think you've got it all under control then. You think, no, no, she'll stop soon. It's okay. It's a little bit of embarrassment. I can cope with this. But kids have energiser batteries in them.

They just keep going. They don't stop there. And they raise up just that next level. And you think if they go any louder or any... They're going to explode. So in the end, you just give them the chocolate.

Well, you'd be pleased to know I haven't done that for a couple of weeks. But in today's parable, we are told we are to have the same type of persistence.

We are to be people who pray and never give up. We are to be people who do not lose heart. And it's actually written particularly to those who are suffering.

[2 : 20] Those who are in the midst of hardship. Don't give up. Never give up praying. The reason why I know this is, is because the Bible reading tells me right at the very beginning.

Which is fantastic when you're coming to a passage to work out what it's trying to say. Right at the very beginning, it tells you what it's all about. If you'd like to open to page 853, we're going to be working through this parable.

In Luke 18, 1-8. And at the beginning, Luke tells us that Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray and always not to lose heart.

This is like a murder mystery. You're sitting there watching this murder mystery and you're trying to work out who did it. Who was the person that killed so-and-so?

But at the beginning of the movie, they tell you the answer already. Oh, it was so-and-so. And so the rest of the movie is sort of going, hmm, well, I know who murdered them.

[3 : 19] It's a little bit boring. But you keep on watching because you want to know how it actually happened. Well, we're going to have to work hard this morning because we've been told what the parable is about. It's about being persistent in prayer.

But we need to work hard to work out why Jesus gives this parable. Why is it that we are to be persistent in prayer? So let's get straight into the parable.

Jesus starts in verse 2 by giving a description of one of the characters in the parable. There are two. One is a judge. The other is a widow.

In verse 2, we find out that in a certain city, there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. The judge is described in two ways. He does not fear God and he does not respect people.

Well, he doesn't fear God. That means you can't appeal to him and say, look, for God's sake, do this. For God's sake, you know, because of what God is like, do this.

[4 : 21] Give some justice. Sort this situation out. This guy doesn't respect God. You can't appeal to him because of God. In 2 Chronicles, Jeroboam, sorry, Jehoshaphat, has just brought the people back together and he starts setting up judges in the towns.

And listen to what he says. In verse 5, Jehoshaphat recognized that you need to keep in mind God. You are doing it on God's behalf. But the judge in our parable, he doesn't. He doesn't fear God. Second thing he's described is, he's described as someone who doesn't respect men. No respect whatsoever. He is shameful. He cannot be shamed. In the Middle East culture, shame and pride is a much bigger thing than we have in our culture.

Much bigger thing. If a child did something wrong, you would say to the child, that is a shameful thing to do. In our culture, we'd say that's a wrong thing to do.

[5 : 52] But in the Middle East, you say that is a shameful thing to do. Absolutely shameful. That's because shame is, for this culture, shame is something that is really important.

If you don't feel shame, then there's no innocence of being good, of what is good. There's no spark of honour left in them. They fail to respect people. It's not a matter of failing to respect people, but it's an inability to sense evil actions.

And this describes the judge. He does not respect people. He cannot be shamed. You cannot go up to him and say, that is a shameful thing to do. Because he doesn't respect people.

He can't be shamed. He has no sense of what is good and bad. In the whole, this judge is a very difficult judge. I certainly would not want to come before him if I had to try and get some justice.

Well, in the next verse, we have the description of the widow. In that city, there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, grant me justice from my opponent.

[7 : 13] Here is a widow. In the Middle East, the widow, in the time of Jesus, the widow is someone who is powerless. She is someone who is oppressed. She has no one to support her.

No one to protect her. It's not like our society where we have nursing homes, where we have a social security that can support and look after widows. The widow lives in a man's world where she is dependent on others.

And as a widow, if she has no one there to support her, then she is left on her own. And it is a terrible, terrible thing. God recognises the specialness of the widow.

And he sets up special considerations. In Isaiah, the beginning of Isaiah, God recognises the helplessness of the widow and the orphan. And he says, when you're sorting out your law suits, when you sort them out, deal with the orphan first, then the widow.

They had to be people of special consideration in the Bible. And this judge, he doesn't respect her. But this widow keeps on coming back.

[8 : 23] She keeps on demanding justice. Keeps on asking, just like a child wanting chocolate. She keeps on coming back again and again because the judge is the only one which she can get justice from.

The passage doesn't tell us what the problem was, why she needed justice. It's probably likely that it was a matter of money, that she needed money to survive.

And so she's come to the judge so that she may continue living, that the judge will give her the justice that she desires. And so she keeps on coming back.

Well, Jesus goes on to explain what happened in the parable. For a while, the judge doesn't do anything about it. Just ignores her. But then, as we see in verse 4, But lady said to himself, Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by her continually coming.

The judge gives her justice. She keeps on coming up and keeps on bothering her. There's a story told by a Western traveller who was going through the Middle East late last century.

[9 : 41] He was travelling near Mesopotamia and he walked into a city. And as he walked into the city, just inside the gates, the prison was on one side of the road and all the people who were held there were leaning out the windows, asking for people to come to their aid.

And on the other side was the courthouse. It was just a large hall. And every day, many, many people would come into this large hall calling out for justice to this judge, wanting justice, and asking to get their case heard.

But as you look closely at the situation, the judge was sitting on a dais, slightly raised. And you could only half see him because he was covered in cushions, looking very comfortable. And he had secretaries all around him. Now those who had money would go up to the secretaries and they would be paying money, bribes, to have their case heard. And so when the case, the person who had the greatest bribe to hurt their case first, the case would come before the judge. But the judge would always rule in favour of whoever gave the largest bribe. [10:47] A terrible justice system, this story. Well, the traveller goes on to describe how a woman kept on coming into this situation day in and day out, asking for justice.

Hear my case. I want justice. Day in and day out. The people there would say, shh, just be quiet. You know, this is no place for you, just shh. Well, the traveller goes on to describe how the judge, at the end of one of the cases, keeps on hearing this woman.

And then in the end says, what does that woman want? And so the woman is able to present her case. Her son has gone to war as a soldier for the country.

And she is a widow. She has no one to plough the fields. No one to support her. No one to care for her. And so she's asking that when the tax man comes around, because he's been coming around, that she could be, would not have to pay the tax that was due.

Without having anyone to plough the field, she could not pay a tax. And in that land, there was a special law that said widows did not have to pay the tax if they couldn't, if they had no one to supply the means by which they could give the money.

[12:06] Well, the judge, after a few questions, listens to the case and he gives her justice and she does not have to pay the tax man the money.

Well, likewise with this parable here. Here we have this widow coming in, coming in and wearing down this judge. It's interesting, the term there, it says, not wear me out by continually coming. This term, not wear me out, comes from a Greek term that when translated literally means a blow under the eye. I'm going to give her justice because otherwise she's going to give me a blow under the eye.

Now many, some have translated, some have interpreted this, that the woman's going to get violent, that she's going to come and sock the guy in the eye. But knowing the culture, that's not the way it would have been.

For the widow's life would have been in jeopardy to do that, to hit a judge. Perhaps it was to destroy his reputation. The term means to destroy reputation.

[13:11] But again, we find out from the parable, he doesn't have a reputation to destroy. He can't be shamed. Now the term, a blow under the eye, means this war of attrition where the person has been worn down.

Worn down. And this is the case with the judge. He is worn down and he gives justice. Well, there's the parable. Jesus then goes on to explain the parable in verse 6.

And the Lord said, saying to his disciples, this is, listen to what the unjust judge says. Listen carefully to this unjust judge. Here is a person, a woman, a widow, no less, in a man's world coming to a judge who does not respect God and does not respect people.

And this judge gives justice. Listen to him, he's giving justice. How much more so will God give us justice?

Jesus is using a rabbinic principle here of going from something that is light to something that is heavy. So, for example, if I wanted to teach someone about the dangers of having a grand piano fall on you, I don't know why you would want to teach someone about the dangers of having a grand piano falling on you, you might get them to come up and say, he put your hand here and you get a hammer and you hit them on the hand.

[14:38] Bang. You go, oh, that hurt. And you go, yes, that was only a hammer. Imagine if it was a grand piano. Well, Jesus is using this same principle.

If this unjust judge is going to give justice, how much more so will God, a loving father, give justice to us. You see, Jesus is bringing out here we are to persist in prayer because of the character of God.

The Old Testament talks about God being slow to anger, abounding in mercy. This passage here talks about God's character. Let me read on. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?

We have a God who listens to us as we cry out to him. A father who listens, not ignores us, a God who listens. I tell you, will he delay long in helping them?

He's a God that comes quickly to their aid. He will not delay. He will bring about justice. Jesus is drawing out the character of God here. He is a just God. He is a God that listens.

[15:48] He is a God who is sovereign, the one who rules over all. He will bring about justice if we cry out to him. Jesus is encouraging his disciples that in the midst of their hardship, in the midst of their injustice, they are to persist in prayer.

Why? Because of the character of God. God listens to them. God cares for them. God will not delay. He will bring about justice.

Jesus. Right at the end of the parable, we see this line.

And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? Will he find faith? It's a bit of a sting, isn't it? Here are the disciples going, yes, I'm going to persist in prayer.

We have a great God. I will follow God and I will follow you, Jesus, and I will persist in prayer. It will be not a problem. And then Jesus says, when the Son of Man come, will you have faith?

[16:55] Can you imagine the shock on their face? Me? Of course I'm going to have faith. What are you talking about? I'll be a person of faith. Let's just flip over a few pages to Luke chapter 22.

Luke chapter 22 in verse 39. You find that page 858. The disciples in Jesus have turned up in Jerusalem.

Jesus knows that this is the time when he is going to die. And he's told his disciples it is a terribly hard time for them. And we're at the point of death where he's about to be caught by the people who want him.

And in verse 39 we have this here in the garden of Gethsemane. He came out and went as was his custom to the Mount of Olives. And the disciples followed him. When he reached the place he said to them pray that you may not come into the time of trial.

Pray. Persist in prayer. Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw knelt down and prayed. Here is our example of the man who prayed who persisted in prayer.

[18:18] In the midst of hardship what did he do? He was on his knees praying. What is his prayer? Father if you are willing remove this cup from me yet not my will but yours be done.

He's calling out to God recognising that God is one who brings about justice but that he will listen to God. Move down to verse 35. Listen to this though. What about the disciples?

When he got up from prayer he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief. And he said to them why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into a time of trial. So you read on you see that the disciples abandoned Jesus.

They abandoned him. When they were meant to be persisting in prayer they fell asleep. Will God vindicate Jesus?

Well doesn't he do that in the most fantastic way? God vindicates. God comes quickly to Jesus and he vindicates him in his resurrection. When Christ is raised from the dead God brings about the justice.

[19:30] We have a great God who brings about justice. The disciples came to see that in the resurrection of Jesus that was where their vindication was coming that came as well.

For when they were in Christ when Christ rose and was vindicated they also were vindicated. They came to recognise that as God vindicated Jesus they too were vindicated.

and when Christ comes again everyone will see it. It will be made known to the whole world that God's justice has been done. He will vindicate his people.

Same for us. we know that we have been vindicated in Jesus. We live by faith in him. But we know that there will come a day a great and glorious day when Jesus will come again and he will show that justice.

The justice will be proclaimed everywhere. Justice will be brought. We are to persist in prayer.

[20:46] Why? Because of the character of God. Why are we to persist in prayer? Because of that is the way of faith. As Jesus was faithful persisting in prayer trusting in God to bring about his justice.

We are to be persistent in prayer because God vindicated Jesus. Because of the vindication of Jesus. I was reading a book by Don Carson about prayer.

And he noted that there was a survey taken in one of the North American seminaries which is just like a Bible college. And there were 50 who offered themselves to go overseas on mission.

They'd been studying there, studying God's word and so they decided they'd better interview these 50 people just to find out whether they were suitable to go on overseas mission. Carefully they were interviewed and of the 50 3 regularly prayed and had a quiet time.

6%. How's your prayer life going? Are you persisting in prayer? Or are you too busy?

[22 : 03] Are you wrapped up in the world and the world's ways? And blinded by them and cannot see that God is going to bring about justice? We are to be people who are persistent in prayer.

Paul was telling me that the prayer meetings that they have here after September 11 the church was I think there was over a hundred here which is much more than normal.

I wonder whether it's only in the times of crisis that we come before God and recognise that we want justice. We want justice in this world. We want Jesus to come again. We need to be people who persist in prayer.

Ask God to bring about his justice because of God's character. Because it is the right response of faith. And because in Christ Christ has been vindicated.

When Jesus comes will he find faith in you? Let us be people who are persistent in prayer and not lose heart. Thank you.