

The Parable of the Persistent Widow (& the Unjust Judge)

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Luke 18, we marched through Philippians at the outset of this little church plant and now are in a series on the parables of Jesus Christ from the Gospel of Luke.

So I'm excited about this one today. I'm sure you've all heard the phrase, behind every great man is a great woman. Amen.

I don't know whether to amen that. I guess you're saying you're a great man too because I just say behind a lousy man like myself is a great woman. But along these lines, in the 1830s, the famous French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, I think that's how you pronounce it, came to America to study and to see how democracy worked in this new country.

When he returned home, he wrote a classic book, Democracy in America, in order to explain what he found and help establish democracy in France. Near the end of his book, he wrote, Now that I am drawing to the close of this work, this book, in which I have spoken of so many important things done by the Americans, if asked, to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people ought mainly to be attributed, if asked what's the single special sauce, special ingredient, he said, the superiority of their women.

[1 : 43] I just thought that was great, you know. In explaining the decisive factor of democracy in America, he didn't point to the founders. Jefferson wasn't there, or the Constitution, or the checks and balances, or the court system, he points to their women.

In another place he wrote, Nowhere have I seen women occupying a loftier position than in the founding of America. Interestingly, a first century reader of the New Testament would have similarly been struck by the lofty position women were given in the Bible.

In a patriarchal society in which men were educated, held power, held office, owned property, had the right to marry, divorce, and mistreat women in general as they please, Jesus repeatedly treats them differently.

He is kind, compassionate, treats them with dignity and respect.

Jesus doesn't look down on women, and that's what stood out when he was gathered with the Pharisees, and Mary broke her alabaster jar.

[2 : 59] Jesus doesn't look past them, whoever they were. In fact, Jesus calls them to occupy important places in the unfolding of his salvation and his mission.

We think of Mary and Martha, who gets a bad rap from that one story, but we think of Mary Magdalene, or Phoebe, or Priscilla, or any of these women that occupy important roles in Jesus's mission.

In fact, many say that one of the most important reasons our New Testament descriptions of Jesus's resurrection are true is because in each gospel, the first persons to the tomb are women. No first century writer would have included that. It would have been foolish to include that. Female testimony was not accepted anywhere, not accepted in any court.

And so the New Testament esteems and elevates women and their gifts and callings highly. Not surprisingly, when Jesus tells parables, he tells stories often about women.

[4 : 04] Now, you've got to imagine, he's telling these stories. Implicit in these stories is inviting women to hear. It would have been so provocative in that culture to make clear salvation was for them.

So it's fitting this morning on this Mother's Day, we study this wonderful parable about a persistent widow from Luke 18, where the main character is not the powerful male judge, but the poor female widow.

And may God give us ears to hear. Luke 18, verse 1, he says, And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

He said, For a while, he refused.

But afterwards, 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 continually coming.

[5 : 33] Verse 6, And the Lord Jesus Christ 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? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

That is the authoritative word of God. Now, this is just a great story, a very vivid story. All these parables are very vivid.

And let's just recap the story as we get started. You know, in many ways, this story, just like all his other parables, are simple and intentionally generic. There's one town, there's a certain nameless town, where this story takes place.

And the story begins, and it centers around a powerful yet unjust judge. He has the judge. He possesses significant power. He's entrusted with the affairs of the people.

[6 : 49] He hears cases. He delivers decisions, particularly in disputes about money. However, he is unjust.

Twice in this text, it says he neither fears God nor respects man. Guided by the fear of the Lord and the desire to do what is right towards men and women, judges are called to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.

They are meant to always call evil evil and good good and rule accordingly. But this judge does neither. He only does what benefits him.

That's what that means. He neither fear God nor respects man. He only does what benefits him. And you know this man.

You know people who only care about what benefits them. You know powerful people who use their power and money for little more than what makes their life easier.

[7 : 56] And that's who this judge is. Rather than fearing God and defending the rights of the poor, weak, and widow, this judge is unjust. And in just a few words, our hearts are meant to be offended and disgusted with this man.

There is no doubt who the antagonist is in this story. It is this reprehensible, offensive judge.

The story continues though and introduces a widow who comes to the judge to cry out for justice.

And that day, widows would have been unmistakable for their, quote, widow's garment of sackcloth. The idea is that you would have seen a widow from afar. And they were often poor, left with no means of financial support.

They would not have inherited their husband's estate and would not have likely returned to their families because of the burden they would bring. And they were among the most poor and most dependent in the first century world.

[9 : 13] And this widow comes to him. Says, give me justice against my adversary. I don't know what's going on.

You know, perhaps she was cheated out of some money. Perhaps someone indebted to her refused to pay. Perhaps she was being oppressed in slavery. And she came to say she needed justice.

She knew the injustice most likely had to do, or the injustice most likely had to do with money. But the details are unknown to us and therefore unimportant. But what we do know is that she keeps coming.

She keeps presenting her case. We read this in a moment, but the idea is this is a span. After a while, she keeps coming.

With no ability to earn money or take matters into her own hands, she keeps coming. One writer said, her only hope and only weapon is her persistence.

[10:19] At first, this crook does not respond. Perhaps he had other matters to take care of. More than likely, he didn't care.

Hearing the widow's case would not help him. It would only waste his time. Finally, he relents. And he says, essentially says, despite the fact that I don't care what God thinks of me or what this lady thinks of me, I will give her justice.

Fine. So that she doesn't wear me down. Literally, the word is punch me in the eye there, but I don't think the idea is the widow punching him in the eye. The idea is you're just wearing him down physically.

And so Jesus concludes here what the unrighteous judge says. Justice is served. We have to assume this poor widow must have had a just cause to be heard because in the end, she was heard and received justice.

So what are we to make of this parable? Don't be a crook. You know, I don't know. What's the big takeaway? You know, what does this unjust judge have to say to us?

[11:28] Jesus tells us at the beginning, he told them in this parable, that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. Are we to assume that God is like this cold unjust judge? Are our prayers just a way to beat him down and pester him until he relents?

Are they just a way for us to annoy him and overcome his reluctance? There's perhaps no greater anxiety than the anxiety of praying and waiting for the Lord to move.

So is that what the Lord is saying? Just keep on praying. Be like this persistent widow? In some ways, I think yes.

In some ways, no. Not merely. The parable is meant to lay out a contrast for us between the unjust judge and our just good God.

The idea is that even if this unjust judge responds to the repeated requests of someone he doesn't know or care about, how much more will our just God hear the cries and work good for his children?

[12:36] The idea is that if this self-absorbed judge who does only what benefits him gives to this widow, how much more joyfully and quickly will God give to those he loves?

You see, it's an argument from the lesser to the greater. If this little thing can happen, then this great thing must happen. If this little judge can actually do something right when he's pestered enough, how much more will the Lord, whose heart is good, give?

Whatever we might ask and whatever we might need. It's the same type of argument he uses in Luke 11. You know, what father gives to, when his son asks for a rock, gives to him a serpent.

I got that so mixed up, you know. But he says, what father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish, give him a serpent. Or if he asks for an egg, will instead give him a scorpion.

If you then who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask? Do you see? The point is, the Lord is good and will do good.

[13:44] And if the Lord is good and promises to do good, faith must be found in our hearts and in our prayers. If the Lord is good and promises to do good, faith must be found in our prayers and in our lives.

We're going to break this out in three points. The first is, your prayers are heard by the King of all. Prayers are heard by the King of all. Our Lord is like this unjust judge in one way.

He's powerful. This unjust judge is powerful. He neither fears God nor respects men because he makes decisions that everyone must follow and receive in that certain town.

He doesn't consult anyone. But our God is also powerful. There's one difference. God is not local. His power is not relegated to a certain town or to certain items.

The Lord possesses all authority in heaven and on earth. He's established his throne in the heaven. His kingdom rules over all. The first thing the Lord would want us to take away from this passage is that everything that happens everywhere happens because he decides without any help.

[14:51] He takes no counsel. No advice. No coaching. He's not watching the polls to see what decision to make next or waiting to see how things would turn out.

He works everything according to his own desire and purpose. He's not antsy or anxious or bothered. He hasn't lost control. No. Things will not go either way.

They will go one way. The way he's determined. Isaiah 46 says, I'm the God and there is no other. I'm God. There's none besides me. Declaring the infinite beginning. Ancients thing.

I can't remember any of my scripture memory today. I have spoken. I will bring it to pass. I have purposed. And I will do it. The very first thing we must see is the Lord is king of all.

Every other king and every other powerful man is puny and a weak stand in for him. And they should take their cues from the Lord. The problem is that's not the way we think of him.

[15 : 58] Let me introduce you to God.

Lowercase g. You might want to lower your voice a little before you go in. He might be sleeping now. He's old, you know, and doesn't much understand or like this newfangled modern world. His golden days, the ones he talks about when you really get him going were a long time ago. Before many of us were even born.

That was back when people cared about what he thought about things and considered him pretty important to their lives. Of course all that's changed now. It's a new world.

But God, poor fellow, just hasn't adjusted very well. Now he spends most of his time just hanging out back in the garden. I go there sometimes to see him.

[17 : 00] And there we tarry, if you know the old hymn, walking and talking softly and tenderly among the roses. Anyway, a lot of people still like him, it seems. And you'd be surprised how many people even drop by for a visit and ask for a few things every once in a while.

But of course that's all right with him. He's here to help. Thank goodness all the crankiness you read about him in some of his old books seems to have faded in his old age.

Now he's just a good-natured, low-maintenance friend who's really easy to talk to. And you know the best thing about him? He doesn't judge me. Ever.

Ever. For anything. He knows I'm human. And nobody's perfect. Besides, forgiving people is his job. It's what he does.

All right. Hold on a second. We can go in now. And don't worry, we don't have to stay long. Really. He's grateful for any time we can give.

[18 : 03] Now maybe that's a bit exaggerated. But isn't that often how we think about God? As just basically a kind, friendly, needy, basically irrelevant, but very loving grandfather?

Don't get me wrong. He has his rules we try to keep. We try to give him at least a day of the week. But when it comes to everything else and the things that really weigh us down, we just conclude he's basically helpless.

Though he wouldn't say it, we tend to think of God as someone we help. Not as someone who helps us. We cover up his warts, especially his anger and hard laws.

We soften some of his commands that are outdated now. We defend him. We make him known.

We help him out. What would he do without us? And if that's what we think about God, why wouldn't we give up on prayer?

You see, we don't give up on prayer when we don't get the answers we long for. We give up on prayer when we lose faith in the real God. A.W. Tozer says, What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.

[19 : 21] Because it directs everything else. What comes to your mind? I think that's the first thing this parable is trying to teach.

What comes to your mind? Is he powerful? Is he alive? Is he the king of all? Or just a few hours on Sunday? Does everything that happens really happen because he decides?

Or have we boxed him in? There may be no more important thing for not giving up on prayer than filling our minds with who God is.

And who God says he is in his word. If the Lord is good and promises to do good, faith must be found in our hearts.

Firstly, by realizing our prayers are heard by the king of all. Point two, whatever his delay, it cannot be his reluctance. Whatever his delay, it cannot be his reluctance.

[20 : 25] Jesus tells this parable to draw an important similarity between God and this unjust judge. But most importantly, he's trying to draw a contrast between the two.

Our Lord is completely accepting one unlike this unjust judge. The unjust judge is just a foil to show us what the Lord is like.

The Lord works good joyfully for his people. Look down at verse 6. He says, Hear what the unrighteous judge says, And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night?

Though he doesn't explain it in so many terms. The idea is that whereas the unjust judge kind of reluctantly agrees, God listens attentively and responds eagerly to the prayers of his people. He

doesn't need to be beat down to respond.

He listens because these are his elect people. Now, election is one of those big words that church people have a lot of big opinions about.

[21 : 32] Here, it simply means God chose to have mercy on some and call them out to be his people. He didn't choose them because of their faith or their character or their talents.

He didn't choose them so he could round out the starting lineup. He wasn't looking for a good asset. He chose them. In fact, they were not a good asset. They were a detraction to the team. But he chose them solely because he wanted to show mercy.

That's been the meaning of election throughout the whole Bible. And it's what it means right here. But the point here is, He chose them so that they would become his. And he would become theirs. You see, he chose them. He called them. He brought them into his people so that they would become his people. And he would become their God.

This parable doesn't promise that the Lord listens attentively to the prayers of everyone. He does not. But this prayer does promise us that the Lord listens attentively to the prayers of his people.

[22 : 44] God is not local. He is everywhere present. And he bows his ear to hear the prayers of his people and unleash his power to help.

He is our Father. And we are his children. You know, fathers play a significant role in our lives. And this was no different for me. As a young man, I was literally all over the place. At 15, I got my driver's license.

That was allowed in the state of South Carolina at the time. By 16, I'd already had two wrecks. Pushed the insurance up a tad.

You know, one wreck occurred at a family reunion in Georgia where my mom grew up. I was asked to go to the store to get some milk, some other things. And on the way back, the milk slid under my leg, making me unable to accelerate or to break.

[23 : 53] So I went through a yield sign and broadsided a lady, sending her flipping down the median. And I've told this story before, so let me tell you, she was okay.

So that you're not wondering. Thank God she was okay. Upon impact, all the windows in the car, at least the back of the car, immediately busted because of the pressure.

I presume. It was almost surreal. To step out of that car. In no time, seemingly no time, the scene is filled with police cars and ambulances.

And I was distraught. I was disoriented. Everything was a blur. I didn't know what to do because we weren't in my hometown. We were in my mother's hometown. I was frazzled.

I was humiliated. I was humiliated because I had gotten into another wreck. In the meantime, unbeknownst to me, a policeman had gone down the road to pick up my grandfather and my dad.

[25 : 06] And as my father walked onto the scene, it was an immediate calm. Because of his affection, his tenderness, and the certainty that things would be okay.

My cares lifted. And I felt his deep, unwavering affection for me, and it made all the difference.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a complete idiot. And he reminded me of that a couple hours later. But when God says, will not God give justice to his elect, it's meant to conjure up the same thing.

The elect is not this word, the theologian's word. It's a family word that he's trying to say. It means you receive my affection. It means you're gathered into those who receive my tender care.

It means you're gathered into that people that receive the certainty that everything will be okay.

Because I am your God. Better yet, I am your Father. Because of Christ.

[26 : 31] So many ways, it's why we offer the gospel every Sunday. Because just like this prayer, it's not because the Lord listens to every prayer the same way he listens to the prayers of his children.

But we proclaim the gospel because we do want more to come into his fold. And more to hear.

More to respond. More to understand the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Because through him, we have been brought into relationship with God. So I present that to you. He who knew no sin became sin. So that in him, you might become the righteousness of God.

He died, the righteous for the unrighteous. That he might bring us to God. And to our Father. And listen, because this is true, whatever the delay between our prayers and his answers, it cannot be his reluctance.

Whatever the delays between our prayers and his answers, it cannot be hesitation or second thoughts. He's our good Father.

[27 : 44] And we are his children. We are in his fold. I love the way Jeremiah 32 puts it. He says, I will rejoice in doing them good with all my heart and all my soul.

That's the promise for those who are in Jesus Christ. That's true of you. If you don't know what God's thinking right now, he's just rejoicing to do good to you with all my heart, with all my soul. So he's storing up his goodness that he might show it to you. So whatever the delay, it's because of his joy and your good. And the good is coming.

Now you might say, what in the world are you talking about? His delays have only brought me heartache, doubt, pain, and fear.

Or maybe you just think that's way too simplistic. How do you say this to a widow who's been crying all day and night for justice? And the delay means only more poverty.

[28 : 47] How do you say this to a single woman praying for decades for a husband and a family and watching her child rearing years come to an end? How do you say this to a parent who's desperately trained up their child in the way they should go, only to watch them wander further and further away?

I don't know. But this passage says his delays are because of his joy and your good. They're always directed there.

Do you remember Lazarus and Mary and Martha, his sisters? Remember that Jesus loved them. John 11 tells us, and Jesus was told that he was ill and would die soon.

So he stayed for two more days before going to see them until he was thoroughly dead. Why the delay?

Jesus knew he would get more glory and give more joy in raising him from the dead than in healing him before he died. So why might the Lord be delaying with you?

[29 : 55] If his delays are never his reluctance, then what might he be storing up for you? John Piper says, The life of the godly is not an interstate through Nebraska, but a state road through the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee.

Everybody said amen. Amen. There are rock slides and precipices and dark mist and bears and slippery curves and hairpin turns that make you go backward in order to go forward.

But all along this hazardous, twisted road that doesn't let you see very far ahead, there are frequent signs that say, The best is yet to come.

All the perplexing turns in our lives are going somewhere good. They don't lead off a cliff, praise the Lord. In all the setbacks of our lives as believers, God is plotting for our good.

So the Lord works good for his people joyfully with all his heart.

[31 : 11] But he also works good soon. Look down in point, or seven, verse seven, he says, second half, he says, Will he delay long over them?

I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. God is unlike this unjust judge. He doesn't have to be pestered to answer. He doesn't delay.

Will he delay long? The answer is supposed to be no. He will give justice soon. The Lord works good soon. Regardless of what's going on, he's working good soon.

He'll make all things right soon. Jesus, just before telling this parable, he was preparing his disciples for the end. He said, After I suffer, Jesus, the Son of Man, will return and be revealed.

And though he comes in a way that all will see, he'll come suddenly and surprisingly, and he'll make all things right. He'll right every wrong. He'll rescue the oppressed, the fearful, the broken, the poor.

[32 : 08] He'll put every enemy under his foot. He'll banish everything bad and swallow up all our sadness with good. He's coming. He will work soon. Now you may be thinking speedily soon.

By whose reckoning? It's been 2,000 years. No one likes to wait.

I remember trying to teach our kids how to wait patiently for us in a conversation. So we were kind of teaching them to tap us lightly while we were talking to let us know that they had something to contribute to the conversation.

And so we said, You could tap, tap, tap us, and we will get to you when we're able. My wife was driving down the road one day, and my daughter from the back seat of the van said, Mom, tap, tap, tap.

Mom, tap, tap, tap. And I thought that was totally great. Great. So we had to explain to her, it's tap, tap with the arm. It doesn't mean scream louder and yell tap too.

[33 : 22] No one likes to wait. But he tells us this good is coming soon, not so that we might start twirling our fingers or counting the days, but so that we might live with the certainty that he's good,

and good is coming.

Unlike the widow for whom justice depended on the whims of an unjust judge, we live in the certainty that good will come from our good God. And so any delay cannot be his reluctance. Finally, your faith must persevere. The final part of this text is a bit of a shock to me. Jesus concludes, Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

You know, it's not what I expected, and that's why it's a zinger. But, you know, if our Lord is unlike the unjust judge, if the Lord is good and promises to work good joyfully and soon, surely faith must be in abundance.

If he's all this, faith must be everywhere. If all that's guaranteed, why would it not be? If only good is in his heart, why would faith, well, would there be anything else in his heart, in our hearts, but faith?

[34 : 44] And yet, as Jesus implies with his question, faith rarely perseveres. So what's Jesus talking about? You know, the New Testament uses faith in two different ways, generally.

The faith are the beliefs and doctrines of Christianity. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Ephesians 4. Faith is also an individual's personal trust in Jesus Christ.

By grace, you have been saved through faith. So what's Jesus talking about here? I think it's really important for us to see. Jesus is showing us how faith is meant to work.

So we know it's a personal commitment. You remember, it's kind of like that chair with three legs that you sit on. It's a personal commitment where you trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he's also saying that faith is a steady confidence and persistent conviction that we will receive what God has promised.

Faith has a stick-it-to-it-ness. It's not easily taken out. It's not easily sidelined. It's not easily brought low because faith is continually looking ahead.

[35 : 47] I remember reading a book by John Calvin one time, and he compared the Christian to a palm tree. So I was immediately intrigued by this. Now, if you've ever watched a palm tree in the wind, you know, you've ever been down to Florida, a palm tree in the wind or in the storm is the most pathetic-looking tree on the planet because it's just kind of, I don't know what you say, swaying, basically, in the wind.

But when the wind and the rain stop, it rises up. And that's what faith is to be in our life. The wind and the rain, we may look kind of silly when the wind blows our hair and when trials come and take us down, but when the wind and the trials stop, faith must push us up, must push us towards God. That's what Jesus is saying. He's saying true faith perseveres. True faith presses on. True faith pushes forward. It's the perseverance of the faith. Hebrews 11, remember that great chapter where it talks about the hall of faith?

It's really not a hall of faith. It's a hall of perseverance. It's people that looked ahead and lived for what was ahead. They didn't count the prosperity and the riches of this world as anything to be held on to.

They pressed on ahead. And so Jesus concludes this parable about prayer, calling us to persist in faith, because the main way we persist in faith is through prayer.

[37 : 17] We persist in prayer not to pester the Lord, praise the Lord. He knows what we need before we ask. And he already intercedes according to the will of God.

We persist in prayer because we must persevere in faith. And moms, I think this passage is a gift to you.

I honor you in the Lord for the way you live. We have some kicking moms. The way you sacrifice, use your gifts, the way you build the church.

But I want to exhort you to, 20 years from now, when the kids are grown, what do you want them to remember? Let them remember your faith, your perseverance, the way you kept trusting God, the way you pressed on.

Let them remember your prayers. And there's so many things we could give our kids, and there's so many things we could get distracted by. What does it mean to be a well-rounded kid, and what are we actually called to do?

[38 : 38] But in so many ways, one of the greatest gifts we can give our kids is our faith and our prayers. I'm going to press on, and I'm going to pray. Do you still know that he can carry them all?

Do you still know he's a mighty refuge? Do you still know that he's a strong tower? Do you still run to him and unfold your cares? Are you still like that young adult that was converted at a young age, and you would just deliver all your requests to him?

Does he still hear your voice? Oh, he longs to hear your voice.
Not to follow some stupid rule. But to hear the heart of his child.

If the Lord is good and promises to do good, we must have faith in our prayer and in our life. And let's remember that poor widow.

[39 : 59] If she didn't give up in her poverty, how much more should we not give up in all our riches in Christ? Let us pray.

Father in heaven, we bow ourselves humbly before you. You are the almighty God before all creation.

We should bow before you and say, Holy, holy, the Lord God almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. Your kingdom rules over all. We can't help but hear your word and hear these words and not think of how low we are.

We bow ourselves before you. And yet, God, we approach you boldly through Jesus Christ. We thank you, God, that you did not spare your own son but gave him up for us all so that we might be drawn near to you to have relationship with you, to commune with you.

That is the treasure held in the field. That's what we live for. So, Lord, I do pray that we would persist, not in our own resolve and our own strength, but persisting in faith because he who had called us is faithful.

[41 : 30] We thank you. We praise you. We worship you. We fear you. We love you. In Jesus' name. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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