

Sermon - Luke 18:1-8, 'The Parable of the Persistent Widow'

Tom Kitson, 16 October 2022

What do we make of this parable, this parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow?

Here are two possible responses we could have.

We could hear the widow's struggle against the unjust judge, where her request is refused, and be glad we're not in the same position! This sounds like a very difficult experience for the widow – she is dealt with in an uncaring way by the judge, a judge who goes against God's law laid out in the Old Testament. This judge doesn't fear God or man – we hear this twice in the parable. We can feel pity for the widow, who is in a vulnerable position in society and has to work hard, be persistent, to get justice against her adversary. We can be glad we don't have to deal with that sort of injustice in our lives.

Or, we could hear the widow's struggle against the unjust judge and we could sympathise with her. We might feel like we're the widow in this story. It's just so hard to compete, to front up to the injustice in this world. This corrupt judge's dealings with this lowly widow are all too familiar, why are the weak and powerless treated with such contempt by those in power? We see many examples of injustice in the world, from the war still going on in Ukraine, all the challenges we've faced through the pandemic, the horrible events recently in Indonesia where innocent people were killed in the soccer stadium stampede and in the shooting at the childcare centre. We might feel the concept of justice is only served when those in power have had enough of our complaining and want us to go away.

Let's take a closer look at what's going on in this parable.

Before this parable even begins we know what it's going to be about! It's about praying and not giving up. But is that all we need to know? A discerning hearer might ask why we should persevere, why should we pray and not give up? It's a good hook into the story isn't it, we want to know more!

The parable begins in the setting of a certain town. There was a judge there, who feared neither God or man, he didn't care what people thought. That's a bit surprising isn't it, not fearing God or what people think – surely he cares about something! A widow in that same town comes to him, asking him to 'grant her justice against her adversary.'

We aren't told who the adversary is, what's happened or what justice the widow is seeking, but we are told the judge refused her request for some time. Finally the judge says even though he doesn't fear God or man he will give the widow what she asked for. In the interest of self-preservation he gives the widow justice. He doesn't want her to attack him it says, to continue to annoy and harass him any longer.

Jesus gives his disciples time to process the parable, telling them to listen to what the unjust judge says, reflect on and digest what they've just heard. Then he asks two rhetorical questions: 'And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?' He then answers these questions, saying God will see that they get justice, and quickly. In the last verse of the passage he asks a different question, without an answer: 'When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'

Looking back at the unjust judge, what law has he gone against in his handling of the widow's request? In Isaiah (1:17) God says we are to do right, to seek justice. Defend the oppressed, take up the cause of the fatherless; *plead the case of the widow*. To be an unjust judge is a contradiction in terms – how can a designated purveyor of justice be unjust in his dealings with this widow? He does eventually give her justice, but only to serve himself. So he does care about something! Himself. He is corrupted by his power, dealing with the widow as he sees fit, perhaps even taking pride in his lack of fear of God or man. He *is* the law in this story.

And the widow, she has no power here. She is subject to the unjust judge and what he decides. But what quality does the widow display? She is persistent. She doesn't give up. The judge does give her justice in the end, only to make her go away, but it's still justice.

There's another time in Luke's gospel where Jesus tells a similar story (11:5-13). In chapter 11, just after Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer, he tells a story of someone being annoyed at their friend for asking for some bread in the middle of the night to feed a visitor. Their request is granted, but not through friendship. Jesus says by their shameless audacity, their persistence - like that of the widow - the friend is given as much as they need to feed their visitor.

So in these two parables there is a dynamic of human interaction, where people ask for something and it is given to them, but reluctantly. Someone who doesn't have the means to help themselves, asking for help from someone who does but doesn't want to give it! On a recent family holiday I saw this dynamic at work.

We were at the airport, getting ready to get on the plane home. We had some oversized luggage as well as two suitcases, so there was a bit to carry. We went up to the staff at the check in desk to get everything sorted, but there was a sense they would prefer if we weren't bothering them with our needy requests – even though it's their job to serve us! Going through security at the airport we also encountered staff that just didn't seem interested in fulfilling their duty of helping the customer, instead pushing us through as quickly as they could, as though the sooner we moved on the sooner they could finish their shift. Maybe this was just our experience this time round after not flying for a while, but it seemed like we weren't quite getting what we needed from people who were intentionally placed in positions to help us out. I'll admit I've been on the other side of this dynamic too, working in retail. Instead of trying to serve the customer as best I could I was sometimes more interested in getting them through the checkout as quickly as possible, as if that would speed up my shift and get me closer to knock-off time. Unfortunately this happens, at low levels like in the airport or at the checkout, and in far worse situations in our earthy lives. So what hope can we find in this parable, who is God in the face of the world's injustice and indifference?

Is God like the unjust judge? When we present our requests to God it may seem like he hasn't heard them, despite our crying out to him. We live in a world where there is injustice, there is corruption among those in power. People in need experience mistreatment, oppression, affliction. Those who have don't always give. Sometimes even our neighbour is reluctant to show us love, and we treat them the same way! What does Jesus say here, how are we to respond to the injustice of this world?

If we look at the dynamic of God's interaction with us, we can see this is something different to our interactions with each other. Jesus says we are God's chosen ones, we who cry out to him day and night. The widow is one of God's chosen ones. He says God will see that we get justice, and quickly! In the earlier passage Jesus says, 'ask and it will be given to you!' How do we ask God to help us, how do we present our requests to him? Through prayer. Persistent prayer, going to God for all we need. Bringing our burdens before him, trusting in him who tells us he will give us joy and peace, we will be overflowing with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:13). Only God can do this for us, no one else can.

God calls us, his chosen people, to come to him. Cry out day and night and he will hear you. God says he will give justice to the oppressed. He is a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows (Psalm 68:5). God says he will hear the widow's cry (Exodus 22:23). He will plead the widow's case. The unjust judge might not care, but God will. The unjust judge might not do what he says, but God does.

We know this by faith, the gift of faith given to us in our baptism. The unjust judge might grant the widow's request reluctantly, but God gave his only Son for us willingly! God didn't save us to help himself, he did that for us. The selfish judge is the opposite of Jesus, our selfless Saviour.

How do we understand this notion of quick justice when the widow's seems to be slow, and what do we make of Jesus' question of finding faith on the earth? We can look to 2nd Peter (3:8) where a day for God is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day, which we can take as meaning God's time is not our time. But this might be very difficult to hear in the midst of difficult times! Luckily for us God is not just a philosopher with his head in the clouds, he is present with us in the mistreatment, the oppression and the affliction we face in this world. In Luke chapter 17 Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, his kingdom that is not of this earth. He tells the disciples there they will not see the Son of God revealed, even though they want to; he will be rejected by this generation. The Son of God will be among the people but they won't know it, instead they will put him to death on the cross.

Jesus himself knows the injustice of this world, he submits himself to it to save us. There is great comfort in this; we are not left alone to try to get our own justice. Jesus has overcome the world, so we can take heart. We can always pray and not give up because we know who hears us, what Jesus has done for us, and what that means for us.

So if we see the widow's struggle and have pity on her, glad we aren't in her position, where can we turn? We can turn to prayer. Cry out day and night because God hears his chosen ones. Bring the needs of those less fortunate than us before God. Give generously to those in need. Welcome people in need, as God welcomes us. We can pray with confidence and with hope.

And if we feel like we're the widow in the story, powerless to get justice for ourselves, where can we turn? We can turn to prayer. Cry out day and night because God hears his chosen ones. Bring our needs to God. Ask him to help us. Trust in him, trust in his quick justice, through faith.

Because when we come before God we're not coming before an unjust judge. We're coming before a God who hears our cries, who knows our struggle, who knows the struggle of those in need. A God who knows the injustice of this world. Instead of turning us away when we come to him, our God welcomes us in. Thanks be to God for the way he works - even through a corrupt judge the widow is granted her request. Our God's kingdom will come. If

even an unjust judge gives justice to the widow, how much more will our God give to his chosen ones! Amen.