

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8)

The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge is related to Luke 17:20–37 in that the believer is to identify with the widow's persistence when praying for the coming of God's justice at Christ's return.

The main thoughts in the parable are as follows:

- The widow pictures someone who is helpless and in dire need – like the believer in a hostile world.
- The dishonest judge's response to the woman *contrasts* God's response to His children; if a dishonest judge eventually responds to a persistent woman, how much more will our Heavenly Father respond to His children's pleas.
- Lastly, the final verse (Lk. 18:8) points out that God will respond quickly although steadfastness is necessary.

18:1 Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart,

Jesus is still speaking to the disciples ("them" refers back to 17:22), teaching them that they should not grow weary of praying.

The fact that they "*ought to pray*" shows that prayer was a moral necessity.

In the context, the focus of the prayer is on God bringing justice to the earth at the return of Christ (18:8). Christians should pray for Christ's speedy return, but not lose heart or stop praying if He does not come as soon as they had hoped.

18:2 saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man

18:3 "There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me legal protection from my opponent.'

18:4 "For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, 'Even though I do not fear God nor respect man,

18:5 yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.'"

The parable begins by pointing out the character of the judge; he was in a powerful position and had no fear of God nor did he care about people.

In the OT it's clear that judges were to fear God, uphold the law, and defend the poor and the widowed in particular (Exo. 22:22-24; Deut. 24:17-18; Psa. 68:5; 82:2-7; 146:9). In 2 Chronicles 19:6-7, Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, said to the judges he had appointed, "Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the LORD who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe." The judge in the parable was the polar opposite

of someone who pleased God; in verse 6 Jesus calls him unrighteous. Not only was he evil, he knew it and was comfortable with it (18:4).

The second person mentioned is a widow. Women married young in that culture (at ages thirteen or fourteen) so this woman need not be thought of as old. As a woman who in that culture had very few rights, and as a widow, she was powerless; the widow was a typical representative of the destitute, the helpless, and the deprived in society. Someone has been threatening her or has taken advantage of her and she needs legal protection. The judge, however, showed no concern for her plight, nor did he offer her legal protection.

Although no reason is given for rejecting her pleas, it is assumed that his character was such that he simply didn't want to be troubled by the case. But the woman refused to give up, and kept returning to the court for an appeal. In fact, she was so resolute in finding relief that she was becoming a nuisance.

Even though the judge didn't care what God or others thought, he cared about himself and he was getting tired of this widow. The expression, "wear me out" literally means, "give me a black eye." Figuratively, it meant to be beaten down. Thus, out of a concern for personal peace he decided to rule in her favor; that was the only way to get rid of her.

The moral of the story is that the powerful and impervious judge was defeated by the weak widow through her persistence. An analogy is then made to God's response to persistent prayer.

18:6 And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said;

18:7 now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?

18:8 "I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

In verse 6, "Hear what the unrighteous judge said" means something like, "listen to what the story about the unrighteous judge teaches us." In other words, verses 6-8 explain the parable and tell us why Christians ought always to pray and not lose heart (8:1).

If we think about the wicked judge in the story, we see a man who is indifferent toward people and God, but finally, for purely selfish reasons, he did what was right. The woman received justice. Just as the woman received justice as a result of her persistent pleading, so God will bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night (18:7). Therefore, pray at all times and don't lose heart.

But there is also a "lesser to greater" comparison that contrasts God to the unrighteous judge. Unlike the judge, God is neither unrighteous nor is He apathetic about injustice. If a godless, self-centered, uncompassionate, unjust judge eventually executes justice for someone whom he has no feeling toward or interest in, then surely God who is always compassionate, merciful, gracious, tender-hearted, and kind will bring about justice for those who are loved by Him and cry out to Him day and night, pleading for His glory to come.

God will vindicate the elect quickly when the Son of Man comes (18:8).

As verses 7 and 8 show, the purpose of the parable is to teach the disciples that they should not grow weary in praying for God to bring about justice for His elect. Verse 8 specifies that justice will come when the Son of Man comes. Thus, although Christians should always persevere in prayer, in this case, the need for perseverance is specifically tied to praying for God to execute justice when Christ returns to establish His kingdom.

Jesus is mentioning this here because He had been talking about His return to establish the kingdom. In Luke 17:22 He said, "The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and *you will not see it.*" Although the disciples would not see His return, they should not give up hope; on the contrary, Jesus tells them that they "*ought to pray and not lose heart*" (18:1) for God will not delay long over them. The longer it takes for Christ to come and vindicate His people, the more temptation there will be to lose heart; it is no wonder that Jesus ponders if there will be faith on the earth when He comes.

This parable leaves us with a couple of questions.

- First, how can it be said that God will not delay in answering the disciples' prayers when more than 2,000 years have passed and Christ has not yet returned?
- Secondly, why should the disciples be encouraged to pray for Christ's return when Jesus told them they would not see it?

QUESTION 1:

Verse 7 asks, "Will He delay long over them?" Verse 8 answers: "He will bring about justice for them quickly." How is this true if 2,000 years have already passed and Jesus has not yet returned?

A number of answers to this have been suggested:

1) God's delay is balanced with His mercy. 2 Peter 3:8-9 says, "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

God is waiting for all who will come to faith, to come; however, since no one knows when that number will be complete, Jesus emphasizes the need of each generation to pray.

2) The period between Jesus' departure and His return is seen as a period of fulfillment in which God acts on behalf of His people (Acts 2:17; Heb.1:2; 1 Pet.1:20; Jude 17-19). This blessing is both now and yet future; God provides spiritual provisions now and physical deliverance upon His return. Luke 18 focuses on the ultimate vindication, when Christ returns. "In other words, vindication may be broader than the fact of the return, since the initial form of eschatological vindication comes with the Spirit's provision and entry into the fulfillment of promise" (Bock, 1454).

3) A third view sees the prayer for justice being answered in that God spares the elect from the full force of persecution.

Any of the above three views are possible.

QUESTION 2:

Why should the first disciples pray for Christ to return when Jesus already told them that they would not see Him return in glory?

(The majority of the following discussion is a condensation of a larger treatment of God's sovereignty and human responsibility drawn from the books [A Call to Spiritual Reformation](#), p. 145 ff. and [Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility](#), both by D.A. Carson. Some of the following material is directly quoted from his works.)

If God is Sovereign, why pray?

Introduction:

The Bible teaches that God is sovereign and yet man is still responsible for his actions. It is admitted that this involves a certain amount of mystery, but scripturally it appears that both are true. The question we will attempt to answer next is this: How do both of these truths operate in our lives? Specifically, how do they relate to prayer? If God is sovereign, why pray?

Our relationship to prayer and the sovereignty of God functions in much the same way that complimentary truths relate to God's sovereignty.

For example, the Bible clearly teaches that God calls, or elects, people for salvation. This means that no one can be persuaded to come to Christ, or that anyone will seek salvation apart from God drawing them (Ro. 3:11; Jn. 3:19-20). Yet God's election never functions to foster complacency toward the lost, or to stifle evangelistic zeal. On the contrary, the sovereign work of God in salvation causes us to marvel at His grace (Ro. 9), gives us confidence that some will be saved (Acts 18:9-10), and promotes endurance in sharing the gospel based on God's promise that we will bear fruit (Jn. 15:16).

In like manner, the sovereignty of God never promotes moral indifference on the ground that we are helpless to do any better. Conversely, because God is sovereignly working in our lives we can have confidence that change will take place and our efforts to please God will not be in vain (Phil. 2:12-13).

It is also knowledge of the sovereignty of God that gives hope in the midst of trials (Ro. 8:28).

In much the same way the sovereignty of God never serves as a reason not to pray. Understood properly it is an incentive to pray.

Examples of Prayer:

Jesus' prayers:

The Bible teaches that Christ's death was foreordained by God (Acts 2:23) and that Jesus was conscious of that fact (Jn. 2:19-23; 3:14; 12:31-33; 21:19, etc.).

In John 17:1 Jesus prays, "Father, the hour has come." In the gospel of John "the hour" is a technical expression referring to the time when Jesus would be glorified through the cross and would return to

the glory He enjoyed with the Father before the world began (Jn. 12:23-24; 17:5). By Jesus acknowledging that His hour had come, He is recognizing that the divinely appointed time of His suffering and death is about to begin.

Later, in Matthew 26:38-39, when His hour drew even closer, Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." All things are possible with God, yet in another sense, all things are not possible. Here Jesus is asking that if allowing this "cup" (i.e. His suffering) to pass were consistent with the Father's redeeming purposes, that is what He deeply desires.

From these two prayers we see that knowing what God has foreordained did not breed the attitude, "Well, the hour is here and there is not much anyone can do about it since it has been pre-ordained to happen." Nor did it result in silence. Jesus prayed believing that God hears and answers prayer, yet He did so in submission to the Father's will.

Daniel's prayer:

In the same way, Daniel did not wait passively for God's will to be done. Daniel was aware that the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied that the Babylonian captivity would last seventy years and that the time was coming to an end (9:2). Since it was prophecy, some would assume that the proper response would be just to sit back and wait for its fulfillment, but Daniel didn't see it like that. He recognized that God was more than an automated being who ran the world like a computer program. He didn't assume that the sovereignty of God meant "what will happen, will happen," but was fearful that the sin of the people might cause God to postpone their return. Therefore, he felt the need to confess his own sins and the sins of the people "by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes." (9:3).

Because Daniel saw God as personal, He appeals to Him in terms of what He has said about Himself and what He would do. He reminds God that He keeps His covenant with those who love Him (9:4) and that He is merciful (9:9). He asks God to hear his prayer, and for His sake, he asks that He would restore the sanctuary and city which have been desolate (9:17, 19). And the exile ends.

Moses' prayer:

Perhaps the most startling passages that confront us in the Bible are those that speak of God relenting. When Moses returned from Mount Sinai after receiving the Ten Commandments, he found that the Israelites had begun to worship a golden calf they had made. God was furious: "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people! Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation." (Exo. 32:9-10).

But Moses would not "leave God alone." He recognized that God is sovereign and if He decided to destroy the nation, no one could stop Him. But He pleaded with God, reminding Him of the covenant He had made with the people, and that if He destroyed the nation He would be breaking His promises to His people and be mocked by the nations.

Moses did not look at the situation from the eyes of a fatalist: "Wow, He's angry. I guess it's over for the nation. God said, 'Let Me alone' so I had better not pray." Instead, he interceded for the people. Verse 14 says, "So [i.e. because Moses had prayed] the LORD relented from the harm which He said He would do to His people."

A casual reader may conclude that God's purposes are not steadfast and that our prayers really will change the decrees of God. But such a conclusion is premature. If God had destroyed the nation, then, paradoxically He would have broken His promises to Abraham. He, therefore, had to turn from the judgment He had pronounced on Israel, and this is what Moses was banking on.

The importance of this passage and others cannot be overlooked. We must conclude that ***God expects to be pleaded with; He expects Godly people to intercede for others. Their intercession is His appointed means of bringing about His change of mind; and if they fail, His wrath will be poured out.*** By looking at the situation with Moses we should not conclude that God had forgotten His promises to Israel and that He needed to be brought back to His senses by Moses. Rather, in God's mercy Moses proved to be the appointed means to turn His wrath. God's relenting was nothing other than a gracious confirmation of the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

For a similar illustration, see Isaiah 38 where God told King Hezekiah, "Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live." When Hezekiah heard this he didn't just hang around and wait for the fatal day to arrive. Instead he repented, God changed His mind, and 15 years were added to his life. This would never have happened if the king had not prayed (Isa. 38:5; II Ki. 20:5-6).

CONCLUSION:

Though the sovereignty of God and our responsibility may be somewhat mysterious, we will do well to look at God's servants and pray as they did. We will find that both God's sovereignty and His personal nature, if viewed correctly, will function as powerful incentives to pray.

In spite of the fact that God has decreed everything that will happen, the men of the Bible realized that God is free and that He responds to prayer. The wonderful truth is that you and I, like Moses, can be God's appointed means to bring the purposes of God to pass. In that limited sense prayer does change things, though it cannot be thought to change things in some absolute way that leaves God out.

God is no less sovereign because we can pray, argue, and reason with Him. Rather, our prayers in accordance with His will reveal His sovereign working in our lives. He prompts our prayers, and then turns around and responds in a way that He would not have had we not prayed.

If I pray, God graciously works out His purposes through me. The praying, though mine, is also the work of the Spirit within me. By this appointed means I become an instrument to bring about God's appointed end. If I do not pray, it doesn't mean that God's appointed end has failed, leaving God frustrated. Instead, the entire situation has now changed, and my prayerlessness, for which I am entirely responsible, forces me to think that God has other appointed ends in view, possibly including judgment for me and for those for whom I have not been interceding.

Those who recognize the sovereignty of God will pray as others in the Bible did. They will line their prayers up with what they will see God doing. They will pray in accordance with what God has revealed He will do in Scripture.

It is worth praying to a sovereign God because He is free and can take action as He wills; it is worth praying to a personal God because He hears, responds, and acts on our behalf.

It must also be remembered that the prayer I offer cannot be exempted from the sovereignty of God. If I pray it is because God is graciously working in me and through me.

We will not go wrong, letting the complimentary aspects of God's sovereignty and personal nature function in our lives.

So there is nothing odd about Jesus telling believers to pray for His coming even though the time of His return is already determined in the plan of God. We are responsible to pray even though God is sovereign. Jesus even asks a question regarding our responsibility to pray: "When the Son of Man comes will He find faith on the earth?"

For 2,000 years Christ has continually been dishonored and denied His rightful place; the Word of God has been mocked, rejected, and attacked; Christians have been persecuted, treated with hostility and, at times, have even experienced martyrdom. The temptation to lose hope increases with every passing generation, and it will be even more difficult to hold on to by the time Jesus returns. In addition, the seemingly unchanging patterns in life can lead to lethargy and worldliness. Thus, Jesus ponders if He will find persevering faith and prayer when He returns.

The purpose of Jesus pondering out loud is to encourage faith and perseverance in allegiance to Him. Luke 21:36 says something similar: "But keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

The message of the parable from our Lord is very clear: Don't lose heart. Keep praying. Jesus will be looking for those who are looking for Him (Bock, 1456).