

Lessons from Jesus' Words to a Church Under Persecution **Luke 18:1-8**

Given changes in sermon scheduling, this week's devotional partially overlaps with last week's. So if the passage or some of the readings seem familiar, it's not *déjà vu*; they are actually familiar! As a result also, the readings which follow apply not only the 'big idea' of the text, but much of its detail, as well.

Day 1: Luke 18:1,7-8 Pray always; never give up!

Whenever reading a portion of biblical text, the first goal is to ascertain 'the big idea', that is, the main theme. Luke helpfully provides two obvious indications, one in his introduction to the passage, and the other in the conclusion. Luke begins: "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (Luke 18:1)." These are two separate ideas: Jesus is urging his disciples (a) to pray always, and (b) not to give up (their faith). Luke ends the narrative with rhetorical questions addressing the same two ideas: (a) will not God answer their prayers? ("And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones ... I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly."), and (b) will they, however, lose heart and give up their faith? ("When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?")

We will look at these two exhortations in more detail later, but for now, they provide not only a good summary of this passage, but also a good guide for any adversity we face in life: (a) pray always, and (b) do not let the adversity cause you to lose heart and give up on God. Is there some issue in your life currently driving you to anxiety or despair? If so, this is Jesus' word to you, no less than to his original disciples: (a) pray always, and (b) do not give up trusting in God.

Day 2: Luke 18:2-6 Two judges: one disreputable, the other virtuous

The Old Testament laid down two essential qualifications for judges in Jewish society: (a) they must fear God, as a safeguard against corruption (because generally, no one else had the authority to hold them in check); and, (b) they must have compassion on victims. This judge fails on both grounds. He is totally disqualified for his position: he is – or should be – an oxymoron, an unjust judge, professionally responsible to uphold a justice that he has concern for. While this unjust judge is merely a character in a story, not a real-life person, the nature of parables is to draw spiritual

lessons out of largely believable scenarios. Which is to suggest that Jesus called on stock figures that people would recognize, that Jesus knew of the existence of such judges, and that his audience would nod in recognition at such a character.

If you follow local, state, or federal politics, you realize that such a stock character would fit no less well in our own age. In a culture where political campaigns depend on contributions from executives, corporations, and industries that will require legislative payback. In a culture where wealthier clients can afford higher-priced lawyers, gaining a higher likelihood of a preferential outcome. In a culture where both laws and justice are available to those who can afford them. This parable does not intend to provide correctives to corruption, but it does intend to contrast this disreputable judge with God, a just judge. As we bump up against corruption – especially among those sworn to uphold the law – that rightly evokes both indignation and anger. Even if we have no other recourse, we can, at least, take pleasure in a God who is incorruptible, beyond influence or bribe, both omniscient and just.

Day 3: Luke 18:2-8 Justice for the unjustly treated people of God

The justness of God is the premise of this account; its point is that as a just judge, God can be counted on to bring about justice for his people. A disreputable judge may act only when compelled. But Jesus promises that God monitors injustice committed against his children, and he ensures that they get justice in the end.

This promise means that Christians need neither despair nor seek revenge when they suffer injustice, but can respond with forgiveness and generosity. As the apostle Paul counsels, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.²⁰ On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Romans 12:19-20). Is there someone in your life who deserves to suffer your revenge? Given that God will set things right in his time, consider forgiving them.

Day 4: Luke 18:4-7 Do we need to nag God?

By definition, an analogy finds one or more points of correspondence between two essentially unlike things. So the interpretation of analogy identifies the correspondence(s) in the midst of the differences. Which is

to ask, how is our relationship with God similar to – and dissimilar from – the relationship between this widow and the disreputable judge? In particular, is Jesus advising that God is susceptible to nagging? That God may not listen to us if we ask just once or twice, but will listen if we endlessly harass him?

There is at least one positive to nagging God: it means, at least, that we are talking to him. Though as any nagged parent or spouse can attest, it may not actually be a positive form of communication! But careful attention to the text demonstrates that Luke is not intending the analogy to be at this point. He is not saying: “Just as the disreputable judge will act on the widow’s behalf only if she exhausts him through nagging, so God will act on your behalf only if you exhaust him through nagging, so nag away.” That contradicts what Jesus teaches elsewhere, such as in Matthew 6:7-8, “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”

Instead, the analogy is simply between the fact of – not the motives or need for – besieging the judge or God. That is, the widow *must* nag the disreputable judge to move him to action; Christians under persecution naturally *do* cry to God out of desperation, not out of any assumption that he will otherwise overlook their case. The other point of continuity – and simultaneous discontinuity – is that if even a disreputable judge can be motivated to act, all the more so the righteous judge will certainly act on behalf of his people. In short, God cares for us when we are in crisis; he hears our cries, and will act on our behalf. He will not put us off endlessly.

Day 5: Luke 18:7 A caveat

With all this talk about God intervening to rescue us, two caveats are essential, if we are to keep our expectations – and our prayers – within biblical priorities. First, Jesus limits his promise of divine intervention to matters of ‘justice’. His primary focus here is on the Church under persecution: he will intervene and vindicate his suffering Church. This caveat is important because so often the requests with which we besiege God flow not out of persecution for his name, or even out of suffering, but out of an insatiable desire for more stuff or an ever easier life. Given that God’s people have never before in history or anywhere else in the world had as much stuff or as easy a life as in 21st-century America, our endless requests for more and better may well turn God’s stomach. Instead of

using this text to feed our insatiable greed, we should use it to feed our prayer for the suffering Church around the world.

At the same time, lest this caveat disappoint (!), we do well to recall a second, deeper sense in which Jesus' promise is true, even though it may not – or may – have been in the front of Luke's mind as he wrote. The word here signifying 'vindicate' also can mean 'justify'. The primary reference here is to God's vindication – his rescue and validation – of a persecuted Church, whether at the hands of synagogue or empire. At the same time, at a deeper level, it may also allude to God's 'vindication' of us in a deeper sense, namely, that he justifies us from sin. This he has done in Christ, through Jesus' death on the cross. That reality should invigorate gratitude toward God, whatever disappointments we may face when our endless requests for more stuff remain unmet.

Day 6: Luke 18:8 A second caveat

Yesterday we saw the need to moderate our expectations in recognition that we already have an unparalleled measure of luxury and comfort. So our prayers should be more heavily weighted toward gratitude than toward solicitation, and toward others rather than ourselves. Verse 8 prompts another caveat: at least as much as we appeal to God to feed our appetite for more stuff and an easier life, we should no less remind ourselves of our commitments and obligations toward him. God does not intend our relationship with him to be one-sided, but reciprocal. He does promise to vindicate, preserve, and care for us in crisis. At the same time, even in crisis, he calls us to continue faithful to him, no matter what it costs us.

And so, in persecution, his Church not only cries out for vindication, it also carries the obligation to remain faithful to him. The NIV translation may obscure this a bit. Jesus does not actually intend to ask, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find people *believing in him*?" Rather, the same word also references *faithfulness*: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find his people *remaining faithful to him*?" He promises to intervene and deliver his people. At the same time, he calls us to persevere through persecution if he does not rescue us immediately, and through disappointment if we do not receive everything we want. So as often as we cry out for deliverance, we do well also to note our own obligation to be faithful to him.