

Prayer is Faith in Action

Luke 18: 1-8 (October 16, 2022)

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18Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. ²He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. ³In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ ⁴For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, ⁵yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” ⁶And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? ⁸I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Historical Context

While the gospel of Luke was written in a largely Graeco-Roman context, Luke honored the prophetic traditions of the Jewish faith, and it can be safely assumed that Luke’s audience would have been aware of the teachings in Judaism that placed emphasis on treating the widow (and orphan, stranger, et cetera) with extraordinary compassion and justice. Widows were thoroughly marginalized in ancient society, given the patriarchal culture that governed societal norms, and as such, were likely seen as “charity cases.” What Jesus does in this parable is challenge this assumption of the helpless widow, giving her agency and authority to challenge corrupt power.

Theme: Prayer is Faith in Action

This parable highlights a number of profound and glaring contrasts—the unjust judge being contrary to the call to be just and impartial; the widow exerting authority in her self-advocacy, and the merciful response of God in contrast to the judge. The takeaway is that justice is central to living prayerfully before God.

At the beginning of this passage Jesus tells the disciples this parable “about their need to pray always and not lose heart (Luke 18:1).” The parable centers prayer as an essential spiritual practice to both strengthen their resolve and remain hopeful on the journey of discipleship. In the last part of Luke 17, verses 20-37, Jesus speaks mysteriously about the Kingdom of God (the *basileia tou Theou*, being “among (and within) you,”

It is in this larger context of the material-spiritual presence of the *basileia* in the here and now that Jesus makes the connection between prayer-making, justice-seeking, and God’s mercy. Prayer here is seen as an act of faith in the *basileia*, a way of actively drawing ever closer to God’s omnipresence and nature. God is everything the unjust judge **is** not. God grants justice *en tachei*—suddenly³, or “soon and very soon.”

Like the persistent widow who doesn’t give up, and like our ever-present God who hears the cries of the weary, authentic prayer is faith in action. It is a constant believing and working for a more just and humane world that reflects God’s wellspring of mercy and justice.