

Will He Find Faith?

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.' " And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you; he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" — Luke 18:1-8

It's that last line that's the hard part. The story Jesus tells at the beginning of Luke 18, known popularly as the "parable of the un-just judge" has a reputation for being a tough story to deal with. And in fairness, you'd have to say that the "parable of the unjust judge" deserves that reputation. If the point of a parable is to make a deep truth easier to understand, then this parable doesn't quite work. What makes it so tough to deal with is that the main character is not a nice person. He's a man who became a judge, but not for any of the right reasons.

We learn that he doesn't fear God. Here he was, in a position to say what was right and what was just. But he didn't feel accountable to any universal ideas of good and bad, of right and wrong. It was his job to lay down the law. It was his job to judge the actions of other people. All well and good, but he didn't think there was anyone judging him. He felt no accountability to a larger sense of justice. It's not that you have to be all religious and whistle hymn tunes on your way to work and teach Sunday school in order to hold public office. That's not the problem. The problem is that this man, this judge, had no belief, or at least no interest, in the higher good. And that's not all. We are told, of this judge, that "[he] neither feared God, nor had respect for people" (v. 2). He didn't judge in response to God's law, nor did he act out of a simple sense of fairness.

A woman came to him and begged for his help, but apparently, he didn't become a judge in order to help people. She pled with him for justice, but he didn't have any interest in justice. She pleaded and she begged and she nagged and she persisted. Finally the judge gave in to the woman and helped her. After all this time, did she convince the judge of the rightness of her cause? Did the judge suddenly realize the selfishness of his ways and resolve to turn his life around and do good with his power? No, it was nothing like that at all. At long last, the judge assisted the woman because she was annoying him, and he wanted her to go away.

It's easy to see why this is not one of the stories that gets told in vacation Bible school. What's it supposed to mean? The whole thing is introduced with these words: "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart" (v. 1). If this is a story about prayer, is the poor woman supposed to be us? More to the point, is the heartless judge supposed to be God? After all, the judge is the one to whom the woman pleads. The judge has the power to bring about justice, and in the end, it's the judge who grants her what she's been asking for. Like the judge, God hears our pleas. Like the judge, God has the power to do something about our problems. But how far does it go? Is God like the judge in every way? Does God also ignore us? Does God also have no respect for people? Does God also cave in to us and answer our prayers only when we've gotten on his nerves so badly that he'll do anything just to get us to stop nagging? Surely we can't believe that of God! We know that God loves us, we know that God wants good for us, and we know that God eagerly listens and answers our prayers. Surely God is nothing like the judge, and that's the point of the story. It's not a comparison. God is not likened to the unjust judge. Instead, this parable is a contrast. The judge is this ... but God is that. The judge has no respect for people. God does respect people and cares for them. The judge wants to be left alone. God wants us to be with him always. The judge gives in out of exasperation. God provides for us out of love.

If a selfish and power-drunk judge, a guy who doesn't even especially like people, will give a poor widow the justice she's been begging for, then God, who loves us, will surely give us what-ever good and helpful thing we request. God is not like the judge. God is better than the judge. Therefore, God will treat us better than the judge treated the widow. After the story is over, Jesus sums it up, so that no one can miss that this is a contrast. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?" [asks Jesus] "Will he delay long in helping them?" (vv. 7a-8). "I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them."

So why does this story disturb people? Why is it so tough to deal with? It's the last line that holds the answer to that. It's that last line that's the hard part. It is another question. "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus just told a story about how God can be trusted with our prayers; a story meant to show that God answers us and cares for us willingly. Why does Jesus ask if there will still be faith on earth when he returns? Because in spite of his assurance that God hears and answers us, it can be hard to trust that this is true. There are so many times when it seems as if God really were like the judge. So many times our prayers seem to go unanswered. It is true that some prayer is self-ish. Some prayers treat God like a menu. Most people would agree that God is not Santa Claus and that praying for luxuries or for one's own glory is out of bounds. Most would agree that God is perfectly within his rights if he says, "No" to those prayers. But what about prayers said in love? What about the many just and kind and selfless prayers that don't seem to get an answer? "God please heal...." "God, please protect...." "God, please don't let...." We pray and we beg and we plead, and people still get sick and still fall victim to crime. There is tragedy still. There is heartbreak. There is death.

It is not easy to trust. It is not easy to believe. It is not easy to pray. We do not always get what we pray for, even when what we want is a truly good thing. So how can we say that God always hears us? How can we still have faith that God says, "Yes" to us when we see "No" all around? Jesus is the answer. Jesus himself is God's, "Yes." Jesus is the answer to every hope and every prayer. Jesus fell victim to crime and cruelty and evil. In Jesus, God is with us when we are victimized. Jesus was rejected and beaten and crucified. In Jesus, God is with us even when things go horribly wrong. Jesus died and was buried. In Jesus, God is with us even in death. Jesus rose from the dead. In Jesus God gives us life and a future and a purpose. In Jesus, God answers our prayers.

God loves us. God respects us. In Jesus, God says, "Yes" to us. In Jesus, God gives peace and solace to us in times of suffering. In Jesus, God gives hope to us when we mourn. In Jesus, God gives us life when we face death. God answers all our prayer. Jesus is the answer. Amen.