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"The Widow and the Judge"

Luke 18:1-8

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Scripture teaches that God has particular concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, and therefore so should we. From this attention to society's most vulnerable, we often inherit the stereotype of the poor, helpless widow. But the Bible consistently shatters this view. Tamar, Naomi, Ruth, Orpah, Abigail, and Judith are all widows who act with intelligence, courage, and agency. Like these biblical women before her, the widow in Luke's parable embodies strength, cleverness, and persistence.

As you listen and read along to this story from Jesus, I invite you to wonder not only what we think, but what Jesus' first audience might have heard in this rather short and odd story.

> Luke 18:1-8. [1]Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. [2] He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. [3] In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' [4] For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, [5] yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" [6] And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. [7] And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? [8] I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

At first glance, Luke frames the story for us: pray always, don't lose heart, and trust that God's justice is coming. The widow's persistence becomes a model of faithful endurance in a broken world. She embodies a kind of stubborn hope. Her persistence is an emblem of

faithfulness; her boldness, a form of courage. Armed only with what James C. Scott called these "weapons of the weak," she refuses to disappear in a system designed to ignore her.[i]

Unsurprisingly, this parable has been somewhat domesticated over time. There is even debate about how much of it comes directly from Jesus and how much reflects Luke's framing. Verses 2–5 form the core of the parable, with the introduction and conclusion shaped by the Gospel writer.[ii]

But when we strip away Luke's intro in v1 and conclusion in vv6-8, the questions only multiply. Is the widow seeking justice or vengeance? Is the judge corrupt, or savvy? Is the widow a victim, a hero, or something more ambiguous?

The judge finally relents. (It is interesting to note that the Greek term used to describe the widow's continuous bothering of the judge implies boxing, in other words, the judge may change his mind because he's afraid of the woman "beating" him up, so to speak.) But why? Has he done the right things for the wrong reasons? Or the wrong thing for the right reasons? We're never told. And that lack of resolution is not a flaw, rather, it may be the point. The parable resists easy conclusions and refuses to let us settle into moral clarity.

In the ancient world, courts were not always places of fairness. Judges could be influenced by bribes, social standing, or personal connections. Legal systems often favored those with power and resources. To enter a courtroom was not necessarily to enter a space of justice, it might mean stepping into a system already tilted against you.

That reality should prompt uncomfortable questions for us today, as well. Where is power located in our own systems of justice? Who has privilege and who does not? Who gets heard and who gets ignored? What do we really mean when we ask for justice? Even scripture itself reflects this complexity. Jesus warns about the danger of courts in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), and Paul cautions believers not to rely on them (I Corinthians 6). Justice, it seems, is not a simple category.

Luke's ending to the parable does not resolve these tensions. We don't know whether the widow's cause was just. We don't know whether the judge acted rightly. We don't even know what "justice" looked like in the end. Instead, we are left with questions: How is justice defined? Who decides? How do we recognize it when we see it? This is what parables do. They unsettle, provoke, and open space for reflection rather than closing it down.

To engage this parable well, we need what Amy-Jill Levine calls "historical imagination," the willingness to hear the story as its first audience might have heard it. And when we do, new questions emerge. What does it mean for a marginalized person to appear publicly and demand justice? Whose side are we on as listeners? Does it matter that the judge neither fears God nor respects people? Do we expect those in power to be shaped by faith? Should we?

In Jewish tradition, wrestling with scripture is itself an act of worship. To question, to probe, and to explore a text in community is a way of encountering God. The ambiguity of this parable, then, is not a problem to be solved but an invitation to engage.

Jesus rarely offers simple instructions, "Do this," or, "Don't do that." Instead, he plants seeds, he tells stories, stories that stay with us and grow within us as we reflect and wrestle. The absence of a single "correct" interpretation is not meant to frustrate us, but to draw us into deeper conversation—with the text, with one another, and with God.

Debie Thomas reminds us that even so, we cannot dismiss Luke's framing entirely. The call to persistent prayer and enduring faith remains central. The widow's power lies in her persistence. She keeps showing up, again and again, with no leverage but her voice. And perhaps this is exactly the kind of faith Jesus has in mind when he asks in v8, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" It is a faith that seeks justice even within unjust systems, that refuses despair, and that lives as though God's promises are already unfolding. It is not quiet or passive, but insistent, questioning, and hopeful all at once.[iii]

And this is where the parable stops being a story about them, and starts becoming a story about us.

Because there are moments when we are clearly the widow—powerless, persistent, crying out for justice that seems delayed or denied. And there are moments when we are more like the judge—indifferent, resistant, slow to respond, protecting our own comfort. This tension raises a deeper possibility: what if prayer is not about wearing down God, but about wearing down the judge within us? What if persistent prayer reshapes us, softening our resistance, expanding our compassion, and opening our ears to cries we would rather ignore?

The real work of prayer may be its effect on the one who prays. To return again and again is to undergo a kind of transformation. Our sense of who we are, what we desire, and what truly matters becomes clearer and stronger. Even when answers don't come, something happens within us… our hearts are stretched, deepened, and, at times, broken open. Prayer becomes the means by

which our indifference is eroded, our compassion awakened, and our attention redirected toward the pain we might otherwise ignore. [iv]

Persistent prayer is not passive endurance but active engagement. It is the refusal to give in to numbness or despair.

In JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, the elves of Lothlorien admit that they're losing their forest lands. But they battle on. They describe their struggle as "fighting the long defeat." In *Letters of Tolkien*, Tolkien describes our human struggle using identical language: "Actually, I am a Christian, indeed a Roman Catholic, so that I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat' – though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some sample or glimpses of final victory."[v]

So maybe our invitation this morning is not to solve the parable, but to live it:

- To be the people who keep showing up.
- To keep praying, not because we're certain of the outcome, but because prayer keeps our hearts open.
- To keep seeking justice even when it is slow, incomplete, or unclear.
- To keep listening, especially to voices the world would rather ignore.

Christian faith is a restless faith.

It might look like the quiet work of showing up for one another—meals delivered, prayers spoken, justice sought in small and steady ways. It might look like the saints who've placed their commitment to Second to grow within and beyond us—men and women who have planted seeds they may never get to see come to fruition, but that we and generations have come to see bear witness with in and beyond us. It might look like refusing to grow cynical when the world gives us every reason to. Because faith, in the end, does not look like certainty. It looks like persistence…like that widow, returning again and again, like Eugene Peterson calls a long obedience in the same direction. It looks like refusing to give up on God's promises, even when they feel distant, and trusting that something is happening within us and beyond us, even when we cannot see it yet.

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[i] Eric Barreto, "Commentary on Luke 18:1-8, Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, October 19, 2025. https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-6.

[ii] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke. 2: X - XXIV. 1,* ed., 3, pr. The Anchor Bible 28A (Doubleday, 1986), 1176.

[iii] Debie Thomas, Journey with Jesus, "The Bothersome Widow" October 13, 2019. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2406-the-bothersome-widow.
[iv] *Ibid.*
[v] Dan Clendenin, Journey with Jesus, "From Our Archives," Accessed April 30, 2026. https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3637-20131014JJ.