



## The Widow and the Judge

Luke 18:1-8

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This is our final Sunday in our *short stories by Jesus* worship series, during which we have taken a close look at some of the parables Jesus told. It is hard at times to allow ourselves to rethink and relearn Biblical teachings, especially ones we've been hearing since childhood. Yet, sometimes the best way to learn what it means to be a disciple today is to strip away the 2,000 years of translations and explanations of the Biblical text, and to rehear Jesus' words as if we were the 1<sup>st</sup> Century listeners to whom Jesus was speaking.

As we have noted throughout the past six weeks, one of the biggest challenges to hearing the parables as Jesus offered them is the editorial headers. The headers often skew our reading before we even begin to read. The headers were not in the original manuscripts; they were not put there by the gospel writers. While added to help organize the text into narrative clumps, these headers are quite often misleading from the desired intent of the story.

While this week's is actually one of the better headers, I think it's still skewed a little. It's pretty straight forward. This header says this is "The Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge." ... I know what you're thinking, how could I possibly have a problem with this header. The text *is* about a widow and an unjust judge. Let me explain.

My problem is that in this header, the widow has no defining adjective like the judge. Why isn't it called, "The Parable of the *pestering* widow and the unjust judge"? Or "The Parable of the *nagging* widow and the unjust judge?" Or, perhaps "The Parable of the *persistent* widow and the unjust judge." Just calling her the "widow" makes it seem like it's her mere presence that makes her important to the story.

Truthfully, in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish culture, her mere presence *should* have been enough for the judge to rule in her favor. In trying to understand what Jesus is saying, we've got to understand the culture into which this story was told.

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, widows tended to be at the bottom of the social and economic ladder and were thus at the mercy of the community. Women in general had little financial autonomy for survival, and were more often than not treated as property. If a woman had been married off from her father to a husband, her financial dependency shifted from her father to her husband. If her husband died, her father had no legal responsibility to take back over her financial needs. One would think that she would be able to claim the remaining financial assets of her deceased husband, but often his family claimed any remaining assets for themselves. We aren't given the details of the widow's legal concern in this parable, but this very well might have been the issue

– her deceased husband’s family might have been trying to take control of whatever assets were remaining, which would have left her destitute.

While there are exceptions – historical records do show there were *some* widows of the time who had plenty of financial resources to care for themselves – generally speaking, without the support of the community, widows were unable to care for themselves. It was because of this reality for widows that the Jewish law mandated widows be cared for by the community. Remember, this 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jewish audience would have without question understood the Hebrew Bible’s mandate to care for widows. Let me just name a few examples:

Zechariah 7:10 says, “Don’t oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; don’t plan evil against each other!”

Exodus 22:2 says, “Don’t treat any widow or orphan badly.”

Isaiah 1:17 says, “learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

Deuteronomy 27:19 says, “Cursed is anyone who obstructs the legal rights of immigrants, orphans, and widows!”

It was the responsibility of the community to care for the widow. And not just to care for them, but to plead *for* them, and the not obstruct their legal rights.

So again, this widow’s mere presence *should* have been enough for the judge to rule in her favor. It was the Jewish law’s mandate that she be cared for.

Yet, no one is arguing for her – no one is there to plead for her – and someone is clearly trying to do something that would hinder her ability to have personal stability. Why else would she continue to go the judge, who had clearly dismissed her previously? This is not *just a widow* – this widow is having to plead for herself time and time again. She’s not *just a widow*, she’s a *persistent widow*.

The reason she must be persistent is made clear. The narrator says, and the judge claims for himself, the judge has no fear of God and no respect for anyone. The judge doesn’t care about the widow because he doesn’t care about the Jewish mandate to care for widows. The judge doesn’t care what God desires, nor does he care about other people. That’s what we call a narcissist. Nevertheless, even without community support, she went on her own behalf time and time again.

Perhaps because of his narcissism, his belief that all that matters is himself, Jesus calls him an unjust judge, which is fitting since he clearly doesn’t care about the justice she desires. And we might be quick to defend her and to accuse him, but hold on a second ... remember, the parables are meant to provoke and challenge. If this parable were about favoring the powerless

widow over the unjust man in power, it would be *too* easy. Looking deeper, this is a place the English translation is somewhat misleading. In our pew bible, verse 3 says she kept going to the judge saying, “Grant me *justice* against my opponent.” The Greek word translated as *justice* is the work *ekdikeō*. The word carries a closer connection to the word *avenge* than *justice*. Better translated, the woman seems to be saying, “Grant me *vengeance* against my opponent.” She’s looking for vindication. Justice and vindication are similar, but not the same. What if her desire is to punish someone? What if she wants someone else to suffer? That’s vindication, but not necessarily justice.

The parable doesn’t tell us anything about her situation. It could be a simple land issue, where her husband’s family is trying to take back the property. It could be about wealth and assets. But what if it’s not? What if it’s more serious than this? What if the widow knows the person who killed her husband? What if she wants vengeance for her husband’s death? This might seem like a stretch, but look how far she’s willing to go to get what she wants.

After she kept going to the judge, he finally said to himself, “This widow keeps bothering me; I will grant her vengeance (using the same Greek word, *ekdikeō*) so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.” Again, we miss the weight of the situation in the English translation. The Greek word for “continually coming” – the thing the judge fears he will face if he doesn’t give in to her – is the word *hypōpiazō* (high-po-pee-ah-zo). When I looked up *hypōpiazō*, the first definition listed is, “to beat black and blue, to smite so as to cause bruises and livid spots.” The judge may not be worried about justice, but it seems he’s worried for his life! He’s worried that she won’t just keep pestering him, but that like a boxer in the twelfth round, he’ll be worn out, bruised and bloodied.

If she was just looking for justice, she might have pestered him. But it seems she’s looking for more than just justice, she’s looking for vindication, and it seems she’s willing to do whatever it takes to get her way. Neither the judge nor the widow seems to be on the “just” side of this legal battle.

Whether he’s tired of dealing with her, or perhaps fearful for his well-being, the judge relents. He didn’t change his ruling because she made a compelling argument; he didn’t rule in her favor because she had new facts to present in her case. He changed his mind and wrote a new decision because her persistence was risking him harm. Narcissism at its best – relenting only when to *not* do so puts one’s self in trouble.

So, what we have is the parable of a persistent widow who was willing to do whatever it took to get her way ... and an unjust narcissistic judge who changed a legal ruling for fear of his own safety.

This is an interesting parable. Odd to say the least. So, what are we supposed to learn from it?

Unlike some of the parables we have studied, this one is *not* about the kingdom of heaven. Which is good, because I’m not sure I could make sense of the kingdom of heaven being like a

persistent and vengeful widow changing an unjust judge's mind through possible physical threats.

This is not about the kingdom of heaven – we're told in verse one, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

So, the judge needs to start praying for deliverance from the widow's threats? ... Or, more likely, the widow's actions are to be seen as a model for persistence in our prayers. This seems the best connection, supported by Jesus in verse 7, when he says, "Listen to what the judge says, and will not God vindicate his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will God delay in helping them? I tell you, God will quickly vindicate them."

In making this connection, we have to be cautious. We cannot simply say the judge is an allegorical stand-in for God. Jesus is not saying that if we pester God enough, even with threats of violence, that God will relent for fear of his own well-being and grant us an unjust decision. No, Jesus makes clear that God is not likened to the judge. Jesus says that God is even greater than the judge, who hears the cries of the faithful, and who responds in support to those who seek God.

Though laden with odd and perhaps even concerning nuances, the parable seems to make sense. If even a narcissistic judge will acquiesce support for one of the most culturally insignificant members of society upon her persistent pleading, how much more will God grant mercy to the persistent prayers of the faithful? Challenging, but sensical.

But then we have to deal with the closing question Jesus asks in verse 8. As the story ends, Jesus asks, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This is a question that invites another layer of context, which is important for understanding why Jesus is telling this parable on maintaining prayer and hope to begin with. To understand Jesus' question, we have to back up into chapter 17. Remember, Luke didn't divide his gospel into chapter and verse – he just wrote the story. It was only later divided for editorial purposes. We often fail to look back, yet in this case, to understand the right context, it is necessary.

Chapter 17 ends with Jesus explaining about the future coming of the kingdom of God. In verse chapter 17, verse 20, the Pharisees asked Jesus *when* the kingdom was coming. In typical Jesus fashion, he offers a cryptic response to the Pharisees, and then turns to his disciples to give a deeper level of teaching. After going on and on with the disciples, explaining how it is they will likely not see even one day of the return of the Son of Man, Jesus then tells them the parable about the widow and judge as an example of their need to pray and not lose heart while waiting for the return of the Son of Man.

The parable is not just about praying and having faith in God. It's more nuanced than that. The parable is couched in a teaching about how we are to pray and maintain faith in our waiting for the return of Christ. Jesus then asks, when the Son of Man comes back, will he find anyone

living in this way – will anyone be living a life of faith that is exemplified in the persistent widow’s constant pleading for vengeance to the unjust judge?

With the simple explanation of “pray with consistency like the widow begs for mercy,” I think we can overlook some of the nuances of the story. Set in a teaching about our demeanor while waiting for Christ’s return, I think it’s worth wondering what the widow’s vengeance has to do with the story.

What does it mean to be in a place of poverty and to have to continually beg for vindication before corrupt powers? If the widow is our example for faithfulness using prayer and maintaining hope in the expectation that Christ will return to vindicate us all, what does that mean for us if we look more like the unjust judge who is turning people away who are seeking justice and vindication than we do the one who is pleading for such justice and vindication? Are we only relenting to the needs of others when our well-being becomes threatened?

Jesus is speaking to disciples in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century who would soon be faced with the fear of oppression. They would have to plead for such safety and vindication from God, because they would be, like the widow, at risk due to their place in society. Over the first few hundred years following Christ’s death, people of Christ went from being persecuted, crucified, and worshipping in hiding, to being the leading agency of the Roman empire in the establishment of a national church. And what happened to the faithful then? What happened when the desired vindication of the early Christians was received? Did they continue to pray with such perseverance while still awaiting Christ’s return? Did they maintain their hopeful role as the persistent widow ... or did they become like the unjust judge?

Do we, the people of Christ today, continue to, like the widow, fight for those who are at the mercy of the community? As we await our own vindication in the return of Christ, are we seeking vindication for the vulnerable in the world who have been mistreated, ignored, or abused? ... When Christ returns, will he find any who are faithful in this way? ... Among other possibilities, it seems that in the context of the narrative, these are questions we must ask when hearing the parable of the widow and the unjust judge.

Jesus’ teaching with parables was not meant to comfort, his intention was to challenge, to provoke, and to call us to a greater sense of faithfulness. May we have ears to hear, and hearts to receive, the word of the Lord.