

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 10/16/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, October 16th

Luke 18:1-8

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Bothering God?

This week's Gospel lection is Luke's Parable of the Persistent Widow (or the Unjust Judge in the Lexham English Bible). This is a parable about prayer and faith. It follows the lesser-to-greater argument (i.e., if the lesser is true, how much more the greater must be true). This is a similar text to the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-13) but this week's text follows a discourse on the coming of the kingdom and thus offers some additional insights. From a practical application, does this text really tell us to bother God until we get our will done in Heaven?

Luke 18:1-8

¹ *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*

Jesus is speaking to His disciples (17:22). The opening sentence frames the meaning of the parable relative to always praying and being persistent in faith in the context of the original audience and what they are likely experiencing.

² *He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"*

The first character in the parable is introduced. A judge who neither feared God nor respected man is hardly likely to respect justice. William Barclay argued that this judge was likely to be one appointed by Herod or by the Romans. Such "robber judges" were notorious for perverting justice through their acceptance of bribes.¹ The second character is introduced. The widow was the archetypal symbol for the poor and oppressed (cf. 20:47 and the scribes devouring widows' houses). The widow was seeking justice against her legal opponent. The widow had nobody to represent her to put pressure on the judge nor resources to bribe the judge. All she had was her persistence. Eventually the unjust judge yielded to the widow to avoid being continuously bothered. The expression "*beat me down*" is used in the ESV. The verb *hypōpiazē* can be rendered as "hit under the eye" or

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 221-222.

perhaps "give a black eye"! The image here is of the persistence of a defenseless widow beating down on a powerful judge which caused him to give in.

⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Verse 6 makes the lesser-to-greater argument. If such an unrighteous judge will grant justice, then how much more will our righteous God grant justice to His elect who persistently pray to Him?

The Greek now becomes difficult. It may be rendered as in the ESV - "*Will he delay long over them?*" - with the implied answer being "no!" Or as in the KJV - "...*though he bear long with them.*" - meaning He will give justice to His elect but He will delay (perhaps in order to strengthen His elect and/or give people the opportunity to repent).² Any delay is thus due to God's purpose. This latter view also makes sense in the context of the previous discourse on the events predicted by Jesus.

Justice will come speedily in God's time (one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day [2 Peter 3:8]). In the meantime, His disciples are to always pray and be as persistent in faith as the widow demonstrated persistence with the unjust judge. The parable closes with Jesus exhorting His disciples to constant watchfulness and prayer. To keep the faith. It is such disciples He will be looking for on His return.

Reflections

What does this parable mean and how do we apply it to our lives?

There are those who over-simplify and equate the unjust judge in this parable with God and Jesus' disciples as the widow. This implies that if our prayers are not answered then we must keep praying harder. Our persistence will eventually wear God down! This interpretation inappropriately elevates the status of humans and positions prayer as a means of getting our will done in Heaven! All we must do is keep bothering God enough.

There are those who take the reverse interpretation. They equate the widow with God and His disciples with the unjust judge. This implies God is begging us to address the injustice in the world and His persistence will eventually motivate us to action. Is this a modern social justice agenda being read into the text (eisegesis) rather than reading out of the text the original intended meaning in context (exegesis).

The parable seems clear based on the context of the original audience and the position in the text: We must keep the faith and pray for the kingdom yet recognize God is in control. The timing is all God.

As modern disciples we find much to be distraught about in our world. There is still injustice permeating our society and the overall visible church is experiencing a rapid decline across the West. It is at times like these when we can take great comfort in our righteous yet gracious God who is sovereign over all of history. It is through persistent prayer that we often become changed. It is through such prayer that we are often moved to become the instruments through which God chooses to achieve His will on this earth. The question Jesus asked at the close of the parable is one that every generation of Christians needs to answer: *When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

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² L. Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 280.