

Parables of the Persistent Widow and Tax Collector

Luke 18:1-14

Verses 18:1-8: Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, 2 saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. 3 Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' 4 And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, 5 yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" 6 Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. 7 And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? 8 I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

Background Notes

The topic in the second half of Luke 17 was the Second Coming of Christ - not the Rapture of the Church, but the coming of Christ to this earth after the Tribulation Period of the future. The Lord Jesus Christ will come back in judgment, and he will bring about justice on this earth. As a result, His earthly kingdom will be characterized by righteousness.

In this context of the Lord's return, we have this first parable about prayer (v1-8). Notice the connection in verses 7 and 8, where the Lord continued to speak about His return in His comments about this parable: *"And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"*

Strictly speaking, then, in light of the context, the "elect" of verse 7 are the elect of the Tribulation Period who will undergo great persecution at that time. Many of them will be martyred, and they will cry out day and night for justice. Revelation 6:9-11 speaks of the martyred saints of the Tribulation Period under the Fifth Seal judgment: *"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed."*

As Luke 18:7 says, the Lord will not delay long. Remember, the Tribulation Period is only seven years in length, and justice will be carried out speedily when the Lord returns. *"I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* Read Revelation 19 on the Lord's return in judgment to bring about justice and righteousness on this earth.

The Lord closed this parable with a question in verse 8: *“When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?”* This rhetorical question is probably meant to motivate the disciples (and us) to pray with more faith, in line with the teaching of this parable. Praying in faith is never automatic, and spiritual conditions in this world will not improve or become more conducive to prayer as we move toward the End Times. As He began this parable, the Lord said that His disciples ought to pray at all times and not lose heart. The Lord meant the *principles of prayer* found in this parable to be applied to the present time. They’re not strictly limited to the Tribulation Period.

Doctrinal Points

1. God expects us to be persistent in prayer.

At first glance this parable doesn’t sit well with some of us, because it sounds like God is reluctant to give us what we need unless we pester Him for it! Did you have that reaction as we read this parable? If we didn’t have the Lord’s interpretation on this parable, we might indeed be left with a distorted view of God.

The key to understanding this parable is our Lord’s comments in verses 6 and 7: *“Then the Lord said ‘Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them?’”* Our Lord shows us that in the parable God is not *compared* with the unrighteous judge, but *contrasted* with the unrighteous judge. Here was an unrighteous judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man, and was not doing his duty under the law of being concerned about oppressed widows. However, if *even he* responded to the persistent request of the widow, how much more will God the *righteous judge* listen and respond to the cries of His people?

It’s important to understand the exhortation that comes to us in this parable. Being persistent in prayer does not mean we should pray repetitiously, or pray as a ritual. No! It’s about bringing your hurts and needs before the Lord in prayer, and not being afraid about boring God or pestering God. Remember, widows in that day had great needs, and most widows had very little means of support. Such was the case of the widow in the parable. An unscrupulous opponent was taking advantage of her - maybe her landlord or property owner. So the teaching of this parable is not to keep on asking God for our wants and selfish desires, but to feel free to keep on asking Him for the real needs that we have - maybe even for survival, as in this widow’s case. God expects us to be persistent in prayer.

2. God expects us to be humble in prayer.

Verses 9-14: Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: **10** “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11** The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ **13** And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ **14** I tell you, this

man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

This second parable on prayer could be called the Parable of the Two Pray-ers. They both went up into the Temple courts to pray - but there the parallel stops and the contrast begins. The Pharisee took a prominent place in the Temple area because he wanted his pious prayers to be seen and heard by others. In contrast, the publican, or tax collector, stood a great distance away (v13).

The Pharisee prayed about himself and to himself (v11). Notice his frequent use of “I” as he recounted his pious deeds before God (as if God had to be reminded!): *“God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortionist, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”* In contrast, the tax collector humbly beat his chest (a sign of sorrow) saying, *“God, be merciful to me a sinner”* (v13).

The Pharisee compared himself with others and thought he was doing just fine, as many self-righteous people do today to justify themselves: “I’m not a swindler, I’m not having an affair, I don’t cheat on my taxes, I’m not like all those other dregs of society around me.” In contrast, the tax collector measured himself by *God’s* standards, found that he fell far short, and cried out for mercy. Verse 14 leaves no doubt that God honored the humble prayer of the sinful tax collector, but not the hypocritical prayer of the self-righteous Pharisee. Are you a humble pray-er? God expects us to be humble in prayer.

Practical Application:

Don’t twist God’s arm in prayer!

The Parable of the Persistent Widow teaches us to practice the principle of importunity in praying. Don’t give up! Continue to ask God for your needs, especially when you’re really in need, and even when it seems that the Lord doesn’t hear.

However, let’s not carry out this principle to the wrong extreme of complaining and selfishly trying to “twist God’s arm” to get something that is not His will. We may be sorry if the Lord gives us what we ask in those selfish prayers. That’s what happened to the children of Israel when they complained about the manna. I’m reading Numbers 11, beginning at verse 18, where the Lord said to Moses, *“Then you shall say to the people, ‘Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat; for you have wept in the hearing of the LORD, saying, ‘Who will give us meat to eat? For it was well with us in Egypt.’ Therefore the LORD will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat, not one day, nor two days, nor five days, nor ten days, nor twenty days, but for a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you, because you have despised the LORD who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying, ‘Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?’”* The people (wrongly) twisted God’s arm in prayer - and they reaped the consequences.

Don't twist God's arm in prayer! That's what the 2 ½ tribes of Israel did in Numbers 32, when they wanted to settle on the land on the east side of the Jordan River. Remember, God wanted all 12 tribes to settle safely on the west side of the Jordan River, but 2 ½ of the tribes twisted God's arm. They liked the land on the east side of the Jordan River, and they wanted to settle there, so they twisted God's arm - and reaped the consequences. When we read further in Israel's history, we find that those 2 ½ tribes were always vulnerable to enemy attack over on the east side of the Jordan River.

Don't twist God's arm in prayer. That's what King Hezekiah did when he was unwilling to die (2 Kings 20). Hezekiah twisted God's arm and God added fifteen years to his life, but during those years the Lord had to sternly rebuke Hezekiah for becoming too friendly with the pagan Babylonians. It would have been better if Hezekiah had died earlier.

Do you see the spiritual lesson here? Don't twist God's arm in prayer!