

And Yet...She Persisted

Texts: Jeremiah 31: 27-34; Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

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Some of you will know that I have a peculiar affection for judges in my heart. It's probably because my father was a judge for 17 years and I have the greatest respect for him.

I know from him how a judge can live out the Bible's ideal of what a judge should be. Listen to Moses' charge to judges in Deuteronomy:

“Give the members of your community a fair hearing, and judge rightly between one person and another, whether that person is a citizen or an immigrant. You must not be partial in judging: hear out the small and the great alike; in judging, you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's.”

I really think my father was like that as a judge, treating great and small, citizen and immigrant, all alike with fairness and compassion and a desire to do what was right, to apply the law fairly, with a love of justice, and with the fear of God.

That's what a judge should be like. But this guy in our parable today, what about him? He's rightly called the unjust judge; he's not like that at all.

He reminds me of that saying from Chicago about an honest politician: an honest politician is one who, when he is bought, stays bought! This guy is that kind of judge: totally impartial for the right sum of money!

The text tells us that he “neither feared God nor had any respect for people.”

He just doesn't care. He doesn't care about justice. He doesn't care about his conscience. He doesn't care about people's suffering, about people who are being wronged. He couldn't care less about them.

He only cares about himself. The story doesn't tell us why he isn't giving justice to this poor widow, it only tells us that he isn't, time and again.

Perhaps he's waiting for a bribe. That was common in the ancient Near East. Bribe the judge and make sure that you get the "justice" you want. But he'll wait a long time for this poor widow to be able to afford to bribe him.

Perhaps he's already taken a bribe -- from her oppressor -- and that's why he won't rule in her favor.

We don't know, the parable doesn't tell us. All we know is that this guy doesn't care about this widow or about justice.

That's what we know about the judge. What about the widow? Widows in the ancient world were in a bad place. They had no husband to protect them.

When their husband died, all his wealth went either to his sons or to his brothers. She got nothing. This is why the ancient church was so insistent on making sure that widows were provided for. In fact, the first fight we hear about in the history of the church is about taking care of widows!

In Acts 6, we find out that the church has a daily distribution of food to the widows in their midst. This was before Social Security, of course, so this was the community's way of taking care of the elderly.

Now in the early church, there were some church members who spoke Hebrew or its sister dialect, Aramaic, and others who spoke Greek. And the Greek-speaking part of the church complained that only the Hebrew-speaking widows were getting food in the daily distribution. Maybe the signs were only put up in Hebrew and the Greek widows didn't know when to show up, or something. Who knows?

So seven people were chosen to make sure that the food distribution to the widows went about in a fair and orderly way. That was the beginning of deacons in the church caring for the needs of the people -- all to take care of widows. And we know there were a lot of widows, because it took seven people to look after them all!

Jesus himself has a heart for widows and often helped them. You might remember that we never hear about Joseph in the grown-up life of Jesus. Joseph must have died, leaving Jesus' mother, Mary, a widow. She seems to have traveled with Jesus, and Jesus took care of her. One of the last things he did was to speak from the cross and ask his disciple, John, to take care of his mother. He was thinking of

widows right to the end. Those of you who are widows out there, Jesus hasn't forgotten you!

Perhaps when Jesus speaks about this widow here, he is speaking from personal experience. Perhaps he is thinking about his own mother! Whatever the case, Jesus' great love and care for widows passed into the early church, in part because of parables like this.

So this widow is in a bad way. She's likely desperate because she has no resources. She appears in court because she has no son or brother-in-law who could appear for her. Someone has wronged her, and her only hope is to get justice.

And this is the judge she gets, the Honorable Mr. Justice Don't Give A Crap! Bad luck, right!

But fortunately for her, while the judge doesn't care about God or the opinions of others, he does care about himself, and because this widow just won't give up – the text says literally that she's giving him a beating; we might call it a verbal tongue lashing – he finds it's just not worth all the bother to keep denying her what she's seeking, so he finally relents.

He does it not out of fear of God, not out of a love of justice, but because she's a pain in the butt and he just wants to get rid of her.

Now, incredibly, some interpreters want us to see the unjust judge as God, requiring people to keep bugging God over and over again with ceaseless prayers, as if God didn't want to do justice.

This, to me, is absurd. Are we really to believe that God doesn't care about justice, and will only answer our prayers because we make ourselves such a pain in the butt? Are we really to believe that God might be waiting for a bribe, or might have taken one from someone who's out to get us? Are we to believe that God cares only for God's own self? Is there any other passage in Scripture that would make us think that?

Those were all rhetorical questions, by the way, a rhetorical device so that I could now say, "NO! We are not to believe that! We are not to think such things about God."

Jesus is using his own rhetorical device here, to get his listeners' attention. There was a very common rhetorical device in Jewish interpretation at the time, called the lesser and the greater.

What it wants to show is that, if something is true in a small case, it will be just as true in a big case.

Jesus practically says this exact thing in another place when he says that "whoever is faithful in very little things will also be faithful in many others, and whoever is dishonest in very little things will also be dishonest in many others."

In other words, the person who takes care of the little details that might easily be overlooked, is the kind of person who will take care of the big things, too. And the person who will rob you of a penny, is also the type of person who will rob you of everything you've got!

Here are another couple of examples from the Bible of this lesser and greater figure of speech: in another passage, Jesus points out that God cares for the birds of the sky. Now, birds are great, I'm sure Jesus cares about the birds, but they're not as important as human beings who are, after all, made in the image of God. So, Jesus says, if God even cares for the birds, well, how much more will God care about you, a person made in God's image.

Jesus says, look at the lilies of the field, see how God clothes them in rich colors? Well, how much more important are you to God than mere flowers. Trust in God that God will clothe you, too. God acts in the lesser case, God will surely also act in the greater case.

Applying that rhetorical technique here we get the meaning of the parable: if even an utterly contemptible, unjust, unscrupulous scum bag of a judge will give a poor, powerless widow justice because she keeps bugging him, how much more will the utterly righteous, loving, caring God of heaven make sure that there's justice in the end for all people?

You see, God is not the scumbag of a judge! Far from it! God is the very opposite of such a judge! So if even that scumbag will give justice to a powerless widow just because she keeps bugging him, how much more will the true and just Judge of all the earth give justice to people when they pray to God?

God wants to bless us. God doesn't need to be buttered up, sweet-talked, soft-soaped, or otherwise cajoled into it. God wants to do it.

The contrast is between the judge who doesn't give a damn, and the God who won't refuse a blessing.

Now, of course, the parable isn't just telling us to pray for justice. It's telling us to live out our prayers in real life by working for justice.

We have to make sure that the widows and the powerless get a fair shake. We have to make sure that the immigrant and the citizen are treated alike in the courts of law.

We have to work to see that the judges we elect aren't going to show favoritism to one race over another, or to kowtow to those who can give big donations for their next campaign, while leaving the poor who can't contribute out in the cold.

To the widow, to the powerless, the parable speaks a word of hope. The living God cares for you!

To the unjust in the world, who care only for themselves, who won't do what's right for God or reputation's sake, the parable is a warning to change their priorities and to start to do what is right.

Let us go from this place to live our lives as an ongoing, persistent, unrelenting prayer for justice in the world. Go in hope, and don't give up. God is with you and, in the end, justice will prevail.

Amen