PARABLES

The Corrupt Judge and the Widow

Luke 18:1-8

This is a bold and risky parable! The negative character (the corrupt judge) is contrasted with God!

Introduction

The story of the judge and the widow obviously relates to prayer. At the same time the passage relates to the question of the coming of the Son of Man – see, ***"They ought always to pray and not lose heart"*** (v. 1) and the conclusion, ***"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"***

The parable reveals what we should do as people of faith in an age when faith is fading. The Lord Jesus tells us there are two alternatives: **prayer** or **losing heart**. And unless you pray, you will lose heart.

The parable breaks down into three sections:

- v. 1 the introduction
- v. 2 the parable
- v. 3 the Lord's comment on the story

The audience is **the disciples**. The theme is **persistence in prayer**. In the context of the coming Kingdom, we are to be persistent in prayer and seek God especially when He seems far away and our confidence in Him is wavering. **The solution to fear is to pray**.

In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, Macbeth is afraid his plans may fail. His wife tries to steel his nerves with the command, "But screw your courage to the sticking place and we will not fail." (Act 1 scene 7) Macbeth does so and yet his grand plans disintegrate into tragedy for himself and all around him. Shakespeare is putting into words the typical advice given to many when they have to overcome fear.

Jesus and His little group of disciples were faced with growing rejection and hostility as they neared Jerusalem. In the hearts of the disciples there was probably a growing fear and fear robs you of **inner tranquillity and rest** and **the will to endure**.

Here Jesus gives His disciples and us the solution to fear. It is trusting prayer!

The parable presents two opposing forces in a war of attrition between a corrupt judge and a totally helpless widow.

The structure of the story

The first "verse" tells us about the judge and the second about the widow. The third returns to the judge and the fourth to the widow. There are three themes: the judge – God – people. These are found in verse one and repeated in verse three. The three themes are found in the second verse and in reverse order in the fourth verse.

Verse 1 (literal translation)

"A certain judge there was in a certain city	JUDGE
God he did not fear	GOD
and man he did not respect"	PEOPLE

In 2 Chron. 19:4-6 Jehoshaphat chooses judges for the people and tells them:

"…consider what you do, for you judge not for man, but for the Lord…. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you, take heed what you do for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God or partiality or taking bribes."

Such words of warning are always needed in every society. Amos was very upset over the corruption of the judges during his life in the Northern Kingdom (Amos 2:6-7 and 5:10-13). Clearly in 1st century Palestine the same problem had surfaced.

In Edersheim's, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, he describes how the judges in the city of Jerusalem were so corrupt that they were called 'Robber-Judges'. The Talmud speaks of village judges who were willing to pervert justice for a dish of meat.

So **this** judge is fairly typical for, ***"He did not fear God"*** nor did he have any ***"respect for the people"***. In all Semitic translations the phrase used is, ***"He is not ashamed before people"***. ***"He does not fear God"*** means that he does not grant God any authority. He has no thought that one day – on the Day of Judgement – he will have to answer for his actions.

Middle Eastern culture is an honour–shame culture to a significant degree. This implies that appeals to correct behaviour are encouraged by warnings about incurring shame. So a parent doesn't tell a child, *"That is wrong, John"* (an appeal to an abstract standard of right and wrong), but *"That is shameful, John"* – an appeal that either stimulates feelings of shame or feelings of pride.

The most negative criticism of a person in the Middle East is, "He does not feel shame." His inner sense of what constitutes a good act and what is a shameful act is missing! He can't feel shame.

Jeremiah says, ***"The wise will be put to shame"***. (Jer. 8:9) Well, that is good for 'wise men' can feel ashamed! But Jeremiah also speaks of prophets and priests, ***"Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all; they do not even know how to blush!"***! (Jer. 8:12)

And **this** judge didn't know how to blush. Nothing shamed him. There was no spark of honour left in his soul to which anyone could appeal. The problem wasn't that he didn't "respect" people in the sense of "disrespecting" the poor and "respecting" the rich and honoured. He had an inability to sense the evil of his actions in the presence of a person who should make him ashamed. In this case, he is hurting a destitute widow and he **ought** to feel ashamed! Others might cry out "shame", but he doesn't **feel** shame. This is a very difficult man. He has no fear of God. The cry of, "For God's sake!" will do no good; neither will "listen for the sake of this poor woman", because he has no inner sense of what is right and what is shameful to which one can appeal.

There is obviously only one way to influence this man – through bribery!

Verse 2 – The Helpless Widow

"And a widow there was in that city	WIDOW
and she was coming to him	COMING
saying, 'Vindicate me from my adversary' "	ADVERSARY

In the Old Testament the widow is a symbol of the innocent, the powerless and the oppressed. (Ex. 22:22-23; Deut. 18:18, 24:17, 27:19; Ps. 68:5; Is. 10:2) Widows are the most vulnerable people in Middle Eastern society.

Is. 1:17 calls on the rulers and the people to ***"plead for the widow"***. But in v. 23 in the same chapter Isaiah says, ***"Everyone loves a bribe … and the widow's cause does not come to them"***.

According to Jewish law, *"The suit of an orphan must always be heard first. Next comes that of a widow"*.

So the legal rights of this widow were being violated. Probably she had no influence (*wasta*) to compel justice and was too poor to buy justice because she was a woman and she was a widow. She had no powerful man to protect her rights and it is no surprise that a number of people had got their hands on whatever assets she had. A judge sitting **alone** was allowed to decide cases relating to money only. Three judges were required in other cases. So clearly

this case related to money matters or to inheritance. The widow was crying out for **justice** and **protection** not **vengeance**. So we can make three assumptions about this widow:

- The widow is in the right and is being denied justice.
- The judge doesn't want to help her. (She has no money to pay a bribe.)
- The judge prefers her adversary. (Perhaps he is influential or he **has** paid a bribe.)
- But note that, as Jesus told the story, there is no mention of good works done by the widow that can earn her the right to a hearing.

At least a hundred years ago – and still in a few places in the Middle East – a typical court scene would be a large room with a raised dais at one end where the 'Qadi' (judge) sits on cushions. The 'Qadi' would be surrounded by a semi-circle of secretaries. The crowd of people would be in the rest of the room. A dozen or so people would be shouting, claiming that their case deserved to be heard next. Wise litigants wouldn't shout, but have whispered conversations with the secretaries passing fees/bribes. When a secretary was satisfied, he would whisper to the 'Qadi' who would promptly call the case. It was assumed that the judgement would go to the litigant who had bribed the highest.

In the Middle East ordinarily women don't go to court! It is a man's world and women are not expected to push and shout in such a crowd. This was true in the first century where women were modest and stayed at home.

So why was the woman in court? The only possible assumption is that she was entirely alone with **no one in her extended family** willing to speak for her! Poor widow! She was totally helpless.

There is another factor in the Middle East. **Women can sometimes do what a man could never do!**

An example: In the civil war in Lebanon '75-'91, a Palestinian woman's male cousin was kidnapped by an armed militia group. He was the only son of a widowed mother. In desperation, the extended family sent **three** Palestinian women to the leader of a powerful paramilitary group that controlled the area where the cousin had disappeared. These women shouted their way into an audience with this leader. Once in front of him, they poured out a torrent of hard words into his face. If they had been men, they would have been tortured and shot. But **in public** women are often honoured and treated with respect!

In post offices and government buildings women always get to the front of the queue. It isn't by accident that the women disciples followed Jesus to the Cross. Had His men disciples appeared, they could have been arrested. But the women were safe. John was young and was protected by Mary.

The family in Lebanon knew this. Only women could express openly their sense of hurt and betrayal in language guaranteed to evoke a response. The cousin was released!

So the Lord Jesus is describing a hopeless situation. We may think we have insurmountable problems! Hers is worse! She has no other option than to shout and to keep shouting.

Verse 3 – The Reluctant Corrupt Judge

"He did not want to for a (certain)***time***	JUDGE
"then he said to himself. 'Although I do not fear God	GOD
and do not respect man' …"	PEOPLE

Verse 4 – The Vindicated Widow

"Yet because she causes me trouble, this widow	WIDOW
I will vindicate her,	VINDICATION
lest in continually coming, she wear me out."	COMING

The word "certain" is in quite a few early codices. It reinforces the parallelism in verse one (a certain city) with verse three (a certain time), but it may not have been in the original. The judge confesses the accuracy of the judgement passed on his character!

"He said to himself" is a well-known Aramaic soliloquy. The Lord Jesus in His parables – The Rich Fool, The Prodigal Son, The Unjust Steward and The Master of the Vineyard – often uses it. It really means: "He started to **think**"!

The word in Greek for "wear me out" is a technical word used in the boxing ring for a punch under the eye. Paul uses its in 1 Cor. 9:27, ***"I buffet my body"*** about what he does to himself in order to keep his body under control. In a Middle Eastern context, a woman can shout as much as she likes, but if she gets violent, she is forcefully removed from court and not allowed to return. For a thousand years Arabic translations have all rendered this phrase, *"lest she give me a headache"*! Possibly the judge was exaggerating. "A blow on the face" (that probably does give you a headache!) was metaphorically used for irritation – i.e. her persistence irritated him.

The Greek phrase '*eis telos'* is translated '**continually**'. It is a strong phrase. It implies a will to go on forever. The judge is convinced that the woman will never give up in this war of attrition between them, so he gives up.

So here is a helpless widow in a hopeless situation. She is a woman in a man's world, a widow without money or powerful friends. The judge can't be appealed to out of duty to God and no human being can make him ashamed of any evil deed he may choose to perpetrate on the innocent. **Yet** this woman not only gets a hearing of her case, but also has her case settled in her favour! Unbelievable!!

Then there is the "how much more" argument. In this rather humorous situation such persistence pays off. So the disciples should pray not to a corrupt judge, but to a loving Father. However discouraged they are and however hopeless their situation may seem to be, it could not be worse than that experienced by this widow! Disciples can know with certainty that their prayers are heard and acted upon. So when fear begins to grip the heart of a believer, that believer is challenged to pray and to pray continually in the face of all discouragements with full confidence that God will act in his best interests.

If this is true, why then is there an apparent delay in the answers to our prayers? God works to His own timetable. Often He is exercising patience with the other party/parties before He intervenes in judgement. His answers don't always come in the form we hope for, but He does answer!

The meaning of verses 6-8

"And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says: And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones who cry out to Him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?' "

Everyone recognises the contrast between the corrupt judge and God. God is under authority! He is eternally under the authority of righteousness and holiness. He cannot violate justice. God doesn't need to be battered by prayer in giving an answer. He doesn't need persuading. The word the Lord Jesus uses is "quickly". We have a God quick and ready to answer the cry of the fearful.

The difficulties

1. The sentence, **"Will he keep putting them off?"** The Greek word is '*makrothumeo'* usually translated 'patience' or 'delay'. But believers are not sinless and their faith is not always strong. Being a believer doesn't automatically protect them from failure. When suffering injustice it is too easy to assume that because one's opponents are evil, suffering somehow makes one more righteous. That is not the case.

There are two problems here:

- How should we translate *'makrothumeo'*?
- Is it a statement or a question?

The meaning of *'makrothumeo'*

This is one of the great New Testament words for patience – 'delay' is a poor word. There are **three** Greek words for patience in the New Testament and they are **all** applied to God.

- *'anoche'* Rom. 2:4 and 3:26 has the meaning of forbearance. God has divine *'anoche'* in passing over former sins.
- *'hupomone'* this is usually used in the context of suffering with patience. It is used of the Lord Jesus when on the Cross.
- *'makrothumia'* is used in the sense of a person who can and does "put his anger far away". This is the "patience" of the winners of a war who refuse to take vengeance. It is magnanimity.

A great example of *'makrothumia'* can be seen in David standing over the sleeping body of King Saul with a spear in his hand. King Saul had come to kill David and now David could easily kill the king. But David "puts his anger away"!

'Makrothumia' is a quality God has for without it He would immediately destroy all sinners. Ex. 34:14 says that God is "slow to anger" and is "gracious". He restrains His wrath and causes His grace and loving kindness to rule. Wrath and grace are both part of the character of God and they can coexist together because of *'makrothumia'.* God puts aside His wrath and shows mercy to us as believers even though we have sinned. So *'makrothumia'* – as applied to God – is a restraint in the heart of God that postpones wrath until something takes place in us that justifies the postponement.

In the parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Mt. 18:23-25) you see *'makrothumia'* in operation. The servant owes his master 10,000 talents and he is not able to pay. (v. 25) The master, obviously furious, orders that the whole family should be sold into slavery. The servant falls on his knees and pleads with the master, ***"Lord, have patience with me"*** (*'makrothumeson ep emoi')*. He was asking his master to set aside his anger. His master does!

Peter uses the word frequently in his letters.

- 1 Peter 3:20 God exercises His *'makrothumia'* with the disobedient.
- 2 Peter 3:9 God exercises His *'makrothumia'* ***"Not wishing any to perish".***
- 2 Peter 3:15 We are to ***"count the*** *'makrothumia'* ***of our Lord as salvation"***.

Setting aside wrath is a necessary part of our salvation.

God's *'makrothumia'* provides the necessary interval of grace in which faith and repentance can take place.

Commentators argue that the sentence, ***Will he delay long over them?"*** isn't a question at all, but a statement? **God is willing to put his anger away!** God will **vindicate** His elect who cry to Him day and night. These elect are sinners – not sinless saints. So God puts aside His anger over our sins and because of this **we can approach Him in prayer**.

Note: Our prayer life doesn't make us righteous. As in the case of the political enthusiasts in Lk. 13:1-5, a righteous cause doesn't produce a righteous people. So our prayers don't produce righteousness. But God's willingness to "put aside His anger" does enable us to pray to Him day and night and "not be afraid".

There is also the question of what Jesus meant when He said, ***"I tell you, He will <u>see that they get justice and quickly</u>"***. How will God see that the faithful get justice? The tense is the

future. 'Quickly' probably indicates the near future rather than the future return of the Lord Jesus. The arrest, trial and execution of Jesus starts in Lk. 22. The enemies of the Lord Jesus are gathering for their final act of hatred against Him. Will God vindicate Jesus? The Lord Jesus prayed to his Father day and night. Well, we are given a clear answer, 'YES'. But how did the vindication of all sinners come about? It is seen in the Resurrection that will come by way of the death on the Cross.

For centuries our Muslim friends have stumbled at **the offence of the Cross**. For them, Jesus is one of the greatest of the prophets and in Ps. 105:15 God says, ***"Touch not my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm."*** If this is true, our Muslim friends argue, where is God's vindication of His Prophet Jesus? The Cross is a shame and a defeat to them. So in an attempt to give God honour and vindicate Jesus, the story of what happened on the Cross is changed to allow for a divine rescue operation before Good Friday. God took Jesus directly to heaven and His outward form (face) was placed on another and that substitute died on the Cross.

So our Muslim friends are asking the right question! Where is God's vindication that enables Him to "hold back His anger" against us poor sinners? The answer is that the Lord Jesus was fully vindicated on Resurrection Day! The Cross, where Jesus paid the penalty for our sins and died as our substitute, dealt with God's wrath. All God's wrath for our sins was poured out on His Son, the Lord Jesus. On Resurrection Day, He ***"was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness, by His resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord…."*** (Rom. 1:4)

So what does Jesus want to teach these listening disciples by this story? It is usually said that this story teaches the importance of importunity in prayer. I think Jesus was trying to teach us the exact opposite. The key to understanding the parable is the great contrast between God as our Loving Heavenly Father and this corrupt judge. The actions of God are contrasted with the actions of the judge. Everything the judge was, God is not!

<u>Notice the judge</u>:

- He was indifferent to the suffering of the widow for a while.
- When he acted it was in order to escape personal suffering and annoyance.

<u>Notice God</u>:

- God will do justice for His own elect speedily.
- God is long-suffering over them and He will justify them.
- God acts and in the person of the Lord Jesus – He suffers so we may be justified.

2. The sentence, ***"However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (***v. 8)

The usual interpretation is that Jesus is speaking of the *'parousia'* – His Second Coming. [See Lk. 17:20-37 where Jesus speaks of the coming of the Kingdom.] This can be a discouraging statement. Mt. 24:14 implies that this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in **all** people groups everywhere and that there will be a fulfilment of the "visions" of John in Rev. 5:9:

"You were slain and with Your blood, You purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation ….." and Rev. 7:9, ***"… a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne."***

These verses encourage us to believe that as we near "the End" – the *'parousia'* – there will be an immense, worldwide ingathering of peoples into the Kingdom. In many places this has begun. Is this statement by the Lord Jesus a refutation of our optimism?

Is the Lord Jesus anxious because a less than perfect faith will be in His disciples who don't endure as this woman did before the corrupt judge? Will we, the disciples of Jesus, fail to pray and so lose heart and lose faith?

I believe God has not only vindicated the Lord Jesus, but He will also vindicate us. We may be fearful followers, but **our election was to service and not for privilege**. We are not the

'pampered darlings' of a Loving Heavenly Father, but an elite fighting unit (the equivalent of the SAS or Special Forces) in the army of the Living God. And because we are what we are, we are doomed to suffer hardship, woundings and perhaps death at the hands of the wicked. The seal of election is martyrdom. He will find the elect. He will find people who have lived by faith, who have come through the battle and overcome the difficulties. They have prayed in order not to lose heart.

So as fear intensified in the hearts of these followers of Jesus as they near Jerusalem, perhaps there is fear in the hearts of many as we come nearer the climax of time – the *'parousia'*. We have the promise of God's vindication and it will come quickly.

So what was Jesus saying? In the gathering gloom of intensified opposition, we need not fear. God has put His anger far away from us and He hears us. We must trust and be steadfast in prayer. We don't appeal to a "corrupt judge", but to a Loving Father who will vindicate His chosen ones (as in some cases we follow our Master through the sufferings of the Cross) and He will do so quickly as He did in the case of the Lord Jesus!

It doesn't mean He won't find faith, but He won't find faith – i.e. Christianity – established and victorious everywhere. No! We will always be warring against the forces of evil. Their power and influence will only be broken by the return of the Son of Man. Until then we ought always to pray and not to faint and we can do that because God is who He is!

Summary

1. A woman is the hero of the story and is presented to us as a model. There is no sexist bias in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. The status of women is enhanced in Kingdom Communities as an example for us to follow.
2. Prayer conquers fear.
3. Persistence in prayer is important. Don't give up until there is an answer.
4. In prayer we address a Loving Father (not a corrupt judge) and this gives us confidence. If God denies the request or offers a solution that is different from the one requested, the disciple is to respond, "Your will be done". But **before** the answer is given, clear persistent prayer is necessary.
5. God must and does put aside His anger to hear our prayers because of what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. But our prayers do not make us holy.
6. God is at work in history and **will fully accomplish** all He purposes. He will vindicate all His chosen ones. History isn't random. It is moving towards a goal and the future is secure for disciples. God will vindicate His chosen ones.
7. Vindication is assured in spite of our failures. God is able and willing to put His anger far away from us so He can reach out in love because of what Jesus accomplished for us on the Cross.
8. The cry for vindication requires self-examination lest we start to lose heart and fail to pray. If this happens it will result in a loss of our love for the Lord Jesus and a loss of faith. So there is a challenge for every day from now until the Son of Man returns to maintain our love and our faith.

We all know it is easier to begin the habit of prayer than to keep it up. A crisis often leads us to pray, but to go on praying needs faith. We are apt to become weary and give in to Satan's suggestion that 'it is no use'. **This** is the time to remember this story! We must remember that the Lord Jesus expressly told us, ***"Always to pray and not to lose heart"***. Let us resolve to pray on steadily, patiently, perseveringly and let us never doubt that it is doing us good. So however long the answer may be in coming, let us pray on.