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Luke 18:1–8

60th Message

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THE FERVENT BREATH OF PRAYER

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Our text this morning is addressed to those of you who struggle in your faith, who feel like you are always the underdog in the battles of life; it is aimed at those of you who have already lost a round or two, your resources are spent, the end seems pretty bleak, and what you need is a comeback. Nothing excites the sports world more than a comeback. I'm sure you all have your favorites. For those who live in Boston, it is hard to beat the 2004 ALCS championship series when the Boston Red Sox overcame a 3–0 series deficit to beat the Yankees en route to the World Series. For me it was in 2007 when Stanford's football team was a 41 point underdogs to number one ranked USC, and scored 17 points in the fourth quarter to win 24–23. When it comes to sports I always root for the underdog. But even more thrilling is when we witness underdogs battling in life and death struggles, when the powerless stand for all that is right and pure and boldly confront the corporate powers of darkness and, against incredible odds, win.

In the previous chapter Jesus tells the disciples that the days are coming when he will no longer be with them and they will undergo severe suffering. During those dark days they will long for the day when Jesus will be publicly vindicated by destroying his enemies, but they will not see it. Instead, life will seem to go on with business as usual and, like Jesus, they will be subject to severe persecution. Given these difficult circumstances it will become easy to for the disciples to lose heart and give way to despair. As an antidote to despair, Jesus sets forth the absolute certainty of God's justice and the call to resolute faithfulness by tenaciously and continually persevering in prayer.

I. The Pressing Issue: The divine necessity of prayer

And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought (Grk. *dei*) always to pray and not lose heart. (Luke 18:1 ESV)

The word “ought” sounds like is a suggestion, but the Greek verb *dei* denotes that which is an absolute *necessity*. In Classical Greek it denoted a compulsion of what was inevitable, a force over which one had no control.

This led, notably in the later stages of Hellenism, to an anxiety-filled and fatalistic approach to life... But in the New Testament the term was freed from its traditional Greek associations, and charged with new meaning by connecting it with God's saving work.

The concept of *dei* plays a distinct role in three contexts:

1 Apocalyptic contexts. *dei* as an apocalyptic term refers to the future cosmic drama which will inevitably break in upon the world.

And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things *must* first take place, but the end will not be at once. (Luke 21:9)

2 Jesus' life and way as salvation history

But first he *must* suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. (Luke 17:25)

...Jesus, whom heaven *must* receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (Acts 3:21)

3 dei in context the life of the Christian. The divine *dei* covers not only the past history of Jesus and future eschatological events; it also embraces the present life of Christians. (Luke uses it 44 times).¹

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you *must* testify also in Rome.” (Acts 23:11)

Because the Lord is sovereign, history is going somewhere, and we are privileged to enter on the stage of salvation history and play significant roles in that drama. Since God has predetermined that the “way” the kingdom of heaven comes to earth is through the vehicle of prayer, therefore it is a divine “necessity” that we persevere in it until the morning dawns.

II. A Parable of the Wicked Judge and the Relentless Widow

A. The setting: The powerful and the powerless

He said,

“In a certain city there was a certain *judge* who neither feared *God* nor respected man.

And there was a *widow* in that city who *kept coming* to him and saying,

‘Give me *justice* against my adversary.’” (Luke 18:2–3)

As the parable opens we are introduced to the two main characters whose contrasting positions of position and power create an insurmountable impasse before the story even begins. At one end of the scale is the city judge, a male from the urban elite with social and political eminence. At the other end is a widow, who has no social standing or status in the community. Normally in Jesus' parables the reader must discern the moral character of the individuals from their actions or dialogue. But in this case, Jesus exposes the judge's character right at the outset. He neither “fears God nor respects people.” This is the exact opposite of what a judge in Israel was ideally supposed to be. The God who liberated Israel from Egypt commanded his people to show special regard and partiality on behalf of the oppressed, especially widows who, left without a husband or a protector, were extremely vulnerable to exploitation and poverty. Thus, when Jehoshaphat appointed judges, he exhorted them:

Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes... Thus you shall do in the fear of the LORD, in faithfulness, and with your whole heart. (2 Chron 19:6–7)

But this judge does not fear God and is so calloused he does not flinch when the rest of the community is repulsed in shame. As Garland suggests, he is “beyond the limits of social pressures that

govern the relationships of others.”² Kenneth Bailey elaborates on the cultural context:

[Therefore] people cannot appeal to him saying, “for the sake of God,” because he does not fear God. Nor can anyone plead, “for my sake,” because he does not care what anyone thinks about him. He possesses no inner sense of honor to which supplicants can appeal. In the Middle East these two approaches are the standard ways to appeal to someone for help. But with this judge neither appeal will be successful, and thereby the widow’s situation appears hopeless.³

Research at International Justice Mission tells us that there are 115 million widows living in extreme poverty, with half a billion children depending on these widows for survival. Women in developing countries are particularly at risk to property grabbing, especially in contexts in which they are viewed as less valuable, subordinate or even as property themselves. In Africa, property grabbing typically occurs after the death of a husband or father, when widows and orphans are particularly vulnerable. Relatives or neighbors quickly divide up the home or land, and the surviving widow or orphans are left homeless and stripped of their belongings. In a poignant video IJM documents the case of Grace Ozitya, a mother of five living in Mangaliba, Uganda. On April 27, 2005 her husband passed away, and immediately her brother-in-law and sister threatened her, ordering her to leave her land, or they would set fire to all her crops. If she still refused, then threatened to burn her house down, or push it down on them while they sleep. Grace knew if she gave in, her children would probably die. Over the course of several weeks she walked hundreds of miles to government administrative centers, hoping to obtain legal title for her land. But officials refused to help, having been bribed by her relatives. Her future and that of the lives of her children seemed hopeless.⁴

Given the insurmountable obstacles that confront the widow in our story, her actions are astounding. In the Middle East, the courts belonged to the men. The fact that she is there alone indicates she has no kinsman—no father, uncle, brother or nephew to speak for her. And the fact that she comes continually suggests she does not have economic resources to offer the appropriate bribe for a swift settlement.

John Donahue explains that we should also avoid thinking of the widow as old and frail. “In a culture with short life spans where women married in their early teens, the ‘widow,’ as the subsequent narrative presumes, would most likely be young and vigorous.”⁵ Forceful resolve and rigor were absolutely essential if one wanted to have a voice in a Middle Eastern courtroom. Unlike the solemn and orderly corridors of Western courts of law, the typical court scene in the Middle East was characterized by “a great din of shouting and pushing. This woman would be heard only because she was the shrillest. She skips any honorific title in her appeal to the judge and pleads her case persistently and loudly.”⁶

Green observes that after the judge turns her away, she refuses to play the helpless, hopeless victim. She absolutely refuses to be quiet or to go away until the judge gives her the justice she deserves. In that world a woman would rarely, if at all, claim her rights by public outcry, but that is what she does. “Like the hemorrhaging woman of 8:43–48, this woman assumes unusual responsibility for her own well-being, adopts a self-presentation of shocking initiative, and thus continually returns to the magistrate in her quest for justice.”⁷

Next we are taken into the privacy of the judge’s chambers, where we hear the judge deliberating over his verdict.

B. Inside the judge’s chambers

For a while he refused,
but afterward he said to himself,
“Though I do not fear God
and do not respect people,
yet because this widow keeps bothering me,
I will give her justice,
lest she beat me down by her continual coming.” (Luke 18:4–5)

True to his character the judge dismisses the widow case out of hand. But after some time, he confesses that he is being worn down by the tenacity of this widow, and fears that soon she is going to assault him with more than words (“beat me down” = “give me black eye”). The Greek text captures both the humor and the shock of the situation: The picture is one of the almighty, macho, fearless judge tossed against the ropes and pummeled like a faltering boxer by a fiery young female fighting to the death for her rights. After 10 grueling rounds the wicked judge rules on behalf of the widow. Justice is secured, not because the judge is motivated by any goodness, or compassion, or preserving his “godfather” reputation (which he fears will be tarnished by giving in to the widow). Justice was secured simply because the widow overpowered him by her relentless resolve.

Bailey notes that in Middle Eastern culture, “the chivalry that surrounds women is striking. In situations of extreme danger women can do things that men dare not do.” Two illustrations serve his point. At the height of the Lebanese civil war (1975–1991), he was serving at a seminary in Beirut, and radical militias began kidnapping male Westerners. Teaching at a seminary got so dangerous he was unable to walk the four blocks to the school. For the safety of his life, he imposed house arrest on himself, and held his classes at his home. But his brave wife and daughter would go and buy the food, do banking, etc. And it was their bravery that kept him alive.

On another occasion, he tells us that a violent militia had its headquarters a few blocks away from his home. As he passed he didn’t even make eye contact. He says, “the community did not ‘see’ them. But there was one old woman, dressed in traditional long black dress with a black head covering who would regularly go to that building, stand out front, point her finger at the guards and shout invectives at them, telling them to get out of the quarter. The guards would smile, address her politely and tell her not to get upset. Had a man done that, he would have been shot.”⁸

III. The Powerless and the Just and Compassionate God

And the Lord said,
“Hear what the unrighteous judge says.
And will not God give justice to his elect,
who cry to him day and night?
Will He delay long over them?
I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” (Luke 18:6–8a)

Jesus now makes the application of the parable for his disciples. He knows that after he leaves the disciples are going to find themselves, just like the widow, victims of gross injustices. They will be hauled into court and will be giving their testimony before corrupt magistrates, who are governed by greed and power. Like this widow, they will seem powerless to confront a world that is as godless and callous as this judge. So Jesus commands them to “Hear what the unrighteous judge says.” If they will listen and reflect on what the wicked judge says, they will be inspired by the courageous faith of the widow and will not lose heart in their cries to God for justice. Though the judge was godless, corrupt and unjust, he eventually responded to the widow’s demand for justice simply because of her relentless pursuit of justice.

How much more will a gracious, good, attentive, compassionate and righteous God grant justice to his elect who, like the widow, “cry to him day and night.” Our God loves justice and defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow.

**The LORD tests the righteous,
but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.
Let him rain coals on the wicked;
fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of
their cup.
For the LORD is righteous;
he loves righteous deeds;
the upright shall behold his face. (Ps 11:5–7)**

**“Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the LORD;
“I will place him in the safety for which he longs.” (Ps 12:5)**

However, though ultimate justice is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt for God’s elect, the timing is ambiguous. The last phrase “*Will he delay long over them?*” is not the best translation. If there is no delay, why must the elect cry out “day and night?” The Greek literally reads, “and he is **patient** (*makrothumeō*) over them.” *makrothumeō* means “to be long-suffering, to bear up under provocation without complaint, to wait patiently.” I take it at face value that God gives a patient hearing to the constant appeals of the elect who cry out for his reign. Unlike the unrighteous judge who has no patience to entertain the widow’s pleas, God welcomes our cries for justice. It is no accident that fifty of the one hundred and fifty psalms are laments. When the poet breaks open his cries and articulates his need, he is often led to new insights or a whole new perspective. Naked honesty gives God access to the deepest recesses of our hearts, so that he is able to transform us with new insights, and comfort us with his presence, which transcends our suffering as we cling to him.

Soon the disciples will find their master beaten and crucified. In that hour he will be mocked as “the elect one” (the only other occurrence of “elect” in the book of Luke). “He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Elect One” (23:35). The taunt implies that God would never allow his “elect” to suffer such a shameful death. But Jesus did not despair, he continued to cry out to his God to the very end, knowing that he would eventually be vindicated.

**In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications,
with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from
death, and he was heard because of his reverence. (Heb 5:7)**

The cry for justice, for God’s reign to be manifest on earth, for God to set things right, will be delayed, therefore by faith we must persist “day and night.” Luke’s wording reminds us of another widow, Anna, who worshipped in the temple with fasting and prayer “night and day...waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:37–38), and such exemplary prayer became the standard for future widows, who wished to be put in the “list,” serving the Lord full-time (1 Tim 5:5). Jesus concludes by emphatically affirming that, though justice will be delayed, God “will give justice to them speedily.” How do we put that together? What does “speedily” mean from God’s perspective? Peter addresses the paradox in his second letter.

**But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one
day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The
Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but
is patient (*makrothumeō*) toward you, not wishing that any should
perish, but that all should reach repentance....count the patience
(*makrothumeō*) of our Lord as salvation” (2 Pet 3:8–10a)**

Praise God for his longsuffering and patience toward us. Just think if God had not been patient and answered the prayers of earlier generations for immediate and complete justice, history would have been brought to an end, and we would not have been saved. And perhaps in our persistent cries for justice day and night our petitions will be transformed from “vindicate me by punishing my enemies,” to “forgive them Lord for they know not what they do.”

In Luke 11:2 Jesus taught his disciples to pray “may your kingdom come.” The widow now portrays the full scope of that prayer, its goal, its passion and persistence. The widow teaches us that a life of constant prayer is not simply praying and then passively waiting for God to act. Rather “crying out to God” means our whole existence is to be like this widow, oriented in pursuit of justice.

In the case of Grace Ozitya, our widow in Uganda, International Justice Mission took her case. It took IJM attorneys three years of tenacious efforts, which included sixteen trips to government offices in Kampala and forty-three trips to Mukono to get the paperwork through system. But they did it. Grace got title to her land, and she rebuilt her home brick by brick. Justice was served, but as often is the case, it was hard won.

IV. One Question for You

**Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes,
will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8b)**

Jesus leaves us with one question: When the Son of Man comes, will this kind of resolute faith of persistent prayer be found on earth? Before we answer the question, we need to discern what he means by his “coming?” Is it his coming back to earth at the end of the age? In my thinking, that makes the question relevant only to that final generation. But if his coming is seen in the context of Daniel 7, then he is referring to his “coming into heaven” where he receives power, dominion and authority as our high priest (Psalm 110) at his ascension.

**“I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
one coming like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13–14)**

If this is the correct context, it gives us tremendous motivation to pray. Finally there is a man in heaven, our representative and high priest who prays for us as our advocate to the Father. And unlike Moses, who grew weary and tired as he was interceding for Joshua fighting in the valley below (Exod 17:8–13), Jesus never grows weary in his intercession and understands all our weaknesses. The challenge Jesus is posing to us is will we take advantage of all that God has put in place to bring his righteous kingdom to earth? It’s as if God has completed the great superhighway connecting heaven and earth via prayer, giving heaven complete access to every corner of earth. Will we believe in it and take full advantage of it?

It is evident from the book of Acts, that the apostles took Jesus’ words to heart. The book opens with the apostles praying and making it a top priority of their devotion (2:42). Prayer opens prisons doors,

breaks through satanic strongholds that hold cities in bondage, liberates thousands from darkness and, when the apostles are unjustly persecuted, their prayers bring forth a heavenly rain of joyous hope and grateful love. In Acts' final chapter after Paul is shipwrecked on the island of Malta, it isn't long before he finds himself being entertained by Publius, the chief official of the island. When Publius' father becomes extremely ill, Paul visits him and prays for his healing. His prayer is effective, and his father's healing stirs the land to revival. "And when this had taken place, the rest of the people on the island who had diseases also came and were cured" (Acts 28:9).

One of the most compelling underdog comebacks in recent years was when a little known Jew took on the KGB and won. Natan Sharansky was a dissident who worked for the Aliyah, the movement that was pressuring the Soviet government to allow Russian Jews to immigrate to Israel. Sharansky had openly denounced the KGB's persecution of Soviet Jews in the foreign press, and in 1973 he had applied for an exit visa. He had renounced his Soviet citizenship and expressed his desire to immigrate to Israel. Two years later, he married Avital, and the day after their wedding he was abducted by the KGB in downtown Moscow and taken to Lefortovo Prison. He was tried for espionage and treason, then sentenced to thirteen years in the Gulag.

The day before he his arrest, his wife gave him a copy of the Hebrew Book of Psalms. Though Sharansky "grew up completely unaware of the religion, language, culture, and history of [his] people,"⁹ he now discovered being isolated in prison with just the Psalms to feed upon, a spiritual strength to survive the dark days of his confinement. Sensing its divine power, they confiscated the book. In response, Sharansky went on a hunger strike to get it back. During this intense struggle that lasted for one year, he spent 186 days in a punishment cell. But in the end, Sharansky won and the KGB returned the book. After receiving it back, he wrote, "I took my Psalm book and for days on end, with photographs of my dear ones in front of me, I recited all one hundred and fifty of King David's Psalms, syllable by syllable."¹⁰

Finally after eleven years he was released and arrived in Tel Aviv on Feb 11, 1986. Sharansky had not only had survived imprisonment, he had emerged victorious over the KGB. With no political clout, having been subjected to endless days of brutal interrogation, solitary confinement, sickness and starvation, he emerged victorious and free. During his imprisonment—in fact, on the 45th day of a hunger strike he had embarked upon—the Soviet leader Brezhnev died. It was his heart, not Sharansky's, that had failed to hold up. Shortly afterwards, Brezhnev's successor, Andropov, died. Four years after Sharansky's release, the whole Soviet state and the dreaded KGB collapsed.

Upon his release, the world flocked to him because they recognized that he was a man of integrity, a hero who refused to compromise his ideals of liberty and justice. When his plane arrived at the airport in Jerusalem, he spoke by telephone to President Reagan. Then he was carried on the shoulders of an excited crowd milling in front of the Western Wall. "Holding our Psalm book in my hand, I kissed the wall and said, '*Baruch matir asirim.*' Blessed is He who liberates the imprisoned."¹¹

That was 1986. Now that he is in the free world, Sharansky finds it much more difficult to retain such a focus. He writes,

In freedom, I am lost in a myriad of choices...In the punishment cell, life was much simpler. Every day brought only one choice: good or evil, white or black, saying yes or no to the KGB. Moreover, I had all the time I needed to think about these choices, to concentrate on the most fundamental problems of existence, to test myself in fear, in hope, in belief, in love. And now, lost in thousands of mundane choices, I suddenly realize that there's no time to reflect on the bigger questions. How to enjoy the vivid colors of freedom without losing the existential depth I felt in prison? How to absorb the many sounds of freedom without allowing them to jam the stirring call of the shophar that I heard so clearly in the punishment cell? And, most important, how, in all these thousands of meetings, handshakes, interviews, and speeches, to retain that unique feeling of the interconnection of human souls which I discovered in the Gulag? These are the questions I must answer in my new life, which is only beginning.¹²

"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b)

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. (Heb 10:19–23)

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1 E. Tiedtke, H. G. Link, "δεῖ" ("it is necessary"), *NIDNTT* 2:664–66.

2 David E. Garland, *Luke* (ECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 709.

3 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 264.

4 International Justice Mission, "Grace's Story" video [cited May, 2014] online: <http://www.ijm.org/casework/property-grabbing>

5 John R. Donahue, S.J., *The Gospel as Parable; Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 182.

6 Garland, *Luke*, 710.

7 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 640.

8 Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 265.

9 Natan Sharansky, *Fear No Evil* (trans. Stefani Hoffman; New York: Random House, 1988), xi.

10 *ibid.*, 352.

11 *ibid.*, 416.

12 *ibid.*, 423.