

Jesus told many stories—called parables—drawn from everyday life in Palestine. These simple stories convey deep, spiritual truths for all people, in any age. This month our Bible study series, “The Parables of Jesus—More Than Just Stories,” focuses on the parable in Luke 18:1-8. Take this opportunity to follow along and study God’s Word for yourself!—ED.

The Parables of Jesus
More Than Just Stories
The Parable of the
Persistent Widow

Keep On Praying!

by Vern Sheridan Poythress

For 14 years my wife, Diane, and I have prayed that God will stop abortion. For 14 years we have prayed that God will end the persecution of Christians in various areas of the world. For years we have prayed for revival to come to the United States. But we haven’t seen much change. Are our prayers doing any good? Will we ever see an answer?

It is easy to give up hope when God does not answer our prayers right away. Jesus knows that we are likely

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Keep On Praying!

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to become discouraged, so he "told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up."¹

How Do We Respond to Hopeless Situations?

Jesus told a parable about a widow who had every reason to give up. Perhaps some wicked person had wronged her. Perhaps he had taken over her home and kicked her out. Whatever the details, the widow desperately needed help. The woman's situation looked especially hopeless for several reasons. She was a widow. Without a husband, she had no steady income or social protection.

"Are our prayers doing any good? Will we ever see an answer? It is easy to give up hope when God does not answer our prayers right away. Jesus knows that we are likely to become discouraged"

She was also legally insecure. In ancient Jewish society the man who headed a family or a clan would usually handle legal disputes. He would be familiar by experience with legal matters and would probably know the judge personally. But this widow had no man to represent her—no husband, not even a father or a brother. She had to go to the judge herself, without the experience or the social leverage that a man would have had.

The situation worsened. The judge to whom she went was unjust. He cared nothing for her plight. Could the widow perhaps hope to persuade him nonetheless? She could remind him that God threatens to punish judges who pervert justice.² But the judge did not fear God.

Luke 18:1-8, NIV

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was

a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

*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?"**

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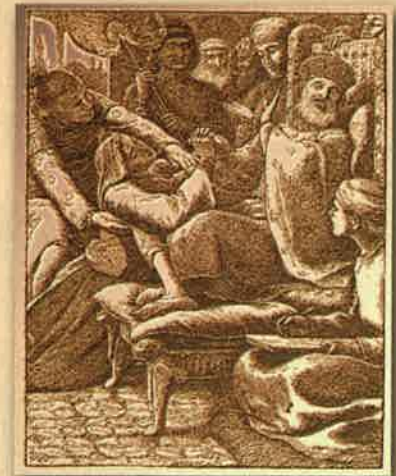


Illustration: "The Parable of the Unjust Judge," by John Everett Millais, 1899, from Art Today/©1998 Zedcor, Inc.

Could the widow argue that the people of the town will despise the judge for not helping her? No, this stratagem would not avail, for the judge "neither feared God nor cared about men."³ He was indifferent to human opinions about him.

Could she appeal to the man's conscience and make him realize how low he had sunk? No, the judge was already well aware of his position and admitted it freely to himself: "Even though I don't fear God or care about men."⁴ The judge had so hard-

ened himself that no human appeal could get through. Apparently nothing that the woman might have said would have the least effect. There was no hope for a change.

Some of us have suffered through situations as bleak as this one. We have felt despair because there seemed to be absolutely nothing that we could do. "Just give up," the devil has tempted us. Job's wife said, "Curse God and die!"⁵ Jesus understands how despair may sometimes grip us like an iron vise.

Amazingly, though everything was against her, the woman did not give up: "For some time [the judge] refused."⁴ Yet the woman persisted. She continued to bother him, to pester him. Finally, the judge awoke to his own selfish interests. He decided to give justice, but only because otherwise she would "eventually wear me out with her coming!"⁶ The woman received relief because she persevered.

What Kind of Perseverance Do We Have?

What is Jesus' point? He tells us to pray and not to give up. God will answer. Jesus said, "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."⁷

Jesus made a comparison, noting that the persistence of the widow was like the persistence that characterizes God's "chosen ones."⁸ The widow cried out to the judge to give her justice. Likewise, God's chosen ones cry out to God to give them what they need. After a while the unjust judge gave justice to the widow. And God will answer his people, the chosen ones. Jesus gave the parable to encourage God's "chosen ones."⁸ To them he said, "Don't give up. Persevere in praying to God. He will do what is right."⁹

How Does God Respond to Our Prayers?

The comparison leaves many people uneasy. "What?" they ask. "Is God unjust and reluctant and in need of being pestered like this horrid human judge?"

Jesus knows that we understand enough about God to see the point of the comparison. The Bible indicates that God is both compassionate and absolutely just.¹⁰ Far from being reluctant, God is eager to give his children good gifts: "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those

who ask him!"¹¹

The comparison to an unfair judge shows how much more we can expect from God. If even an unfair judge can be persuaded, how much more can we expect God to answer us for our good? If even someone who has no love for us or does not care for us can decide to help, how much more will God respond to us with outpoured love?

The Bible expresses the depth of God's love and commitment to us: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"¹² How tremendous a commitment God has made! We are to come boldly to God, knowing that he will answer us fully and compassionately. He has proved his faithfulness and his eagerness to provide for us by giving the most spectacular Gift of all, his own Son!

Note that these promises are

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all offered to God's children, his "chosen ones."⁸ Not all prayers are equally acceptable. Speaking to hardened, sinful Israelites, God warned, "When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen."¹³ For our prayers to be acceptable, we need to receive forgiveness for our sins and be

Parables Into Practice

Here are some ways that I have found to put into practice Jesus' lessons in The Parable of the Persistent Widow. They may be helpful to you:

① Pray some of the prayers in the Bible as your own. Try Ephesians 1:17-19 and Colossians 1:9-12, as well as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and some of the psalms. Learn from these prayers how to pray with God's purposes at the center of your thinking.

② Record in a "prayer diary" your prayer requests and God's answers to your prayers. Make sure that your requests are for God's goals. Continue praying each request until you get an answer!

③ Learn how Christians are treated in your own country and in other countries—pray that they would be treated justly.

④ Think about the fact that God brought about righteousness through the death and resurrection of Christ, even though the religious and political leaders who had tried and crucified Jesus had acted unjustly (Acts 4:25-28). Thank God and praise him. Be emboldened to believe that God will bring about his purposes in marvelous ways today as well.

⑤ Pray for Christ to come again to establish his perfect rule of righteousness. Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11; and Revelation 19:1-22:21 to fuel your prayers.

Vern Sheridan Poythress

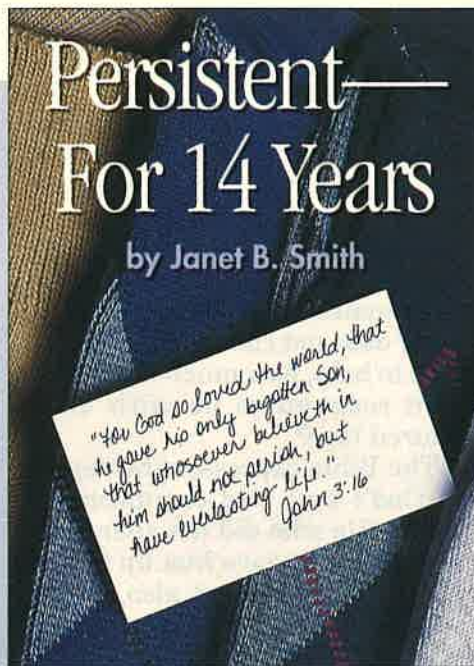
I was born in Chicago, Illinois, and spent my early years there. My father faithfully took all seven of us children to church and made sure that we knew who Jesus Christ was. To me it was the greatest legacy my father could leave his children, for in my greatest hour of need I knew who had the answers to life.

I met Brent Smith on a blind date 39 years ago. When I first met him, he had just quit a job riding for a large ranch in southern California and was leaving in two weeks to ride for a cattle company in British Columbia. I interfered with those plans, however, and we married.

Being married to Brent has been an experience that has brought me to the foot of the cross of Jesus Christ. Looking back on those early years of marriage, I now can laugh at some of the trying times, but the truth is that my heart was broken and my spirit crushed to see the man whom I loved destroying his life—our lives—with alcohol. There was nothing that I could say or do to change him. In my desperation I cried out to God, praying even when I didn't think God was listening. I poured out my heart to God for Brent for 14 years.

During those 14 years, I saw no evidence that God was working in Brent's life—in spite of the fact that I turned our home into a "Bible bookstore." Brent could barely walk a few feet without finding Scripture strategically placed around the house, especially in his underwear and sock drawers. I had Bibles lying around open to different Scriptures which, he later told me,

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he read when I wasn't around.

I struggled to trust God. I tried to believe that he had heard my cries and had seen my tears, although I could see no evidence of change in Brent. Many times I was under great pressure almost beyond my ability to endure. I despaired of life itself. I came to the point of relinquishment—"God, whatever it takes . . ."

Knowing Brent, I believed that God would have to drive him to his knees. I also knew that the children and I would

share in whatever consequences God brought about. But the Word of God always brought me back to his faithfulness and to Jesus' instruction to "always pray and not give up."¹ His Word sustained me: "Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me. . . . I will praise your name, O Lord, for it is good. For he has delivered me from all my troubles."²

So, like the widow in Luke 18 who was persistent in seeking justice, I was persistent in praying. I did not lean on my own understanding,³ but I trusted in my Savior and Lord. He answered my prayers and petitions far beyond my expectations. In his timing and plan, God took my husband, whose feet were set on a path of destruction and hell, and changed his heart, turned him around and set his feet on the path of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

God healed the broken relationships between husband and wife and between father and children. God put our family back together again. The Lord God is the Healer of all relationships, especially the relationship between himself and mankind. 

(1) Luke 18:1, NIV. (2) Psalm 54:4,6-7, NIV. (3) Proverbs 3:5. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado

cleansed by the blood of Christ.¹⁴ Only then may we have confidence that God loves and receives us even as he receives Jesus Christ, his only Son.¹⁵

For What Do We Pray?

Is God's promise to answer

prayer like a blank check? No, even an earthly father knows how to give good gifts to his children. Not everything that children ask for is good. A wise father takes into account the entire situation. How much more so

with God our heavenly Father! We can be thankful that God in his wisdom does not always give us everything for which we foolishly pray. God renews our hearts and our minds so that we begin to pray for his goals rather

than for our own selfish goals.¹⁶

The parable of Jesus points to that same truth. The widow in the story asked for a fair resolution of her case. Likewise, our prayers need to be that God will establish his righteous will.¹⁷ God answers such prayers: "His ears are attentive to their prayer."¹⁸

But now we need to understand God's justice, God's righteousness. He cares not only for just decisions in human courtrooms, but for what is right in every sphere of life. Each mean re-

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mark, each social snub, is a violation of God's righteousness. Each instance of right living and self-control expresses God's righteousness. We are to pray for nothing less than the coming of God's Kingdom, the coming of his rule in all aspects of life. We pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,"¹⁹ and, "Come, Lord Jesus."²⁰ Come and set things straight, wipe out evil, make a new earth.

God is so perfectly righteous that he cannot ignore sin. He showed his zeal against sin by the terrible punishment that he inflicted when Christ bore our sin. We have only to look at the cross and its meaning to understand that God is utterly serious about righteousness and utterly serious about punishing sin.

But the suffering of Jesus Christ issued in victory, in the glorious achievement of right when he was vindicated in his resurrection: "God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above


every name."²¹

God now works out true righteousness in history as people submit to what he accomplished in Jesus Christ. He abolishes sin in the souls of men and women who submit to Christ's rightful authority: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."²² Thus, we are to pray for all people everywhere to submit to Christ's universal rule, to acknowledge him as Savior and Lord. We are to pray even for those who mistreat us.²³ This is his command.


God's plan is to exalt Christ. We can pray no greater prayer. We persevere in true prayer when we understand this goal and yield ourselves to Christ in our praying: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done."¹⁹ So we pray for revival. We pray for Christ to come and to bring his reign to completion. We plead for

Exploring God's Word:

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

- 1 Read Matthew 7:7-11; 2 Peter 3:8-9 and 1 John 5:14-15. What can encourage us as we wait on the Lord in prayer?
- 2 Look at James 1:5-8 and James 4:1-3. What are some reasons that our prayers may not be answered the way we would like them to be answered?
- 3 According to Hebrews 11:1,6; James 4:6-10 and James 5:7-11, how should we prepare ourselves before coming to the Lord in prayer?
- 4 Think about 1 Peter 2:9. Make a commitment to record your prayers and God's answers to your prayers for one month. Also, record any Scriptures that have influenced your praying. After the month is up, tell an unbelieving friend about some of your prayer entries and God's answers, giving him the glory. 

righteousness to come in our own lives, and for others to be saved in Christ. When we are praying for these goals, the goals of God's own Kingdom, we can have confidence. God himself tells us to persevere. He hears. He will accomplish his purpose in us and around us.

We do not know the details, nor how long we will have to wait for God to answer a particular prayer. We do not know just how he will answer. But we know that God is all-wise and full of mercy and love. He has shown it through giving Christ. We can have perfect confidence in him. Keep on praying! 

(1) Luke 18:1, NIV. (2) Deuteronomy 27:19. (3) Luke 18:2, NIV. (4) Luke 18:4, NIV. (5) Job 2:9, NIV. (6) Luke 18:5, NIV. (7) Luke 18:7-8, NIV. (8) Luke 18:7, NIV. (9) Cf. Luke 18:6-8. (10) Psalms 111:4; 119:137-144. (11) Matthew 7:11, NIV. (12) Romans 8:32, NIV. (13) Isaiah 1:15, NIV. (14) Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-22. (15) John 17:26; Ephesians 1:6. (16) James 4:3. (17) Luke 18:7. (18) 1 Peter 3:12, NIV. (19) Matthew 6:10, NIV. (20) Revelation 22:20, NIV. (21) Philippians 2:9, NIV. (22) Philippians 2:10-11, NIV. (23) Luke 6:28, NIV. Bible verses marked NIV are taken by permission from The Holy Bible, New International Version, copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado