

The parable of the widow and the unjust judge

Parables
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The parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge is found only in the Gospel of Luke. “The most pervasive tradition is that the man who wrote [the book of Luke] (and the book of Acts) was a physician, a medical doctor and he is also widely regarded as a historian – someone to be included among the ranks of Josephus, Herodotus and other reporters of ancient history,”¹ Luke was known as “a highly educated individual who appreciated both historical context and artistic elegance.”² While the identity of the author is unknown, he does identify himself as one of the apostle Paul’s traveling companions.³ “This could allow the author to be Epaphroditus or Titus or some other friend of Paul, possibly even someone whose name is never mentioned in the New Testament, but the early and unanimous tradition of the Christian church was that these books were written by Luke, who is referred to as “the beloved physician” in Colossians 4:14.”⁴

“The Gospel of Luke has been called the most beautiful book ever written. At its heart is the perfect life, Christ’s teachings, redemption through him, and the lives of those who cluster around him.”⁵ Mark Allen Powell opines that “Luke apparently wanted to appeal to a broader, more culturally diverse audience, one that would be likely to interpret the story of Jesus against the background of Roman history.”⁶ “The ideal reader is likely a Gentile, for Luke defines Jewish practices...and the Gospel lacks the Aramaic terms found in its canonical counterparts. The ideal reader is also likely a Christian, and such is familiar with the Scriptures of Israel in their Greek form (the Septuagint), which the Gospel frequently quotes and to which it makes numerous allusions.”⁷

¹ Mark Allen Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2018), 271.

² Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 271.

³ Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 273.

⁴ Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 275.

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, Ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, The Zondervan Corporation, 1975), 1000.

⁶ Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 281.

⁷ Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, Eds., *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2011), 107.

As to when the Gospel of Luke was written, there is debate. According to David Flusser, “a critical evaluation of the literary evidence indicates that Luke wrote before Mark.”⁸ Flusser concludes that “Luke and Matthew together provide the most authentic portrayal of Jesus’ life and teachings.”⁹ At least one author suggests that he wrote somewhere in the 60s and 70s.¹⁰

Luke is noted as having included seventeen parables which are not included in any of the other Gospels.¹¹ “The charm of the Lukan parables lies in no small measure in their teasing playfulness and indulgence of wry humor, yet the very strangeness that captures the interpreter’s attention creates a dilemma when these parables are integrated into a larger narrative that projects its own vision of the good.”¹² While many may think parables are simple stories, Fee and Stuart opine that “the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to the book of Revelation.”¹³ They go on to describe the interpretation of how Jesus suggested that the parables contained mysteries and

because he then proceeded to “interpret” the parable of the sower in a semi-allegorical way, this was seen to give license to the hardening theory and endless allegorical interpretations. The parables were considered to be simple stories for those on the outside to whom the “real meanings,” the “mysteries,” were hidden; these belonged only to the church and could be uncovered by means of allegory.¹⁴

Fortunately, and despite a history of scholars following this interpretation, the opposite is now widely accepted.

If the parables, then, are not allegorical mysteries for the church, what did Jesus mean when responding to the disciples’ inquiry about the parables (Mark 4:10 – 12) with language about the “mystery” of the kingdom of God? Most likely the clue to this saying

⁸ David Flusser with Steven Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius*, (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 3.

⁹ Flusser and Notley, *The Sage from Galilee: Rediscovering Jesus’ Genius*, 3.

¹⁰ Darrell L. Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, (Louisville, Westminster John Know Press, 2004), 3.

¹¹ Powell, *Introducing The New Testament: a Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey*, 282.

¹² Garwood P. Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke’s Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol 70, No, 4, (October 2008),733.

¹³ Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2014), 153.

¹⁴ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 154.

lies in a play on words in Jesus' native Aramaic. The Aramaic term *mēthal*, which was translated *parabolē* in Greek, was used for a whole range of figures of speech in the riddle/puzzle/parable category, not just for the story variety called "parables" in English. Probably the phrase "to those on the outside everything is said in parables" (v. 11) meant that the meaning of Jesus' ministry (the secret of the kingdom) could not be perceived by those on the outside; it was like a *mēthal*, a riddle, to them. Hence his speaking in *mathlîn* (parables) was part of the *mēthal* (riddle) of his whole ministry to them. They saw, but they failed to see; they heard — and even understood — the parables, but they failed to hear in a way that led to obedience. They were looking for their idea of power and glory, not for a humble Galilean who cared for all the wrong kinds of people... Jesus was not trying to be obtuse; he fully intended to be understood.¹⁵

"Story parables function as a striking way of *calling forth a response* on the part of the hearer. In a sense, the parable itself *is* the message."¹⁶ Since we receive parables in written form today and they were originally told orally, "they can never function for us in quite the same way they did for the first hearers."¹⁷ We will never experience the impact that the first hearers would have.

Luke 18:1-8 contains the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge:

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 what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with a 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 what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she eventually won't come and attack me! And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry 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 earth?"¹⁸

Just prior to Jesus telling this parable, the Pharisees had been asking about the coming of the kingdom. The major application of the parable of Luke 18:1-6 is to keep our eyes focused on

¹⁵ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 156.

¹⁶ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 157.

¹⁷ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 158.

¹⁸ Luke 18: 1-8 (NASB).

the hope that is yet to come.”¹⁹ “The application of the parable in verses 7-8 keeps our focus on the attitude we should have about his return.”²⁰

The parable emphasizes the importance of prayer. “

Luke introduces the persistent widow with this directive: “And he told them a parable to the effect that it is necessary to pray always and not lose heart. Whatever the parables former uses, it is unmistakably now a parable enjoining persistence in prayer.”²¹ Bock sees Jesus understanding the world that they were facing every day and how to face it. “If they minister in a world that will not accept them, how should they handle the injustice of that rejection? The answer comes in a call to pray persistently without losing heart. It is another way to call for enduring faith.”²²

As Philip Ryken sees it “Jesus knew us well enough to know that we would struggle with persisting in prayer, so he told his disciples a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.”²³

The parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge is a popular parable and “what makes this parable so effective are its two characters, with whom it is easy to identify.”²⁴ “A good story has strong characters, and in this story two clearly drawn characters stand sharply in contrast. One is a man, while the other is a woman. One is in position of power, while the other is almost helpless. One is wrong, and the other is in the right.”²⁵ “[Luke] takes the figure of the judge and his reluctant vindication of the widow to be an a *minori ad maius* contrast to God’s faithful dealings with the elect and the widow’s vigilance as a model of persistence in prayer.”²⁶ The judge is clearly the one in the wrong as he holds a position that requires him to act in a just

¹⁹ Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 459.

²⁰ Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 453.

²¹ Garwood P Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke’s Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition,” (Catholic Biblical Quarterly 70, no. 4 October 2008), 734.

²² Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 453.

²³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke Volume 2: Chapters 13-24*. (Phillipsburg, P and R Publishing Company, 2009), 245.

²⁴ Bock, *The NIV Application Commentary: Luke*, 454.

²⁵ Ryken, *Luke Volume 2: Chapters 13-24*, 246.

²⁶ Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke’s Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition,” 734.

manner, but we hear he cares not for people or that part of his job that requires him to deliver justice no matter who the claimant.

“The judge is probably a Jew and may have been a powerful man, since the Romans allowed the Jews to manage many of their own legal affairs...but because this man is described as one who does not fear God, it is unlikely that he is a religious leader.”²⁷ Ryken compares the judge to King Jehoshaphat as the standard. “Consider what you do,” the king said, “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” (2 Chron. 19:6-7).²⁸ In that day, a bribe may have been required to receive “justice.”

The widow would have been entitled to special protection under the law of God as she would have been one of the most vulnerable.²⁹ We are left to assume that she is too poor to hire counsel as we don’t know much about her. “She need not have been very old since in this culture women married at age thirteen to fourteen and widows were frequently quite young.”³⁰ We can see that she is so persistent that even the judge recognizes this trait, and it is the reason that he finally hears her plea. There is also nothing about why she requires justice so again; it is only her stubbornness that gets the judge’s attention. Clearly, Jesus meant this behavior to get our attention.

“[The judge] is watching out for himself. His concern for himself is seen in his conclusion... “I will vindicate her, or she will wear me out by her continual coming.” The Greek

²⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51 – 24:53*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1996), 1447.

²⁸ Ryken, *Luke Volume 2: Chapters 13-24*, 246.

²⁹ Ryken, *Luke Volume 2: Chapters 13-24*, 246.

³⁰ Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51 – 24:53*, 1448.

word translated “she will wear me out” is *hypopiazo*, a word used for boxing.”³¹ It can mean the threat of a physical blow but more likely in this instance, it means to damage their reputation.³²

But if he already feared no one, how could this be so? It is probably better, therefore, to interpret the widow's actions and the judge's response in the context of a culture of shame and honor — that is, to see implied in the story the scenario that if she causes him to be known as someone who ignores a widow in need, such shame could overbalance any self-bestowed "honor" that he cherishes of being a "tough judge."³³

But the response of the judge gets to the crux of the matter. If even he can be provoked to respond to pleas of the widow, how much more can we count on the gracious response of a loving God. However, there is still the question of the time element as the widow must seek justice again and again before the judge responds. So, in conjunction with the question of God's response, one can also question how quickly he will respond and Jesus, in verse 8, assures us that God will respond quickly.

It is sometimes complained that the frame of the parable, is intolerably dissident with the parable itself, but the parable could not at once focus on the persistence of the widow, on the other hand, while concentrating on the judge, as a character, representing God, by means of antithesis, on the other. This judgment, however, requires assent to the dubious, if durable assumption that the message of parables is simplex. In fact, there is no reason that one must choose between the theme of persistence in prayer and Gods readiness to vindicate. After all, the “frame” in verse six describes Gods elect as “those who cry out to him *day and night*”. If the judge is antithetical to God in Luke's *minori ad maius* interpretation, it is not so with the widow and the elect; her tireless pleading with a judge over some period of time concretizes the persistence that v. 1 commands, and that v. 6 describes with the terminology “day and night.” Although questions of interpretation remain for this parable, in its *Lukan* form, the general direction of his interpretation is hardly ambiguous.³⁴

Brad Young compares the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge with the Parable of the Contemptible Friend and the Corrupt Judge, also found in the Gospel of Luke. “The early

³¹ Brad H. Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1998), 58.

³² Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 59.

³³ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 257.

³⁴ Anderson, “Seeking and Saving What Might Have Been Lost: Luke's Restoration of an Enigmatic Parable Tradition,” 740.

Jewish sources on prayer and tenacity provide rich background for these dramatic stories of village life. As situation comedies from first-century Jewish life, they convey a powerful message of God and his ways with his people... the parables challenge one's concept of God while they teach expectancy in prayer."³⁵ Young notes that "when it came to prayer, the disciples prayed as if God were like an untrustworthy friend or an evil judge, unconcerned about their needs."³⁶

[The two parables demonstrate] the important Jewish principle of the light and the weighty (*kal vechomer*). On the light (*kal*) side, if a person will respond to the persistent demands of a friend or if a corrupt judge will be moved to act on behalf of a widow only because of her constant annoying complaints, how much more will God answer the prayers of his people?... Jesus is teaching about prayer by illustrating the divine character. God is a good friend. He is a righteous judge. As a friend he is trustworthy and as a judge he is fair.³⁷

"These parables describe faith as unrelenting determination, but the illustrations press beyond an idea of persistence. They challenge the people to redefine their concept of the divine nature."³⁸ "Not only is one arrested by the startling references to bold tenacity as a form of true religious piety and devout faith in the parables of Jesus; an examination of Jesus' Jewish heritage reveals a strong current in ancient Judaism that extolled perseverance to the edge of blasphemy in the struggle contained within the relationship between God and humanity."³⁹

One author took issue with the idea that prayer should be the focus of this parable, and it is not hard to understand how a different voice could be heard out of this parable. It evokes a voice that they would have heard in the first century and we should still hear today.

But the chasm between this unjust judge and a gracious God who hears the prayers of the oppressed and acts in loving response to them is an interpretive leap too far. As Barbara Reid notes, Luke's comparison to fervent prayer "sidetracks the reader" from the parable's core message of relentlessly seeking justice, leading many interpreters of the

³⁵ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 41, 42.

³⁶ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 42.

³⁷ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 42.

³⁸ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 64.

³⁹ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 60.

parable to over-look its main point. The unjust judge serves as an example of how all too often — in Jesus’ time and our own — justice is not blind, that what passes for justice is unevenly and unfairly administered. Similar to the ancient law code of Hammurabi that established different laws for different groups of people there often is a separate set of expectations for the wealthy and privileged and a contrasting set of expectations for other groups. In Jesus’ parable, because of first-century patriarchal systems, gender plays a role in the judge’s mistreatment of the widow, despite the fact that Jewish law required judges to give precedence to widows and orphans. The unjust judge’s initial refusal to respond to the widow’s case thus illustrates some of the structural and other injustices people faced in their daily lives throughout the Roman Empire.⁴⁰

This interpretation calls out the inequitable social structure that existed in the first century and reminds us of the inequities that remain today.

The parable of the persistent widow unrelentingly pursuing justice from an unjust judge is best seen as an example of not how our prayers for justice should be continuous — although they should be — but instead as a paradigm for how we should unrelentingly pursue justice for those denied justice in our society, with a reminder that justice should not only be fair and equitable; it should be compassionate and restorative. Recovering the radical message of Jesus’ parable means that we should both recognize the widow as causing “good trouble” and realize that she should not be acting alone.⁴¹

While some might say that this interpretation is a stretch or an attempt to give the parable a more modern flavor, it is clearly in line with the teachings of Christ, and it is very easy to see the heart of Jesus in this interpretation.

Debate continues as to the eschatological meaning of verse 8b when Jesus asks “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” Bock agrees that there is an end-times message in this parable. “The parable of the nagging widow and the consenting judge is linked to the previous eschatological discourse by the reference in Luke 18:8 to the Son of Man’s return. Its plea that believers ask God for justice looks back in the vindication of the saints described in 17:22-37.”⁴² Bock further explains that “the context of Luke 18:8 makes clear

⁴⁰ David B Gowler, “Good Trouble” What we See in Jesus Parable of the Persistent Widow,” National Catholic Reporter (September 2021) <https://www.eds-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=3a2880fe-daa7-4d61-a291-e1981c856538%40redis>.

⁴¹ Gowler, “Good Trouble” What we See in Jesus Parable of the Persistent Widow,” National Catholic Reporter (September 2021) <https://www.eds-p-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.nyack.edu/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=3a2880fe-daa7-4d61-a291-e1981c856538%40redis>.

⁴² Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51 – 24:53*, 1444.

that the ultimate request is for God's justice and the Son of Man's return...The point is that in the midst of persecution and possible delay, the disciple should not stop praying for justice and for the return that will bring justice."⁴³

However, Young takes issue with the conclusion that this parable has anything to do with eschatology.

While it is true that either the picture of going before a judge or the conclusion of the parable in the Gospel...may suggest that the end-time judgement, one must listen carefully to the storyteller to catch the main point. The widow is not being judged in the courtroom. She goes to receive justice in her case against her adversary. For the end-time theme one would expect a judge to pass judgement on her. The reference to faith...in this saying and the mention of the "persistence" of the widow in the parallel illustration, as well as the progression of the action in the plots of the two stories, suggest another message that is closer to the cultural heritage of Jesus in the first century."⁴⁴

What did Jesus want us to hear when he told the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge? When we read a parable, we expect a message or a moral. In this parable, you can find more than one message. It would be hard to argue that Jesus was not teaching his disciples and anyone else within earshot that they need to pray and pray often – a message that comes from the character of the persistent widow. She didn't give up and neither should we. But then there is the judge. We are told he doesn't care and yet the persistence of the widow drives him to give her justice. Once again, it is hard not to see the obvious lesson. If a man who announces to the world, whether by word or deed, that he does not care about them can be driven to "care," how much more will our God who professes to love us care about us and answer our pleas. Yet, there is one more lesson that can be gleaned from this parable. The New Testament provides many examples of Jesus going out of his way to help the poor and downtrodden. His heart was always for the "underdog." The persistent widow fits that bill and the conclusion that the overall message of this parable is a mirror image of the heart of Christ. We are called to help those in need and

⁴³ Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament: Luke 9:51 – 24:53*, 1447.

⁴⁴ Young, *The Parables: Jewish Tradition and Christian Interpretation*, 44.

especially those that would find it difficult to help themselves. Each of these lessons can be found in this parable and each are consistent with the teachings of Jesus.

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