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Riverside Covenant Church
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Luke 18:1-8 – The Pain of Waiting

I hate to wait. Waiting can be excruciating.

That is one of the most ridiculous things about law school. You would think after you get a law degree that you would be ready to practice law, but nope. You have to pay a couple thousand dollars to take a class that prepares you for the bar exam. So you spend the entire summer after law school graduation preparing for the bar exam and then you take the exam over 2 days in July. But the worst part is that you don't get the results of the bar exam until October. So you start working, or in my case, I started seminary, which is not so common. And you just wait. When you sign up for the exam, they give you an identification number and then they tell you that there will be a two week time period in July where the exam results will be posted online. If your number is on the website, you pass. If your number is not on the website then you did not pass. Luckily my number was on the website and I passed, but the wait was awful. I actually checked the website every day for weeks to make sure my number was still up there and I actually printed the screen a few times just to be able to prove that it was on there in case they tried to take my number off or something. The waiting is excruciating and what are we to do when we are waiting.

This is the tricky part of our Christian life. Though we talk about having Jesus Christ as a good thing, which it clearly is, it does not mean that our life is instantly all good. We have to wait for heaven, we have to wait for Jesus to come back, we have to wait for final justice. **We live in a reality** that has a lot of suffering, injustice and generally bad things that happen all around us. Yet, in the same breath we talk about having hope in Jesus Christ, being forgiven of our sins and generally being content and joyful. This parable wrestles with this tension. How do we both talk about hope and an all good God while experiencing awful stuff happen to us and around us?

The story itself is again not that complicated. There are two characters. A widow and a judge. Luke tells us the meaning of the story right off the bat too. He says, **“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.”**

The parable begins with the judge. The text says that he “**neither feared God nor cared about men.**” We know where he stands with regard to his faith immediately. He has none. Jesus has already characterized faith in two commands: love God and love your neighbor. The judge does neither. He acts with no fear of God and no care for humans. His ungodly approach to the widow comes out of his lack of faith.

The widow's character is not described explicitly, but Jesus immediately tells us what the widow is doing. She keeps coming to the judge and pleading with him to give her justice against her adversary. After all, this is what judges are supposed to do. This is their job. People who have been wronged in some way go before a judge and ask for justice against whoever is responsible for wronging them.

The passage does not say how many times exactly the widow came back to the judge to plead with him for justice, but it definitely implies that it was several times. **I have used this strategy with businesses.** I have cell phone service through T-Mobile and have had a few problems over the past several years. I just call back over and over again until I get someone who will make everything right. There is not much you can do to counteract people that never give up. Actually, that is how I got my wife. Some might call it stalking, but I prefer to call it never giving up. “I know you said a couple minutes ago that you didn’t want to break up with your boyfriend and go out with me, but what about now?”

In our parable, each time the widow asked, the judge refused to give her justice. Again we don't know exactly why the judge would not give her justice, but the implication is that he simply did not care about her. He did not care what injustice had happened to her and certainly did not care about a God whose standards he had violated. So the judge kept refusing the widow’s requests for justice each time she presented them.

In order to understand this parable better, we have to understand the place of widows in Jesus' time. Widows were one of the most vulnerable people in Jesus' day. They were vulnerable to all sorts of forms of abuse because of their social position and the Bible is repeatedly clear that they are to be protected.

Exodus 22:22-23 says, ““Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.”

Deuteronomy 27:19 says, “Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.”

Widows are a part of the trio that God always lists as the most vulnerable and in need of his protection: the alien or foreigner, the orphan and the widow. These groups of people had the least amount of social support in the community and were thus sitting ducks for those looking to steal and abuse.

Widows would even have been easily recognized by what they wore. Their clothing would have indicated their social status which was poor. And widows were not just older women, but perhaps just as often younger women. Because women often married in their early teens in Jesus' day, it was common that widows were of a full range of ages. If their husband left them, they were generally left with no means of support. If there was a marital estate, the law did not provide that she would inherit it. She might get some provision for her upkeep, but if she remained a part of her husband's family, she was treated as inferior and almost as a servant. If she chose to return back to her family, she likely received very little of value. Widows were so victimized at the time that they were often sold into slavery to pay off debts owed. **All this to say that widows were often trampled on and cast aside without any societal concern.** This necessitated God's singling out of them as a group of people uniquely in need of care and support.

Now combine the desperate situation of widows, and the widow in Jesus' parable particularly, with the unsympathetic and corrupt judge. Not a good situation.

What we find though, is that despite the judge's refusal to grant the widow justice the first several times she comes, he eventually says 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!”** That is what Dana eventually said too.

Like other parables we have looked at, Jesus is again using this parable to make a “how much more” argument. He is moving from the light to the heavy. If even an unjust judge will vindicate a widow who keeps coming to him, how much more will God answer the cries for vindication from his people?

The parable's point is that we should not grow weary. We cannot give up praying and hoping for better days ahead. We can't give up hoping and expecting the day that we will be in heaven or even the day that Jesus will return again to complete the work he has already done. If we give up our quest for better days then we might be caught unprepared when they come. We can't get tired, but must remain steadfast, faithful and ready.

The parable's concern is that believers, Jesus is talking to his disciples, not give up while they are waiting for their vindication, which in many respects is Jesus' second coming. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say, **“thy kingdom come.”** This is a prayer of hope and expectation to regularly keep our mind on the day when God will more fully reign over all of the earth and completely destroy evil and its influences.

The widow does not give up as she petitions the judge for justice. It is hard to know exactly what the woman wants justice for, but one can easily imagine that someone has taken the widow's property from her and now she desires it back. And the judge eventually grants her justice, not because he is convinced by the truth of her case, but simply because he fears she might annoy him to death with her repeated requests. He fears there would be no end to the coming to him. Her hope and expectation cannot be diminished.

Again the parable is simply drawing a contrast between the judge and God. If even a horrific and mean judge eventually gives to the widow, how much more quickly will a gracious and merciful God give to those who love and desire to serve him? **Jesus wants to increase our confidence in God's eventual victory for us over all our pain and suffering.** Hebrews 10:23 says, **“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.”** The parable makes this explicit in verse 7, **“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?”** We can be confident God will come through in the end.

Without patience before God it seems that we could be excluded from the vindication when it comes. We must be patient and trust that it will come so that we will be found faithful when it arrives. The passage says that those who are patient and expectant **“will see that they get justice, and quickly.”** “Quickly” does not mean here that it will come soon, but that when it does come, whenever that may be,

that it will come quickly. One minute it will not be here and the next it will be here. Thus we must be ready and not in a position where we have given up.

In the chapter immediately before the one we are looking at in Luke, Jesus is explaining what the second coming of Jesus will be like. He says, "Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. "It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all."

Jesus is saying something in our parable about the second coming and about vindication for justice. One day it will not be here, but then one day it will be here. We don't know when, but if we start to doubt whether it will happen at all, we will likely find ourselves unprepared when it actually does happen. People are to endure with patience.

And this is the toughest part. I have felt like I have been in this role as a parent a lot with two young kids. Whether it is waiting for Grandpa and Grandma to show up or for it to stop raining so that we can go outside or just waiting for our food at a restaurant, Dana and I find ourselves in the role of encouraging them to be patient. We can say with certainty that Grandma and Grandpa will get here, and that it will eventually stop raining and we will eventually get our food, but we don't know exactly when. And the kids flip out sometimes. They cry and carry on.

While the consequences of their impatience are never too great, except spilled milk and stares from people around, we can imagine situations with more consequences for impatience. In Chicago, I can remember waiting and waiting for a train. After a while after it did not come, I ran down to get something to eat and it came while I was gone. **Or Dana would tell you that her method of cooking** is without patience. If the recipe says 1 hour at 300 degrees in the oven, then she tries to go with 35 minutes at 450 degrees. Her impatience generally results in food that is cooked, but cooked into blocks of charcoal.

To the extent that we become impatient, we generally take our eyes off the goal and wander off. We become distracted. Jesus' message is that deliverance will not come immediately, and readiness and faithfulness are required. In our faith, such readiness is enabled and accompanied by prayer.

The parable addresses the implied questions, “will God respond to pleas for deliverance, to which the answer is “certainly.” But a bigger question remains for us to answer in the mean time, will we remain faithful?

In our lives we face the reality of God's delay all the time. Perhaps we are wronged or we experience the pain and suffering of lost loved ones or we lose our job or a whole host of other negative things. There are no immediate solutions to these problems generally. And we pray and we hope at first that they will be fixed. But what we generally find is that they are not resolved as quickly as we would hope. Thus, we get frustrated or we despair, **but Jesus' point is that we won't allow this to happen if we keep our eyes firmly established on the prize,** namely that vindication or justice will come, we just don't know exactly when.

Our parable offers no answer as to why God moves slowly in brining final vindication and justice, but it urges prayerful and faithful living in the confidence that God will act. The parable is not about badgering God until we get what we desire. There are two primary emphasis: that the character of God, who is not like the uncaring, unrighteous, judge, is merciful, patient and eager to assist his people and the necessity of staying alert and ready for God's vindication and judgment.

The evidence of faithfulness and a primary path to alertness and faithfulness is prayer - constant involvement with God as we interpret and deal with the world in which we live.

There is clearly a tension that exists in our faith lives. Our hope and confidence come from knowing that in Christ the kingdom of God has entered into this world. Our frustration and disappointment come from recognizing that the kingdom has not yet come in its fullness.

The disciples shared this struggle. When Jesus arrived, he came sharing the Good News of forgiveness for sinners, healing for the broken, liberty for the captives, good news for the poor, justice for the oppressed. And Jesus taught the disciples the Lord's Prayer, which prayed for the coming of the kingdom. And we have to imagine that as they went into Jerusalem they believed that the kingdom would appear immediately. But it didn't and Jesus died on a cross.

Jesus knows that in the gap – the gap we live in between the Good News and its final culmination – it is easy for us to lose heart, to grow cynical, to lose confidence in God’s good will. It will be easy to give up and walk away, but Jesus’ continued admonition to us is do not quit, keep praying, keep hoping, do not cut yourself off from the power of God, be ready!

However painfully slow the progress may seem, we are getting closer. Be confident. Don’t expect immediate results. God will ultimately prevail and defeat evil.

When Christ comes, bringing final victory over evil, will he find his people faithful in the end, still believing and praying that it would happen?

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