

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 18:1-8

Year C - Proper 24, Text: Luke 18:1-8

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Luke 18:1–14 contains two parables: (1) The Judge and the Widow (18:1–8) and (2) The Pharisee and the Publican (18:9–14), which will be dealt with in the pericope that follows. Jesus’ audience consists of the disciples (Luke 17:22; 18:1). The opening verse to each parable explains its emphasis:

- “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart” (18:1).
- “Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt” (18:9).

The Parable of the Judge and the Widow

Jesus tells the disciples the parable of the Judge and the Widow to encourage them to persist in prayer. They are to remember at all times that the God to whom they pray is the Maker and Owner of all, the One who began and directs history, and is still involved in it. They are to trust God and to seek Him when their confidence is wavering and when He seems far away.

Verse 18:2: The first verse of the actual parable introduces the judge, the next verse the widow, the next verse the judge, and the next verse the widow. The judge referred to in the parable neither feared God nor had respect for people. The only way to influence him was to resort to bribery!

Verse 18:3: In the city where the judge functioned was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent!” Throughout the Old Testament, widows are viewed as symbols of those who are innocent, powerless, and oppressed (Exodus 22:22–23; Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17; 27:19; Job 22:9; 24:3, 21; Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 10:2). Isaiah 1:17 calls on the rulers and people to “plead for the widow,” and in v. 23 the prophet writes:

*Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow’s cause does not come before them.*

On the basis of this passage, the Jewish legal tradition required that the suit of an orphan must always be heard first, then a widow next. However, a widow was always vulnerable, and there were always many ready to prey on her.

Obviously, this woman’s legal rights were being violated; her cry was for justice and protection, not vengeance. But she was unable to pay for the legal services that she needed. Apparently, the judge did not want to serve her — possibly because she was not in any position to pay a bribe. Perhaps the judge preferred to favor her adversary — who perhaps had already paid him a bribe.

Verse 18:4: Initially, the judge states that he feels no sense of obligation to God or responsibility to his fellow human beings. Apparently, he had no shame in being known for this reputation.

Verse 18:5: Eventually, the judge finds the woman overly bothersome. Although he uses a Middle Eastern term for giving someone a blow under the eye in a fight (i.e., “wear me out”), there is no suggestion of the judge having any real fear that the woman might get physically violent. She can shout all kinds of verbal insults, but if she gets physically violent, she will be forcibly removed from his presence and not allowed to return.

The judge’s real fear is that the woman will never give up and deliver so many verbal blows to his head that he will finish up with a gigantic headache! So, the widow gets a hearing, gets a decision in her favor, and goes on her way rejoicing.

Verses 18:6–8: The point of the parable is as follows: If this woman gets her needs met, how much more will not the pious get their needs met — the pious who pray, not to a harsh judge, but to a loving Father. They can rest assured that their petitions are heard and granted. God will hear and act in their best interests. The parable is an appeal to persistence in prayer.

The same concern expressed in this parable is seen in other writings of the time. One might argue that Sirach 35:17–22 (an Apocryphal writing) is a prototype of Luke 18:1–8. It reads:

*He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.*

*Do not the tears of a widow run down her cheek
as she cries out against the one who causes them
to fall?*

*The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord
will be accepted, and his prayers will reach to the
clouds.*

*The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds
and it will not rest until it reaches its goal;*

*It will not desist until the Most High responds,
and does justice for the righteous, and executes
judgment.*

*Indeed, the Lord will not delay and like a warrior
will not be patient until he crushes the loins of the
unmerciful.*

This is a description of the faithful and merciful character of God.

I may be significant to note that Jesus tells the parable under review while approaching Jerusalem (Luke 19:28). The passion is rapidly approaching. Jesus' opponents are preparing to deliver their final act of opposition to Him. They will soon send Him to a cross. Will God vindicate Jesus? Yes, God will vindicate His Son who also prays to Him day and night, but that vindication will be seen in resurrection and will come by way of a cross.

The parable assured the disciples that God would vindicate Jesus and the disciples — and do so quickly. It assures us that, although we can expect to encounter opposition in this world, we need not fear. God has put His anger far away and He hears us. We must trust God at every step along the way and pray constantly and zealously. We can pray with confidence, for in our prayer life we do not appeal to a disgruntled judge, but to a gracious forgiving Father who will vindicate His elect and do so quickly.

Some Additional Cultural Background

Still today in the Middle East, women do not ordinarily go to court. Court, with its shouting and pushing and shoving, is a man's world. The Jewish tractate Shebuoth states that it is not usual for a woman to go to court, for a woman is modest and stays within her home as much as possible. In light of this, it would follow that the widow in the parable lives alone and has no men in her extended family to speak for her. She is a widow in a man's world and has neither money nor powerful friends.

Several Old Testament passages are required reading when probing the meaning of this parable, namely 2 Chronicles 19:4–6 and Amos 2:6, 7; 5:10–13. Ederheim makes reference to judges who were quite corrupt and called “robber-judges” rather than “judges of prohibitions” — a description that involves a play on words in Hebrew. The Talmud speaks of judges who were willing to pervert justice for a dish of meat (B.T. Baba Kamma 114a).

While English versions generally translate to suggest that the judge did not regard or respect people, the real point is that he is not *ashamed* before people. The culture of the Middle East is, to a remarkable degree, a shame/pride culture where the focus is not so much on avoiding what is wrong, but on avoiding what is shameful. Still today, it is quite terrible to be able to say of someone, “He does not feel shame!” The person referred to lacks an inner sense of what constitutes a good act or a shameful act; he cannot be shamed.

Jeremiah makes vivid reference to wise men who lack shame (8:9) and have lost the ability to blush (8:12). In His parable about a landlord seeking rent, Jesus makes reference to rebellious tenants who treat the landlord's messengers “shamefully” (Mark 12; Luke 20:13).