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# Persistent Prayer for the Lord's Return (Luke 18:1–8)

# 1

**Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”(18:1–8)**

The Bible teaches both by precept and example that prayer encompasses many different matters. For example, the Old Testament

records numerous prayers for people and their needs. Abraham prayed that God would make Ishmael his heir (Gen. 17:18), for God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-32), and for Him to heal Abimelech and his household (Gen. 20:7, 17). David prayed for the recovery of his infant son (2 Sam. 12:16), and for Solomon as he assumed the throne (1 Chron. 29:19). Elijah prayed that the Lord would raise a widow's son from the dead (1 Kings 17:20-21), and Elisha did the same for the Shunamite woman's son (2 Kings 4:33). Job prayed for God to forgive his friends (Job 42:8-10). Moses prayed that God would spare Aaron (Deut. 9:20), heal Miriam (Num. 12:13), and lift the plagues from the Egyptians (Ex. 8:12-13, 30-31; 9:33; 10:18-19).

The Old Testament also records prayer offered for the nation of Israel as a whole, by David (2 Sam. 24:17; Ps. 25:22), Daniel (Dan. 9:3-19), Ezekiel (Ezek. 9:8), Ezra (Ezra 9:5-15), Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:14-19), Joshua (Josh. 7:6-9), Moses (Ex. 32:11-13, 31-32; 34:9; Num. 11:1-2; 14:13-19; 21:7; Deut. 9:26-29), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:4-11), Samuel (1 Sam. 7:5-9; 12:23), Solomon (1 Kings 8:22-54), and the people of Israel (Ex. 2:23; 14:10; Judg. 3:9; 1 Sam. 12:10; Neh. 9:27).

People in the Old Testament also brought their personal requests to God. Abraham prayed for God to give him a son as his heir (Gen. 15:2-3); his servant prayed that God would make his mission to find a wife for Isaac a success (Gen. 24:12); Jacob prayed that God would deliver him from Esau (Gen. 32:9-12); Moses prayed that he would find favor in God's sight (Ex. 33:12-13) and that God would reveal His glory to him (v. 18); Hannah prayed for a son (1 Sam. 1:10-11, 27); David prayed for help and deliverance from affliction (Pss. 18:6; 22:19; 69:1, 13, 29), as did the sons of Korah (Ps. 88:1-2); Hezekiah prayed that God would spare his life (2 Kings 20:2-3); and Jonah prayed that God would deliver him from drowning (Jonah 2:2-10). David (Pss. 25:18; 32:5; 51), Daniel (Dan. 9:20), and Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:11-13) prayed for God to forgive their sins.

The New Testament also records prayers for the needs of individuals. Jesus prayed for His disciples (John 17), for Peter's faith (Luke 22:32), for God to forgive those who crucified Him for what they had done (Luke 23:34), and for children who were brought to Him (Matt. 19:13); Paul prayed for Philemon (Philem. 4-6), Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3), Publius's father (Acts 28:8), and the salvation of Israel (Rom. 10:1); Philemon

prayed for Paul's release from imprisonment (Philem. 22); the early church prayed for Peter's release from prison (Acts 12:5); Peter prayed that God would raise Dorcas from the dead (Acts 9:40); John prayed for Gaius's health (3 John 1-2); the various churches that Paul ministered to prayed for him (Acts 13:3; Rom. 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:19; Col. 4:3; 1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1), and he prayed for them (Rom. 1:9-10; 2 Cor. 13:7, 9; Eph. 1:16-21; 3:14-21; Phil. 1:3-4, 9; Col. 1:3, 9; 1 Thess. 1:2; 3:10; 2 Thess. 1:11-12). Epaphras prayed for the Colossian church; Peter and John prayed that the Samaritans would be filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-15).

In addition, Scripture commands prayer for civil rulers (1 Tim. 2:2), all believers (Eph. 6:18), and lost sinners in general (1 Tim. 2:1)—even those who persecute believers (Matt. 5:44).

But an often overlooked element of prayer is prayer for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, which the apostle John pled for in Revelation 22:20 and a prayer all believers should pray (v. 17). It is such prayer that is the theme of our Lord's parable, which may be examined under four headings: the illustration, the intention, the interpretation, and the inquisition.

### THE ILLUSTRATION

**“In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’”** (18:2-5)

The setting for the Lord's illustration is a **certain** fictitious **city**. Though the story is invented, the situation Jesus described was an all too familiar one to those listening, who had much experience with needy widows (Luke took a particular interest in widows [Luke 2:37; 4:25-26; 7:12; 20:47; 21:2-4; Acts 6:1; 9:39, 41]) and with unjust judges.

The Lord characterized this **judge** as one **who did not fear**

**God and did not respect man.** That description was used in ancient literature to describe the most wicked and rebellious people, who had no regard for what God commanded or people expected. This man was ultimately and consummately immoral. He was not moved by reverence or worship, or by compassion or sympathy. He had no interest in the first commandment, to love God, or the second commandment, to love his neighbor. Not only was he wicked, but he was also comfortable with his corruption, as his boast in verse 4, **“I do not fear God nor respect man,”** reveals. His confession is consistent with his reputation. Here was the most immoral kind of man in the most important position of moral responsibility; a judge whose disregard for God and man had far-reaching implications for all who came before his bench.

The court over which he presided was not a religious court, but a civil one. He did not rule on the significant matters of the Old Testament law and the religious traditions, but on the application of the law to the affairs of everyday life (cf. Matt. 5:25; Luke 12:14). Nonetheless, he had a very serious duty before God to uphold the law with justice and demonstrate sympathy and compassion with wisdom. After appointing judges in the cities of Judah, King Jehoshaphat charged them,

“Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the Lord who is with you when you render judgment. Now then let the fear of the Lord be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the Lord our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe.” (2 Chron. 19:6-7)

But despite their sobering responsibility before God, judges were often corrupt. Through the prophet Amos, God indicted Israel’s judges:

They hate him who reproves in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks with integrity. Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them, though you have built houses of well-hewn stone, yet you will not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine. For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great, you who distress the righteous and accept bribes and turn aside the poor in the gate. Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and thus may the Lord God of hosts be with you, just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, and establish

justice in the gate! Perhaps the Lord God of hosts may be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:10-15)

Alfred Edersheim wrote concerning Israel's corrupt judges, "Jewish wit designated them, by a play on words, as *Dayyaney Gezeloth*—Robber Judges, instead of their real title of *Dayyaney Gezeroth* (Judges of Prohibitions, or else of Punishments). . . . The Talmud . . . accuses them of ignorance, arbitrariness, and covetousness, so that for a dish of meat they would pervert justice" (*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 2:287).

*Entrepō* (**respect**) means "to be put to shame." Middle Eastern culture then as now was a shame and honor based culture. People sought to do what would bring them public honor, and avoid at all costs doing anything that would bring them public shame. Good social behavior was encouraged by appealing to a person's shame, much as the contemporary expression, "Shame on you!" does. Thus, the point of the expression **did not respect man** is that this judge was not ashamed before people. He had no shame; he could not be put to shame. Because he had no reverence for God and could never do anything that would cause him to feel shame in his behavior toward people, he was impervious to any appeal to justice or righteousness. No one could move him to do what was right.

Into his court came a **widow** from **that city**. She had been seriously defrauded by someone and as a result she was destitute. Because of that **she kept coming to him, saying, "Give me legal protection from my opponent."** Her persistence indicates that her financial situation was desperate and she needed what was rightfully hers. Further, her destitution extended beyond financial matters. She was not only bereft of material resources, but evidently there was no man in her life to look after her in the absence of her husband. Courts were the province of men, and women came there only when there was no man available to plead their case. This widow represents those who are alone, destitute, powerless, helpless, unloved, uncared for, and desperate.

The Old Testament taught that widows were to be treated with justice and mercy. Exodus 22:22 prohibited afflicting a widow (cf. Isa. 1:23; Jer. 7:6; 22:3), while Deuteronomy 24:17 commanded that they be

treated fairly. In Isaiah 1:17 God instructed His people to “plead for [lit., “contend for,” or “fight for”] the widow,” while Deuteronomy 10:18 says that God “executes justice for . . . the widow” (cf. Pss. 68:5; 146:9; Prov. 15:25) and Deuteronomy 27:19 warns, “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.” Eliphaz, one of Job’s would-be counselors, insulted Job by falsely accusing him of having “sent widows away empty” (Job 22:9), while Job denounced the wicked as those who “take the widow’s ox for a pledge” (Job 24:3; cf. 24:21). Based on the teaching of the Old Testament, the fictitious judge was obligated to do something to help this widow, if not on a legal basis (though she apparently had the law on her side, since she requested **legal protection from her opponent**), then purely on the basis of mercy. He, however, was utterly indifferent, unsympathetic, and without compassion toward her.

Her desperate need made the widow relentless and determined in her pursuit of the justice due her, so **she kept coming to** the judge, probably on an almost daily basis, demanding that he **give her legal protection from her opponent**. She insisted that he recognize the validity of her complaint and render a just verdict in her favor. Initially, **he was unwilling** to help her, but eventually her persistence wore down his resistance. Exasperated by her constant requests **he said to himself, “Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.”** He affirmed, as noted above, his utter disdain for both God and men, thus disclaiming any noble motive for what he was about to do. He decided to give **this widow** the **legal protection** that she requested solely because she bothered him. Her **continually coming** to him was more than he could handle and threatened to **wear him out**. *Hupopiazō* (**wear out**) literally means “to strike in the face,” “to treat roughly,” or “to beat black and blue.” Paul used it in 1 Corinthians 9:27 to speak of the severe self-discipline he imposed on himself. The widow was figuratively beating up the judge. Though women were powerless in that male-dominated culture, they were respected and honored. Because of that, they could get away with behavior that would not be tolerated in a man. The trouble and annoyance she caused him was relentless, and it was not going to stop until he acquiesced. In the end, the powerful and seemingly impervious judge



was worn down by the persistence of the weak, helpless widow. He decided to give her the **legal protection** (from the verb *ekdikeō*; “to vindicate,” or “execute justice”) that she asked for.

#### THE INTENTION

**Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, (18:1)**

Before He related this **parable**, Luke gave its point. The Lord **was telling** His followers (17:22) **that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart**. This fictional story continues His discourse on the second coming that began in 17:22. Jesus' point is that believers are to continually **pray and not to lose heart** as they wait for His return.

The Lord knew that there would be a long (by human reckoning, not God's; cf. 2 Peter 3:8) interval between His first and second comings, so far lasting for two millennia. During that time Christ has been continually dishonored and denied His rightful place. The Word of God has been unappreciated, assaulted, and denied. Christians have faced rejection, hostility, persecution, and martyrdom at the hands of Satan and the evil world system. It is only natural that they should long for the Lord Jesus Christ to return and judge the ungodly, destroy sin, end the reign of Satan, and set up His earthly kingdom. But until the second coming, Christians must not **lose heart** (give up, become weary, or lose courage) and stop praying (cf. 21:36). This verse is not a call to unceasing prayer in general (cf. Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:17). As noted above, the context (see also v. 8) indicates that the prayer in view is specifically for Christ's return (cf. 11:2; Matt. 6:10; Rev. 6:9–10). In fact, such prayer is part of the means of bringing about the second coming, since prayer is a means God uses to accomplish His work.

The doctrine of the second coming brings comfort, promotes holy living, and spurs evangelism. It has implications on how believers view everything they own, how they live their lives, and how they pray. Prevailing, persistent prayer for the Lord's return drives the heart to leave the things of this passing world and to love Christ's appearing (2 Tim. 4:8; cf.

Titus 2:13). That should be a defining characteristic of every Christian's life.

#### THE INTERPRETATION

**the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. (18:6–8a)**

The phrase **the Lord said** introduces Christ's explanation of this story in the context of His return. He began by contrasting the **unrighteous** (dishonest, corrupt, unjust) fictional **judge** with the true God, who is holy, just, and righteous. The judge was cruelly indifferent to the widow's plight. Yet in the end, worn down by her persistent determination to force the justice due her, he finally gave in and did the right thing, albeit for purely selfish motives.

In an argument contrasting the lesser with the greater, Jesus asked, **“Will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them?”** The elect, like the widow, are helpless, and at the mercy of God as their judge. But the corrupt, wicked judge was not at all like God. Yet even though he was indifferent to the demands of justice and mercy he finally, reluctantly, and for his own selfish interest, did what was right for a person for whom he had no feelings. How much more will God, who loves His own perfectly, do what is right for them, whom He chose from “before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), when they **cry to Him day and night** because they “long to see one of the days of the Son of Man” (17:22; cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; Rev. 6:10)? He is the one, in contrast to the unrighteous judge, “who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:23); who has said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Rom. 12:19); and whose “judgments are true and righteous” (Rev. 19:2). Unlike the uncaring, merciless judge, God is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” toward His people (Ps. 103:8).

The phrase **delay long over them** might better be translated “be patient over them.” The long interval between the first and second

comings of Christ is a period in which God is exercising patience on behalf of His own. **Delay long** translates a form of the verb *makrothumeō* from *makros*, which in terms of time means “far distant,” or “remote,” and *thumos*, which refers to anger or wrath. *Makrothumeō* here indicates that God has delayed for a long time His eschatological wrath in order to extend His mercy in gathering the elect. “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness,” wrote Peter, “but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9; cf. Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Peter 3:20). God is bringing salvation to His elect; His patience is for their redemption (2 Peter 3:15). Once all the elect have been gathered, He will both satisfy His justice and glorify them. When God does vindicate His elect He will do so suddenly and quickly, as the Lord’s rhetorical question, **Will He delay long over them?** indicates.

#### THE INQUISITION

**However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?** (18:8b)

Jesus concluded this section by asking this pensive question. When He returns, will He find anyone faithfully praying in eagerness for the second coming? Any who have loved His appearing? Who cry out, “Maranatha” (“come Lord”) (1 Cor. 16:22)?

Some think that eschatology, the doctrine of the last things, is mere sensationalistic speculation with little practical value. But as the Lord’s teaching in this passage indicates, nothing could be further from the truth. Paul’s dealings with the infant church at Thessalonica further emphasizes the importance and practical value of teaching on the end times. The apostle’s two epistles to them reveal that in the brief time he spent with them (cf. Acts 17:1–2), he taught them an amazingly comprehensive eschatology (2 Thess. 2:5).

In the salutation to his first epistle Paul praised the Thessalonians for their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), which is “to wait for His Son from heaven” (v. 10). In 2:12 he exhorted them to “walk in

a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory,” while in verse 19 he referred to “the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming.” Paul prayed that God would “establish [their] hearts without blame in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints” (3:13). In chapter 4 Paul gave them a detailed description of the rapture (vv. 13–18), while in chapter 5 the apostle reminded them of what he had taught them regarding the Day of the Lord and the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ (vv. 1–11, 23).

In his second epistle to that Thessalonian congregation, Paul continued his detailed instruction regarding eschatology. In chapter 1 he described God’s judgment and the coming of the kingdom (vv. 5–10), and the eternal punishment of the wicked (v. 9). In the second chapter he gave them detailed teaching on the rise of Antichrist, the return of Christ, and the coming of the Day of the Lord.

The extensive eschatological teaching Paul gave this young church reveals that such doctrine is critical, foundational, and highly useful to living a godly life (2 Peter 3:11, 14; 1 John 3:1–3). Knowing the end of the story encourages Christians to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that [their] toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

True Christians live in hope, waiting expectantly for the promise of Christ’s return to be fulfilled. To that end they pray for His glory and honor to be revealed. Such prayer is life changing.