

Waiting & Working for Justice:

A Parable of Patient & Prayerful Persistence

An Exegesis of Luke 18:1-8, and Assessment of
Donald Penny's article, 'Persistence in Prayer'

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Introduction and Context

The Parable of the Unjust Steward presents a widow who, due to her continual badgering for justice against her oppressor, convinces a godless, indifferent judge to act on her behalf. It is spoken to encourage heartfelt prayer, and faith which continues until the coming of the Son of Man.

It is part of a body of unique Lucan content in general, and one of several unique Lucan parables in particular. The material specific to Luke is concentrated at the bookends – the prologue and birth narratives of Jesus and John the Baptist (1:1-2:52) and the post-resurrection events (24:1-53) – and variously throughout the gospel; toward the middle of the Galilean Ministry section (4:14-9:50) and interspersed throughout the Jerusalem journey narrative (9:51-19:44) and the passion narrative (19:45-23:56) – thus leaving the Baptism, Wilderness-Temptation narrative and much of the Galilean Ministry section lacking any significant unique Lucan material. Our parable comes toward the end of the Jerusalem journey narrative, which some have seen to include a massive chiasmic structure.¹

The parable is presented in a context preoccupied with the coming of the Son of Man (17:22, 24, 26, 30; 18:8) and the relationship of the elect to that coming; raising the dual issues of judgment and vindication. Wright notes:

Israel will experience a time which will be like the days of Noah, or of Sodom (17.22-37). The elect will be vindicated, but there will be few who will be faithful on the day of the son of man (18.1-8). Those who trust in their riches will never enter the kingdom (18.18-30).²

¹ See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 399 n.20; noting the tension between various under-persuasive attempts (due to the sheer difficulty of his readers to keep such a large structure in mind), and the reality that “at the very least the order in which Luke has located these scenes remains important to his audience”. It is significant to this exegete that the passage ‘across the (proposed) mass chiasm’ from ours (11:1-13) has several strikingly similar features – a concern about prayer, and for a ‘coming’ kingdom; an emphasis on persistence (there in the form of ‘ask, seek and knock’), and the similar ‘how much more’ style of argumentation!

² N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 332.

The immediate concern from both the disciples and the Pharisees has been with *when* the days of the Son of Man will occur, and Jesus effectively changes the subject to what matters more – who will respond with the appropriate patient and humble faith (e.g. 17:23, 18:1, 8, 14, 17, 24; cf. Acts 1:6-8)?³

Major Issues of Interpretation

The first of significant interpretive issues regards the nature of Parables. Peisker makes a distinction between a ‘parabolic story’ (which our parable is classed as) and other forms of *parabole* (e.g. ‘figurative sayings’, ‘metaphor’ and ‘allegory’), noting that the content in a parabolic story “is recounted as if it had once happened.”⁴ Sellev also draws attention to a narrative device in several Lucan parables, where a character’s thoughts are disclosed via an ‘Interior Monologue’ (e.g. Foolish Farmer [12:16-20] “What shall *I* do...”; Prodigal Son [15:11-32] “How many servants of *my* father...”; and our parable “Even if *I* do not fear God...”).⁵

The relationship between the ‘parable’ and the ‘frame’ is raised by Curkpatrick, who sees “incurable dissonance” between the bare parable (vv. 2-5) and the interpretive frame (vv. 1, 6-8).⁶ For him, the parable, with the widow (interpreted: the elect) as the central character and persistence for justice the central theme, cannot be harmonised with the frame, whose central character is the unjust judge (interpreted: the one whom God is most unlike), and whose theme is prayer.⁷ In spite of this view, it remains perfectly sensible that the parable’s emphasis on the widow’s persistence for justice on one hand, and the frame’s emphasis on heartfelt

³ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 642-3.

⁴ C. Brown & C.H. Peisker, ‘Parable, Allegory, Proverb’ in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology – Vol 2: G-Pre* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1986), 747.

⁵ Philip Sellev, ‘Interior Monologue as a Narrative Device in the Parables of Luke’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 244, 6, 7-8.

⁶ Stephen Curkpatrick, ‘Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121 (2002): 114.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 109-120.

prayer to a God quite unlike the unjust judge on the other hand, both come together nicely (even on the lips of Jesus, given the progression of Luke's narrative) in the imperative for the elect to – in spite of the delayed vindication (context, 17:22 ff.) – persist for justice (parable, vv. 2-5) *in prayer to the far-from-unjust God* (frame, vv. 1, 6-8).⁸

In addition to these notes on genre and textual transmission, several Lucan sub-themes are evident in our parable; all of which can be located underneath the over-riding and double-edged theme of judgment on 'this generation' and vindication of the 'elect'.

The ending words of our parable ('on earth') portray a tension throughout Luke between the opening message of 'peace' on earth (2:14), and the reality of 'fire' (12:49) and 'division' (12:51); and (possible) faithlessness (18:8).

The *a peiore ad melius* (from least to greatest) argumentation which juxtaposes the least-just judge to the most-just God continues the Lucan theme of judgment between justice and injustice (cf. 13:27, 16:8-9, 18:6-8).⁹

The hanging, rhetorical inquiry at the end of our parable is but one of several passages exposing the surprising contrast between the slowness and/or failure of the 'insiders' (disciples/apostles; 8:25; 17:5-6; 18:8; cf. 22:32) and the consistent and exemplary character of the 'outsiders' (outcasts, diseased, Gentiles, Samaritans, widows, etc.; 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42) when it comes to faith. Green also

⁸ Concurring is François Bovon, 'Apocalyptic Traditions in the Lukan Special Material: Reading Luke 18:1-8' *The Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997): 389-390; who concludes that 18:1-8 "is a good example of the development of Jesus' sayings and parables in the life of the early church." See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1978), 670-1; and Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 637.

⁹ Cf. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 670, 676; Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 642; and Bovon, 'Apocalyptic Traditions' *THTR*, 388.

rightly observes that the nature of this persistent faith is an *active* faith that aggressively and persistently *works* to protest injustice.¹⁰

Also coming through in our parable is the Lucan concern about prayer; Anna at fervent prayer (2:37); instruction to pray for those that curse (6:28); Jesus at prayer before the Transfiguration (9:29); Jesus model prayer (11:2, ff.); and Jesus warning to the sleeping and prayer-less disciples (22:40, 46). Not to be missed here as well are those who prayerfully ‘cry out’; the man ‘shouting’, begging Jesus to heal his only-born (*monogenes*) son (9:38); the blind man ‘crying out’ to the son of David to have mercy on him (18:38).

Another key Lucan theme not to be omitted is that of the inclusion of and activity with widows, whose primary support perishes along with their husbands, leaving them subject to socially and economically oppressive structures leaving them often helpless.¹¹ Examples include Jesus’ offensive emphasis on Zarephath the widow (and Gentile!) in Sidon (4:26); the raising to life of the widow’s only-born (*monogenes*) son (7:12); the widow in our parable (18:3, ff.); the damning of scribes who ‘devour’ widows’ houses (20:47); and the certain poor widow, whose last two mites cost more than the wealth-skimming of rich men (21:2-4).

In fact, women in Luke often seem more in touch with Jesus’ ministry than men. Scholer notes that Luke has the strongest emphasis on the inclusion of women in Jesus mission; in stories about healing, faith, prayer, discipleship, and proclaiming the resurrection.¹² A particularly striking resonance is found between the widow in our parable and Anna in Luke 2; both are widows, persistent in their ‘praying’,

¹⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 637-8.

¹¹ Dorothy Jean Weaver, ‘Between Text and Sermon: Luke 18:1-8’ *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 318.

¹² D.M. Scholer, ‘Women’ in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green & Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, Illinois / Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 885-6.

wanting and waiting for ‘redemption’ and/or ‘justice’ – and both undoubtedly seen as having patient ‘faith’ and part of the ‘elect’ waiting to be vindicated.¹³

Conclusion

We have seen with particular clarity how the Parable of the Unjust Steward carries forward various Lucan themes and issues as the Jerusalem journey narrative nears completion. This unique Lucan parable sits sensibly within its context, providing instruction as to the prayerful, patient and persistent posture the disciples are to have as they continue to await their seemingly delayed vindication.

The instruction to Luke’s initial readers carries forward to our modern context, though perhaps differently than often thought. The vindication that Luke’s initial hearers were waiting for is not to be equated with ‘the end of the world’. Wright points out that the events anticipated in this particular context come with the destruction of the Temple in AD70.¹⁴ However, the final promised vindication of God’s people, humanity and the entire creation still carries – and the elect of God are called to the same patient, faithful, prayerful *and active* faith as the widow who badgers the unjust judge to breaking point.

Evaluation of Donald Penny’s article: ‘Persistence in Prayer: Luke 18:1-8’

Penny’s tone throughout is pastoral.¹⁵ The article is free of footnotes or technical apparatus, but the author shows an awareness of textual and interpretive issues and seeks to provide an application that is solid and encouraging.

¹³ One wonders if Jesus and/or Luke may have had Anna in mind whilst speaking and/or editing/including this parable!

¹⁴ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 361-367, esp. 362.

¹⁵ Donald Penny, ‘Persistence in Prayer: Luke 18:1-8’ *Review and Expositor* 104 (2007): 737-44.

After surveying the ‘now but not yet’ shape of the ‘kingdom’ theme in Luke (making observations about the characters along the way), he provides three lessons from the parable: first, *encouragement* to tackle difficult issues with confidence; second, *caution* not to expect immediate results; and third, *assurance* that God’s justice will prevail in the end.

There is much of value here. It is no small measure of the health of a Christian’s perspective for it to include the reality that things aren’t yet as they should be and that life is characterised by *both* ‘hope *and* frustration’ and *both* ‘confidence *and* disappointment’.¹⁶ Penny rightly acknowledges not only the tension between these emotions, but also the conviction which they stem from – that the kingdom *has come* (it is *now*), but *has not yet fully come* (it is *not yet*).¹⁷

His survey of this come-and-coming kingdom theme in Luke is solid, and so is his assessment of both the judge and widow. He correctly recognises the extreme juxtaposition of the weak-yet-passionate widow and the powerful-and-indifferent judge, and the issues involved with the interpretation.¹⁸

The three points of application, too, are solid. Picking up on the Lord’s Prayer earlier in Luke, he reminds us that true prayer is that which moves us to *action* (like the persistent action of the widow), giving us encouragement for all kinds of tough, gritty issues.¹⁹ Emphasising the patience of the widow, he correctly draws out the caution against impatience which her example provides.²⁰ And finally (albeit without bothering to anchor it in anything other than the success of the widow) he closes on the sure hope of restoration and justice, and the assurance that comes from that.²¹

¹⁶ Penny, ‘Persistence in Prayer: Luke 18:1-8’ *R&E*, 737.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 738.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 740-1.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 741-2.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 742-3.

²¹ *Ibid*, 743-4.

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