

God is a righteous judge, so the righteous should persistently pray expecting deliverance from human adversaries; but since no one is righteous before God, do not pray to him in pride expecting exaltation—only the humble repentant sinner will be justified and exalted before him.

Introduction – Sometimes we forget the Gospels are books in which one passage flows into and informs the next. These two familiar parables teach distinctive stand-alone lessons, but their power is enriched when we consider the questions that arise from observing their connections.

I. God Hears Persistent Prayer

A. The parable of the persistent widow (vv. 2-5)

1. A judge who neither fears God nor respects people. The two most important attributes a judge must possess are love of justice (fear of God) and compassion for people (2 Chronicles 19:5-7). This judge didn't have either quality. One who does not fear God would lack the wisdom to judge fairly (Proverbs 9:10).
2. A widow in need of justice against her adversary. Widows in ancient cultures often had three strikes against them. First, they were women, and women did not possess much of any standing before the law. Second, they were husbandless, so they lacked the legal advocate married women enjoyed. Third, they were often poor and thus could not afford to pay a bribe to a judge in order to “grease the wheels” of justice. Her only asset is persistence.
3. But her persistence was enough. She made herself a total nuisance by continually calling upon the unjust judge for justice against her opponent. He resisted her for a time, but she kept coming and coming and coming until she wore him out. The language is vague enough for us to imagine her confronting him even outside the courtroom (on the street, in the market, outside his home).

B. The reason for the parable: to encourage continual prayer (v. 1)

Jesus had just taught his disciples that his return would come suddenly (Luke 17:24). But it might be a long way off. So this delay might discourage them in prayer. We all know people who despair of God and prayer when an answer doesn't come soon. Jesus doesn't want us to give up on prayer as we wait for his return. Justice is coming! Don't give up praying!

C. The lesson of the parable: God is supremely just (vv. 6-8)

If this corrupt, careless human judge finally gives the persistent widow justice out of annoyance, how much more will God, because of his great love, give justice to his chosen ones who pray.

II. God Hears Humble Prayer

A. The reason for the parable: to rebuke the proud (v. 9)

What kind of person would likely respond in self-justification to the first parable? The person who prays much and who has a reputation for praying much. Without the second parable, the self-righteous religious person who is impressed with how much he prays and obeys God in his praying “day and night” might be confirmed in his pride. But Jesus is too clever to let prayerful people off the hook. In this parable he subverts their view of themselves as the real prayer warriors. Disciples who learn that God desires persistent prayer, now learn on what basis to approach God in prayer.

B. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (vv. 10-13)

1. There are two characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both go up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee's prayer is more of a boast. He fasts twice a week, although the law only required fasting once a year. He meticulously tithes of all his income to meet the letter of the law, and then tithes on everything else he acquires which was exempt from the law (Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 14:22).

2. Whereas the Pharisee seems to stand as close to the altar of sacrifice as possible, the tax collector stands far off. The Greek word for mercy is associated with propitiation, thus the tax collector is pleading with God for a mercy that pours God's wrath due for his sin onto a substitute sacrifice. He beats his chest in self-derision and will not even lift his eyes to heaven. As the Greek reads, he even sees himself as "the" sinner, not just "a" sinner (1 Timothy 1:15).

C. The lesson of the parable: God justifies the humble (v. 14)

To "justify" is to declare someone righteous. The Pharisee possesses lots of self-righteousness, and he prays for God to take notice. The wicked, traitorous tax collector who has no righteousness at all cries out for mercy. God responds to both, justifying the tax collector not the Pharisee (Romans 3:21-25a)!

III. How God Answers Prayer

A. The (seemingly) bad news (vv. 7, 14)

1. He delays giving justice to his elect who pray faithfully (v. 7). For a culture that expects instant gratification, the widow teaches us that prayer is not like ordering from a menu.

2. He humbles good people praying for affirmation (v. 14). The Pharisees prayed often and tried harder than anyone to please God by obeying him. We know this because they prayed in public for people to notice. But Jesus condemns prayer that approaches God as a good person.

B. The (truly) good news (vv. 8, 14)

1. He gives speedy justice to his elect who pray faithfully (v. 8). The justice from God may not always seem to come speedily to God's elect, but from God's perspective his response in giving justice is speedy (2 Peter 3:8-10). When Jesus returns, he will be looking for those who are still praying and watching for his coming—not with a sense of idleness or otherworldliness, but living as disciples in the midst of the world.

2. He exalts bad people praying for mercy (v. 14). The tax collector is a wicked beggar who doesn't deserve any kind of praise for what he is or does. But because of his humility, he goes home justified in God's sight. Instead of relying on something good he might have found in himself, he relies on God's mercy. And God was pleased to give it.

3. He gives us a husband advocate and a propitiation for our sins in Jesus Christ. Widows need a husband who will protect them, fight on their behalf, and assure them that their prayers will be heard and answered. The tax collector knows his sins must be *propitiated*—that God's righteous anger against him be averted and diverted onto a substitute sacrificial offering. How can a supremely just God answer this sinner's prayer? Only by diverting the just punishment onto himself as that sacrificial substitute (1 John 4:10-11).

Conclusion – If God left you to yourself without Jesus, your prayers would cease in despair or you'd redouble your efforts and become like the Pharisee, proud before God and despising others who don't live up to your standard. But God did not leave you to yourself. Behold God's love for you in Christ Jesus! In him you have everything you need to pray with persistence and humility so God will hear your prayers.