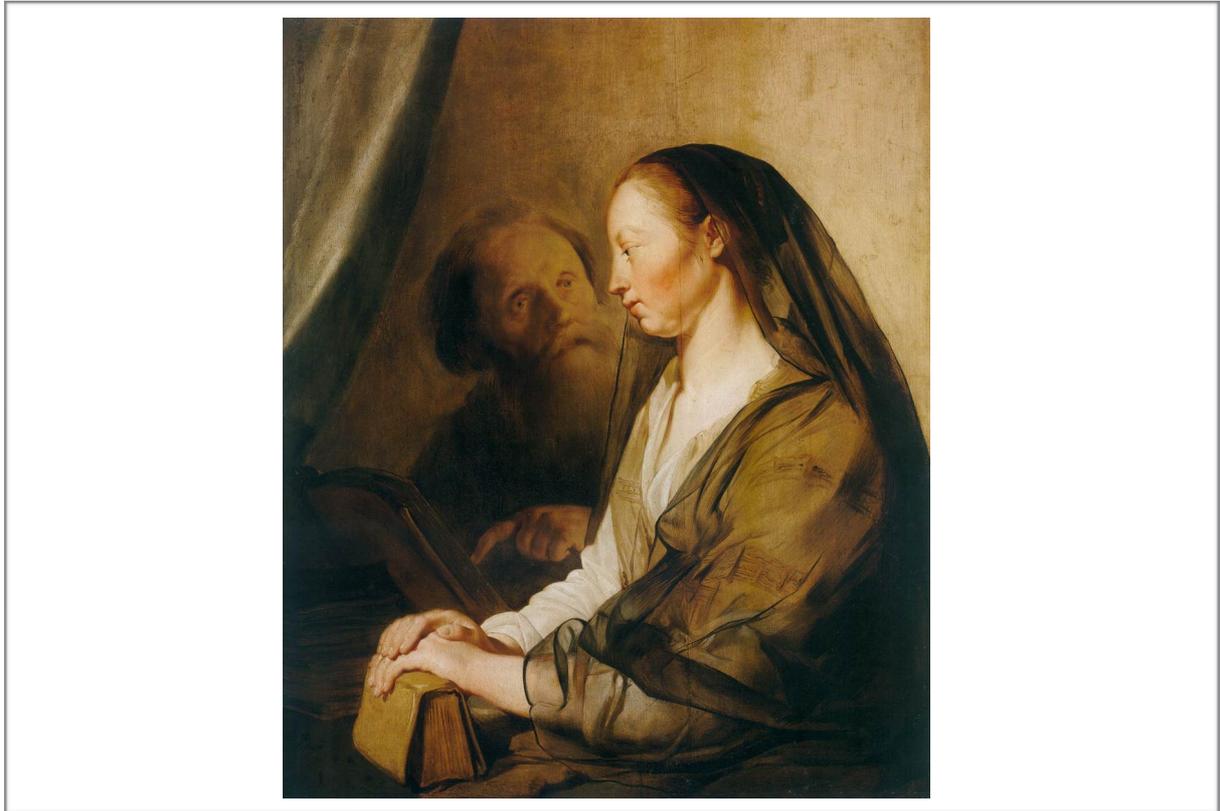


THE BOTHERSOME WIDOW AND THE UNJUST JUDGE

Read Luke 18.1-8



THE PARABLE OF THE PERSISTENT WIDOW

Pieter de Grebber

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Have you ever felt like giving up? Throwing in the towel?
Quitting? Walking away from the problem?

In telling the parable of the persistent widow, sometimes known as the parable of the unjust judge, Jesus acknowledges that quitting the journey is a real possibility. He was, after all, a

man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. His own cry of dereliction expressed on the cross.

When Jesus scandalized some of his followers, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." Jesus then asked his twelve closest followers, "Do you want to leave too?" People quit the faith for many reasons - hypocrisy seen in the lives of faith leaders, unanswered prayers, bitter disappointments, intellectual doubts, the feeling you are no longer needed anymore.

In Luke 18 Jesus encourages us, "always to pray and not give up." He tells a story about a persistent widow who importuned a corrupt judge. She never gave up, despite the many injustices she experienced at the hands of the judge who "neither feared God nor cared about men."

There is no mysterious meaning here. The parable is straight forward. Despite our feelings of fighting a losing battle, of supporting a losing cause, don't give up. Keep praying. Keep marching on to the end, despite the many defeats and retreats along the way. Keep on praying and don't give up. But are we to harass God until we wear God down. Is that what prayer is? Bothering a hard hearted God until finally God caves in? Thankfully the reading provides the answer, Jesus explains that the parable works by way of contrast: Unlike the heartless

judge in the story, God “will quickly grant justice” to those who cry out in heartfelt prayer.

However, I feel sure many of you have prayed persistently and your experience is that God has not answered. Too often God has delayed, despite our most fervent prayers. What is really going on?

Let’s consider this story from two angles. First, what can we learn if we put ourselves in the place of the widow? The parable begins with the encouragement ‘not to lose heart.’ What does this mean? What does it look like to ‘lose heart’ in our spiritual lives? The words that come to mind are weariness, resignation, numbness and despair. When I lose heart, I lose my sense of focus and direction. I lose clarity and begin to doubt God’s intentions. All roads seem to lead nowhere. In contrast the widow in Jesus’ parable is the very picture of purposefulness, precision, aliveness and clarity. She knows her need, she knows it’s urgent and she knows exactly where to go and whom to ask in order to get her need met. If anything, the daily business of getting up, getting dressed, heading over to the judge’s house, banging on his door, and talking his ear off until he listens fortifies her own sense of who she is and what she’s about. “Give me justice! I will not shut up until you do.”

Whenever I persist in prayer, really persist, with a full heart, over a long period of time, then something happens to me. My sense of who I am, what really matters in this life, and why. Then these things mature and solidify. My heart grows stronger. It becomes less fragile and sometimes it even soars and much to my surprise, these good and substantive things happen even when I don't receive the answer I'm praying for. There is something about persistence that matters. The work of prayer is hard. The widow had to make a costly choice each day. Will I keep asking. Dare I risk humiliation one more time? Can I be patient? Am I still capable of trusting in the possibility of justice? Yes, many times our prayers hit the wall of God's silence and prayer remains a great mystery. And yet Jesus asks, "Will I find faith on the earth?" Which is to say, will I find men and women like the bothersome widow? Will I find such ferocity? such tenacity? Such fortitude? The widow's only power in the story is the power of showing up. The power of sheer grit, and this power is not to be taken lightly. Prayer is not to be taken lightly. We can't always know what gets shaken, transformed, upended, or vindicated simply because we show up again and again in prayer.

Let's look at this parable from a second angle: What if I am the judge, and God is the widow? The widow knocking down my door in the hopes that I will soften my heart and attend to the pain, injustice, and sorrow wounding God's very being? Jesus describes the judge as a man who neither fears God nor has

respect for people. Can I honestly say I never fit this description? Am I never indifferent, irritable, closed off, or unsympathetic? Is my heart always open to the pain and brokenness of others. How often do I say to myself, "It's not my problem. Someone else will take care of it?"

Scripture attests to the fact that God not only hears the cries of the helpless; God is in the cries of the helpless. God is the wronged widow crying for justice, pleading with me to listen, to care, and to keep my heart open on her behalf.

The truth is, the judge lives in me and prayer alone will wear down my inner judge. It is through persistent prayer that my heart will soften. In fact, every obstacle I place before God - my fear, my shame, my inattentiveness - will be dismantled. Prayer is the fist that breaks down the doors of my own stubborn and sinful resistance. Prayer is what enables the light of God's compassion to illuminate the darkest and most oppressed corners of human life with hope and compassion.

The Son of Man (Jesus) asks at the end of the parable, will he find faith on the earth? Faith that persists. This is the question that matters. Will he find such faith in us?

This essay owes much to Dan Clendenin and Debie Thomas.

