



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life. **Amen**

‘Starter for Ten’ Discussion Question

Think of a time when you needed to be persistent, in order to obtain what you needed. What happened, and what kept you going?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

God of nourishment and sustenance,
you created the universe in all its wonder and complexity,
and made human beings to be creatures of prayer and praise
as those capable of recognising and returning your love.

You care about our bodily needs and physical nourishment,
calling us to account when your children go hungry or thirsty,
and offering us a foretaste of the great feasting of heaven.

You care about our mental health and emotional wellbeing,
tasking us to care for and nurture one another as Jesus did,
and bringing the peace which passes all understanding.

You care about our spiritual longing and desires of our souls,
drawing us to you as the only One in whom we can truly rest,
and cleansing our hearts from the ravages of sin.

God of nourishment and sustenance,
we bring you our thanks and praises in the power of the Spirit
and in the holy name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Amen

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 121 (Singing the Faith 830)

I lift up my eyes to the hills,
from where is my help to come?
My help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.
He will not suffer your foot to stumble;
he who watches over you will not sleep.
Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel,
shall neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord himself watches over you;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand,
so that the sun shall not strike you by day,
neither the moon by night.
The Lord shall keep you from all evil;
it is he who shall keep your soul.
The Lord keeps watch over your going out and coming in,
from this time forth for evermore.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of justice and goodness,
you bring renewal in tired places,
and set us free to follow you into a hope-filled future.
Let us therefore bring to God those things in need of renewal:

We bring to you those things for which we are sorry:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the times we've failed to love one another:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the burdens we carry and sorrows we bear:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the wounds and fractures in our community:
Restore us and heal us.

We bring to you the injustices and oppression in our world:
Restore us and heal us.

Silence is kept for a few moments...

God of new beginnings, of love stronger than even death,
you set us free from the past, to flourish in the future.
Thank you that you forgive us, restore us,
and breathe new life into us.
Amen

Reading Luke 18:1 – 8

Sermon

It is sometimes tempting to want clarity and certainty, especially with so much in our world in flux, and these longings can shape how we

approach Scripture. In particular, some argue that the stories Jesus told, many of which are documented uniquely within Luke's Gospel, can only have one 'correct' interpretation. However, whilst I can see the appeal of this, I think it fundamentally misses the point. We may imagine wrestling with the parables of Jesus as being a bit like trying to solve a Rubik's Cube, with every 'twist and turn' mirroring the act of looking at a story from different angles, as we gradually work our way towards a solution to the puzzle. Moreover, just as there's more than one way to do this, and the steps we follow will depend on both the strategies we use and the starting configuration of the Cube, so I would argue Jesus' parables are open to a range of interpretations, and can be read on multiple levels. This is true of today's parable – sometimes called the Parable of the Unjust Judge, and other times, the Parable of the Persistent Widow.

Jesus was on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, followed by huge crowds which included other Jewish religious leaders. One of those people, who belonged to the Pharisees, had asked Jesus when the Kingdom of God would come. He responded using apocalyptic and dramatic language to talk about the breaking in of the Kingdom and the unpredictable return of the Son of Man, which was his preferred title for himself (Luke 17:20 – 37). It appears this unsettled the group of disciples walking along with him, and today's parable is described in 18:1 as an encouragement to constant prayer, and to keep heart. Yet, it defies straightforward interpretation. Partly, this is because it is bookended by both this heading, and an early exposition focusing on the return of the Son of Man and a need for faith (18:7 – 8), which points to at least two possible ways to read it. Moreover, by the time Luke's Gospel was written, around 80 to 85 CE, expectations of the *Parousia*, the 'second coming', as something that would follow soon after Jesus's death and resurrection had been dashed, and this was quite probably in the author's mind as they relayed this story, adding another element into the mix of possible interpretations.

So, what are we to do with this tricky parable? Well, for starters, we must keep in mind that widows were among the most vulnerable of people within the deeply patriarchal society of that time. Those who did not have other male relatives around to support them were even more precariously situated, as it was extremely difficult for a woman to make her own way, and many fell into destitution. That is why the special attention that Jesus gave to widows was important, and built upon the injunctions throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to take care of them. This makes the actions of the unjust judge, who refused to come to the aid of a widow without a family to petition alongside her, especially shocking. His title is, therefore, entirely justified, with both the narrator and the judge himself saying that he had no respect for either God or his fellow human beings (18:2, 18:4). Faced with such an attitude, it would have been easy for the widow to give up, but it seems she was persistent and determined (18:3, 18:5). Luke points to examples of widows who were prophetic, active and faithful, such as Anna the Temple Prophet who recognised who Jesus was when his parents brought him to be circumcised (2:37). It appears that the widow in this story was in the same mould.

With all this in mind, and thinking back to the twists and turns of the Rubik's Cube, at least three different interpretations of the story are possible. If we focus upon the introduction Luke gives to the parable in 18:1, which speaks of encouragement to always keep on praying, we are likely to read it as pointing to the contrast between the unjust judge and God as the 'good judge'. As even that unjust judge ended up relenting in the face of the widow's persistence, how much more will God the just judge long to answer our cries for justice? If instead we read the parable as primarily about the doubt Luke's community may have experienced as the Son of Man had not yet returned, it is probably an encouragement to keep persisting even though it looks like God is unjust and darkness will triumph. The emphasis is hence on 18:7 – 8, and a need to hold onto faith. Both of these views make

sense if we treat Jesus' story as centring on the unjust judge, which then decides the name we assign to it.

A third possible reading invites us to shift perspective and attend to the character of the persistent widow. In 18:5, when the judge states that he will relent because she is wearing him out, the Greek literally means 'she gives me a black eye'. This points to the widow being a threat to the judge, both physically and reputationally, as such injury cannot be readily hidden. For David Lose, this means her "insolent, obnoxious, even intolerable behaviour" led to her getting justice. As he says, "sometimes, it takes extreme – even socially unacceptable – behaviour to effect change". Reflecting on this brought to mind the anti-monarchy protests we saw a few weeks ago; are we looking at a modern-day example of socially unacceptable behaviours proving necessary to bring change? Whatever your view on that contentious subject, this reading of the parable presents a stark challenge to the respectability politics which is often prevalent these days and is one of the most difficult barriers to overcome when anger at injustices is 'tone policed' by those not themselves impacted.

So, friends, there are several different ways to interpret this parable, and this is not an exhaustive list. I wonder which makes most sense to you. All three raise questions about prayer, and in particular those prayers which go unanswered despite our persistence. There is not an easy answer to this, suffice to say that prayer isn't like playing a slot machine, where keeping putting in coins and turning the handle might eventually lead to God relenting and giving us what we desire. After all, God is not the unjust judge. For me, it makes sense to hold the three views together, as they each reveal something true, which leads us into a deeper recognition of God at work in the world. God's longing to bless us follows from the first, God's light prevailing in the darkness comes from the second, and our calling to seek justice as a key part of discipleship flows from the third. To return to where we began, if you want certainty, Jesus will disappoint you here. If you're

willing to ride the various twists and turns, however, the rewards are all there to be discovered. May we have the courage to grapple with this parable in its complexity, because in the midst of our fluctuating times, it has the power to bring real hope. Amen

Recommended Resource of the Week

William Barclay's *The Parables of Jesus* explores the stories Jesus told, sets them in context, and offers an interpretation for today.

Prayers of Intercession

Generous and justice-seeking God,
we bring to you the places and people
in need of your love and care.

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with conflict and without peace,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with extreme weather and without safety,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those places with despair and without hope,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with anxiety and without encouragement,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with heavy burdens and without rest,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

For those people with sickness and without good health,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

Generous and justice-seeking God, in a time of silence
we bring to you the people and situations on our hearts,

God of all goodness, **hear our prayer.**

Lord's Prayer

Blessing