

Faith That Won't Quit

Luke 18:1-8

Introduction

Bureaucratic Roadblocks: Have you ever called a customer service line to get help with a problem? You get through the maze of automated prompts: “If you’d like to talk to a representative, say ‘representative.’ I’m sorry, I didn’t understand you. Say ‘representative again.’ It’s always fun to be in your house yelling, “REP-RE-SEN-TA-TIVE” to a robot on the phone (while your dog is looking at you like you’ve lost your mind). Then you’re put on hold. The **music** (if we can call it that) drones on, and every so often a voice breaks in: “You’re call is important to us.” But you don’t *feel* important, especially 45 minutes later when you’re still waiting. What are your options? Hang up? Quit? Or **persevere**.

- There’s a lesson even in these moments about **perseverance**. But there’s also a difference: God is not too busy, disinterested, or slow.
- But we live in an *instant-results* world. We want microwave meals, Amazon Prime same-day delivery, and streaming shows we can watch on our schedule (what a travesty if you have to wait a week for a new episode). When God doesn’t respond as quickly as we’d like, we’re tempted to hang up on him.
- And Jesus knows that temptation. So he tells his disciples a parable with a clear purpose: that they [should] always... pray and [never] lose heart.

Faith and Prayer: A life of faith is fueled¹ by prayerful perseverance.

- (1) A Clear Encouragement (v. 1)
- (2) A Contrasting Illustration (vv. 2-7)
- (3) A Searching Question (v. 8)

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”²

¹ Alt.: “proven” instead of “fueled.”

² ¹ “Ἐλεγεν δὲ παραβολὴν αὐτοῖς πρὸς τὸ δεῖν πάντοτε προσεύχεσθαι αὐτοὺς καὶ μὴ ἐγκακεῖν, ² λέγων, Κριτὴς τις ἦν ἐν τινὶ πόλει τὸν θεὸν μὴ φοβούμενος καὶ ἄνθρωπον μὴ ἐντρέπόμενος. ³ χήρα δὲ ἦν ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐκείνῃ καὶ ἤρχετο πρὸς αὐτὸν λέγουσα, Ἐκδίκησόν με ἀπὸ τοῦ ἀντιδίκου μου. ⁴ καὶ οὐκ ἤθελεν ἐπὶ χρόνον. μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα εἶπεν ἐν ἑαυτῷ, Εἰ καὶ τὸν θεὸν οὐ φοβοῦμαι οὐδὲ ἄνθρωπον ἐντρέπομαι, ⁵ διὰ γε τὸ παρέχειν μοι κόπον τὴν χήραν ταύτην ἐκδικήσω αὐτήν, ἵνα μὴ εἰς τέλος ἐρχομένη ὑπωπιάζη με. ⁶ εἶπεν δὲ ὁ κύριος, Ἀκούσατε τί ὁ κριτὴς τῆς ἀδικίας λέγει· ⁷ ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐ μὴ ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν βωόντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπὶ αὐτοῖς; ⁸ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν αὐτῶν ἐν τάχει. πλὴν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐλθὼν ἄρα εὕρησει τὴν πίστιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς;

1. A Clear Encouragement (v. 1)

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Parables: Parables are one of Jesus' favorite teaching tools. They're not just "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." Parables do double duty: they build up the disciples while at the same time confounding those who reject Jesus.³ For those with ears of faith, a parable can make the kingdom of God clearer; but for those hardened in unbelief, it only sounds like another confusing riddle.

- That's why many parables come with a sense of mystery. Jesus tells a story, his followers are confused, then *later* he explains the meaning (e.g., Parable of the Sower).⁴ Sometimes he simply tells a Parable and asks a probing question forcing the audience to wrestle with the call (e.g., The Good Samaritan, "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor").⁵
- But here in Luke 18, things are a little different (at least from our vantage point).

Cliffs Notes: In this parable, we learn the point from the jump. Luke lets us in on the meaning before relaying the parable.

- He (Jesus) told them (the disciples)⁶ a parable to the effect that they ought (lit: for the **purpose** that it is necessary to)⁷ always to pray and not lose heart (get discouraged, lose your motivation, give up).
- I don't know exactly why this one is different, but I suspect it is because the danger of giving up is so real, the reality of discouragement is so inevitable, and the path to faithfulness requires endurance, not cleverness.
- This one isn't about figuring something out; it's about not giving up.

Don't Give Up: James Valvano ("Jimmy V"), the Long Island native who coached an underdog NC State team to an improbable victory over Houston in the 1983 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship is probably more famous for his courageous battle against cancer. In 1993, during the final weeks of his life, he gave a speech which culminated in the simple but oft-repeated phrase, "Don't give up, don't ever give up." As a child of the '90s during the heyday of ESPN, that moment of humanity and courage is etched into my brain.

- A greater danger than we imagine is to lose heart, to grow weary, and give up.⁸
- We love a flash of inspiration, a spectacular moment, a mountaintop experience, but most of our walk is not a sprint, but a marathon. As I've said many times in various ways, "I don't care how fast you start or how fast you run the Christian race, I care that you make it across the finish line."
 - "There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue."

³ Cf. Matt 13

⁴ Lk 8:4-15

⁵ Lk 10:25-37

⁶ Cf. 17:22

⁷ πρὸς τὸ δεῖν

⁸ 2 Cor 4:1, 16; Gal 6:9; Eph 3:13; 2 Thess 3:13

- In everything from relationships to exercise, vocation to marriage, church to finances, we seem, as a culture, to be deficient in commitment. The spiritual and moral muscle of perseverance has atrophied. As a result, lives are built on shallow foundations, relationships are disposable, and we give up when things get tough.
- “I’m gonna not quit even harder now.”

Perseverance and Prayer: Why is perseverance connected to prayer here? I think this has to do with what prayer is. Calvin says, “Prayer is the chief exercise of faith.”⁹

- Prayer is both the evidence and fuel for our perseverance. Prayerful dependence fuels faithful obedience.
- Perseverance is not the result of determination; it is the result of God’s faithfulness.
- Prayer is the act of latching onto that faithfulness.
- Prayer is the continual turning of our hearts toward God that keeps us from giving up.
- Prayer, at its core, is an exercise in dependence. “I need God.”
 - “Remember what sin is: fundamental independence of God; the thing in me that says, ‘I can do without God, I don’t need him’” (Oswald Chambers). **Faith** fosters dependence; **sin** fosters independence.
 - If we stop praying, our faith withers and our power to press on dries up.

What does it look like not to give up in prayer? Jesus gives us a story, not of a superhero of faith, but of a powerless widow who simply refused to quit.

2. A Contrasting Illustration (vv. 2-7)

² He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” ⁶ And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?”

Scenario: In this scenario, we don’t know *exactly* what’s going on but we have important details. There are three characters: a judge,¹⁰ a widow,¹¹ and an adversary.¹²

- **(1) Judge:** It’s almost cartoonish how **bad** this judge is. Not only is he *described* as not fearing God or respecting man (v. 2), but he also *admits* it (v. 4). He’s not just *unknowingly* wicked; he’s *unashamedly* corrupt.
 - Judges *should* defend the oppressed and vulnerable, such as a widow.¹³ They are meant to reflect God’s character by upholding justice.

⁹ Institutes 3.20.2

¹⁰ Κριτής

¹¹ χήρα

¹² ἀντιδίκου

¹³ Ex 22:22-24, Deut 24:17-18, Ps 68:5

- The reason we long for truth, beauty, and justice is that we have a God who is true, beautiful, and just. God is the source and definition of all that is right and good.
- It doesn't take much to imagine ways in which a judge might be deficient: incompetent, inept, unmotivated, lazy, biased, corrupt, partial, cowardly, apathetic, self-serving, or unprincipled. This judge, however, isn't just flawed (as all human judges are), he is proud of his injustice.
- **(2) Adversary:** The adversary is an opponent in a lawsuit, the plaintiff (a legal adversary). Most likely, the widow is in some kind of civil dispute over property or inheritance. Or perhaps she is being financially exploited by someone in a more powerful position.
- **(3) Widow:** In this patriarchal and patrilineal society, a widow was one of the most vulnerable members of society (hence why the Bible has so much to say about taking care of widows).¹⁴
 - No husband to provide, limited legal standing, and dependent on the protection and generosity of others (e.g., Naomi and Ruth).
 - If she's being denied the provision and protection commanded by God, who is she supposed to turn to? A judge! But here, the judge who is supposed to defend her is corrupt and indifferent.
 - The danger is both *emotionally* frustrating and *physically* dangerous.
 - It's frustrating to know you're right but not get justice. You feel powerless.
 - It's dangerous because she is facing real financial loss that could see her destitute and suffering if someone doesn't step in. We're talking no shelter, no food, and vulnerable to all manner of abuse.

Strategy: She pulls out the one tool she has: persistence. She **pesters** the judge. She becomes a **bother**. She **annoys** him into doing the right thing. *And it works*. Not because the judge cares, but because he wants to get her off his back: ⁵ "Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming."¹⁵

- E.g., Foster Care, DHS, SS #, Elwyn, etc. Even though I didn't have the power to make decisions, I had the power to pester. Some of these decision makers underestimate my ability to annoy. I can put a reminder on my calendar to call every week, to write a letter every month, and to show up at the office. And you'd be surprised how many people eventually give in and do the right thing, not because they feel compelled ethically but because they just want me off their back.

Switch: If an *unjust judge* will give justice to a *persevering widow*, how much more confident should we be that our **righteous God** will give justice to his **beloved saints**?

- ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?"

¹⁴ Exod 22:22, Deut 10:18, Isa 1:17

¹⁵ Lit: Because indeed this widow is causing work/labor/weariness to me, I will give justice to her so that she may not wear me out coming (back) to the end (endlessly).

- Cf. ⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt 7:7-11).
- If I, as a fallen, sinful, flawed, and selfish father, love to protect my kids from harm and give them gifts that make them happy, how much *more* does my perfect Father know what is best and give it to me.
 - *If God has promised to give us “good things” when we ask, we must consider it possible that our understanding of good and God’s understanding is different.
 - If God gave us *everything* we ask for, we would be God.
 - If God gave us everything we ask for, it would often hurt us, not help us.
 - God *only gives us good things*.
 - God knows what is best for you and will give you that.
 - When you ask, you will receive, but only what is good from God.
 - One of my favorite quotes, that is both infinitely reassuring and frustrating: “God will either give us what we ask for in prayer or give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything he knows” (Keller).
- If a sinful father gives good gifts to his kids, a perfect God is better. If an unjust judge can be persuaded to do justice, then a just God can be trusted to faithfully defend his people.

Chosen: God did not choose you (i.e., elect)¹⁶ to punish you.

- “You did not **choose** me, but I **chose** you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (Jn 15:16).¹⁷
- How do I know God will give me good things? The fact that he is my father is proof. I am not his child by accident or obligation but by **choice**. “For what would he not now give to sons when they ask, when he has already granted this very thing, namely, that they might be sons?” (Augustine). The fact that he adopted us into his family is proof that he will do good to us (e.g., why would I adopt Joshua or Adam and then fail to love, provide for, and care for them?).

Rhetorical Question: Jesus asks the question that anticipates a “no” answer. Will he delay long over them? We “know” we’re supposed to say “of course not,” but if we’re honest, we feel like the answer is “yes.” We cry “day and night,” and the world still looks unjust. What do we do with this discrepancy? We walk by faith (trust). ⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not

¹⁶ τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν

¹⁷ οὐχ ὑμεῖς με ἐξελέξασθε, ἀλλ’ ἐγὼ ἐξελεξάμην ὑμᾶς καὶ ἔθηκα ὑμᾶς ἵνα ὑμεῖς ὑπάγητε καὶ καρπὸν φέρητε καὶ ὁ καρπὸς ὑμῶν μένη, ἵνα ὁ ἅν αἰτήσητε τὸν πατέρα ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου δῶ ὑμῖν. For God’s people as the elect, see Isa 42:1; 45:4; 65:9, 22; Matt 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1; 2:9; 2 John 1, 13; Rev 17:14. For God’s choosing/electing (verb), see Deut 7:6–7; 14:2; Isa 41:8–9; John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16, 19; Acts 9:15; 13:17; Rom 8:29–30; 9:11; 11:5, 7, 28; Eph 1:4–5; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 2:4.

slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet 3:8-9).

- **(1) Trust God's Perspective.** One theologian says that God is both eternally ancient and eternally young, because he cannot age.¹⁸ What seems unbearably slow to us is actually just right on schedule from God's eternal vantage point. God's justice might feel slow to us, but in his providence, it's right on time. **The wait will not have seemed long when he comes.**
- **(2) Trust God's Character.** God is not slow in the sense of being careless or distracted. He is patient. His timing flows from his mercy. The apparent delay is his gracious gift to allow repentance, space for his grace to reach more people.¹⁹ We persist not to wear God down, but because we trust his timing. Persistence in prayer is not grounded in nagging God but in trusting him.
- **(3) Trust God's Promise.** We already have the down payment of the kingdom.²⁰ His Spirit is the guarantee that full justice is coming. The promise of his second coming is secured by his first. Because of his first coming, we can trust his second.

Rhetorical Question: As God's chosen children, we should cry to him day and night, trusting that he hears and will deliver. And there is a beautiful lesson in the process of persevering in our prayers. **Why is persistence a key to our prayers?**

- Persistence proves our prayers are not for temporary relief but significant need.
- Persistence proves we are not looking for an easy out, but seeking the right path.
- Persistence proves that we go to God for his presence, not just for his benefits.
- Persistence compels us to the true center of prayer, which is someone, not something.
- Persistence forces us to examine what we really want.
 - **Do we want our will or God's will? Do we want temporary relief or eternal joy? Do we want God more than what you are asking for?**
- Persistence grows a heart of patient trust.
 - Because our natural inclination is to use God and not to love God, only frustrations in prayer can purge and purify our desires. Perhaps God desires to give you exactly what you have asked for, but only in a time and way that the gift can truly benefit you instead of harming you. Many of us will pray about something for a while, and when the answer doesn't come when we think it should or we get a different answer than we like, we throw up our hands in defeat and say, "What's the use?" Persistence in prayer molds and transform our desires, to change how we pray and even what we are praying for so that we gradually come to pray closer to the heart of God's will.

¹⁸ "God is young, and maybe we're the ones who grow old" (John Mark McMillan from Barth).

¹⁹ "Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we" (Chesterton).

²⁰ Eph 1:14; 2 Cor 1:22

- God is calling each of us to persevere. Persevere in our trust, persevere in our obedience, persevere in our prayer.
- We think growth comes from ecstatic visions or theological acumen, but often it is the result of perseverance, of continually going to God. This is true of lots of things: I've taught guitar a number of times. You know what stops someone from learning to play the guitar? Impatience. They want to be as good as someone who has practiced a lifetime in a week or two (e.g., callouses, muscle aches, etc.). Too many Christians fail to mature because they quit!

If even a corrupt judge can finally give in, how much more can we trust our just Father to act for his children? But Jesus doesn't end there. He turns the spotlight from God's faithfulness to our own: when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

3. A Searching Question (v. 8)

⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

The Truth: God's promise will come speedily, that is "swiftly" or "suddenly".²¹ When it happens, it will be immediate and unstoppable. The question isn't whether God will bring justice, but will you be ready?

- When the Son of Man comes: The NT's discussion of the end times is difficult because it affirms, simultaneously and equally, three facts that are sometimes hard to synthesize:
 - (1) **The time of Christ's return is unknown**,²² and will be **unexpected**²³, like the coming of a thief at night.
 - (2) On the other hand, **there will be signs, so that believers will not be surprised, deceived, or caught unprepared**²⁴.
 - (3) Despite the fact that these signs must happen before his return (and some have not), the NT has a very expectant attitude, **as if the return of Christ may happen very soon**²⁵.
- So, Christ's coming is **expected** by believers, and motivates the way we live: as if Jesus is about to come through the door any minute. **How can believers expect the return of Christ if we do not know the exact time of his return?** The only answer seems to be by expecting it all the time, by living in a constant, continual state of readiness. **How would that change your choices today? Your priorities? Your urgency in evangelism? Your pursuit of holiness?**
 - For most of Christian history, these promises were the fuel that kept the spiritual fire burning in dark times.
 - The Bible was a lifeline to the real story of what God is doing.

²¹ Cf. Lk 17:22-37; Josh 8:18-19, Ps 2:12, Exek 29:5, Sir 27:3

²² Even by Jesus, Mk 13:32

²³ Matt 24:44, 25:13; Lk12:45-46; 1 Thess. 5:2-3; 2 Pet 3:10

²⁴ Matt 24:3-8, 14, 21-25, 29-33; 1 Thess 5:4-6; 2 Thess 2:1-4

²⁵ Matt 10:23, 16:28, 24:34; Rom 13:12; 1 Thess 4:15, Rev 22:20

- Unfortunately, rather than forming trust, for many in our day, the promises of the Bible become an obstacle. The cultural pressure is often more formative in our lives than the biblical reality.
- Rather than the gospel story being the true story against which we judge the false narratives of the world, we are using our feelings and experiences to judge it.
- Rather than interrogating our hearts, we interrogate God's word.
- Rather than doubting our perspective, we doubt God's promises.

What About You?: Whether you believe it or not, God is trustworthy. Whether you feel it or not, God is faithful. So Jesus closes the parable, not with an interrogation of God's character but of ours. God's faithfulness is not in question; ours is.

- So, the only way to avoid being found unprepared is to watch continually and **always be prepared**.
 - Mom is coming home, and I haven't done my chores.

Are You Ready: Will he find faith on earth? Will he find faith in you?

- We so badly want God's justice to come quickly and we fail to ask whether we're ready. What if he did return right now? Will you be ready? Is your life in order? Is your heart in order? Is your soul in order?
 - I think we live in a wicked world like Noah, but when God tells us to build a boat, we complain about the cost of lumber.
 - On the last day, when you stand before the Lord, you will not regret a single moment of trusting and obeying Jesus.
 - But, I suspect, you and I will regret many moments wasted in the ways of the world, many careless words, prayerless days, and worry-filled nights.
- What does it look like to live ready? A life of faith is fueled by prayerful perseverance.
 - I think it looks like daily prayer that seeks God's kingdom to come in our world, and daily surrender to God's rule in our lives.
 - I think it looks like a life dependent on *grace*, and character shaped by *the cross*.
 - I think it looks like hope that endures when the world is dark, and love that perseveres when people are difficult.
- Will you walk by faith to the end or quit before the finish line? When Jesus returns will he find faith that won't quit, faith that keeps praying, faith that keeps trusting, faith that perseveres?
- Will he find faith in you?