

A PERSISTENT LONGING FOR JUSTICE

Luke 18:1-8

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I think I can make this gross generalization without any fear of contradiction: we are all basically impatient and crave instant gratification. Even the greatest personalities in the Bible, including Moses, King David, even the Apostle Peter, were tempted by the old, "I want it now," syndrome. What's more they wanted "it" without working hard for it.

However, unlike the people in Bible times, because of modern technology our generation is able to sustain the illusion of low cost, instant gratification. We expect fast service and fast food. Go to the drug store for instant relief from aches and pains. Flick a switch and instantly cool or heat your house. Go to church one hour a week and instantly experience the full, abundant life.

Of course that last example, "Go to church one hour a week and instantly experience the full, abundant life," drags us back to reality. Maybe our science can produce one hour dry cleaning and instant oatmeal, but only a fool would believe there's a fast track to a quick and easy relationship with God that translates into a rich and significant life.

Unlike Moses, King David, Peter and us, Jesus never showed signs of impatience, except when the people he loved were impatient. You see, Jesus knew the journey is as important as the destination because it's on the long and sometimes frustrating journey we can encounter the God who gives us just what we need at any given moment, to be the man or woman God created you to be. So instant gratification may be fine for the short term, but persistent patience is necessary for the long haul, especially in your prayer life.

Luke writes, "Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart."

Jesus taught this parable about a self-reliant, tough lady who kept bugging the daylights out of a corrupt judge, demanding justice for herself against an unnamed opponent. It's obvious this widow's only advantage was her persistence. She knew the judge was corrupt and her opponent had money and influence, but she was persistent and so she waged an all out campaign for justice, until the judge wised up and gave in.

Now, this parable can be misinterpreted to be all about all types of persistent prayers, and not getting frustrated when your prayers aren't instantly answered. We're told, keep praying never quit, then wait patiently and in God's time your prayers will be answered.

It's also tempting to misread the point of this parable and make a case for the power of positive thinking, that is, if you pray hard and long enough the world is your

oyster, you can achieve the impossible dream by following the example of that widow, so believe in yourself and never, never quit. Be persistent in prayer and you'll be successful in business and be happy in life.

Sadly, you can watch and hear preachers giving motivation speeches (I won't call them sermons) to packed arenas of gullible listeners who somehow believe Jesus died on the cross so people can become financially successful and personally fulfilled. I even heard one famous T.V. preacher actually say the cross of Christ is God's plus sign!

But is that what Jesus is really saying here? Listen again to his closing comments. "...will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him all day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you he will quickly grant justice to them all. And yet when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

You see, this parable isn't just about persistent prayer in general, it's specifically about praying long and hard for justice. "And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?"

Now, before we move on we better stop a moment and define the word "justice." According to my dictionary, justice means, "the quality of being right and correct; impartiality, fairness; the use of authority and power to uphold what is right, just or lawful." These definitions are a good start.

Ideally justice presupposes that in the eyes of the law, everybody is equal. It's the job of the courts to make sure our laws are evenhanded, giving no one an unfair edge over the other.

That's the ideal, unfortunately we don't live in an ideal world. The courts have been known to favor the rich and powerful over the poor and weak. Our Declaration of Independence declares, "all men are created equal," but our history shows some are more equal than others. Isn't that why that widow had to systematically wear down that judge who neither feared God nor respected people?

It's important to realize Jesus didn't compare, but instead contrasted God to the unjust judge. God is just, the judge was unjust. God is just because he loves everyone equally and wants everyone to get a fair shake. The judge, on the other hand, relented to the widow's persistence only because he was afraid she'd make trouble for him. Most translations read the judge gave in before the widow "wears me out" but the original Greek translation reads before she "gives me a black eye." The judge only gave the widow justice because he wanted to protect his reputation!

God, on the other hand, demands justice simply because God is good. God gets both sad and angry when the weak and helpless are victimized by the rich and powerful. Read the writings of the prophets, especially Amos and Jeremiah, then read Christ's Sermon on the Mount. God is all about justice because injustice upsets the balance of his creation.

So if God is all about justice, then maybe we should be all about being persistent in praying for justice, especially for the weak and defenseless.

Having cited the dictionary's definition of justice, let's now explore God's brand of justice. What's God's justice look like?

A good place to start is the first petition of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Whenever you pray for God's kingdom and will to come down from heaven to earth, whether you realize it or not, you are praying for a just society. Certainly in the Kingdom of Heaven there are no unfair advantages for the few, no oppression by the haves of the have nots simply because in heaven there are no "have nots." I doubt you'll ever hear anyone in heaven say, "Life's not fair." Why? Because in heaven where love reigns supreme, God's will is perfectly done. Everyone chooses to live together according to the Great Commandment, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

That's why Jesus included that first petition, in the only prayer he gave us, to pray for God's justice in our unjust world. That's also why Jesus concluded his closing remarks with the question, "Any yet, when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?"

A young black man in South Africa frustrated by the injustice and oppression his people suffered at the hands of the white minority asked his pastor, "Why doesn't God do something?"

His pastor replied, "He has done something, he created you."

The young man was Desmond Tutu, who thereafter must have prayed long and hard, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Sadly, the institutional Church has not always taken God's side and followed God's will, but even when the leaders of the Church chose to protect the privileges and powers of the establishment, at the expense of the weak and defenseless, God would always raise up prophets, like Jeremiah and Amos, and then latter day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, who like the widow in the parable challenged the corrupt and unjust judges of their time and shared their vision of God's Kingdom coming down to earth bringing peace and justice for all. They took unpopular positions at great sacrifice to themselves, but they faithfully remained persistent.

Question: How many of us, do you think, include in our prayers heartfelt and persistent pleas for justice, not just for ourselves, but for the powerless victims we read about in the papers or see on the evening news? Another question: Do you ever ask God what you can do about it?

Most of the time our attention span lasts no longer than the images we see flashed on the television screen and then our minds wander to our more immediate concerns. We then comfort ourselves by thinking, “There’s really nothing I can do about it, I’m just one of five billion people with limited time and resources.” We may also be wondering, like young Desmond Tutu, “Why doesn’t God do something?”

Remember what his pastor answered? “God has done something, he created you.”

Maybe none of us have the calling to be a Martin Luther King or a Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but we can all do something to make a difference.

Here are a few suggestions on how you can start. When you become aware of any injustice being done, very near or far away, pray for justice. Perhaps someone where you work is being bullied or overworked by a dishonest manager, maybe you suspect a neighbor or a child is being abused physically or emotionally at home and you don’t know what to do about it. If that’s the case, pray persistently, by yourself or with others, as the Spirit leads you. Lift up the victim of injustice and if possible, support that victim or if you can’t, find then someone who can. Always remember, God created you to be a friend and helper for those who have neither.

I can’t specifically say where your prayers will take you, but if you pray persistently, I can say God will lead you to the right time and place where you can be and make the difference.

Having said this, I will remind you of one specific suggestion how you can bring peace and justice to a child who depends on the generous giving of people like us. You’ve heard from Howard and Lois Muthungu about the orphanage they support in Nairobi, Kenya. Each child needs \$1,000.00. Maybe you and your family are able to support a child, or maybe you can partner with two or three others, or maybe at this time you’re not able to give, even so, in the meantime you can still pray persistently for the children and their teachers and for yourselves, for discernment and guidance for this opportunity or any other God sets before you.

After telling the parable of the widow’s persistence for justice Jesus concluded his teaching with the question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Will he find it in you and me?

Let’s pray

Lord, how can we become agents of your peace and justice, how should we be praying and what should we be doing. Show us the way to alleviate the pain and suffering of others in a tangible way. And when you call us, we pray we will answer in a way that will please you.”

In Christ’s Name. Amen.