

# Sharing our Dreams



**19 October 2025**

**The unjust judge and the  
persistent widow: a Bible study  
workshop by Sue Richardson**

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## **Luke 18:1-8**

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

## Introduction

This is a familiar story, although it occurs only in the Gospel of Luke. The passage is in the lectionary so we are used to hearing it preached on and usually with the same message: be persistent in prayer and God will hear you and grant your requests.

In this exploration of the parable we are going to look closely at that interpretation by paying attention to a number of things:

- **Where it occurs in Luke's narrative** (does it matter what precedes and follows it?) Jesus is on his final journey to Jerusalem. He speaks to his disciples about the Kingdom of God; not as a physical political entity, but as something to be discerned in the life we have and create around us. He warns them that there will be suffering and disappointment, they must hold fast to what they have discerned is the right way. He also speaks of faith. He has healed ten lepers and only one returns to thank him and Jesus commends his faith, which has made him well. He follows this parable with one about righteousness – the Pharisee and the tax collector. Righteousness does not always lie where we expect it.
- There is no mention of **prayer** in the story, the comments about prayer are Luke's narrative around the parable. It is difficult to see the Judge as representing God. We are told he delivers justice without himself being just. He has no faith in God, people or processes.
- Luke addresses his Gospel to an **individual**, Theophilus, although some have interpreted the meaning of the name 'lover of God' as being inclusive of the believing community. He is supposed to be a Gentile, and Luke's concern in writing may have been to use everyday life to instruct a Christian Gentile community in the ways God is present and acts in these situations.
- **Context:** the social situation of Jesus' time, and of Luke's time and what he might have intended by including it.
- **Theology:** what does it tell us about God?
- **Spirituality:** how does it instruct us in our life of faith?
- **Discipleship:** what are we to do with what we learn in the life we lead in the world?

And we will do this by looking closely at the text, investigating some of the social and cultural practices and assumptions of Jewish life, and bringing our imagination to bear on the characters and the situation.

## Read the text together

The version on the previous page is from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised) of the Bible.

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart.

*This is Luke telling us what this story means.*

He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.'

*The stage is set for a conflictual encounter. The characters are introduced to us and described in a way that leads us to believe immediately that there is going to be a challenge here. We are immediately invited to take sides, although the Greek word translated here as 'justice' is better read as 'vengeance' or 'vindication'.*

**For a while he refused;**

*Some passage of time is envisaged here, and the judge continues obdurate.*

**but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'"**

*The judge is aware of his character. He lets us know that the woman returns to ask for the same thing even though he refuses her every time. She is a nuisance to him. 'Justice' is more accurately 'vengeance'.*

**And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says.**

*There is an important lesson here: that a successful conclusion can be achieved against opposition through persistence, and the threat of violence. 'Unjust' is Luke's description.*

**And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?**

*This is not a comparison so much as a contrast.*

**Will he delay long in helping them?**

*The judge is tardy, God is not.*

**I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"**

## Questions

- What strikes you from this story?
- Are there words or phrases that catch your attention for the first time?
- What surprises you?
- What would you like to ask?

## Key words and phrases

"In a certain city", a judge, a widow. This is a very spare description of what is about to happen.

The judge's character is described, the woman's is not, but we learn something of her situation. She has been offended against in some way and has come for redress. The word used means 'vengeance' or 'vindication'.

At first he says no.

She responds by returning again and again.

The judge begins to fear her ('wearing me down' is better translated as 'give me a black eye') and might even have begun to develop a grudging respect for her: 'she keeps coming'.

He grants her 'justice', again unspecified, but better translated as 'vengeance' or 'vindication'.

## Who are the characters?

- The Judge
- The widow
- The crowd (not mentioned but it is highly probable there was one and that it might have grown day by day as the widow returned)
- God
- God's people

## What do we know about them from the text?

The judge is complacent and without shame; he does not fear God or respect the people for whom he is exercising judgement. He occupies his position without any sense of value.

The widow is determined; she presents herself to his 'court'. She has been offended against. She wants 'justice', unspecified. She has personal courage, to come again and again despite rejection and rebuff.

God is not like the judge.

God's people are lacking faith.

## A role-play exercise

Ask for volunteers to be judge and widow (three or four each) Ask the rest of the group to be the watching crowd.

Using the information provided and your imagination, explore the characters and their actions. As the crowd is absent from the text, try to call upon your experience of audiences that might find themselves watching an unusual encounter play out.

And here is some background to help you:

### The Judge

First century Jewish society was enmeshed in two systems of law: Roman law and Talmudic law. The latter existed at three levels: the Beth Din, the Lesser Sanhedrin and the Great Sanhedrin. The parable is referencing the Beth Din, which would deal with local civil and criminal matters and which met openly at the edge of the town to hear cases and deliver judgement. Your actions are very public.

The judges had to be at least 25 years old to preside over the Beth Din. They were also supposed to be men of irreproachable character, men of intelligence, men of learning, men of fine discrimination and balanced judgement, men who were affable, genial, with a broad sense of the dignity of their office and yet approachable to all men, men with the milk of human kindness in their hearts. You were not paid to be a judge, so they were men of all sorts of callings, earning their livelihood as carpenters, blacksmiths, silversmiths, tailors, shoemakers, weavers, perfumers, apothecaries, teachers, physicians.

The judges were supposed to make their decisions based on the Talmud, which was the guidance on how to perform the Commandments and the laws of Torah, the Jewish scripture.

## Questions

### For the Judge

- How did you get to be recognised as a judge in your community?
- If you don't seem to care about the role what are you getting out of it?
- What kind of a person are you if you can admit you don't care about God or about the others in your community? Luke calls you 'unjust' – on what basis?
- There is no indication in the text that you are corrupt or unrighteous. Are you complacent? Worn down? Lazy?
- What makes you finally respond to the widow's petition? Embarrassment? Fear of violence? You are the one who mentions violence, what is that based on?
- Why don't you change?

### For the widow

- What has happened to you to make you take this step of asking a powerful man to intervene in your situation? The word used in the Greek means 'vengeance' not 'justice'.
- What do you feel the first time he ignores you?
- What motivates you to come back?
- How do you feel about doing this publicly?
- Why do you think he fears violence from you? He is the one who mentions it.
- What do you know about Jewish law and practice concerning widows?
- What examples of feisty widows do you know from scripture?

### For the crowd

- Can you create a character (male or female) that you can inhabit and create a reason that meant they were present at the first meeting of Judge and Widow?
- What alerts you to this encounter?
- Whose side will you take? Why?
- What surprises or shocks you about how this plays out?

Bring the groups together again and allow them time to share their character sketches and their feelings and reactions with each other.

## Theology

- What do we learn about God?
- Are there times when God's response does not seem to be enough for us?
- Can we ask for just anything?
- The story seems to show that 'justice' can be gained even from an uninterested or unhelpful system. Dorothee Soelle said, "Prayer is borrowing God's eyes". Does this help our understanding of God and God's interaction with the world?

## Spirituality

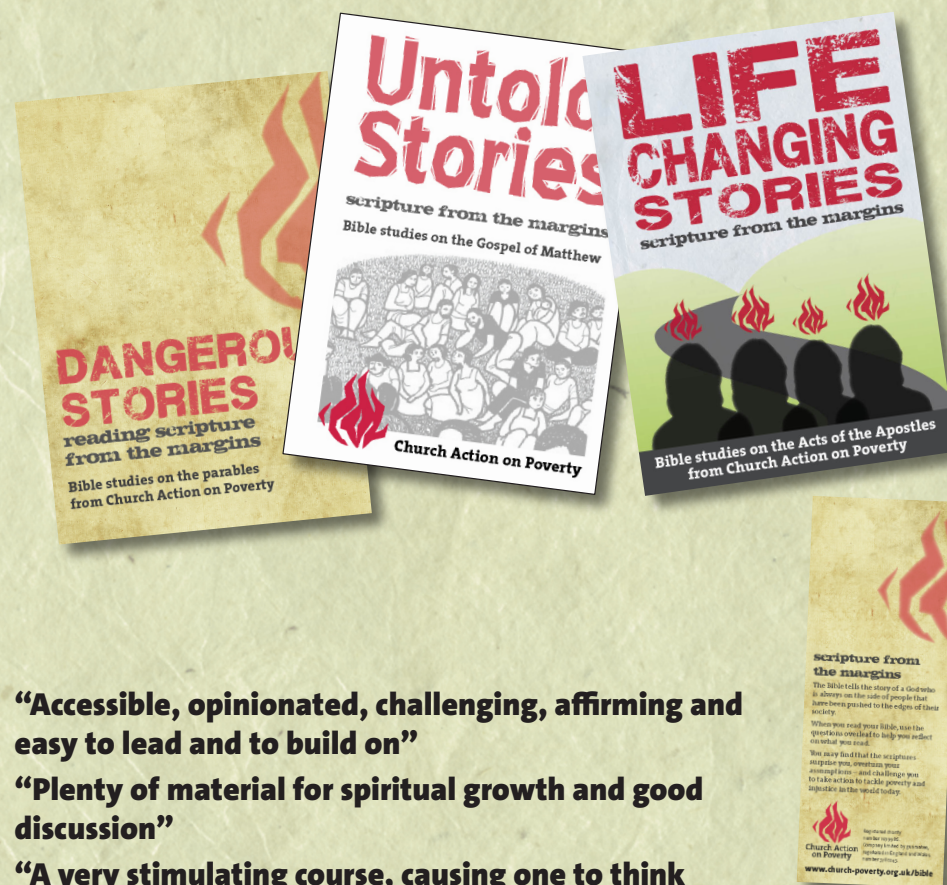
- What role is prayer given in the telling of this secular encounter?
- "I felt my legs were praying", Rabbi Abraham Heschel on his participation in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. What does prayer do to us?
- Have we 'domesticated' prayer? When terrible things happen the response is often to say "our thoughts and prayers are with you". What does that mean practically?
- How do we 'practise our prayer'?
- The thread of this passage moves from prayer through justice to faith. Where had Jesus noticed faith?

## Our context

- Can we think of situations where this sort of encounter is familiar?
- What impedes the resolution of those situations?
- What tactics and strategies do we see today to overcome them?
- What do we feel about the reference in the text to potential violence? Especially as it comes from a male judge and is about a woman plaintiff? Frederick Douglas said: "Power concedes nothing without a demand".
- Do we have the faith to resource this persistence and where do we find it and develop it?

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