The Widow and the Judge

Luke 18:2–5 · read without its frame (vv. 1, 6–8) · November 15, 2026

Levine
Amy-Jill Levine, translator

Some judge was in some city; God was he not fearing, and people was he not respecting.
And a widow was in that city. And she kept coming to him, saying, 'Avenge/grant me justice against my adversary.' And not did he wish at the time.
But after these things, he said to himself, 'If even God I do not fear nor people do I respect, yet on account of the trouble this widow causes, I will avenge her, so that not into the end, coming, she will wear me out/give me a black eye.'

NRSVue
New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition

2 He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had
respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and
saying, 'Grant me justice against my accuser.' 4 For a while he refused, but later he
said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet
because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not
wear me out by continually coming.' "

KJV
King James Version

2 Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:
3 And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of
mine adversary. 4 And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself,
Though I fear not God, nor regard man; 5 Yet because this widow troubleth me, I
will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

NIV
New International Version

2 He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared
what people thought. 3 And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him
with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' 4 "For some time he refused.
But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people
think, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so
that she won't eventually come and attack me!'"

The Message
Eugene H. Peterson

2–3 "There was once a judge in some city who never gave God a thought and cared
nothing for people. A widow in that city kept after him: 'My rights are being
violated. Protect me!' 4–5 "He never gave her the time of day. But after this went on
and on he said to himself, 'I care nothing what God thinks, even less what people
think. But because this widow won't quit badgering me, I'd better do something and
see that she gets justice—otherwise I'm going to end up beaten black-and-blue by
her pounding.'"

Levine: translation by Amy-Jill Levine.
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You Have Heard It Said

"The Widow and the Judge"

What are parables?

What are Parables?

The word parable comes from the Greek παραβολή (parabolē)

> *Literally, throwing (bolē) alongside (para-)*
> Comparison, Illustration, Analogy

While common in the ancient world, they have limited precedence in the Old Testament

> Nathan and David, the parable of the ewe lamb (2 Samuel 12:1-14)
> The Wise Woman of Tekoa, persuades David to bring Absalom back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 14:1–20)

What are Parables?

New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine identifies three ways in which common interpretations of parables by Christians would be unrecognizable to first century Jews:

> Allegorical readings: in which every character must be God or Jesus or the church or a sinner
> Moral readings: in which the parable is reducible to a simple, tidy lesson
> Anti-Jewish readings: in which Jesus's teaching is presented as superior to and overturning the legalistic laws of Judaism

What are Parables?

Some parables seem to be in conflict with the narrative frame that they are placed within

> Some parables seem to present readings that are in conflict with the reading that the Gospel writer claims Jesus to have framed it with or the moral imperatives that follow
> This possibly indicates that Matthew and Luke sometimes massage the text to fit the narrative they are constructing or community concerns they are responding to. Matthew fixates on Jesus as the new Moses and the vigilance required for Jesus's return and Luke on the centrality of prayer and the poor.

> Some judge was in some city; God was he not fearing, and people was he not respecting.
>
> And a widow was in that city. And she kept coming to him, saying, 'Avenge/grant me justice against my adversary.' And not did he wish at the time.
>
> But after these things, he said to himself, 'If even God I do not fear nor people do I respect, yet on account of the trouble this widow causes, I will avenge her, so that not into the end, coming, she will wear me out/give me a black eye.'
>
> *Luke 18.2-5, Amy-Jill Levine, Translator*

Some Judge

In the Roman court system, it was one thing to get a judgement, it was another to have it enforced

The New Testament has a varied view of judges:

> "'Thus when you go with your accuser before a magistrate, on the way make an effort to reach a settlement, or you may be dragged before the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer throw you in prison.'" — Luke 12:58
> Christ as the Ultimate Judge: Above all human magistrates, Jesus Christ is depicted as the righteous and final judge who evaluates every person's actions with total fairness (2 Timothy 4:1, 8; James 4:12)

Some Judge

"God was he not fearing, and people was he not respecting"

> Is this an advantage?

Sirach 35:
"Do not offer [God] a bribe, for he will not accept it,
and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice,
for the Lord is the judge,
and with him there is no partiality.
He will not show partiality to the poor,
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged."

What are widows like in the Bible?

Some Widow

Social and Financial independence

> During the time of Jesus, women owned 1/3 of the property in Israel
> The home is always called "of Martha and Mary" not "of Lazarus"
> Women owned businesses and took each other to court over forgeries of artisan crafts

Some Widow

Social and Financial independence

> Temple and synagogue distribution system
> Precedence in Jewish and Roman law for inheritance
> No prohibitions on interacting with men outside of their families

Some Widow

Social and Financial independence

> No law in Roman or Judean life required head coverings
> The financial backers for Jesus's ministry (Luke 8)
> Prohibitions on women came later as reactionary responses to Christian gnostic teachings about women's bodies

What are widows like in the Bible?

Some Widow

The Unnamed vs. Named Widows of the Bible

> The unnamed widows of the Bible are always in need of care, support, and attention (Exodus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Job, the Psalms, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Malachi)

Some Widow

The named widows of the Bible are not in need of help

> Tamar, in Genesis 38, the Bible's first named widow, who proves more righteous than Judah
> Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, in the Book of Ruth, who exercise agency over social location and geography
> Abigail, in 1 and 2 Samuel, who manipulates her relationship with her father and David to become David's queen
> The wise woman of Tekoa, 2 Samuel 14, plays as a widow for political gain
> The widow of Zarephath, 1 Kings 17, who shames Elijah and forces him to save her son. (Note: Luke 4.26, her actions go missing.)
> Judith, who is a lying, seductive assassin who saves her people from destruction

The Demand

"Avenge/grant me justice against my adversary.'"

> Romans 12:17-21
>
> "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." Instead, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."
>
> Is vengeance the same as justice?

The Demand

What of the woman's opponent?

hypōpiazō (ὑπωπιάζω)

> "...yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down[hypōpiazō] by her continual coming." Luke 18:5 (ESV)
>
> "But I discipline [hypōpiazō] my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." 1 Corinthians 9:27 (ESV)
>
> Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plutarch, Diogenes Laërtius … ὑπωπιάζω is a boxing term

What is this parable about?

The Frame

The frame of the parable troubles how to interpret it:

> Luke 18:1, "Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart …"
>
> Luke 18:6-8, "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?'"

The Frame and Allegory

Allegorical interpretation raises troubling questions:

> If the judge is God and we are the widow and Jesus says "how much more so" God will do for us, does that mean we can threaten God to get what we want?
>
> Does that mean whoever makes it to God first gets what they want?
>
> If we are the judge and God is the widow, little is improved.

What do you think?

Next Week: The Pharisee and the Tax Collector