

Series: Life Stories
Part IX: Why God Answers Prayer
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“Life Stories” is the name we have given to this series of messages on the parables of Jesus. These parables are stories found in our Bible that talk about the real, deeper meaning of life – often in very surprising and unexpected ways. Today’s story is from Luke’s gospel and has often been called “The Parable of the Unjust Judge.”

Now you might recognize the group of judges who make up our Supreme Court. We have again entered into the process of naming a new judge to the court. This summer we will probably hear much debate about the qualifications necessary to be a good judge. If judges are supposed to do justice and be just in their rulings, then what does it look like to be a good judge? I found a picture this week that seems to be asking about the qualities of a good judge. Off to the side is the word “fair.” This picture suggests that “fair” could mean at least two things: one who defends rights, and one who puts principles before politics. And maybe that is one way to look at it. But, the parable we are going to look at today may give some other insight into what a good or just judge should look like – though that is not the main point of this parable.

Luke actually tells us the meaning of the parable *before* we read the words of Jesus. These who tell stories or jokes know that it is not good form to tell the moral of the story before you tell the story. It is like telling the punchline of the joke before you actually tell the joke. It is usually better to let the story or the joke evolve. And if you have to explain a joke, then it is probably not that funny. But apparently Luke missed that discussion because in this parable he tells the meaning of the parable at the very start. And while the parable may be about an unjust judge and a persistent widow asking for justice, Luke says this is a parable about prayer and not giving up:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:1-8, NIV)

While this parable may have some things to say about what it means to be a good or just judge, Luke tells us it is really about prayer. It may help us answer the question, “Why does God answer prayer?” However, the answer will not be about having the right techniques to get what we want from God. I think this parable goes much deeper than that -- if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

As we said, it begins with an unjust judge and Jesus tells why he is “unjust.” He neither feared God nor cared about other people. In other words, he had no respect for God, if there even was a God who would be the ultimate judge of him and everyone else. Nor did he care for people. But in a moment, we see what he does care about – what motivates him to act.

We are also introduced to a persistent widow who kept coming to the judge to grant her justice against her adversary. Now, in that time, widows were at the bottom of the social ladder. Without a husband to advocate for and protect them, they had very little influence. If the husband had property, upon his death it usually passed over the wife to the next oldest brother. Cases like the one described here were usually about property or money. But, while this widow had very little social standing, she was very persistent.

In that time, the judges were often known for taking bribes to rule on cases. Those with the most money and power often got their way. A widow hardly stood a chance of even getting her case heard, much less getting justice. But, this woman was persistent. She won’t go away. So, the judge decides to give her a hearing because he was just tired of her.

Have you ever felt that way before? You just get tired of something or somebody? You have so much on your plate, and then someone asks you to do one more thing and you just try to ignore them? I can actually relate to the judge in this story. Some of you may have heard it.

A number of years ago when I was pastor of the Shallowford Presbyterian Church, we hosted two other congregations who worshipped in those buildings, just like we are doing here now at JCPC. At Shallowford we were hosting a Korean-American Church and a Spanish-speaking church – both of which were Presbyterian. But, one day I got phone message from a pastor named Alexander Thomas. He was starting a small church with about fifteen people. Alex was an Indian Christian from a Church of God background. He was originally from south India, and he said about 2% of India was Christian -- though it was not easy being a Christian in a country that was mostly Hindu. Alex later told me his last name was “Thomas” because, according to tradition, Thomas, one of the disciples from the Bible, had been the first missionary to India.

However, when Alex called me, I was very busy and we already had two congregations worshipping with us, so honestly, I just kept ignoring his phone messages. But, Alex was persistent – just like the widow in this parable. And finally, like the judge in our story, I agreed to meet Alex and talk with him.

When we met, Alex told us he only needed one classroom in which to meet. So, we took him to the top floor of our education building to show him a room that might work. Our sanctuary and chapel were already booked on Sunday with four worship services between the three congregations. I remember as we walked into the classroom, it had those old kinds of horizontal windows you used to find in school classrooms – the kind that you had to crank open. Alex walked into the room first. He then looked at the windows and smiled. Then he said words I will never forget. He said this: “This is the room with those windows, the Lord showed me in a vision when I was praying where we would meet.” Now, I have to admit, no one had ever said that to me. I felt like saying, “Well, He didn’t show it to me!” But, I talked it over with the elders who

were with me. How do you say “No” to a vision from God that came in a prayer? Things like that do happen in the Bible from time to time. So, we gave them space to meet. Today they are still meeting at that church, but they have long since outgrown that classroom. They are now meeting in the chapel. But, it all happened because of Alex’s prayer and his persistence.

A few months ago, I got another phone message here at our church. It was from a man named Matthew whose daughter takes music lessons here through our Fine Arts Academy. He said he was part of a new church that was starting up and was wondering if they might meet here. We had already had the Korean-America Church worshipping here on Sunday, so I could not see any time where this might work out. But, I have always tried to try to meet with folks who are trying to start a new church. I called Matthew, who was very nice, and we set up a time to meet with the pastor and the pastor’s spouse. When they arrived, it wasn’t until then that I realized that it was Neelam, the wife, who was the pastor. Her husband Navneet was also there for support. Navneet had been a doctor in India, but is now a very successful importer in this country.

The four of us sat down in our library. They told me they had a small group of about fifteen Indian Christians and they were looking for a place to meet. Presently, they are meeting on Saturday evenings in their home, so they did not need space on Sunday. They also told me about a daily Bible study that Neelam, the pastor, leads online every day with people from all around the world joining in. I had never heard about that kind of ministry before.

Then I asked them to tell me their story. I always want to know how people go to this place in their lives. Navneet grew up a Christian in India, but in the northern part of India where it was very unusual. But, Neelam was Hindu, and she had come here to this country with her family. She told of a time when she was very sick physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Her family had paid others to try to help her get well, but nothing worked. However, someone told her father that there was this Indian Christian pastor who they should get to pray for their daughter. So, they contacted him, and for three days he prayed for her – and she got well. Not only that, she became a Christian. And when her family saw what had happened to her, they, too, became Christians.

Now as she told me this story, it sounded like some things I had heard before. So, just on the off chance I asked, “Have you ever met an Indian Christian pastor named Alex Thomas?” Navneet said, “Alexander Thomas? We saw him at lunch this week!” And then Neelam said, “He was the pastor who prayed for me for three days and helped me get well. We worshipped there at Shallowford Presbyterian Church!” I told them how I knew Alex Thomas, and then I just began to laugh at how God works. Matthew had no idea I knew Alex. He came here because his daughter took music lessons from our Fine Arts Academy. I half-jokingly told them I knew Alex and I was going to call him and check them out before we decided to give them permission to meet here.

So, I called Alex and we decided to have lunch at a nearby Indian restaurant. Alex confirmed the story of what happened to Neelam. He even said that after Neelam was healed, her father asked Alex how much the healing cost – to which Alex said, “Nothing – this is the work of the Lord – there is no charge.”

But, then Alex went on to say that because we had been faithful in allowing his church to meet there twenty-five years ago, not only had Neelam's life been changed, but hundreds of Indian Christians had passed through his church and then moved all over the country and even the world, sharing the good news of God's love in Christ. And, it happened because Alex prayed and was persistent, like the widow in this parable -- while I, like the unjust judge who just wanted someone to go away, finally went along, and God graciously used me anyway.

In this parable, Jesus says that the judge doesn't care about God or others. But, he does care about something else. When it says that he will give the widow justice so that she will not "come and attack me" -- the Greek word for "attack" is really a boxing term. It described a person who gave someone a black eye. What the judge was saying is that he was going to do this so that he wouldn't get a "black eye" in the sight of others for not responding to this widow. He didn't care about God or other people. What he cared about was his own reputation -- what people would think of him. So, he gave her justice and God used him anyway. God used him in the same way God used me with Alex, almost in spite of myself. Why does God answer prayer? Because God is a much better judge than the unjust judge in this story. And even the unjust judge gets it right sometimes. But, God gets it right every time!

And when it says that God will bring justice "quickly" -- another way to translate that word is "suddenly" or "unexpectedly." All of us who have prayed know that sometimes God's answers to prayers seem to take a long time -- they are not always "quick." But, often they are sudden and unexpected -- like the answers we find in these parables of Jesus. As I said earlier, the last thing I expected or had in mind was to hear from this persistent, praying Indian pastor was that God spoke to him through a vision, telling him he would meet in our church. But, *God had it in mind all the time!*

So, let's look at the widow for a moment. When I picture her -- a determined, persistent widow who had very little power in the eyes of the world, but somehow managed to get others to do the right thing -- I picture someone maybe like Mother Teresa. One of my favorite stories about her is told by Tom Long:

[Mother Teresa] went to visit Edward Bennett Williams, a legendary Washington criminal lawyer. He was a powerful lawyer. He at one time owned the Washington Redskins and the Baltimore Orioles and he was the lawyer for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, among others. Evan Thomas's biography of Williams tells the story about when Mother Teresa visited Edward Bennett Williams because she was raising money for an AIDS hospice. Williams was in charge of a small charitable foundation that she hoped would help. Before she arrived for the appointment, Williams said to his partner, Paul Dietrich, "You know, Paul, AIDS is not my favorite disease. I don't really want to make a contribution, but I've got this Catholic saint coming to see me, and I don't know what to do." Well, they agreed that they would be polite, hear her out, but then say no.

Well, Mother Teresa arrived. She was a little sparrow sitting on the other side of the big mahogany lawyer's desk. She made her appeal for the hospice, and Williams said, "We're touched by your appeal, but no." Mother Teresa said simply, "Let us pray." Williams looked at Dietrich; they bowed their heads and after the prayer, Mother Teresa

made the same pitch, word for word, for the hospice. Again Williams politely said no. Mother Teresa said, “Let us pray.” Williams, exasperated, looked up at the ceiling, “All right, all right, get me my checkbook!” (Sermon by Tom Long – “Praying Without Losing Heart”)

It is amazing what a powerless person can do when she is persistent and prays! I think it shows us that *persistent prayer of the powerless is powerful*.

However, this parable may not really be about the unjust judge or even the persistent widow, as much as it is about the character of God who answers this prayer. Persistence was part of why God answered that prayer, but it was more about the character of God -- the truly righteous judge who does care about people and who answers our prayers because *God loves us*. And the answer is often sudden, when we least expect it. It may even come through someone powerless whom we would never think could do something like that.

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks if there will be faith on this earth when he, the Son of man, comes again for the final time. Will there be faith on this earth? So, what might that faith look like in our time?

I am reminded of another story – the story of Ruby Bridges. One person tells her story this way:

A federal judge had ordered New Orleans to open its public schools to African-American children, and the white parents decided that if they had to let black children in, they would keep their children out. They let it be known that any black children who came to school would be in for trouble. So the black children stayed home too. Except Ruby Bridges. Her parents sent her to school all by herself, six years old. Every morning she walked alone through a heckling crowd to an empty school. White people lined up on both sides of the way and shook their fists at her. They threatened to do terrible things to her if she kept coming to their school. But every morning at ten minutes to eight Ruby walked, head up, eyes ahead, straight through the mob; two U.S. marshals walked ahead of her and two walked behind her. Then she spent the day alone with her teachers inside that big silent school building.

Harvard professor Robert Coles was curious about what went into the making of courageous children like Ruby Bridges. He talked to Ruby's mother and, in his book *The Moral Life of Children*, tells what she said: “There's a lot of people who talk about doing good, and a lot of people who argue about what's good and what's not good,” but there are other folks who “just put their lives on the line for what's right.” (Lewis Smedes, *A Pretty Good Person*)

Coles noted something else about Ruby Bridges. The day she walked between those lines of people screaming awful things at this little girl, Coles noted that as she was walking along, she was moving her mouth. She seemed to be saying something while these folks yelled at her. Later, he asked her about it – what she was saying to them. Ruby said that she wasn't saying anything *to* them. She was just praying *for* them! I think that is what the persistent prayer of the powerless can do in our world today.

So, Luke told us what this parable was about at the beginning: pray and don't give up. We have some wonderful examples of those who showed us how to do it – the persistent widow, Alex Thomas, Mother Teresa, and Ruby Bridges. So, pray and don't ever give up – knowing that God will answer our prayers because God cares about people, and the answers will come suddenly and unexpectedly. But until then, *pray and don't give up!*

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.