SM054 The Widow and the Unjust Judge

Jesus and his disciples were eating a meal with a group of religious leaders. It should have been a festive occasion but the disciples were quiet. They seemed concerned and worried. It was not that Pharisees, the religious leaders were present. Often they caused Jesus problems, testing him, trying to trap him, accusing him unjustly, calling him bad names. No, on this occasion the concern of the disciples was not because of what the Pharisees said, it was because of what Jesus had said.

Earlier in the day the Pharisees had asked Jesus when the kingdom was coming. Jesus replied that the kingdom had already come, not completely, but that the kingdom had been inaugurated in his life and in his ministry. He healed the sick, he gave sight to the blind, he made the lame walk, he cast out evil spirits, and above all, he forgave sinners and renewed their relationship with the living God.

Hearing Jesus talk about that was good, but when Jesus had talked about his death, the disciples didn't like it. They didn't understand it and it confused them. They believed the Messiah should be glorious and live. They believed the Messiah should rule Israel from Jerusalem. They believed the Messiah should drive the Romans out of the land. But Jesus kept talking about dying and some kind of resurrection on the third day that would vindicate him. It was all confusing to them.

In addition, Jesus talked about the coming judgment upon his people. He had said that not all of his people would be saved. Some would, but others would be taken away to judgment. He described the judgment like great carrion birds, circling, waiting for the victims to die so they could feed on the flesh, and all because of their sin.

The meal continued in silence and a sense of gloom seemed to settle over them all. Finally, Jesus asked, "Why are your hearts troubled?" One of the disciples answered, "Lord, when you talk of this judgment upon our people, and when you talk about your suffering, how can we not be troubled? How can we not be saddened with the thought of you being taken away from us and of the coming judgment upon Israel?" Another disciple said, "Master, it makes me afraid."

Then Jesus said, "let me tell you a story. This will lift your hearts."

Not far from here lived a woman with her husband and small children. They were both righteous. They feared God and loved their neighbor. The man owned a small field. He worked it diligently and was able to make enough to provide for his family. But the years took their toll on him and he was often sick from his long labor in the field.

In the same village was a wealthy landowner. He had much land and many servants. He was also greedy and was always trying to obtain more for himself. Many times he tried to obtain the small piece of land that the man owned but the man would not sell it. As small as it was, it had been in his family for generations and he aimed to hold onto it and pass it on to his children.

But the greedy landowner kept plotting and scheming to take it away from him. And then, the unthinkable happened, one evening, the husband did not return home from his field. His wife became

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worried. She put her small children into the care of a friend and went out to the field to search for her husband, and there she found him, dying from the heat, from the exhaustion of the long years of labor, and from worry over the wealthy landowner who had threatened his inheritance.

After the woman buried her husband, it did not take long for the wealthy landowner to approach the woman and begin threatening her. He told her how the husband had wanted to sell it to him. The woman scoffed at him and said, "My husband would never sell this land to anyone, especially to you!"

A few days later the wealthy landowner returned, but this time he tried a different strategy. He said, "I have offered you a price for your land but you will not sell," and the woman quickly replied, "Even if I were to sell, I would not sell it at the price you are offering. Your price is a travesty. It is unjust and a mockery before God."

The landowner smiled and continued, ignoring the woman's sharp words, "It has come to my attention, that there are some irregularities in the deeds of trust for your land. I will soon go to the judge in our village and tell him of these irregularities if you do not sell to me. You know of him, and you know what he will do when he is, well, properly motivated to make certain decisions. The land will be taken away and you will lose everything. You and your children will have nothing." Then, he walked away, laughing at her weakness in the world of men.

The woman trembled. She knew of the judge in her village. He was an unrighteous man and he could be easily bribed. She knew the wealthy landowner could present a formidable legal case against her and that she, a woman, would stand little chance in a court proceeding against him.

Her fear grew. But she looked at her children and she knew there was only one thing she could do. She must appear before the judge, and, as wicked as he was, she must cry out to him for legal protection.

The next day, the judge sat in the village gate. He was a large man and dressed luxuriously. He sat upon his pillows and his droopy eyelids, dull with wine and too much food, showed that he was bored with the complaints people brought to him for judgment. The judge was surrounded by his aides. These were also wicked men who took the bribes for the judge and decided which cases would be heard. People would line up and call out their requests to be heard, but the judge would ignore them, until one of them would approach his aides and discreetly pass money to them. Then, the judge would have their name called out and would hear their case and decide in their favor.

The widow surveyed the situation. It looked impossible. She was a woman. She lived in a world controlled by evil men. She was a widow. In her world, men circled around widows like wolves surrounding a lost lamb. She had little money, and the judge ruled only by bribes and gifts for he did not love justice, had no heart to advance honor, and cared not that his actions were shameful. This man, this judge, did not fear God.

But the woman was undaunted. The woman laid aside her fears and concerns and in the presence of all the men at the village gates she began to cry out to the judge, "Give me legal protection from my opponent! You must hear my case. You must give me legal protection." The large judge looked in the

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direction of the widow, slightly amused, turned to one of his aides and motioned for him to get rid of her. The aide got up, took the woman by the arm, and held out his hand as if he were asking her for something, but she angrily walked away. The judge laughed and went back to his business of receiving bribes.

But the next day the woman was back. No sooner had the large, sleepy, uncaring judge sat himself upon his cushions than the woman was there screaming at him, "Give me protection from my legal opponent." She would not be quiet. She cried out louder than all the men and again the judge motioned for one of his aides to have her leave.

This went on for some time. Day after day the judge would sit and rule over the people, profiting from their bribes, and day after day the woman would be there shouting out to the judge. Nothing could stop her. They couldn't ignore her. They couldn't treat her shamefully in public. Their threats against her had no power, and it seemed they could not outlast her. She was determined to get her way with the judge and she was going to make life miserable for him until he did something.

Finally, one day, the judge arose in the morning. He usually arose with great happiness, looking forward to sitting in the place of honor at the village gates and enriching himself from the bribes of people, but on this day, the judge had a headache. "That woman," he said. "That woman is wearing me out. That woman is making me look bad and is making me ill."

He called to one of his aides, "Listen, you know we don't make a ruling unless someone gives us money. You know that I care not for people and that I don't believe in some God and his justice that I am supposed to carry out. But this woman keeps coming to me and crying out. She is making my life miserable. If she comes again today, even if she continues to refuse to give us money, bring her to me, and I will rule in her case."

And so the judge and his aides prepared themselves for the day's work. With great pomp they paraded through the village to the village gates and prepared the platform and the cushions upon which the judge would sit. As they did this they looked upon the crowd that was forming and there in the front was the woman, with a look of determination on her face.

The judge sat and the court was announced "in session." And just as the woman started to cry out, "Give me legal protection," one of the aides came up to her and said, "The judge will see you." The woman was astonished, but she quickly collected her thoughts approached the judge and said, "You know my husband. You know how hard he worked. You know that land is ours. My opponent, the wealthiest landowner in this area is trying to take it from me. This is all I have. You must stop him. You must give me protection."

And the judge leaned close to her and said, "If I do this, does this mean you will stop coming to this place and screaming at me?" And the woman said, "If you give me legal protection, I will never come here again." The judge breathed a sigh of relief. He turned to one of his aides, gave him some instructions. He wrote some things on a parchment, gave it to the woman, and said, "Here is what you have asked for." And the woman, with a look of triumph in her eyes turned and faced the crowd. The

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men quietly parted and the woman walked through the multitude of men victorious in her quest for justice.

Interlude

Jesus had finished the story. He looked upon his disciples and said, "Let me now explain this to you. Let me encourage your hearts. The unrighteous judge did it. He granted her request. Listen to what he said. He said that even though he did not fear God or have respect for granting justice to people, he still did what she asked!

"And I say to you, if that *unrighteous* judge gave her justice, don't you think that God in heaven, your Father, who is good and who loves you will bring about justice for his chosen ones? Of course he will. He will keep the covenant with you. He will bring about his covenant righteousness. He will bring his covenant justice in your behalf.

"You should be like the woman. Although she feared, she did not let her fear control her. She cried out to the judge every day. And you should cry out to your Father day and night. And even though you are not perfect, he will be very patient with you. He will keep his anger far from you. He will bring about justice for his chosen ones.

"I have shared with you that I, the Son of Man, the heavenly one, will be vindicated. Yes, I will suffer but God will vindicate me. I trust in him and he will raise me up. In the same way, you trust in him also. Don't give in to your fear. Have faith in God. I ask, when the Son of Man comes, when the Son of Man is vindicated in the difficult days that will come, will he find you with this kind of faith? Will he find faith on the earth?"

That was a great question Jesus asked his disciples, and it is a question he asks us. As Jesus looks out upon the earth today, does he find faith? Let's see how this story applies to our life.

First, the story reminds us, painfully, that we live in a fallen world. The disciples were fearful. Jesus told the story because the disciples were under stress. Jesus himself was in danger. The disciples were in danger. The political authorities were keeping a wary eye upon Jesus. Remember, Herod knew about Jesus and was very concerned that he was causing disturbances in the land. Pilate was the Roman governor and he was ruthless and cruel. He would stop at nothing to keep order in the land, and if he learned of this movement of people following Jesus and determined that it was causing problems in the land, he would bring it to a swift end.

The religious rulers were following Jesus and hounding him, trying to trap him with silly questions and discredit him in the eyes of the people. Many of them were plotting to arrest Jesus and kill him, and those who were his closest followers would not be shown mercy either. There was, indeed, much to be afraid of.

If that were true of these men, it was also true for those in society who were vulnerable, and who was more vulnerable than widows and orphans? God, in his Word, set down laws that his leaders should protect widows and orphans. In the book of Exodus we read, "You shall not afflict any widow or

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orphan. If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry." The prophet Isaiah said, "Learn to do good. Seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Such commands and circumstances remind us that they and we live in a fallen, difficult world.

Second, the story reminds us that though God has given specific commands to help those who are weak, our leaders do not always do this. Sin not only affects the hearts of individuals, but sin also affects the government systems we have in place so that justice is not dispensed. The story of the unjust judge revealed a reality that was true in the ancient world and true in our modern world – judges and leaders often do not carry out their God-given responsibility to enact justice. Many are like the judge in the story who did not fear God and who did not respect man. This judge had no sense of honor and shame.

The prophet Isaiah, after he exhorted the people to dispense justice and to protect the widow and orphan said, "Your rulers are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and chases after rewards. They do not defend the orphan, nor does the widow's plea come before them." Yes, our world is filled not only with fallen people, but with fallen and sinful government systems that oppress the poor.

Third, the story does tell us that even though we live in a fallen world, sometimes good things do happen. The widow in this story did get her wish! She did get legal protection and the reason she did was because of her *persistence* in crying out for it. Her persistence is a lesson for us to persist in our faith and in our prayer. This was the lesson Jesus gave to his disciples. Like the widow, don't give in to fear. Like the widow, keep crying out to God.

Many of us have fears that surround us. They were fearful because Jesus kept talking about dying and they knew if he was killed they would probably be killed too. But Jesus did not want them to give in to fear. Instead, he wanted them to pray. What are your fears? Do you feel vulnerable and weak? Jesus encourages you to cry out to God day and night over those things that bother you, that trouble you, that make you afraid. Luke 18:1 tells us that Jesus told this story so that "at all times they should pray and not lose heart."

The New Testament is filled with exhortations to pray and to keep on praying. In Acts 1:14 we find that after Jesus was enthroned at the right hand of God, his followers met together and devoted themselves to prayer. We find in Acts 2:42 that the first followers of Jesus devoted themselves to four things – teaching, worship, fellowship with one another, and praying. When the Church became very large, the apostles asked the members to appoint seven men to help them in caring for the widows in the church so that they could spend more time in prayer. Paul told the Roman Christians to be devoted to prayer. To the Christians in Ephesus Paul said, "with all prayer and petition, pray at all times in the Spirit. Be on the alert with all prayer and petition for all of God's people." And to the Christians living in Colossae he said they should devote themselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving in their hearts."

For the disciples, a middle eastern widow crying out before a judge for legal protection was a familiar image and would help them to understand that they should cry out to God like that.

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Finally, there is one more lesson for us. The unjust judge granted the woman her request, at last. Jesus wanted to drive home the point that our Father in heaven is not unjust. He is the righteous God. He is the just judge. He is the one from whom all just laws come. He does care for people. He is concerned about honor and shame. He does want to meet needs. He is not partial. He takes no bribes. He is full of love, concern, and compassion for the needs of all mankind. If the unjust judge could be moved by the constant pleas of a widow, how much more will the just judge of all the earth, the compassionate God, the heavenly Father be moved by the cries of his people!

Jesus guarantees that all prayers will be answered. Some will be answered quickly in our life. Some will not be answered until he returns but justice will be done for all. And even though we come to him imperfectly, he has great patience with us. He is merciful and kind.

The widow and the unjust judge. A story of sorrow, a story of injustice, but a story of perseverence in crying out for what was right. It is a story to encourage us, to lift our hearts, and strengthen our faith. The question we have to answer is, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find our hearts full of such faith?"

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