



“Prayer as Protest in Luke: Persistent Friends and Widows”

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Prayers feature prominently in the Gospel of Luke. They occur at moments of theophany, such as Jesus’s baptism (Luke 3:21) and the transfiguration (9:28–36), where a voice from the heavens reveals Jesus’s identity. Beyond contributing to the identification of Jesus as God’s son, prayers in Luke draw the reader into the calls for persistence, generosity, and justice. Immediately after Jesus teaches the disciples the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1–4), Jesus offers a commentary on the need for persistent prayer (Luke 11:5–8). Likewise, Jesus again exhorts his followers to persistent prayer in the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1–8). These two parables, widely regarded as parallel stories, illustrate both the character and the function of prayer

There is no prayer more important to the Christian faith than the Lord’s Prayer. The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Widow and the Unjust Judge, parables in which characters make requests (for bread and justice, respectively), have much to teach us about the Lord’s Prayer. These stories remind us that prayer can be an act of resistance against unjust systems and structures.

in the Gospel of Luke.¹ Though both stories indicate that persistence in prayer is necessary—required, perhaps—the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge demonstrate the power of prayer as a protest against systems of injustice.

PRAYER AND PERSISTENCE

Unlike the other Synoptic Gospels, Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer in response to a request from his disciples (Luke 11:2), who come to him after he has prayed. In this story, persistence and shamelessness intertwine to offer a surprising conclusion to what it means to say the Lord's Prayer. Immediately on the heels of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells a story of an inconvenient man who wakes his friend and requests bread from him at midnight.

Jesus invites his disciples to imagine that this inconvenient friend comes to *their* house at midnight. They, the unprepared host, go to another friend to ask for bread, creating a chain reaction of inconvenient guests and requests. The friend responds, "Do not cause me trouble" (Luke 11:7a, my translation) along with the reasons for his refusal to get up to offer bread. The audience would have been drawn into the discrepancy of the prayer for daily bread in the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:3) followed by the request for bread in this parable. At first glance, it seems that Jesus tells them to ask for bread and then, in the next breath, tells a story where a person asking for bread might not receive it. The sleeping friend, often connected with God, seems intent on continuing to sleep. This connection is troubling. Indeed, as Mikeal Parsons suggests, "The predicament of a friend who sleeps when his petitioning friend has a need is an image that is similar to the problem of a god who seemingly sleeps in spite of human injustice and suffering."² This parable marches directly into accusations of theodicy, questioning God's goodness (or, at the very least, ambivalence) to human suffering and need.

The friend, however, does not accept this refusal. The author of Luke does not cue the reader into what happened between the

¹ See: François Bovon, *Luke*, trans Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 534; Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 262; and John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 356.

² Parsons, *Luke*, 184.

neighbor's apparent refusal and later acquiescence to the request. It seems the conversation between friends continued: the petitioning friend must have continued demanding bread. His requests were so persistent, in fact, that the author of Luke suggests that it was not friendship, but persistence, that led to the acquisition of bread.

The connection between the petition for bread in the Lord's Prayer and the petition of the friend at midnight for bread are hard to miss. Occurring within four verses of each other, the story seems to suggest that the disciples—the petitioners—ought to persistently ask for bread, even when it seems their requests will be refused.

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Daily bread includes everything that has to do with the support and needs of the body, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children, devout workers, devout and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace,

health, self-control, good reputation, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.³

Even if Luther did not have the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer in mind here, Luther connects one's daily sustenance with one's friends and neighbors. The supply of bread, for Luther and for Luke, tethers us not only to God in our petitions for bread, but also to our friends and neighbors, especially those who have answered our calls for help—whether for bread or support in times of trouble—and those whose calls we might answer.

The Lord's Prayer and its ensuing commentary draw us into community. In this community, persistence is part of our sustenance. The petitioner reminds us of the shamelessness of prayer, "Truly I tell you, even if he [the friend] does not rise to give him [the petitioner] anything because of his [the friend's] friendship, indeed he [the friend] will rise and give him [the petitioner] whatever he needs as a result of his [the petitioner's] shamelessness" (Luke 11:8). We rarely talk in Christian communities about this aspect of prayer. Often, prayer is portrayed as a way to connect with God (and it is) and with our neighbor (and it is). The need for persistent prayer may also be stressed. The calls to *shameless* prayer, however, are an altogether different matter. It does not mean asking for ridiculous things in prayer; rather, this shameless prayer, as the petitioner demonstrates, lies in the persistence of prayer. It lies also, as indicated in the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, in our willingness to let our prayer lead us to action.

PRAYER AND PROTEST

The parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge shows the ways prayer leads to action. Like the friend who initially refuses but eventually rises and gets bread, the judge who cared nothing for justice and even less for a wronged widow eventually grants her justice. Both the widow and the petitioning friend show persistence and both are willing to trouble those who could provide what they need.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism: With Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 20–21.

The parable gives little detail to the widow's background, the particular form of injustice she has experienced, or who her opponent is. The woman's appearance in court might suggest, on the one hand, that she has no remaining male relatives to bring her case. It could suggest, on the other hand, that her male family members' have failed to do their duty to support her. While F. Scott Spencer admits that this story does not necessarily suggest that the woman is poor, he argues that "more often than not, widows' claims to ownership and security remained especially ripe for *litigation* in the face of male relatives disinclined to share their resources with widows in the family and, in some cases, maliciously bent on taking widows to the cleaners to pad their own accounts."⁴ Barbara Reid argues similarly: "[widows] are usually mentioned in the same breath with orphans and aliens, that is, those who are vulnerable and without resources, a woman in a financially precarious position as well as without social status, at the mercy of her nearest male relative, who was responsible to take on her care."⁵ The widow does not seem to have the status necessary to send someone else to court, nor does she seem to have the funds to pay someone else to go on her behalf.

The widow, however, is a surprising character. She is neither helpless nor hopeless. In fact, the parable portrays the widow as aggressively pursuing justice. John Carroll highlights the humor in the scene: "Jesus draws cartoon-character sketches that defy expectation: a judge who cares not a whit for justice; a vulnerable widow who acts aggressively with persistent courage, such an imposing force that the judge feels he is undergoing pummeling by a boxer."⁶ The widow continually troubles the judge, so much so that the term used to describe her action was one used to describe a boxer punching another in the eye. The widow, it seems, will not stop until the injustice is righted. The irony and humor, however, as Carroll notes, are "the sort of

⁴ F. Scott. Spencer, "The Savvy Widow's Might: Fighting for Justice in an Unjust World," in *Salty Wives, Spirited Mothers, and Savvy Widows: Capable Women of Purpose and Persistence in Luke's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 271. Tannehill, likewise, suggests that the situation is grim: Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 263.

⁵ Barbara Reid, "A Godly Widow Persistently Pursuing Justice: Luke 18:1-8," *Biblical Research* 45 (2000): 29-30.

⁶ John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 356.

serious humor that knows, and names, the stark reality—within Rome-occupied Palestine in the first century, but in other times and places as well—of oppression and injustice suffered by persons to whom the judicial, economic, and political systems continually turn a cold, silent shoulder.⁷ It seems that the widow, like the petitioner in Luke 11:5–8, will not receive that which she seeks.

Given the lack of regard the judge has for God and humans, it also seems unlikely that the judge fears the shame or any reputational damage that could be incurred by his failure to bring about justice. The judge's reason for granting justice is that the widow continues causing him trouble.

The judge, however, presents an expected turn; he grants the widow justice. He has not come to his senses or had a change of heart. In fact, he repeats to himself the introductory phrase that he has “no respect for God nor have regard for humans” (Luke 18:4). The widow is little threat to this judge; she apparently has no recourse other than to continually go to him with her demand for justice. It is unclear why, exactly, the judge offers the widow relief from her opponent. François Bovon argues “Just like the father who had gone to sleep in the parallel parable (11:5–8), the judge finally condescends to giving the victim her rights in order to avoid an external discomfort and to spare himself a personal humiliation. What the widow could do to him would probably damage his professional reputation.”⁸ Given the lack of regard the judge has for God and humans, it also seems unlikely that the judge fears the shame or any reputational damage that could be incurred by his failure to bring about justice. The judge's reason for granting justice is that the widow continues causing him trouble. I imagine her going to court daily, raising a ruckus about the judge, making his work less efficient. The widow has been granted justice because she, it seems, was willing to be a royal pain for the judge, obstructing his ability to do his job.

⁷ Carroll, *Luke*, 356.

⁸ Bovon, *Luke*, 534.

The widow takes the matter of justice into her own hands. Lacking someone to advocate for her, she becomes her own advocate. Her persistence leads to the righting of the wrong. The judge's dilatory attempts to thwart justice ultimately fail. The lesson of the judge is that God brings justice to those like the widow, who call out day and night. When the calls of the widows will not reach the ears of those who are tasked to enact justice but do not, their cries reach the ears of God.

GOD ACTS

In both narratives about prayer, a petitioner makes a request that is denied, at least at first. Without any indication of a change of heart on the part of the friend who supplies bread or the judge who supplies justice, something shifts so that they grant the requests for bread and justice, respectively. The explanation for granting the request is supplied in both texts: the friend's shamelessness in Luke 11:8 and the widow's rabble-raising in Luke 18:5. I wonder, however, whether something more is at play here. Given that the context of both of these narratives is teaching on prayer, it seems that the persistence of the pray-er is only one part of the equation. The other part suggests that the context of prayer is asking God to intervene, whether for daily bread or for justice. It is God's intervention, taken together with the petitioner's persistence (or shamelessness) that leads to action.

God's intervention is an important component in the pursuit of bread and justice. In the case of the first narrative, its connection to the Lord's Prayer two verses earlier is unmistakable. The friend's refusal is his last word: "I am not able to get up to get you anything" (Luke 11:7). The conversation seems to have ended, yet it has not. The explanation could stand as-is. While it is the most natural reading of these verses when read in isolation, the explanation for why the petitioning friend received bread is not the best reading of the verses when they are read in the light of the Lord's Prayer. In the Lord's Prayer it is *God* who supplies bread. Despite the friend's clear refusal, he still provides bread. In this parable, the one who provides bread acts in the image of God, who hears the cries of those who hunger.

The second parable presents a more difficult argument in terms of God acting within the parable. How does God act in circumstances

where a person meant to enact justice is not compelled by God or humans? At the end of the parable, Jesus instructs his hearers to "Listen to what the unjust judge says..." (Luke 18:6) and insists that *God* will grant justice swiftly to those "who cry out day and night" (Luke 18:7). With little recourse against the judge or her opponent and little power to bring about justice on her own, the widow is cast among those who cry out to God. The unjust judge, despite lacking the necessary characteristics to enact justice (i.e., respect for God or humans), grants the woman relief from her opponent. This enactment of justice, for the unjust judge, must come from without; the woman's continual nagging and God's commitment to bringing about justice. If it is God who brings about justice, then the unjust judge—despite his introduction—is utilized as an agent for God's purpose. The widow, whose cries have reached the ears of God, receives the justice she seeks.

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⁹ Spencer, "Savvy Widows," 307.

PRAYING THE LORD'S PRAYER AS PROTEST

The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Widow and the Unjust Judge shed light on how we might read the Lord's Prayer. Because these stories are tied together through similar features and because the first acts as a commentary or explanation of the Lord's Prayer, both shed light on the prayer and what it might mean. The Lord's Prayer, in the light of the Friend at Midnight and the Widow and the Unjust Judge, might be read as a prayer of protest. This prayer, prayed in a world where might makes right and where those who have receive more and those who do not have receive less (Luke 19:26), is a prayer that insists that God is the one who brings daily sustenance and enacts justice. The prayer, at the same time, implicates those who say it to act in the image of God, to provide daily sustenance for those who need it and to bring about justice for those who have no advocate.

The Lord's Prayer is rarely read as a prayer of protest. It is rarely read as a prayer that has any real effect on our lives here and now. For many, the prayer has lost its transformative power and has become a performative—worse, rote—component of communal worship. The words of the prayer, however, are an eschatological reckoning; they ask that God's eternal present be drawn into our present reality.

Your kingdom come
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven

These words, both in the first and the twenty-first century, are a protest to the structures and systems of the present day. Instead, they call for God's reality and God's reign to come. This reality, where God provides daily sustenance and justice for all, flies in the face of the realities of the first and twenty-first centuries.

In the first centuries BCE and CE, the Roman government worked to regulate the grain trade. This regulation, in many cases, backfired, leading to those who could afford to hoard grain to do so. As Morris Silver argues, "Maximum price edicts and forced sales undermined and disrupted Roman grain markets. This caused significant anxiety among urban consumers, which led them to hoard

grain insecurely in their homes.”¹⁰ The Roman economy, according to Seth Bernard, “attained levels of production sufficient to end regular famine,”¹¹ but nevertheless paved the way for hoarding instead of sharing. The human propensity to hoard food and other life-sustaining items continues in the twenty-first century. An estimated 30–40 percent of food in the United States is wasted (and around 20 percent of that waste comes from consumers).¹² At the same time, according to a United Nations Report, “As many as 828 million people were affected by hunger in 2021.”¹³ This dual-reality of hoarding and hunger is a reality against which we pray when we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

The prayer for daily sustenance draws the one who has an abundance of sustenance (bread, money, friends, government, etc., as Luther described it) into community—communion—with one who does not. Those of us who have more than we need, in this prayer, both admit and confess our excess. At the same time, we admit and confess our responsibility to remedy this excess.¹⁴ The offer of bread is intertwined with our prayer that God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done. Like the friend who provides bread at midnight, we are called to hear the cries of those who hunger and to provide for them. We are also called to disrupt systems that perpetuate hunger for the enrichment of those who have more than they need.

Likewise, in this prayer, we pray for the disruption of systemic injustice. In the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, the widow, apparently, did not have anyone else to advocate for her; she was her

¹⁰ Morris Silver, “The Plague under Commodus as an Unintended Consequence of Roman Grain Market Regulation” *The Classical World* 105, no. 2 (2012): 225.

¹¹ Seth Bernard, “Debt, Land, and Labor in the Early Roman Economy,” *Phoenix* 70, no. 3–4 (2016): 317.

¹² “Why Should We Care about Food Waste?” United States Department of Agriculture, ND, <https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/why>.

¹³ “UN Report: Global hunger numbers rose to as many as 828 million in 2021,” World Health Organization, July 6, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxum6fv>.

¹⁴ In Luther’s commentary on the Fifth Commandment in the Large Catechism, he argues that those who could provide sustenance for their neighbors but do not are guilty of murder: “under this commandment not only he is guilty who does evil to his neighbor, but he also who can do him good, prevent, resist evil, defend and save him, so that no bodily harm or hurt happen to him, and yet does not do it. If, therefore, you send away one that is naked when you could clothe him, you have caused him to freeze to death; if you see one suffer hunger and do not give him food, you have caused him to starve.” Martin Luther, “The Large Catechism” in *Triglott Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*, trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 565.

own advocate. This parable, like the Lord's Prayer, reminds us that the systems of justice on earth are beset with human inclinations and power dynamics. In praying the Lord's Prayer, we recognize that we are part of these unjust systems and commit to do our part to advocate for justice and for our neighbors who experience injustice. The Lord's Prayer, in its invoking God's kingdom and God's will, calls us to be advocates for the least of these, including those who do not have an earthly advocate. We therefore listen with God for those who call out day and night (Luke 18:7). Praying the Lord's Prayer—in its call for a different kingdom and a different will from that which we experience on earth—is an act of protest against systemic injustice. In doing so, we join with the widow in arguing her case.

CONCLUSION

The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Widow and the Unjust Judge have much to teach us about prayer. Even more, they have much to teach us about the Lord's Prayer. In both stories, a character makes a request: for bread and for justice, respectively. Both requests are refused, at least at first. Eventually, with no apparent change of heart, the characters in the stories grant the requests to their petitioners. According to the Lord's Prayer, it is God who brings bread. Likewise, according to Jesus's commentary on the Widow and the Unjust Judge, it is God who brings justice.

These stories remind us that prayer, among other things, can be an act of resistance or protest against systems and structures that cause harm. In a world where people are more likely to hoard resources than to share, the Lord's Prayer acts as a simultaneous confession and call to action: God calls us who have bread to share. The prayer, in asking for God's kingdom and reign to come, proclaims our desire for God's justice and righteousness to prevail. The prayer, more than a rote recitation of ancient words, invokes God's reality among us. It likewise asserts our belief that God will not rest until all has been set right and invites us into God's justice-bringing work.

In the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Widow and the Unjust Judge, the author of Luke draws us into active prayer. While prayer *can* be an introspective journey in one's relationship with God, these stories remind us that prayer also draws us out of ourselves.

Prayer impels us to action, as we listen for those who hunger, whether for bread or for justice. ⊕

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