

PRAYER OR DESPAIR?  
THE PARABLES OF THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT AND THE UNJUST JUDGE

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NASB	New American Standard Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Two parables—the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8) and the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)—are often grouped together and considered to be making the same point: we need to be persistent in prayer if we expect to receive our requests. This paper will argue that this popular understanding of the parables is wrong on two counts: 1) the two parables do not make the same point; and 2) neither parable is advocating persistence in prayer as a means of receiving our requests. I do not want to be misunderstood; persistence in prayer is a biblical idea, although as many of the heroes of the Bible (including our Lord) could remind us, earnest and extended prayer is no guarantee that God will grant what we ask for. The parables of the Unjust Judge and the Friend at Midnight, however, are about those prayers concerning which God has promised He *will* say “yes.” Together, they urge us to persevere in faith by reminding us who God is and why His promises must be believed. Throughout the centuries, God’s people have been crying out to Him for deliverance; these parables serve to remind us why we should maintain our confidence that those prayers will be answered.

The paper will explore these parables in five main chapters:

**Chapter 2: Methodology.** Part one will comment *very* briefly on two unavoidable methodological questions: 1) How should we interpret parables? 2) What role should we give modern higher criticism of parables?

**Chapter 3: The Parable of the Friend at Midnight.** This exegetical examination of Luke 11:5-8 will argue that the parable is not concerned with persistence in

prayer at all; rather, it assures us that our prayers are not in vain—especially those for God’s promised future salvation—because of the character of God.

**Chapter 4: The Parable of the Unjust Judge.** This exegetical examination of Luke 18:1-8 will argue that the parable does not focus on perseverance in prayer as a means to receive our requests; rather, it portrays perseverance in prayer as an essential part of persevering in saving faith and avoiding faithless despair.

**Chapter 5: The Place of Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-8 in Church History.** After having laid out the exegetical issues in the previous sections, the paper will look at the way these parables have been understood and used in Church History, both exegetically and theologically.

**Chapter 6: Theological Reflections on Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-8.** This chapter is my own attempt to connect the teaching of these two parables with larger biblical themes—to propose a way in which these parables help us to develop a biblical worldview.

The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge deserve a more central place in our reflections on the Christian life. My purpose in this paper is to show how this is so.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible passages in this paper are from the NASB.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

Anyone undertaking a serious study of the literature on parables will soon discover the following: 1) there is much disagreement on how parables communicate; and 2) many scholars are skeptical about whether the parables as they stand accurately reflect the teaching of Jesus. Therefore, before the paper looks specifically at the parables of The Unjust Judge and The Friend at Midnight, this chapter will briefly address these two methodological issues.

#### The Interpretation of Parables

Given the long and rich debate over the correct way to interpret the parables of Jesus, it seems appropriate to describe the approach taken in this paper. I understand the parables to be vivid, extended analogies. If this is correct, then they should be understood the way any analogy would be understood. There are always three steps: 1) Try to understand the story itself, the dynamic and logic that drives it. Why was the pearl merchant so happy to sell everything he had (Matt. 13:45-46)? Why did the unrighteous steward cheat on his boss (Luke 16:1-13)? Why is it obvious that the vineyard owner should throw the tenants out (Matt. 21:33-44)? 2) Determine the points of analogy between the story and the reality. There may be one; there may be several. Are the vineyard owner and the tenants like God and Israel? Is the unrighteous steward like us? Of course, we want to avoid “stretching the analogy,” making connections between the story and the reality that the author did not intend. 3) Ask the most important question: How is the reality like the story? How is pursuing the

kingdom of God like cheating on your boss? Why should we expect the same positive answer to our prayers that the widow received from the judge? It is at this step that the richness and power of the analogy will be apparent.

Scholars often debate whether the parables of Jesus should be seen as “allegories.” My answer is: it depends on how we define allegory. This issue will be discussed further in the Church history chapter later in this paper, as well as in Appendix 1, “Interpreting the Parables.” For now, let it suffice to say that the key concept in parables is not “allegory” but “analogy.” Therefore, this paper will ask three questions derived from the above discussion of analogies: 1) What is happening in the story? 2) To what reality is the story analogous? 3) Why is the reality like the story?

### Higher Criticism

Exegesis is a search for coherence; the exegete wants to find the flow of thought, the connection of ideas that an author has made. Researching scholarly opinion about these two parables in Luke, however, quickly shows that many scholars are on a higher-critical quest for fragmentation. According to this approach, we see in the parables pieces of Jesus’ original story wrenched from the original *Sitz im Leben*—the original “life situation”—and fitted into a new context to make Luke’s point, not Jesus’ point. Sometimes this approach can seem very mild; Ellis suggests, for example, that Luke is writing the parable of the Unjust Judge to those who are denying faith under persecution.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, could be true, but how we would know this? Ellis does not explain his rationale, but

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<sup>1</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 212.

he seems to be assuming that if a text has something in it relevant to persecution, it must be attributable to Luke and not Jesus. Barnett goes further:

The editorial comment [verses 1, 6-8] reflects neither the spirit nor the times of Jesus, but rather a persecution situation in which the faith of disciples is so severely tested as to make the survival of the Christian movement doubtful unless the parousia comes speedily.<sup>2</sup>

Blomberg reminds us that other scholars take the same approach; they believe that the parable reflects the situation of the later church, when it had to face into the reality that Jesus had not yet returned.<sup>3</sup> Hultgren argues that Luke has added “However, when the Son of Man returns will He find faith on the earth (Luke 18:8b)” to the parable of the Unjust Judge,<sup>4</sup> and Nolland says that a broad consensus of scholars would agree.<sup>5</sup> Many believe that Jesus is only responsible for the bare story of the widow and the judge, with Luke having transformed its meaning to be about prayer. For example, Scott sees the point of the original parable to be the unstoppable nature of the kingdom; like the widow, it just keeps coming.<sup>6</sup> Crossan sees the Judge as a model of bowing to the inevitable.<sup>7</sup> Curkpatrick does not even consider the possibility that Jesus could be responsible for both the story and the application, and he

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<sup>2</sup> Albert E. Barnett, *Understanding the Parables of our Lord* (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1954), 172.

<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 272.

<sup>4</sup> Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 257.

<sup>5</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35b (Nashville: Nelson Reference, 1989), 870.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 187.

<sup>7</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 84.

asserts that there are two parables: an inner one about an “audacious widow with a quest for justice” and an outer one, formed by Luke’s additions, about prayer.<sup>8</sup>

The same sorts of claims are made concerning the parable of the Friend at Midnight. Jeremias says that the point of the parable has been “distorted” by Luke’s placement of the parable.<sup>9</sup> Waetjen warns of the danger that the original parable will lose its “radical nature and power” in the setting in which Luke has placed it, and he suggests that it is about the subversion of oppressive power structures.<sup>10</sup> Scott distinguishes between Luke’s “performance” of the parable, which is about prayer, and the original parable, which was about the obligations of life in a village.<sup>11</sup>

The above are examples of the sort of arguments any student of these parables will encounter, and there are many more where they came from. How do these arguments relate to the project of this paper? I have several comments:

1. The conclusions of form criticism, redaction criticism, and so on, are not always reductionistic and destructive, although they often are.
2. It can be a worthwhile and legitimate endeavor to patiently answer each of the destructive arguments of higher criticism one by one. For example, Blomberg makes it his goal to propose some “alternative hypotheses” in his chapter on “Form Criticism & the Parables.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen Curkpatrick, “Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* vol. 121 no. 1 (2002): 108-9.

<sup>9</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d. rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 105.

<sup>10</sup> Herman C. Waetjen, “The Subversion of ‘World’ by the Parable of the Friend at Midnight,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 120, no. 4 (Winter, 2001): 716-717.

<sup>11</sup> Scott, 89-91.

<sup>12</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 72.

3. By no means, however, is it the purpose of this paper to address higher-critical arguments concerning the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge.
4. This paper will take a canonical approach to the parables; that is, the parables will be studied in the form that they appear in the canon, with the goal of understanding the coherent message the parables communicate in that context.
5. Although this is not the place to argue it, I would maintain that a canonical approach is mandated by the inerrancy of the Bible.

The focus of this paper, therefore, will be on the arguments of the parables as Luke presents them, with the confidence that they reflect the teaching that Jesus intended the church to have.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PARABLE OF THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

And He said to them, “Suppose one of you shall have a friend, and shall go to him at midnight, and say to him, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; and from inside he shall answer and say, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs.” (Luke 11:5-8, NASB)

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight is deceptively simple. At first glance its point seems obvious: just as the man inside, who at first refused, finally responded to the persistent pleas of his friend, so God will respond to our persistence in prayer. And yet, I would argue that this popular impression of what the parable teaches is quite wrong.

A number of recent studies, however, have shed light on this parable, with the result that the meaning Jesus intended is becoming clearer. The purpose of this chapter is to draw on those studies to clarify what Jesus meant and highlight the profound importance of what this parable is actually teaching. The first part of the chapter will deal with a number of exegetical details.<sup>1</sup> It will examine various issues regarding the background, the context, and the details of the story itself. After having examined the details, the chapter will conclude by putting the pieces together to decide what the parable is teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Metzger reports no textual variants of interest in either of the two parables being studied in this paper, so the exegetical discussion will not include textual criticism. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, 3d ed.*, (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 156, 168.

### Background and Context

No parable stands in a vacuum; things outside the parable itself have the potential to affect how we understand it. This section examines three such issues.

#### Twin Parables?

Some would argue that the Parable of the Unjust Judge is a twin parable with the Parable of the Friend at Midnight; therefore, each parable should be understood in light of the other. In particular, since the Parable of the Unjust Judge is clearly a story about persistence in making a request, the twin nature of these parables suggests that the Friend at Midnight should also be seen as being about persistence. Since the idea that both parables teach the same thing is one of the points at issue in this paper, Hultgren's summation of that argument is useful:

In both form and content the Parable of the Unjust Judge is a twin of the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (11:5-8): (1) it portrays a person in need going to another for assistance; (2) that person goes with one degree or another of impertinence; (3) the other person (the one being visited) becomes annoyed; but (4) he does actually provide the assistance; (5) there is a linguistic similarity between 18:5 and 11:7 [παρεχειν... κοπον,]; and (6) in each case the parable has to do with the theme of prayer.<sup>2</sup>

This argument is very clear, but it is not as compelling as it might first appear. Points 1, 4, and 6 are true but trivial, since the issue in both contexts is petitionary prayer. It is hardly surprising that a story about making requests of God would be about prayer (6) and would have a needy person who makes a request (1) and receives what he asks for (4). Points 2 and 3 concerning impertinence and annoyance are debatable, as shall become apparent in this chapter. The linguistic similarity noted in point 5 is true, but the logic of the word usage in the two parables is quite different. Thus, although there are clear similarities between the

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<sup>2</sup> Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 253.

two parables, the similarities are not so strong that we must conclude that they make the same point. The parables are both about making requests to God, but surely we cannot assume that Jesus only has one point He can make about petitionary prayer.

### Hospitality and Shame

I was first introduced to the fascinating interpretive issues in this parable through colleagues who called my attention to Kenneth Bailey's influential book, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*.<sup>3</sup> While my conclusions have now varied somewhat from Bailey's, his discussion is very helpful and provocative. A key point that he makes concerns the cultural expectation regarding hospitality. "The Oriental responsibility for his guest is legendary. . . . The host *must* serve his guest and the guest *must* eat."<sup>4</sup> For a host to be unable to offer hospitality to a guest would be shameful; more importantly, it would bring shame not only on himself, but also on the entire village. "A guest must leave the village with a good feeling about the hospitality of the village as a community."<sup>5</sup> As modern readers we might see only one striking feature of this story: midnight is an outrageous time to ask a favor from a friend. But in the cultural setting in which Jesus is telling the story, the outrageous time must be balanced against the importance and reasonableness of the request. This will be an important consideration as we interpret the parable.

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<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Jesus in Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976). Crump reminds us though that the basic approach goes back to Fridrichsen in 1934; David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven's Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 68.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, 121-122.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

## The Context on Prayer

The Parable of the Friend at Midnight is found in Luke 11, in a section where prayer is the focus. The parable is preceded by the Lord's Prayer, and it is followed by the assurance "ask and you shall receive." The teaching in the Lord's Prayer and its relationship to a theology of prayer is a topic that deserves a thesis paper of its own and cannot be explored at length here. I cannot talk about the Friend at Midnight, however, without making a few comments on the kind of prayer represented by the Lord's Prayer.

Imagine that a man came to Jesus and said, "I am praying to God that I might become rich and important; power and wealth and many beautiful wives are the key to happiness, and I am asking God for all of that." Would Jesus respond by telling him "ask and you shall receive"? No. We must think about the requests we make to God as being of two kinds: requests for things that God has promised to give and requests for things that we want but have not been promised. The Lord's Prayer represents a prayer of the first kind: in it we pray for the ultimate spiritual blessings that God has promised: forgiveness, deliverance and our ultimate fulfillment in the coming kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> I agree with Keener:

Although Jesus' ministry sets the elements of the prayer in a new context—the future kingdom is present in a hidden way in the future King, Jesus of Nazareth (8:29; 13:31-33)—the disciples must have heard in Jesus' words an exhortation to seek God's coming kingdom (4:17; 6:33) by praying for it to come. . . . This is a prayer for the desperate, who recognize that this world is not as it should be and that only God can set things straight—the broken to whom Jesus promises the blessings of the Kingdom (5:3-12).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The request "give us each day our daily bread" may seem to be of a different sort, and perhaps it is. However, the case can be made that the request is really for a taste today of the eternal bread of the coming kingdom, which would be a promised spiritual blessing as well. See R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 184.

<sup>7</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 216.

When we are praying for God to honor His promises and meet our fundamental human and spiritual needs, we can indeed expect that if we ask, we will receive. (This issue will be explored further in the theology chapter below.) Thus as we seek to understand the story of the Friend at Midnight, the story about one who will surely say “yes,” we need to be clear in our minds the sort of requests to which God will always say “yes.”

### Exegetical Details in the Story

In the story of the Friend at Midnight, there are three very important exegetical issues that must be addressed; these three issues correspond to three places that, in my view, the NASB made some unfortunate translations.

#### Who among you?

The NASB makes the first sentence a statement rather than a question: “Suppose one of you shall have a friend . . . and shall go to him . . . and from inside he shall answer . . .” This is an unfortunate way to translate a sentence starting with τίς ἐξ ὑμῶν (“Who among you?”), a phrase that is among the most important in the parable. I agree, therefore, with Jeremias,<sup>8</sup> Bailey,<sup>9</sup> and Johnson<sup>10</sup> (among others) in their emphasis on the importance of the phrase. It is a construction that Jesus used in numerous contexts. Consider a few examples (I have made the translations more literal to make the point clear):

But who among you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, “Come immediately and sit down to eat”? *Implied answer: “No one among you will say this.”* (Luke 17:7)

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<sup>8</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, 2d. rev. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 158.

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Johnson, “Assurance for Man: The Fallacy of Translating *anaideia* by ‘Persistence’ in Luke 11:5-8,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 22 no. 2 (June 1979): 124.

For who among you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost, to see if he has enough to complete it? *Implied answer: “No one among you does not sit down to calculate the cost.”* (Luke 14:28)

Now a son will ask what father among you for a fish and instead of a fish he will give him a snake? *Implied answer: A son will ask no father among you for a fish and get a snake.* (Luke 11:11)

Jesus starts His stories “who among you” so He can emphasize that “no one among you” would act in the way He describes. What makes the Friend at Midnight passage more difficult is the length and complexity of the sentence that follows it, which includes several quotations. Hultgren is right to emphasize that the entire statement runs through verse 7.<sup>11</sup> Reduced to its simplest form, however, the logic of Jesus’ statement emerges clearly:

Who among you shall make this request to his friend and the friend would say “Don’t bother me, I can’t give you anything.” *Implied answer: “No one among you has a friend who would answer in this way.”*

Jesus’ point is categorical: no one has a friend who would act this way under these circumstances. Notice what Jesus does not say; He does not say, “If you ask your friend and at first he says ‘no,’ then keep asking him and eventually he will say ‘yes.’” Instead, Jesus is asking, “If you ask your friend in these circumstances, he will say ‘yes,’ won’t he?” Here Bailey’s argument concerning cultural background comes into play. The friend’s request is very reasonable, even at midnight; it would bring shame on everyone in the village, including the man in bed, if a guest were not fed. Of course he will say “yes.”

Does he refuse at first?

Some commentators understand the man inside to have turned down his friend’s request—at first. As Hanko puts it, “This was a flat refusal that could not possibly be

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<sup>11</sup> Hultgren, 228.

misunderstood.”<sup>12</sup> This understanding seems to be reflected in the NASB translation, “even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend” (Luke 11:8). However, is this the best way to translate a phrase starting with εἰ καὶ? Is Jesus saying, “even though he will not,” or is He saying, “even if he might not”? “Even though” implies that the speaker believes what he is about to say is true, and sometimes that is the best way to translate εἰ καὶ, as in Luke 18: 4, “[the judge] said to himself, ‘*Even though* I do not fear God nor respect man,’” But in other places “even if” is the better translation—for example, in II Corinthians 11:6, where Paul is defending himself against the charge that he is a poor speaker: “For I consider myself not in the least inferior to the most eminent apostles. But *even if I were* unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge.” Paul is not agreeing with the statement “I am unskilled in speech.” Paul clearly believes that he is not inferior in any way, but *even if it were true* that he speaks poorly, he still is not inferior in knowledge. We should understand the meaning of εἰ καὶ in Luke 11:8 in the same way, as Nolland asserts.<sup>13</sup>

Geldenhuis says it well:

The Saviour does not state that the friend will say anything of this kind, but (according to verse 8) wants expressly to point out how impossible it is for a normal person to adopt such an unfriendly attitude. Many Bible expositors go astray here by saying that the person by these words refused to accede to his friend’s request, and only later on, in order to get rid of the importunate friend, granted what he needed.<sup>14</sup>

Jesus is not saying that friendship would not be enough for the man inside; if we think about our own lives, it seems pretty clear that friendship might easily be enough. If

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<sup>12</sup> Herman C. Hanko, *The Mysteries of the Kingdom: An Exposition of the Parables* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1975), 85.

<sup>13</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35b (Nashville: Nelson Reference, 1989), 625.

<sup>14</sup> Norval Geldenhuis, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 326.

my friend comes with a need, even if it is inconvenient for me, I am likely to meet it. Rather, Jesus is saying, “Even if the householder might not get up and give the man outside something because he is his friend (although friendship would likely be enough), another reason will definitely make him get up.” That other reason, as we are about to see, is his ἀναίδεια.

### ἀναίδεια

So far I have argued that there is no hint in Jesus’ story of persistent, repeated requests. Where, then, did we get the idea that persistence is the issue in the Friend at Midnight? One contributing factor may have been the Vulgate, the Latin version that became so influential in the Catholic Church. The Vulgate has picked up from the Old Latin MS tradition the phrase *et si ille perseveraverit pulsans*,<sup>15</sup> which we see reflected in the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible as “yet if he shall continue knocking,” clearly indicating that at some time a Latin translator saw persistence in knocking as the key to the story. The Vulgate translation of ἀναίδεια is *improbitatem*, a word which typically has meanings such as “wickedness; however, there is some evidence that it could also be understood to mean “persistence.”<sup>16</sup> The following chart shows the relationship between the Greek text and the Latin Vulgate Clementina (and the English texts which reflect them, the NASB and the Catholic Douay-Rheims versions, respectively):

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<sup>15</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 462.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Burton, *The Old Latin Gospels: A Study of their Texts and Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 130-131.

Greek	NASB	Vulgate Clementina	Douay-Rheims
λέγω ὑμῖν, εἰ καὶ οὐ δώσει αὐτῷ ἀναστὰς διὰ τὸ εἶναι φίλον αὐτοῦ, διὰ γε τὴν ἀναίδειαν αὐτοῦ ἐγερθεὶς δώσει αὐτῷ ὅσων χρήζει.	I say to you, even if he will not get up to give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his ἀναίδεια he will get up and give him as much as he needs.	(Et si ille perseveraverit pulsans:) dico vobis, etsi non dabit illi surgens eo quod amicus ejus sit, propter improbitatem tamen ejus surget, et dabit illi quotquot habet necessarios.	(Yet if he shall continue knocking,) I say to you, although he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend; yet, because of <i>improbitatem</i> , he will rise, and give him as many as he needeth.

Whether through the influence of the Vulgate or not, many versions understand ἀναίδεια in the same way:

- NASB: yet because of his persistence
- RSV: yet because of his importunity
- KJV: yet because of his importunity

Persistence, importunity—this is how these translations have rendered the word ἀναίδεια.

At some time, perhaps because of the seeming similarity between this parable and the parable of the Unjust Judge, it became commonly understood that this parable was talking about persistence in prayer. Much has been written about this difficult word; my purpose here is to sum up the main features of the arguments concerning this word and to propose how I think it should be understood. To do so I will make four points:

Point #1: Not Persistence

In their survey of ancient Greek texts, Bailey,<sup>17</sup> Snodgrass,<sup>18</sup> and Johnson<sup>19</sup> show that there is no clear example of ἀναίδεια ever being used to mean “persistence.”<sup>20</sup> Although ἀναίδεια only appears once in the New Testament, it appears often in Greek literature, and in that literature “persistence” is far from its typical meaning. Crump puts it bluntly:

One point that can be stated categorically is that the traditional translation of *anaideia* as “persistence” is incorrect and should be consigned once and for all to a short paragraph among the historical oddities of biblical (mis)translation.<sup>21</sup>

Point #2: Shamelessness

In those same surveys, Bailey, Snodgrass, and Johnson show that ἀναίδεια is used to mean the negative quality of “shamelessness.” To be shameless is to lack appropriate shame; if I stand up in church, interrupt the pastor’s sermon, and start trying to sell Tupperware, I ought to be ashamed of my behavior, but clearly I am not—I am shameless. The evidence clearly points to this as the common meaning of the word, but not everyone finds this compelling; Arndt acknowledges that it means shamelessness, but then asserts the following:

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<sup>17</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 125-126.

<sup>18</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, “Anaideia and the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:8),” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 116, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 506-509; 511-512.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, 125-127.

<sup>20</sup> There are a few debatable examples involving cognate forms, but I think Snodgrass deals with them well: Snodgrass, 511-512.

<sup>21</sup> Crump, 67.

The parable, of course, is not intended to commend shamelessness. To give it such an interpretation would mean losing sight of the point of comparison: that persistent prayer is not in vain.<sup>22</sup>

As we have seen, however, nothing in the parable points to persistence in prayer as the issue. Given that the word has a very clear range of meaning in Greek literature, it would be best to pursue that meaning and see if it fits in the parable.

### Point #3: Negative, not Positive

In their survey of Greek texts, Bailey, Snodgrass, and Johnson also all agree that ἀναίδεια always had a negative, not positive, connotation. That is, it always meant something like “lacking appropriate shame for shameful behavior” rather than the positive idea of “lacking anything to be ashamed of” or “desiring not to shame oneself.” This, however, presents a problem: how does a story about a man who lacked appropriate shame teach us anything about prayer?

One kind of solution is proposed by Bailey. In spite of the evidence of prior Greek usage, he would interpret ἀναίδεια positively and attribute this quality to the man in the house, not the man making the request.<sup>23</sup> Jesus is then saying something like “because of the desire of the man in the house to avoid shame, he will get up. . .” Johnson, with some reservations, seems to embrace Bailey’s perspective.<sup>24</sup>

I find myself in the same position that Snodgrass did: he found Bailey’s argument appealing until he looked again at the evidence of how the word was used in Greek

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<sup>22</sup> William F. Arndt, *Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 297-298.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 133.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, 130.

literature.<sup>25</sup> There is zero evidence that the word ever had this positive sense. Bailey is quite aware of that, and he proposes two alternative explanations: 1) there is a textual error, with ἀναίδεια incorrectly replacing ἀνάτιος, “blamelessness”; or 2) the meaning of ἀναίδεια is dependent on an underlying Aramaic construction “lack of shame” or “avoidance of being shamed.”<sup>26</sup> From my perspective, however, these are arguments of despair. Concerning the first option, it is methodologically dangerous to amend texts just because we find the emendation easier to understand. And concerning the second option, I agree with Nolland: Bailey is basically saying that Luke mistranslated the underlying Aramaic.<sup>27</sup> Luke expected that the Greek readers of his gospel would understand what he wrote; how can we assume that he used a Greek word that communicated the opposite of what he intended it to mean? Furthermore, some would argue that it is not certain that Luke was translating; Jesus may have spoken Greek as well as Aramaic.<sup>28</sup>

It would be attractive to translate ἀναίδεια positively, with a resulting meaning like “because of the desire of the man inside to avoid shame” or, perhaps, “because there is nothing shameful about the supplicant’s request.” I have to agree with Snodgrass<sup>29</sup> and Crump,<sup>30</sup> however, that the evidence for the word’s use does not support this. I conclude,

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<sup>25</sup> Snodgrass, 507 In note 22 on 510 he speaks to the issue of who the “friend” and “he” is throughout.

<sup>26</sup> Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, 131-132.

<sup>27</sup> Nolland, 626.

<sup>28</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Impact of Historical Criticism on Theology and Apologetics,” In *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, ed. Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 368.

<sup>29</sup> Snodgrass, 510.

<sup>30</sup> Crump, 69-70.

therefore, that we must see the basic meaning in this context as the negative quality of “shamelessness.”

#### Point #4: A Positive Implication

If we take ἀναιδέια to have its extremely common negative meaning of “shamelessness,” where do we go from here? Is there, in fact, genuinely shameful behavior in view somewhere in this story?

Some would say yes. Nolland, for example, sees the issue as the desire of the man inside not to be *seen* as shameless, which is what the neighbors would think if he turned his friend away.<sup>31</sup> The problem with this perspective is the difficulty of turning “his shamelessness” into “his desire not to be seen as having shamelessness.” Liefeld sees the supplicant as acting in a truly shameful manner by awakening his friend; the man inside, then, acts to protect his friend from looking shameless by granting his request.<sup>32</sup> I agree, however, with numerous others who have maintained that, in this culture, the supplicant’s behavior would have been seen as ultimately the right thing to do.<sup>33</sup> Finally, there are others who, while agreeing that the supplicant acted in a truly shameless manner, argue that this is an irrelevant part of the story.<sup>34</sup> The man inside acted begrudgingly, in spite of the rudeness of his friend; how much more can we expect God to answer our prayers, since He does not

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<sup>31</sup> Nolland, 626.

<sup>32</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, “Parables on Prayer (Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-14),” in *The Challenge of Jesus’ Parables*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000), 251.

<sup>33</sup> See Greg W. Forbes, *The God of Old: The Role of the Lukan Parables in the Purpose of Luke’s Gospel*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 75; Jeremias, 158; Bailey, 121; Geldenhuys, 326; Scott, 87; Blomberg, 275; Nolland, 624;.

<sup>34</sup> See Snodgrass, 512-513; Crump, 71.

think we are rude at all? The problem with this argument, however, is that in the story the man inside responds *because* of the supplicant's "shamelessness," not in spite of it.

The best option, then, is to see "shamelessness" as having its usual negative denotation, but in this context to have acquired an ironic positive connotation. Considered as an act in itself, waking up his friend at midnight was a shameless thing to do. As Geldenhuys rightly says, "His coming at such an inconvenient time is the *anaideia*"<sup>35</sup> And yet, considering the need, it was also the *right* thing to do. In fact, the man inside will be struck by the compelling nature of the need precisely because his friend was willing to wake him up brazenly to meet it.<sup>36</sup> Thus ἀναίδεια in this context is best understood to mean "unapologetic boldness, seeming audacity"; it is "shamelessness" in ironic quotation marks. I think of it in terms of my own situation. If a man came and awakened me at midnight and said, "Wake up; I'm bored and I want to play cards," that would be truly shameless behavior. But in this case we are talking about my friend; he is not going to disturb me for something trivial. If my friend comes to me at midnight and says, "I have an urgent need," he is going to get a positive response from me. The very fact that he is doing the (usually) audacious thing of waking me at midnight shows me that his need is serious. His very audacity is a mark in his favor. Because of his ἀναίδεια, I will give him as much as he needs.

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<sup>35</sup> Geldenhuys, 326.

<sup>36</sup> Derrett makes the interesting (and possibly relevant) claim that, in Asian cultures, asking in what might seem to a rude manner indicates how strong the asker views the friendship. J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Friend at Midnight: Asian Ideas in the Gospel of St. Luke," *Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 3, *Midrash, Haggadah, and the Character of the Community* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982), 36.

### The Meaning of the Parable

Here is how I would translate Luke 11:5-8 in the light of the issues discussed above:

And He said to them, “Imagine one of you were to have a friend and were to go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him’; who among you would expect him to answer from inside and say, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up to give you anything.’ I say to you, even if he would not get up to give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his “shamelessness”—his unapologetic boldness—he will get up and give him as much as he needs.”

To understand what Jesus is saying here, I want to address the three essential questions we must use to understand a parable: 1) What is happening in the story? 2) To what reality is the story analogous? 3) Why is the reality like the story?

#### What is happening in the story?

Jesus wants us to put ourselves in the place of the host and then imagine what the response of our friend inside would be. On the one hand, the host has a very real and legitimate need: it is unthinkable that he would receive a guest without offering him a meal. On the other hand, the host has a problem: he has no food, and to awaken a neighbor at midnight would be outrageously presumptuous. Under normal circumstances, a neighbor would rightly be outraged if he and his family were disturbed at midnight. These are not normal circumstances, however; if the guest is not fed, not only the host but also the whole village will be shamed, and his sleeping friend would agree with this. Can the host not expect that his friend will meet his need, even if he were to commit the seemingly outrageous act of disturbing him at midnight? Of course he can; the friend would probably do it just for the sake of friendship alone, but if that were not enough, the very urgency of the request that

drove his friend to disturb him at midnight would inspire him to say "yes." His friend would not have been so audacious as to awaken him if the need were not real and legitimate.

To what reality is the story analogous?

The basic answer to this question is easy to see and mostly non-controversial: our relationship with God is like the needy host's relationship with the man inside. Jesus means to assure us that our prayers—at least, the right sort of prayers—will be answered in the affirmative. That is what Jesus goes on to say: "ask and you shall receive," "how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?" It makes sense, then, that we who bring our prayers to God are analogous to the needy host, and God is analogous to the friend inside the house. Jesus also means to say that the responses are analogous as well; just as we would expect the man inside to say "yes" to his friend's request, so also God will say "yes" to these requests of ours. The most interesting point of analogy is the hardest one to sort out: Jesus seems to be suggesting that the motives of the man inside are the same as God's motives; the same thinking that leads the man inside to say "yes" is the thinking that leads God to say "yes." To see how that could be, we must turn to the third and most important question.

Why is the reality like the story?

The dynamic of this story hinges on the tension between the audacity and the legitimacy of the host's request. He is awakening his friend at midnight, which is an outrageous thing to do. And yet his need is real and legitimate; ultimately, it is right for him to do such an audacious thing; its very audacity testifies to the urgency of the need, and his friend would agree. I think, therefore, that Jesus is speaking to a similar tension that we might feel in our prayers. He has just given the Lord's Prayer, which urges us to pray for

such things as forgiveness and rescue from temptation and the coming of the Kingdom. But who are we to come to God with such requests? After all, why do we need forgiveness? We need forgiveness because we are hostile rebels against God who have earned His wrath. Why do we need to be rescued from temptation? We need to be rescued because we are weak, evil, people who could easily follow temptation to our destruction. Who are we to be praying for the coming of the Kingdom? We do not even deserve a place in it. It is audacious to think that we can go for deliverance to God, the very One whom we have most offended. And yet, our need is desperate and legitimate. The very urgency of our need is shown by the fact that we are praying to the God who has every right to reject us.

This, then, is how our circumstances are similar to the story of the Friend at Midnight. We go to God with a compelling and legitimate need, asking Him to grant our request for forgiveness and deliverance—for life. Do we have reason to believe that He will say yes? Certainly. His friendship might be enough; that is, the fact that God loves us and cares for us, sinners that we are, might be enough to lead Him to answer our cries. If that were not enough, though, there is the desperate urgency of our pleas. The very fact that we would come audaciously to the One who most has the right to condemn us shows that we know our need and we know whom to go to for deliverance. God is a God of mercy, and we know that this is so. As presumptuous as our behavior might look, He agrees that we should come to Him, even though we have sinned deeply against Him.

In the case of this parable, the point Jesus is making depends not only on the similarities but also the differences between our situation and the Friend at Midnight. Jesus is

making the kind of argument variously referred to as *a fortiori*,<sup>37</sup> *a peiore ad melius*,<sup>38</sup> or *kal wa-homer*.<sup>39</sup> This is a “from the lesser to the greater” kind of argument, such as “if a child can lift it, surely a grown man can.” We see Jesus making exactly that sort of argument a few verses later in Luke 11:13:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?

A very similar logic is implicit in the story of the Friend at Midnight: if your friend, being evil, would respond to your request, how much more shall your Heavenly Father respond? The difference between the friend and God serves to strengthen, not weaken, Jesus’ point. If even a fallible people like our friends respond to our legitimate needs, how much more can we confidently go to God with our desperate needs, even though we know we do not deserve His favor?

This chapter is making a major and a minor point. The major point is that the parable teaches us to be confident that God will answer us as we cry to him in our great need. Yes, it is audacious for us to seek such blessings from the God we have scorned, when we deserve nothing but condemnation. But that audacity arises from our great need, and God in His mercy will certainly not turn us away. The minor point of this chapter is that this parable teaches nothing about persistence in prayer. It was not the persistence of the host that caused his friend to help him. Rather, the friend responded to the legitimacy of the host’s need, a need so compelling that it drove him to awaken his friend shamelessly at midnight. This

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<sup>37</sup> Blomberg, 272.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, 670.

<sup>39</sup> Simon. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus told* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 255.

parable contributes nothing to the idea of persistence in prayer one way or the other. This raises the question, then, as to whether there is any legitimacy at all to the popular idea of persistence as the key to answered prayer. That issue, among others, will be addressed in the chapter on theology.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE PARABLE OF THE UNJUST JUDGE

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God, and did not respect man. And there was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ And for a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest by continually coming she wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them speedily. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:1-8, NASB)

Whenever someone wants to make the point that the way to get our prayers answered is to ask and ask and ask again, it is certain that the parable of the Unjust Judge will be used as evidence. It seems obvious: a widow keeps asking a judge for justice, and in spite of the fact that he turns her away, she keeps coming back again and again. Eventually, this persistence wins her what she was asking for. We, therefore, should do the same with our requests before God; if we have not gotten what we wanted, we should just keep going back until we do. As was true with the previous parable, however, the popular understanding of this parable is not correct. Before we can talk about the big picture, however, we must deal with a number of exegetical details. Once again, we will start by looking at various issues regarding the background and context, as well as interpretive details in the story itself. Only then will we attempt to put the pieces together and decide what the parable is teaching.

### Background and Context

Once again, issues outside the parable itself have the potential to affect how we understand it. This section examines three such issues.

#### Widows and Judges

Jesus' hearers would certainly have known of the unique vulnerability of widows and of the obligation to treat them well; one of the most common admonitions in the Old Testament was the need to uphold and not oppress the widows.<sup>1</sup> A widow was the sort of person that a godly judge should be most concerned to protect. However, this judge neither fears God nor has regard for man. II Chronicles 19:7, in its advice for judges, makes clear the importance of the fear of God for a judge:

Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord; he is with you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, or partiality, or taking bribes.

This widow has need of some sort of legal protection; perhaps someone is threatening to take her land in payment of a debt.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, she must deal with a judge who is by nature unlikely to be interested in the problems of a socially insignificant widow.

#### The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach

A potentially helpful bit of background information is pointed out by Bailey: there are strong parallels between the Parable of the Unjust Judge and Sir. 35:12-20, a passage in the apocryphal book known as *Ecclesiasticus* or *The Wisdom of Jesus Ben*

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; Zech. 7:9-10; Mal. 3:5.

<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 238.

*Sirach*.<sup>3</sup> In the following chart I have highlighted what I think are significant correspondences between the two:

[the humble] will not be consoled until [his prayer] reaches the Lord; he will not desist until the Most High visits him (Sir 35:17b, RSV)	they ought to keep on praying and not lose heart (Luke 18:1)
. . .for the Lord is the judge, and with him is no partiality. He will not show partiality in the case of a poor man; and he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. (Sir. 35:12b-13)	In a certain city was a judge who had neither fear of God or regard for man. (Luke 18:2)
He will not ignore the supplication of the fatherless, nor the widow when she pours out her story. Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek as she cries out against him who has caused them to fall? (Sir. 35:14-15)	And in that city was a widow, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me justice from my adversary.’ (Luke 18:3)
He whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted, and his prayer will reach to the clouds. The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, and he will not be consoled until it reaches the Lord; he will not desist until the Most High visits him, and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment. (Sir. 35:16-17)	now shall not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry to Him day and night. . .? (Luke 18:7)
And the Lord will not delay, neither will he be patient concerning them (μὴ μακροθυμήσῃ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς), till he crushes the loins of the unmerciful and repays vengeance on the nations. . . till he judges the case of his people and makes them rejoice in his mercy. (Sir 35: 18-19)	will He be patient concerning them (μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς)? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. (Luke 18:7b-8a)

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 127-128.

It seems quite possible, in the light of these parallels, that Jesus was aware of Sir. 35, and that He transformed a statement about God as the righteous and impartial judge into a story about a judge who was neither righteous nor impartial. What effect this might have on how we read the parable will be discussed below.

### The Coming of the Son of Man

Several commentators point out that Luke 18:1 says, “He spoke a parable to *them*,” perhaps indicating that Jesus is still talking to the same group he addressed in Luke 17—that is, the disciples.<sup>4</sup> If that is so, then it may be that Luke 18 is continuing with the same theme found in Luke 17. Starting in 17:20, Jesus speaks of the coming of the kingdom of God and the Son of Man. Jesus says specifically to his disciples, “The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it” (Luke 17:22). One day, at a time unknown, the Son of Man will return, bringing destruction to some and salvation to others. Liefeld points out that the connection between Luke 17 and 18 is strengthened by Luke 18:8, the conclusion of the Parable of the Unjust Judge: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”<sup>5</sup> The parable is both preceded and concluded by a discussion of the coming of the Son of Man. The very strong presumption, then, is that the teaching in Luke 18:1-8 is directly related to the surrounding teaching on the coming of the Son of Man.<sup>6</sup> We will explore this further below.

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<sup>4</sup> See Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 411; Geldenhuys, 448.

<sup>5</sup> Walter L. Liefeld, “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 999.

<sup>6</sup> My advisor, Dr. Kistemaker, in private conversation points to the unrighteousness on the earth in Luke 17 as a backdrop to the unrighteousness of the judge in Luke 18.

### Exegetical Details in the Story

Most of the story is fairly straightforward; however, a few interpretive ambiguities should be discussed.

#### A Black Eye

One ambiguous part of the story is the reason that the judge gives for granting the widow's request. He decides to do it "lest she ὑπωπιόζη me." The basic meaning of ὑπωπιόζω is to give someone a black eye by hitting them in the face.<sup>7</sup> Commentators take three basic approaches.

#### Option #1: The Widow Will Hit the Judge

The judge might literally fear that the widow will hit him in the face. Few commentators argue for this; Daube, however, does prefer this literal sense and points out that a blow in the face is the archetypal insult among Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans.<sup>8</sup> The main point in favor of interpreting ὑπωπιόζω as hitting the judge in the face is that this is the typical, attested meaning of the word.

#### Option #2: The Widow Will Annoy the Judge

The judge might be referring metaphorically to the irritation and trouble the widow's coming will cause him: translations such as "annoy me greatly,"<sup>9</sup> "cause me much

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<sup>7</sup> Weiss, Konrad, "ὑπωπιόζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 8, 590-591.

<sup>8</sup> D. Daube, "Shame Culture in Luke," *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982); quoted in Barbara E. Reid, *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1996) 191.

<sup>9</sup> Plummer, 413.

trouble,”<sup>10</sup> “wear me out,”<sup>11</sup> and “give me a headache”<sup>12</sup> have been proposed. This meaning is very plausible in this context. Marshall says that this meaning is reflected in some Syriac and Georgian versions.<sup>13</sup> However, I cannot find one example in Greek literature where ὄπωπιόζω is used in this way. The argument can be made that, even so, this is preferable to the literal translation “give me a black eye” because of the tenses of the verbs. “Coming” and ὄπωπιόζω are both in the present tense, which would typically be used for an ongoing action. “Coming to hit him” would be a one-time action; “by continually coming she would be wearing me out” is a more ongoing kind of activity. This option, then, would fit quite well in the passage, but no evidence supports the word ever being used this way. Admittedly, however, there are not that many examples in Greek literature to compare.

### Option #3: The Widow Will Shame the Judge

The judge may be referring metaphorically to the damage the widow will do to his reputation. A very common Semitic expression “to blacken someone’s face” means to bring shame on someone;<sup>14</sup> once again, however, I can find no clear example of the Greek word being used in this way. The arguments concerning the progressive nature of the present tense applies here as well; her *continual* coming would be making him look bad.

We are left then to choose between one somewhat less plausible but well-attested meaning “to give a black eye,” and two slightly more plausible but unattested

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<sup>10</sup> Geldenhuys, 448.

<sup>11</sup> Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 256.

<sup>12</sup> Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Commentary on Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 673.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

meanings, either “to wear out” or “to bring shame on.” In the end, I find the evidence insufficient to make a definitive decision. Below we will discuss the possible impact of this choice on the understanding of the parable.

### Patience

Another ambiguous phrase is found in the explanation of the story that Jesus gives. Jesus says, “Shall not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry to Him day and night,” which is followed by *καὶ μακροθυμῆ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς*. The literature on this parable is filled with discussions about the many possibilities for the meaning of this phrase. From my perspective, however, whichever option we choose has little impact on our overall understanding of what Jesus is teaching. Rather than discussing the issues in detail, therefore, I will just paraphrase some of the options:

- Shall not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry to Him day and night. . .
- . . .and will he wait patiently (i.e., delay) concerning his chosen ones?
- . . .and will he withhold his wrath on behalf of his chosen ones?
- . . .and will he withhold his wrath from the adversaries?
- . . .even though he tarries concerning his chosen ones,
- . . .while he withholds his wrath (graciously) from the chosen ones,
- . . .while he withholds his wrath (for a time) from the adversaries,

To come to a definitive decision is difficult. If we consider Jesus as deliberately drawing on the language of Sir. 35:18, however, the options become fewer. Ben Sirach is clearly saying that God will *not* delay and *not* “be patient.” If Jesus is echoing that language, He is asking a question that demands a negative answer: “Will He be patient? No!” In the Ben Sirach passage, it is not clear whom God is being patient toward; in the context the intended meaning might be either that God will not delay concerning *his people* or that God will not withhold His wrath from *their adversaries*. Since no adversaries are explicitly

mentioned in Luke 18:6-8, perhaps the (marginally) best choice is to see Jesus as asking, “and will He wait patiently (delay, hold back) concerning His chosen ones?” (No!)

### Quickly or Suddenly?

Yet another ambiguous phrase in Luke 18:6-8 is ἐν τάχει, which can be translated either “quickly” or “suddenly.” “Quickly” would seem like an obvious translation here, except for the problem it creates. This is a parable about answers that seem a long time in coming: there is a judge who says “no” for quite a while, an encouragement not to “lose heart,” and a hint that Jesus may be so long in coming back that no one will be left expecting Him. For Jesus to say that God will answer our prayers for justice “quickly” seems to be saying too much. This leads some to argue that “suddenly” is the better translation. Jones points to the suddenness of the events portrayed in Luke 17—lightening, flood, the destruction of Sodom—to support the idea of suddenness here.<sup>15</sup> Many others, however, argue that “quickly” is the better translation, if we understand that by “quickly” Jesus does not mean “immediately.”<sup>16</sup> I agree with the second option; Jesus does indeed mean “quickly,” “speedily.” Habakkuk 2:3 provides a great example of how something could be long in coming and yet speedy at the same time (emphasis added):

For the vision is yet for the appointed time;  
It hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail.  
*Though it tarries*, wait for it;  
For it will certainly come, *it will not delay*.

One might think that “tarry” and “delay” mean basically the same thing, but God is making a very important and subtle distinction here. What He has promised in the vision may

<sup>15</sup> Peter Rhea Jones, *The Teaching of the Parables* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 249.

<sup>16</sup> See Geldenhuys, 448; Marshall, 676; Nolland, 870; Ellis, 213; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, ed. Grant R. Osborne (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 295.

*tarry*; it may seem to us as if it is a long time in coming, and we may wonder whether it will ever arrive. However, it will not *delay*; there is nothing hindering it, and God will not wait one second longer than is necessary to accomplish all His purposes. In this sense, then, Jesus can tell a story about having to wait for an answer and yet being sure the answer will come “quickly.”

### Justice

Since the great hope of the Christian is that we will *not* receive justice but rather mercy, why does Jesus portray the people of God as crying out for justice? The word *ἐκδίκησις* can be translated with words like “vengeance,” “punishment,” or “justice.”<sup>17</sup> These may seem inappropriate for Christians to be hoping for, but it is important for Christians to understand that God values justice as well as mercy. We see this in Romans 12:19:

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance (*ἐκδίκησις*) is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.<sup>18</sup>

Paul does not say, “Never take your own revenge, because it is wrong ever to want justice to be done for anyone, no matter what they have done.” He rather reminds us that ultimately God will deal with the wrongs that have been done. Those who will not come to God for mercy will receive His justice. This is a part of the Christian hope; this world needs justice done, and the solution is coming on that day when Jesus returns to redeem finally or to condemn finally. The classic statement of this theme is in II Thessalonians 1:6-10:

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<sup>17</sup> *BAG*, s.v. “ἐκδίκησις.”

<sup>18</sup> See also Deut. 32:35; Heb. 10:30.

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution (ἐκδίκησις) to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed.

It should be noted that the means by which God will bring about ἐκδίκησις in this passage is the return of our Lord Jesus. Jesus is the one who will return to vindicate His people and do justice once and for all. This should not surprise us; one of the great themes of the prophets is how the Messiah, the Christ, will establish justice on the earth.

Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;  
 My chosen one in whom My soul delights.  
 I have put My Spirit upon Him;  
 He will bring forth justice to the nations.  
 .....  
 He will faithfully bring forth justice.  
 He will not be disheartened or crushed,  
 Until He has established justice in the earth;  
 And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law. (Isaiah 42:1-4)

Christians are not called to be bloodthirsty; in fact, in this life, we are called to forgive all. But our great hope is that Jesus will return to make everything right, and part of making things right is dealing out justice to those who have afflicted the people of God.

### The Meaning of the Parable

Here is how I would translate Luke 18:1-8 in the light of the issues discussed above:

Now He was telling them a parable to show that they ought to keep on praying and not lose heart, saying, "In a certain city was a judge who had neither fear of God nor regard for man. And in that city was a widow, and she kept coming to him, saying, 'Give me justice from my adversary.' And for a time he did not want to; but eventually he said to himself, 'Even though I have neither fear of God nor regard for man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, lest finally in her coming she blacken my eye.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unrighteous judge said; now

shall not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry to Him day and night, and will He hold back concerning them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

Once again, we will address the three essential questions we must use to understand a parable: 1) What is happening in the story? 2) To what reality is the story analogous? 3) Why is the reality like the story?

What is happening in the story?

Jesus again wants us to put ourselves in the place of a supplicant—in this case, the widow—and think about the response of the judge to whom she makes her plea. The basic turn of events is easy to understand and mostly uncontroversial. The widow has a great need for justice, and there is no one to whom she can turn except the judge whose job it is to hear her case fairly. Unfortunately, the widow must deal with a judge who, because he does not fear God or regard man, also has no concern for what is right or for her. Perhaps her opponent is a powerful man; perhaps the judge is waiting for a bribe that the widow cannot pay. For whatever reason, the judge has no interest in granting her request, and he repeatedly turns her away.

What is the widow to do? Luke's words about "losing heart" in the introduction to the story show us one option: she could look at the fact that she keeps being put off and decide to quit. However, she does not quit. Why should she? If she quits, then she will never get the justice she needs; if, however, she keeps going back, there is always the possibility that the judge will change his mind. Sure enough, ultimately the judge decides to grant her request, even though he has no interest in her or in what is right. Why? Either because he fears that she might cause him trouble (her coming might be irritating, or she might get mad and hit him in the eye) or because he fears that his reputation will be ruined as

her constant coming makes her case more widely known. For whatever reason, it turns out that the widow was wise to keep going back, because in the end the judge granted her request.

To what reality is the story analogous?

Just as was true with the Friend at Midnight, it is not hard to see what is being compared with what in the parable of the Unjust Judge. Just as the needy host was comparable to us, and the man inside was comparable to God, so here the needy widow is comparable to us, and the judge is comparable to God. In the explanation that Jesus gives following the story, He makes it clear that, just as the widow was crying out for justice, so too we are crying out to God for justice, and it is those prayers for justice that are in view here.

Two somewhat shocking questions arise with the analogy Jesus is drawing in this parable. First of all, is Jesus suggesting that God is comparable to an unjust judge? Secondly, is Jesus suggesting that our situation is like the widow in that we too keep being put off in our requests? The answer to both of these questions is yes, but to see why, we must turn to the last and most important question concerning the parable.

Why is the reality like the story?

To understand the analogy Jesus is making, to understand why our situation is like that of the widow in this story, we must start with a clear understanding of the problem Jesus is addressing. Here is where the eschatological context is key. Consider the following points:

- Before He tells this parable, Jesus starts out by telling His disciples, “The days shall come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.” (Luke 17:22)

- Then He tells “them” (presumably the disciples still) a story so that they will not “lose heart.”
- He concludes by asking the rhetorical question, “Shall not God bring about justice for His elect, who cry to Him day and night?”
- We remember that the prophets and the apostles alike say that it is the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom that will finally bring justice for God’s people.
- Jesus concludes by saying, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

Jesus is not talking about God answering any sort of prayer; Jesus is talking about God answering our cries for vindication, for justice, and such prayers can ultimately find their answer only in the second coming of Christ. The following comments are worth quoting in full:

He now teaches in this parable that when His coming is apparently slow in taking place believers are not to become discouraged, but should persist in prayer, knowing that He will indeed come at the right time and will answer their supplication by destroying the powers of evil and by causing His chosen ones to triumph.<sup>19</sup>

[Luke] does not say it in so many words, but it is clear from the context that this prayer is about the end-time resolution of the problems of the present and not simply about answered prayer in the normal sense.<sup>20</sup>

The parable of the judge and the widow is not a parable about prayer simpliciter; it is not concerned with generic principles relating persistence to efficacious prayer per se. This is first and foremost a parable about waiting, waiting appropriately and effectively, for the eventual, surprising return of Christ.<sup>21</sup>

This, then, is how our situation is like the widow in this story. Like her, we have been asking and asking, and yet we have not received. Jesus Himself reminds us: God’s

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<sup>19</sup> Geldenhuys, 446.

<sup>20</sup> John Nolland, *Luke 9:21-18:34*. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 35b (Nashville: Nelson Reference, 1989), 871.

<sup>21</sup> David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 79.

people have been crying out to God day and night for justice. And what answer have we always gotten? “Not yet.” The world goes on, and God’s chosen ones suffer injustice every day. We face the same decision that the widow faced: given that the answer is still not “yes,” shall we give up, or shall we keep looking to God to make things right? Jesus is rightly urging us “to keep on praying and not lose heart.” The present difficulties may make it difficult to believe that God will come through, but remember the story of the widow: if the judge came through for her, God will certainly come through for us.

Now we can see clearly why Jesus chose an unjust judge as a main character. Once again, Jesus is using a “from the lesser to the greater” kind of argument, which means that his point partly depends on the *differences* between our situation and the widow’s; the difference between her judge and our God strengthens his point. We see this in Luke 18:6, where Jesus draws a conclusion from the story, saying, “Listen to what the unrighteous judge said; now shall not God. . .” If *this* judge said “yes,” then what shall we expect God to say? Jesus highlights the differences in two ways. First of all, He emphasizes that the “unrighteous” judge said “yes.” As Kistemaker makes clear,

The expression “unjust judge” sets the stage for the contrast between unrighteousness personified in the worldly judge and God who listens to his chosen ones.<sup>22</sup>

Likewise, by calling those who cry to God His “elect,” His “chosen ones,” Jesus highlights the difference between the judge, who has no regard for man, and God, who

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<sup>22</sup> Simon. Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus told* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 265.

loves His chosen people. Wenham has a chart that clearly shows the contrasts in this *a fortiori* argument.<sup>23</sup>

if an unrighteous judge	how much more	God in his righteousness
faced with the persistent cry of a widow in whom he has no interest		faced with the persistent cry of his elect
responds eventually and vindicates her		will respond and vindicate them quickly

The judge does not care about justice and he does not care about the widow, and yet he said “yes”; how much more certain is it that God, who cares about both deeply, will say “yes” as well?

One issue remains, however. It makes a difference whether we understand the judge to have said “yes” (1) to avoid being troubled or (2) to avoid having his reputation ruined. If the judge is merely avoiding trouble, then that detail is irrelevant to the analogy being made. God cannot be hit in the face or inconvenienced in any way. If, however, the judge is concerned about his reputation, that could possibly carry over in the analogy. God is not vain, but it is a biblical idea that He will act for the sake of His name. Jesus’ analogy would then be:

If a judge who cared nothing for righteousness or for people granted the widow’s request for the sake of his reputation, how much more will God grant our requests for justice when He not only cares about His name but also cares about righteousness and cares about His elect?

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<sup>23</sup> David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1989), 187.

Since, however, it is difficult to be definitive in translating ὑπωπιάζω, it is equally difficult to decide whether God's concern for His name enters into this analogy at all. In the end, it does not affect the main thrust of what Jesus is teaching.

Once again, the current chapter has a major point and a minor point. The major point concerns what this parable *does* teach: the connection between prayer and persevering faith. God's people have cried "How long, O Lord" ever since the fall of Adam and Eve. God is gracious to us in the present life, and some of our prayers find the beginnings of an answer now. But this is not yet a world where justice and righteousness and life prevail over injustice and evil and death. The believer is hard pressed; we need to remind ourselves of the character of our God, so that we keep turning to Him even when His promised deliverance seems long in coming.

The minor point of this chapter concerns what the parable does *not* teach: that is, if we persist in asking God, we will get whatever we ask for. Is there a place for persistence in prayer? Yes. Can we count on God to be gracious toward us always? Yes. But this parable teaches that God will *certainly without fail* answer our cries for justice with a resounding "yes." This is not true for every prayer we might pray. Once again, these issues will be addressed further in the chapter on theology.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE PLACE OF LUKE 11:5-8 AND 18:1-8 IN CHURCH HISTORY

How have the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge been understood in the history of the Church? To prepare for this chapter, I searched through the writings from Church history for references to the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge. This chapter, then, is a report on the various decisions our forerunners made as they sought to understand and apply these parables. The first part of the chapter will examine how a few specific exegetical issues were handled. The second part of the chapter will explore some of the theological reflections on prayer that have been made from these parables.

#### Exegetical Issues

Just as we have had to do, our ancestors had to wrestle with interpretive decisions concerning these parables. This section explores how some of those decisions—some very good, some not so good—were made.

#### Allegorization

Bible students of the Middle Ages were attracted to allegorization as a means of deriving a fuller, spiritual meaning from the text. Allegory is a slippery concept, however, so it is appropriate to start by clarifying what might be meant by calling something “allegorical.” Blomberg, for example, defines allegories as “more complex stories which

require numerous details in them to be ‘decoded.’”<sup>1</sup> This definition, however, is not going to help get at the heart of medieval allegorization. Consider the following comparison of the way Jesus and Augustine explain a few points in a parable:

Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the Sower		Augustine’s explanation of the parable of the Good Samaritan <sup>2</sup>	
<i>sower</i>	one who preaches the word	<i>robbers</i>	satan and his angels
<i>seed</i>	the word	<i>stripped him</i>	robbed him of his immortality
<i>ground beside the road</i>	a heart that has no interest in the word	<i>beat him</i>	by persuading him to sin
<i>birds eat the seed</i>	the evil one snatches away the word	<i>two coins</i>	promise of this life and the life to come
<i>shallow, rocky ground</i>	heart with no root, falls away under persecution	<i>innkeeper</i>	apostle Paul
<i>etc.</i>		<i>etc.</i>	

According to Blomberg’s definition, both Jesus and Augustine are giving “allegorical” explanations of the respective parables. Blomberg can, of course, define words as he wishes, and indeed many scholars join him in his definition.<sup>3</sup> We can see, however, that calling what Jesus and what Augustine did here “allegorization” is not helping us understand the significant *difference* between their approaches. Granted, they are similar in that both Jesus and Augustine are saying, “X stands for Y.” But Jesus is explaining an analogy: preaching the word is *like* the experience that a sower has when he broadcasts seed, in that

<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 150.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1 for further discussion of this issue.

the result depends entirely on the receptivity of the one receiving it. The analogy is a brilliant one, and we probably could have figured out the correspondences if Jesus had not explained them, the analogy between sowing and preaching being very tight. But Augustine is not explaining an analogy; he is treating the parable as a symbolically coded message. His interpretation is actually ignoring all the clues in the context as to what the story is about (the question “Who is my neighbor?”), and instead he is searching for a deeper, “spiritual” meaning behind the literal meaning. What Augustine has done to the parable of the Good Samaritan is what I mean by saying that the Middle Ages allegorized the Bible.

I do not mean to ridicule Augustine; his approach, as we shall see, is more sophisticated than the previous example might indicate. Augustine had a fourfold view of the Bible, with each text having a possible four levels of meaning—one literal and three spiritual levels. Thus he was not making a simple “either/or” choice between literal and spiritual interpretations; there was room for both.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes, Augustine has a very straightforward and contextually aware interpretation of biblical texts. For example, even though Wailes calls the following statement of Augustine’s “allegorization,” it is in fact very defensible:

Truly this widow bears a likeness to the Church, which seems to be forsaken till the Lord may come—he who, this notwithstanding, cares for her in his privacy.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine is doing nothing more than explaining the analogy Jesus is making. Jesus Himself compares the widow’s request for justice with the cries of God’s “elect.” Augustine is right: the widow does bear a likeness to the Church waiting for the Lord to come.

Augustine’s further comments on the parable are equally sound:

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<sup>4</sup> Zhang Lonxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2005), 120.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen L. Wailes, *Medieval Allegories of Jesus’ Parables* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 263.

For that unjust judge does not in any way allegorically represent the person of God; but yet as to how far God, who is good and just, cares for those who supplicate Him, our Lord wished the inference to be drawn from this circumstance, that not even an unjust man can despise those who assail him with unceasing petitions, even were his motive merely to avoid annoyance.<sup>6</sup>

The judge is not an allegorical picture of God; he is there to make the contrast between the “unjust” judge and the God who is “good and just.” Augustine is exactly right.

When Augustine deals with the Friend at Midnight, however, a different picture of his interpretive methods emerges. Augustine treats it as an elaborate, symbolic coded message. The traveler seeking hospitality symbolizes a friend who comes to you for counsel, but you have none to give. You want to turn to the apostles, Paul or Peter, but they are represented by the family of the householder, and they are asleep (dead). Yet the householder himself, Christ, will freely answer your request and give you the three loaves—that is, He will let you feed on and understand the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the three loaves show us that the trinity is of a single substance.<sup>8</sup> Further, Augustine tells us that we know the three loaves do not represent faith, hope, and charity, because love is more important than faith and hope, and yet the three loaves are all the same size.<sup>9</sup> As time went on, Augustine’s particular allegorical interpretation of this parable seems to have influenced many in the church.

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, “Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount,” in *Augustin: Sermon on the Mount; Harmony of the Gospels; Homilies on the Gospels*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff, ser. 1 vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, “Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament,” in *Augustin: Sermon on the Mount; Harmony of the Gospels; Homilies on the Gospels*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: , ed. Philip Schaff, ser. 1 vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 431.

<sup>8</sup> Wailes, 217.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, “Sermons,” 431,

Identical or similar teaching on this parable can be found in Zacharias Chrysopolitanus, Bruno of Segni, Abbot Gueric of Igny, and Nicholas of Lyra.<sup>10</sup>

Interestingly, Augustine had another variation on his allegorical view of this parable. Instead of the visitor being a person looking for help, the visitor symbolized a separate aspect of our own human nature, the appetitive force (*appetites hominis*). When we turn to God, this appetitive force turns from temporal things. This variation of Augustine's was also influential. Bede, for example, saw the visitor as representing a similar idea:

the spirit. . . completely departs from us every time it wanders abroad seeking temporal and earthly things. It returns and asks to be fed on true and celestial nourishment when, having come to itself, it begins to meditate upon the supernal and spiritual."<sup>11</sup>

In a way that I do not understand, Bede went on to draw the following moral from the parable of the Friend at Midnight: To use the fruits of the earth is legitimate, but one should not put one's entire trust in money.<sup>12</sup> At any rate, the idea that the visitor represented some aspect of ourselves was also picked up by Bernard of Clairvaux, who saw it as the self returning to the heart at conversion, with the three loaves representing the reason, will, and body.<sup>13</sup>

The allegorical approach seems to have been used as well by those in the later mystical tradition, such as John of the Cross. As one might expect, he sees in the Friend at *Midnight* a picture of the dark night of the soul (emphasis added):

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<sup>10</sup> Wailes, 216-217.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Warren S. Kissinger, *The Parables of Jesus: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1979), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Wailes, 218.

HAVING now to endeavour to show how the three faculties of the soul — understanding, memory and will — are brought into this spiritual night, which is the means to Divine union, it is necessary first of all to explain in this chapter how the three theological virtues — faith, hope and charity — which have respect to the three faculties aforesaid as their proper supernatural objects, and by means whereof the soul is united with God according to its faculties, produce the same emptiness and darkness, each one in its own faculty. . . And here we must consider that parable which our Redeemer related in the eleventh chapter of Saint Luke, wherein He said that a friend had to go out at midnight in order to ask his friend for three loaves; *the which loaves signify these three virtues*. And he said that *he asked for them at midnight in order to signify that the soul that is in darkness as to all things must acquire these three virtues according to its faculties and must perfect itself in them in this night*. . . in this spiritual night, with the favour of God, we shall describe a method whereby the spiritual faculties are voided and purified of all that is not God, and are set in darkness concerning these three virtues, which, as we have said, are the means and preparation for the union of the soul with God.<sup>14</sup>

The friend asking for three loaves at midnight is a picture of the necessary connection between the three virtues (faith, hope, and charity) and the dark night of the soul. John is clearly not concerned at all with the context of the parable or the literal meaning of what Jesus taught.

Allegorization did not retain its popularity as an approach to the Bible. At the time of the Reformation, in the writings of Luther and Calvin and others, there occurred a reaction against allegorization in favor of a reading of the text that was more grounded in the actual context and historical circumstances of the biblical text.<sup>15</sup> A concern for the “literal” meaning of the text had never been entirely absent, but it gained a new currency at the time of the Reformation.

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<sup>14</sup> John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3rd rev. ed., translated and edited by E. Allison Peers. (Garden City: Image Books, 1958), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Longxi, 20.

### ἀναίδεια and the Friend at Midnight

As we have seen, the meaning of ἀναίδεια is a *crux interpretum* in the Friend at Midnight. Only one of the historical sources I found spoke directly concerning the word itself; however, it is easy to see how commentators interpret ἀναίδεια by how they explain the parable in general. Why did the householder say yes? Was it persistence or shamelessness?

#### Persistence

This paper has quoted numerous modern commentators that have argued ἀναίδεια did not mean “persistence”; in contrast, the historical sources I surveyed show a near universal understanding that persistence is the issue in the parable. (The preferred word in the older English translations of these texts seems to be “importunity,” asking again and again.) For example, early writers such as Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine<sup>16</sup> all saw importunity as the issue. Jerome’s comments are representative:

By her importunity the widow in the gospel at last gained a hearing, and by the same means one friend induced another to give him bread at midnight, when his door was shut and his servants were in bed.<sup>17</sup>

Jerome’s meaning is clear, since he is equating the logic in the parable of the Unjust Judge, where a kind of persistence is clearly in view, with the logic in the parable of the Friend at Midnight.

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<sup>16</sup> For Augustine’s comment, see Augustine, “Sermons,” 430.

<sup>17</sup> Jerome, “Letter XVI. To Pope Damasus,” in *Jerome: Letters and Select Works*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, ed. Philip Schaff, ser. 2 vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 20.

Since the preferred option among modern commentators is “shamelessness,”

Chrysostom makes an interesting connection between persistence and shame:

Hast thou never heard of that friend, who at midnight shamed his friend into yielding by his perseverance?<sup>18</sup>

And how, again, did the friend persist, remaining before the door in the dead of night, till he shamed the other into yielding by his importunity, and made him arise.<sup>19</sup>

Chrysostom here is not disagreeing that it was the persistence of the friend that made the man relent; however, the repeated requests did not irritate him into responding; they shamed him.

Calvin also sees persistence as the issue:

Believers ought not to be discouraged, if they do not immediately obtain their desires, or if they find them difficult to be obtained: for if, among men, importunity of asking extorts what a person would not willingly do, we have no reason to doubt that God will listen to us, if we persevere constantly in prayer, and if our minds do not slacken through difficulty or delay.<sup>20</sup>

Many other authors take this same perspective, including the following: Fr. Augustine

Baker;<sup>21</sup> the poet and Dean of St. Paul’s, John Donne;<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Edwards;<sup>23</sup> John Wesley,<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Chrysostom, “Homily XXIV,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: , ed. Philip Schaff, ser. 1 vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 169.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 1.354.

<sup>21</sup> Baker, Augustine, *Holy Wisdom*, ed. Serenus Cressy and J. Norbert Sweeney (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1876), 368.

<sup>22</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions: Together with Death’s Duel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1959), 38.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Most High a Prayer Hearing God,” in *The Works of President Edwards, vol 4* (New York: Leavitt, Trow & Co., 1844), 563.

<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, *Wesleyana: Or, A Complete System of Wesleyan Theology* (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1840), 251.

and (arguably) Tertullian.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the history of the Church, it has been very common for people to think that the parable of the Friend at Midnight was about persistence in prayer.

### Shamelessness?

My research unearthed very little evidence of anyone agreeing with the perspective on the Friend at Midnight argued for in this paper—that is, that the issue is the “shamelessness” of the host. I thought at first that Erasmus saw shamelessness as the issue; in his paraphrase of the Gospel of Luke, he renders part of the Friend at Midnight as follows:

I assure you, even if regard for friendship does not move the other, he will still be overcome by the shamelessness of the suppliant; he will get up and give him not just the three loaves, but as much as he needs.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, in his notes, Erasmus congratulates the Latin Vulgate translator for picking an elegant word to translate ἀναίδεια, and he acknowledges that no Greek texts and not all Latin texts have the *si perseveraverit pulsans*, “if he continues knocking,” that is found in the Vulgate.<sup>27</sup> These comments are all in keeping with Erasmus’s reputation as a humanist scholar who helped to revive interest in the original languages and text of the Bible, and they contribute to the impression that he might agree “shamelessness” is the issue in the parable.

On closer examination, however, what Erasmus is saying turns out to be quite different. First of all, although he admits that “if he continues knocking” is not in the Greek, he still includes it in his paraphrase. Secondly, the word “shamelessness” above is how Jane

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<sup>25</sup> Tertullian’s seems to be saying that the host only stops knocking when he gets what he has asked for. Tertullian, “The Perscription Against Heretics,” in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian: I. Apologetic; II. Anti-Marcion; III. Ethical*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 249.

<sup>26</sup> Erasmus, *Paraphrase on Luke 11-24*, trans. Jane E. Phillips, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Robert D. Sider, vol 48 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

E. Phillips translates Erasmus's Latin word *improbitas*, but in a later note Erasmus says that *improbitas* can mean "pressing on and not stopping"—in other words, persistence.<sup>28</sup> In this context, Erasmus quotes a famous saying of Virgil that suggests work will conquer all if it is *improbis*; certainly "persistent" or "unstopping," is a more likely translation than "shameless" here. Erasmus, therefore, must be added to the column of those who see the issue as being the persistence of the host.

Of the various historical authors surveyed for this paper, only one seems to have (perhaps) agreed that "shamelessness" is the issue: Erasmus's contemporary (and sometime opponent), Martin Luther. In a discussion concerning the unworthiness we might feel to take the Lord's Supper, Luther makes the following very interesting side comment:

Your heart should therefore reflect: . . . "Though I am unworthy, I am also needy. Whoever must beg should not be ashamed to do so. Shamefacedness is an unnecessary domestic servant in a poor beggar's home. For that reason Christ himself praises an impudent rascal in Luke 11[:8]."<sup>29</sup>

Luther's logic here seems to be exactly how I understand the logic of the Friend at Midnight. On the one hand, who am I to seek these blessings from God? But on the other hand, it is my very unworthiness and need that drives me to Him. Since we are needy beggars, it would be inappropriate for us to be shamefaced; Christ praises the needy host who was the opposite of shamefaced; he was impudent, shameless. Luther's comment is very short, and therefore it would be possible to misconstrue; without further information, however, it appears that he understands Jesus to describe the coming of the host at midnight as "impudent," "shameless." If so, he is the only historical author surveyed who did.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, Vol. 38, *Word and Sacrament*, ed. Martin E. Lehmann (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1971), 133.

## Other Interpretive Issues

Did Jesus use a “lesser to the greater” argument? Why did the judge say “yes”? Is God delaying or will He not delay? Exegetical details such as these were also addressed by the authors in this historical survey. Augustine, for example, saw a “lesser to the greater” argument in both the parable of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge. In discussing the Friend at Midnight, Augustine argues from the distinction between the story’s human giver, “who gives compelled not by friendship but by annoyance, and the divine one, who gives what is asked for very bountifully without being annoyed.”<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Augustine says concerning the Unjust Judge:

What greater encouragement to prayer than the parable which is proposed to us of the unjust judge? . . . If he [i.e., the judge] then heard her prayer, who hated to be asked, how must He hear who exhorts us to ask?<sup>31</sup>

If the judge said “yes” who did not want to be bothered, how much more will the God who is urging us to seek justice from Him say “yes”? Similar sentiments are found in Calvin,<sup>32</sup> Hugh Latimer,<sup>33</sup> and John Lightfoot.<sup>34</sup> At least on this issue, the historical and the modern commentators tend to agree.

Another issue addressed by the commentators in this survey is the motive of the judge; why did he say “yes”? None of them said that the judge feared being punched. Martyrius, however believed the judge acted “because [the widow] had wearied him with her

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<sup>30</sup> Erasmus, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, “Sermons,” 454.

<sup>32</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary*, 2.199.

<sup>33</sup> Hugh Latimer, *The sermons of the Right Reverend Father in God, and Constant Martyr of Jesus Christ, Hugh Latimer, sometime Bishop of Worcester*, (London: Printed for James Duncan, 1824), 147.

<sup>34</sup> John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew—I Corinthians*, vol. 3, *Luke—John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 183.

insistence.”<sup>35</sup> Augustine<sup>36</sup> and John Donne<sup>37</sup> agreed. On the other hand, Erasmus saw the issue as being the judge’s reputation; in his paraphrase of Luke 18:5 he writes:

So I will help her against her opponent’s ferocity—not that I wish her well but so that she and her insults won’t eventually come back, and, since she has been spurned so many times, brand my good name with some mark of reproach, on the grounds that though I hold the position of chief judge in this city I nonetheless stubbornly let an oppressed widow down.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the commentators of this survey reflect the same indecision seen as well in modern commentators.

The authors of this survey said little concerning the ambiguous “patience” God shows (or does not show) in Luke 18:7. Calvin, however, did speak to this issue (emphasis in the original):

Yet it must be observed that, while Christ applies the parable to his subject, he does not make God to resemble a wicked and cruel *judge*, but points out a very different reason why those who believe in him are kept long in suspense, and why he does not actually and at once stretch out his hand to them: it is because he *forbears*. If at any time God winks at the injuries done to us longer than we would wish, let us know that this is done with a fatherly intention—to train us to patience. A temporary overlooking of crimes is very different from allowing them to remain for ever unpunished.<sup>39</sup>

Calvin does not see Jesus’ words as a question expecting a negative answer: “will He delay? (No!)” Rather he sees it as a statement, presumably something like “even though He forbears.” Calvin seems to see God as forbearing with the oppressors of the elect for a while,

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<sup>35</sup> Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., *New Testament III: Luke*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 277.

<sup>36</sup> Augustine, “Our Lord’s,” 50.

<sup>37</sup> Donne, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Erasmus, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, 2.199.

to train the elect in patience. This is quite possible, although it is different than the conclusion to which this paper (tentatively) came.

### Historical Reflections on a Theology of Prayer

The commentators surveyed did not merely speak to the exegetical details of the parable of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge; they also drew theological implications from the parables, largely concerning prayer. This section will look very briefly at theological comments made by Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. How did these authors move from the details of the parables to theological reflections on prayer?

Concerning the Unjust Judge, Augustine makes a profound observation  
(emphasis added):

When therefore by this comparison from a contrary case the Lord had taught that “men ought always to pray and not to faint,” He added and said, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man shall come, thinkest thou that He shall find faith on the earth?” *If faith fail, prayer perishes. For who prays for that which he does not believe? . . . So then that we may pray, let us believe.*<sup>40</sup>

Augustine implies the connection that I think Jesus is making; continued faith that God will keep His promises is what motivates us to continue praying until the Son of Man returns. The connection between faith and persevering prayer is exactly Jesus point; if faith fail, prayer perishes.

Augustine shows equal perception as he generalizes about the nature of our prayers (emphasis added):

Making use of an example from a contrary case; as of that “judge who neither feared God, nor regarded man,” and yet when a certain widow besought him day by day, overcome by her importunity, he gave her that which he could not in kindness give her, against his will. But our Lord Jesus Christ, who is in the midst of us a Petitioner, with

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<sup>40</sup> Augustine, “Sermons,” 454.

God a Giver, would not surely exhort us so strongly to ask, if He were not willing to give. Let then the slothfulness of men be put to shame; He is more willing to give, than we to receive; *He is more willing to show mercy, than we to be delivered from misery; and doubtless if we shall not be delivered, we shall abide in misery.* For the exhortation He giveth us, He giveth only for our own sakes.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps Augustine could be faulted for ignoring the details of the parable; the specific prayers that Jesus is talking about concern the establishment of justice. But the lessons of that parable can rightly be extended to anything God has promised to do, which certainly include mercy and deliverance. In this same sermon, Augustine's extended allegory on the Friend at Midnight is found; even here, however, although the exegesis is suspect, the theologizing is profound; Augustine rightly sees us as asking for our spiritual needs to be met through the bread of life that comes from the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup>

Luther is also a perceptive theologian, although his manner of doing theology can be hard to pin down. Apparently, Luther is prepared to take the message of a passage in different directions, in ways that seem incompatible with each other. For example, sometimes Luther seems to see clearly that the issue in the parable of the Unjust Judge is the prayers of God's elect for justice and the fulfillment of those cries at the return of Christ:

Likewise in Luke 18:1-8, in the parable of the unjust judge, Christ calls this sigh of the pious heart a cry, and a cry that cries to God incessantly day and night. . . . Today, amid all the persecution and opposition from the pope, the tyrants, and the fanatical spirits, who attack us from the right and from the left, we cannot do anything but emit such sighs. . . . But they will provoke Christ to hasten the day of His glorious coming, when He will abolish all principalities, powers, and might, and will put all His enemies under His feet. Amen.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 430-431.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 431. The idea that the object of our prayers is a spiritual bread, the bread of life, seems to be Origen's perspective as well; Origen, *Prayer; Exhortation to Martyrdom*, trans. John J. O'Meara (New York: Newman Press, 1954), 42.

<sup>43</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians 1535 Chapters 1-4* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1963), 383.

Elsewhere Luther seems to think the point of the parable to be that persistence will get you what you want from God now:

This is the lesson of the parable in Luke 18:1-8 about the widow. She was so persistent and importunate in her refusal to let go of the judge that he was overpowered and had to help her in spite of himself. How much more, Christ argues there (Luke 18:7), will God give us if He sees that we do not stop praying but go right on knocking so that He has to hear it? This is all the more so because He has promised to do so and shows that such persistence is pleasing to Him. Since your need goes right on knocking, therefore, you go right on knocking, too, and do not relent. For you have His Word, and He will have to say: "All right, then, you may have what you want."<sup>44</sup>

In this context, Luther seems to see persistence as meaning "do not stop until you get what you want." And yet in another place again, Luther sees persistence in still another way, as non-stop, twenty-four-hour praying.

But I mean spiritual praying. That is, no man is so heavily burdened with his work that he cannot, if the will is there, speak with God in his heart while he is working, lay his need and that of other men before him, ask for help, make petition, and in all this exercise and strengthen his faith. That is what the Lord means when he says in Luke 18(1) that we should pray without ceasing.<sup>45</sup>

Luther's observations are always interesting and profitable. Whether the parable of the Unjust Judge can mean all those things at once is questionable, however, as the earlier analysis in this paper shows.

Calvin's reflections on prayer are profound and profitable. For example, consider this general statement about why we pray:

still it is very important for us to call upon him: first, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor. Secondly, that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we would be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our

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<sup>44</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 21, *The Sermon on the Mount and The Magnificat* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1956), 234.

<sup>45</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 44, *The Christian in Society*, ed. James Atkinson (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1966), 61.

whole hearts. Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand.<sup>46</sup>

His comments on Luke 11:13, immediately following the Friend at Midnight, show great perception on the nature of our prayers:

Instead of good things in the last clause, Luke says the Holy Spirit. This does not exclude other benefits, but points out what we ought chiefly to ask: for we ought never to forget the exhortation, Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all other things shall be added to you, (Matthew 6:33.) It is the duty of the children of God, when they engage in prayer, to strip themselves of earthly affections, and to rise to meditation on the spiritual life. In this way, they will set little value on food and clothing, as compared to the earnest and pledge of their adoption, (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:14:;) and when God has given so valuable a treasure, he will not refuse smaller favors.<sup>47</sup>

That last statement, “he will not refuse smaller favors,” begins to raise some questions. In general, there is no question that it is true; God does not only grant His people the great spiritual blessings of eternal life and the kingdom of God, but He also graciously gives daily help and comfort, the “smaller favors” with which we are often so concerned. But does the parable of the Unjust Judge, for example, promise us that our requests for every “smaller favor” will certainly be answered “yes” if we only persist? I wish that Calvin had been clearer on that point in this comment (emphasis added):

The parable which he employs, though apparently harsh, was admirably fitted to instruct his disciples, that they ought to be importunate in their prayers to God the Father, *till they at length draw from him what He would otherwise appear to be unwilling to give*. . . . In the parable Christ describes to us a widow, who obtained what she wanted from an unjust and cruel judge, because she did not cease to make earnest demands. The leading truth conveyed is, that *God does not all at once grant assistance to his people*, because he chooses to be, as it were, wearied out by prayers; and that, however wretched and despicable may be the condition of those who pray to him, *yet if*

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<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. John T. McNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 852.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, *Commentary*, 1.354.

*they do not desist from the uninterrupted exercise of prayer, he will at length regard them and relieve their necessities.*<sup>48</sup>

Understood in the right way, this statement is quite true and is compatible with the understanding of the parable presented in this paper. Because Calvin gives us no definition of “assistance” and “necessities,” however, it is difficult to say exactly what he is implying. If he means that we must wait and continue praying for all the promised blessings of the gospel, then that is what this paper has argued as well. If he means that we should persist in *whatever* we ask for, because God *sometimes* makes us wait before he says “yes” (although sometimes He says no), that is true, but it is not taught in the parable of the Unjust Judge. If he means that we should persist in *whatever* we ask for, because God will *certainly* grant whatever we ask if we persist, that is neither taught in the passage nor is it true.

That same ambiguity is found in Jonathan Edwards:

He allows them to be earnest and importunate; yea, to the degree as to take no denial, and as it were to give him no rest, and even encouraging them so to do: Isa. lxii. 6, 7. “Ye that make mention of the Lord, keep not silence, and give him no rest.” Thus Christ encourages us, in the parable of the importunate widow and the unjust judge, Luke xviii. So, in the parable of the man who went to his friend at midnight, Luke xi. 5., &c. Thus God allowed Jacob to wrestle with him, yea, to be resolute in it; “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.” It is noticed with approbation, when men are violent for the kingdom of heaven, and take it by force.<sup>49</sup>

If we see the promised blessings of God as the object of these prayers, then Edwards point is true and encouraging. Edwards is urging us to never give up in calling on God to bless us as He has promised. But when he says, “take no denial,” does he mean to suggest that applies to everything we might pray for?

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2.198.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards, “The Most High,” 563.

The statements in the brief theological survey above are profound and give us much from which to learn. Much is right, and nothing is terribly wrong, in what these authors have said. No one has said anything about prayer with which I could not agree, if given the right sort of qualifications. Ultimately, however, the nature of the promises in the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge deserves a specificity and clarity that is occasionally lacking in these commentaries.

### What Shall We Say to These Things?

Clearly not everyone surveyed above agrees with the perspective argued for in this paper concerning the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge. When it comes to the meaning of ἀναίδεια, virtually nobody agrees that it means “shamelessness,” although it is possible to claim that Luther may agree. Should it be of concern that this paper is in disagreement with the great Christians who came before us? My own answer would be, “A little . . . but not too much.” We have much to learn from those who came before us. They were, however, people of their own time, just as we are people of our own time. God has given the task of understanding the Scriptures as a project for the entire Church throughout history. I could not pretend for a minute that I am an independent exegete; I am standing on the shoulders of giants, dependent in many ways on the insights of those who came before. But it is still true that we today are in a better position to answer some questions than our ancestors were, most of all because we have had time to digest the arguments they made. In the end, some of those arguments are more convincing than others, and with that we must be content.

## CHAPTER 6

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON LUKE 11:5-8 & 18:1-8

The validity of systematic theology is hotly debated in some Reformed circles. The purpose of this paper is not to enter into or resolve that debate. This chapter, therefore, talks about “systematic theology” only in the in the very general sense of “biblical worldview.” My conviction is that the Bible teaches theological truths primarily so that we can conform our picture of the world to God’s, thereby changing the way we live as a result of that picture. This chapter, then, explores the ways Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-8 relate to other biblical theology, how they contribute to our understanding of reality, and how they should affect our choices as believers.

Prior chapters in this paper have relied heavily on research; this chapter emphasizes instead my own attempt to draw coherent theological conclusions from the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge. The first three sections deal with the positive contribution these parables make to our understanding of God, our final hope, and the connection between prayer and perseverance in faith. The last section deals with the more controversial question of persistence in prayer and what these parables do and do not say about it.

#### The Character of God

The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge make a significant contribution to our understanding of theology proper—that is, to our understanding of God. More importantly, however, they demonstrate how a proper

understanding of God is the foundation for the personal decisions of faith each person must make. Both parables use the “from the lesser to the greater” form of argument, and in both cases the “greater” thing to be considered is the character of God in comparison to the character of man. Thus an understanding of the nature of God becomes a call to action.

One aspect of God’s character that is brought out by the parable of the Unjust Judge is His righteousness. Now, in one sense, the righteousness of God is a terrifying thing. Luther certainly found it so, as he thought about his own evil and unworthiness in comparison to God’s righteousness and holiness.<sup>1</sup> Jesus, however, means for the contemplation of the righteousness of God to be comforting.<sup>2</sup> Evil and injustice seem to triumph all too often. What confidence can there be that cries to God to make things right will be heard? Such confidence comes in part from contemplating God’s righteousness. The widow got the justice she was asking for, even though the judge she dealt with cared nothing for justice. How much more will the Judge of judges do right? He knows the extent of the injustice in the world more than we ever could, and He cares more about righteousness than we do. Knowing His love of justice as we do, how could we think that God will not keep His promises to fill the earth with justice?

Even more important than God’s justice, at least in terms of the comfort it affords, is His covenant loyalty. The widow was dealing with a judge who cared nothing for her. Jesus, however, emphasizes that it is God’s elect, His chosen people, whose cries He will answer. The great covenant promise of God reverberates through the OT: “I will be their

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<sup>1</sup> Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1950), 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> Bavinck points out that God’s righteousness in the Bible is usually “in a favorable sense” due to the way God imparts His righteousness through justification, but that is not the sense I have in mind; rather, the issue is what Bavinck would call “retributive justice.” Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 217.

God, and they will be my people.”<sup>3</sup> How could we think that God will not keep His promises to rescue His people when it is indeed *His* people who cry to Him?

With the parable of the Friend at Midnight, Jesus provides no commentary; He makes no explicit statements about what God will do, leaving us to see the point of the story for ourselves. Once again, however, the force of the parable depends on our understanding of God’s character—in this case, His mercy. In the story, the host was caught in a bind between the audacity of waking his friend at midnight and his real and compelling need to do so. Jesus argues, however, that his hearers would never expect that sleeping friend to say no; the compelling need that drove the host to so “shamelessly” bother his friend would be seen and responded to. Well, that is our situation with God; we too feel abashed to approach God for blessings we do not deserve, and yet our need drives us to do so. Our God, however, is even more committed to the value of mercy than that friend is in the story. It was God’s “good pleasure” to save sinners through the death of Christ; this was not an “arbitrary choice” but was “founded in the love and justice of God.”<sup>4</sup> We can approach God with confidence because we know His character and His values; He *wants* us to come to Him for mercy, in spite of our unworthiness.

We see modeled in these parables, therefore, what a good “theology” (study of the knowledge of God) is meant to do. Rather than giving us merely abstract facts about the metaphysics of the ground of all being, theology is meant primarily to reacquaint us with the Creator so that we can respond to Him as we ought.

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<sup>3</sup> For example: Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23, 31:1, 31; Ezek. 37:27.

<sup>4</sup> L. Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), 212.

### Our Eschatological Hope

The parable of the Unjust Judge focuses on the return of Christ. Once again, we see how a theological truth is intended to drive us to the appropriate response. Several aspects of the return of Christ come into play in this parable. First of all, Jesus draws on the theme found in both the OT and NT that the establishment of Christ's kingdom means the overthrow of ungodly opposition and the establishment of justice. The earlier chapter on this parable showed several passages where this theme emerges; we might also think of Psalm 110:1-2:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand,  
Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet."  
The Lord will stretch forth Thy strong scepter from Zion, saying,  
"Rule in the midst of Thine enemies."

The NT specifically applies the language of this Psalm to Jesus, telling us that Jesus reigns now at the right hand of the Father, while we are waiting for God to make Christ's enemies a footstool for His feet.<sup>5</sup> This is a significant part of the eschatological hope declared in Scripture, that Christ will reign "until the victory over the enemies is complete."<sup>6</sup>

It should probably be noted that the eschatological views with which one approaches the parable can affect one's conclusions. In the seventeenth century, John Lightfoot seems to have been an early preterist, and he connects the coming of the Son of Man with the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> On the other extreme, some commentators, both ancient and modern, have argued that the unjust judge is a symbolic picture of the

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<sup>5</sup> See Acts 2:34-35; 1 Cor. 15:25; Heb. 1:13; 10:12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 411.

<sup>7</sup> John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica: Matthew—I Corinthians*, vol. 3, *Luke—John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 184.

Antichrist.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of my own amillennialist views, the coming of the Son of Man that Jesus describes is clearly His future second coming, when He fulfills the eschatological hopes of His people and abolishes all opposition to the rule of God.

The parable of the Unjust Judge also implies another eschatological theme: the real possibility that the final consummation will be long in coming. The theme of the parable is encouragement not to lose heart if we must wait, and Jesus implies that He may be long in returning when He says, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” In the face of His long absence, we are not to lose heart; we are not to be among those whom Peter talked about:

Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” (II Pet. 3:3-4)

The Christian life is lived in the tension between the firm confidence that God will fulfill all His promises and the reality that He has not yet done so.

This tension highlights the most important eschatological theme raised by the parable of the Unjust Judge: the Christian life in this age is a life of hope. God has not made this life, this world, this age, to fulfill all our needs; if He had, then why are God’s people still crying out to Him day and night? Paul very explicitly explores this theme in Romans 8 (emphasis added):

For I consider that *the sufferings of this present time* are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For *the creation was subjected to futility*, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself

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<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, ed. Philip Schaff, vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 554; Arthur W. Pink, *The Antichrist* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1988), 174-175.

also will be *set free from its slavery to corruption* into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that *the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth* together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, *even we ourselves groan within ourselves*, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but *hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.* (Romans 8:18-25)

Christians are often criticized for being “so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.” The biblical perspective is the opposite; we are called to be completely heavenly minded, which alone gives us the perspective from which to live correctly in this world (emphasis added):

Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, *fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, *be holy yourselves also in all your behavior* (I Peter 1:13-15)

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. *Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness*, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! *But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.* (II Peter 3:10-13)

These are the truths undergirding the parable of the Unjust Judge. God has promised to restore all things through Christ, but that day may be (it has been) long in coming. The call to Christian discipleship, then, is a call to a life of patient hope.

### Prayer and Perseverance

The emphasis on the Christian life as a life of hope brings us to the great theme of these parables: the connection between prayer and perseverance in faith. This theme is implicit in the Friend at Midnight and very explicit in the Unjust Judge.

Since Jesus Himself uses the analogy between human fathers and God (“Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son. . .” in Luke 11:11), it seems appropriate to illustrate the connection Jesus makes between prayer and perseverance with a father and son story of my own.

Once there was a father who made a great promise to his two sons: one day, when each of them was ready, he would give them each a large piece of his extensive property. Through the gift of this rich and fertile land, each son would become a wealthy and important landowner in his own right.

The first son, whenever need pressed him, would think of the promise of that land and ask his father if he could have it now. Each time he asked, the father would answer, “No, not yet.” Many times the longing for that land led the son to ask, and many times he was disappointed in his request. Yet he never lost heart; he knew that his father’s word was his bond, and that one day he would receive what he had been promised. So whenever his need and desire filled his heart, he would go again to ask, and one day he heard the father say what he had been longing to hear, “Yes, it is time.”

The second son also was pressured by many needs and filled with desire for that land. He too went a number of times to ask his father for the land he had promised. The second son, however, soon lost heart. “Each time I ask I come away empty-handed; why should I pin my hopes on a promise of land that may never arrive?” So one day the second son said to the father, “I am no longer your son,” and left home to make his own fortune, a fortune that he never found. When the time came to give the first son his promised piece of land, the father gave him the second son’s land as well because the second son was nowhere to be found.

The first son kept asking; the second son stopped asking because he stopped believing that the father would keep his promise. This is exactly how I understand the choice with which Jesus confronts us in the parable of the Unjust Judge. Like the sons in this story, like the widow in Jesus’ story, we have promises from God that He will finally make all things right, and yet we continue to face suffering and unrighteousness in this life. When the pressure is on, we cannot ignore it; we must respond *somehow*. But will our response be to go again to the God that we know loves us and cares about what is right? Or will we abandon

hope, cease to persevere in believing God's promises, and look to some other remedy for our troubles?

God has promised many things to His people. He has promised to forgive us, which is why "Christ propitiated the wrath of God and rendered God propitious to his people."<sup>9</sup> He has promised to free us from death because "we cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life."<sup>10</sup> He has promised to bring justice and righteousness to the world because the reign of Christ "secures perfect peace with God and good-will among men."<sup>11</sup> He has promised to sanctify His people because the atonement secures "the gradual mortification of the old man, and the gradual putting on of the new man created in Christ Jesus."<sup>12</sup> For all the many promises of this sort, the appropriate, and indeed absolutely necessary, response is faith; God's people should ask for the promised blessings with full confidence that the answer will be "yes." There is no question of "if it be Your will"; God has already made it clear that it *is* His will. Both the parable of the Friend at Midnight and the parable of the Unjust Judge tell us that God will *certainly and without fail* say "yes" when we ask Him to fulfill the promises that He has made; He will certainly say "yes" even if we feel presumptuous and unworthy; He will certainly say "yes" even if that "yes" seems a long time in coming. Jesus asks, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" Given that His coming is the eschatological fulfillment of all the promises of God, God's people should certainly pray with total confidence until that great day arrives.

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<sup>9</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 30.

<sup>10</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Norcross: Great Commission Publications, 1993) 16.5.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 105.

<sup>12</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 393.

Continuing in prayer, then, in the sense that Jesus means it, is continuing in faith. In the face of persecution, loss, and all that we want to be free of now, we are to think about the promises of God, and we are to think about the character of God. To give up seeking God's promised blessings would be a declaration that we do not believe Him, that what He has promised will not come to pass. If we no longer believe that God will come through, then we are not in fact believers, and we will stop praying. If we do believe that God will come through, then our response in the midst of the pressures of life will be to turn again to God, confident that our prayers are not in vain. Of course, this is not easy or automatic; to continue to trust God in the midst of trials is the great challenge of the Christian life. We will stumble and struggle at times, but no one who has a genuine faith and a sanctified heart will cease going to God altogether.

#### Persistence in Prayer?

The key argument up to this point has been this: when God has promised something, believers should continue to pray for that something with absolute certainty. Not everything that believers pray for, however, falls into the category of things promised by God. Financial hardships, relationship problems, health worries, death—these are all issues that press on believers terribly, and yet God has made no promises that each situation will be resolved in this life as the believer might wish. Ultimately, of course, God has promised to solve all these problems fully and completely. God promises life eternal, with richness and health and love. There is no promise, however, that in this life Bob will stop mistreating Carol, or that Fred will be healed of his fatal disease. And yet believers greatly desire for God to solve these problems, and their prayers are often about these things.

Some Christians would take exception to the previous statements. They would argue that God has promised to solve any problem now, in this life, including healing any fatal disease, if only a person asks with enough faith, perhaps appealing to James 5:14-15.<sup>13</sup> There are two questionable ideas here: 1) God has promised to heal all diseases and solve all problems in this life; and 2) Faith means being totally convinced that you *will* receive these things and persisting until you *do*. The first idea takes us into the knotty problem of the charismatic gifts, and this paper is not going to deal with that issue at all. For the sake of argument, let me just say that I take the position held even by some who have strong charismatic leanings: God has made no promise to heal every disease and solve every problem in this life.<sup>14</sup> The second idea, however, raises the issue of the connection between faith, prayer, and persistence, an issue which deserves some comment.

#### Perseverance in Faith

One connection between faith and persistence we have seen already as the key teaching from the two parables:

*Faith means believing everything that God has promised and persisting in prayer until those promises are fulfilled.*

This idea has been fully explored in previous sections of this paper.

#### A Persistent Trust

There is another way in which persistence in prayer is connected with faith, a way not touched on in the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge:

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<sup>13</sup> James 5:14-16 need not be understood to be promising universal healing; I find persuasive the argument in: Daniel R. Hayden, "Calling the Elders to Pray," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (July-September 1981): 258-265.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit: Discovering How God Speaks and Heals Today*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 126.

*Faith means trusting God's good intentions and persisting in taking our concerns to Him.*

To illustrate this point, here is another story about the father with two sons:

Once there was a father who had made great promises to his two sons concerning rich and fertile land that would one day be theirs. Before the day when that land could be theirs, however, the two sons both found themselves in need of \$10,000 to help them out of a difficult situation. Although the father was loving and kind, he was also a father of discipline and temperance, and it was by no means certain that he would grant the money.

The first son thought to himself, "My father has shown how much he loves me and cares for my future by the great promise he has made; perhaps he will add to that promise and help me with my current trouble." But when he asked his father for the money, he received a non-committal answer. He was content for a time, but his need pressed on him again, and so, remembering his father's love, he went to ask again. Each time that his need drove him to his father, he asked hoping the answer would be "yes," but knowing that the answer might be "no." He always remembered, however, the great promise that his father had made and that ultimately his father would make him rich. The last time he asked, the look in his father's eyes told him that the answer was a final "no," and the son bowed his head in acceptance and went his way to deal with his problem another way.

The second son thought to himself, "How can I get my father to give me the money? I think that I have him all figured out: bombarding him with constant requests will force him to give me what I want." Just as the first son did, the second son went to the father again and again, but all the time thinking that he had found a very effective technique to bend his father to his will. When it became clear to him that the father would not give him what he wanted, he went away cursing under his breath.

The story is intended to illustrate that, even with those things that God has not promised to do for us, persistence in prayer can be an appropriate sign of faith. The first son asked because he was in need and because he knew that his father loved him. To pray when we are in trouble, even when the specific answer we want is not assured, can show that we trust the God we are praying to:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (I Peter 5:6-7)

Neither of these passages promises that God will specifically give us the answer we want; Peter in particular goes on to imply that God may let the times of suffering last for some time. We have put our trust in the God whose wisdom surpasses ours, of whom Paul said, “How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways” (Romans 11:33b)! Yet if God in His wisdom says “no,” He nonetheless is very much on our side. Persistence in appealing for His help can be, therefore, an act of great faith.

#### Taking No for an Answer

Implicit in the last point is the idea that faith is willing to accept God-given limitations:

*Faith means accepting that God may say no and not letting persistence become presumption.*

Making persistent requests for help from God is a biblical concept. David prayed unendingly for the life of his son. Paul prayed three times for relief from the thorn in the flesh. Jesus prayed all night for deliverance from the cross. These prayers were a true expression and sign of their faith. And yet their faith was also shown in their willingness to accept the answer “no.” When David’s son died, he got up and accepted God’s decision. Paul accepted God’s explanation that He had an intended purpose for the thorn in Paul’s flesh. And Jesus gave us the very model of all such prayers when He said, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” The strength of His faith and the fervency of His desire were beyond question, yet He deferred to the Father’s will, even though it meant He must go through agony. In the end, His victory would not be by avoiding the cross but by triumphing through it.

Persistence can sometimes be motivated not by faith but by misunderstanding and (sometimes) presumption. The misunderstanding can come from misreading passages such as the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge. God has promised an absolutely certain “yes” in response to our prayers for ultimate justice and all His other promised blessings; the mistake comes in taking that “yes” and applying it to any and all requests we might make. The possible presumption arises from a distorted view of faith, thinking that “not taking no for an answer” is always an expression of the strength of our faith. But as the heroes of the Bible show us, taking no for an answer is sometimes the most faithful thing to do. We see the possible problem in the story of the second son above; he kept going back not because He trusted the Father, but because he thought it was a technique that would work. Yet getting what we want is not necessarily a victory. The same is true for us as it was for Jesus in the garden; although God may not choose to grant every request for relief in this life, our ultimate triumph will be found by being faithful in the midst of our troubles.

I started to read David Crump’s recent book, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, with the understanding that he totally dismissed the idea of persistence in prayer; indeed, parts of his book might sound as if he does.<sup>15</sup> Although I disagreed with him about several things in general, I also found that we share a similar perspective on persistence in prayer. As I do, he sees that there is both a biblical and an unbiblical way to persist in prayer (emphasis added):

*Persistent prayer is an essential component of the Christian life. The apostle Paul describes his own experience of wrestling in prayer (Rom. 15:30; Col. 2:1; 4:12). Yet,*

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<sup>15</sup> David Crump, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: A New Testament Theology of Petitionary Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 60-64; 75.

is there a biblical basis for the formula *long-term repetition + sufficient fervency = positive response*? No. It is impossible to construct such an equation from the materials found in [the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge].<sup>16</sup>

Crump's paragraph captures in a nutshell my own perspective. Faith can indeed express itself in persistent prayer for all our many concerns. The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge, however, do not teach that persistence is a necessary technique to receive what we want from God. Crump starts his book by telling the story of a woman on the verge of losing her faith because she had been assured that the persistent, fervent prayers of her church would save her friend dying of cancer, and yet the friend had died. God had not come through on His promise. In my favorite part of his book, Crump ends his own discussion of the Unjust Judge by returning to this hurting woman:

No doubt, her pastor would suggest that the church had not started to pray early enough, that they had not pleaded earnestly or forcefully or frequently enough. Yet, she had begged God for healing, desperately, persistently, shedding tears night and day . . . But the young mother had died, and now my visitor found herself trapped in the parenthetical position of waiting blindly between the ages. Trapped between a spiritual rock and an eternal hard place, would she continue to believe the ancient gospel promises of a Father who saves each of our tears in his bottle, of a Savior whose coming will redeem all our waiting? . . . When the Son of Man comes, will he find her praying?<sup>17</sup>

The parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge do not tell this young woman that persistence will give her the healing she seeks from God; instead, they tell her that she must not lose heart, that what seems wrong now will finally and completely be made right. If she continues to believe and to pray to the God who made these promises, she will find herself in the company of those who have been fully redeemed.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 89.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

Three reasons motivated the writing of this paper, in increasing order of importance:

1) A misunderstanding of the relationship between faith and persistence in prayer can be spiritually unhealthy. Some come to see prayer as a technique to make God pay off; others find their confidence in God shattered when He does not do what they mistakenly thought He would do. Having a more accurate view of the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge can contribute to a healthier view of faith and prayer.

2) It is important for all Christians to be willing to reconsider how they understand passages in the Bible, and the parables of the Friend at Midnight and the Unjust Judge provide good practice. Particularly when we are in an environment where a certain view of prayer is taught, it is easy to read that view back into these parables without asking whether, in fact, that view is what the parables teach. Learning to care more about what the Bible says than what we have been taught it says is a spiritually healthy exercise.

3) Most importantly, these parables have a great and important message for us. At its most fundamental, prayer is a way of living out and persevering in our faith. The great call of all believers is to persevere in that belief. Jesus in these parables has reminded us that God is merciful and righteous and loyal to His people; in the light of these great truths, let us never stop crying out to God for the blessings He has promised.

APPENDIX 1  
INTERPRETING PARABLES

*This appendix is adapted from a paper I wrote for the Gospels class taught by Dr. Cara.*

Since my understanding of Luke 11:5-8 and 18:1-8 very much depends on how I approach parables in general, and the approach I take is far from universal, I want to provide in this appendix a limited defense of my understanding of the parables. Much ink has been spilled debating whether parables have one point or many points, with the word “allegory” typically associated with the idea of “many points.” Clearly, many of the parables of Jesus have more than one point of correspondence between the story and the reality. Therefore, if we define allegory as a figurative story with the possibility of multiple points of correspondence, the parables are allegories. I would argue, however, that the issue of “multiple points” is not the only relevant issue in the hermeneutics of parables; in fact, it is not even the most important issue. More important is the *manner* in which a parable uses figurative language to makes its point(s).

To illustrate, let us consider two famous stories told by two different prophets. The first story is told by Ezekiel in Ezekiel 17:2-20. An eagle plucks the top off of a cedar in Lebanon and sets it among merchants; it also plants the seeds by the waters, and they grow into a vine. The vine, however, reaches out toward another eagle, seeking to be watered by it. What strikes me about this story is that, fundamentally, it is a symbolic code which yields its meaning through decoding. The first eagle represents Babylon, and the second eagle

represents Egypt, to whom the transplanted member of the royal family of Judah had sent envoys. What is equally clear about this story is that it is *not* intended to make sense as a story; it is not portraying a situation that is understandable in terms of real life. Vines do not ignore the eagle that planted them to reach out to another eagle for watering. Therefore the author is not using a real-life analogy to explain his point. When the decoding has happened (Eagle = Babylon, and so on), the meaning of the story has been found.

The second story is told by Nathan to David after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. He tells of a rich man who, instead of taking from his own flocks, takes the one, beloved lamb that belongs to his poor neighbor. David responds with anger to the story, insisting that the rich man deserves to die. Nathan cries out, “You are the man.” What David had done, stealing the wife of Uriah and arranging his death, was just as worthy of condemnation as what the rich man had done in the story. Notice that there are several points of correspondence between the story and the reality: David is the rich man, Uriah the poor man, and so on. But the meaning of the story is not derived merely from decoding it. As a story, it makes sense on its own. Only after David understood the logic of the story itself did Nathan reveal that he was making an analogy between the rich man’s offense and David’s.

The distinction between these two types of figurative language, between a code and an analogy, is a fundamental one. Each type must be approached differently. For example, I would argue that the book of Revelation is filled with visual coded messages. Jesus is portrayed in the book of Revelation as having a sword coming out of His mouth. This is a code, a memorable picture that reminds us that Christ conquers with His word. Imagine, however, that I came to this figurative picture assuming that it is an analogy: “Jesus

is like a man with a sword coming out of His mouth.” What would that mean? I have never seen a man with a sword coming out of His mouth. I cannot imagine that it would be a very effective weapon; a sword in the hand would be much easier to use. And how could He issue commands in battle with a sword in his mouth? In the real world, a sword in the mouth would be a handicap, a powerful weapon rendered ineffective by being in the wrong place. All of this, however, is irrelevant to the image in Revelation. Thinking about what a sword in the mouth would actually be like is counter-productive; the author connected “sword” and “mouth” only because of the code, because the author wanted to literally connect “word” and “weapon of conquest.”

When dealing with an analogy, however, a different approach is needed. In Isaiah 5, God paints a lyrical picture of His vineyard lovingly cultivated on a fertile hill, a vineyard that produces nothing in the end. Although it is not wrong to say “God is the vineyard owner” and “Israel is the vineyard,” such a code-breaking approach to the story does not do it justice. The place to start is with the story itself. This vineyard owner has lavished time and attention on his vineyard, using choice vines, building a tower, making a vat for the expected wine. Why does he do all of this? He does it because he expects that the vineyard will yield good grapes. If instead it yields bad grapes, what would we expect him to do? He will stop caring for the vineyard; he will let it become overgrown and overrun. Why should he continue to pour his time, resources, and energy into a vineyard that yields no harvest? After understanding the story in this way, the analogy really has an emotional weight. Israel is like this vineyard, cultivated by God to yield a certain fruit. And yet what did He find in Israel? “Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress” (Isa 5:7). The analogy of the vineyard uses the motives and

feelings of a human vineyard owner to help us understand the motives and feelings of God toward Israel. Unlike reading a coded message, understanding the sense and dynamic of the story is as important to its meaning as identifying the points of correspondence between the story and reality.

In the light of the distinction made above, how should we think about the parables of Jesus? My contention would be that most of the parables are not codes to be broken but analogies to be understood. For example, Jesus tells a parable about tenants in a vineyard who first dismiss the vineyard owner's servants and then kill the vineyard owner's son. There is no question that there are multiple points of correspondence in the story: Israel as the vineyard; the prophets as the servants; Jesus as the son. It is even likely that a vineyard is chosen for its symbolic value, alluding back to the song of the vineyard in Isaiah. But fundamentally, this story is an analogy that makes sense on its own terms. Matthew brings this out when he reveals the detail that Jesus asked the Pharisees themselves what should happen to the tenants in the story. Just as David did with Nathan, they respond to the logic of the story itself: "They said to Him, 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers, who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons'" (Matt 21:42). The Pharisees have understood the story clearly, because it makes sense on its own terms; what they have not seen, but soon will, is the analogy that Jesus is making to them. Jesus could have shouted out like Nathan, "You are the tenants."

Does this distinction between parable as code and parable as analogy have a practical impact on how we interpret parables? I believe it does. For example, in the parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus says that the mustard seed is the smallest seed in the garden, but it grows up into the largest plant, and the birds can nest in its branches. As a young Christian, I

was taught that we should ask the question, “What do the birds stand for?” I was also told that Jesus had answered the question for us a few verses earlier. In the parable of the Sower, the birds eating the seed represented Satan. Therefore, I was taught, the parable of the Mustard Seed is about how, as the church grows, Satan will get a foothold in it. Interpreting the parable of the Mustard Seed in this way depends on seeing the parable as a symbolic code to be decoded. Birds are the code for evil, for Satan, and so birds in the branches can only mean evil in the kingdom, in the church. Notice, however, that this interpretation depends on totally ignoring the logic of the two stories. There is a reason that the birds represent evil in the previous parable: the sower is trying to plant crops, and the birds are his antagonists, eating the seed off the hard ground. In the parable of the mustard seed, however, the birds are doing nothing bad. It is a universal human experience that birds nest in the branches of trees and that the trees are none the worse for it. In the logic of the story that Jesus actually tells, the birds nesting in the branches highlight the *size* of the plant; what began as a tiny seed is now so big that the birds can make nests in it.

We can see, therefore, that it makes a big difference whether we are looking for the *sense* of the story as an analogy or the *code words* that must be broken. I would argue that, although the parables may have symbolic elements, fundamentally they are stories that make sense, stories that yield their meaning when we see the analogy between the situation in the story and the situation in the kingdom of God. Blomberg, summarizing the perspective of Sider, describes this perspective well: “The correct interpretation of a parable . . . requires a recognition of the fact that certain elements in the parable are being compared to certain spiritual realities as in an analogy, with respect to one or more specific characteristics.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 46.

Blomberg raises two other relevant points that I will address briefly:

1) He speaks of studies concerning “atypical features” in the parables, elements of the story that are “extravagant” and “unrealistic,” and he concludes, “But although these features appear implausible as descriptions of normal events, they make excellent sense when interpreted allegorically as standing for various spiritual truths.”<sup>2</sup> Does the presence of these unusual elements contradict my assertion that the parables are real-life analogies? No. Jesus does at times introduce unrealistic elements into His parables; think, for example, of the impossibly large amount of money owed by the unforgiving servant. No real servant could amass such a debt or hope to pay back such a debt; however, that fact does not render the story incomprehensible. The exaggeration serves to make the logic of the story more vivid: the servant is forgiven a *monumentally huge* debt. It also highlights an important aspect of the analogy: we, too, owe a *monumentally huge* debt to God’s justice. Again, in the parable of the Wedding Feast, it may be an unusual thing for the father to beat the bushes looking for guests to attend his son’s wedding, but it still makes sense in the story: this father obviously wants the wedding of his son to be celebrated, so much so that he generously invites strangers to attend (but even so, they had better wear their wedding clothes!). This unusual detail also highlights an important aspect of the analogy: if the Jews do not respond to God’s invitation, He will reach out to others in their place. The “atypical features” in the parables may not be typical in real life, but they are comprehensible in terms of real life; they work in the story itself, and they draw attention to certain key elements in the analogy.

2) Blomberg argues that parables are allegories. The key issue here is how we define allegory. Blomberg speaks approvingly of “the views that allegory is equivalent to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 45.

metaphor extended to narrative, and that it may contain many or few points of comparison”<sup>3</sup>

If we understand allegory along those lines, then I would agree that parables are allegories. I remain to be convinced, however, that those are the best definitions of allegory. The distinction between coded message and analogy seems quite relevant to the definition of allegory as well. The prototypical allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, seems to me to be an extended coded message punctuated with theological discussions. For example, Christian carries a burden on his back that, when he looks at the cross, falls off his back and rolls down a hill into a sepulcher. Bunyan is not saying, “You know how when you look at something and the thing on your back falls off and rolls into a grave? It is like that.” Instead, he is speaking in code: Christian looks on the cross (believes in Christ’s death for his sins) and the burden (his guilt) rolls off into a grave (is taken away forever). To my mind, it is at points like this that *Pilgrim’s Progress* is at its most allegorical. However, it is not an important point to me; the only issue is how we define allegory.

I have taken the time to define the nature of the parables in this way for one very important reason: if it is true, then it tells us what we must do to understand a parable. The important, irreplaceable first step is to seek to understand the story itself. Do not start by looking for symbols; start by asking what is happening in the story and why it is happening. When the story makes sense, the nature of the analogy will be easier to see.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 51.

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