

WHEN THE KETCHUP DOESN'T COME Luke 18:1-8

INTRODUCTION

How many of us would describe ourselves as patient? Not many. We don't like to wait. Dale Rooks is a school crossing guard in Florida. He tried everything he could think of to get drivers to slow down in his area. Nothing worked until he hit on an ingenious idea. He got an old hair blow dryer and wrapped it with black electrical tape. As cars would come speeding toward his intersection they would invariably slow down dramatically, certain he had a radar gun on them. We like to get what we want quickly and get where we're going fast.

One area where I have experienced some impatience is with ketchup. I love ketchup. I hate it when I go to a restaurant where I'm going to have a burger and fries and the ketchup bottle is almost empty. But there's another frustration I have with ketchup. You try to pour out ketchup and nothing happens. The ketchup just doesn't want to come out. You hold it upside down until your arm grows weary, but no ketchup. A year ago *Time* published an article about a new invention that has been created by a guy named Dave Smith and a team of engineers and technologists at MIT. After much research using nanotechnology the MIT people have come up with LiquiGlide. They say it is "kind of structured liquid, rigid like a solid, but lubricated like a liquid." Coat the inside of a bottle with LiquidGlide and the waiting is over. Ketchup slides right out.

Perhaps my days of waiting for ketchup will soon be over. But that doesn't solve the problem of impatience. And that problem often manifests itself in the lives of Christians. This is a matter that comes up in Luke 18:1-8. Here Jesus tells a parable that has a crucial message that is often forgotten right when most needed. In fact, the lesson of this parable may be among the most frequently forgotten and unused truths in the Bible. Let's see if we can learn to live by the lesson of this somewhat unusual story. I will warn you that it is easy to misconstrue the meaning of this parable and end up with some disastrously bad thinking.

This parable teaches:

TIMES OF TESTING WILL COME

In Luke 17:20 the Pharisees had asked "When is the Kingdom of God going to come?" Jesus had been telling everyone that the Kingdom of God was near and that they should prepare for it. So the Pharisees said, "Okay, pal, where is this Kingdom? When is this going to happen?" Jesus said in verse 21 "the kingdom of God is within you." He may have actually meant "among you" and been referring to himself, or he may have been saying, "the kingdom is about God's rule, and that starts in your heart." Either way, he

was saying that they had the wrong idea about the kingdom of God. They were thinking purely earthly power.

Then Jesus turned to his disciples and said, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it.” He told them that he would come back and set up his kingdom, but that there was going to be a wait before that happened. In the meantime things might be difficult. They might find themselves longing for him to show up because life is hard. That’s why he told the parable that we are looking at today.

Luke gives you the theme right up front in verse 1. “Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.” So I can make this sermon real short and tell you this passage means you should keep praying and not give up. But I am paid by the word, so I won’t make any money if I preach that short. Just kidding. There are two characters in this story. The first is a judge. This guy is described as a person who “neither feared God nor cared about men.” The first part means that he doesn’t think he’s accountable to God and he doesn’t care about what God thinks. He doesn’t let God’s law, direct his life or his decisions.

Not caring about men means he doesn’t give a rip what people think either. These two phrases combined formed a colloquial expression that meant this guy was as corrupt as he could possibly be. In his commentary on Luke, Joel Green says that this description was “common in the Roman world as a proverbial invective.” It “signified thoroughgoing wickedness.” This judge didn’t care what was just and right. He didn’t care if people knew he was crooked. He had power and he was going to use it for his own benefit. Most of the time his decisions were determined by who gave him the biggest bribe or what would bring him some advantage.

I recently read a book Brad Colbert gave me titled *Raid On The Sun*. Written by Rodger Claire, it is an account of the Israeli attack on the Osirak, the Iraqi nuclear reactor, back in 1981. As part of the story I got a glimpse of Saddam Hussein. One passage summarizes the character of this late tyrant. Claire wrote (p. 18), that Hussein “found he had only to make one or two particularly dramatic examples and a reputation for his ruthlessness and retribution would grow by itself.” He heard that one general, Omar al-Hazaa, had spoken badly about him. Hussein had him arrested, cut out his tongue, sentenced him to death, then executed his son and bulldozed his house, turning his wife and surviving children out onto the street. That’s the kind of person who doesn’t fear God or care about men. When Jesus told this story everyone in the audience knew exactly what he was talking about, and probably had one or more such corrupt judges in mind.

The other person in this story is a widow. This woman is at the other extreme. She has no power. In that culture a widow was the most helpless and powerless person in the society save for an orphan. She couldn't own land, she couldn't get a job, she had no rights, and she didn't even have access to the courts. The courts were restricted to men. Jesus doesn't give any details of this woman's legal problem. He just says that she had one. She had been treated unfairly and was put in a dire circumstance. Despite the fact that the woman had no standing in court, she went to the judge and appealed for help. She pleaded with him to grant her justice. The word used for justice here is a very strong one. It is used in Romans 12:19 when Paul said, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge.'" The words "revenge" and "avenge" are the same as this word. This woman clearly had been badly wronged and she wanted the judge to get her opponent.

Note that she "kept coming" to the judge. The grammar makes it clear that this was a repeated action. She would not take no for an answer. I envision her showing up every day badgering the judge. She simply would not give up. After all, what other recourse did she have?

Verse 4 says, "For some time he refused." Jesus pictures the judge as utterly disinterested in the woman's appeals. She had no power that he needed to curry, and she couldn't give him a bribe so he had no interest in helping her.

Who does the judge represent? God. Who does the widow represent? You and me. This is almost as weird as the story about the dishonest business manager back in chapter 16. Why would Jesus have a corrupt judge represent God and a widow represent us?

I believe that Jesus chose those particular characters because *that's how life feels to us sometimes*. We are like the widow. We have no power. We don't control things. They are going sideways. We have been treated poorly, maybe even unfairly and there's nothing we can do about it. We feel as helpless as that widow. Frankly, sometimes it feels like God is like the unjust judge because he isn't even a little bit interested in listening to our problems. He certainly isn't responding to our pleas for help. Haven't you at some point in life felt like that has happened to you? Maybe it is happening right now. You have prayed and prayed and prayed and the only thing that has happened is that the situation has gotten worse.

When Laurie and I first started in ministry we were leading a little start-up church that met in a school in Solana Beach. (Sound familiar?) I was young, green, and had visions of great ministry. In the early going I have to say my motives were mixed. I wanted to impact people for the kingdom of God, but there was a certain amount of selfish interest too. I wanted to be a success. It wasn't that I was especially proud, but who wants to start

a ministry and have nobody come? So we began that little ministry with a handful of people. I would pray continually that God would use me and that he would grow our ministry. I can remember so many times driving to church on Sunday morning longing to see that at last God was answering our prayers as surprising numbers of people were flocking to our little worship service. And I can remember being disappointed as mostly our faithful few showed up week after week. It would have been very easy to conclude that God wasn't interested in the least bit in our ministry nor in answering my prayers.

I've prayed for most of my adult life to see God do a dramatic work in our nation, to turn it back to him. How would you say that's been going? I prayed for months that our son-in-law, Michael, would not have to go to Afghanistan. I assume you know where he is right now. He's in Afghanistan. Well thank you very much, Lord. It *feels* (and I emphasize this is how it *feels*) like God at times is as disinterested in my requests as the corrupt judge was in that woman's.

GOD WILL ANSWER

In the story the woman kept at it. Eventually the corrupt judge couldn't take it anymore. In verse 5 where it says she kept "bothering" him it literally says she caused him "labor" or "painful toil." She made his life miserable. He was afraid she would "wear me out" with her coming. That word literally meant to strike under the eye, or to give a black eye to. This did not mean he was afraid this woman was going to get all aggro on him and actually start beating him up. It could mean to give him a black eye in the metaphorical sense the way we might use it of someone spoiling our reputation. But this guy didn't give a rip about his reputation, so I doubt he was concerned about that.

The idea is that her relentless badgering was going to cause him to feel like he was being pummeled. He was going to feel beaten up. He can either finally do as she requests or he can deal with the exhausting misery of putting off this woman day after day. She literally was beating him down emotionally.

So he finally gives her what she asks for. So Jesus asks, don't you think the just God of the universe is better than that crooked judge? There are two crucial ideas to remember that make it far more likely that God will answer prayers than the judge in the story would accede to requests. First, he is a God of love, mercy and goodness. The judge in the story was corrupt, selfish and venal. So because of the character of God it is far more likely that he will listen to requests and grant them.

Second, we aren't really like that widow at all. Verse 7 describes those who know Jesus as his "chosen ones." When we bring our requests to God we don't do so as just some random unknown mendicants. We are God's chosen people. We are people he has called

to be his. That means we matter to him. What is happening in our lives is important. He cares!

This is a consistent message in the Bible. In Matthew 7:7-8 Jesus said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.” Psalm 34:4 says, “I sought the Lord and he answered me.” In John 14:13-14 Jesus said, “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

So Jesus says that God will see that we get justice and quickly. Does it seem like that to you? It doesn't to me. Sometimes praying to God feels more like the ketchup bottle as it is now than it will be with LiquiGlide. Waiting, waiting, waiting, and nothing happens. So how can Jesus say that God will see that his people get justice quickly? This is particularly of concern given that in the context there was talk of him coming to establish his kingdom on earth. Notice that verse 8 ends with a reference to his coming. Would you call 2000 years quickly?

Jesus is contrasting our Father with the judge in the story. The judge delayed in giving a response. In fact he would never have responded if it hadn't been for the woman's constant hectoring. God is not like that. I would translate this term that he will render justice “promptly.” When the time is right and when it is just to do so, God will answer.

That doesn't completely solve our problem of impatience. I don't want to have to wait for the ketchup. It annoys me if someone says “just keep waiting, it will come.” So it isn't a totally satisfying answer to know that God will answer promptly at the right time when I don't want the right time, I want NOW! Yet somewhere in the back of my mind I do know that it is best if God waits for the right time. So though I may not like it, I can learn to endure it.

So it would seem the message of this little story is if you whine long enough God will finally cave in and give you what you want? I can get anything I want if I will just badger God enough, right? It'll really work well if I get a whole bunch of people to whine right along with me, right? No, that's not the meaning of the story. The big lesson comes at the end. “When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?” That's what this is all about. When we've been praying for revival and it hasn't happened, when we've prayed for our ministry to go a certain way and it hasn't, when we've prayed for a person to turn and give their life to Jesus and it hasn't happened, what will we do? Will we maybe think without actually verbalizing it, “this is useless. I quit”? Or will we say, “God is anxious to grant requests promptly when the time is right, so I am going to keep praying. I will trust him and wait on him”?

We know that we are called to live by faith. But what does that mean? When Abraham was told by God that he was going to have a son, then nothing happened, what did living by faith mean? It meant continuing to believe that promise even when there was no evidence that it was going to be fulfilled, even when it got to the place where it was not possible for it to be fulfilled. Abraham hung on to the promise. He believed God. That's what faith is.

I don't have to exercise a great deal of faith when I got to the ATM. I put my card in the slot, punch the right buttons and tell it to give me \$20. Almost immediately that \$20 bill slides out of that slot. Not much faith involved there. What if I went to the ATM, punched in the numbers and nothing happened? I would not exhibit much faith. I expect my money almost immediately.

Rick Timm sent me a story about a woman who was picking up medicine for her daughter at a pharmacy. The daughter was very ill and the woman was rushing to get back home. In her hurry she locked her keys in her car. She prayed and asked God to help her get in her car, and almost immediately spotted an old wire hanger on the ground nearby. But she didn't know how to use it to open the car. She prayed and asked God to send someone to help. Immediately a very rough looking biker arrived and asked if she needed help. She explained, and in less than a minute he had the car open. He explained he had just gotten out of prison for auto theft. As she got in her car the woman said, "Thank you Lord. Not only did you send help, you sent a professional!" That's the kind of quick answer we want.

What if we don't get an answer that quickly? Faith means we trust God, we keep believing that he will be faithful and will answer prayers even when we have to wait, even when we get no answer for long periods of time. Jesus was not teaching that we can pester God into giving us what we want if we will just work hard at continual whining. This story is not about convincing God to give us what we want. ***The issue in this story is whether we will continue to believe God when it gets hard.***

Jesus knew hard times were ahead for his followers. They were anxious for him to set up his kingdom because they knew it would be great. But there was going to be a wait for that to happen, and in the meantime it was going to get quite difficult for his people. They would be persecuted and opposed and life in general would be hard. Would they trust him? That's what this is all about. Will we persist in faith? Will we continue to trust God when time goes by and we don't see evidence of his answer?

APPLICATION

STAND FIRM IN FAITH

There is a constant drumbeat in the Scriptures on the need and the call for us to trust in God and to keep trusting in God when it is hard because we don't see evidence of his presence or work. That's what Jesus meant by this little parable. That is a message we need to hear constantly, and so Scripture gives it to us repeatedly. Psalm 27:14 says, "Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Psalm 37:7 says, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes." Lamentations 3:26, in a context of utter disaster for God's people, says, "It is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." 1 Corinthians 16:13 says, "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong." Hebrews was written to people who were struggling because life had gotten so hard. They were disappointed in what following Jesus had brought in their lives and didn't see God answering their prayers. In Hebrews 10:35-36 the writer said, "Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere."

Stephen Ambrose wrote a best seller called *Band of Brothers* that was turned into a television series by HBO. It was the true story of a company of paratroopers in the 101st Airborne Division in World War II. In the sixth episode the company is in a crucial position in the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. They are surrounded, camped in the snow and frigid cold around the Belgian town of Bastogne, and they are running out of ammunition. Eugene Roe, one of the company medics, finds Joe Toye sitting in his foxhole with his boots off. Roe looks at his discolored, frostbitten feet and tells him that he could get gangrene and lose his feet. Roe wants to get him into a place where they can put him in a warm bed and try to save his feet. Toye just looks coldly at Roe and says, "I ain't coming off the line, Doc." That's the kind of gritty persistence and faith Jesus is calling us to have. When the prayers aren't answered, when one mystifying trial after another befalls us, when it just keeps happening, what will we do? Will we just pack it in? Or will we say, "I ain't coming off the line, Doc"?

That's the kind of dogged, determined faith we are called to have. It is what faith really means. If we say we believe God is powerful and he loves us, but as soon as life gets hard and he doesn't give us what we want we start questioning whether he really cares about us, whether he is trustworthy, is that really faith? It simply says we don't believe him.

But why would God work this way? Why does he make us face trials, persecution, disappointment and hardship? Why must we wait? For several reasons. Here are a few:

Because such hardship is necessary to shape us into people who are like Jesus.

James 1:2-4 tells us that persevering in trials is the only way we can become mature or complete in our faith. God has given us a physical analogy for this spiritual truth. How do we become strong physically? Is it through taking it easy, stretching out on the couch and

only moving the muscles in our fingers that are necessary to push the buttons on the remote? I think even that is too much effort. I suspect it will happen soon, but they need to make the TV so it responds to verbal commands. "Television on. Tune to ESPN." That would be great. But we know we only become strong physically through straining against resistance. So it is spiritually. I wish that were not true. I wish both physically and spiritually we get strong by taking it easy. But we don't, and we all know it.

But why should we need to go through that? Think back a couple of weeks ago. It is because God is preparing us for eternity. He is creating in us what we will be eternally. He is preparing us for eternal greatness and joy. I think of it like players in the minor leagues. Coming into this year I knew the Padres didn't have enough starting pitchers. Sure enough, the first month of the season their starters were horrific, the worst in the major leagues. Meanwhile, down in the minors they have some pitchers that are just tearing it up. Why don't they bring those guys up? They wouldn't do any worse than what they have. They don't because they need to develop. They need to stay in the minors and get ready for the majors. That's what God is doing in our hardships.

Because God is working his perfect will even in the hard things.

Romans 12:2 tells us that if instead of being forced into the mold of this world we are transformed by the renewing of our minds by the Spirit and Word of Christ, we will be able to live out the will of God and find out that it is good, pleasing and perfect. We will see the great thing God wants to do in us.

In other words, in all these hard things God is at work in ways we may not see for a long time, maybe not until eternity. But he is doing something that is good, it is perfect. Last night Laurie and I talked to our son-in-law, Michael. He told us more about his situation in Afghanistan. It is absurd. The superior officers who are over him have put him in a situation where it is pointless for him to be there. He's there not because it will actually accomplish anything but because somebody above him had an idea that anyone with common sense would see is ridiculous. I have no confidence in his superior officers. But do we have confidence in God? Do we believe he is wise, loving, good and powerful? If we do then even when we don't understand it we will trust him to work his good will in our lives.

Because God wants to display his glory and power in us.

2 Corinthians 4:7-8 has a profound message. Speaking of the treasure of the knowledge of God Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair." In other words, what shows God's power is that we undergo difficult times, times when we don't see God's hand, when life is hard and God

doesn't seem to answer, but we are not crushed, we do not despair. We trust God and have peace. This is what will show people that our God is real and powerful.

You have probably heard of Winston Churchill's famous speech at Harrow school during World War II. Speakers like to dramatically picture him standing up and saying, "Never give up. Never give up. Never give up. Never, never never, never give up." That's not what actually happened. It was in October of 1941. England still stood alone against Nazi Germany. It had already withstood the brutal air war called the Battle of Britain. Churchill gave a speech at Harrow that day, but the text was two pages long. In it he said at one point, "never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense." He ended the speech this way. "These are not dark days; these are great days—the greatest days our country has ever lived; and we must all thank God that we have been allowed, each of us according to our stations, to play a part in making these days memorable in the history of our race." The hard times are the times when we have a big role to play in God's great plan. It is when we can most glorify him. Facing hard times, confusing times, with peace, joy and confidence in God is what will most glorify God.

KEEP YOUR THINKING STRAIGHT

There are some things we can do that will help us to persevere, to be persistent, to keep trusting God and praying even when life is hard and answers seem either slow in coming or non-existent.

Remember what God has done

In Psalm 77 the Psalmist cried out to God for help. In verse 2 he said he was in distress. In verse 3 he said he groaned and his spirit grew faint. In verses 7-8 he asked, "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time?" Have you ever felt like that? But look at what he says in verse 11. "I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago." In Psalm 78 the Psalmist wrote of the failure of God's people. They didn't keep God's covenant. He said in verse 11, "They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them."

That's the key. We forget what God has done for us. One of the most important things we can do when we are pressured and wondering where God has gone, is to remember what he has done for us. Remember that Jesus died for us and conquered death for us. Remember the times he has worked in our lives when there was no denying those amazing answers to prayers.

Be clear about what you want

Laurie and I both have pretty slender builds. But at the end of last year we both found ourselves facing a situation we could no longer deny. I had some pants I couldn't wear anymore and she had some that had become way too tight. We both weighed more than we had ever weighed in our lives. We had stuff happening around our waists that we wanted to deny but no longer could. What was frustrating about this is that we both were exercising diligently. It would be hard to put more time in than we already were. But we had to do something. We said, "That's enough. This has got to change." So we entered this year committed to reversing that problem and losing weight.

The answer, of course, was changing our diet. So that's what we did. We didn't starve ourselves. We followed a plan that mostly cut out certain foods. Unfortunately there were some that had to go that I dearly love. Among them were things like doughnuts and fried potatoes. I love fried potatoes. French fries, hash browns, home fries, they're all delicious to me. But on multiple occasions it came down to a simple question. Which do you want more, to eat those fries or to lose the Michelin man look? If I don't want to be the Michelin man anymore then I have to say no thank you to the fries.

So ask yourself, what do you want to be? What do you want your life to be about? If the Spirit of Jesus is in you I believe you will find that at your core what you want is to be a person who radiates the joy of the Lord, a person who loves others, a person who heroically displays the glory and power of God by being steadfast and at peace no matter what may happen. I think you want to be like Jesus.

Hebrews 12:2 has good advice for us. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross." We want to take the long view of life and not shy away from the hard things. We want to live like he lived and to bring honor to the Father the way he did. If we can keep that focus, remember that is what we really want, that will help us in those times when the world seems to be blowing up around us.

Ask God to make you strong

In Ephesians 3:16 Paul prayed, "I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being." Do you think that's a prayer God might answer? I do. I think we should pray that for ourselves, especially when it gets difficult. Ask God to strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being so that no matter what happens you will, like that widow, persist in prayer and in faithfulness to God and not give up.