

The Persistent Widow

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Intro

Unbelief made headlines this week when Joshua Harris, famous author and pastor announced his departure from the Christian faith. It's easy to make too much and too little of this. *Too much*: When public figures or anyone walks away from the faith, it's easy to overreact—the sky is falling. Public figures are sometimes attacked online by people in a way we would never treat our friends in real life. Truth is, doubt is part of life and when faced head on, with the Scriptures and community, it can actually strengthen faith. *But*, it's also easy to make *too little* of walking away from the faith. This act is a rejection of the most powerful, most loving, most wise, most real person of history—Jesus Christ. Who said all the Scriptures point to him. *That* is no light decision at all. If we pull out that pin, Jesus, the whole of Scripture comes apart. Yet, it's popular in some small circles to reject primary biblical doctrines like substitutionary atonement (Jesus death in our place) and original sin (the need for his intervening death). These twin doctrines reveal the necessity and uniqueness of Jesus. Now, you may not think you're in jeopardy of walking away, but think again, Jesus asks you this morning, "Will I find faith on the earth when I return?" It's soul-searching stuff. Prior to the parable, he describes what it will be like when he returns: people will be buying and selling, eating and drinking, planting and building: completely unready. One will be taken, one will be left behind. *How can we know Jesus will find faith in us when he returns?*

Persist in Prayer

Jesus tells the story of a widow who obtained justice from an unscrupulous judge. In the ancient world, when a woman became a widow she lost security and provision. If she returned to her family, her husband's family would have to pay back the bride price, which they rarely did. Widows were left in the lurch. This widow has suffered some injustice and has no one to represent her, but somehow she gets justice. How? She kept bothering the judge (5). She's persistent. The words pile up: always, kept coming, bothering, beat down by continual coming. What does the widow represent? Jesus tells us up front, **And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart**" (1). The widow shows us the necessity of persisting in prayer. She beats down the judge through persistence. The phrase means to blacken the eye. The judge gave in because she wore him out! Makes me think of when my kids want to have a friend over they say please over and over. They ask me morning, afternoon, and evening, until finally I give in. They don't give up. Have you given up in prayer? Lost heart? Why? Why don't we pray? Listen, I know it's easy to walk away feeling guilty that you don't pray. I want more than that for you. Prayer *can* be difficult. Jesus knows; it's why he says, Don't lose heart. Over the last month I moved my family of five from one house to another. Man, did I underestimate the impact. There were tears. It was tough, threw out my back twice, but I also allowed it to get to me *spiritually*. I haven't been as prayerful over the last month. Why? I've been **busy**. Some of you have been busy *for months, years*. Too busy for prayer. If so, is it any wonder you're dissatisfied, dry, prone to critique the church, the faith? It's inevitable if we don't stay *close* to the object of our faith, to God himself. Another reason we don't pray is that Austinites like **experiences**. We work so we can play, especially in the summer: SUP/greenbelt, new restaurant, vacay. When we're busy working to play it's easy to lose touch with God. We

short-circuit our spiritual senses with short-term, skin deep experiences and find ourselves looking for the next thing. Prayer becomes intermittent not persistent. *Until* something wrecks our work/play rhythm: a sickness, a headline, gnawing loneliness, a struggling friend. Suddenly we're prayer warriors, begging God for relief, help, healing. This is a dangerous way to live. I took my son to Dallas for a baseball game this week, and when I suggested I drive there and back in one day, my wife said, No way. You know how you drive at night. I get very sleepy when driving at night, veer over those divots in the road, rumble strips, then wake up suddenly fearing for my life, praying Lord help me stay awake. Some of you treat prayer like that. You only really pray when you're shaken up, when you feel needy, when you lose something you really want, *something other than God*. This reveals an approach to prayer that's cold, **utilitarian** not warm and relational. It's manipulating God not communing with God. How can we turn away from this skin deep approach to prayer?

Trust the Character of God

The way to move away from this superficial approach to God is not to reinvent ourselves but to reengage God. To see him as he is, not as we would have him be. This parable is not about badgering God until he gives us what we want. That misses the point entirely. God is not a handmaiden to *our* whims. Rather, Jesus is saying if this judge who doesn't fear God or respect humanity can act justly for a helpless widow, how much more can the true Judge and Lord of all be trusted in our prayers? It's an argument from the lesser to the greater, an unscrupulous judge to a scrupulous Judge: "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? (6-7). Jesus is saying because God has greater character, we can trust him *more*. Be cautious, extremely cautious, of trusting yourself more and God less. Jesus urges the opposite. Distrust yourself, your impulses, your rationalizations, and trust me. I am good. I am right. I am perfect all the time. Don't put faith in yourself, put faith in me. In a parallel passage Jesus asks, What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent...If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11:11-13). If we're bad and can give good gifts, how much more can our good, Heavenly Father give us just what we need? The widow shows us its not immediate but ultimate justice. Jesus shows us God gives us more that we even know to ask for—his Holy Spirit. God wants to give us *himself*, his Holy Spirit, who brings his compassion, mercy, comfort, joy, peace, and *truth* right down into our hearts. Prayer puts us in intimacy with that God. How? Jesus taught us to pray, your kingdom come, your will be done. When I get on my knees and pray that prayer each day, it reminds me I am not in charge, that I was created to come underneath God's perfect rule and reign, that I can trust him and his timing for things in my life and the lives of the suffers, saints, and sinners I pastor. And when I do it, when I really let go of things, situations, people and ask for his will I'm met with real peace and assurance. When Jesus asks will I find faith when I return, he's asking *you*. Will he find you praying, persistently? Not mindless repetition but opening your heart to God over and over, trusting him with your concerns. Prayer is faith with a heartbeat, warm to God. Yielding—your will not mine. Trusting—your character greater than mine. Believing—your wisdom, even if I disagree with it, is greater than mine. A prayerful person is faithful person. A person who reengages God each day, not from the armchair of the Self, but from up close communion with God. How's it going? Are you opening your heart to the Father? Don't lose heart. Are you

listening to his Scriptures? Don't get so busy that work, play, and a utility approach to prayer keeps you from the God who wants to give himself to you.

Hope in the Son

Now to receive him, to enjoy prayer, to be a person of faith when the Son of Man returns, we've got to become like the widow. She was in touch with her need. She's knew she was vulnerable. Do you? Don't wait for the rumble strip to rip you out of your slumber. Cry out, day and night. Jesus promises in these last few verses to give justice to his elect. Why? It's very tempting to read our notions of justice into this text, many of which are *very important*, Jesus is talking about a different kind of justice. He's addressing a time in which God's people, the true church, the remnant will be so persecuted they cry out for vindication. That's why Jesus tells this parable right after describing the harrowing effects of his return. As the acceptance of Christian faith begins to crumble in our country, and persecution of historic Christian faith increases, we will sense the need to cry out or bail out. Jesus says cry out and vindication will come. Don't look for vindication from the world or a compromised faith. Rather, increase in faith. Pray. Get closer not further from God. He will uphold you. When you're tempted to give up, don't lose heart. And if your heart has become cold, if you're weary, look to the greater widow—Jesus who died and rose to stand before the Judge of all and plead our innocence, make our case, and lives to make intercession for us. If you can't get a word out, at least turn your heart to the one who died and rose and lives to pray for you. What grace! Consider Christ afresh, who prays persistently when we fumble, and be moved to faith. He is coming soon. Take heart.