

Five Forks Church

Sermon: “The Persistent Widow”

Series: “Will He Find Faith?”

Text: Luke 18:1-8

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever seen a headline that looks like this...?



“Christ Returns – Millions Missing Around the World” – I guess that’s one headline you certainly would hope you aren’t around to read! Hopefully, you would be one of the millions! Of course, this isn’t an actual newspaper, just an image designed to look like one. Over the last four or so decades, I have occasionally seen publications put out by various ministries, saying things like: “Millions Missing – the World in Shock.”

Now, admittedly, not everyone in today’s Church believes in the literal “snatching away” from the earth those who know Jesus as Savior. For those who don’t hold to the view often called “the Rapture” of the Church, the “Millions Missing” headline sounds irrelevant to their Christian walk.

Nonetheless, just for discussion, consider this with me for a moment. Whether the Rapture is a real future event or not has nothing to do with what I’m about to say anyway. But let’s suppose that it actually will happen – and that it actually does happen. Jesus returns to gather to Himself all those true believers around the world to meet Him in the air. All the true believers are thus gone from the planet in one single moment of time.

What if nobody left behind really notices? What if the news headlines hit the media outlets that day, but there is no mention of “millions missing” – or even thousands? In other words, when Jesus returns, what if there aren’t enough *true* believers to be removed from earth to make any kind of significant dent in the global population? Except for maybe a handful of relatives or friends of the missing, what if the effect is that no one realizes anything of significance has happened?

Do you think that would be unlikely? “Come on, Pastor Brian,” you might respond. “There are millions of Christians all over the world! If they all went missing at once, I’m sure the world would notice!”

Perhaps that would be the case. But the first time He came to earth, Jesus asked a very pointed question which causes me to give more serious consideration to the scenario I just described. In Luke 18:8, Jesus asked,

Luke 18:8b – “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

What do you suppose Jesus meant by that question? What will the spiritual condition of the planet be like when Jesus returns? And consider this: How much responsibility will we, as true believers in Christ in this present moment, bear for the state of that spiritual condition when Jesus returns?

What are we doing now in our lives to strengthen our faith – if anything? More significantly, what are we doing to encourage faith in those around us who presently don’t know Christ? Do we care about their spiritual condition at all and, if not, why not? How accountable to our Lord would we, as His people – as His Church, be for the way things are on earth *spiritually*, should He return today?

“WILL HE FIND FAITH?”

That’s the two-sermon series I’m beginning today and finishing next week. Or perhaps I should say I *plan* to finish it next week. For Jesus may return at any moment. “Will He Find Faith?” My hope and prayer is that you will join me as we ponder together Jesus’ question and how we should respond!

I. THE PARABLE

To ponder, then respond. That should always be our approach to God’s Word. Think it through until the Spirit tells us what to do. And the Spirit will tell us through the Word – every single time.

In this particular case, then, I want to first of all know the context of Jesus’ question. What is it that comes before which prompts our Lord to ask, “When the Son of man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

When we turn to Luke 18, we learn the chapter opens with a parable – an earth-based story with a heavenly focus. Jesus tells His followers the account of a persistent widow who is constantly pleading with an unjust judge to hear her case and rule in her favor. Listen to how the Bible relates it....

Luke 18:1-8 – Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ² He said: “In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. ³ And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, ‘Grant me justice against my adversary.’

⁴ “For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, ‘Even though I don’t fear God or care what people think, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually come and attack me!’”

⁶ And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. ⁷ And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who cry out to Him day and night? Will He keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?”

A good question to ask whenever you read one of Jesus’ parables is: Who is Jesus addressing? To whom is He telling the story? That’s important because He obviously, in each case, has something He wants His intended audience to understand. This will help you, then, as the reader to better determine the meaning of the parable.

For example, we see here that Jesus tells this account to His disciples. Therefore, if you want to be a better follower of Jesus yourself, there’s a message for you in this parable. And, odds are, the question at the end of the story, “Will He find faith?”, is directed at you.

The purpose of Jesus’ story is to tell us how we must always be praying, never giving up. There are two characters in the story – the widow and the judge. Even though the judge is prominent in the story, the focus of the parable is on the widow and her determination to get the judge on her side. She wears him down! Therefore, she is the one we’re being told to emulate. She is our example.

What then do we observe in this woman? First, we notice...

The widow is poor! She can't care for herself. The situation of a widow, especially in that Middle Eastern culture in that time, was such that, unless she had sons old enough to provide for her or her late husband left her wealthy, she had no one to care for her.

Remember the widow of Zarephath? When Elijah the prophet requested that she make a meal for him, she told him...

1 Kings 17:12 – “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she replied, “I don't have any bread—only a handful of flour in a jar and a little olive oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it—and die.”

Obviously, there was no hope for her in Zarephath – no one to care for her. Similarly, the widow in the parable of Jesus *needs* the judge's help. No one else in town can.

Next, we see that...

The widow is pressured! She certainly has a problem under which she's trying to survive! She feels keenly the pressure brought to bear upon her by her adversary. We aren't given specifics of her case. We have no idea what this adversary is doing. But, because we see her tenacity in pursuing the judge's aid, we know she is being treated unfairly in some fashion by someone. That unfair treatment forces her to regularly seek out the judge's help.

But we also can observe that...

The widow is perceptive! The widow recognizes the reality of the situation. She may or may not be emotional; we don't know. But she's not emotionally spent or distraught! She's not distracted by side issues. She has rightly identified the real problem. And she's dealing with it in the best way possible. She believes that the judge *can* help her with it.

And...

The widow is purposeful! She is single-minded. She is focused. Her mind is consumed with the reality of her need. But she is not overwhelmed with worry and anxiety. She has a course of action, she has a plan and purpose. So she's staying the course.

Note that...

The widow is persistent! It must be that this woman is a major part of the unjust judge's life. No matter where he goes, there she is! I can picture the judge doing all sorts of things to try to avoid this woman – sneaking out of his house by the back door or trying to be very quiet to give the impression he's not at home. But she is relentless! With dogged determination, she always manages to find him. She never gives up, she's not a quitter. In her conviction, she believes that he will eventually help her – and knows that only he can! Notice that, in the end, though the motives are different for each, the widow's goal also becomes the judge's goal. That's a testament to her persistence.

In this parable, Jesus paints a picture of the kind of character we ought to have, not only in our prayers, but in our whole lives. Remember, He wants us to see that we ought to *always* pray, never giving up. That speaks of a living attitude for life, not a mere shifting of the mental gears whenever we get ready to pray. We're not to only *pray* like this, we are to *be* like this. **The widow is poor, pressured, perceptive, purposeful, and persistent.**

II. THE QUESTION

But there's a problem. Jesus gives us this example of the ideal approach to prayer and to living a disciple's life. Then He closes out the parable with that question which, I believe, is meant to challenge us. "When the Son of man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

What is the answer to that question? Yes, Jesus will find faith? Or, no, He won't? In the book *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (by Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch), the writers comment...

When a question is asked in Greek, it is often possible to determine, from the presence of one particle or another, whether the answer expected is yes or no. But no such help is given with this one. Many commentators assume that the answer implied here is no, but in form at least it is a completely open question.

They're saying that Jesus' question remains open – that we can't know the answer for sure, just from looking at the way the question is rendered in the Greek text of Luke 18.

And therein lies the challenge to us. If the answer is variable, then the answer may well rest on how we, as Jesus' followers, respond to this parable! In fact, the writers of *Hard Sayings of the Bible* come to the same conclusion....

The lesson impressed by this discourse on the hearers is that they must keep on the alert and

be ready for that day when it comes. When it comes, God will vindicate His righteous cause and therewith the cause of His people who trust Him. But they must trust Him and not lose heart; they must here and now continue faithfully in the work assigned to them.... The Son of Man, whose revelation will be like the lightning, illuminating “the sky from one end to the other” (Luke 17:24), will be able to survey the earth to see if there is any faith on it, any “faithful and wise steward” whom his Master when He comes will find loyally fulfilling his service (Luke 12:42-44 RSV).

So the question “Will He find faith on earth?” remains open in fact as in form: its answer depends on the faithfulness of those who wait to render account of their stewardship when He calls for it.

How faithful would I be found to be, if Jesus were to return today? How about you? If called to give an account, how would you fare? That’s the challenge that lies before us.

And, according to Jesus, as the time of His coming draws near, it will not get easier to remain faithful. **Matthew 24:24 - For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect.**

False teaching will increase. And as a result, believers will be distracted to other things and other agendas, not staying the course, not staying on task. The Apostle Paul sounds the same warning.... **1 Timothy 4:1 – The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons.**

Being deceived. Abandoning the faith as the time of Christ’s return draws near. Will He find faith on the earth? Certainly doesn’t sound very promising, does it!

The previous context to this parable in the first 8 verses of Luke 18 is Jesus’ discourse on His Second Coming at the end of Luke 17. We don’t have time to unpack all of that today. But look at this portion of Luke 17 for just a moment....

Luke 17:26-27 – Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

How many people were found faithful when this worldwide judgment happened in Noah's days?

A conservative estimate from one source of the earth's population at the time of the Flood gives a figure of around a billion people. A billion people living on Planet Earth in Noah's time! How many were found faithful? Eight. Eight people. What if God took the eight people with Him in the same way he had taken Noah's great-grandfather Enoch? "Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him!" What if God "raptured away" the eight faithful people of Noah's day, and left all the millions of the wicked behind? Would the ones left behind really notice the missing eight people?

In Noah's day, did God find faith on the earth? Barely. At the end of Luke 17, Jesus says that when He, the Son of Man returns, it will be just as it was in the days of Noah. At the beginning of Luke 18, Jesus asks...

"When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?"

Barely? Maybe?

How will we respond to what we've considered so far this morning? Ponder. Then respond.

CONCLUSION: HAVING PONDERED...

I will present more on how we respond in next week's sermon. Having laid the groundwork for that message in this week's sermon, with a few reminders of what we've talked about so far, we should be able next week to focus on ways to prompt those around us to consider placing their trust in Jesus. Next week, we'll focus on evangelism.

For the rest of this morning, you and I need to consider our own faith. We have pondered; let's respond. Let's place ourselves side by side with the persistent widow to learn what we need to be and to do that we might be found faithful....

WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND WE ARE POOR

The widow was poor and couldn't help herself. In a similar way, we need to realize that we do not possess the necessary resources within ourselves to increase our own faith. As did the widow, we must make an appeal outside ourselves for help. The incredible truth is that, when we humble

ourselves before the Lord and say, “You know what, Lord? I can’t handle this; You’re going to have to do it!”, whatever the circumstance may be, we are perhaps, in that moment and in that situation, acting in faith for the very first time! We believe the Lord can help – and that He will!

WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE WE ARE BEING PRESSURED

The widow cried out to the judge, “Avenge me against my adversary!” She felt the pressure in her life and knew exactly where that pressure was coming from.

We may undoubtedly feel the pressure. But we may not have the right idea about where that pressure is coming from. We might think it’s our boss or our neighbor or our mother-in-law! We might believe it to be family members or co-workers or fellow students. Or society or the culture or the government. Or the church! But the Bible is very clear about the source of the real adversity we face....

Ephesians 6:10-12 – Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. ¹² For *OUR struggle is not against flesh and blood*, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Our adversary is not found to be made of flesh and blood. Quit blaming other people! Don’t attack them. Exercise some faith, be spiritually mature and recognize the reality of supernatural, evil forces that are at work in this world. Many of those around us have been blinded by spiritual evil. And because those people are not redeemed, they have no choice but to act in accordance with their own sin nature. Recognize the identity of the true adversary – and rest in the strength and power of the Lord.

This leads naturally to the next admonition....

WE MUST STRIVE TO BE PERCEPTIVE

The widow perceived correctly that her adversary was the problem. To rightly assess the situation and the circumstances in which we are living in this old world, we therefore need to have our perception shaped and molded by what the Lord tells us in His Word. The reality is, by ourselves we

do not, will not, and cannot gain access to the information needed to deal with Satan. We don't think the way God does; we need His perspective....

Isaiah 55:8-9 – “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord. ⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”

We might imagine that we know what would be the best way to handle whatever we're facing – and we might therefore also imagine that what we think is best is exactly what God is going to do!

But we're likely way off the mark in those imaginations! We need God's thoughts and ways to inform our ways and means. Once we're truly taking God at His Word by faith, we'll have what it takes to be even more like the widow of Luke 18....

WE MUST PLAN ON BEING PURPOSEFUL

The widow set out to do whatever she needed to do to maintain her connection to the judge who could help her. With her purpose firmly in mind, she let nothing distract or derail her. Jesus Himself also serves as our example....

John 6:38 – For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me.

Don't let other things clutter your life and distract from the main thing! Remember Jesus' words to Mary's sister Martha...?

Luke 10:41-42a – “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴² but few things are needed—or indeed only one.”

How often we are admonished in Scripture to do things like bring *every* thought into obedience to Christ, do *all* to the glory of God, pray *without ceasing*, and give thanks in *everything*. Nothing is to be done halfway, nothing should be allowed to distract or turn our attention from doing His will in His way! This is faith in action!

WE MUST BE PERSISTENT

The widow never gave up in seeking the judge to do what she needed done. Searching him out daily became her obsession. What would it be like to live life having our minds constantly filled with the

idea of seeking out the Lord in all things? That such a thought is so foreign to us, that it almost seems impossible, or even wrong-headed, may well be indicative of how far off we have gotten from what our Lord desires. Remember, Jesus told His disciples this parable of the persistent widow to teach them – and us – that men ought always to pray and to never give up. How different our lives might be if we believed God enough, if we exercised that kind of faith, that we would always be ready to pray! Are we too afraid of what others might think of us? Do we fear being thought a “religious fanatic” if we propose to pray about things “too much”? Is that why we don’t pray as often as we should? What did Jesus say about that attitude...?

Luke 9:26 – Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.

When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?

The question is open, dependent upon our response. Ponder, then respond. Let’s therefore ponder the widow who was poor, pressured, perceptive, purposeful, and persistent. If we seek to be the same as our Lord has admonished us to be, perhaps He will find faith when He comes.