

The Unjust Judge



Luke 18:1-8

Year C Proper 24

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Parts by scene

■ = large part ▲ = medium sized part ● = small part

		1
▲	James - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲
▲	Joanna - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲
▲	John - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲
▲	Judas - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲
▲	Peter - the most headstrong disciple, and the least afraid of a fight, but never the smartest person in the room	▲
▲	Thomas - the skeptic, who really wants to believe because of his emotional bond with the others, but can't simply ignore his doubts	▲
●	Jesus	●

Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Peter , Thomas

{James, Joanna, and Thomas enter.}

James *[angrily]* I can't believe you're doing this again. I thought you agreed to stop criticizing the rabbi!

Joanna *[more calmly than James, but still argumentatively]* I'm not criticizing him. I'm just saying that the parable wasn't quite right. And I never agreed to anything! I just haven't had any questions about his teaching lately.

James His parables can't be wrong. He's the Messiah!

{John, Judas, and Peter enter.}

John What's wrong?

James The rabbi just told some of us a parable, and Joanna is attacking it.

Judas *[humorously]* Well then, it must be Tuesday.

Joanna I wasn't attacking it. I just didn't think it made sense in some ways.

James You hear that? She says the rabbi doesn't make sense!

Peter Hot dog! Joanna vs. James, round five!

Joanna No, no! It's not like that!

Thomas *[miserably]* Actually, it's been exactly like that!

John Well, let's hear all about it. Maybe we can help figure out the parable.

Thomas It began when Phillip said he'd been praying for something, but it wasn't happening and he was losing hope.

James I told him he shouldn't give up, but *Joanna* told him he should go ahead and quit.

Joanna *[setting the record straight]* I *suggested* that maybe it was time to accept that God's answer was No.

James *[pointedly]* Then the rabbi said that *I was right* and told a parable to prove it.

Peter *[to Thomas]* Did he really say straight out that James was right?

Thomas Well...no, not in so many words. He just launched right into the parable. But it seemed to me like that's what the parable was saying.

Judas *[to Joanna]* Do you agree with that?

Joanna Well, yes. I do think that's what the parable was meant to teach. I'm just not sure it succeeded.

James If you know what it was meant to teach, then it succeeded!

John Hold on, hold on! We're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's hear the parable.

Peter Thomas, you tell it. You're impartial.

Thomas Okay, let's see if I can remember it exactly. *[after a pause]* There was a wicked judge who didn't care about God's law or the people's good, and one day, a widow who had been victimized by powerful interests came to him seeking justice. He ignored her for the longest time, but eventually got so tired of her constant petitions that he granted her suit, even though he didn't care about justice at all. And...I think that was it.

Judas *[to Joanna and James]* Do you concur?

Joanna Yes, that was it.

James Exactly.

John Well...I'm sorry Joanna, but it seems pretty clear to me.

James Exactly!

Peter Yeah, even I understand it. If you keep on bugging God with your prayers, he'll eventually grant them just to get rid of you! I love it. My kids used to do that to me. I used to give in just to get them off my back!

Thomas That's pretty much what the rabbi said at the end. *[trying to remember the exact words...]* "And will not God grant justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night? Truly I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly!"

James Case. Closed.

Joanna Except for this: if God will grant them justice quickly, then why do they need to keep bugging him?

{A pause while everyone digests this.}

Judas *[to Thomas]* Are you sure those were the rabbi's exact words? "He will see that they get justice, and quickly"?

Thomas I'm pretty sure.

Judas In that case, I'm with Joanna.

James What?

Judas It's supposed to be one of those "how much more" parables, right? If even a corrupt judge will grant justice to a powerless but persistent widow, how much more our good God? But the problem

is that if God is a good judge, then we shouldn't have to persist. He should hear us the first time.

John I see what you mean. It's really more a parable about the importance of asking, and not the importance of asking persistently. If you're shy about asking God for something, you should go ahead and ask, because he's not like a wicked judge who'll deny your suit just out of spite or callousness. Instead, he's a good judge who does care about both God's law and the good of the people.

Peter Hey, that reminds me of *my* parable!

Thomas You made up a parable?

Peter No, no. The parable the rabbi made up about me!

Joanna The parable about you?

Peter *[to Joanna]* Maybe you were here yet. *[to the others]* Come on, guys, you remember it, don't you?

John I'm sorry, Peter, but I have no idea what you're talking about.

James Why would the rabbi tell a parable just about you?

Judas Tell it to us. Maybe it'll jog our memories.

Peter We were sitting around talking about prayer one day - just like we are now! - and the rabbi asked me, if my sons asked for bread, would I give them a stone or a snake instead, and I said of course not, and then he said -

Thomas I remember it now! He said, "If you as earthly fathers know how to give good gifts to your children, *how much more* your Father in Heaven?"

Peter Bingo!

James *[argumentatively to Peter]* Dude, that parable was *not* about you! He just asked you the question to get it started.

Peter Says you!

Joanna *[quickly trying to head off the coming fight]* It certainly sheds light on our problem, though!

John Yes, I think I can imagine what happened now. He wanted to tell a parable about prayer, and his mind naturally went back to the other parable. He borrowed its structure. But the problem was that that structure only worked for the importance of asking even once. It didn't work as well for teaching that you should continue asking if you don't get what you want right away.

James *[to John in disappointment]* You, too? *[half to himself]* She's...*infecting* everybody!

Judas In all fairness, it's not like this was a parable he carefully composed to use in a public sermon, right? It just came up spontaneously in the course of conversation, right?

Thomas That's what it sounded like.

Judas So I think it's not unreasonable to allow that it might be a little rough around the edges. Wouldn't you all agree?

Joanna That's all I was saying.

Peter My head is spinning. So what are we saying?

James *[petulantly]* That black is white and right is wrong!

Judas *[trying to keep the peace]* No, no, that's not it at all. I think what we're saying is this: the rabbi meant to agree with James. (So James, you do win the argument with Joanna.) But when he tried to make up a parable on the spot to support that teaching, he unfortunately copied the Peter parable, which is also a good teaching about prayer, but a *different* teaching about prayer.

Thomas But the two teachings kind of contradict each other, don't they?

John Absolutely! But in the way of many things the rabbi says. They hint at some greater truth, some hidden mystery. I can imagine him reconciling them in a way that seems to dodge the question at first, but the more you think about it, the more you begin to sense that ineffable something he's trying to communicate. Or he does dodge the question outright, in order to lead you to a more important question. I can imagine him saying something like -

Peter Stop! You're making my head hurt! If we want to know what the rabbi meant, why don't we just ask him?

{A stunned silence.}

John Oh my goodness, I didn't even think of doing that!

Judas Behold! The wisest man in the room!

Joanna There's just one problem.

Thomas Oh, yeah.

James *[remembering what the other two are talking about, and immediately letting go of his earlier antagonism]* Right. I think he might not be in the mood to talk about it. At least for a while.

Peter Why? What happened?

Thomas Right after he finished the parable, he suddenly got into a weird, sad, angry mood, and said something none of us understood, and then stormed off!

Joanna Actually, I think the mood started earlier, while he was still in the middle of telling the parable. I could see it building up.

Judas What was the strange thing he said?

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

John Well, he's the Son of Man. But "comes"? He's already here.

Judas Could he have been talking about the Day? Something like, "When the Son of Man comes into his Kingdom, will people be ready to believe in him?"

James It's possible, but what does that have to do with prayer?

Joanna Maybe nothing. As he was telling the parable, I could see him becoming more distracted and distressed. I think for whatever reason, the thought of the Day entered his head while he was talking to us, and it grew and grew until he was so upset, he couldn't go on with our talk any longer.

Thomas Well, that's a relief in some ways. I thought maybe he was upset at *us* because, I don't know, because we were giving up on praying too soon, or asking him stupid questions.

Peter Maybe he *was* mad at us. We're no picnic to lead, you know.

Joanna I think if he was mad at us, he would have reacted right away. But he seemed very engaged and teacherly when he started the

parable. It was only while he was telling it that he seemed to start changing.

Judas But it was just an innocent - if flawed - lesson about why it's important to pray persistently. What's upsetting about that?

John What if he started thinking about the world of the parable itself, instead of the lesson of the parable? What if he started thinking about all those wicked judges out there right now in the real world, oppressing the poor and weak and favoring the rich and powerful?

James That would explain the part about "on earth". He wasn't just thinking about the Romans. He was thinking about injustice everywhere. The sad state of the world.

Thomas *[to himself, in wonder]* Like I do. He thinks just like I do sometimes. He feels the same feelings.

Peter We have to cheer him up!

Joanna That's a generous thought, but maybe there are some things we shouldn't be cheered up from.

John Yeah. We can't pretend that injustice doesn't exist, or that we shouldn't be bothered by it. Maybe *we're* in the wrong here for not despairing over it more than we do.

Peter Well then we should let the rabbi know we're with him. That he doesn't have to be sad all by himself. That we'll fight with him to make it right, to bring the Kingdom in!

Thomas You're a brave man. I'm afraid to approach him, the mood he was in.

Joanna Maybe we should wait. I wouldn't want to intrude on his grief.

John Yeah, maybe first thing tomorrow.

James No. I'm with Peter on this. Now is when he needs us. We should go to him now!

{Everybody begins speaking at once, only to be interrupted by Jesus' appearance.}

Peter See? Even James agrees with me! We should -

Thomas Sure, let's all go and get yelled at -

Joanna You can't just make someone feel better -

John Settle down, everybody! Settle down -

Judas We're not even sure this is how he feels -

{Jesus suddenly enters.}

Jesus *[brightly]* Peace be with you!

{Everybody ad libs surprise at Jesus' appearance.}

Jesus What are you all having such a lively discussion about?

Peter *[solemnly to Jesus]* We just want you to know we'll be right beside you to the end, for every moment of the fight.

Jesus *[in a little confusion]* Uh, that's good to hear. Is that what you were talking about?

John We were trying to figure out what upset you at the end of your parable about prayer.

Jesus What upset me?

Thomas Was it the state of the world?

Peter Or were you mad at us for some reason?

Jesus Mad at you?

James Was all that "Son of Man finding faith" stuff about the Day when you declare yourself in Jerusalem?

Joanna And what was supposed to be the lesson of your parable?

John We think there might have been some problems with it.

Jesus All these questions! I'm sorry I bolted so suddenly earlier and left you dangling. In reality, the answers to all your questions are quite simple, and if you'll all have a seat, I'll explain everything right now. *[pausing while they sit]* Okay, the first answer is -

*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at
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