This is quite a difficult parable, and so there is a lot of technical stuff that follows. You could just read the bits in boxes and questions if you prefer.

Read: Luke 18:1-8.

Also read: Sirach 35:14-26 (11-24) (see last page - this is not a canonical book, but is in the Septuagint (LXX) and is possibly being an influence on this parable). Look for parallels, and contrasts.

Where are we in Luke

Jesus is still on his journey to Jerusalem. One of themes throughout this journey has been discipleship, and this teaching continues that.
While the themes of the outcast might not be present here, Jesus' parables often give prominence to women, and we see that here too. In addition, widows are given special focus in Luke (see notes on widows below).

Context and Introduction

This parable follows on from, and finishes off, the eschatological discourse (teachings about end times) of Luke 18:20-37. This context is important in the interpretation of the parable. Luke 18:8 ties this section back to the previous eschatological discourse. The cry for justice from God's elect ('chosen ones' in Luke 18:7(NIV)) looks back to the vindication hoped for in Luke 17:22-23.

> The parable serves as a concluding illustration to 17:22–37 and teaches that the day of the Son of Man will certainly come, even if there is an apparent delay[1]

The parable is also linked to the following parable by the theme of prayer and 'the prominence given to words in the *dikaios* ("righteous, just") word group, from which this parable has *antidikos* ("the opponent," v. 3), *adikia* ("unjust," v. 6), *ekdikein* ("vindicate," vv. 3, 5), and *ekdikēsis* ("vindication," vv. 7, 8).[2]

The Parable

This parable has a "how much more" logic to it. The judge described does not represent God. Nor does the widow represent the disciples. Rather the parable uses this narrative to draw a contrast with what God is really like with his elect.

Luke introduces the parable as being 'to show them that they should always pray and not give up' Luke 18:1 NIV). But this parable is not so much about prayer in general:

[1] R.H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary v. 24 (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 444.
[2] K. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2008), 453.

> Luke announces the thrust of the coming parable as encouragement to persist in prayer to God. He 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.[3]

For a parable more about prayer in general, see Luke 11:5-10.

Also the 'not giving up' is an important theme in the parable.

This is actually quite a tricky parable, due in part to a couple of translation issues. So, in case we lose sight of the forest for the trees, we could summarise the message as follows[4]:

1. the disciples should pray persistently (and humbly if we take in verse 9-14 as well) for the coming of the kingdom

2. Know that the delay does not mean that God is indifferent (unlike the unjust judge)

3. the need to remain faithful.

This parable tells of a widow, who takes her case, most likely a monetary issue (see note on the legal system below), to a judge. A widow would not normally appear in court so we may assume that she did not have a male family member to represent her. She was alone.[5]

The judge is described, twice to emphasise it, as one who 'had no fear of God or respect for man' Luke 18:2 (NIV). The word for respect here is ἐντρέπω (*entrepō*) which means, to 'make ashamed'. Here in the passive it means that this judge is not someone who can be made to feel ashamed. 'He is shameless, he has no sensitivity to how his actions are perceived in the community.'[6]

Widows

'Widows were easily recognized by their distinctive attire, which indicated their status (see Gen 38:14, 19; Jdt 8:5; 10:3; 16:8). Since women married in their early teens, widows were numerous but not necessarily old.

Widows were often left with no means of support. If her husband left an estate, she did not inherit it, although provision for her upkeep would be made. If she

[3] John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34,* WBC 35B (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1993), 871.
[4] Following Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* BECNT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1996), 1445, and D.L. Tiede, *Luke* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House , 1988). 304.
[5] Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary of the Synoptic Gospels*, Second (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 298.
[6] Malina & Rohrbaugh, 298.

remained in her husband's family, she had an inferior, almost servile, position. If she returned to her family, the money exchanged at the wedding had to be given back. Widows were so victimized that they were often sold as slaves for debt'[7]

See Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 24:17; 27:19; Jeremiah 22:3; and Zechariah 7:10, for God's concern for widows. 'The trilogy of widows, orphans, and strangers is a standard description of those who are vulnerable.'[8]

'Widows receive special focus in Luke-Acts: Anna in 2:36–38; the widow of Zarephath in 4:25–26; the widow of Nain in 7:11–17; the denunciation of scribes who devour widows' houses in 20:47; the widow's offering in 21:1–4; the distribution of food to widows in Acts 6:1–6; and the widows mourning at the death of Dorcas in Acts 9:39–41.'[9]

The Judicial System

'Information about how the judicial system functioned in first-century Palestine is, however, sketchy at best. The saying in Matt 5:25–26/Luke 12:57–59 assumes a court with one judge, and it could be that only one judge is mentioned here in keeping with the brevity of parables. The interpretation of the parable does not turn on specific knowledge about the kind of court. One need only know the desperate situation of many widows and the possibility of unsympathetic and/or corrupt judges.'[10]

Marshall states that the judge was 'apparently in a small town where local people of prominence were appointed to act as required; there does not appear to have been a uniform, organised system (cf. Schürer II:1, 149f.; SB I, 289). Jeremias, *Parables*, 153, states that monetary cases could be settled by a single judge rather than by a tribunal.'[11]

According to Wright: '[E]very legal case in Jesus' day was a matter of a judge deciding to vindicate one party or the other: 'vindication' or 'justification' here means upholding their side of the story, deciding in their favour.'[12]

---

[7] Snodgrass, 453. Note though, that the above is true in general, but as Levine reminds us, not all widows were helpless, poor, or completely dependent on others. Levine gives the example of the twice widowed Babatha of Maoza, of the early second century, whose personal documents were preserved in the Cave of Letters. She seized her deceased second husband's property in Ein Gedi and petitioned the Roman courts for guardianship over her son by her first marriage. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 229-231.

[8] Snodgrass, 451.

[9] Snodgrass, 453.

[10] Snodgrass, 454.

[11] I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a commentary on the Greek text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Paternoster Press, 1978), 672.

[12] Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 212.

The Judge ignores the widow's pleas for some time, but eventually gives in. In the NIV, the judge says: 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!' Luke 18:4b-5. The word used for attack is ὑπωπιάζω (*hypōpiazō*) literally means, 'strike under the eye' (or give a black eye). We should understand this as metaphorical or sarcasm. To translate it as 'attack' is probably too strong. Snodgrass suggests: 'The judge fears not that the woman will strike him but that she will annoy him to death.'[13]

How would you describe the judge, and what does this initial impression tell us about his character?

What motivated the judge to finally respond to the widow's plea?

How is the judge like or unlike God in this parable?

How would you describe the widow's trait of persistence in the story?

In what ways does the widow's persistence serve as an example of how disciples should pray?

What does this parable teach us about the nature of faith?

Jesus then applies the logic of the parable to God and the elect. The unjust Judge is contrasted to God, in a "how much more" argument.

> If there is even hope in such a case, then how much better must it be when we are dealing with the God of all goodness, and when the petitioner is one of God's own elect to whom he is deeply committed. God will certainly act for those of his own people who steadily look to him for the vindication of all that they stand for as his people.[14]

The last part of verse 7 is tricky. Read the whole of verse 7 again. The NIV translates the last bit as 'Will he keep putting them off?' Look at some different translations. Should the last bit be a question or a statement, or a concessive clause? And does μακροθῡμέω (*makrothymein*) mean "have patience", "delay," or "be gracious"?[15] Bock lists 12 different options! And he translates it as 'And will he delay over them?' This goes better with verse 8, and also has a parallel in Sirach 35:19 (Greek).[16]

In verse 8, Jesus says that God, 'will see that they get justice, and quickly.' We should see 'quickly' here as not referring to vindication coming very soon, but the certainty of it.

---

[13] Snodgrass, 458.
[14] Nolland, 871.
[15] Snodgrass, 459.
[16] Bock, 1452-1454. Also Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* Anchor Bible 28A (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1180, who points out Sirach 35:19 where μακροθῡμέω is used in parallel with βρᾰδύνω (to delay, to be slow)

Read: Habbakkuk 2:3

> Waiting and quickness are thus held in tension, but "quickly" *(en tachei)* does not make any statement about the time of the parousia. Certainly Luke does not remove the idea of near expectation in this text, but he is less concerned with the timing of the parousia than with its impact because he knows that an interval exists before the coming of the Son of Man (17:22–23). His main concern is the reality of the Son of Man's appearance, which will bring vindication and will be a sudden intrusion into human affairs.[17]

And finally Jesus asks, 'when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?'. πίστις (*pistis* 'Faith') could also be translated 'faithfulness'.

> We may suspect that the tension between now and not yet which is so much a part of NT eschatology is present here, but the parable itself is not explicit. The parable assures that God will vindicate his people. … The parable then addresses the implied question "Will God respond to pleas for deliverance from his people?" to which the answer is "Certainly," but a second question is appended: "Will his people remain faithful?[18]

What Jesus is saying is that God, who is loving and not unfeeling as the judge is, will respond promptly, and will not delay and demand insistent petitions, as does the judge.

Why then the need "to pray always and not to lose heart"? Because the disciples are living, as was said in the previous section, in the difficult days when they long for the day of the Son of Man and their open vindication. They are like Noah being mocked by his neighbors. The only way to remain firm in such a situation is to pray constantly, and thus to receive vindication from the Lord. The open manifestation of such vindication may not be until "the day when the Son of Man is revealed." But those who pray receive prompt assurance of their vindication.

Given some of the more common interpretations of this parable, it is also important to say something about what it is that the disciples are to pray for. The parable is not about praying for things we want. It is not about being "blessed" with a fortune as the result of insistent prayer. It certainly is not about being successful in the present days. It is rather about being vindicated even at a time when such vindication seems illusory, like Noah and Lot knowing that they were right even while their neighbors might disagree, and eventually being openly vindicated.[19]

Why does Jesus tell this parable, and what is the main lesson for his disciples?

[17] Snodgrass, 460.
[18] Snodgrass, 461.
[19] Justo L. González, J. L. *Luke* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2010), 211-212.

What does it look like to be steadfast and enduring in your faith, especially when things seem difficult?

What does it mean for the Son of Man to "find faith on earth" when he returns?

How does this parable shape your understanding of and anticipation for Christ's return?

Sirach 35

14 (11) Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it;
15 and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice;
(12) for the Lord is the judge,
and with him there is no partiality.
16 (13) He will not show partiality to the poor;
but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged.
17 (14) He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan,
or the widow when she pours out her complaint.
18 (15) Do not the tears of the widow run down her cheek
19 as she cries out against the one who causes them to fall?
20 (16) The one whose service is pleasing to the Lord will be accepted,
and his prayer will reach to the clouds.
21 (17) The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds,
and it will not rest until it reaches its goal;
(18) it will not desist until the Most High responds
22 and does justice for the righteous, and executes judgment.
(19) Indeed, the Lord will not delay,
and like a warrior will not be patient
(20) until he crushes the loins of the unmerciful
23 and repays vengeance on the nations;
(21) until he destroys the multitude of the insolent,
and breaks the scepters of the unrighteous;
24 (22) until he repays mortals according to their deeds,
and the works of all according to their thoughts;
25 (23) until he judges the case of his people
and makes them rejoice in his mercy.
26 (24) His mercy is as welcome in time of distress
as clouds of rain in time of drought.

(Sirach 35:35-26 NRSV. Red verse numbers are the LXX verse numbers (11-24)