

## **Persistent Justice**

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**Luke 18:1-8**

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**Grand Rapids MI**

“I fly like a butterfly and sting like a bee.” This is the iconic line of the most famous, and by most standards, still one of the greatest world champion boxers of all time, Mohammad Ali. Listen to commentators and boxing experts and you will hear several reasons why Mohammad Ali was a great boxer. Besides his fancy footwork, Ali had great stamina and stinging punches. But as effective as he was in the ring, his ability to psychologically mess with his opponents outside the ring was extremely effective. In an interview following the Mohammad Ali vs. George Foreman fight a reporter asked Ali if his pre-fight banter was effective in psyching out the opponent before that match. Ali said, “no, it actually made them fight harder as if they had to prove something in the ring”. This played to Ali’s advantage because he could let them wear themselves out. Ali would lean against the ropes and allowed the opponent to pound on him so that the other fighter would tire. Once the opponent was warn-out then he would turn the tables and go on the offensive and with his signature one-two punch the opponent would be out for the count.

Now you may be wondering, “hey pastor, I thought you were a pacifist or something, why are your admiring and glorifying a boxer like Mohammad Ali?” First of all, I greatly admire Mohammad Ali as a great human and fighter of justice. His contributions to society outside the ring far outshine

his accomplishments in the ring in my opinion. But I really chose this example because of something I read in this morning's parable and what it opens up for us regarding praying without ceasing and seeking justice still today.

In this parable the judge is described as a person who "neither feared God nor had respect for people" and yet we hear the unjust judge say to himself, "I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." Now I must tell you that the translators of the NRSV really have missed the mark here on this sentence. Scholars today say that this phrase "that she may not wear me out", should be translated, "so that she will not give me a black eye." The Greek word here is *hypōpiazō* (hoopo-piazō) is only used two times in the New Testament. The other place is 1 Corinthians 9: 24-27. Which reads, "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we receive an imperishable one. So, I do not run aimlessly, nor do I box as though beating the air, but I punish my body (*Hypopiazō* my body) and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified."

The term here "punish my body" is this same word *hypopiazō* "to beat, buffet until bruised." Hence the image of getting a black eye. This word is a boxing term that describes the beating that one endures in the ring. Paul likens the call to discipleship akin to training as a runner or boxer. Paul's use of the term is more literal, whereas in Luke it is more figurative. The unjust Judge is finally persuaded to give in to this widow's demands because he is afraid she will give him a black eye of sorts, even though he

supposedly has not respect for others. Perhaps he is afraid of her actually assaulting him to convince him to judge in her favor, but most likely he eventually felt it would impact his reputation in the community. She was persistent enough to break through his reputation of a unmoved or apathetic judge.

In the same way, Mohammad Ali was not only good at giving real black eyes in the ring. he was also known for giving figurative black eyes when speaking out against racism and oppression. He did not use his fists to cause such bruises but his words. For example, when asked why he was refusing the draft and not going to Vietnam to fight he gave this speech,

“Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights?

No, I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end...”

Mohammad Ali took a very bold and visible position to speak out against something that he and many others saw as an unjust war that perpetuated racial oppression. He was stripped of his title and license to box and faced the courts with the threat of jail time if upheld. He did not quietly pray for it to stop, he was vocal and visible. His visibility also inspired others to oppose the war.

In a similar manner this widow was visible and vocal in her demands. She made the judge uncomfortable in some very public ways until he gave in. She did not just sit back passively praying for the judge to have a change of heart, she was actively demanding that change to the point that the Judge feared a black eye, a hit to public opinion of him. She made her demands very public and maybe even rallied others to her defense. I can imagine that her efforts even inspired others to take such action for themselves. That is effective persistence at work.

As the church, when we pray for people's lives to improve, when we pray for justice in their lives, praying is the beginning but not the only thing we are called to do. Prayer gives us the stamina to stay in the fight. It inspires and motivates us to stay the course and demand justice. It gives us faith that God the truly just judge will aid us in our efforts even if that means giving the unjust judge a black eye.

Widows were seen as the most vulnerable and helpless of society, but she certainly did not see herself as helpless. She was persistent, vocal, visible and unrelenting in her pursuit.

So I ask you, what injustice do you want to give a black eye to? Where do you need to get off your knees and put feet to your prayers in the streets or in the courtrooms? How can we as a congregation focus our efforts to really create change for the betterment of others? How can we join in the fight for equality, justice, equity and bring about true restitution for past wrongs?