

Prayer acts: Luke 18:1-8

by [Maggi Dawn](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

This year in Great Britain we marked the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. The media have been full of documentaries and reflections, books have been published, plays performed and the movie *Amazing Grace* released. The story of Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce has been celebrated for the justice they achieved, but it has also highlighted the fact that other forms of slavery continue to this day.

Although Clarkson played a major part in the story, it is William Wilberforce whose name is remembered. Wilberforce became a member of Parliament in early adulthood, but initially had no particular interest in religion or social justice. Then one Easter when he was in his late 20s, a powerful religious experience changed his perception of his life's purpose, and he began to see his place in Parliament not so much as a career but as God's calling. He began to set his mind to various issues of justice, and Clarkson persuaded him of the importance of taking on the cause of abolition.

Seeing the slave trade abolished was far from a swift victory. Campaigning for nearly 20 years, Wilberforce was repeatedly obstructed by members of Parliament who had vested interests in slavery, was interrupted by the country going to war and was dogged by frequent illnesses that confined him to bed for weeks at a time. Someone with less determination would have given up. But for Wilberforce, prayer generated a sense of purpose that carried him through these endless setbacks, sustaining his determination and his belief that, against all the odds, change must eventually come.

Wilberforce's story is like an echo of the parable of the unjust judge. Luke often writes about the gospel imperative to care for "the orphan and the widow." A first-century widow was in a situation similar to that of a present-day single parent who's been left in the lurch to raise the kids, except that in Luke's time no single parent received maintenance payments or support from a welfare system. She had no rights over her late husband's property and would be thrown on the mercy of her in-laws. The widow in Luke's story was asking the judge to act on her behalf, maybe

because she was destitute or because her children were hungry. Too busy, too lazy or too corrupt to do his job properly, the judge stands as a symbol of the impenetrability of the system, or the brick wall that people bang their heads against when they can't get out of the poverty trap.

Whether the need is on a personal level or on the scale of international disaster, all too often attempts to bring justice are frustrated by the monolithic institutions of power in society. Politics, the justice system, welfare institutions and even the church, all of which are supposed to make life fairer, can be immobilized by corruption or bureaucracy. Most people eventually get worn down fighting the system, so in the pursuit of justice we can certainly be inspired by stories of a first-century widow or a 19th-century politician who simply refused to take no for an answer. But how does this help us understand prayer? If, as Luke tells us, God is not like the unjust judge—not corrupt, not lazy and not immobilized by bureaucracy—then why do we need to pray repeatedly until we get a result? Is God just playing with us?

I think that two things emerge from this puzzle. One is that constant prayer shapes the person who prays. Repeated, habitual prayer gradually tests and sifts what you believe is really important and what is of ephemeral value. If something doesn't matter that much, the momentum for prayer will diminish. But if it does matter, an unanswered prayer becomes like grit in an oyster—something that worries and annoys you until you are determined not to take no for an answer.

But the other thing that strikes me is that the widow's story connects prayer with public action. Like Wilberforce, the widow needed justice that private prayer alone would not deliver. We aren't called to pray passively, hoping that God will change the world on our behalf. Prayer may be the wind at our backs, but sometimes we need to track down the answer in person. As the African proverb says, "When you pray, move your feet."

Wilberforce once wrote, "My walk is a public one," and the widow's action was public too. Banging on the judge's door every day, she must have given rise to gossip among the neighbors as to why she returned so often. Eventually the judge was either embarrassed or annoyed into action, and the widow got justice for herself and her children. The widow's story seems to blur the distinction between petitioning in prayer and petitioning as public activism. Pray and keep on praying; ask and keep on asking; don't take no for an answer. And rattle plenty of cages until the answer

comes.

Prayer as Jesus taught it isn't just a private matter. It's not personal therapy or a crutch for the weak. Prayer is about refusing to believe that the way things are has to be the way they will always be, about imagining how the world could be, and gaining the wisdom and the energy to bring it about. For some, like Wilberforce, this applies to issues of international justice. For others, like the widow, it means chipping away at the dozens of petty injustices that diminish ordinary people's lives. Either way, prayer makes us refuse to accept a system that deals out injustice and gives us the determination to see it change. As Bruce Cockburn says in the song "Lovers in a Dangerous Time," you have to "kick at the darkness until it bleeds daylight."