

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: Luke 18:7 God's "Patience" with Our Prayers

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During his Perea ministry, a several month period just before his final entry into Jerusalem, our Lord Jesus repeated many of the spiritual lessons he had earlier taught his disciples. The Evangelist Luke records far more (9:51–19:28) from this special instructional time than the other Gospel writers. A parable from the Perea ministry serves as the Gospel for Pentecost 22 this year (October 20, 2013). The Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:2-5) is short and its point is clear. Especially in these end times when we may wonder if God is in control and when spiritual preparedness is called for, it is necessary for Christians to pray as persistently as a widow who would not take “no” for an answer in her pleas for justice. This main point is presented to the reader by Luke himself (Luke 18:1). Application and encouragement from the parable is presented by Jesus himself (Luke 18:6-8). The preacher who expounds on Christ’s words has an excellent opportunity to encourage a more vibrant prayer life within his hearers.

This brief article concerns itself with an interpretational issue regarding Jesus’ words of explanation at Luke 18:7. Specifically, we will focus on the last four words of the verse:

ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐ μὴ ποιήσῃ τὴν ἐκδίκησιν τῶν ἐκλεκτῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν
βοώντων αὐτῷ ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός, καὶ μακροθυμεῖ ἐπ’ αὐτοῖς;

When one considers the many different translations and interpretations of this last phrase, it becomes apparent that translators and commentators have wrestled with a number of questions, including these:

- 1) Does the καὶ serve to coordinate or subordinate?
- 2) What is the best meaning in context for μακροθυμεῖ?
- 3) What tense is μακροθυμεῖ?
- 4) Do these four words comprise a separate question about God, or do they make a statement about God?

Here are four popular English version translations of the concluding phrase of Luke 18:7:

- NIV (84 and 11): “Will he keep putting them off?”
 NASB: “and will he delay long over them?”
 ESV: “Will he delay long over them?”
 HCSB: “Will he delay to help them?”

All these translations essentially treat the phrase in the same way. First, they understand the *καὶ* as a coordinating conjunction in this case, even if they do not render the word in English translation. In other words, they treat these four words as a second question asked by Jesus in this verse. Thus, after asking a strongly emotional (*οὐ μὴ* + aorist subjunctive) question in the first part of the verse, Jesus asks a second question with the indicative in the last part of the verse. Second, all these translations render the verb *μακροθυμέω* not in its most common meaning ("to be patient with") but with an interpretive meaning ("to put off; to delay"). In so doing, these translations obviously expect a "no" answer to the question. Third, all these translations understand *μακροθυμεῖ* to be future in tense in order to match the strong future idea of *οὐ μὴ* + the aorist subjunctive in the first part of the verse. Thus, the word "will" shows up in each translation.

Each one of these translation decisions has an exegetical basis. Normally *καὶ* coordinates and so in this verse it certainly could be introducing a second question. Furthermore, the indicative is often used in questions. While *μακροθυμέω* normally means "to be patient with," both Louw Nida (67.126) and BDAG (p. 489) suggest meanings like "to be slow" or "to delay" in this passage. Such a rendering for *μακροθυμέω* puts a negative spin on what is usually a positive verbal idea, but it makes sense in the apparent delaying, then a *minori ad maiorem* argument: If an evil human judge ultimately renders justice, God the Almighty Judge certainly *will not delay* justice for his people. Understanding the present tense *μακροθυμεῖ* as a future can be justified by the immediate context in which future tenses are utilized in v. 7a and v. 8. Upon closer examination we see that the translation "will he keep putting them off?" can be defended exegetically.

We might wonder, however, if this is the best way to understand these words of Jesus. What if we allowed the *καὶ* to introduce a subordinate concessive clause, emphasizing a fact that is surprising or noteworthy, as it does at Matthew 3:14; Mark 12:12; John 9:30, 16:32; 2 Corinthians 6:8,9, and Hebrews 3:9? What if we understood *μακροθυμέω* to mean "to be patient with," which the verb means every other time it is used in the New Testament? What if we translated the present tense *μακροθυμεῖ* as a present, recognizing that the future tense form of every other epsilon contract verb in the New Testament (e.g., *αἰτέω* or *εὐλογέω* or *μακροθυμέω*) either employs a sigma or elongates the *ε* to *η* or both? What if we recognized Luke's switch from the subjunctive to indicative in this verse to be a signal that Jesus added a statement at the end of Luke 18:7 to add to his rhetorical question at the beginning of Luke 18:7?

Each one of the "what if's" in the preceding paragraph can also be defended exegetically, and they would leave us with a translation

closer to the KJV's: "though he bear long with them." Such an understanding of the last phrase of Luke 18:7 would allow the verb μακροθυμέω to speak positively to God's attitude toward our imperfect prayers. Even though (καὶ concessive) we chosen ones cry out to God day and night in these tough times when we wonder if there is any divine justice, God is (statement, not question) patient with (normal meaning of μακροθυμέω) us right now (present tense) so we never have to worry about bothering him with our prayers.

When preaching this parable, then, there is an exegetical basis for at least considering a translation of Jesus' words in Luke 18:7 that would go something like this: "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night, *though he is patient with them?*" The truth that God patiently hears all our prayers for Jesus' sake is certainly an encouragement to pray. A Christian prays daily, often repeating the same prayer, often making the same request. God's patience with us allows us to understand our continual praying not as impatience, but persistence. And this is something God wants.