

Historic Commentary



(The 22nd Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C)

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 18:1-8: Selections from Church Fathers & John Calvin

*Compiled by the Rev. Eric Dirksen.

Augustine: [The Lord] taught us to pray to receive this blessed life. He taught us not to pray with much speaking, as if we were more likely to be heard, the more words we use in our prayer. The Lord said, "He knows what is needful for us before we ask him." For this reason, it may seem strange, although he cautions us against much speaking, he still urges us to pray since he knows what is needful for us before we ask for it. He said, "We should always pray and not faint." He used the example of a certain widow who wished to be avenged of her adversary and petitioned an unjust judge so often that she made him listen to her. She made him listen not through any motive of justice or compassion, but through weariness of her insistence. In this way, we were to learn how surely the merciful and just God hears us when we pray without ceasing. The widow, because of her continual petition, could not be treated with contempt even by an unjust and wicked judge.

Cyril of Alexandria: The present parable assures us God will bend his ear to those who offer him their prayers, not carelessly nor negligently but with earnestness and constancy. The constant coming of the oppressed widow conquered the unjust judge that did not fear God or have any shame. Even against his will, he granted her request. How will not he who loves mercy and hates iniquity, and who always gives his helping hand to those that love him, accept those who draw near to him day and night and avenge them as his elect?

Ephrem the Syrian: How was that unjust judge immoral and wicked? How was the upright judge gracious and just? The first in his iniquity was not willing to vindicate the widow, and in his wickedness, he was not willing to put her mind at rest. The justice of God knows how to vindicate, and his grace discerns how to give life. The iniquity of this wicked judge was contrary to the justice of God, and the wickedness of this rebel was in opposition to the grace of the gentle One. His wickedness therefore was stubbornness, for it dared to go against the fear of God. His boldness was stubborn, for it refused the lowly person.

These two were stubborn, but persistent prayer was even more stubborn. The persistence of the widow humiliated both the iniquity that was rebelling against God and the boldness that was behaving arrogantly towards human beings. She subjected them to her will, so that they might provide her with a vindication over her adversary. Persistence transformed these two bitter branches, and they bore sweet fruit that was against their nature. The iniquity of the judge brought about a righteous judgment and a just retribution for the falsely accused woman. His wickedness gave peace to the afflicted one, although iniquity does not know how to judge, and wickedness does not know how to give refreshment. Persistence forced these two evil and bitter branches to give good fruit against their

nature. If we persist in prayer, we should be even more able to prevail on the grace and justice of God to give us fruit that agrees with their nature. Let justice vindicate us, and let grace refresh us. Accordingly, the fruit of justice is the just reward of the oppressed, while the giving of refreshment to the afflicted is the fruit of grace.

Augustine: These examples now are proposed so that important things may be suggested from things of less importance. They are like the example of the judge who feared neither God nor people and who nevertheless yielded to the widow bothering him to judge her case. He yielded not through piety or kindness but through fear of suffering annoyance. By no means does that unjust judge furnish an allegorical representation of God. The example is of an unjust man who, although he yields for the mere sake of avoiding annoyance, nevertheless cannot disregard those who bother him with continual pleadings. By this the Lord wishes us to infer how much care God bestows on those who beseech him, for God is both just and good

Cyril of Alexandria: We say in our prayers to him who is able to save and drive away from us that wicked being, "Avenge me of my adversary." The only-begotten Word of God has truly done this by having become man. He has ejected the ruler of this world from his tyranny over us and has delivered and saved us and put us under the yoke of his kingdom. It is excellent to make requests through constant prayer, because Christ will receive our pleas and fulfill our petitions...

People sell the word of righteousness and make many abandon sound faith. They involve them in the inventions of devilish error. As Scripture says, they belch things out of their own hearts and not out of the mouth of the Lord. He foretold this saying, "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" It did not escape his knowledge. How could it, since he is God, who knows all things? In his own words, he tells us that the love of many will grow cold. In the end times, some will depart from a correct and blameless faith. They will be going after seducing spirits and listening to the false words of people who have a seared conscience. Against these, we come near to God as faithful servants, begging him that their wickedness and their attempts against his glory may have no effect.

John Calvin: We know that perseverance in prayer is a rare and difficult attainment; and it is a manifestation of our unbelief that, when our first prayers are not successful, we immediately throw away not only hope, but all the ardor of prayer. But it is an undoubted evidence of our Faith, if we are disappointed of our wish, and yet do not lose courage. Most properly, therefore, does Christ recommend to his disciples to persevere in praying.

The parable which he employs, though apparently harsh, was admirably fitted to instruct his disciples, that they ought to be importunate in their prayers to God the Father, till they at length draw from him what He would otherwise appear to be unwilling to give. Not that by our prayers we gain a victory over God, and bend him slowly and reluctantly to compassion, but because the actual facts do not all at once make it evident that he graciously listens to our prayers. In the parable Christ describes to us a widow, who obtained what she wanted from an unjust and cruel judge, because she did not cease to make earnest demands. The leading truth conveyed is, that God does not all at once grant assistance to his people, because he chooses to be, as it were, wearied out by prayers; and that, however wretched and despicable may be the condition of those who pray to him, yet if they do not desist from the uninterrupted exercise of prayer, he will at length regard them and relieve their necessities.

The parties between whom the comparison is drawn are, indeed, by no means equal; for there is a wide difference between a wicked and cruel man and God, who is naturally inclined to mercy. But Christ intended to assure believers that they have no reason to fear lest their persevering entreaties to the Father of mercy should be refused, since by importunate supplication they prevail on men who are given to cruelty. The wicked and iron-hearted judge could not avoid yielding at length, though reluctantly, to the earnest solicitations of the widow: how then shall the prayers of believers, when perseveringly maintained, be without effect? If exhaustion and weakness are felt by us when we give way after a slight exertion, or if the ardor of prayer languishes because God appears to lend a deaf ear, let us rest assured of our ultimate success, though it may not be immediately apparent. Entertaining this conviction, let us contend against our impatience, so that the long delay may not induce us to discontinue our prayers.