

Luke 18:1-8 Proper 24C • Persistence in Prayer

The Word of the Lord from Luke 18:7-8: "And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" This is the Word of the Lord.

The Widow and the Judge

"I want justice!"

That's the widow's cry. She keeps coming to the judge, demanding "Give me justice against my adversary." It's quite a match-up between these two. As Jesus tells the parable, he begins by saying that the judge neither fears God nor respects men. If that's the case, he's going to be a self-centered guy. He's not going to be interested so much in the rights of the downtrodden as he is in his own selfpromotion and comfort.

When it comes to the downtrodden, the widow would be numbered among them. It's a manoriented society. Women don't have much in the way of rights, so widows go largely unnoticed, neglected. They're to be taken care of by family, and the fact that this widow is taking action may indicate that there's no family around to take care of her. When it comes to power in this showdown, the judge has all and the widow has none.

But this woman has two things going for her. One is the justice of her cause. She's the innocent party—after all, the guilty don't usually go pounding on the judge's door, demanding that he give their case some extra scrutiny. When this widow goes to the judge, she knows she's right and deserves vindication. That explains her persistence, why she keeps coming back.

That persistence is her other advantage. She keeps coming. She won't stop. She won't give the unrighteous judge a moment's peace. "I'm innocent, I'm wronged, I want justice, and I'm going to keep this up until you do your job—until you declare me innocent and deliver me from my adversary." She's playing a weak hand—all she can do is keep bothering a man who doesn't want to be bothered and doesn't want to help; but she's going to play it all the same. It's all she's got.

Now, the judge doesn't care about this woman. But no matter how much he works at not caring, she's wearing him down. Finally, he says, "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming." He's had enough. He vindicates the widow, finding in favor of her and against her adversary. Her sheer persistence carries the day. He justifies her and provides for her request because she doesn't give up, because it's the only way that she'll leave him alone.

Jesus concludes this parable saying, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will give justice to them speedily." In other words, here is the good news that Jesus proclaims: God is the Judge, but He is in no way like the unrighteous judge of the parable. He is righteous and He loves justice. He hates unrighteousness and injustice. He wants to be bothered with the prayers of His people. He desires to help. He desires to give justice, to vindicate His people. He is intent on protecting and delivering them from all of their enemies and adversaries.

So if the widow can count on getting the help of the unrighteous judge who doesn't want to help her, how much more can you count on the help of the righteous God who does?

And to see how much God does want to help you, we move on to talk about justice and persistence.

Justice and Persistence

So far, we've skipped over the wonderful verse that begins our text: "He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." The whole point of this parable is that you not lose heart. In others words, Jesus doesn't speak here to beat you down, to say "You're terrible at prayer, so you'd better start doing a better job if you want to be a Christian!" Now, it might be very true that you're terrible at prayer—it's a difficult discipline in this world, where the devil and your sinful flesh are constantly trying to distract you from it. But Jesus doesn't speak to berate you. He speaks so that you do not lose heart, so that you might continue to call upon God and trust in His help no matter the affliction that you are given to endure.

There is good reason to pray. For one thing, there is the matter of justice. Remember the widow's cry: "Give me justice against my adversary!" Before you skip past too quickly, stop here for a moment and consider what you pray. Apart from Christ, a prayer like that is foolhardy. "Give me justice"? Do you really want to demand justice from the Judge when you're guilty as sin? If the Lord acts justly toward you apart from Christ, then His action will be to condemn you.

That's why one of the most underrated lines in the liturgy is from Psalm 32:5: "I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord." Old Adam says, "Are you crazy?! If you want God's help, hide your transgressions—don't admit them! Put on a happy face and hope He overlooks the sin and rewards you for good behavior. But don't confess your sin to the Judge who condemns sinners to hell!" Ah, but how does that verse conclude? "I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." The Judge doesn't condemn penitent sinners. For the sake of Jesus, He forgives them. He removes their sin and guilt that deserves condemnation. He justifies them. So when the

Christian prays, "Give me justice, Lord!," the Lord responds, "I do. Because you are holy in My sight for Jesus' sake, I vindicate you. Your enemies are now My enemies, and I will deliver you from them."

You don't have to wait and wonder. He declares you forgiven and justified now. He gives justice to His people speedily.

So before you can expect help from God, you need to be made innocent first. In other words, and this is so important, prayer begins with the Gospel. It begins with the forgiveness won by Christ.

This is also why a good conscience is necessary for prayer. Those who are guilty don't bother the Judge; if they pray at all, they pray that the Judge will leave them alone. That's the problem with a guilty conscience, too. No matter how much help is needed, the guilty conscience is afraid to appeal to God for help. This is a time when confession—and especially private confession and absolution—will be of great benefit to you. Confess the sin. Hear it spoken away with forgiveness. Be assured by the Lord Himself that He doesn't hold your sins against you, that He calls you His beloved child, that He desires to hear and answer your prayers. Remember: He's not the reluctant Judge who doesn't want to help. He bids you to pray to Him as dear children ask their dear father, knowing that He delights to hear and answer your prayers.

So as you consider the parable of the unrighteous judge and the widow's plea for justice, remember that prayer begins at the foot of the cross. God will hear and answer your prayers because Christ has died for your sins. If your sins still cling to you, it is only just for God to condemn you as a lawbreaker. But for Jesus' sake, He declares you justified, just, righteous; and because you are His holy child, He delights to hear and answer your prayers.

Prayer involves an element of persistence, too. You pray for deliverance from your adversaries and justice for your enemies. You pray for deliverance from sickness, from affliction and injury. You pray for deliverance from an evil death and from all evil. You pray for deliverance from the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh. In a world this corrupted, there's a lot to be delivered from. So you pray, but deliverance doesn't always come right away. It usually doesn't come near as fast as you'd like. Sometimes it's a roller-coaster ride where you think the answer is near, but then far away again. As the unrighteous judge fretted that the widow would beat him down, so you know all too well that all sorts of troubles can beat you down.

But you do not lose heart, because by faith you know of the Lord's faithfulness. Your afflictions and troubles make a lot about this life uncertain, but with the Lord you have all sorts of comforting certainty. You know that He has already justified you speedily for Jesus' sake; and having paid the price of His own blood to redeem you, you can be certain He will not abandon you now. You know that

faith trusts in what you do not see, often in spite of what you do see. You know that even though the devil will use trouble to persuade you that God isn't listening, you trust that God is working all things for your good—according to His wisdom and timing, not your own. Perhaps He delays vengeance so that your adversaries might also repent of their sin and be saved for Jesus' sake. Perhaps He waits to deliver you as a matter of discipline, to train you that His grace is sufficient for you, that His power is made perfect in weakness. Perhaps He waits to strengthen your faith and teach you the importance of prayer, preparing you for whatever else lies ahead.

You don't know, can't know the reason for trouble. The devil uses that uncertainty to try to make you doubt the Lord. He's very persuasive. It isn't easy or enjoyable to suffer and wait for the Lord to act. It's difficult enough that many will declare Him to be the unrighteous judge and abandon Him. How many? Enough that the Lord says, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?"

That being the state of things, it can be easy to cease praying and lose heart. But that's why Jesus tells this parable. Again, you don't measure God's faithfulness by what you don't know or can't know, but by what you do know for sure because He tells you. As we said before, He promises that you're His beloved child for Jesus' sake. And because you're His beloved child, He bids you to pray to Him. He bids you to take His Word and rub it in His ears, delights to hear you say, "Father, You promised, and You've got to keep Your promises!"

Think of a young child who's been promised a trip to the donut shop. He hears that word. He clings to it. He keeps on reminding his parents about their promise until it's time to go. Now, honestly, his parents might well resemble the unrighteous judge of the parable, saying, "Let's get the boy to the donut shop before he drives us mad." But Jesus tells you in our text that your Father in heaven is neither an unrighteous judge nor a reluctant parent. He delights to hear your prayers. He assures you that, while you can't beat Him down until He gives in, He will keep His promises and deliver you according to His will.

When commenting on this text, Martin Luther said, "It is not enough just to begin and to sigh once, to recite a prayer and then to go away. As your need is, so should your prayer be. Your need does not attack you once and then let you go. It hangs on, it falls around your neck again, and it refuses to let go. You act the same way! Pray continually, and seek and knock, too, and do not let go.... Since your need goes right on knocking, therefore, you go right on knocking, too, and do not relent." (AE 21:234)

After all, why should some affliction be more persistent than you? You're a holy child in the care of God the Father, while your affliction is a conquered nothing that can do you no lasting harm. It is so because God has justified you speedily, already for Jesus' sake. He doesn't leave you alone to battle your afflictions, but

bids you, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never permit the righteous to be moved" (Psalm 55:22). There is no despair for you! You do not cease praying and you do not lose heart, because you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen