

“PRAYERS: SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: Luke 18:1-8 NLT

God's Word: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 NLT

Luke 18:1-8 NLT

18 One day Jesus told his disciples a story to show that they should always pray and never give up. ² “There was a judge in a certain city,” he said, “who neither feared God nor cared about people. ³ A widow of that city came to him repeatedly, saying, ‘Give me justice in this dispute with my enemy.’ ⁴ The judge ignored her for a while, but finally he said to himself, ‘I don’t fear God or care about people, ⁵ but this woman is driving me crazy. I’m going to see that she gets justice, because she is wearing me out with her constant requests!’”

⁶ Then the Lord said, “Learn a lesson from this unjust judge. ⁷ Even he rendered a just decision in the end. So don’t you think God will surely give justice to his chosen people who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? ⁸ I tell you, he will grant justice to them quickly! But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?”

~~~~~

No doubt you have heard about the Postal Service’s “Dead Letter Department.” That’s the place where mail goes when it’s not clearly addressed or doesn’t have enough postage and the sender’s identity can’t be figured out. There the letter is opened and it is examined for clues as to where the letter came from. If the return address can’t be found the letter is destroyed. It never reaches its destination and any requests made by the writer remain unanswered!

There is even a Hallmark series called, “Signed, Sealed, Delivered.” Four civil servants diligently seek to solve the mysteries that are contained in the “dead letters” to seek out the rightful recipients.

How about you? Do you feel like your prayers end up in some kind of dead letter department? Do you feel like your prayers never reach God? If so, this parable is for you.

As we take a look at the New Testament it becomes obvious that Jesus was never afraid to ask things of God the Father. He asked for wine at a wedding party. He asked for more bread and fish to feed a crowd. He asked God to heal the blind, the lame, the mute, and the possessed.

Jesus asked a lot of God. And He never felt as if He were imposing. And here in our Scripture Lesson, Jesus is telling us to do the same.

The problem, of course, is the identity of the “judge who neither feared God nor cared about [people].” Jesus is speaking here not of God, but of a human judge—and a rather cold and heartless one at that.

No doubt, it can be hard to knock on someone’s door. That’s something many of us learned early in life—perhaps as paperboys or girls, or trying to sell fund-raiser candy. There we would stand, on the doorstep, wondering who was inside, wondering what kind of reception we’d get. If there was a barking dog, that made it much worse. And sometimes when you ring the doorbell; you don’t hear anything. “Did the doorbell even ring? Does it work?” we might ask ourselves. Then we might wonder, “Should I ring it again—or should I wait? And if I ring it again, how long is the acceptable interval?”

Most of us who have been in that situation would probably agree: “Doorknockers are superior to doorbells.” With a doorknocker you never have a question. “Rap, rap, rap” on the brass plate, and if anyone is lurking inside, they have to hear that noise.

Jesus tells us about a woman who stands knocking on someone’s door: knocking and waiting, knocking and waiting, wondering if the judge will ever answer. Now, Jesus doesn’t tell us that she is literally knocking on the door—but He does tell us that she “kept coming to him with a plea,” saying, “Grant me justice against my adversary.”

This woman is a widow, and very likely lived in poverty. In the male-dominated culture of that day, she had no social standing of her own and no right to file a complaint in court, unless a man did it for her. The law of Israel said that judges were to take special pains to hear the complaints of people like this widow. The Scriptures are very compassionate when it comes to the likes of her.

The first Chapter of Isaiah upholds this high ideal of justice: “...learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” It doesn’t appear, though, that this judge has read the Book—at least, not recently. He’s a tough customer.

Some theologians speculate that he would have been a crook, a charlatan, a thoroughly corrupt person. He was just out to make a buck. And this woman had no money to pay him. “Why, she can knock on the door forever,” as far as the judge is concerned. More than likely, this judge is a bureaucrat. His desk is piled high with paper work, and this paperwork requires his stamp of approval. It can be tough to be heard through a whole lot of paperwork.

One time Mother Teresa signed into a California hospital for heart tests. After signing her name to the umpteenth legal-release form, she put down her pen, shook her head, and said softly, “So many signatures for such a small heart.”

Yet, here is this widow, standing on the bureaucrat's doorstep. Who does she think she is? She just keeps pounding on the judge's door! And as time wears on, the judge's resistance begins to falter.

It's hard to sleep when you're lying in bed with a pillow over your head and when you glance out the window and see all your neighbors' lights going on, as they look out to see who's causing all that racket.

Finally, the judge admits that he's beaten. "Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!"

The Greek word translated here as "wear me out" is an old sports term. It comes from the world of boxing. It means to give somebody a black eye. Jesus is painting a bit of a comical picture: this poor widow has just popped the judge with a right hook. And in response, he's thrown in the towel. That would have brought a smile to the face of Jesus' audience. Certainly they had their own horror stories of the dreaded bureaucracy!

But Jesus' point here is not, "how to succeed in government." He's only using the unjust judge as an example. "Listen," He says, "to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?"

This parable is a good example of what could be called the "if this is so, then so much more" story. Jesus is saying, "If the most powerless widow you could imagine, who is at the very bottom of the world's pecking order, can get her case heard—by a crooked judge—then will not our Loving Father willingly listen to every plea and petition of ours?"

"Is this what prayer is like?" Jesus is asking. "No it isn't," is His reply, "though it may seem that way, sometimes." God is not like the unjust judge. God listens. God cares. God responds. Our prayers to God do not end up in the dead letter department. But this is no reason to think we should expect to get whatever we pray for.

For example, often a father has to refuse the request of a child, because he knows that what the child asks for would hurt rather than help. God is like that. We don't know what's going to happen in the next hour, let alone the next week, or month, or year. Only God sees time as a whole, and, therefore, only God knows what is good for us in the long run.

That is why Jesus says that we must never be discouraged in prayer. And that is why He asked if human faith will stand the long delays before the Son of Man comes. We will never grow weary in prayer and our faith will never falter if, after we have offered to God our prayers and requests, we add the perfect prayer, "Your will be done." For prayer is not about changing the mind of God, but opening our hearts to the will of God!!! Prayer is not getting God to see it our way, but getting us to see it God's way.

In Philippians chapter 2, Paul tells us that we should have in us the actual mind of Jesus Christ. And here is the key! Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name I will do it." But what does that mean?

Augustine asked, "Do we pray, 'O God, make me pure—but not now?'" It has been said that "our failures in prayer are most often due to the fact that our aspirations are halfhearted; we haven't really made up our minds to 'will with God one will'; we are instead 'double-minded.'"

It's like we pray, "Lead me, O God, except in the direction I don't want to go." Or, "save me, O God, from the consequences of evil, but not from its pleasures." If we pray this way, instead of praying "in Jesus name" which means in the mind of Christ or "not my will but thine be done," we are praying outside Jesus' name.

So, when we pray, we should ask God to reveal God's mind to us. "Lord, there is a need. Teach me Your mind. Teach me how to pray about this."

Suppose you are in a rowboat which is 15 feet from shore. You throw your anchor ashore and pull yourself to the dock. Now, what have you done? Did you pull the land to you or did you pull yourself to the land?

Prayer works like that as well. It brings us closer to God. It is a means of grace, whereby we are brought closer to the mind of God.

Paul knew how to pray. He prayed, "God, I have a thorn in my flesh." Three times Paul went to God and asked to be healed. And there in God's presence Paul began to know the mind of Christ! He quit asking to be healed, and he started asking for strength to bear the affliction for the glory of God! God answered Paul's prayer.

*"To keep me from becoming conceited...there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'... 'For when I am weak, then I am strong.'"*

A little boy knelt down to say his bedtime prayers. His parents heard him reciting the alphabet in very reverent tones. When asked what he was doing, he replied, "I'm saying my prayers, but I cannot think of the exact words tonight. So, I'm just saying all the letters. God knows what I need, and He'll put all the words together for me."

In prayer, we are seeking Christ's mind. We ask God to take our minds and make them God's. We ask the Holy Spirit to pray through us and for us. And when we pray like that, Jesus assures us that we shall find!!! Praise God! Amen.