

These Parables: The Unjust Judge

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The driver's license registration hall of the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) is a great equalizer. All classes, ages, and races huddle together on the benches. A rich man cannot send his chauffeur as a surrogate. Even if you live in New York City where a driver's license is usually only symbolic for those without cars, you still have to show up before (as the clerk ominously says) "the day you expire." And unlike Almighty God, the DMV actually gives you an expiration date.

My recent experience there was like an enjoyable version of the last moments on the Lusitania. It was also very unlike the court of the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8) who lacked the homogeneity of the New York DMV. As an oriental arbiter of human fate, he traveled about with his collapsible tent and made it known that only a bribe was surety for a hearing. A modern litigious society cannot think itself superior. The parabolic judge regarded neither God nor man. He was a secularist and an egoist, and thus contemned the two highest commandments, to love God and your neighbor. His lack of self-regard was not a lack of the human respect that should animate a judge. He had much human respect, only it was entirely focused on him.

A painting of the parable by John Everett Millais around 1860 shows a flaccid voluptuary enthroned on pillows. When Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said that he did not do justice, he just did the law, at least he did not do Oliver Wendell Holmes. The prejudice of his legal positivism notwithstanding, he did not lie about on satin pillows fanning away people of no profit to him.

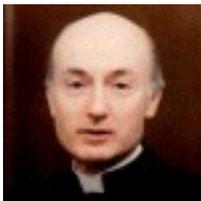
An oppressed woman who approaches, seeking justice, is female and poor and thus at a double disadvantage in the perfumed audience hall. She has only persistence on her side. I do not know whether she is more like the telemarketer or like the atonal parishioner who thinks that if she asks enough, she can sing at her daughter's wedding. She is neither. She seeks justice rightly for she has been wronged. The woman keeps coming at him and finally he relents. She "importunes" the judge. It is a nice term, and one that suited a quieter English-speaking world before the advent of telephone calls at two in the morning.

The woman's importuning was more violent than the translations commonly render when they say that she might "wear out" the judge. The Greek word is a boxing term. The plump judge on his couch fears that she will disfigure his face and give him a black eye. We may assume that the judge's verdict was just, because the widow's cause was just and the judge's injustice was a matter of luxury and not jurisprudence.

Some parables are allegorical, but not this one. God is not an unjust judge who will be awakened by a pagan Greek who finally calls the right name into the Pantheon, nor is He so serene that only a Hindu prayer wheel can awaken Him. Jesus tells this parable “to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” Discouragement means losing heart. It drives the recidivist who is a potential saint away from his next confession, and the driver is the Liar. God knows every prayer before we pray, and answers every prayer before we start complaining.

This parable is a brilliant varnish on Christ’s reminder that a father does not give his son a stone for bread or a snake for fish (Matthew 7:9-11). It is fashionable to disparage the arm-twisting kinds of petitions beleaguered souls make in desperate moments. I suppose more people pray to St. Jude and St. Anthony than to St. Maximilian the Confessor and the Venerable Bede. But these saints, and all the rest of those in white robes, intercede before God, who only wants us to persevere in prayer that we might see how he has answered our petitions or increased our faith like Jacob and the Syro-Phoenician woman. A parish priest may want some of his flock to be less demanding of our great God, but when he opens each week the petition box, he reads some requests that would move even a busy man to tears.

Christ wants us to keep asking until we realize that He has answered our prayers the way that will make us supplicants happy—not until the next mortgage payment or the clean bill of health but forever. “When the Son of Man comes, shall he find that faith?” Note the definite article, which is dropped from wanton translations. “That” faith is the faith that persists until the Son of Man, whom human ego treats like a puppet, comes in light as Saviour and King.



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