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A table of contents for *The Expository Times* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expository-times_01.php

pdfs are named: [Volume]_[Issue]_[1st page of article].pdf

introduces an intermediary between man and God.

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The writer's intensely Protestant convictions further come out in the statement that he regards 'with the utmost contempt and suspicion the constant attempts that are made to attach priestly functions to Nonconformist ministers.'

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There are a few points at which we disagree both with Mr. FLOWERS' thought and with his language. We do not, for example, like to hear of God 'butting into' the plans of men, nor of His 'hammering certain facts home to them.' Nor are we quite sure that he puts the case well when he says that 'in order to witness to the worth of the family, Israel had to believe in the worthlessness of the individual.' 'Relative unimportance' would surely have been nearer the truth than 'worthlessness.'

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Nor is the following sentence beyond challenge: 'The wars of extirpation carried out against the Canaanites were in accordance with the command of God, and were in the nature of punishment upon the enemy for their cruelty and idolatry.' But what of the cruelty of these very extirpations? And what of the treatment of Adoni-bezek? The truth is that the Jahweh who was believed to have commanded these massacres was practically on the level of the Chemosh of the Moabite Stone. These, however, are but little points in a book that cannot fail to be full of suggestion to the preacher, and that deserves the eulogy of Dr. Moffatt which appears on the wrapper of the book.

# The Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke xviii. 1-8).

BY PROFESSOR J. A. ROBERTSON, D.D., UNITED FREE CHURCH COLLEGE, ABERDEEN.

THIS parable is a companion picture to that of the man outside a locked door at midnight trying to borrow three loaves to feed an unexpected guest (Lk $11^{5-8}$). They were probably originally spoken by Jesus at the same time, this one of the Unjust Judge following that of the Unfriendly Friend. Luke makes the story of the Unjust Judge follow a discourse on the Parousia, possibly because he found an apocalyptical conclusion attached to the parable, or because he got both from the same source—had listened to some Christian preacher, an early follower of Jesus, some prophetic voice, Silas or some other, discoursing on our Lord's predictions of the end. Certainly the closing verses do sound like some Christian prophet's attempt to press home the moral of the story.

But the kinship with the parable of the Unfriendly Friend is unmistakable. In both we find a needy suppliant and a reluctant bestower; in both there is a touch of the Master's humour; and both end with a complete breakdown of the reluctance. Here, however, in the parable of the Unjust Judge all the lines and shadows are hardened and intensified. In the earlier parable we are listening to a friend begging from a friend on a friend's behalf. In this case we are listening to a Jewish widow, one of the most helpless and unprotected creatures on God's earth, petitioning a callous beast, who happened to be the city's judge, for justice against some wolf of a man who was taking a cruel advantage of her unprotectedness. We are away from the circle of human friendship, out amid the cold and blighting winds of enmity. The widow had no bribe to offer the judge, and he had no sense of justice and apparently none of the milk of human kindness about him.

It is one's own impression that both these stories are founded on experiences which Jesus Himself had shared. They are memory echoes of the early days in Nazareth. In the one there is the family atmosphere of protection and freedom from care which Mary shared with her children, while the hard-working, conscientious husband Joseph was alive. The other is perhaps the guarded memory of the blackest hour in the long grim days when the widow and her eldest-born, without protection now, exposed to all the bitter and relentless winds of man's inhumanity to man, toiled and struggled to keep the little home together. How often is that word 'widow' upon Jesus' lips! And was the enemy of that Nazareth home perchance some pious money-grubbing Pharisee, who devoured

widows' houses, trying to sell the house over her head to get what was not his own?

A widow! The word conjures up before our Western eyes a vision of the long, black, trailing weeds of sorrow. In many an instance, and certainly in this case, it brings to mind also a story of poverty and need. Darkest shadow of all—the very fact that this widow stands before a minister of law, clamouring for justice, means that she is a hunted, wounded thing, hard-pressed and cruelly wronged. Sorrow, care, need, unprotectedness, the 'sense of wrong and outrage desperate'—these are the conditions out of which this anguished prayer springs.

But before passing away from the comparison of the two parables, let us think for a moment further of the two men to whom the prayers for help were directed. In the earlier case we listen with an amused smile to the lame excuses of laziness for a refusal that is certainly going to break down. Are they not the things that a man in the ill-humour of being half awake would say? 'The door is already barred'—as if it were any harder to unbar at midnight than at daybreak; 'and my children are with me in bed'—as though he were unwilling to disturb or waken them, and yet he was shouting through the room to a man outside the door: one little pair of ears at least were alert and listening in Nazareth. Such is the Master's touch of humour in this parable. But in the other case we hear no uttered word of refusal. We are called on to contemplate that most dreadful of all refusals—silence. In the stillness of that house of law, we seem to see the judge with lowering brows listen for one impatient moment to the querulous, tearful entreaty. And then with a shrug of the shoulders and a lifting of the eyebrows in annoyance and disdain, he deliberately turns his back upon the insignificant suppliant, and with brutal rudeness stalks away. And though we wait long in that silent chamber, though we watch the poor petitioner come again and yet again with ever loud and louder outcries, still the same answer, the awful refusal of the stony silence that breaks the heart and turns it too to stone.

It is a fiercely drawn picture of a certain mood in prayer. It reminds us of some of the ancient Hebrew Psalms. 'How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? For ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long shall mine enemy be exalted over me? Consider and hear me, O Lord my God: lighten mine eyes lest I sleep the sleep of death: lest mine enemy say, I have prevailed against him; and those that trouble me rejoice when I am moved.' It is the mood that sometimes comes when men have been standing in the great audience-chamber of the Universe, and their eyes are too dim with sorrow, too dark with the tragedy of a broken world, to discern the figure of the Judge upon the bench; and out of the great, blank, empty silence only the echo of their own cries seems to come back to mock them. It is to this mood the Master addresses Himself here. And His counsel is to keep on praying. The purpose of the parable is, in the words of the Evangelist's editorial comment at the beginning of the story, to urge 'that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.' For, according to Jesus, such persistent prayer sooner or later is crowned with success. We must note at the outset how He makes His story end. The widow's prayer was granted, at last. Even in this desperate and seemingly hopeless case, where all the facts were dead against the petitioner, the prayer was granted—because she persevered.

In those old headings to the chapters in our King James' version, this parable has been named 'the importunate widow.' And it is a right human instinct that has named it so. For the story is meant to teach the value of importunity, the real spiritual efficacy of a kind of sanctified presumptuousness in prayer. The widow has been accused, indeed, of impudence, because she did not take time to use a flowery circumlocution, because she did not address the gentleman on the bench with proper ceremony, and call him, 'My Lord.' But real distress knows no ceremony. It goes straight to the point. And it persists in coming back to the point, again and again. She had got long past the stage of proffering a humble request. She had got beyond even the stage of urgent entreaty. Her prayer had grown to be a loud complaint which was almost an imprecation. We may not write her down perhaps as an angry fury; but she was at least a little, piteous, hustling storm of wind and rain, which kept repeating itself. The Divine Artist has made it very clear that she was out to pester and annoy the man, to compel him to take action in spite of himself. And, startling though it may appear, it is precisely this quality in her prayer that Jesus is commending to our earnest attention. The conclusion to which we are forced back in the end is that of the virtue, the usefulness, nay, the success of importunity in prayer.

'Hear what the unrighteous judge saith,' the Master bids us. We now turn, therefore, to take close scrutiny of the judge's words. And as we look

at them, the petty selfishness of them, the frank and sordid meanness, the cynicism, the blasphemy, we are forced to remind ourselves that Christ is drawing no comparison between this judge and God. He *is* thinking no doubt of God as a Judge, an honourable and upright Judge in a universe governed by laws of strict justice. And it is no unworthy title to apply to God. A judge is set to be the guardian of law and order, a terror to evil-doers, the protector of the injured and the wronged. And we recall the fact that an old Hebrew poet, in a hymn of adoration (Ps. 68), can find no nobler name to praise God by: 'A Father of the fatherless, a Judge of the widows is God in his holy habitation.' A Judge of the widows! But this man in the parable had mistaken his vocation: a judge that was no judge.

And let us, at Jesus' bidding, listen to his soliloquy (Luke is fond of recording soliloquies: witness his parables of the Rich Fool, the Prodigal Son, and the Vineyard Owner). Let us listen to the dreadful character he gives himself: 'I fear not God, neither regard man . . . . this woman annoys me.' An atheist, whose denial of the fear of God indicates the extreme degree of religious and moral corruption. A cynical misanthrope, quite shameless in the face of his fellows. An egotist, concerned only about his own selfish ease and comfort. Self—that was the source and spring of all the motives by which his life seemed to be guided. He felt it would be a toil to set the apparatus of justice in motion, and he would gain nothing in his own interests. And we are just about to turn away from the ugly picture with a feeling of utter hopelessness, when the Master pulls us up again: 'I beg you to hear what the unjust judge says.' We must have missed something. Then a light begins to dawn, and we follow the gleam till at the end we are constrained to break into a ripple of laughter. Let us listen again to him. The man is talking to himself. Short, gruff, laconic phrases he is muttering. A lonely, crusty old man. And ever that hoarse croak falls on the ear: 'God! What do I care for God? Mankind! I have no interest in mankind.' And just at that moment the door is pushed open, and immediately there is a shrill, strident voice: 'Redress, redress! Free me from the clutches of my enemy! Legal satisfaction! Justice, justice!' And there is a movement in the room, and the old harsh voice growing louder and harsher: 'Dear me! is that the woman again? Will I never get rid of her? Why won't she leave me alone?'

When men tell us that our Lord never made use of the high gift of humour, we are driven back to this story among others, and it will not let us pass without a smile. 'Hear what the unjust judge saith.' Closely scan the closing words of his soliloquy. 'This widow troubles me'—what a nuisance she is! 'I will avenge her'—I had better settle her case. 'Lest by her continual coming she weary me' (so our Authorized Version renders the clause). Almost literally the Greek means, 'in case, coming back and back, at last she strike me black and blue in the face.' Lest she get more and more persistent, and end by giving me two black eyes.

And with these words we seem to catch sight of the man, and are just in time to see the last fleeting gleam of a smile on his usually stern, forbidding face. In that whimsical gleam of ironical self-pity the man stands before us self-betrayed. All that stern outward aspect, all that bullying bluster, all that fiercely muttered soliloquy are just a mask, an assumed mask which he has all but succeeded in persuading himself to be his real self. A Mephistopheles disguised in human form he seems to regard himself. 'You have no idea what a terrible fellow I am,' he seems to say. 'I am a cynic, utterly regardless of mankind.' And with bulging eyes, as if he would fain make our flesh creep, he whispers huskily, 'I am an atheist.' It is really a sham, even though he may have persuaded himself he is quite in earnest.

And that brings us to the heart of the meaning of this parable. It was the woman's importunity, her brazen refusal to be put off with the cold shoulder, that broke down the mask at last. The woman refused to believe that there was not a spark of humanity lying hidden somewhere still in the man's apparently selfish heart. And she was right. It was more than mere outward annoyance. There was a little prick of conscience disturbing the man's inward peace as well. A thoroughly selfish being would only have found a malicious amusement in the woman's daily tears and cries.

But importunity of this sort in prayer? we are fain here to ask. Is it not an unseemly attitude of mind? And Christ answers, reluctance to beg even of your fellow-men for some good cause means suspicion on your part. It means that you are unwilling to give the uncertain friendliness of the world the benefit of the doubt. Of course he who is not ashamed to beg hard for some good object *is* presumptuous. He presumes upon the essential goodness of mankind. But surely that is, in itself, a noble thing. It is exercising faith in human friendliness, in the brotherhood of man. And as a matter of fact this confiding urgency of appeal to

men, while it may meet with an occasional rebuff, is in the main rewarded. Men are surprised into a smiling generosity by the persistent beggar. They are agreeably amused at him, because he is paying them a very high compliment. And in trying to persuade them that they are more generous men than they think they are, he wakens the better self in them.

But the point of the parable is, How does the case stand when we apply all this to God? Dare we be forward and importunate with Him? Does it not seem to be the very thing the Master is bidding His followers here to be? His argument is that it would be the height of unfaith, not to presume—not to form the presumption—that God is essentially and altogether good. His argument is *a minori ad maius*. How much more ought we to exercise importunity with God than with men. When there is no importunity in prayer to God, no persistent sincerity of desire, Christ seems to say, men are guilty of a terrible suspicion about God. They are listening, with the ear of the soul awake, in the long unbroken silence of the Justice-chamber of the Universe, and they are allowing dark shadows of suspicion to gather in their hearts. Then they are projecting those shadows out into the void: they are imagining that God is altogether like this sour, warped soul, this misanthropic, selfish judge. That is what Christ drew in this parable—not *His* picture of God, but man's, with his suspicion, his lack of faith.

The apparently sinister indifference of the world of Nature with its iron laws, man sometimes thinks, is God saying to him: 'I am an austere, hard person; do not come plaguing me with your prayers.' It is the nonsense of unfaith to think so, Jesus says. The Eternal Will is set constantly in the direction of His people's highest good. As long as men imagine otherwise, they are bound to faint and grow slack in prayer. And so long as they do that, they fail to provide the very condition and opportunity in which the kindest and most generous Heart in all the Universe can break through the hard mask of Nature, or rather men's illusions about Nature, to answer their prayers. Importunity toward God is the sublime refusal to believe that God is anything else but fatherly, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Humble importunity toward God in prayer is childlike faith in the eternal and inexhaustible fatherliness of God. God is the infinite Father, holy and just in all His ways, teaching His children to ask. He withholds His best gifts until we learn to ask with sincerity. He withholds the holiest desires of our heart until we learn to ask for them with all our heart. Because only so shall we be fitted to receive them. The gates of the Kingdom of Everlasting Satisfaction are only to be unlocked by real prayer. And only the strongest and most persistent prayer can turn the key that opens the door into the treasure-house of God's most precious jewels. For it is to be remembered that the barriers against entrance to that heavenly treasure-house are man-made barriers. The Christ of glory bends with yearning agony over the world to-day, but all the surge of His mighty healing spirit will be lost in the quicksands of hate and despair unless men open a way for it by their prayers.

The closing verses, reflecting the consciousness of the early Church, are difficult to interpret, especially that despairing sigh with which the parable in its present form ends: 'Nevertheless, when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?' Perhaps, as Dr. A. T. Cadoux has pointed out, these verses represent a mistranslation from the Aramaic, and should be read: 'I tell you, he would avenge them speedily; but then would the Son of man, when He comes, find faith on the earth?' God's delays are a condition for the growth of faith. That would bring the present ending into line with the teaching of the parable. 'God does feel the wrongs of humanity—is long-suffering over them' (a probable gloss in the text)—'and will stop the injustice as soon as possible, but if He does so immediately, what possibility would faith have of making good its place in the world? . . . If God permitted no undeserved suffering in His world, faith in goodness, and, with it, all spiritual triumph, would be impossible.'