

They say when we meet new people we size them up within a few seconds of conversation. Are they cute? Are they fat? Are they exciting? Are they boring? Within seven seconds, they say, we judge people for good or for ill. Of course, this means we misunderstand people, and it means they misunderstand us. If you've ever been turned down for a job interview, for a date, or for a credit card, you may have argued back, "Wait, you've misunderstood me; you don't know what I'm really like."

I think this is the reason Jesus gives us this parable. He feels we've misunderstood him. The point of the parable, Luke says, is to have people pray without being discouraged. That tells me some people were getting pretty discouraged about this prayer business, and they concluded "Enough of this; let's move on to something else." So, Jesus says, "Wait, you've misunderstood me; you don't know what I'm really like." And he tells this parable.

It's a story of a defenseless widow and a hard-hearted judge. This may be the world's first melodrama: You can almost hear villain and the heroine shouting, "You must pay the rent." "I can't pay the rent." "You must pay the rent." "I can't pay the rent." So the woman pleads her case to a heartless judge. He ignores her, so she pleads again, and again, and again. Finally, he rules in her favor not out of pity but out of exasperation. "All right, all right, all right. You win the case. Now leave me alone."

Then Jesus says "When you plead before God you do win the case out of pity. God is more merciful than the hard-hearted judge. He will hear and answer."

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't want to let Jesus off the hook that easily. The fact is, many people experience prayer differently. For many, God is not the merciful judge. For many, God is distant and God is silent. Many righteous people pour out their hearts before God and hear no reply, except a parable telling them it's wrong to be discouraged. *lose heart*

But this parable tells more. I think it teaches three lessons about prayer that are worth remembering.

First, prayer helps faith. To pray is to believe there is a God, a God with power who cares for us, a God who will listen and act. If our faith is weak, prayer helps faith.

Second, prayer taps God's reputation. The reason we pray to God is that God has a reputation for helping out. Our parents knew it; their parents knew it; thousands of generations have said the same thing. God helps. If our experience is different we can see it in perspective. Prayer taps God's reputation.

And third, prayer makes us stronger. If we don't get the answer we want, prayer helps us deal with the answer we get. Prayer makes us stronger.

Jesus argues that we misunderstand him. It's very likely; after all, we misunderstand one another all the time. The solution for him is the same as it is for people: Keep praying, keep talking, and we'll understand.