

GOD WOULD HAVE US demand things of Him, and for this accounts Himself greatly bound to thee. For He alone of all debtors, when the demand is made, counts it a favor, and gives what we have not lent Him. And if He should see him pressing earnestly that makes the demand, He pays down even what He hath not received of us; but if sluggishly, He too keeps on making delays; not through unwillingness to give, but because He is pleased to have the demand made upon Him by us. For this cause He told thee also the example of that friend, who came by night, and asked a loaf; and of the judge that feared not God, nor regarded men.

And He stayed not at similitudes, but signified it also in His very actions, when He dismissed that Phoenician woman, having filled her with His great gift. For through her He signified, that He gives to them that ask earnestly, even the things that pertain not to them. “For it is not meet,” saith He, “to take the children’s bread, and to give it unto the dogs.” But for all that, He gave, because she demanded of him earnestly. But by the Jews He showed, that to them that are careless, He gives not even their own. They accordingly received nothing, but lost what was their own. And while these, because they asked not, did not receive so much as their very own; she, because she assailed Him with earnestness, had power to obtain even what pertained to others, and the dog received what was the children’s. So great a good is importunity. For though thou be a dog, yet being importunate, thou shalt be preferred to the child being negligent: for what things affection accomplishes not, these, all of them, importunity did accomplish.

Say not therefore, “God is an enemy to me, and will not hearken.” He doth straightway answer thee, continually troubling Him, if not because thou art His friend, yet because of thine importunity. And neither the enmity, or the unseasonable time, nor anything else becomes a hindrance. Say not, “I am unworthy, and do not pray;” for such was the Syro-phoenician woman too. Say not, “I have sinned much, and am not able to entreat Him whom I have angered;” for God looks not at the desert, but at the disposition. For if the ruler that feared not God, neither was ashamed of men, was over-

come by the widow, much more will He that is good be won over by continual entreaty. So that though thou be no friend, though thou be not demanding thy due, though thou hast devoured thy Father’s substance, and have been a long time out of sight, though without honor, though last of all, though thou approach Him angry, though much displeased; be willing only to pray, and to return, and thou shalt receive all, and shall quickly extinguish the wrath and the condemnation.

But, “behold, I pray,” saith one, “and there is no result.” Why, thou prayest not like those; such I mean as the Syro-phoenician woman, the friend that came late at night, and the widow that is continually troubling the judge, and the son that consumed his father’s goods. For didst thou so pray, thou wouldest quickly obtain. For though despite have been done unto Him, yet is He a Father; and though He have been provoked to anger, yet is He fond of His children; and one thing only doth He seek, not to take vengeance for our affronts, but to see thee repenting and entreating Him.

Would that we were warmed in like measure, as those bowels are moved to the love of us. But this fire seeks a beginning only, and if thou afford it a little spark, thou kindlest a full flame of beneficence. For not because He hath been insulted, is He sore vexed, but because it is thou who art insulting Him, and so becoming frenzied. For if we being evil, when our children molest us, grieve on their account; much more is God, who cannot so much as suffer insult, sore vexed on account of thee, who hast committed it. If we, who love by nature, much more He, who is kindly affectioned beyond nature. “For though,” saith He, “a woman should forget the fruits of her womb, yet will I not forget thee.”

Let us therefore draw nigh unto Him, and say, “Truth, Lord; for even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Let us draw nigh “in season, out of season:” or rather, one can never draw nigh out of season, for it is unseasonable not to be continually approaching. For of Him who desires to give it is always seasonable to ask: yea, as breathing is never out of season, so neither is praying unseasonable, but rather not praying.

St John Chrysostom,
Homily XXII on the Gospel of Saint Matthew, pp. 155–56.

Pearls from the Holy Fathers, February 2-8, Prodigal Son-day