

**Basking in Reflected Glory**

**October 16, 2016**

**Luke 18:1-8**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Judge, Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

It used to be called name-dropping; now it’s called BIRGing. It’s a new phrase, actually it’s an acronym. It stands for Basking In Reflected Glory. In his book *Fame Junkies*, Jake Halpern brings the psychological concept of BIRGing to pop-culture. Halpern notes that BIRGing and other fame junkie behaviors are evidence of American addiction to celebrity culture. Look at the magazine covers when you’re in line to buy your groceries — our nation apparently cares if Britney Spears’ poodle has puppies with Al Gore’s beagle or that OJ Simpson is Khloe Kardashian’s real dad or that Janet Jackson is pregnant, at age 50… Such headlines are more widely noticed in our fame-fascinated society than famine in Africa or wiping out the entire city of Aleppo, which is the capital of Syria.

BIRGing is less about celebrity fixation and more about self-fixation. The expression was actually coined by a psychologist who noticed BIRGing has its roots the fact that people will generally act in ways which boost their self-esteem. According to studies at various university campuses, students are far more likely to wear school logos such as sweatshirts, T-shirts or hats after a sports team victory. The same is true after a professional team win as well. Super Bowl and World Series winners have huge crowds of BIRGing admirers all basking in the reflected glory of their favorite team’s victory. We love to share the glory, but we don’t love to share the shame. If something goes wrong, we immediately distance ourselves from the disaster. For the latest example of this phenomenon all you have to do is think about all the Republicans running as fast and far from Donald Trump as they can get after the recent revelations regarding his locker room talk. The opposite to the Basking In Reflected Glory or BIRG is called CORF — “Cutting Off Responsibility for Failure.” In the same campus research, psychologists found weekend wins resulted in student descriptions of how “we” played — a BIRG. However, following team losses conversation was dominated by descriptions of “their” performance — a CORF. In other words, if there is a success, we love to be a part of it. We BIRG. If there’s failure, we run like crazy. We CORF. Armed with our new pop-culture lingo, let’s adapt a couple of familiar Bible verses using these two now terms:

The first is just after the Last Supper when Jesus had predicted all the disciples would desert him and Peter protested that all the others might, but he would die rather than leave Jesus. Then Jesus said to Peter, ‘Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will CORF me three times.’

Another time when news that Jesus had the power to cure diseases, “BIRGers came to him, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the mute and many others. They put them at his feet, and he cured them.”

How about the opposition Jesus received after healing on the Sabbath? “When his family heard it, they went out to CORF him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’

Today’s Gospel message is the classic tale of the culturally CORFed. A marginalized person in her day, the persistent widow had no power relationships with which she could BIRG. She had absolutely no cultural advantage to brag about, no strings to pull, no names to speed dial, not a single friend on her Facebook page. Nothing…

Mosaic Law prescribes that the husband’s immediate family and the community of faith were primarily responsible for widows. This social contract is easily overlooked as we read the story today. Women have come a long way since the days when their only value came as a reflection of the men they were married to. It would have been a glaring detail in this story that would jump off the page to anyone reading it in ancient times. Our question then becomes, why was there nobody except this judge who could help this woman with her opponent? Either she had no other family or community, or they were ignoring her. The point in the parable is that there is only one advocate for this woman — the judge.

Looking for ourselves in this parable, we, too, have only one true advocate to whom we can turn with life problems. While He may use our family and community to minister to us, Jesus is our only hope. “The Judge” is all we have.

Jesus wants people to know about The Judge. His parable starts with the lesser, human judge — think America’s Got Talent’s Simon Cowell here. The story goes, there’s this judge who couldn’t give a rip about spiritual things. He’s just a guy with an opinion, answering only to himself. He doesn’t care about people, just the system of do’s and don’ts that keeps them in line. If this really is her only hope, the widow should feel pretty hopeless. However, she pleads on and on, waiting for the judge at his office every morning and being the last face he sees as he leaves every night. She’s not BIRGing; she is badgering. Justice by irritation. It’s emotionally eroding the powerful judge’s patience. Now, if this hypothetical judge with *those* motivations will grant justice in response to persistence, the point of the story goes, how much easier is it to have confidence in the heavenly Judge with Divine motivations for the same response?

Jesus wants to provoke two things in us: belief in God’s justice and the value of persistence in securing it. These words are hard for most people today for a couple of reasons. Start with the teaching on prayer. Since disciples then and now can be a bit slow, Jesus comes out of the gate in the very first verse with the meaning of the story: their “need to pray always and not to lose heart”. These words aren’t hard to understand, but they’re very hard to live. Since Jesus was teaching with a parable and not intently praying at that moment we can safely say he wasn’t being literal when he advised us to “pray always.” What Jesus wanted of His disciples then and now is to develop a habit of regular prayer so that the first thing we do in times of stress it to turn to Him in prayer. Whenever your heart is affected by a friend’s story, by a sermon’s message, by what you read in the news, by what happened at work, by what the television reports about the other side of the city or the other side of the world, the first thing we do is pray.

We pray each time an issue comes to mind. Prayer can be like a reflex in the body. When we step on something sharp, we instantly put all our weight on the other foot. It’s natural and immediate. Prayer can eventually become like this ... with practice. We pray quick sentence prayers as a response to God, based on anything our eyes and ears perceive. But we’re also encouraged not to “lose heart.” The Greek word Enkakeo comes from the roots en, “into” and kakos, “wrong, evil, base.” To lose our enthusiasm for prayer and become discouraged is to enter into a wrong, evil, and base state of the soul.

When facing evil, brokenness and injustice, the last thing we need to do is to give up fighting against it. When praying for the sick relative, the obstinate boss, or a new relationship, our only real option is to rely on the God option. It’s really hard to finally give up struggling on your own and rely only on God. We know we should pray always, yet we utter a few short phrases and give up. That’s why Jesus’ second thrust addresses our theology of justice. Jesus claims the persistent receive justice quickly and without delay... Really? Am I the only one who questions this? It’s been 2,000 years since this parable was first told, so what’s with this idea of “quickly”? Where is justice when school and night club shootings and bombings and world hunger are the only things that briefly appear between the mud slung by political opponents? And how does it work if justice comes without delay, why are we commanded to persist in seeking it? I offer a personal warning here. If you question God about what God’s doing about injustice, you should be prepared for God to ask the same question of you… The best answer I can come up with is already-not yet. Jesus promised we would have trouble in this life (John 16:33). A sin-tainted, broken world will always provide injustices, but we believe God uses his truth and his followers to bring redemption to these places. Justice has already come through the good news of Jesus meeting the real life of today. But there’s also a not-yet element too. The final judgment at the end belongs to God. Only God controls perfect justice, and it comes completely only when Jesus returns.

So, you want to BIRG? Bask in reflected glory. There’s only one Person you need to know, one Advocate against our opponents, one true Judge. May you freely turn yourself over to this true Judge and trust in His eternal justice, amen.