

Luke 18:1-14

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Date: 16 February 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, let me say it's a pleasure to be back here with you again. It's been a while. And so let's look at these two parables here.

And the two parables that we're going to look at here are interesting for a number of reasons. But the first thing that I noticed was that Luke, being led by the Holy Spirit, leads us in no doubt what they are about.

In fact, the first verse of each parable states exactly why Jesus is telling this story to his listeners. In verse 1 of chapter 18, Luke writes, Jesus told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Then in verse 9, we see that the second of these parables was told by Jesus for those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

So there we have the why Jesus is telling the parable. So let's have a quick look at the context in which he tells them. And to look at the context, we need to just move our fingers back a few verses into chapter 17, which I hope you probably won't even have to turn the page back to see.

[1 : 09] But from verses 20 to 37, Jesus has been talking about his second coming. In verse 22, we see that he's been addressing his followers and telling them the fact that the Son of Man is going to come again.

Then in verse 24, he says he's going to come in a way that is visible to everyone. And the whole world will see him like lightning that flashes from one end of the sky to the other.

Verses 26 to 28, he says that he's also going to come in horrific judgment, as it was in the days of Noah and the days of Lot.

And in these verses 34 and 35, he says he is going to come in a way that brings separation. It's going to split families and marriages, friends, work colleagues.

One is taken and the other is left. So we come now to verse 1 of chapter 18, and you'll notice that there's no change of scene. There's no change of audience.

[2 : 06] There's no change in his train of thought. Jesus is still speaking to his disciples. And we're told that he now tells them a parable in the context of the second coming that they are always to pray and not lose heart.

So in the context of the second coming, Jesus tells his followers they should keep praying. They should remain hopeful. And that's the key to understanding the story.

Jesus knew that in terms of human understanding, this period of time between his ascension and his second coming was going to be a very long time. In fact, I'm sure it was even seen long to some of those people in the first century.

First, he wasn't there for a few years. Then it became decades. Then it became centuries. And now it has been a couple of millennia. And since his ascension, it's never been hard to see that Christ is not honored in the world.

He's not appreciated or offered his rightful place. The word of God is unappreciated. It's often under attack. You only have to pick up the paper or turn on the television to see the work of Satan all around us.

[3 : 15] And Jesus, when he's telling this parable, knew this was going to happen. And he knew that we would find it hard to remain hopeful and expect it for his coming. So what he is saying to these people here and to us is that no matter what the circumstances are, good or bad, hopeful, hopeless, regardless of the event, the season or the era, until he comes, we are to pray and not lose heart.

So let's look at the illustration here of the first parable. And as we said, this parable is to illustrate the importance of prayer. And he tells this story about a widow who is persistent with a certain

wicked judge that she was eventually able to secure justice for herself.

And notice how the wicked judge is self-described there in verse 4 as someone who has absolutely no reverence for God and no interest in people. See, there is simply no way to penetrate this man's wickedness, either from the law of God or from the needs of men, which means he has no interest in the first commandment to love God.

He has no interest in the second commandment to love his neighbor as himself. He is simply a wicked man. And not only is he wicked, but he seems to be absolutely fine with it.

He says of himself there in verse 4, I neither fear God nor respect man. This is his own description of himself. He is a self-confessed wretch.

[4 : 46] Still, the woman will not be pushed away. And we meet her in verse 3. There was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, Give me justice against my adversary.

It appears someone has defrauded her, and it's serious. And she's powerless. She has no other way to receive justice other than through this wicked judge. And she pesters him relentlessly. Finally, through her persistence, the wicked judge caves into her demand. In verse 4 he says, For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.

In other words, she's saying, This is killing me. All day long, every day she won't leave me alone. Every morning on the way to work she meets me on the pavement. Nagging me all the way to work she meets me at lunchtime.

She follows me home in the evening and pleads her case through the open window at my house. And although he has no concern for God or man, What we see is that he has regard for himself and he wants his life back.

[6 : 02] So in order to rid himself of her, he gives her justice. Now, not only is the meaning of the parable explained to us before Jesus starts the story, but now he spells out the application to us in verses 6 and 7.

He says to his disciples, In other words, if such a wicked man can offer justice in this situation, how much more can be obtained through earnest, persistent prayer from our judge in heaven, our Father in heaven?

And you see, the subject here, as we said, is prayer. And this is an important subject for all Christians. Prayer is right at the center of our faith. It's been said that prayer is the ultimate expression of our faith.

See, our prayer life is the place where true religion starts. It's the place where our faith flourishes.

But your prayer life is also the place where your faith can stagnate.

It's a place where it can go to seed if you neglect it. And this is why Jesus exhorts us here always to pray. It's far easier to start a habit of praying than it is to keep it up.

[7 : 25] I mean, there are many things that might make us start to pray. Loss of a loved one. Fear. Unhappiness. Thankfulness. Feelings of guilt. Embarrassment. Excitement. Sorrow. So many things can start us off to pray.

But to go on praying and continue to pray, that takes faith. There are always times when Satan will strike the believer in our prayer life.

We find we may be growing tired. We might be restless. We might even start to think, why on earth am I praying? My prayers seem to be so seldom answered anyway.

Well, see, these situations, these thoughts are attacks from Satan. And when they happen, we must keep at the very forefront of our minds this parable. We must remember the Lord's words here.

Always to pray and not lose heart. I mean, do you ever feel that hidden desire to shorten your prayers or maybe to put them off until later? I mean, maybe to even not pray at all sometimes.

[8 : 23] Or are you able to openly admit there are times when you lack a prayer life? Well, see, we're supposed to remember at those times that these are attacks from Satan.

Satan is trying to sap your faith and undermine your spiritual lifeline to God. And believe me, for a Christian, prayer is a spiritual lifeline. And at these times, Satan is trying to attack the very citadel of your soul.

So we must always remember that Satan's ultimate goal is to see you cast into hell. Now, verse 7 shows us something about the Lord's people.

His followers that Jesus refers to here as the elect. The doctrine of election tells us that God chose his people.

He chose the elect out of his own pleasure without reference to men or women. Salvation is all about God. It's about God's sovereignty and his grace. But what are the marks of the people that he has chosen?

[9 : 27] I mean, how might a man or woman know that they are part of God's elect? Well, in this passage, the Lord Jesus shows us that at least one of the marks of the elect is that they are a praying people.

They are a praying people who pray without losing heart, who persevere in faith that God will fulfill his promise to return. And note how Jesus even asks the question here in verse 7.

Will not God give justice to his elect? Those who cry out to him day and night? And then he answers it for us in verse 8. He says, I tell you, he will.

Now, it may take some time before the event of the second coming happens. But when it happens, it's going to take place speedily, as it says there in verse 8.

In fact, we're told in 1 Corinthians that it's going to take place in the twinkling of an eye. We're also told that the Lord's judgment is going to be swift and mighty. You see, the Lord will do what he has promised to do because his word is at stake and he is faithful always to his word.

[10 : 36] And he's always faithful to his people. And if we, as his people, are able to understand the fate of those who do not believe on the day that he returns, and beside that we're able to understand what he is saving us from, then that should always bring to mind a first reason that we can always pray.

We can give thanks for our salvation. We should thank him for our salvation over and over again and often. Because remember, he chose us, not us, him.

So, note these words here of the Lord Jesus. And let's make a note to resist the temptations to shortchange our prayer life. Let's resolve to obey him and pray always with persistence and with patience.

Now, having used the parable of the widow to show them how they should pray, Jesus asked them a question there at the end of verse 8. When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

In other words, Jesus is asking, will he actually find when he does return? Will he find his people praying with faith and persistence? Will there be those who have stayed praying?

[11 : 54] Or will it be like the days of Noah, the days of Lot, when there were only just a handful? You see, for those who believe, we have been given a fantastic promise.

We've also been told how the whole of history is actually going to end someday. But still, there will be times when the world around us seems to be hopeless.

Times when Satan's reign just seems absolutely rampant. And at those times, we might actually ask, Why? Why is he waiting to return?

Why does he come now and sort all of this out? Well, the Bible tells us that he waits in part so that men and women might come to repentance. You see, he does it in part because if he brought justice today or tonight, it would certainly answer the deepest questions of all our hearts.

But it would also remove every possibility that your child or your wife or your friend or your father would ever have the opportunity to be saved. You see, it would be the end of opportunity, it would be the end of the world.

[13 : 02] It would mean the books had finally been opened and settled. But it also means the door of salvation would also be closed. So for now, God is patiently waiting for sons and daughters to stop their rebellion.

He's waiting for wives to come to him. And he's waiting for people to lay down their pride and their arrogance and trust in the Lord Jesus. So what he's saying to his followers here is, The time before my return is going to be hard.

And it's going to seem like a very long time. So I'm going to tell you this story so that you will not give up and you will continue to pray. And all this talk about the kingdom raises a very basic question.

How does one get into the kingdom? A question for all of us. How is it that God will let me into his eternal kingdom?

Well, here in this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus answers this ultimate question with amazing simplicity. He says in verse 9 that Jesus told this parable to those who were confident

in their own righteousness and looked down on others.

[14:20] He tells it because he's surrounded by people who are absolutely convinced that they're fine. Absolutely certain that their religious behavior and their religious practices have set them on a higher plane and they have no sense of need.

And what makes it so simple to understand is that Jesus explains to us here that all religions fall into one of two categories. Category 1. Your religion says that you, through your own efforts, are able to make yourself right before God.

Category 2. Your religion tells you that you cannot, by your own efforts, make yourself right before God. In other words, you believe that you're able to achieve the righteousness that God requires on your own merit, or you're not.

And if the parable of the persistent widow teaches us to be persistent in our prayer, then the parable here of the Pharisee and the tax collector shows us the spirit in which we should pray. Now, we're all naturally self-righteous. I don't think that will come to a surprise to anyone. And it expresses itself here in the Pharisee's feeling of moral superiority with respect to other people.

[15:33] And moral superiority is not a sin that is just limited to unbelievers. I mean, any time we believe that we are holding the moral high ground, whether it be politics or theology or something as temporal as fashion, even, for example, we are exercising our moral self-righteousness.

A good example is when we look around and we see society openly committing or encouraging flagrant sins like sexual immorality or avarice or abortion, or even in those cases when we can look down on people, we can actually say, we don't commit those specific, obvious flagrant sins they're committing.

Those who seem to have no control over themselves when it comes to those issues. Even at those times, we sort of secretly flatter ourselves that we're not as bad as others.

And therefore, we feel like we may have something to recommend us into the favor of God.

However, we should never forget, the Bible does tell us that, for we all stumble in many ways.

Ecclesiastes says, surely there is not one righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

So I think there is a warning here.

[16:48] Do not assess your spiritual life by comparing it to others. I mean, even though this type of assessment is strong amongst us, it's hard to recognize and it's one of the great obstacles that stand between us and God.

So you see, we have these two men who come to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. Now, immediately we have a problem because when we think Pharisee, we think of a bad man, don't we?

However, in the minds of all the listeners there, the Pharisee was the church man. He was the religious guy. A Pharisee to these listeners was scrupulous when he came to the law of God.

And so when he says that he tithes, in verse 12, that means he is generous to the poor. And when he says, I don't commit adultery, in verse 11, it means he is a faithful husband.

So you see, the Pharisee is offering his evidence that he is actually a good man. And to the Pharisee, in his prayer there in verse 11, he says, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax selector standing next to me.

[18:06] I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But there's one obvious problem with this prayer. I mean, after one says, God, I thank you, should not the things that follow be about the things that God has done for him.

However, after he says, God, I thank you, this is the last we hear about God. His prayer contains no sense of sin or need, no confession, no acknowledging of his guilt, or even his own helplessness.

There's no crying out for mercy or grace. And notice how he says there in verses 11 and 12, I thank, I am not, I fast, I give, I get.

It's simply a recital of self-worship. And the Lord Jesus is showing us here that under the shroud of it being about God, this man's prayer is actually about adoration of self.

You see, he's expressing not only his sort of self-proclaimed goodness, but also view that in some way, maybe his goodness should be acknowledged. And we come to the second man, the tax collector.

[19:17] He was a crook, a scoundrel, he was a traitor to his people. In the culture at the time, you were not required to keep any promise that you made to a thief, a murderer, or a tax collector. And if you were to ever watch one of these World War II movies, I'm sure you've seen them, where the

mayor of a little town in Holland or France, it kind of welcomes the Nazis when they come as a result.

And all during the war, he's living a great life and he's socializing and making lots of money. Well, that is who this man is, the tax collector. He was a friend of the enemy. He was a traitor who was enriching himself on the occupation of the Romans being in their country.

So what you have in these two men are the extremes of society. One represents the ultimate religious man, and the other represents the height of sin and wickedness.

And then Jesus pronounces that the good man, the Pharisee in the story, is lost. And the bad man, the traitor, is saved.

What Jesus is saying to us here is he's trying to show us that if you try to be your own master, your own savior, then what you're actually doing is rejecting God as your savior.

[20 : 31] I mean, how can God be the master of your life if you're holding on to that position yourself? Starting with the fall of Adam and the Garden of Eden when Satan said to Eve, For God knows that when you eat it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.

Ever since that moment, we've all seen men and women trying to be their own masters, their own gods. And although these two men seem to be polar opposites, they are both in exactly the same place.

You see, there are two ways that you can attempt to be your own savior. Either by keeping all of God's laws so that you can feel like you've earned something and you may be owed, or by simply breaking all of God's laws and rejecting him outright like the tax collector.

Two seemingly opposite approaches, but both get you to exactly the same place. Jesus is not saying that it's okay to be a tax collector and that it's not okay to be a religious man.

No, what Jesus is saying is that both good people and bad people in their fallen natural state are being good and bad for exactly the same reason.

[21 : 41] To control their own life, to be their own master, to be their own savior. And notice here how the Pharisee says, I am not like other men.

I am not an extortioner or adulterer. You see, I can think of all kinds of things that I am not or that I don't do. But all that does is just put up a smoke screen.

It sort of hides all the sins that I have done. He says, I tithe, I fast. It's the Pharisee himself here who is now deciding what it is to worship God.

He says, I tithe of everything. The Bible only requires that he actually tithe 10% of certain things. He says, I fast twice a week.

The Bible only requires him to fast once a year at Yom Kippur. So he's picking out the things that he finds easy to do, that he can do on his own. And he just doubles up on them.

[22 : 39] The Pharisee is now apparently the one who is deciding what it is to worship and honor God. It's no longer God who is ordering the worship for the Pharisee. And notice how he says, he never says this in his prayer.

He never says something like, Thank you, Lord, that I am becoming more loving. Thank you, Lord, that you are making me more humble and patient. Or thank you, Lord, that even living in the hardship of this life, I am finding joy through my relationship with you.

There's nothing ever like that. You see, the problem for the Pharisee is that he is not able to see his spiritual state. He compares himself with his neighbors, and he thinks his goal is to outdo his neighbor.

I think the underlying message here is that religious people can be in danger of never seeing their situation.

And never is the heart of a man or woman in more danger than when they are unable to see their true spiritual condition. I mean, I think that runs throughout the Bible, doesn't it?

[23 : 44] Never is the heart of a man or woman in more danger than when they are unable to see their own sinful condition. You know, at the start of the parable, both the tax-select and the Pharisee are polar opposites in terms of how their lives look to other people.

However, it was not what they were in the eyes of men that matters, but what they are in the eyes of God. Both men were lost. Both men were living lives that are unrighteous in the sight of God.

But the Pharisee is not aware that he's doing it. And the danger is that even if you told him, he most likely would not believe you. And never is a man or woman in more danger than when they cannot see their own spiritual situation.

So now look at the prayer of the tax collector in verse 13, which the Lord commands. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but he beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Now here is the answer to the big question. How does one get into the eternal kingdom of God? How is one reconciled with God?

[25 : 03] Like the tax collector, you accept your true state of sinfulness and you look to God and you ask for mercy. Now I think it's important to note here that our translation there says in verse 13, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

It's actually not quite correct. In the original, Luke uses the definite article, and it reads, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. And you see, I think that's important because by saying the sinner, he's not comparing himself to anyone else.

You see, what use is it to be more moral than other men and women when in reality, all men and women are vile and imperfect in the sight of God? It is, in all of our self-examination, we must not look at ourselves in comparison with others.

We must only look at ourselves in comparison to the requirements that God makes. Romans 3 says that, for we have already charged that all men are under sin.

None is righteous, no, not one. No one does good, not even one. So, if we examine our sin in relation to other people's sin, there's always somebody that we're going to be able to find who has done more sin than us.

[26 : 21] And if that's the case, then we are only ever a sinner. We never see ourselves as the sinner. And you see, this is the great obstacle for the Pharisee in the story.

But the tax collector is looking at himself. He's looking at his sin in a way that you must see yourself if you want to resolve your situation with God. If you want to know how to spend eternity in his kingdom with him.

You see, this tax collector comes to the temple and he simply says, I am a spiritual wreck. All I know is that I'm lost. And whatever anybody else is saying or is not saying, it has no effect on the fact that my soul is totally bankrupt.

And so he says, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. And as he uses that word merciful, the tax collector is using a word that means atone for my sins.

In the original language, it's the word hilasterian. The word hilasterian is also used in Hebrews 2 when the writer speaking of Jesus writes, For this reason, Jesus became a merciful and faithful high priest in the service to God that he might make atonement, that he might make hilasterian for the sins of the people.

[27 : 46] You see, the tax collector knows that he cannot deal with his problem himself. And he knows that if there is nothing outside of his own power, outside his own self, to deal with this problem, then he has no chance whatsoever of knowing God or spending eternity with him.

Notice he's not asking God to compare him to others or to lower his standards. He's just simply saying, I need atonement for my sins. Here we have two men, two prayers, two eternities.

Have you ever asked God to pardon you the way the tax man did? Have you ever asked God to pardon you through the atoning sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross? I mean, maybe you are seeking a righteousness that's built on your own religious reputation or on your own moral achievement or maybe you're hoping that God will simply find you righteous enough.

In other words, the real question is, what is it that you are staking your eternity on? But note how the parable ends here with Jesus saying in verse 14 that the tax collector went down to his house justified.

And then he adds, for the one who humbles himself will be exalted. The tax collector was righteous in the eyes of God. He was acquitted.

[29 : 15] He was set free from the bondage of sin and accepted to spend eternity with God. And you see, it was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who accepted his sin outright.

He recognized this helplessness to do anything about it himself. He just dropped his sword of rebellion and he humbled himself to the mercy and the love of the Lord Jesus.

The tax collector was able to find a humility that, for which he can honestly say, there is nothing in me to respect. Deep down in my heart of hearts, I am wretched.

I have nothing else that I can say. You know, we sing a song quite often that I love a lot actually. In America, we call it It Is Well With My Soul.

I think over here you call it When Peace Like a River. Have you ever thought about that? when we sing that verse, My sin, O the bliss, such glorious thought, my sin, not in part but in whole, is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more.

[30 : 28] Praise the Lord, O my soul. Have you ever thought about what we're saying when we sing that? We're saying that the gospel is all outside of us.

It has nothing to do with our feelings. It has everything to do with what has been done for us. It's about the fact that Jesus became the sinner.

He became the ultimate sinner and He died on the cross for us. And as He hung there, He was looking at you and He was looking at me.

He knew my name. He knew your name. He knew my sins. He knew your sins. And still, He loved us so much that He made atonement for us.

Now, we noted earlier that in part the second coming of the Lord Jesus is being held back so that men and women still might have time to come to Christ to receive the saving mercy. Is it possible if there's someone sitting here today who is one of those he's waiting on?

[31 : 36] Maybe this is your time to simply stop the rebellion, to drop your sword, to lose your pride and your self-righteousness and pray as the tax man did.

Lord Jesus, I need you. I am helpless without you. Forgive me. Show me mercy. Save me. Live in me. Come take me as your own. Because that is how you will find yourself reconciled to God. So let me pray for us.