

Luke 18:1-30: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 18 verses 1 to 30. And the Lord said, He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Now they were bringing even infants to him so that he might touch them.

And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him saying, Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

[2 : 0 0] And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honour your father and mother. And he said, All these I have kept from my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have, and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me.

But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, And who can be saved? But he said, What is impossible with man is possible with God.

[3 : 0 1] And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you. And he said to them, Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come, eternal life.

The persistent widow at the beginning of Luke chapter 18 represents the oppressed righteous in Israel, waiting for salvation. The parable argues from the weaker to the stronger.

If even an unjust judge will respond, how much more the righteous God. The woman is calling out to be avenged by the representative of the law against her adversary or oppressor.

This is compared to the prayers of God's people for judgment against their oppressors. Her faith provides a model for the people of God to follow. And such prayers for vengeance are found at various points in the Psalms, but also in such places as Revelation chapter 6 verse 10.

They cried out with a loud voice, O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? Handled appropriately, it is not wrong to pray in such a manner.

[4 : 1 1] As in Romans chapter 12 verse 19, we are not to avenge ourselves, but to give place to God's vengeance. And it can be helpful when we're thinking about these prayers for vengeance to consider David's imprecatory Psalms that were written while he was fleeing from Saul.

And we read those alongside 1 Samuel's description of his actions to see how not avenging ourselves and praying for God to avenge us need not conflict. The coming of the Son of Man then is here associated with his coming to avenge his persecuted people and in part in response to their prayers.

Prayer is central in both of the opening parables in this chapter. We pray as those deserving nothing from God's hand, who trust his mercy. And the images of the people of the kingdom are striking here, a widow, a tax collector, infants, the poor.

If the second half of Luke chapter 17 is concerned with the manner of the coming of the kingdom of God, the when and the where, much of the chapter that follows addresses the manner in which people will receive its blessings.

In a series of parables and teachings, Jesus presents this in terms of a number of different categories. In verses 1-8, vengeance. In verses 9-14, vindication.

[5 : 26] In verses 15-17, reception. In verses 18-23, inheritance. And in verses 24-30, entrance. While it might be easy to read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector merely as a teaching concerning contrasting private relationships individuals can have with God, when we situate the parable upon the broader canvas of Jesus' teaching regarding the coming kingdom, there are further dimensions that emerge.

In particular, it underlines the fact that the actions of the various characters in this parable and the teachings that surround it, the persistent widow, the rich young ruler, the tax collector and the Pharisee, the disciples, are all oriented towards the horizon of a future and public action of God within Israel and the world's history.

That day would bring both vindication and judgment. It would be a deliverance and reward for some, and exclusion and shame for others. It would publicly reveal where everyone stood relative to God in his purposes for history.

For the Pharisee, that future was awaited with a blithe assurance that he would be vindicated within it. When he looked at his life, all the signs were propitious that he was in the right. He was a fine specimen of a true and faithful Israelite.

He guarded the nation's holiness. And as a result, he was free to engage in a sort of self-congratulation under the guise of a prayer of thanksgiving. His self-confidence was also powerfully bolstered by how favourably he appeared against the foil of others, the extortioners, the unjust, the adulterers, and the tax collector.

[7 : 02] His high self-regard was inseparable from his habitual judgment of others. If the Pharisee was confident in his righteousness, the tax collector openly addressed God from a position of moral destitution and injustice.

He threw himself upon the divine mercy. Facing the prospect of God's coming just kingdom, the tax collector is well aware of where he stands relative to it. The Pharisee's self-righteous presumption of his own standing, his assumption that he was on the right side of history, one who would receive future praise and vindication, manifested a deep perversion of what it meant to relate to the Lord. In Jesus' teaching, the kingdom of God is one in which we are all found to be on the wrong side of history. If the blessings of God's justice are to be received, they must be received as pure mercy and grace from a position of weakness, dependence, lack, and confessed injustice.

As we find ourselves in such a position, justification no longer provides us with the grounds for condemning others in self-assured righteousness. The tax collector goes home justified, because although unworthy, as he's one who appreciates his utter lack, he's able to receive the divine gift of the kingdom's fullness.

To the degree that we resist perceiving ourselves as radically unjust, morally insufficient, subject to condemnation, and as willfully and extensively complicit in forms of evil, we disqualify ourselves from entry into the justice of the kingdom.

[8 : 30] The justice of the kingdom comes in the form of forgiveness, and to receive forgiveness, you must acknowledge your wrong, and your insufficiency, and your failure, and your need to receive the kingdom as a gracious act of God in mercy towards you.

None of us stand securely on the right side of history. Rather, like the tax collector, we must reach out in humility from our moral destitution, seeking divine mercy like humble and needy beggars. After this, the disciples seek to prevent children from being brought to Jesus to be blessed, but Jesus tells them not to do so. While the disciples presumably thought that the young children were distractions from the business of men, they lacked honour and status, and they should not be given so much attention, for Jesus they were quite the opposite.

They were models of the way that the kingdom is to be received. Our section of this chapter is concluded with a description of a ruler coming to Jesus, asking what he must do to inherit eternal life.

Many read this passage thinking that Jesus is highlighting the futility of seeking righteousness according to the law, driving the man to despair of his righteousness. That's not actually how the story goes.

[9 : 37] Jesus teaches that the commandments are necessary for entering into life. The twist is in how this is understood. He highlights the commandments that relate to our relationship with our neighbours in particular.

Although he does not mention the tenth commandment, you shall not covet. That commandment will be fulfilled as the ruler sells what he has and gives to the poor. And the commandments are kept on a deeper level still by following Christ himself.

When he lists the commandments to the ruler, Jesus only lists from those commandments that concern loving your neighbour. How is the ruler to obey the command to love God? By giving up the thing that he is most attached to, money, and following Jesus.

Jesus implicitly asks for the loyalty that belongs to God here. And we can see the parable of the unjust steward in the background. The rich ruler should sell what he has, make friends with the poor with his money, and then he will have great riches in heaven.

This exchange highlights once again the danger of riches as things that weigh us down and prevent us from serving and following our true master. This should also make us uncomfortable.

[10 : 44] We want to be assured that Christ would never ask such a thing of us. However, while there is no general requirement to sell all that we have and to give to the poor, Christ does call us to that same sort of loyalty.

Wealth is a power that can prevent us from entering the kingdom. Wealth is something that can master us. We think that we possess wealth, but often it's our wealth that possesses us, and we should be very, very fearful.

This is why Jesus gives the most incredible warnings against riches, that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. However, those who give up things for the kingdom are promised to return, not just in the age to come, but also in the present age, and we should be prepared to renounce our riches and follow Christ, to give up whatever it is that tethers our hearts to this age, to commit ourselves to the kingdom, and we'll find that we are richer for it.

In laying down our lives, we'll finally secure them. The disciples have shown their loyalty to Christ and their faith in Jesus by their actions. They've left everything to follow him, and they will be richly blessed, both in this present time and in the age to come.

We gain much as we follow Jesus, even in this present life. The need to receive God's kingdom from a position of lack or destitution is a recurring theme within Luke 18.

[12 : 05] The widow addresses the unjust judge from a position of social powerlessness. In receiving the kingdom as a little child, we do so as those who are weak and dependent. In light of the kingdom, the rich ruler's paradoxical lack is his abundance, something that he must surrender in order to inherit the kingdom aright.

Finally, the disciples are promised a reward in the age to come as they have left houses, parents, brothers, wives, and children. The tax collector who seeks God's mercy from a position of moral unworthiness is the true heir, rather than the Pharisee who presumes his entitlement.

If the coming of the kingdom is not as people would have expected it, the receiving of it is not either. A question to consider. Why do the righteous need to be persistent in their prayers for justice if God is a just judge?

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