

The Gospel of Luke

Lesson 23: Prayer, Humility, and Riches -- Luke 18:1-43

A widow keeps walking back to the same courtroom. She has no money to bribe the judge, no powerful relative to lean on him, no advantage at all except a case that is just and a refusal to go away. The judge does not fear God and does not care about people, but morning after morning she is there again, and finally he gives her justice simply to be rid of her. Jesus tells this story, Luke says, to teach His disciples that they “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1). He is preparing people who will have to keep believing, and keep praying, through long stretches when heaven seems silent and the answer does not come.

From that picture of stubborn faith, Jesus turns to two men praying in the temple, and the contrast is meant to undo us. One is a model of religious achievement, a Pharisee who fasts and tithes and can recite a resume of righteousness. The other is a tax collector who cannot even lift his eyes, who beats his chest and prays seven desperate words: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (v. 13). Then Jesus says the thing no one expected. It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who “went down to his house justified” (v. 14). Heaven runs on a different economy than we imagine, and the door into it is lower than our pride wants it to be.

The chapter keeps pressing on the question of who actually enters the kingdom. Parents bring babies to Jesus, and when the disciples shoo them away He insists that the kingdom belongs to such as these and that we must receive it “like a child” (vv. 16-17). A rich, moral, sincere ruler comes asking what he must do for eternal life, and walks away sorrowful because he cannot loosen his grip on his wealth, leaving Jesus to say how hard it is for the rich to enter, and that what is impossible with man is possible with God (vv. 24-27). The widow, the tax collector, the children, the ruler. Again and again, the same lesson: the kingdom is for the humble and the empty-handed, not the self-sufficient.

The chapter ends on the road to Jericho, where a blind beggar hears that Jesus is passing and will not be silenced. “Son of David, have mercy on me!” he cries, and when the crowd tells him to hush he only shouts louder (vv. 38-39). Between the courtroom and the roadside stands a sober word about the cross, the third time Jesus tells His followers He will be mocked, killed, and rise again, a word they do not understand (vv. 31-34). Read this chapter slowly and watch the kind of person Jesus receives. Not the one who has it all together, but the one who keeps crying out for mercy and will not stop until he is heard.

Group Discussion: Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow so that His disciples “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1). Most of us know what it is to pray for something for a long time and slowly stop expecting an answer. Why do you think Jesus tied prayer so closely to not losing heart, and what does it look like to keep praying with hope instead of drifting into

quiet resignation? Share, if you are willing, what helps you keep going when the answer is slow in coming.

Personal Reflection: Picture the two men in the temple, the Pharisee listing his accomplishments and the tax collector beating his chest and pleading for mercy (vv. 9–14). Honestly, which prayer sounds more like the inside of your own heart this week? Where might you be quietly trusting in your own goodness, your record, or your effort, rather than casting yourself on God’s mercy? What would it mean to come to God this week with the tax collector’s seven words?

Read Luke 18:1–43

Study Questions

1. Jesus tells the parable of the persistent widow so that His disciples “ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v. 1), and He ends by asking, “when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (v. 8). What does this parable teach about the kind of prayer and faith God is looking for, and how does the unjust judge, by contrast, reveal the heart of the God to whom we actually pray?
2. The widow had no power, no money, and no influence, yet she kept coming back, refusing to give up on a just cause (vv. 3–5). Where in your own life have you stopped praying because the answer did not come quickly, and what would it look like this week to bring that request back to God with the widow’s stubborn, hopeful persistence?
3. When the disciples tried to turn away the babies and little children, Jesus rebuked them and said, “to such belongs the kingdom of God,” and that whoever does not receive the kingdom “like a child shall not enter it” (vv. 16–17). What does it mean to receive the kingdom like a child, and what does this teach about how a person enters God’s kingdom?
4. Jesus said we must receive the kingdom “like a child” (v. 17), with the empty-handed trust and dependence of a little one. Where are you tempted to come to God as a competent adult who has earned His favor, rather than as a child who simply receives, and how might that self-sufficiency be keeping you from the very thing you most need?
5. A ruler who was rich, moral, and sincere asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, yet when told to sell all and follow, he “became very sad, for he was extremely rich” (vv. 18–23). What does this encounter teach about the danger of riches, and why did Jesus put His finger on this man’s wealth in particular rather than commending his obedience to the commandments?
6. The rich ruler kept the commandments outwardly from his youth, and yet one thing still held him back from following Jesus (vv. 20–23). What is the one thing in your life that you sense Jesus putting His finger on, the possession, relationship, ambition, or comfort you would find hardest to surrender if He asked, and what is that grip costing you?
7. When the disciples, astonished, asked “Then who can be saved?” Jesus answered, “What is impossible with man is possible with God” (vv. 26–27), and Peter noted that they had left all to follow Him (v. 28). What does this teach about the source of our salvation and the cost of

discipleship, and how do we hold together the truth that salvation is God's doing with Jesus' call to leave all and follow?

8. Jesus told the disciples plainly that He would be delivered over, mocked, killed, and on the third day rise, "but they understood none of these things" (vv. 31–34). Are there things Jesus has said in His word that you would rather not understand because of what they would require of you, and what would it look like to stop turning away from the parts of His teaching that unsettle you?
9. Two men went up to the temple to pray, and Jesus said it was the tax collector who beat his chest and prayed "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," and not the confident Pharisee, who "went down to his house justified," because "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (vv. 9–14). What does this parable teach about how God justifies a sinner, why the Pharisee went home unjustified despite his real religious works, and what kind of heart God receives and saves?
10. Look back across the whole chapter, the persistent widow, the humbled tax collector, the children, the rich ruler, and the blind man crying "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (v. 38). Each one shows us something about the humble, dependent heart that God welcomes. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these scenes. What is the single truth from Luke 18:1–43 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: James 4:6–10, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, so humble yourselves before the Lord; Romans 3:21–28, all have sinned, and sinners are justified by God's grace through faith in Christ, not by works that boast; 1 Timothy 6:6–19, the love of money and the right use of riches by those who are rich in this present age; Hebrews 4:14–16, drawing near with confidence to the throne of grace to receive mercy in our time of need; Philippians 3:4–9, Paul counting his own religious credentials as loss for the sake of being found in Christ.