

Luke 18:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] Let's turn for a moment back to chapter 18 of Luke's Gospel. And I'd like to read again verse 1 of that chapter, and also verse 9. Because Jesus, this morning, has a word for the weak and a word for the strong.

Chapter 18, verse 1, page 1052, to the weak. Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

In verse 9 we have a word for the strong. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.

Now I'm going to suggest this morning that somewhere in between this spectrum, between the weak and between the strong, between those who are confident of their own righteousness and those who are tempted to give up, that somewhere in that spectrum we're going to find ourselves.

And you can be confident that Jesus is speaking to us. He knows our circumstances. He knows our weaknesses. He also knows our temptations and our faults.

[1 : 0 8] Especially that temptation towards pride and for self-reliance. And with you this morning, I'd like to look at these two simple parables. It doesn't mean much in the way of understanding or explanation, because they're so, so forward, so clear.

But the challenge, of course, comes in the application. We understand. We see clearly what Jesus is getting at. But do we do what He says to do?

Or do we avoid what He says to avoid? Do we learn the lesson by applying the lesson? Because it's one thing to understand in your head, even to grasp within your heart, but it's another thing entirely to live out in your life the examples and the message that Jesus is teaching in these two simple parables.

So let's begin with the first, to the weak. And maybe this morning there are those here today who are weak. Weak in their faith. Discouraged. Downcast.

And Jesus says that we should always pray and not give up. And maybe if you're being honest, maybe you're tempted to give up. And maybe you're tempted to give in.

[2 : 1 6] Maybe you're tempted to turn back. Maybe you're looking at your circumstances and saying, This is not how I expected it to work out. This is not the plan as I thought it would be.

And maybe it's too hard. Maybe it's too difficult. Maybe the answers that you're speaking are too complicated. And maybe Jesus is saying these words to you this morning.

He's saying to His disciples, I want you to pray. To keep on praying. And I don't want you to give up. Don't give up praying. And look at the way in which He gives us, first of all, the lessons straight out.

It's not, there's no puzzle here. It's as if He says, I'm going to tell you a story, but before I tell you the story, I'm going to tell you the meaning of the story. The meaning is, pray, don't give up.

And then He gives us a vivid illustration. He talks about a judge, and He talks about a widow. But notice who His audience is with this first parable specifically.

[3 : 14] Now, of course, it relates to everyone, but He's drawing His disciples aside, and He's saying to them, don't give up. And that really maybe sets the scene for us today, because it asks the question, are we in that number?

Are we in that particular audience? Because are we one of these disciples of Jesus? Jesus is the great teacher. And a disciple simply means a pupil, a student.

Many of the young people here are students in the universities of Aberdeen, and in our own congregation down in Edinburgh, we have students from the University of Edinburgh, and maybe you're a Harriet Watt, and you know that you're a student, you belong to a particular college or university, and you're studying a particular course.

Maybe if you're doing a postgraduate degree, you have a particular advisor, supervisor. So you know that you're a student, you know what you're studying, you know who you're studying from, and you have an idea of where that study is going.

Now, the same is true for a disciple of Jesus. We're students. He's the teacher. The master, He leads us. He directs us. It's not just that He's teaching us a course, but He's teaching us about life.

[4 : 24] And He wants us to follow Him in this life, in order that we would enjoy all the blessings and privileges of Him in the life that comes. So this morning, are you among the disciples to whom Jesus is speaking directly?

Do you trust Him? Do you follow Him? Is He your teacher, your Lord, your Savior, your master? Look at the story that He tells. Very simple. He says there was a judge, and there was a widow.

Now, you look at these two contrasts, and you think, here's a person with power, here's a person with prestige, with authority, he's a man of substance. What he says goes.

And then there's a widow. Now, the widow has no authority, no power, no prestige. She has no husband, which means that there's no source of income.

So she's either destitute, or completely reliant on someone else for her daily existence. And you can't think of two people who are more different in terms of the social status, in terms of their power or authority within the society.

[5 : 30] And yet, we also, as if it wasn't worse, as if it couldn't get worse, we're told that the judge was corrupt. The judge was crooked. And we don't need to look too far from the news today to see stories of people in authority who misused their authority, who abused their position, and whose reliability is compromised.

Well, this man, we're told, neither cared about men or feared God. Didn't care about God, no relationship with God, and didn't really care about his fellow man. He had his position, he had his authority.

And we're told that this widow had a grievance. She had an adversary. So you think to yourself, could it get worse? She's poor, she's weak, she's vulnerable, and somebody is causing her grief.

Somebody is seeking to hurt her or to misuse her. And you think of these two contrasts, the judge and the widow, the unjust judge, the widow with the adversary.

But look at the story of how it develops. She comes to him with a plea, grant me justice against my adversary. But sometime he refused, but finally he said to himself, even though I don't see a daughter care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming.

[6 : 53] So you get the picture. You can imagine the beginning of every day, the end of every day, before court, after court, that same widow was coming to that same judge with the same plea.

And you would get fed up, you would get tired. You would finally say, look, if it's only just to keep this woman quiet, I'll make sure that whatever she wants, she gets. And that's the picture of a persistent widow, the parable of the persistent widow.

She keeps at it. The same plea, the same judge, the same urgency, the same simplicity. Maybe she realizes, she understands that she has a challenge here because the judge doesn't care, the judge isn't interested, but nonetheless, she keeps going.

She keeps making her plea. She keeps going to the judge. So that's the simple story that Jesus tells. And then we see, in verse 6, we see the application.

And the Lord said, listen to what the unjust judge says. What did the unjust judge say? I will see that she gets justice. That goes against his character.

[8 : 00] It goes against his inclination. He doesn't care. His natural concern is neither with the widow, nor with God, but he says, look, because she's bothering me so much, I'll see that she gets justice.

So listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night, will he keep putting them off?

I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. Simple application. This is the widow. This is the unjust judge. She prevails because she comes consistently with the same thing.

Consider the judge who is unjust and consider God. God who is completely just. God who is completely fair. God who is completely loving. God who knows the whole situation, the whole circumstance.

And if the unjust judge yields eventually to the persistent plea of the widow, how much more will the God who inhabits heaven, the God who is all-powerful, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-loving, how much more will our God answer us.

[9 : 08] Think about justice. Give us the answers that we are seeking. Give us the solutions to the problems that otherwise are without solution. You see, the widow could not solve her problem alone.

She didn't have the power. She didn't have the authority. She needed help. And the only person that she saw that could help her was this judge. It didn't look promising, but she took the one route that was available.

And she stuck too. Now today, we broaden this out and we say today, you're here. And maybe you have an adversary. Maybe you have somebody in your life that is causing you grief.

Somebody who's agitating you. Somebody who's upsetting you. Somebody at work. Somebody at the university. Somebody at school. Somebody at home. And you just can't get on. You just can't make a way forward to try your best.

You put on a brave face. You try to smile, but you're not smiling inside. What is Jesus saying? Jesus is saying, pray and keep on praying. Don't give up.

[10 : 09] Don't give in. Don't make it a waste of time. Don't go back to your old way of life, but continue to pray. Why? Not because of who you are, but because of who you are praying to.

You're praying to the one who answers. You're praying to the one who can change situations. You're praying to the one who can change a person's heart. Transform a person's life. And there may be no earthly solution to your problem.

And even when you try to explain it to other people, it sounds too complicated even to explain. You don't need to explain it to God. You see, this widow didn't explain the circumstances to the judge.

She just says, look, I have an adversary and I need justice. You say to God, I've got a problem and I need a solution. You don't need to explain the intricacies of it. You don't need to suggest an answer to God.

But just say, God, look, you know, you know this situation, you know this circumstance, you know this person. Fix it. Solve it. Provide an answer. But look at the key at the end.

[11 : 08] You see, Jesus explains the story to begin with, but he challenges us at the very end with this final line. A line that you can easily overlook. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?

He's speaking to his disciples, encouraging them to pray, not to give up, and he says, a key is faith. Do you really trust God? Do you really believe in him? Do you really accept that he has your best interest at heart?

That he knows what's right? That he knows what's good? That he understands? That he understands your situation? That he cares about you? Because if you don't have faith in God, then you will give up, you will get discouraged, you will turn your back, but it won't make any sense whatsoever.

And maybe this morning you're here and you're not yet committed to Jesus. And maybe you're looking along from a distance saying, I know this relates to other people, but I can't see the connection with me.

Well, the connection is this. In every life there's going to be some challenge, some difficulty. You're going to come up against some force, whether a person, whether a government, whether an opposition of some sort, that you can't solve.

[12 : 21] And the question is, where do you go? Where do you turn? Do you turn inwards in bitterness or anger or just giving up? Or do you turn to God?

Do you turn to Him and say, well, I can't solve this situation, I'm not strong enough, I'm not wise enough, I can't see all the possible answers or permutations, but I'm going to turn to God in faith.

First of all, I'm going to believe that there is a God. Secondly, I'm going to believe that He has made Himself known in Jesus, that He has demonstrated who He is and what He is about by sending Jesus.

So if I look at Jesus, I see God. If I see Jesus, His character, His nature, His love, His mercy, His power, then I have every reason to trust in God personally and directly.

So the message is for the week, keep praying, don't give up. And maybe you can need an illustration. It's interesting in these two chapters of Luke, and that's why we read into chapter 10, chapter 19, we'll see that in a moment.

[13 : 25] But at the very end of chapter 18, who do we see? We see blind Bartimaeus, a man who is nothing. If you think of a widow and a blind man, you have a pretty good parallel there.

The blind man needs someone else to decide for him, just like the widow. The blind man doesn't have power or prestige or authority, just like the widow. And what does the blind man do?

He hears that Jesus is going by. He has to rely upon somebody else to tell him that. He can hear a commotion, but he doesn't understand what it's about. And what does he do? He cries out.

He cries at the top of his voice, Son of David, have mercy on me. And everyone says, be quiet. Don't bother the teacher. Leave him alone. What does he do? He shouts all the louder, Son of David, have mercy on me.

That's what Jesus is getting at. That's the kind of persistence that he's looking for. You see, Bartimaeus had one chance. Jesus was passing that way one time. He would never be back there again.

[14 : 27] I'm not sure if he'll be back here again. I'm not sure if I'll be back here again. You don't know what tomorrow holds. But I can tell you that Jesus will answer your prayer. I can tell you that Jesus will bring salvation.

He will save you. He will forgive you. If you cry out in faith like Bartimaeus did, remember what Jesus said? Receive your sight, your face is healed you. So you see, the parable has an illustration in the very section that we're looking at.

So if you want to know what the parable of the persistent widow looks like, look at Bartimaeus. He wouldn't shut up. He wouldn't be quiet. He knew that there was help. He didn't know how, he didn't know where or why, but he knew that Jesus was there, and somehow, somehow, Jesus could help.

And maybe if you have that understanding of Jesus, you don't need all the details, you don't need to have a great understanding of the Bible or of the person of Jesus, but if you know that somehow, somehow, Jesus can help, and you cry out to him in faith, meaning you believe in your heart, you will have the same answer, you will have the same response, and the healing that Jesus brought to Bartimaeus physically, he'll bring to you spiritually.

He gives you answers to your questions, he gives you hope in the midst of the fear. So that's today the message for the weak. You're weak in faith, you're tempted to give up, you're tempted to give in.

[15 : 51] Let's look at verse 9, because Jesus has a message for somebody else, for another group of people, for some who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on everybody else.

He told this parable. So you see, it's a mixed audience. There's disciples who are struggling in their faith, but then there are also people who think they're okay. I'm okay. My righteousness, my goodness, my behavior, in God's sight, I am all right.

And what's more, he's not, she's not, they're not. I like looking down on other people. I like seeing the faults of other people. I like highlighting the mistakes of other people, because when I see mistakes in other people, that makes me look better.

And you see, we do have this tendency, don't we? Whether it's a brother telling the parents about a sister, whether it's, you know, looking at other people's failures and thinking, well, at least I would never do that.

You look at the headlines in the newspaper and say, I would never get caught doing that. And we look down on other people. And Jesus, as it were, was saying, if you think you're strong, I've got a message for you as well.

[16 : 55] If you're weak, I've got a message for you, a message of encouragement. But if you think you're strong, if you think you're all right, I've got a message for you as well. He told another story.

He told a story about two men, the Pharisee and the tax collector. And the way Jesus often teaches is that He tells you a story and your initial impression is completely turned around.

Remember the parable of the rich man and Lazarus? And you think to yourself, in that story, I want to be the rich man. I don't want to be the beggar sitting out in front of a gate full of sores.

I'd prefer to be the rich man in that story. And in this story, you say to yourself, I'd prefer to be the Pharisee. I don't want to be a tax collector. Everybody looks down on tax collectors.

They cheat, they rob, they steal, they take advantage of their own people. And the way that Jesus tells the story, He draws you in, and then He twists, He turns the story on its head.

[17 : 50] So you think to yourself, I'd like to be the Pharisee, I'd like to be the rich man, and then you find out that the rich man in that parable ends up in hell. You find out that the Pharisee in this story goes home from the temple unchanged, and you realize that your initial impression, your initial response was not the correct one.

Let's look at the story. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. It's interesting, I think, that they go to the same place, they go to the temple, the center of religious worship in that day.

And that's true today as well, that in church, in this church, in my church in Edinburgh, throughout this land, throughout this world, people come to church for all different kinds of reasons.

All different types of people, all different types of backgrounds, some who think they're okay, some who know they're not okay, some who look down on other people, some who look down on themselves.

But they come to the same place. These two men, very different, very distinct, same place. The Pharisee is a religious person, the way he dresses, the way he behaves, the money he gives, the prayers he prays, the position that he has in the temple, you look at this man and you say religious, you say righteous, and you say holy.

[19 : 08] This is a godly man. You can see it by the very way in which he dresses. On the other hand, the other man, the tax collector, you say the exact opposite. Now in the Bible, tax collectors and prostitutes are often paired together.

That gives you an idea of where the tax collector sits on the rungs of the social ladder, right at the very bottom. tax collectors and the tax collectors would earn his wealth at the expense of his own people.

You see the Roman authorities would say to the tax collectors, you collect this amount of tax and you give it to us. Whatever you get above that, you can keep. You see the natural corruption that that breeds.

The tax collector satisfies the Romans and gets as much as he possibly can from his own people. The Romans were smart. They didn't want to get involved in collecting tax and creating animosity, but they said to themselves, we'll get some of the Jews to collect tax from their own people.

We'll make them rich in the meantime, but they'll do our dirty work. It gives you an idea of what a tax collector looked like. Now today, if you're working for women in revenue, this doesn't really apply to you.

[20 : 16] You're doing an honest work, you're doing a good job, but tax collectors are never possible. But in this age, particularly, they were looked down upon as cheaters, as liars, as evildoers.

These two men went to the temple and went there to pray. Look at the two prayers. The first prayer of the Pharisee. Remember the setting, people who look down on other people, people who are confident of their own righteousness.

God, I thank you for that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

Look at me, God. Look at what I do. Look at what I don't do and draw the obvious conclusion. Draw the obvious conclusion. I don't commit adultery. I don't cheat.

I don't steal. I'm not like him. I do good things. I give money. I pray and I fast. Now, is this how your relationship with God is based?

[21 : 16] Do you come to God and say, look God, I don't do these things. You know that. And look God, I do these things. I'm good. I'm good to my family. I'm good to my friends. I work hard.

I give money. I go to church regularly. Do you base your relationship with God on what you do and what you don't do? Because that's the Pharisee here, the religious man.

But notice this. He stood up and prayed about himself. He prayed, basically, he said, God, I'm going to tell you about me. I'm going to focus my prayer on me. And that really tells you where the man's heart is.

His heart isn't with God, focused on God and his truth, but his heart is focused on himself. God, let me tell you how great I am. Let me tell you the bad things I don't do. And let me remind you of some of the bad things that he does, that they do.

One man in his faith, but look at the second man, but the tax collector, stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

[22 : 18] This man is not looking down on anybody else. This man has no evidence of pride in his heart. This man realizes, and realizes very keenly, that he is not right with God, that he needs help, that he needs mercy, and that he is a sinner.

He's not comparing himself. He's not taking any choice and saying, I'm bad, but I'm not as bad as them. He says, look, God, you have mercy on me, a sinner. Is that your relationship with God, that you turn to God for help, because you know that you need his help, and that only he can help you.

God, have mercy on me, a sinner. He would not even look up to beat his breast and say, Lord, have mercy on me, because I am a sinner. I have missed tomorrow. I haven't done good.

I haven't kept it at all. I haven't been a good mover. I haven't been loving. I haven't been caring. I haven't been generous. And look at the results. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus is saying these two men go to the same place. These two men do the same thing.

[23 : 34] They pray, but they pray very different prayers, but they leave the temple very differently. The one man, the Pharisee, leaves the same way he came. Full of pride, full of self-righteousness, full of self-confidence.

He didn't need God. He didn't need God's help. He didn't need forgiveness. He didn't need mercy. So he didn't get it. So that's the idea here, is that if you don't ask, if you don't need, you don't get.

If you don't want God's help, he won't help you. If you don't want God's forgiveness, he won't forgive you. If you don't want God's guidance, he won't guide you. If you don't need it, why would you even ask for it?

But, if you do need, if you do realize, if you do understand that you need forgiveness, you need grace, you need mercy, you need help, look at the tax collector.

This man, we're told, went home justified before God, accepted by God, declared right by God. It's a word that you would expect to find in a court of law.

[24 : 34] You see, we're used to these ideas of guilty and not guilty. Well, this is kind of a not guilty, but even more than not guilty. This means right. You've done right.

You haven't done wrong. You're accepted. You're not condemned. And this man is declared right in God's sight rather than the other. Not because he was a good man.

Not because he did good or he was a perfect neighbor. No. He recognizes sin. He turned to God in faith. He requested mercy. He received mercy. What kind of kingdom is this?

What kind of savior is this? Who rejects the religious man and accepts this wicked, evil man like the tax collector. Because it turns everything upside down.

It says to the religious person who gives money, who prays, who's fasted and who's active in the life of the temple, it says to that man, I'm sorry, but you're not in. You're not in the kingdom.

[25 : 29] You may be in the temple. You may be a person of position and authority in society, but you're not in my kingdom. You're not part of my group. You're not welcome in my house.

And yet this other man, this other man who was disreputable, this other man who had no goodness of himself, this man was me. What actually kind of shows us, doesn't it, the standard that God sets?

Because in God's sight, all have sinned, all have fallen short. But only some realize, only some recognize, and only some turned to him for help.

You see, this man, this Pharisee, he needed God's help, he just didn't see it. This man sinned, but he just didn't realize it. This man was content to compare himself to others, rather than to compare himself to God.

And when you compare yourself to God, your prayer will naturally be, God have mercy on me, a sinner. You compare yourself to your neighbor, you compare yourself to the people you leave it out in the newspaper, you compare yourself to bad people as you define bad people, or then you can be content with your own righteousness or your own goodness.

[26 : 39] Now, just like the parable of the persistent widow was illustrated, so too this parable is illustrated. We have two very clear examples given almost immediately. We're told about a rich ruler who comes to Jesus.

He says, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? This looks like a good start. Coming to Jesus, coming with a question, wanting to go to heaven. But what is the net result?

The net result is this man leaves Jesus sad, because his wealth was more important to him than Jesus. He was a man who kept the commandments, he was a man who wanted to do good, and he was a man who left Jesus sad.

His money, more important than Jesus. So you might say there's a parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Here's the Pharisee, here's the religious man that goes away sad, but look at the tax collector, the chias in chapter 19.

Here's the man who's also welcome, here's the man who has made his money at the expense of others, and here's the man that comes to Jesus, Jesus comes, calls him down, and says, the chias, come down at once, I must stay at your house today.

[27 : 52] The chias welcomes him gladly, and look at the chias, look Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions for poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.

Here's the tax collector who recognizes his need for Jesus, who realizes his sin, and who repents from his sin. He says, you know, my life up to now was about money, getting more money, and now all I want to do is give it away.

I want to pay back the people I've cheated, and I want to help the people who have nothing. This is a real change of heart. This is a real change of life. And this is a vivid illustration of what Jesus means for a man to be justified, for a woman to be made right with God, because their heart is changed and their life is changed.

The change of life doesn't occur first. You don't think that he is giving his money away and then going to see Jesus. No. You see the curiosity, yes, but the change only comes after he means Jesus.

And Jesus explains it so clearly. He says, salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham, for the son of man, came to seek and to save what was lost.

[29 : 04] The message of the gospel is simple. If you humble yourself before God, if you make yourself low, God will lift you up. If, on the other hand, you try to make yourself high, make yourself substantial, make yourself stand tall, then God will bring you down.

That's what Jesus says at the very end of the parable that we were looking at. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. So, you're going to an elevator.

The door opens, somebody's in the elevator, and they say to you, are you going up or are you going down? I'm going up. They come into the elevator. I'm going down. I'm going to the elevator, whatever it may be.

But this is the parable that asks this simple question, are you going up or are you going down? If you're going up in the sense you want to be with God in heaven, you must first go down. Humility, go down on your knees in prayer, recognize your sin, realize the salvation that comes from God.

If you go down, God will lift you up. On the other hand, if you try to go up on your own, God will bring you down. Are you going up this morning or are you going down?

[30 : 14] Are you one of those today who will be humbled because you exalt yourself? or will you enjoy the promise that Jesus did that whoever humbles himself will be exalted?

Two parables, two lessons, the leap to the strong, to you and to me this morning. May God give us wisdom not just to understand, but to apply these truths to our lives.

Let's unite our hearts in prayer. Let us bow in hand. Amen. Amen.