

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 18

Prayer, Humility and Discipleship...

The parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18 v 1 to 8)

“They ought always to pray and not lose heart” (v 1) – people are created ‘with eternity in their hearts’ (Ecclesiastes 3 v 11), so prayer often comes naturally. Yet obstacles come in the way of effective and constant prayer, so Jesus knows we need to be both taught and encouraged to pray. It’s easy to lose heart in prayer, because prayer is hard work, and we so often approach it lightly. Paul commended Epaphras because he was “always struggling on your behalf in his prayers” (Colossians 4 v 12). And Jesus lived a prayerful life, and he lives to make intercession for those who draw near to God through him (Hebrews 7 v 25).

- Why do we need to be persistent in prayer? How does the parable illustrate this? Note the elements of (a) comparison, and (b) contrast – for example, Jesus is not saying that God is *like* the “unrighteous judge” (v 6), rather he is *unlike* him. God *loves* to answer our prayers, and he helps us when we pray. God is *on our side* when we pray, and not against us (as the unrighteous judge was against the widow).

“Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night...” (v 7) – Jesus probably had in mind the prayers of persecuted believers, who long for justice and who cry out day and night for God to avenge them and deal with their persecutors. See Revelation 6 v 9 to 11. “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (v 8) – this connects Jesus’ thought to his words about his Coming at the end of Luke 17. Unless we know who God is (that is, *not* like the unrighteous judge), and unless we are people who pray without losing heart, we won’t have the kind of faith Jesus looks for when he returns...

The Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18 v 9 to 14)

“Two men went up into the temple to pray” (v 10) – in this parable, both men prayed, but they did not come to God in the same way. “Standing by himself”, the Pharisee did not pray to God. In his short prayer he repeated the word ‘I’ five times. It is possible to address your words to God, but actually be praying to yourself, because your focus is on *your* agenda, not God’s. Read Acts 12 v 5, noting the key words ‘to God’.

- What was the Pharisee’s error? Was he wrong to give thanks? What does God require in prayer?

“The tax collector, standing far off... beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (v 13) – the Pharisee relied on his own deeds before God, but the tax collector recognized that he was a sinner who needed God’s mercy. We can imagine the Pharisee praying with eloquent words and flowing style; anyone hearing him pray would say that he was a ‘spiritual’ man. By contrast, we can imagine the tax collector praying awkwardly, with halting phrases, and trembling with fear; but his prayer was pleasing to God.

The Greek word translated ‘be merciful’ is *ἰλάσκομαι* (*hilaskomai*); it is actually the word for ‘an atoning sacrifice’. The sense of what the tax collector prayed was, ‘God, be merciful to me through your atoning sacrifice for sins, because I am a sinner.’ The only other place this word is used is in Hebrews 2 v 17, where it is translated ‘propitiation’. “This man went down to his house justified” (v 14) – the justification of the tax collector was immediate. He humbly came to God on the basis of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice and was justified. He didn’t earn his justification, he didn’t serve a probationary period; he was simply ‘justified’.

[MORE OVER...]

Let the children come to me (Luke 18 v 15 to 17)

In the middle of Jesus' teaching on prayer, parents bring their children to be blessed. Jesus wants to bless children and welcome them into the kingdom of God. This incident tells us something about Jesus' character – he was the kind of man that children like, and children are often astute judges of character.

The rich young ruler (Luke 18 v 18 to 30)

- The rich young ruler had some things right, and some things wrong – what were they in each case? What were the factors that made him turn away from Jesus? Why are possessions so dangerous?
- In v 20 Jesus lists the 'second table of the law' – the commandments that deal with man's relationship with others. Do you think the rich young man *really* kept those commandments, in the 'Sermon on the Mount' sense? See for example Matthew 5 v 21, 22. What was the rich man's real problem?
- What does Jesus mean by the 'camel' and 'needle' saying (v 25)? The Greek word used for 'needle' is *ραφίς (rhapfis)*, which is the normal word used for sewing with a needle – here Jesus is using *hyperbole*, exaggeration to make a point. What point is he making? Can rich people be saved (v 27)?

"All these things I have kept from my youth" (v 21) – it is likely that this rich young man actually did keep them in a way that made him righteous in the eyes of men, in the sense that Paul could say, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless" (Philippians 3 v 6). But he certainly did not keep them in the full and perfect sense in which Jesus spoke of in the Sermon on the Mount. "One thing you still lack" (v 22) – though the man had everything – riches, an outwardly righteous life, respect, and prestige – Jesus could still say to him, "One thing you still lack." The man had *everything* but knew that he did not have eternal life – so he really had *nothing*. "Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" – instead of challenging the man's fulfillment of the law (which Jesus had every right to do), Jesus pointed him to the 'first table of the law' – the commandments that deal with our relationship with God. Jesus challenged him to put God first; to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6 v 4, 5).

- Peter then asks a blunt question: "We have left our homes and followed you" (v 28); in other words, 'What's in it for us?' What promise does Jesus make to anyone "who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children" (v 29) for God's kingdom? How can this encourage us?

Jesus foretells his death a third time (Luke 18 v 31 to 34)

Note the precise details of Jesus' betrayal, passion, crucifixion and resurrection predicted here – why did the disciples not understand what Jesus was saying (v 34)?

- Do you see any connection between Jesus' radical demands expressed in v 22 and 29, and his own self-sacrifice portrayed in these verses? See 1 Peter 2 v 21.

Jesus heals a blind man (Luke 18 v 35 to 43)

"As he drew near to Jericho" (v 5) – one of the most travelled roads from Galilee to Jerusalem went through Jericho. When Jesus came to this ancient city, he was not far from Jerusalem and the fate waiting for him there. Mark 10 v 46 tells us that the blind man's name was Bartimaeus.

- Why was the blind man so desperate, and how did he express his desperation, yet also his devotion and faith? "What do you want me to do for you?" (v 41) – why do you think Jesus asked him such a question? See James 4 v 2b. What was the result? What happened to the blind man?