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The Gospel of Luke
LIX. Will He Find Faith When He Comes?
Luke 18:1-14

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When interpreting the Bible, context – considering what comes before our passage and what comes after – context is everything. And nowhere is that more true than in our two parables this morning. Take the first parable, that of the persistent widow. This parable is often misread as an instruction on how to pray – namely, that when we want something from God, we should beat on Him relentlessly with our prayers until He gives in and gives us what we want. There are at least three things wrong with that interpretation. First, it contradicts what the rest of Scripture reveals to us about the character of our God – it equates God with that corrupt, unjust, and terrible judge in the parable. And so suggests that God doesn't want to answer our prayers unless He absolutely has to – which is wrong! That interpretation completely distorts the nature of our God.

And the second mistake is like unto the first – it mistakes the nature of prayer. It defines prayer as relentless begging in order to get what we want – in other words, that prayer is all about getting the goods from God. But that is not how Scripture defines prayer. Prayer is not about getting what we want from God, it about intimate communion with God. Prayer is all about relationship with God, not the way we twist the handle on the divine Gumball machine to get what we want from Him. Yes, God gives to us when we pray – but the point of prayers is not what we get, but the One who gives, the One who meets us in prayer. The point of prayer is simply, and yet incredibly profoundly, to be in conversation with the living God.

And the third mistake, of course, is all about the immediate context of our parable – or rather, about the ignoring thereof. To mistake this prayer as being about prayer in general is to forget that Jesus has just finished talking about something very specific – namely, His Second Coming. Remember that at the end of chapter 17, Jesus spoke to His disciples about His Return – how it would come suddenly on some unknown day, like a flash of lightning across the sky. The implication of that teaching being that the disciples must stay prepared at all times for when that day might come. But the potential problem Jesus is anticipating with that constant state of readiness is that it may well be easy for the disciples, instead, to lose heart, and therefore lose readiness, if Jesus' return appears to them to be delayed. And it is that particular context and concern – how to keep the disciples from losing heart during the interim before Jesus returns – which forms the point of the parable of the persistent widow. This is not a parable about how to pray, but a parable about why to pray: *“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and [so] not lose heart.”*

Now the parable itself is actually quite funny – but it takes a little cultural translation for us to get in on the joke. “*In a certain city,*” says Jesus, “*there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.*” In other words, a seriously lousy human being, and an even worse judge. A person with contempt for both of the two tablets of the Ten Commandments – the first four commandments regarding love for God and the next six commandments regarding love for neighbor.¹ And into the courtroom of this horrible judge each day comes a certain widow. Now, right there, is something quite unusual – in that time and culture, women had no legal standing. They couldn’t even testify under oath. If a woman needed to raise a legal issue, she had to do so through her husband or through another male relation. But this woman is a widow – and clearly has no other male relations to plead her case for her. And so, both desperately and rather boldly, she does this rather scandalous thing of showing up daily in the boy’s club of the city courtroom to plead her case.

And here’s where the humor comes in. Because she not only keeps showing up in court and pleading her case, but she does so in a noisy, forceful, and unrelenting fashion, in order to get the attention of this lousy judge. Back then, also, there were no daily dockets – it was simply a matter of convincing the judge to hear your case next. And there she is day after day, shouting incessantly, this one angry female voice amid all the basses and baritones: “*Give me justice against my adversary!*” And here’s the funny part. While women back then had no legal standing, nonetheless they were to be treated with respect – especially a widow. Which means that while she is doing this legally inappropriate and seriously annoying thing, there is nothing this lousy judge can do about it! If she were a man, he could have her thrown out of the court and beaten. But because she is a woman, and a widow at that, he just has to sit there and take it. And being such a lousy human being, and such a rotten judge – he sure does deserve it!

Finally, of course, he can take it no more. He gives in. He even uses a boxing term to describe what she is doing to him. He says, “*Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet, because this woman keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not [boxing image] beat me down by her continual coming.*” He speaks as if he fears she might just come forward one day and whack him over the head with her purse! So he gives her what she wants, just to get rid of her and protect his noggin. And the parable then ends with Jesus giving the punchline: “*Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God – who is nothing like this unjust judge, in fact completely the opposite – will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.*”

So how, then, does this parable instruct the disciples in why they need to pray always and so not lose heart? Two ways. First is that reassurance Jesus gives there at the end – that God, who is the very opposite of that judge in terms of His concern for His people and for justice, will bring justice upon the earth – it is a sure thing and it’s coming! It is Jesus’ assurance to His disciples that when they pray for the Kingdom, they are not praying in vain – the Kingdom is precisely what God is absolutely intending to accomplish on earth, as it is in heaven. That the day really will come when Jesus will return and all shall be made right again on earth. Now the “speedily” part of that reassurance may confuse us – by our clocks and calendars, we have been waiting some two thousand years, to date. But, as the Psalmist reminds us, “*For a thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.*”² God’s Kingdom is coming, we can

be assured of that, says the parable – but on God’s time, not ours. That’s the first part of our “not losing heart.”

But the second, and more important part of the guidance Jesus gives us here is that continual prayer is the deeper key to not losing heart, to not losing faith that the Kingdom really is coming – even when it does seem to us to be long delayed. But continual prayer not because we need to box with God in order to get that Kingdom to come – God is the very opposite of that horrible judge. Rather, pray continually like the widow, Jesus is saying, because prayer is what keeps us connected to the King, to the One who is going to bring His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Connected to the King through prayer, we don’t lose heart while we are waiting for Him to bring His Kingdom.

An analogy: Albert Einstein’s wife was once asked if she knew all about her husband’s theory of relativity. She answered with a smile: “No, but I do know my husband.”³ You and I do not know when the Kingdom is coming, but we do know the King – and through our continual prayers come to know Him more and more, and so come to trust Him more and more while we wait. Closely connected to God through continual prayer, we don’t lose heart. Closely connected to God through continual prayer, we stay prepared. Closely connected to God through continual prayer, we are also made able to stand up and take it whenever bad things come upon us while we wait – as bad things surely will in this not yet fully redeemed world, like whatever bad thing/adversary was troubling that widow.

For example: Alice and her husband David lost their four-year-old son to cancer, despite their prayers and prayers of many friends. For Alice, it was a tragedy that indeed caused her to lose heart, and particularly to lose any faith in prayer. But she kept on praying, anyway – even if sometimes her prayers were nothing more than angry rants against God. But through those prayers, whatever they were, she stayed connected to God, even in her grief and anger. Her persistence in prayer opened the door to healing and rekindled in her the gifts of faith and hope. Her persistence in prayer meant that she did not lose hold of God and, more importantly, that God did not lose hold of her. She writes:

I am still on this journey of seeking. My heart is filled with many emotions. I feel anger at some church groups who make it seem like God can be rubbed like a good-luck charm and will perform in any way the Christian prays. I doubt the sincerity of people who make it seem that because they prayed, God responded as they desired. The focus here is often on the ones who prayed and not on the all-powerful God who answered.

I study the Scriptures on prayer, and the more I read and ponder, the more I wonder if the average Christian really knows much about prayer at all. Perhaps to be in communion with God means to be still before him and meditate on who he is, instead of thinking that prayer is coming to him in a huff with all our requests.

Perhaps for now, prayer for me is looking up in the dark starry night or at the rising sun and pouring forth my simple yet heartfelt words: God, you are there, you are sovereign, you are

*immortal. I am here, confused, broken, saddened, and extremely mortal. And for your unchanging love, I am thankful.*⁴

Persistent prayer keeps us intimately connected to God, which in turn keeps us intimately connected to His power and to His promises, which keeps us from losing heart in this world while we wait for the Kingdom to come. One writer says it this way: “[Prayer] keeps our hearts chasing after God’s heart. It is how we bother God, and it’s how God bothers us back. There’s nothing that works any better than that.”⁵

“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” That’s our first parable, but now what is the right context and therefore meaning of our second parable – the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee praying in the Temple? For here is yet another teaching where failure to consider the context means an incorrect interpretation. The most common interpretation of this parable is that we should pray with humility – be like the tax collector and not the Pharisee. But that is not at all what this parable is about. Once again, we have a parable concerning not how to pray – but, in this case, what to pray for.

Remember that Jesus ends the first parable by promising the disciples that the Kingdom will come: “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” But there is more to that verse. How the first parable actually ends is with Jesus asking a very pointed question: “Nonetheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” And that question is what the second parable is all about – not humility in prayer, but what the Son of Man will be looking for in us when He returns.

Now, in order to get us out of here before the Baptists eat up all the fried chicken at every restaurant in Easley and we go hungry, I’m going to have to do the very short version. Again, this is a parable teaching us not “how” to pray, but “what” to pray for. And it is that “what to pray for” which tells us of the faith Jesus is expecting to find in us. Remember how the judge in the first parable was described as neither fearing God nor respecting man – disobeying the two tablets of the Ten Commandments? Well, in his prayer our Pharisee presents himself in much the same way, despite being outwardly a very religious and moral figure. Jesus describes him as being one of those “*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt*” And that’s the content of his prayer – his prayer reveals that he feels no need for God’s grace. In other words that He fears not God. And when he looks over at the tax collector, his prayer reveals the contempt he feels towards others. Outwardly he may seem deeply religious and moral – but his prayer reveals that his heart is actually far from God (tablet one of the Ten Commandments) and contemptuous toward others (tablet two of the Ten Commandments). He does not really love God, and he clearly does not love his neighbor as himself.⁶ His is not the sort of faith our Lord is hoping to find. In fact, it is just the opposite.

Look now at the tax collector – a horrible man, a traitor to his country and an exploiter of his own people. But listen to the content of his prayer, not just watch how he prays it: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” It is important that we understand this – it is not merely a prayer for mercy, for forgiveness for what he has done and been. This is a prayer of real repentance. He is not just asking God for a little forgiveness, while planning on continuing on with his life as it is. He is asking God to change him altogether. To take his miserable wrong-ended life and turn it

around in a good and Godly direction. He is acknowledging that he is lost and needs to be found, much like a lost sheep or a lost coin or even a lost and prodigal son.⁷ He is crying out that he needs, that he desires, to be cleansed and made new – like that tenth leper.⁸ And he is opening up his heart, his mind, his very way of living in this world to that life-changing power of God's grace – that God might enter in and heal him, and change him, and make him fit for the Kingdom that is coming. For if, indeed, God answers his prayer – as God surely will and does, says Jesus – it will mean changing not only his stance before God, but also the way he relates to others. Remember what happened to another tax collector, the one named Zacchaeus, after he also met with God's grace. The next thing you know, he was paying back fourfold to all he had cheated, and giving half of his wealth to the poor.⁹ It wasn't just his relationship with God that was altered, it was also the way he lived and loved among his neighbors.

And there it is – that is the faith Jesus is looking for when He comes again. The sort of faith which acknowledges a continual need for grace – pleading and praying not just for forgiveness, but for the divine transformation of our hearts and minds and ways of living. And the sort of faith which manifests itself daily in works of kindness and compassion and service to others. The two tablets of the Ten Commandments, the two great commandments of our Lord and Savior – to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is what the tax collector is praying for. And that is the faith Jesus is looking for. And that is what the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee is teaching us – not how to pray, but what to pray for. So that, when Jesus does come again, He will find in us real and living faith – loving God and loving neighbor. So that, when Jesus does come again, He will find reason to rejoice over you and over me.

¹ Exodus 20:1-17.

² Psalm 90:4.

³ Leslie D. Weatherhead, The Significance of Silence (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1945), p. 236.

⁴ Quoted in Johann Christoph Arnold, Cries from the Heart (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1999), pp. 20-21.

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Bothering God," Christian Century, Vol. 116, No. 10 (March 24, 1999).

⁶ Mark 12:28-31.

⁷ Luke 15.

⁸ Luke 17:11-19.

⁹ Luke 19:1-10.