

# **LUKE**

Part 66: “Justice and Justification”

Luke 18:1-14

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Sunday, September 29, 2019 (Ordinary Time)

## **Scripture Reading**

*“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And 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. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” 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” (Luke 18:1–14, ESV).*

## **Introduction**

Not that long ago I was in the barbershop getting my hair cut. All the guys were talking about the Dallas Cowboys and their kids’ sports when after a while, there was a lull in the conversation.

It was then that we all started listening to the TV that was on in the background that no one had noticed before. A reality court show was on. A case was in motion in which a woman was suing her dad’s mistress for blowing up her house. (I’ll let that take a moment to sink in). But it didn’t stop there. The mistress (who happened to be pregnant with the plaintiff’s sister) was countersuing her boyfriend’s daughter for defamation. The case was *fascinating*.

And before we knew it, all the guys at the barbershop were debriefing the case like legal pundits commenting on the OJ trial. All the sports-talk was gone, and we were sucked into this crazy legal drama that we had heard about five minutes ago.

Something about the drama courtroom captivates the imagination. Whether it is Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* or Judge Judy on daytime television, the quest for justice grips us.

In fact, one of the most important philosophical treatises ever been written is a book named *The Republic*, by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. The whole book is a long, flowing conversation that is one giant attempt to define the concept of justice. And after three hundred plus pages of ornate argumentation, no suitable definition of justice is to be found.

The concept of justice fascinates us, but it also eludes us.

For this reason, theologian N.T. Wright has written that the concept of justice is a signpost that points the human heart toward eternity and the divine. He writes in his book *Simply Christian*: *"We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out....It is as though we can hear, not perhaps a voice itself, but the echo of a voice: a voice speaking with calm healing authority, speaking about justice... We are like moths trying to fly to the moon. We know there is something called justice, but we can't quite get to it."*<sup>1</sup>

Today's text from the gospel of Luke is about the justice of God from two angles and from two different parables. I'll call this sermon "*Justice and Justification*," and those two words will comprise the two big ideas we will explore from this passage of Scripture today.

## **Exposition**

### **1. Justice**

Let's take a closer look at the first parable. We have two main characters. The first character is the unrighteous judge. He doesn't care what God thinks of him, and he doesn't particularly respect people. He is a man who doesn't care about winning any popularity contests. He doesn't care if people think he is a jerk. He is powerful and seemingly untouchable.

The second character is the persistent widow (χήρα). As a widow, she utterly vulnerable. She lacks money or power to defend herself from harm. But one thing she does have is persistence. She persistently pleads her case before this unrighteous judge, and the ends up caving to her will. He grants her justice, not because he has had a change of heart and wants to become a nice guy, but because his self-interest wants to do whatever is necessary to get this widow off his back.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 4.

Look at verses 4 through 5: *“For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’”* (Luke 18:4–5, ESV).

At the surface level, this is a parable about persistent prayer. It seems like Jesus saying, “Don’t just pray, pray with persistence. The end.” But there is more to it than encouraging the habit of persistent prayer. Rather, this text is showing us a certain type of prayer – a prayer to be given “justice” (ἐκδικέω) (a word that is mentioned 4 times in a mere 8 verses). The widow is experiencing injustice, and she is asking that the judge would intervene and make things right. Examples of injustice today include abuse of power, criminals that get away with their crimes, false accusations, or slander with no recourse for the victim.

Jesus is saying if justice will come in this scenario, with a godless and unsympathetic judge, how much more justice will God’s people receive with a God who is the definition of justice and kindness and love?

In other words, God’s judgment is good news. Our culture tends to look at Judgment Day as a terrible, dreadful thing. But the Day of the Lord was often viewed in the OT as a day of vindication for God’s people (cf. Isa. 26:9). It was something that was longed for.

Our culture, on the other hand, tends to hate the idea of God’s judgment. We might ask: why does God have to judge at all? Can’t he just forgive? But true injustice is not just a violation of a rule. True injustice creates a debt that must be paid.

Yale philosopher Miraslov Volf argues against cheap forgiveness and the need for God’s justice.<sup>2</sup> He grew up in the Balkan Peninsula, which was ravaged by war and reckless genocide. He knew friends and family members who died because of the injustice of evil men. He believes that it takes the quiet comfort of a suburban home to stand in judgment against the idea of God’s justice. Instead, he says, the promise of God’s judgment gives true hope for those who have suffered. One day, evil will end, and the world will be set to rights!

How might this matter to you today? If we trust God to make our justice, we can truly forgive even the worst of our enemies. We no longer need to create our own justice; God is our vindication! When we believe this, it gives us the capacity to stand against injustice with boldness, but also to truly be released from the poison of bitterness.

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<sup>2</sup> “If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship... The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by ourselves is to insist that violence is legitimate only when it comes from God.... My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many... [But] it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of a thesis that human non-violence [results from the belief in] God’s refusal to judge.” Volf, Miroslav. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, quoted in Timothy Keller *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 76-77.

Recently, this played dramatically in the 2017 case of Rachael Denhollander and Larry Nassar.

Larry Nassar was the former national team doctor for Team USA for girls gymnastics. He used that position of trust and authority to abuse multiple girls. And despite several early reports of concerns, he seemingly got away with it. It was the definition of grave injustice. It took the courage of Rachael Denhollander, a Christian woman, former gymnast, and victim of Larry Nassar to break the case wide open. She had the courage to bring something very dark and shameful into the light. And all throughout her interviews, she talked about how the Christian worldview –namely the concept of God’s justice – empowered her in this endeavor

In the courtroom, Larry Nassar asked for mercy from the court and his victims based on the Bible. But in her final testimony, here is Rachael Denhollander said to her abuser in court: *“The Bible of which you speak carries a final judgment where all of God's wrath and eternal terror is poured out on men like you. Should you ever reach the point of truly facing what you have done, the guilt will be crushing. And that is what makes the gospel of Christ so sweet. Because it extends grace and hope and mercy where none should be found. And it will be there for you.”*

These are not the words of a woman who sees herself as a weak victim. These are the words of a woman who has found her ultimate victory and vindication in Christ. Here we have a courageous stand against injustice and evil, and still an invitation to grace and hope in Christ to the very monster who wounded her.

We need the good news of God’s justice when we experience the brokenness of this world. This is the reason this parable is being told: *“And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart”* (Luke 18:1, ESV).

Pray, Jesus tells us, when you experience injustice and long for the kingdom of God pray without ceasing (1 Thes. 5:17) and do not lose heart. Justice is coming very soon (cf. Rev. 6:9-10). The Son of Man is coming for those who are faithful to him (cf. Lk. 18:8).

But this provokes a problem. We want God to judge evil and injustice, but what about when we are the evil and unjust who deserve the judgment? That question leads us to the second point.

## **2. Justification**

In the second parable, we meet two brand new characters. They are two men who go up to the temple to pray.

The first character is Pharisee. A Pharisee was a member of a particular religious party that took meticulous obedience to God very seriously. The Pharisees cared very much about keeping Jewish people visibly different, separated, and holy from the gentile nations.

The second character was a tax collector (τελώνης.). Tax collectors are particularly popular today, but they were very unpopular among Jews in the first century. Whereas the Pharisees were trying to remain separate, pure, and undefiled from the pagan Gentile culture around them, the tax collectors were actively raising funds for the very same Roman Empire that was subjugating and oppressing the people of God. Tax collectors were opportunists who betrayed his own family and countryman for easy money.

For the hearers of this parable, the expectation of the audience is that the Pharisee is obviously the good guy, and the tax collector is obviously the bad guy.<sup>3</sup> But Jesus creates a grand reversal of expectations.

The story is aimed at those who trust in their own righteousness and have judgmental contempt on others (18:9). The Pharisee stands tall and proud before the altar of God: ***“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’”*** (Luke 18:11–12, ESV).

The Pharisee lists his résumé of how awesome he is to God. Instead of confessing his own sin, he then confesses the sins of all the other people who are around him, including the tax collector. He thinks God is pretty lucky to have him on his team. There is indication in the Greek language that he is not praying to God, but to himself (πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ταῦτα προσήχετο<sup>4</sup>).<sup>5</sup> This isn’t a prayer of worship. It is, as one commentator calls it, a self-eulogy.<sup>6</sup>

The tax collector is so aware of his unworthiness before the holiness of God that he stands far off (Lk. 18:13). He beats his chest. He knows the greatness of his sin, and he is overwhelmed by it. He lists no good works that could mitigate his situation. He knows and acknowledges his cosmic need, indebtedness, and sin before God. He humbly pleads with empty hands for the mercy of God (ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ<sup>7</sup>).

And in the shocking conclusion of this passage, Jesus says, ***“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other”*** (Lk. 18:14a, ESV).

“Justified” (δεδικαιωμένος), or justification, is an important theological concept that you need really need to know. It is the reason the Protestant Reformation happened.

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<sup>3</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 210–211.

<sup>4</sup> Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Lk 18:11.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 449.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 448.

<sup>7</sup> Aland, Lk 18:13.

Here is how the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines the word: "*Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone*" (WSC A33). Justification is that which gives us right standing before God; justification is what makes us feel valid and worthy of life.

But even if you are not a believer, I would wager that you are looking for justification somewhere. The British novelist Ford Madox Ford said it this way: "We are all so afraid, we are all so alone, we all so need from the outside the assurance of our own worthiness to exist."<sup>8</sup> Our self-justification projects include academic and athletic achievements, careers, kids, and even the motivation behind a lot of the accrual of wealth and appearance.

This naturally leads to comparison; what I call "*comparative justification*." Comparative justification is the idea that I know I'm not righteous, but at least I'm not as bad as that other guy! How do you know you are engaging in comparative justification? Do you tend to look for what is wrong with people, judge people, or feel the need to gossip about people? When you heard this story was your response, "Thank you God that I am not like other people who are Pharisees."

Comparison is a sword that cuts both ways. There is always someone a little worse than you. And there is someone who is always a little better. We might feel a little better when we see someone who is worse than us. But we feel a sense of condemnation and worthlessness when we see someone doing a little better than us. That's why social media causes depression-like smoking causes lung disease. Do you want to be free of comparison? Look to the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Often we think that we can earn our justification through works, but we can't. If we (like the Pharisee) think we earn have right standing before God, we have too low of a view of God's holiness and standards for righteousness. The book of Romans tells us: "*for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23, ESV). How deluded must we be to think that we have even lived a few hours of perfect righteousness before God, let alone a whole life of righteousness?

No one gets to strut before the glory of God's throne. We come before God only with the empty hands of faith. For this reason, the end of the parable is a statement about humility: "*... For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Luke 18:14b, ESV).

All true faith is humble faith. We will either come to God trusting in our goodness, or his goodness. And only one of those options gives us justification.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>8</sup> Ford, Ford Madox. *The Good Soldier*. (New York: Vintage, 1955), 115.

But the question that needs to be answered is, “How can this work? How can God forgive us without us somehow needing to pay for our sins? How can God be just and also gracious and willing to justify us? Isn’t this a contradiction?”

This is the brilliance of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has made a way to be both just and our justifier (cf. Rom. 3:26).

By sending Jesus, God made a way to end sin without ending us. Jesus lived the perfect life we should have lived but could not live. He died a death in which he took upon himself the penalty of our sin. He rose again to conquer the power of evil and death. And when we have faith in him, a great exchange takes place. As the Apostle Paul writes later in the book of 2 Corinthians: *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”* (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV)

When we trust in Jesus, he takes our sin, and we are credited with his righteousness. And his righteousness saves, sanctifies, and makes us new!

The voice of justice that has echoed all throughout human history and fascinated and eluded the minds of the most brilliant men has spoken and is speaking today through Jesus Christ.

Redeemer Christian Church, may we have faith in Jesus the Son of Man, and be found a faithful people when he returns! May we trust in his justice! May we rest in his justification!

AMEN.

### **Community Group Discussion Starters**

- 1. Luke 18:1-14 is comprised of two short parables. How would you summarize these parables in your own words?*
- 2. In the first parable (Lk. 18:1-8), the word “justice” is repeated four times. Have you ever been a victim of injustice? How might persistent prayer and hope in God’s ultimate justice give us comfort when we experience injustice?*
- 3. The key verse in the second parable (Lk. 18:9-14) seems to be verse 14. The Pharisee trusts in his own works for salvation, but is not “justified.” How does this passage show us a picture of “justification by faith alone”?*
- 4. Why is the idea of “justification by faith alone” so important?*
- 5. How is it possible that God can be the source of both our justice (God’s judges all evil) and justification (God forgives us of our evil)?*

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