

WEEK 7: TWO PARABLES ON PRAYER

Luke 18:1–14



The Place of the Passage

Teaching on prayer is recorded in only a few places in Scripture, including in these two parables in Luke: the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (vv. 9–14). Jesus, a man of consistent communion with his Father through the Spirit, tells these parables to his followers shortly before he makes his final passion prediction (vv. 31–33) and enters Jerusalem to accomplish his mission (19:28).

The Big Picture

In these two parables on prayer, Jesus offers his disciples hope and encourages humility.

Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Luke 18:1-14. Then think through and write your own notes on the following questions. (See ESV Study Bible notes on pages 1994-1995; online at www.esv.org.)

What realities described in Luke 17:20-18:8 might cause us to be discouraged as we await Jesus' second coming ("when the Son of Man comes"; 18:8)?

Lined writing area for the first question.

In the first parable on prayer (Luke 18:1-8) why does the judge give in to the widow? What is the lesson for us (see v. 1)?

Lined writing area for the second question.

Why might Jesus have chosen a widow as a character? What does the widow want? How do her desires and actions relate to how God's people ("his elect"¹) ought to pray "day and night" for God to "give justice"? What is the nature of this justice, and when will it come?

Lined writing area for the third question.

What do you make of Jesus' comment on the speed of God's justice for his elect? How about Jesus' comment on himself ("when the Son of Man comes . . ."; v. 8)? How is the judge like and unlike God?

Lined writing area for the first question on the right page.

The second parable (Luke 18:9-14) is traditionally named after its two characters, the Pharisee and the tax collector. From the New Testament, what do you know about the Pharisees? What about tax collectors?

Lined writing area for the second question on the right page.

What is totally different between the two men as they pray—in their attitudes, words, and actions?

Lined writing area for the third question on the right page.

Why does Jesus tell this second parable on prayer (see v. 9)?

Lined writing area for the fourth question on the right page.

Does self-righteousness² before God and contempt for others affect how God hears our prayers? Read Proverbs 15:8; 15:29; 28:9; Isaiah 59:1-2; James

5:16–18; and 1 Peter 3:10–12 and see how these other parts of Scripture shed light on this question.

Luke 18:9–14 also teaches us something about justification³ (the tax collector “went down to his house *justified*,” v. 14a, that is, declared right with God through God’s forgiveness). How does this teaching on justification and what follows on humility (“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted”; v. 14b) relate to each other? And how does Jesus’ end stress⁴—the two teachings in verse 14—offer additional insights on why Jesus tells the parable?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections have for you.

Gospel Glimpses

SEEKING AND SAVING THE LOST. In this section of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus repeatedly extends the blessings of salvation to those who are despised and treated “with contempt” (Luke 18:9)—including a Samaritan, children, a blind beggar, and Zacchaeus the tax collector. Unlike the Pharisee in this parable (vv. 10–14), Jesus embraces sinners who seek God’s mercy. The Son of Man delights “to seek and to save the lost” (19:10)—even if it means being treated with contempt for our sake (18:32–33; 19:14).

DEEP FAITH, TRUE FRUIT. Faith that is born from a profound sense of sin, and thus from deep appreciation for God’s mercy, will lead us to costly repentance and obedience. This is the message we learn through two tax collectors—one a sinner pleading for mercy in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:9–14) and the other a repentant Zacchaeus (19:1–10). By contrast, the Pharisee of Jesus’ parable and the rich ruler of 18:18–23 boldly claim to obey God but are enslaved to the idols of pride and riches. Self-righteousness will never produce true repentance or obedience. These fruits grow only where the seed of God’s unmerited favor to sinners is planted in the soil of desperate need.

Whole-Bible Connections

LORD, HAVE MERCY. The specific wording of the tax collector’s prayer, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13), is unique in the Bible. However, similar expressions are found elsewhere, such as in the first line of David’s prayer for forgiveness after his hideous sins of adultery and murder (“Have mercy on me, O God”; Ps. 51:1) and in one of Israel’s songs of ascents that they sang as they journeyed to the temple to make atonement for their sins (“Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us”; Ps. 123:3). Whether as a confession of sin and plea for forgiveness or a cry for help (e.g., the two blind men’s “Have mercy on us, Son of David,” Matt. 9:27, or the Canaanite woman’s supplication, “Have mercy on me, O Lord,” 15:22), the prayer “Lord, have mercy” should be found often on our lips.

ANSWERED PRAYER. Jesus promises to answer prayer (John 14:12–14). Yet, we know from experience that God’s responses to prayer can be rather mysterious. God knows infinitely more than we do. He has in mind not only our happiness or personal fulfillment but also our eternal good, linked to a grand plan involving countless interrelated people, events, purposes, and problems. James teaches that, sometimes, “You do not have, because you do not ask,” while other times “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (James 4:2–3). God sometimes says no to our petitions for our own good, however mysterious that may be to us. On the other hand, God does seem to be attuned particularly to fervent prayers of the righteous (James 5:16–18). He can be honored by persistence in prayer, especially when one prays for something such as justice, as seen in the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8).

Theological Soundings

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH. In Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14) we see three principles at the heart of the doctrine of

justification. (1) Boasting in human works—even religious disciplines—is worthless before God. (2) Our only hope is to confess our need as sinners, casting ourselves on God’s mercy. (3) The issue is not where we stand in comparison to others but whether we are accepted by God. (The Greek term for “be merciful” even implies securing mercy through the proper means, so that verse 13 may allude to trust in the death of a sacrificial substitute.) Though we often associate it with the apostle Paul (Rom. 3:20–5:1; Gal. 2:16; 3:1–14), the doctrine of justification by faith clearly has its roots in Jesus’ teaching.

FINAL VINDICATION. There will be a vindication of God’s people (the “justice” we should pray for; Luke 18:7) at the end of time, when Christ will return in great glory to claim his elect as his bride and to execute judgment against his enemies. On that day there will be a definitive, comprehensive acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord over all (see Phil. 2:10–11).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Luke 18:1–14 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the *Personal Implications* for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) the passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

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2. Whole-Bible Connections

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3. Theological Soundings

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4. Luke 18:1–14

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As You Finish This Unit . . .

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Jesus’ parables. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight or underline these to review again in the future.

Definitions

- ¹ **The elect** – People whom God has chosen from eternity for salvation. Or, as Paul summarizes in Romans 8, “God’s elect” (8:33) are “those who are in Christ Jesus” (v. 1), for whom Christ died (v. 34), who have been adopted into God’s family (v. 23), and who are “led by the Spirit of God” (v. 14) throughout life and are heirs of heaven, where in eternity they will “be glorified” with Christ (v. 17).
- ² **Self-righteousness** – The belief that one is acceptable before God because of one’s own moral uprightness or human effort, rather than because of dependence on the grace of God. Self-righteousness begins with evaluating oneself in light of human standards rather than God’s standards and is therefore typically accompanied by pride and a judgmental attitude toward others.
- ³ **Justification** – The act of God’s grace in bringing sinners into a new covenant relationship with himself and counting them as righteous before him through the forgiveness of their sins (see Rom. 3:20–26).
- ⁴ **End stress** – The final line in a parable that summarizes or applies the whole narrative. (See the chart in Week 8 for examples of this.)