

Today’s lesson is read from Luke 18:1-14

Hear from Luke Jesus’ parable:

Read Luke 18:1-14

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable, pleasing, and perfect in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

Two parables: both are about God’s justification

The widow and the unjust judge: (vindication of saint)

God will soon justify the saints

The Pharisee and the tax collector: (vindication of sinner)

God will justify those who confess to be sinners, not those who think themselves saints.

So, here we are again this morning in chapter 18 of Luke’s gospel. The lectionary has done something interesting with Luke’s eighteenth chapter as we’ve already seen last week. The lectionary decides to divide Jesus’ parables in Luke 18 into two parts. If you can remember, last Sunday’s lectionary reading was verses 1-8, “the parable of the widow and the unjust judge,”

this morning we continue with verses 9-14, “the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector”. It seems the lectionary has forced us to read and understand Jesus’ parables separate from one another, but is that what Luke had in mind? Are these parables distinct from one another, or does a common theme join them?

In verse 1, Luke seems to give us the answer. He begins by telling us that these two parables from Jesus are about “the need to pray always and not lose heart.” And I had always read these parables with that in mind.

the first parable is about a widow who seeks justice against her oppressor. Day after day, she appeals to a judge, “who neither fears God nor has respect for people.” Day after day, the judge refuses to help her. But she persists, tirelessly bothering the judge until he’s sick of her very presence: “I will grant her justice,” the judge says to himself, “only so that she may not wear me out. (In the Greek, “so that she won’t give me a black eye”).

In this parable I had always understood that we are supposed to harass God until we wear him down. Like the widow did with the judge. That in order for our prayers to be answered we need so desperately to be people persistently in prayer.

and the second parable is about two men who go up to a temple to pray. The first man is a Pharisee, a religious insider who serves a vital leadership role in the spiritual life of his community. In the disguise of a heartfelt “thank you,” he makes a personal progress report to God at the altar: “I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, murderers, adulterers.” He then humbly brags about his holier-than-thou lifestyle: “I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” Assuming, he leaves the temple feeling exactly the same way he felt when he walked in: just fine. No growth, no change.

The second man is a tax collector, a co-worker with the Roman Empire, and a traitor to his own people. He stands “far off,” beats his chest, and refuses to raise his head towards heaven. He prays just one line: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

In this parable I had always understood that we are supposed to be like the tax collector and confess that we are sinners and humble ourselves before God in our prayers.

So. Is this what are we to make of these parables? Prayers of persistence and prayers of confession? We could, but maybe there is a deeper understanding found in the parables. Maybe there’s something at stake Jesus is talking about that we’re aren’t seeing. Maybe these parables are about our human condition in sin and our need for divine grace? Maybe these parables are about God’s relationship to us in making us justified in spite of our sin that blemishes us.

Sin, that now unfortunate reality in the world, which over time has caused perversion to our existence and corruption to our likeness of God. As creature’s freely opposing God’s will, God is displeased with our condition and the consequences are dire. In other words, like a loving parent who detests their child for recklessly driving because it is harmful to them and lessens their experience of life, so it is with God who detests humanity’s sin because it threatens to do the same.¹ And like someone who chooses drive recklessly, they are fully aware of the risks involved and take responsibility for its results. Yet paradoxically, they cannot quit because it is fun. This is similar to our sin, we are both responsible for our sin, and yet victims of it.² On the one hand, if we are victims and not in control of our sin then we are not responsible, and fighting it would be pointless. On the other hand, if we are responsible and in control of our choice to sin, then carrying the weight of shame and guilt would be too heavy to carry.³ Therefore, as God’s creatures

¹ Serene Jones Essay on, “Human Nature and Human Sin,” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 149.

² *Ibid*, 153.

³ *Ibid*.

imprisoned and dying from an infection that we ourselves cannot stop or escape, we are in dire need of redemption.

Maybe we are the widow and sin is our oppressor and maybe we need to be like the humble tax collector who acknowledges his condition to the core, recognizes his existence as no god and cries out to God the just ruler, grant me justice God! Vindicate me! Have mercy on me!

It is only by God’s grace in which we are redeemed. God’s unmerited love is freely given to humanity as a gift. There is nothing humanity can do to earn or deserve it.

Let us pray:

Offering