

An Unrighteous Judge and the Righteous Pharisee Luke 18v1-14



Our study focuses on two stories that are about prayer: the *parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge*, and the *parable of the Pharisee and the Toll Collector*.

Philip Yancey, writing on prayer, says:

“My home sits in a canyon in the shadow of a large mountain along a stream named Bear Creek. During the spring snow melt and after heavy rains the stream swells, tumbles frothily over rocks, and acts more like a river than a creek. People have drowned in it. Once I traced the origin of Bear Creek to its very source, atop the mountain. I stood on a snowfield marked by “sun cups,” the bowl-shaped indentations that form as snow melts.

Underneath I could hear a soft gurgling sound, and at the edge of the snow, runnels of water leaked out. These collected into a pool, then a small alpine pond, then spilled over to begin the long journey down the mountain, joining other rivulets to take shape as the creek below my house.

It occurs to me, thinking about prayer, that most of the time I get the direction wrong. I start downstream with my own concerns and bring them to God. I inform God, as if God did not already know. I plead with God, as if hoping to change God’s mind and overcome divine reluctance. Instead, I should start upstream where the flow begins.

When I shift direction, I realize that God already cares about my concerns—my uncle’s cancer, world peace, a broken family, a rebellious teenager—more than I do. Grace, like water, descends to the lowest part. Streams of mercy flow. I begin with God, who bears primary responsibility for what happens on earth, and ask what part I can play in God’s work on earth. “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” cried the prophet. Will I stand by the bank or jump in the stream?

With this new starting point for prayer, my perceptions change. I look at nature and see not only wildflowers and golden aspen trees but the signature of a grand artist. I look at human beings and see not only a “poor, bare, forked animal” but a person of eternal destiny made in God’s image. Thanksgiving and praise surge up as a natural response, not an obligation.

I need the corrective vision of prayer because all day long I will lose sight of God’s perspective. I turn on the television and face a barrage of advertisements assuring me that success and achievement are measured by possessions and physical appearance. Driving downtown, I see a grizzled panhandler holding up a “God bless. Can you help?” sign by the expressway off-ramp, and I avert my eyes. The world obscures the view from above.

Prayer, and only prayer, restores my vision to one that more resembles God’s. I awake from blindness to see that wealth lurks as a terrible danger, not a goal worth striving for; that value depends not on race or status but on the image of God a person bears; that no amount of effort to improve physical beauty has much relevance for the world beyond.”

Discussion Question:

As you read through what Yancey has written about prayer, how do you respond to what he says?

A. Putting it in Context: Luke 17v20-32

These parables of Jesus (Luke 18v1-14) follow the discussion that Jesus had with the Pharisees and his disciples in Luke 17:20-32, and is his response to questions posed to him about the Kingdom of God. The kingdom is present now, but the final fulfilling of the kingdom will come at a future time. Therefore, when we pray, we are to be concerned about the kingdom or rule of God, both present and future, and our place in that kingdom

1. Jesus told these stories in order to answer a question that the Pharisees asked in 17v20. What was the question?

2. What does Jesus tell the Pharisees about coming of the Kingdom of God? (see v20-21)

What does he tell his disciples? (see 22-37)

3. Is there a contradiction between the answers that Jesus gives to the Pharisees and to the disciples?

B. The Widow and the Judge - Luke 18v1-8

1. Why does Jesus tell this story? (see v1)

How does the story relate to Luke 17v20-37?

2. What is the character of the Judge? (see v2 and v4).

3. What is the character of the widow? (see v3 and v5).

4. Why does the Judge relent and grant the request of the widow?

5. Notice that Jesus does *not* draw our attention to the words of the widow, but to the words of the unjust judge (“And the Lord said, ‘hear what the unrighteous judge said...’” v6). Jesus has used this style of teaching before.

^{Luke 11v11} What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; 12 or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? 13 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

What does this parable teach us about prayer?

6. What does this parable teach us about God?

7. In v8, Jesus asks the question, “Will he find faithfulness on earth,” *not*, “Will he find faith...” Why does he ask this question?

What is the difference between faith and faithfulness?

8. How does this question relate to Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees and disciples in 17v20-37?

9. What do we learn about prayer from this parable?

B. The Pharisee and the Toll Collector Luke 18v9-14

Our approach to God

The Pharisee would not have been seen as the “bad guy” in this parable. They were the most respected people in Jesus’ day. It was the Toll Collector (not Tax Collector) who was the crook. When it says that the Toll Collector stood from afar,” it doesn’t just refer to physical distance, but spiritual distance as well.

1. The Pharisee’s prayer sounds arrogant to us today, but according to the *Talmud* (The collection of Jewish law and tradition), such prayers were made to thank God for righteousness, and were seen as sincere

R. Judah said: “One must utter three praises every day: Praised be the Lord that He did not make me a heathen, for all the heathen are as nothing before Him (Is 40:17); praised be He, that He did not make me a woman, for woman is not under the obligation to fulfill the law; praised be He that He did not make me . . . an uneducated man, for the uneducated man is not cautious to avoid sins.”

2. Read v11-13, and compare the prayers of the two men.

a. What petitions do you find in the prayer of the Pharisee?

b. What petitions do you find in the prayer of the Toll Collector?

c. What differences can see as you compare the prayers of the two men?

3. How did the Pharisee view himself, and how he thought God related to him?

4. The list of “sinners” that the Pharisee gives in v11 is meant to serve as an indictment of the Toll Collector. What do you think he is trying to say about the Toll Collector?

5. The Pharisee saw the Toll Collector as a sinner, which he based on how he thought God looked at sinners. What was wrong with his understanding of sin and sinners?

6. How does the Toll Collector respond to the Pharisee (and to God) in his prayer?

7. When the Toll Collector asks God to have mercy, what was he asking God to do?

8. This mercy that the Toll Collector asked for is what made him “right” in the eyes of God, or *justified*. Jesus says that the Toll Collector went home justified in the eyes of God. How is it possible for the Toll Collector to be justified and not the Pharisee?

Definition: Justification - *justification* refers to the divine act where God makes humans, who are sinful and therefore worthy of condemnation, acceptable before a God who is holy and righteous. More appropriately described as “justification by grace through faith,” this doctrine asserts that a sinner is pardoned from the punishment and condemnation of sin and brought into relationship with God by faith in God’s grace alone. See Heb. 2v17 and 1 Jn 4v10