

An Unrighteous Judge and the Righteous Pharisee - Teacher's Guide

Luke 18v1-14



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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, how would you respond to what he says?

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

These parables of Jesus on prayer are part of the discussion that Jesus had with the Pharisees and his disciples in Luke 17:20-32.

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

[TC]²⁰ Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,

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

[TC] 20 Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, 21 nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

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

[TC] The kingdom's consummation also will be sudden and unexpected, and people will be unprepared (17:26–30). This reveals that even as the realized dimension of the kingdom is not preceded with signs that serve as precursors (11:29–30), so too will the consummation. There will be no warning, no opportunity to prepare oneself. Life among "this generation" will continue as normal (17:27–28) in ignorance of the oncoming judgment. As in the case of the rich fool (12:20), so in that day the world will be caught unprepared. And the result of this will be condemnation at the final judgment. There will be no respite or time to prepare (17:34–35; cf. 12:57–59), for the time of grace will have ended (13:6–9).

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

[TC] Jesus tells the Pharisees that the Kingdom of God is present now in the person and ministry of Jesus, and was evident to everyone who believed by his acts, but he tells his disciples that because he, the *Son of Man*, has been rejected, the second appearing will be in judgment.

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

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

[TC] Because of the delay in the consummation of the kingdom, it is especially important for persistent prayer to characterize the Christian life. This will insure that a community of faith will exist when the Son of Man comes (18:8).

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

[TC] Jesus' and Luke's understanding of the law as summarized by the two commands of love of God (see Luke 10v27)

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

[TC] The widow represented the needy, helpless, poor, and oppressed. She was the kind of person spoken of in Luke 20v47. In this instance her insignificance resulted in an injustice.

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

[TC] "So that she won't eventually wear me out," Literally hit me under the eye. This must be interpreted metaphorically, for the widow would hardly have attacked the judge physically. There are two possible ways of interpreting the metaphor: she will wear me out (by her continual coming), or she will blacken my face, i.e., make me look bad by having ignored her and thus give me a bad reputation. The former is more likely since the judge did not care what other people thought (18:2, 4). Ultimately, however, the exact reason for the judge's yielding to the widow's request has no corresponding reality. What the parable seeks to teach is not why God will bring justice for his people (18:8) but that he will.

Application

The kingdom is present now, but the final fulfilling of the kingdom will come at a future time. Therefore, prayer is about the kingdom of God, both present and future, and our place in the kingdom

1. 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?

[TC] Discussion question. Among the principles found here is the constant address of the Widow to the Judge as a model for our pray. Also the Judge, as bad as he is, he answered the widow's request, how more so will God, who is good, be faithful to us when we pray?

2. What does this parable teach us about God?

3. 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?

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

5. What does it say to us today?

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

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

Our approach to God

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."

The Pharisee would not have been seen as the "bad guy" in this parable. As Farrar says above, they were the most respected people in Jesus' day. It was the Toll Collector (not Toll Collector) who was the crook. When it says that the Toll Collector stood from afar," it doesn't just to physical distance, but spiritual distance as well.

[TC] Who were these vilified toll collectors? They were neither publicans nor tax collectors. Direct taxes, such as the poll tax and the land tax, were not farmed out to publicans but were under the direct supervision of the Roman prefects and procurators in Judaea and Galilee. The bureaucrats who collected the taxes were state officials directly accountable to the government, and it is likely that Jews were involved in collecting taxes.

The telōnēs of the parable is a toll collector. Although direct taxes were not farmed out but collected directly by the government, the collection of indirect taxes, such as tolls, imposts, customs, and tariffs, was leased out by means of contracts. The lessee had to pay the amount of the contract in advance and then recoup his investment and take a profit as best he could. The system was rife with extortion and dishonesty, although on a lesser scale than tax farming under the publicans had been. With good reason, the population hated the toll collectors. In an excellent study of the problem, A survey of the relevant rabbinical literature shows that tax collectors and toll collectors were often grouped together with robbers. The judgment on toll collectors remains harsh throughout the Talmud.

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

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

[TC] There are none, only a review of his accomplishments and character. **N.B.** Standing with arms lifted and looking toward heaven was the normal stance for prayer.

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

[TC] He only asked God to be merciful to him, a sinner. **N.B.** Standing with arms crossed and beating the breast was a sign of extreme grief, often used in a funeral or other situations, but not normally by men.

c. As you compare the two prayers, what can you notice about them?

[TC] The Pharisee is full of himself, and the Toll Collector is not.

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

[TC] The Pharisee saw his main role as a rule enforcer. The Pharisee's believed that he had kept all the rules, and then some.

4. The list of "sinners" that the Pharisee gives in v11 is aimed at the Toll Collector. What was he trying to say about the Toll Collector?

[TC] He gives a recitation of character traits -- " extortioners, swindlers, adulterers" – of the Toll Collector, or "toll collector," which is the equivalent of "sinner," one who lives beyond the bounds of the acceptable obedience to the Law. The Pharisee attempts to shame, label, and stigmatize the Toll Collector, and to make himself look good. He was judging the Toll Collector according to how he and his fellow Pharisees, scribes, and lawyers had written the rules to describe how to have a relationship with God. Based on these rules, he had indicted the Toll Collector of his sins and pronounced him guilty.

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

[TC] He thought people could have a relationship with God, based on the rules that he followed, and anyone who couldn't follow the rules was obviously a sinner.

6. How does the Toll Collector respond to the Pharisee in his prayer?

[TC] The Toll Collector cries out, beats his breast, and prays for mercy. He refuses to consent to the Pharisee's shaming, He refuses to accept the labels attached to him, the stigma of toll collector, but appeals to a higher source, and speaks directly to God, seeking mercy.

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

[TC] Note the use of word merciful, we can only ask for mercy, not based on my worth but God's mercy, as opposed to the Pharisee, who was full of his own worth. He cries out, beats his breast, and prays for mercy, the same mercy that was given through the sacrifices that were made in the temple every day.

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?

[TC] As mark of repentance and accepting forgiveness, it was that the Toll Collector was expected to make restitution (cf Zaccheus in Luke 19v8). Without specific restitution, the justification of the Toll Collector would likely have struck many as too easy, or even impossible. Because toll collectors worked with a constantly changing public, there was no way they could even identify the people they had extorted, to say nothing of making restitution.

Toll collectors were considered beyond the reach of repentance because repentance would require both restitution of all extorted funds plus one-fifth and the abandonment of their occupation.

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.