

## **Persistence & Humility**

### **Luke 18:1-14**

This week's passage juxtaposes two different themes, linked by verbal and topical connections. Each parable focuses on the role of prayer in vindication. Yet the sort of vindication, and the way that prayer brings vindication, is different in each case. In the first parable, a widow seeks vindication against those who treat her unjustly; she represents a suffering Church asking for God's intervention in the face of persecution. In the second, the Pharisee and the tax collector seek God's vindication of themselves individually; they represent two diametrically opposing forms of personal spirituality and their potential for divine approval. Two different sorts of vindication; two different criteria of assessment. The links are mainly verbal ('vindication', 'prayer'), and explain why Luke placed these two accounts in succession. The difference in theme explains why a single sermon or Bible study best focuses on only one of the two.

#### **Day 1: Luke 18:1-7 The persistent widow and the persecuted church**

This parable recounts the efforts of a widow to gain justice in the face of mistreatment by unspecified adversaries. The key characteristic in play is the first-century reality that widows are defenseless, since they lack an adult male protector in a male-dominated society. So she seeks vindication in court. The real-life parallel to the widow is the Church, which in Luke's time was defenseless in the face of persecution. The widow's plea to the judge represents the plea of Luke's Church to God: "Grant us justice against our tormentors."

Persecution – and so this parable – may have little direct relevance for the contemporary American Church, or for our particular local church. From time to time, we may run up against issues where Christian values are at odds with our culture, and come under criticism for it (e.g., Christian sexual standards, though our list should be a lot broader than that). Nevertheless, the issue is urgent to many of our fellow-Christians overseas, under oppressive, totalitarian regimes. Today, consider, for example, the current crackdown in parts of China, and pray for the Church there.

#### **Day 2: Luke 18:1-7 God's first response to a suffering Church**

What is God's word to his Church when it comes under persecution? As it happens, he has two words, and they are in tension (no surprise, since life, too, is complicated). The Church undergoing persecution pleads, "God,

grant us justice against our adversaries.” His first reply is: “I will, and I will do so quickly.” The unjust judge in the parable exists to emphasize the certainty of God’s intervention. The argument is what ancient Jews called, ‘from greater to lesser.’ That is, if an immoral earthly judge will finally intervene if nagged enough, the just God of the world will all the more intervene when his children plead. He will bring justice, and he will do so quickly. And this is pretty much what we find throughout history: that crazed dictators often take aim at the Church as a potential rival to human devotion, and initially their oppression succeeds. But, after a lesser or greater span of time, the regime falls and the church explodes (consider, for example, China). This is God’s reassurance: he watches over his suffering Church, and intervenes when they face crisis.

**Day 3: Luke 18:1-8 God’s second, surprising response to a suffering Church.** Yesterday we saw God’s promise that he would intervene to vindicate his people, and that he would do so quickly. But apparently, not too quickly. This passage offers two indications that deliverance does not come immediately. For one, in the parable, enough time must pass to allow for the widow to *keep* coming (18:3 NIV), to *keep* bothering the judge (18:5 NIV). Correspondingly, in the real-life equivalent, enough time must pass for God’s people to develop the reputation for crying out to him ‘day and night’ (18:7). Similarly, enough time must pass for it to see as though God might *keep* putting them off (18:7 NIV). For the other, as a parting comment, Jesus turns the tables on his followers: God will indeed bring justice, after an indeterminate time, but when he brings it, will any of them still remain in their faith (18:8)? Jesus promises to intervene quickly, but not so quickly that no risk exists of falling away.

Again, the application is more for the suffering Church than for us: God’s word to the suffering church is to hang in, to persevere under persecution. At the same time, the passage – and these believers – speak, even if only indirectly, to us also. Just as Jesus argued from lesser to greater (from the unjust judge to God himself), so we can apply the text from greater to lesser (from Jesus’ disciples to us now): if they had to persevere in faithfulness to receive salvation, so must we.

**Day 4: Luke 18:9-14 The religious and moral, and vindication before God.** The Pharisee and tax collector illustrate a second sort of vindication, the verdict whether one receives – or forfeits – relationship with God. This religious leader considers himself beyond needing vindication; his lifestyle

speaks for itself. His moral integrity is indisputable: he is not wicked, a thief, an adulterer, or a collaborator with an infidel regime (18:11). Instead, his behavior is exemplary: the law requires that he fast once a year, yet he fasts twice a week; the law requires that he tithe his income, instead he tithes everything. He is devout. And so, he does not need God's vindication.

Or so he thinks. And so, religious and moral people often feel today. Jesus intimates that something is deeply wrong here, without saying exactly what at this point, because he says it so many times elsewhere. This religious leader may have been all that he claimed to be, but that only makes him better than some of his fellows. It does not make him good enough for God. One simple proof lies in his contempt for his fellow: "I thank you that I am not like this rabble!" His sense of superiority belies any show of gratitude toward God. His practices may genuinely be more religious and moral than his fellows in all respects but humility, yet none of us stands pure before God. So he returns home no better for having worshipped, prayed, and tithed.

In your more honest moments, which of your activities or virtues do you suppose put you a leg up religiously and morally? What service do you perform, what devotional activities do you practice, that makes you a cut above most people? Offer them to God today. Not as merits to be acknowledged, or as virtues to be crowned, but as baseless grounds, in capable of earning merit or approval from God

**Day 5: Luke 18:9-14a The irreligious and immoral, and vindication before God.** This anomaly is so familiar to us that it has lost impact: Jesus rejects the religiously and morally self-satisfied, but welcomes the religiously and morally suspect. Tax collectors collaborate with the foreign infidels oppressing the people of God: occupying forces need a steady source of funds; tax collectors solicit those funds with some markup for their own effort. They are despised both religiously and morally, and shunned socially. But in the topsy-turvy world that is the reign of God, this man goes home vindicated, while the religiously and morally upright do not.

The story is one of the most familiar to come out of Jesus' ministry: this man is vindicated before God because he realizes that he has no merit before God. He does not enter the sanctuary, but stands outside in the courtyard. He does not look up in prayer, as was the ancient practice, but

looks down, signifying spiritual inferiority. No recital of accomplishments, he pleads for mercy. He is not better than other people; he is worse. He has no virtues, only sin. Yet he is vindicated, because he acknowledges that he has no basis for vindication beyond the mercy of God. The tax collector serves as a model for those who are culturally despised, morally dubious, religiously neglectful, but yet repentant. These are the sort of people whom Jesus welcomed. If this describes who you are today, then he also welcomes you.

### **Day 6: Luke 18:14b But what comes next?**

This parable is clear: religious devotion and moral behavior often lead to pride and a sense of superiority over others; religious and moral failure, along with social exclusion, can promote appropriate confession before God. Jesus sums up both in a maxim: whoever inflates himself, God will deflate; whoever deflates himself, God will inflate (the passives are a way of expressing divine activity without invoking the name of God). Fair enough. But what does this mean moving forward? Does it mean that religious practice and moral behavior are counterproductive, or that religious and moral impropriety are superior lifestyles? No maxim covers all cases. This maxim covers just one: those who come to Christ must acknowledge that they bring no merit to him that warrants their acceptance. All their religious virtue and moral rectitude merely encourage arrogant self-aggrandizement. As the old hymn has it, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die" (*Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me*). This is the only possible grounds for coming to God: nothing we do, only what Jesus does.

That said, some Christians vainly hope that this is all we need ever say on the topic. That if religious practice and moral rectitude do not bring us to God in the first place, that they have no necessary role with God at any point thereafter. Yet Jesus also taught that if we do not renounce both family and possessions for his sake, we cannot be his follower; if we hoard our money rather than helping the poor, we are likely headed to an eternity in hell; if he does not find us faithfully serving when he returns, he will exclude us from his kingdom. We will never have any basis for supposing that we can merit God's favor; but if mercy does not pull holiness in its wake, then we have not come to life in Christ. We rightly live between these two poles: our works grant us no merit with Christ; yet, his grace produces abundant works in our lives.