**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**PRAYING FOR JUSTICE**

**Luke 18:1-8**

**INTRODUCTION**

What kinds of things do you pray for? Ask your average Christian this question and I anticipate that their answer will be something like, “It depends. I pray for whatever needs I have in my life at the time. When I need a job, I pray for that. When I need guidance for my life, I pray for that. When I need courage to do something really hard, I pray for that. It all depends on what I’m going through.”

It’s great to bring our needs to God. In fact, God tells us to do that in the Scriptures. 1 Peter 5:7 tells us to cast all our anxieties on God, because he cares for us. Bringing our needs to God and casting our anxieties on him is one of the sweetest things about having a relationship with him.

But what if you have no needs? What if life is going just the way you feel it should? If we only pray when we have needs, then our praying will stop when our needs are met. The ironic thing about only praying when we have needs is that, the better our lives are, the worse our spiritual lives become, when it should be the other way around. I think that’s one of the reasons why God often shakes things up in our lives. He creates needs in our lives so that we will be reminded of our need for him.

There’s another problem with only praying when you have needs, and it’s this: you fail to pray about a host of other things that God cares about. Yes, God cares about your needs, but those aren’t the only things he cares about. He cares about building his church. He cares about saving the lost. He cares about punishing the wicked. He cares about protecting the weak. Do we pray about what God wants, or do we only pray about what we want?

Jesus has told us a lot about what God cares about throughout Luke’s Gospel by telling us what kinds of things we ought to pray for. For example, in Luke 11, Jesus taught us to pray the Lord’s Prayer, which begins with this: “Father, *hallowed be your name*.” We are to pray that God’s Name would be exalted and worshipped throughout the world as people everywhere acknowledge him as *holy*. Jesus wants us to pray about this because God cares about it. He cares about spreading the fame of his name among all the peoples of the world.

Then he teaches us to pray, “Your Kingdom come.” We are to pray that the fullness of God’s Kingdom would come with the return of King Jesus himself. Why? Because that’s something God wants. God wants his Kingdom to come, and he wants us to ask him for it.

Praying about what we want is good, but praying about what God wants is more important. The more we pray about and care about *those* things, the closer we will be to God’s heart. And that’s where every Christian wants to be.

Today we’re going to look at what is commonly known as the parable of the persistent widow. This is quite a well-known parable, but as we will see, Jesus teaches us to pray about something that is close to God’s heart but is often very far from ours. God wants us to pray for this, not just once or twice, not just here and there, but *always*. What is it? It’s justice. More specifically, it’s justice for his suffering people.

The title of this message is **Praying for Justice.** My aim today is to show you that **God Wants Justice for His People and We Should Too.**

We will have three points today:

1. Pray with Perseverance
2. Pray with Desperation
3. Pray with Faith

(1) **PRAY WITH PERSEVERANCE**

Our text today is a parable. It’s one of the more well-known parables from Luke’s Gospel, and like most of the well-known parables, it’s also one of the most misunderstood. In this parable, we have a widow who has a need that only a judge can meet. The judge, being an unrighteous man, refuses. But the widow doesn’t give up. She keeps going to him again and again until finally he throws his arms up and says, “Fine, I’ll give you what you want as long as you leave me alone!”

Jesus then says, if that’s what an unrighteous judge does, what about a righteous judge? What about *the* righteous judge, the perfect judge, God himself? Will he not answer our requests? Yes, he will, not because he wants to get rid of us, but because he cares for us.

Now, the typical application from this parable is *don’t stop praying.* That’s actually how Luke describes the application in verse 1: “And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.” What we see in verse 1 is a rare personal moment for Luke, who is usually content to simply record what Jesus said and let us do the interpretation. But here, Luke does the interpretation for us.

Why? Because he really doesn’t want his readers to miss the parable’s point. Remember that Luke is writing this entire book for a fellow believer named Theophilus, who was likely struggling with his faith because of the persecution facing the church. Luke pauses here and essentially says, “Now pay attention here, Theophilus, because the lessons in this parable are really going to help you persevere in faith.” And what are those lessons? That believers “ought always to pray and not lose heart.”

But pray about what? What are we to persevere in praying for? For many of us, when we read this parable, or when we hear it taught on a popular level, we assume that the answer is *anything*. We assume that the parable teaches us that, whatever we bring to God, he will give it to us as long as we keep coming to him and don’t give up. It could be the salvation of a loved one. It could be provision of a better job. It could be for that husband or wife you’ve waited so long to marry.

God may answer those prayers, but it’s not because of the truths in this parable. This parable isn’t about bringing *any* requests to God and knowing that he will answer. It’s about one, specific kind of request: the request for *justice*.

That becomes obvious as soon as we take a closer look at the text, starting with the context. The previous narrative in 17:22-37 was all about Jesus’ Second Coming. He talks about the judgment he will bring, he talks about how to escape the judgment, and he talks about how those who escape will suffer until he returns. He said in 17:33:

“Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.”

Followers of Jesus must *lose* their lives *now* if they are to *keep* them *later* on Judgment Day. If you’ve grown up in the church you’ve likely heard this language a lot and have become quite familiar with it, but let’s not forget that losing your life *hurts*. Losing your life is *painful*. Losing your life means that life will even feel like death at times, not only because of the types of things that afflict everyone in this broken world like sickness and death, but because of things like persecution, rejection, and in some parts of the world, martyrdom. Losing your life means suffering injustice for the sake of Christ and his gospel.

That’s what Jesus was talking about in Chapter 17. Now in Chapter 18 we see this parable about the persistent widow, and at first glance, it seems like Jesus has switched gears to talk about something completely different. But that’s not the case. He’s still talking about his Second Coming. We see that in verse 8 where he says “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. *Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes*, will he find faith on earth?”

Jesus is still talking about his Second Coming, which means that he’s still talking about judgment. The only difference is that in Chapter 17, he was talking about the judgment he will bring *against* those who don’t know him, whereas here he’s talking about the judgment he will bring *on behalf* of those who do know him.

The fact that Jesus is talking about justice is made obvious by the way he tells the parable as well. One of Jesus’ intentions here is to contrast sinful human beings with a holy, perfect God, and the figure he uses to represent God is a judge. What does a judge give out? He gives *justice*. Jesus is saying that, if sinful judges know how to give justice, how much more will a perfect God?

Notice also what the widow asks the judge for in verse 3. She says, “Give me *justice* against my adversary.” And notice what the unrighteous judge says in verse 5: “yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her *justice*.” And finally, notice the application Jesus brings to us in verses 7 and 8: “And will not God give *justice* to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give *justice* to them speedily.”

There’s no question that this parable is about justice. In fact, it’s quite obvious, and yet so many Christians misread this parable. How could we miss something that now seems so obvious? It’s because not many of us can relate to it. Not many of us have suffered injustice, and for those who have, not many have suffered injustice *for the sake of Christ*. But other things, like the salvation of a loved one, or a better job, or a long-awaited spouse? Those are things we relate to. Those are things we want, and we read our wants into a text like this so that it says what we want it to say.

That kind of misreading is incredibly dangerous for our faith, because we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment. We pray and pray and pray for that loved one to be saved, and we believe that a parable like this promises that God will give that to us if we just keep praying, but then that loved one dies without putting their trust in Christ and we think, “God said he would give me what I asked for if I kept coming to him, but he didn’t. He failed me. God doesn’t keep his promises. God isn’t faithful.”

But that’s not true. We can’t blame God for not doing something he never promised to do! He never promised to save our loved ones, or provide us with spouses, or give us our dream jobs, or make life the way we always dreamed it would be like. He may still do those things, but it won’t be because of his promise. It will only be because of his undeserved mercy.

God may not promise those things, but what he *does* promise is *justice*. Justice for his people who have suffered injustice will surely come, and God wants them to pray for it. He wants them to wait for it. He wants them to keep coming to God and asking for it. It may come now, or it may come when Jesus returns. We don’t know when it will come, but it *will* come, because God has promised, and God always keeps his promises.

That’s the context that Theophilus was living in. He was living in the days of the early church when Christians were being persecuted left right and center. The Apostle James was executed. Stephen the first deacon was stoned to death. The Apostle Paul was harassed by the Jews and imprisoned by the Romans. Injustice was the daily experience of the early believers, and this would have been incredibly difficult for a new believer like Theophilus to endure. Perhaps he wondered, “Is Jesus really Lord when his people suffer so much? Why does he allow the wicked to rule the world and persecute the church? Where is his justice, and when is it coming?”

That’s why Luke includes this parable. He uses it to remind Theophilus that justice is on its way, and until it arrives, he must not give up. He needs to keep praying. He needs to keep trusting, and God will bring justice when the time is right.

(2) **PRAY WITH DESPERATION**

That’s the first purpose of the parable. It’s to encourage us to pray for justice with perseverance and not give up. The parable also instructs us to pray another way, which leads to our second point: pray with desperation.

Whenever Jesus tells a parable, he chooses the characters of the parable very intentionally. For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he chose a Samaritan as the hero of the story to make the point that true obedience to God’s law can come from the most unexpected of people. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus he intentionally gave poor Lazarus a name – “God is my helper” – while leaving the rich man nameless to show that his identity was wrapped up in his wealth. And here, in the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus chose a widow to stand for his people.

Throughout Luke’s Gospel, Luke reveals that he has a great concern for widows. He frequently mentions that a woman was a widow even though that detail has almost nothing to do with the narrative. The only purpose it serves is to help us more deeply understand the person’s situation. For example, he told us in Luke 2 that the prophetess Anna was a widow to show us her astounding devotion to God even though she had lived a hard life. He told us in Luke 7 that a widow was mourning for her dead son when Jesus looked on her with compassion and raised her son from the dead. Later in Chapter 20 Luke will record Jesus criticizing the religious scribes because they “devour widows’ houses”, and then in Chapter 21 Luke will hold up a widow as the paradigm of generosity when she puts two small copper coins – the only money she had – in the Temple offering box.

All these references to widows reveal the desperate situation they faced in those times. Widows tended to be poor. They tended to be lonely. Life for widows was very precarious, and they were always on the brink of utter ruin.

So when Jesus says that a widow was approaching the unrighteous judge in verse 3, we’re not just supposed to think, “Oh, she lost her husband. That’s sad.” We’re supposed to think that she’s poor and desperate. She’s alone in the world and vulnerable. And to make things worse, she also has an enemy. She has an adversary who is opposing her. We don’t know who this adversary is, but we do know that this adversary has committed some grave injustice against her, and she has no one to turn to except for this unrighteous judge. So that’s what she does. She turns to him and cries, “Give me justice against my adversary”, and even though she’s refused again and again, she keeps coming back, because she knows that this unrighteous judge who neither fears God nor respects man is her only hope.

Jesus inserts the widow into the parable because he wants to give us a picture of the kind of desperation we’re supposed to have when we come to God and pray for justice. He wants us to know that God is our only hope, so that even when it seems like he’s refusing us, we will keep coming back to him in prayer.

For many of us, injustice may seem like a foreign concept. It always seems to happen “out there” rather than in our own lives. I’m thankful for that. But the sad reality is that it’s only a matter of time before injustice comes for us all.

To get a foretaste of what’s coming, all we need to do is look at our institutions of justice to see what trends are building in our country. For example, think of the Trinity Western case. Trinity Western is a Christian University in British Columbia that has wanted to start a law school for years. When they applied to have their law degrees accredited by the various provincial Law Societies, all of them said yes except three: British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Ontario.

Why? It wasn’t because the curriculum was subpar, or the facilities were inadequate, or there weren’t enough funds. The only reason was because Trinity Western asks all its students to abide by biblical morals, including those that relate to sexuality. These three Law Societies didn’t like that, so they rejected the proposed law school. That’s injustice. That’s injustice against the university, and that’s injustice against all the believers who hoped to study law in a Christian context. And recently, it’s an injustice that was declared to be just by our very own Supreme Court.

What about the Canada summer jobs grants controversy? Churches and Christian charities rely heavily on these grants to fund their summer programs, but this year many of them were denied funding because they refused to say that women have the right to abort their unborn children. Government funding isn’t being denied because of what Christians do. It’s being denied because of what Christians believe. That’s injustice.

There are countless other examples. Christian businessmen and women are being sued in the Human Rights Tribunal because of their beliefs. The Law Society in Ontario has started vetting lawyers to make sure they’re promoting so-called “tolerant” views of gender and sexuality. Changes to the Criminal Code are being considered by Parliament that will result in parents who use any force on their children being charged with assault, whether it be a slap on the wrist, a spank on the bum, or being carried where they don’t want to go. Under this proposed legislation, if you touch your kids without their consent, you’re committing a criminal offence.

When that kind of injustice knocks at our doors, whether it be the doors of our homes or the doors of our churches, Jesus wants us to remember to put our hope in God. I had the opportunity to be involved in the early stages of the Trinity Western case, so I can tell you that, when it comes to justice, it’s so easy to put our hope in man. We either hope in ourselves – in our ability to advocate, argue, and persuade – or we put our hope in earthly judges. We think, “Oh, if only we get this judge or that judge. Then everything will be ok.” Or “If only I can craft my argument *just right*, we’re definitely going to win.” There’s nothing wrong with working hard, or with refining your arguments, or with hoping for a certain judge. *But these things must not come at the expense of prayer.* We need to pray. We need to pray for justice. And we need to pray for justice desperately.

I think a lot of Christians don’t pray for justice because they just don’t care that much. They look at injustice and they think, “Well, a little persecution never hurt the church.” To be honest, that’s often been my mindset when it comes to injustice. But here’s the problem with this kind of thinking: just because injustice never hurt the church doesn’t make injustice right. Injustice is still *wrong*. It’s *sinful*. It’s a blemish on God’s good creation, and it shouldn’t exist in the world. That’s why injustice angers God, and that’s why injustice should anger us. The fact that a little persecution never hurt the church isn’t an excuse to ignore it. Rather, it’s a reminder that God is faithful to build his church regardless of what the world does to it.

If we care about what God cares about, then we must pray for justice. Yes, we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, but let’s remember to pray for justice as well. Let’s pray that God would forgive those who hurt us, but let’s also pray that the Lord would make right all the injustices that are committed against us.

That’s what the martyrs in heaven call for. Revelation 6 tells us that, even in the bliss of heaven, those who have been murdered for the sake of Christ cry out,

“O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:10)

God cares about justice for his people, so we should as well. We should care about it so much that we cry out for it day and night like desperate widows who have nowhere else to turn.

(3) **PRAY WITH FAITH**

Jesus wants us to pray with perseverance, and Jesus wants us to pray with desperation. Lastly, Jesus wants us to pray with faith. Of course, these three things aren’t separate and distinct. Praying with faith is the only way we pray with perseverance and desperation. But how do we increase our faith so that we become the kinds of people who pray with perseverance and desperation? That’s what we’re going to look at in our third and final point.

Jesus says that, at the core of it, praying for justice with perseverance and desperation is a matter of faith. Look at verse 8. He says, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find *faith* on earth?” Jesus is looking for people who persevere in prayer, because he’s looking for people who have faith.

In other words, he’s looking for people who trust God. You’re only going to pray to God day and night for justice if you trust him. If you don’t trust him, if you don’t believe he will give you justice, you’re not going to pray. Instead, you’re going to spend all your time finding other ways to get justice.

But Jesus wants us to trust God, and he helps us to trust God in this parable by reminding us of two things: who God is, and who God’s people are.

Who is God? He is the *righteous judge* *who always does what is just*. Jesus highlights this by contrasting the unrighteous judge with God, the righteous judge. In verse 2, Jesus tells us that the judge in the parable was a man who “neither feared God nor respected man.” This guy does whatever he wants. He doesn’t care about God, and he doesn’t care about people. The only thing he cares about is himself. When he judges, he’s not acting out of reverence for God or compassion for other people. His judgments serve the sole purpose of advancing his own, selfish interests.

So when this no-name widow approaches him with a request, he doesn’t grant her request, because it doesn’t benefit him in any way. She’s not a person of great influence, wealth, or power. The only thing she brings to the table is her need. But this judge isn’t in the business of meeting the needs of people like her, so he turns her away.

But she keeps coming. Again and again, she comes to him until he finally gives her what she wants. He gives her justice.

Why did he do that? It’s not because he’s become a just man between verses 2 and 4. In verse 4, he reflects on the fact that he still doesn’t fear God or respect man. The only reason why he gave her justice was because he was tired of her appeals. He says in verse 4, “I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.” He’s grown fed up with her constant appearances, so fed up that he gives her justice just to get rid of her.

Jesus’ lesson here is simply this: God isn’t like that! He’s the *righteous* judge who always does what is just! So if unrighteous judges can do what is just, how much more will God? Surely, if an unrighteous judge is capable of doing justice, then we can have confidence that God, the righteous judge, will give us justice every single time.

That’s who God is. He’s the righteous judge who always does what is just.

And who are God’s people? Verse 7 tells us that they are God’s *elect*. Today, if you’re a Christian, if you have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, then you are one of God’s chosen people. God set his love upon you before the creation of the world and made you his own. You belong to him. Always have, always will. You aren’t like the widow who approached the judge as a no-name stranger. You approach God as his son or daughter who was chosen by God from all eternity and named by him as one of his dearly loved children.

And we know how much God loves his chosen people by what he did to make us his people. He sent his Son, Jesus Christ himself, to die on the cross for our sins, so that everyone who trusts in Christ and believes in his name could become God’s people forever. God is the righteous judge. He always does what is just. And the justice that we deserved for our sins was an eternity apart from God in hell. But in his great love, God saved his chosen people by pouring out his justice on Christ instead of us on the cross, so that we could become the very children of God.

This is why we can approach God with confidence. This is why we can pray with faith. God is not like the unrighteous judge, and we are not like the lonely widow. God is *just*, and we are his beloved people, so we can have confidence that God will always give us justice when we ask.

**CONCLUSION**

So how do we grow in this area of caring for justice and praying for it? If this is something you’ve never prayed much about, where do you start? Here are some practical suggestions to get you started.

First, find some way to receive regular updates on justice issues affecting Christians in Canada. The Gospel Coalition Canada website is a great resource for this. You’ll learn all about the big issues affecting religious liberty in Canada from this website alone. Another resource is the Christian Legal Fellowship. This is a ministry I have served with over the years, and it’s led by godly people whom I trust. Their website and mailing lists will give you information on a lot more of the justice issues currently going on in Canada. A similar ministry is the Association for Reformed Political Action.

Second, learn about the suffering of our fellow believers around the world. Opendoors and Voice of the Martyrs are two common resources to learn about how Christians today are being persecuted, whether it be by their neighbours or their very own governments. When injustices are committed against our brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to pray. We need to pray that the Lord would give them persevering faith, and we need to pray that the Lord would give them justice.

Lastly, when injustice arrives at your door, whether it be because you unfairly lost your job, or someone brings a false accusation against you, or you’re mistreated because of your faith, don’t be afraid to pray for justice. Don’t buy the lie that you’re not as godly as you should be because you’re praying for justice to be done on your behalf. After all, the martyrs in heaven who no longer struggle with sin pray for exactly that. God doesn’t just care about justice. He cares about justice *for his chosen people*. So pray, pray for justice without embarrassment or reservation, and wait with patience and faith for God’s righteous justice.