

# The Justice of God

Psalm 34:1-22, Luke 18:1-14 (ESV)

October 2, 2005

“Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?” Again and again we have found that the Gospel according to Luke reads like a catechism, with key questions pointing to the main affirmation of the passage. This is no exception. “Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?” And as we have seen again and again, the repetition and variation of the question serve to emphasize it and therefore to elevate its importance. This is no exception. “Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?” Jesus answers his own two questions, quickly and directly: “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” Yes, God will give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night. No, he will not delay long over them. “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” This is good news. This is the major affirmation of the text: God will give justice to his elect, and he will do so speedily.

And then, as soon as that point is made, Jesus rushes on to another question: “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” And this question is not simply a catechism question. This question is not so much about teaching the faith as it is about inquiring into our faith. This question is direct, personal, and aimed right at you and me. “When the Son of Man comes,”—and we remember that “Son of Man” is a title, by which Jesus refers to himself—“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” Will you have faith? Will I have faith? That is the real question. It is aimed right at us. And no one else can answer it for us.

It is, I am convinced, to help us answer this third question that Jesus tells us the second parable, ostensibly about appropriate prayer and yet therefore at the same time also about the nature of true faith. That is to say, what Jesus is looking for in us with his question about faith he also sets before us in the second man in this second parable. So, there is still an element of the teaching catechism here, though we will find soon enough that we come back to direct, personal inquiry. “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even

lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.”

It is no accident that Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.” And it is no accident that Luke recorded this introduction for us so that we might know exactly what the parable intends to address. That is to say, trusting in oneself that one is righteous is not faithful, is not Christian, and will not be tolerated. Moreover, treating others with contempt is not faithful, is not Christian, and will not be tolerated. These two negative qualities are not only named but are also illustrated in the parable. The Pharisee in the parable both trusted in himself that he was righteous and also therefore treated others with contempt. This, then, in introduction and parable, is both the naming and also the illustrating of that which is not Christian faith, of that which the Son of Man does *not* want to find when he returns, but with which we are all too familiar.

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.’” This parable works better than any other parable I know. It gets me every time. You know what I mean. I have no sooner read about this despicable character than I break into a prayer of thanksgiving, “God, I thank you that I am not like that miserable Pharisee!” Then before I can say “Amen,” it hits me: By my praying that prayer, I *am* that Pharisee, trusting in myself that I am righteous and treating him with contempt! And then Jesus has me right where he wants me. Now I am ready to listen. Now I know I need some help. If my self-righteousness and contempt constitute the opposite of Christian faith, what is true faith?

“The tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” Now, that is Christian faith. The tax collector, working against his own people, widely assumed to be crooked, well despised and perhaps deservedly so, made no pretense of self-righteousness. He did not look down upon anyone else. He simply begged for mercy. Why did he do that? Not only because he needed it, but also and even more so because he believed and knew that God is merciful. That is the only possible basis for such a painful and exquisite prayer. He prayed that prayer because he believed and knew that God is merciful. There is no other explanation. And such knowledge of God’s mercy is Christian faith. “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” More of that in a moment.

Fifteen hundred years after Jesus told this parable, John Calvin, a theologian and reformer of the church, wrote, “Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and

sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup> Faith, then, is not believing something we cannot know. It is, instead, “a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence toward us.” It has to do with something we do know. That is to say, faith is knowing, in and through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, that God is merciful. And it is on the basis of this faith knowledge alone that we are made brave to pray, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” It is on the basis of this faith knowledge alone that we are healed of our sickness of trusting in ourselves that we are righteous. It is on the basis of this faith knowledge alone that we are relieved of that nastiness of treating others with contempt. It is through such knowing faith alone that we are, by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, justified. So let us join the tax collector in praying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” This is the gospel invitation to us in today’s reading.

Now, do you remember the first two questions and their answer? “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.” It is these first two questions and their answer at the end of the first parable which provide the basis for the affirmative answer to the tax collector’s prayer. It is these first two questions and their answer which provide the basis for the conclusion of the second parable, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.” At the same time, it is the tax collector’s prayer in the second parable that not only demonstrates for us the nature of Christian faith but that also tells us what the elect are to cry out for and that tells us what we ought always to pray for without losing heart. Let us examine this content a little more closely. You see, the poor widow in the first parable was up against an “unrighteous judge,” “who neither feared God nor respected man.” He did not care about her. He did not care about justice. He did not care about what was right. He had no inclination whatsoever to help her. And yet, because she kept coming to him and wore him down, he finally gave in, relented, and gave her the justice against her adversary for which she had asked so many times.

What a strange parable! Does it mean that God is like the unrighteous judge, so that we must weary him with our prayers? *No*, not at all! Of course not! What it means, instead, is quite the opposite, that God is not like him at all, that God is quick to answer prayer, that God does not delay, that God speedily gives justice.

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), cited by book, chapter, section, and, in parentheses, volume and page, 3.2.7 (1:551).

Thanks be to God! The point of this parable, that we “ought always to pray and not lose heart,” is not that we should pray out of despair and certainly not that we should pray desperately, but that we should pray and not lose heart, that we should pray confidently, that we should pray joyfully, that we should pray boldly, so that we ought always to pray believing and knowing that God is merciful, just as the tax collector prayed. Is this how we pray today?

There is a great divide in humanity between those who believe in the God and Father of Jesus Christ and those who do not. There is a great divide in humanity between those who trust in themselves that they are righteous and so treat others with contempt, and those who stand far off, do not even lift up their eyes to heaven, but beat their breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” There is a great divide in humanity between those who pray boldly and gladly and those who try to make it through life on their own. And this great divide has immense and eternal implications, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” This great divide will lead to a great reversal of everything we see in the world here, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” We dare not ignore this.

So while the first parable tells us that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is eager to give justice speedily, the second parable tells us that the justice which he gives is our justification. The justice that God gives to us is the forgiveness of our sin, the restoration to right relationship with God. That is what we ought always to pray for. That is the mercy for which we cry. The adversaries against which we seek justice are not of flesh and blood. The adversaries against which we seek justice are sin, death, and evil. And while they attack us from without, they also well up from within us. So the only justice we can have against them is the justification which God alone gladly gives to us, the forgiveness of a sinner, the mercy given to, and received by, those who believe and know that God is merciful. So let us always pray, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” Let this be our prayer, so that when the Son of Man comes, he will find such faith on earth, and he will find it in us.

*To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.*

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