

**KINGDOM LIVING NOW:
PERSISTENT PRAYER
AND TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE KINGDOM
LUKE 18:1-17
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Introduction

In our last sermon from Dr. Luke's Gospel Jesus warned of the fact that many people when he returned to fully consummate His Kingdom would be preoccupied with the things of this world rather than looking for Christ and preparing for God's judgment. In our passage this morning, Jesus teaches *how we should live our lives NOW* in light of the fact that the Kingdom has dawned in him and the full consummation and revelation of the Kingdom is imminent.

We are to remember Lot's wife; rather than being like Lot's wife (cf. 17:32), and others during the time of Noah and Lot who were unprepared and were caught unawares by God's judgment, we are to live prepared and expectantly prayerful lives in this present age (18:1-8). We are to trust in God's righteousness by faith alone and we are to find in this salvation the gospel of the Kingdom (18:9-14). In fact, as Kingdom people we are to be like little children not in our knowledge or in our behavior, but in our simple trust and hope in God (18:15-17).

We learned in our last sermon that the manifestation of God's Kingdom comes in three "acts" or stages: ***The Kingdom of God has come in Jesus (Matt. 13:11, 16-17; 12:28; Luke 11:20)...is coming in Jesus (Luke 9:27; Matt. 10:23; 16:28; Mark 9:1)...and will come in Jesus (Matt. 8:11-12; 13:39-42, 49-50; 25:31ff; cf. Luke 17:20-22).*** We should understand that according to the Gospels and the clear teaching of Jesus the Kingdom of God has three "acts" or stages of being revealed; the Kingdom of God is present in Jesus, is continuing to be manifested, and will come again in a consummate and climatic way at the end of time.

In our passage from Dr. Luke's gospel this morning, Jesus focuses our attention on Kingdom living NOW in light of the future Kingdom that has yet to fully be revealed and consummated at his Second Coming!

I. Perseverance in Prayerful Expectation of the Coming Kingdom (18:1-8)

Jesus has already taught His disciples to pray; Dr. Luke records this teaching for us in chapter 9 (see previous sermon):

^{ESV} Luke 11:1-8: Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them,

"When you pray, say: 'Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.'³ Give us each day our daily bread,⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation."⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves,⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him';⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything?'⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

A characteristic of Kingdom people NOW is perseverance in prayerful expectation of the coming Kingdom (v. 1: "to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart"). In contrast to those who are unprepared and continuing to live lives preoccupied by the things of this world (cf. 17:26-33), Kingdom people are to live by faith in prayerful expectation of Jesus' imminent return and the full consummation of His Kingdom.

The term "losing heart" in Greek [ἐγκακέω] means not growing discouraged or tired and weary in one's prayer for the Kingdom. The Kingdom has dawned in Jesus, but during this interim time as we await the full consummation and revelation of God's Kingdom in Christ, disciples can easily be distracted by worldly cares and can be discouraged by worldly opposition to their faith- -they must pray and hope in God!

In this world of sin and misery, the disciples of Christ will have joy, but they are often burdened by sin, temptation and persecutions (cf. 17:22ff- There is a desire sometimes to see the coming Son of Man NOW rather than waiting). It is easy for true disciples of the Kingdom when undergoing many years of frustrations as we wait for the Coming of the Son of Man to grow discouraged and tired in our journey. God's timing is perfect, and His Kingdom will come when men least expect it (see last sermon), but God's people are to hold on to hope in Christ and pray!

The point that Jesus is making here is about praying in an ongoing manner or "again and again". What is the exact content of the prayer: That God's just judgment will come and that the Son of man will return soon (part of the larger context of Luke 17:20-37). We should understand that there is a general aspect to the praying Jesus is speaking of. When Jesus is teaching that disciples should "always pray" (v. 1) he is using "prayer" as a metonym for confidence and hope in God whatever one's situation (cf. Green, NICNT, pg. 639). We should have confidence in God and His present sovereign rule (this is what "prayer" represents).

The prayerful hope and expectation of God's people should be that the full consummation and revelation of God's Kingdom will come, and coming kingdom includes salvation for God's people, including their vindication before God and man, as well as the just judgment of the unrighteous.

^{ESV} Luke 21:36 But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

The Parable of the Persistent Widow

In order to instruct His disciples, Jesus tells another parable story in chapter 18, verses 1-8. The story is about a judge who neither feared God nor respected man (v. 2), and a widow who persistently persevered in coming to him for justice (v. 3). The judge (although not a loving man) eventually gives the woman justice because of her persistence or “continual coming” to him (v. 5).

The unrighteous judge was not a person to show mercy or compassion or justice; he simply did not care- -particularly for the poor, widowed, and orphaned (cf. Exodus 22:22-24; Deut. 24:17-18; Psalm 68:5). The judge did not care what anyone thought about him and yet this widow showed persistence in seeking justice from him (although he was unjust).

The widow who was powerless sought the powerful judge with persistence and was granted her request. Widows in Israel and scripture symbolized the ultimate state of vulnerability and weakness, and yet the widow continues to seek justice in her humble and helpless state.

It is important to notice in verse 4 that there was a time in the widow’s experience when her persistence was not paying off: “For a while he refused” [Gk. ἐπὶ χρόνον—*unspecified passage of time*]her request for justice against her adversary. “Afterward” he changed his mind and acted.

The point here is that the widow did not focus on the length of time, but that she persistently sought justice no matter how long it would took!

You can imagine when the judge would climb the bench and take his judgment chair, he would look over his docket and agenda for the day, and look up and there was that silly widow again! How irritating she must have seemed to this uncaring and unrighteous and unjust judge.

In response to this irritating widow who is climbing on the nerves of this judge, he thinks to himself: “Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering [παρέχω –“troubling”] me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming” (vv. 4-5). Literally, the woman was “wearing the judge out” (or “badgering” the judge) by her persistence and so he was frustrated. The language Jesus uses as recorded by Dr. Luke is startling (and even humorous). The word that is translated as “beat me down” [ὑπωπιάζη] is language used in the boxing ring and means “to give a black eye” (Green, NICNT, pg. 641; see also BAGD).

In the judge’s soliloquy (vv. 4-5), he reveals some important truths about himself. The judge realizes he fears neither God nor man; he doesn’t care a whit for the poor widow, but she is riding his nerves and bothering him. Because he is self-centered, he just wants to do whatever it takes to rid his world of her- -even if it means showing her justice and giving her what she wants. In giving her what she wants, that she has gone to such persistent and untiring measures to obtain, he will get the peace that he

desires. He acts justly toward her because of his own needs, not hers! She is a nuisance to him and he wants to rid his world of this pest!

In contrast to this unrighteous judge, Jesus is implicitly comparing the judge's unrighteous, irritating response with God's righteous character and response. The *a fortiori* ("from the lesser to the greater") argument is: ***"If an unrighteous judge eventually gives into a persistent widow although he does not fear God nor respect man, will not God who is righteous and loving toward his elect give them eventual justice in the midst of their suffering in this world of sin and misery?"*** (vv. 7-8). Will God in his mercy and love ***NOT answer the persistent prayers of his people?***

This widow serves as an example of how Kingdom disciples are to pray: persistently. We dare not press this parable literally and think of God as an unjust judge or that he is irritable. Rather, the focus is on how God will much more grant our persistent prayer requests because he is not like the unjust and irritable judge. If an unjust and unrighteous self-centered judge will grant a persistent widow's request, how much more will God grant the persistent requests of his children! (cf. Bock, Vol. II, pg. 1450).

Jesus asks rhetorically: "And will not God give justice to his elect who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" -v. 7 The implied answer is "no" - "of course not!" Remember examples of other widows in Scripture who were devoted to prayer? There was Anna who worshiped in the temple with fasting and prayer "night and day" (Luke 2:37); the Apostle Paul teaches widows to continue in prayer "night and day" (1 Timothy 5:5).

As Jesus says: "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33). In light of the victorious vindication-resurrection-ascension of Christ Jesus our LORD, who suffered great humiliation and disrespect and even death itself, we should expect nothing less as His disciples. We must live our lives in light of Christ's vindication and realize that although we might undergo real difficulties in this world of sin and misery, we can trust in God who will eventually vindicate us and grant justice to his children- -his elect.

Are you disrespected in this world because of your humble position in Christ? Are you persecuted for your faith? Are you sometimes treated unfairly? Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth; blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you because of me" Jesus says (Matt. 5:3-14). We are to prayerfully seek God persistently, knowing that He will answer our prayers- -in his perfect timing as Sovereign Lord. We must not focus on the time period, but on God Himself who loves us as His children.

Jesus is teaching his disciples the importance of persevering prayerfully in reliance upon God's grace by seeking God and His Christ for more grace each day as they anticipate and await the coming of the Kingdom - -even when it seems the return of Christ has been so delayed that some imagine it will never come (cf. Rev. 22:20).

Persisting in prayer will keep His people from being too preoccupied with the things and stuff of this present world-age.

Remember in the larger context from our sermon last week (17:11-37) when Jesus said that his full Kingdom consummation or revelation of the Son of Man in all his exalted glory would happen in the future ***that many would not be expecting him*** (cf. v.8b). He says “As it was in the days of Noah and Lot, so it will be in the days of the coming of the Son of Man” (cf. 17:26, 28).

Remember that Jesus’ focus on the days of Noah and Lot were not on their sinfulness necessarily, but upon their preoccupied lives of busy-ness (which is extremely relevant for our culture, too!).

It is significantly interesting to note in light of other passages of teaching from Jesus that the activities that characterized the people of Noah’s time were normal daily activities (although they were indeed a greatly sinful people, Gen. 6:5, 11). These normal daily activities had taken priority in their lives and caused them to live sinful (but “normally sinful”) lives without thought of the coming of the Kingdom.

Jesus is saying that the days of the coming (or full and consummate) manifestation of His Kingdom will be a time when men and women with no regard for their sins are just going about their normal daily business of eating, drinking, doing business, getting prepared for marriage, marrying, planting and building, and that these things have become such a priority and they have become so preoccupied by them that they are not concerned with anything but their own life-pursuits (17:26-32)!

To put this in modern terms and images: Jesus is saying that when he returns people will be going out to eat at their favorite restaurants, preparing the grill for some hamburgers, inviting friends over for wine, going to work on a Wednesday morning in traffic, purchasing *Bride’s* and *Modern Bride* magazines, planning reception parties and picking out gowns, planting new trees in the back yard, and building new homes and building on to their present homes...when Jesus Christ comes back to judge the world.

The imagery is “normal living” that is focused on the fact that life will go on in the light on Main Street in “Our Town” USA, not that life in the sinful darkness with underhanded dealings, death, crime, murder etc. in the back alley of Gotham City- - and Jesus will return. But that for many, their lives have been placed before God- - even “good and nice” people—***and they will be unprepared at Jesus’ coming!***

The people will certainly NOT be looking for, nor prepared for the full manifestation of God’s Kingdom revealed in Christ’s return! This is why Jesus says the righteous person who is fully possessed by Christ and therefore an heir of the Kingdom will not be characterized by running off their roof on that apocalyptic day and seeking to protect his goods and possessions (which are images of their “lives”- v.31- -They won’t be trying to save their latest issue of *Bride’s Magazine* or their

wedding dress, or their grills, or their hopes, plans, and dreams in this age that is passing away!).

In contrast to this speedy and rapid (unrelentless!) busy-ness of Jesus' culture as well as ours - -we are to pray, and seek God in an ongoing and persistent manner. We are to prayerfully ask God to help us during this time of suffering and temptation (17:22), and to seek the LORD for grace to be satisfied with being fully granted our justice and vindication when he returns (18:8).

But the question that Jesus leaves open: "When the Son of Man comes (on this day in the future to consummate and reveal and manifest His Kingdom reign as the exalted-glorified Son of the Living God) will he find faith on earth?"

Will he find those who persevere before God prayerfully? Or will he merely find proud self-gratified and self-satisfied and self-motivated and self-centered people preoccupied with possessions and stuff in their lives. Remember what Jesus has said numerous times in his preaching in different ways:

ESV Luke 17:33 Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.

Our persistence (or lack thereof) in prayer reveals a lot about what we believe concerning God, and whether we truly believe that He will graciously answer his children! Even though we may suffer great tribulation in this world because of our confessing Christ (John 16:33), nevertheless, we are to remember that God will remember his children and at the Coming of Christ will vindicate them and rescue them and ultimately deliver them from sin and evil.

No matter who long the time period may seem (2 Peter 3:6ff), we are to remain persistent in prayer, seeking God for his righteous vindication.

ESV Romans 8:33-34: Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (v. 8). Jesus is asking all of his disciples to consider that not all will be persistently and prayerfully looking for him when he returns.

This again is a warning about being prepared and watchful for his coming as he has said many times before in Dr. Luke's Gospel (Luke 12:35, 40, 43, 46; 17:24, 26-30). Another way of saying this is that those who persistently seek God in prayer (similar to the persistence shown by the woman even when it didn't seem she was going to get an answer) shows forth the true faith of a Kingdom disciple who is eagerly anticipating our Lord's return.

Our faith is strengthened by prayer, even if it seems God is slow to answer; God is gracious and loving to his elect, he will act swiftly and suddenly when Christ returns (v. 8a)- -but for now we must be patient.

ESV Philippians 3:20-21: But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

II. Justification by Faith Alone and Humility in the Kingdom (18:9-14)

A second important way of living NOW in light of the future Kingdom is living humbly by faith in *God's imputed righteousness found in Jesus Christ*. This is very much related to our Lord's teaching on persistent prayer. Persistent prayer reveals our humility, trust and our total dependence upon God. This humility should be what characterizes us before God and man. We should not be those who are "self-possessed" (one commentator called this the *Parable concerning the Self-Possessed* and I think that is a good summary, Green, NICNT, pg. 644).

This second parable (v. 9) teaches us about humility before God and man- -especially humility in light of our sinful condition. As the people of God we must be confident *in God and not ourselves*. We must be confident in God's *mercy* and not in any supposed works that we have performed that we think are *meritorious*.

Pharisees and Teachers of the Law during Jesus' time thought of themselves more highly than they should have- -they "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (v. 9). This man sadly trusted in his own righteousness rather than trusting God for a righteousness that only He could grant in Christ

[Note: The man literally "trusted in" and had confidence in himself for righteousness *πεποιθότας ἐφ' ἑαυτοῖς*; we must understand that those who are characterized by "trusting in themselves" are opposed to trusting in God because they depend upon themselves wholly and not God- -therefore they are not characterized by persistent prayer!].

This Pharisee would have agreed with three notable modern people who characterize and represent the hubris and folly in the thinking of many today who confess "I have faith in me" (these three quotations are from a great literary genius, a reprobate, and a woman runner):

"Read a work on the literary characterization of genius today, and this awoke in me the conviction that I am a remarkable man both as regards capacity and eagerness to work. I have not yet met a single man who was morally as good as I....I do not remember an instance in my life when I was not attracted to what is good and was not ready to sacrifice anything to it."

"I believe in me. I'm God. God is your need to believe in some super being. I am the super being. I am your God, admit it."

“I believe in me more than anything in this world”.

Incidentally, if you are of this mindset you can also purchase a book for children entitled “I Believe in Me: A Book of Affirmations” that helps you become self-possessed and self-centered at an early age.

Jesus contrasts two men and two prayers: (1) A Pharisee and (2) A tax collector. As we have learned in previous sermons, Jesus uses this contrast to shock his audience of disciple-learners. The Pharisee would have been greatly respected for his outward display of religion and would have enjoyed great prosperity and position in Israel. Although modern Christians think differently about the Pharisees, we must remember and understand in Jesus’ time they were the most admired and popular Jewish leaders of their time.

The Pharisee was part of the most conservatively pious movement in Israel during Jesus’ time. Contrastly, tax collectors were deviants of low status who were despised and hated as scum in Israel because they were seen as traitors in being employed by Rome to tax the Jewish people; tax collecting was the most hated profession in Jesus’ time (Bock, Vol. II, pg. 1461; Hughes compares tax collectors with modern pimps and drug pushers, *Luke*, pg. 192).

But as Jesus has shown many times in his ministry, it is a true heart of humility and a contrite spirit before God and man that God requires (cf. Isaiah 57:15).

ESV **Isaiah 57:15** *For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

How does Jesus describe these two men? Both of the men go up to the Temple to seek God; both are religious outwardly; both pray. In other words, both of the men are not blatant and unrepentant sinners but “church-going folk” or part of the visible Church. At this time in redemptive-history, you will remember that the temple was where God dwelled to meet with his people. At the coming of Christ this is passing away as merely typological and symbolic because God’s dwelling with man is now in Jesus Christ and His revealed Kingdom. But the point is that these men were seeking God where he dwelled in the Old Covenant economy or time period.

The Pharisee

His position: Stands by himself (v. 11) - This position reveals his supposed self-importance before God. The Pharisee attempts in his position to stand by himself to make himself distinct from the “sinful tax collector” before God (probably in the “inner court” of the Temple nearer God’s presence). The Pharisee by his position thinks that God owes him something and that he has merited God’s justice (cf. Luke 17:10). ***“I have faith in me.”***

His prayer: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” The Pharisee is thankful that he is not like this sinful man as he prays full of presumption. The Pharisee is specifically listing his righteousness before God’s Law (“I do not steal; I do not commit adultery; I do not

covet” etc. cf. 1 Cor. 5:10-11). We should all give thanks to God for his help to us in avoiding sin, but we should be realistic about our hearts before the Law of God; the Pharisee is NOT being realistically honest before God’s Holy Law (Rom. 3:23; Gal. 3:21 ff).

The problem with the Pharisee is not in his thanking God for the ability to avoid sin; rather he is contemptuously self-righteous before God; he believes that he has a righteousness inherent in himself and that he has a right unfairly to judge another man’s heart just because he is a tax collector (although he is a repentant one! Cf. Luke 15:1 ff).

In fact, he literally prays to himself! The RSV rightly translates v. 11 as ***“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself...”*** The Pharisee’s focus is on himself - not God! Notice the use of “I’s” in his prayer! Professor Blomberg notes that v. 9 can be translated: “He also to this parable to some ***who were continually in a state of confidence that they were righteous...***” (*Preaching the Parables*, pg. 160).

The Pharisee judges the other man not on his profession of faith, or his manifest repentance and actual devotion or service to God, but on what the man does for a living (“like this tax collector” he compares the other man to himself in v. 11; this doesn’t mean that there are not illegitimate and sinful vocations, but that in the case of the man in this vocation of tax collecting, there had been repentance for his sins). The Pharisee judges his own self-righteousness by comparing himself with others.

His works: “I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get, etc.” This is a religious man! Don’t underestimate this fact. Fasting *twice a week* would be considered by many in Jesus’ day and in our own as a true and real display of righteousness and religion that would be the envy of all. He actually gave tithes of all that he got - how many of you have done that?! He (thinks he!!) is going above and beyond the requirements of the Mosaic Law because that’s the kind of great guy that he is!

He is not merely fasting as required on the Day of Atonement, but fasting above and beyond the law’s requirements by doing it weekly - two times! He is tithing faithfully in giving a tithe on all that he gets!

This Pharisee is truly religious - ***but he is NOT righteous!***

Ezekiel 33:12-13: “And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. ¹³ Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die.

There are other Rabbinical prayers that have been recorded during this time period and one is as follows: “I thank Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou hast put my part with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit at the corners (money-

changers and traders). For, I rise early and they rise early: I rise early to the words of the Law, and they to vain things. I labor and they labor: I labor and receive a reward, they labor and receive no reward. I run and they run: I run to the life of the world to come, and they to the pit of destruction”

Another prayer of the Rabbis reveals the Rabbi speaking on behalf of all of Israel and saying: “Lord of the world, judge me not as those who dwell in the big towns (such as Rome): among whom there is robbery, and uncleanness and vain and false swearing” (Quoted in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, pg. 677).

Many of the Psalms (especially those called *Thanksgiving Psalms*) begin with thanks to God like the Pharisee, but then the Psalms speak of the great acts and works of God- -not what his people have done (In fact, many times the Psalms speak of the unfaithfulness of the people in light of God’s faithfulness, cf. Psalm 78). The Pharisee begins well with thanks to God, but then does not give God the glory and the honor due to His Holy Name for his Great acts of mercy and salvation (see Psalms 30, 92, 118, 136, 138).

What is the difference between religious and righteous before God? A religious person can merely go through the outward, external motions of religious practices (tithing, fasting, praying, etc), but have a self-centered, unloving, unforgiving and judgmental heart concerning God and their neighbor. The people who are warned are the self-righteous. How does one know if one is self-righteous?

“Self-righteous” simply means one is dependent upon one’s own supposed righteous life or works that causes God to act toward them with reward and salvation. “Self-righteous” has many proud symptoms that come with it (thinking proudly of oneself, snubbing others, judgmental tendencies and tendencies to better see the sins of others rather than one’s own sins, etc.) but at the heart of the self-righteous is a can-do confidence more in what they have done for God rather than what God has graciously done for them! As one commentator aptly wrote: “This man glances at God, but contemplates only himself” (Quoted in Geldenhuys, pg. 452).

While one may not be a full blown self-centered self-righteous person, nevertheless as this Pharisee, there can be tendencies even for Christians on a daily basis. Putting our focus on what we do for God (tithing, service, fasting, prayers, etc); thinking we are profitable servants who deserve something before God (cf. 17:10).

As Pastor Kent Hughes says so well about many well-meaning Evangelical Christians today: “They began the walk as Augustinians (understanding that everything is because of the grace of God) but later began to live as Pelagians (living as if it were all due to their virtues)” (pg. 194). Christians can become confident in their own self-righteousness.

The Apostle Paul was a former Pharisee (presumably) like this man in the parable, and he too had a “righteous list” that he checked twice to find out if he was naughty

or nice; but in Christ, Paul put that behind him and considered it a heap of dung (or cow manure!):

ESV Philippians 3:3-14: For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh-⁴ though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith-¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul learned that the true righteousness that God requires to be saved is the righteousness that God provides in Jesus Christ!

The Apostle Paul wanted to be found in Christ (v. 9) not having a righteousness of his own, but one that comes through faith in Christ. In fact, Paul the former Pharisee came to rightly see himself before God's Holy Law:

ESV 1 Timothy 1:15 The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

All disciples can be tempted to live a lifestyle of mere external religion while secretly and impenitently living in disobedience before God. We can be tempted to compare our "righteousness" with others "righteousness" and then judge others unfairly in their sins, forgetting our own sins before God. We can all be tempted to think of ourselves as more righteous or more highly than we ought before God. If we're reading the Law correctly, this should never be our presumption! As the Apostle Paul teaches:

ESV Philippians 2:1-3: So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.³ Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

ESV Romans 12:3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

A righteous person in contrast (like the tax collector here) realizes that he has nothing to offer God but his sinfulness and he turns to God for mercy, forgiveness and the righteousness that only God can give through imputation (see Romans 1:16ff; 4:1ff).

The Tax Collector

His position: Stands far off in humility not even able to lift his eyes to heaven because of the knowledge of his sinful unrighteousness (v. 13). His position “far off” teaches us that he probably prayed not in the central part of the temple but on the outer edges of the Court of the Gentiles further away from the presence of God’s presence.

He is unworthy to approach God; he reveals his knowledge of his unworthiness in his very position, posture and stance. This man does not claim to judge other men based on mere external law keeping; this man does not claim to have been faithful according to God’s Law himself; this man claims nothing for himself- -and seeks the mercy of God which is his only hope (as well as *our only hope!*).

His prayer: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*” The repentant tax collector (15:1ff) recognizes that his only hope is found in God’s mercy. The repentant tax collector recognizes that his only characterization and designation before a holy God is “sinner”.

His works: None worth mentioning. The repentant tax collector realizes that if he were to ask for God’s justice as a sinner, he would get what he deserves: He would be the recipient of God’s wrath and holy justice. Therefore, he seeks God for mercy; he seeks God for what he does not deserve- -salvation and forgiveness and peace with God.

“Lord Have ‘Atonement-Blood Mercy’ Upon Me...”

The mercy [ἱλάσθητί -*hilastheti*] that the tax collector seeks after from God is particularly the kind of mercy shown in propitiation and atonement for one’s sins (see Lev. 17:11; cf. Heb. 10:4; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2). The tax collector’s prayerful plea could be translated: “God be *propitiated* for me” (Blomberg, pg. 161).

The Greek word translated “mercy” here is from the Greek verb *hilaskomai* which means “**to propitiate**” or show mercy through propitiation (the Apostle Paul uses it in the sense of “atoning sacrifice”). ***Atonement or propitiation should be understood as the reception of God’s grace because God has accepted the substitute of Christ in our place and has removed his wrath from us.*** Christ has stood in our place as the cursed one who received God’s wrath and shed his blood so that our sins could be blotted out and we could be reconciled with God.

In the Septuagint (LXX-translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek) this verb is used from the Hebrew *kipper* which means “to cover” or “to atone” in the Old Testament. It is used in these Psalms of David:

*^{ESV} Psalm 51:1 TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN NATHAN THE PROPHET WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*

ESV Psalm 79:9 Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake!

The tax collector is asking for God to atone for his sins. This is the full redemption that is found in Christ alone that the Apostle Paul further speaks of in Romans 3:24-26 when he is describing the righteousness that God provides in Jesus and the unrighteousness of mankind because of their sins under the law (Rom. 3:19ff):

ESV Romans 3:23-26: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The word translated “propitiation” [ἱλαστήριον] in Romans 3:25 is the atoning blood of Jesus Christ and the same word that is used by the repentant tax collector crying out for God’s mercy. The repentant tax collector asks for God’s mercy through atoning, propitiating forgiveness that is found in Christ alone. The tax collector asks for “atonement blood mercy” that covers and removes our sins, and takes away God’s wrath. Why? Because Christ’s blood has been shed and He has suffered under God’s wrath so that men like the tax collector and other believers who cry out for mercy might be forgiven and justified.

As the Book of Hebrews teaches in chapter 9 the mercy seat in the Old Covenant was the place where atoning forgiveness and a covering for one’s sins was found. What that “mercy seat” or “atonement cover” symbolized is now found in the perfect and final redemption of Jesus Christ:

ESV Hebrews 9:11-12: But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Jesus Christ shed his blood on not the typological and symbolic mercy seat or atonement cover found in the Tabernacle, but has shed his precious blood once and for all on the mercy seat in heaven at God’s feet to atone for the sins of all who call upon the name of the LORD- -even wicked and sinful tax collectors. The blood that God offers to us to cover or atone for our sins is found by faith in Jesus- -and this repentant tax collector is forgiven (as are we when we seek God for his forgiving and atoning mercy in Christ).

The revealed hearts of the two men before God: Both men had “gone up” (v. 10) to seek God; One came back down to his house justified before God; one did not. Bock wrote interestingly: “Position in the temple means nothing; the position of the heart means everything.” One man came home “saved” from God’s wrath, imputed with Christ’s righteousness before God; one man did not and the wrath of God continued to abide upon him (cf. John 3:18, 36).

The repentant tax collector went back down to his house justified. That is, he was in a righteous state and had righteous standing before God based on the righteousness that God imputed to him by faith alone.

The message: For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."- 14b

God requires perfect righteousness in order to enter heaven (Matt. 5:48). That perfect righteousness is not found in even our best works for God. That perfect righteousness that God requires of all mankind, he provides and gives to all who believe in Christ Jesus. In Christ Jesus, his perfect righteousness is imputed to us by faith. Paul teaches in Romans 1:16-17:

ESV Romans 1:16-17: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The assurance of God's mercy can come to all who believe that Jesus Christ's final sacrifice of blood was shed to atone and extend forgiving mercy to all those who believe. Kingdom disciples must be like the persistent widow and the tax collector in their faith, and they also must be like children.

III. The Kingdom belongs to the Children (18:15-17)

Finally, in our passage some people are rebuked by the ignorant disciples for bringing infants to Jesus (v. 15b)!

But Jesus says: "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (v. 16)

The Pharisees and Teachers of the law hindered men from coming to Jesus, but especially infants due to their traditions.

Jesus says that to such as children belongs the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is for children- -not the childish! Jesus is not teaching his disciples to be ignorant like children (that is without as much knowledge as adults); Jesus is not teaching for his disciples to act like children (that is to be childish in their Christian walk); he is teaching them to be primarily trusting like children.

We are to trust God by faith in the simple way that children trust their parents.

ESV Luke 9:47-48: But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great."

ESV Matthew 18:2-3: And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

In fact, the reception of the Kingdom of God must be like a child (v. 17). An infant or child is God's example of the attitude in which all mankind should receive Christ's revealed Kingdom NOW.

Do you believe? Call upon God with persistent prayer, knowing that as a disciple he loves you and will perfectly answer your prayers as your loving Heavenly Father.

Think about how God has redeemed you and shown you mercy; avoid self-confidence and self-righteousness in your thinking by God's grace- -concentrate and focus on the mercy of God show in the atonement of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ shed his blood on the Mercy Seat at God's right hand and pleads his blood as our defense attorney before the Holy Law of God and God the Judge (cf. 1 John 2:1-2). Let us seek not what we deserve from God, but atoning, propitiating mercy that is found in the blood of Christ.

Let us have confidence in the perfect righteousness that is given and imputed to us by faith. This is the right standing before God that all men need to avoid his coming wrath! Remember that as bad as you may have been (like the tax collector), through repentance and faith in God's substitutionary sacrifice in Christ, you can go home justified today!

Let us enter the Kingdom then as children- -not as childish people- -but as loving and trusting children who know that our father knows best.

Thanks be to God for His Word! Thanks be to God for His Christ who atones for sinners!

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Next Sermon: "*Eternal Riches*"

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Scripture Lesson

^{ESV} **Isaiah 57:15** For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

^{ESV} **Ezekiel 33:11-16:** Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? ¹² "And you, son of man, say to your people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses, and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness, and the righteous shall not be able to live by his righteousness when he sins. ¹³ Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die. ¹⁴ Again, though I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' yet if he turns from his sin and does what is just and right, ¹⁵ if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, and walks in the statutes of life, not doing injustice, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ¹⁶ None of the sins that he has committed shall be remembered against him. He has done what is just and right; he shall surely live.

^{ESV} **Ezekiel 21:26** thus says the Lord GOD: Remove the turban and take off the crown. Things shall not remain as they are. Exalt that which is low, and bring low that which is exalted.

^{ESV} **Ezra 9:5-6**: And at the evening sacrifice I [Ezra] rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, ⁶ saying: "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens.

^{ESV} **Psalm 51:1-3, 16-17**: TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN NATHAN THE PROPHET WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ^{ESV} **Psalm 51:16-17**: For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

^{ESV} **Luke 11:1-8**: Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say: "Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread, ⁴ and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation." ⁵ And he said to them, "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, ⁶ for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; ⁷ and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? ⁸ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs.

^{ESV} **Luke 17:26-33**: Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. ²⁸ Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot- they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ²⁹ but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all- ³⁰ so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. ³² Remember Lot's wife. ³³ Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.