

The Lowly and the Lofty

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, I wonder where you see yourself in the packing order in life, whether it's in your workplace or in society more generally.
- Perhaps you feel like you're at the bottom, without much power or saying, where your voice isn't heard nor your opinion sought.
- And you always feel that you're on the losing end. If that's how you see yourself, then you are probably what I would call the lowly. Perhaps instead you feel like you're at the other end, in a position of authority or privilege.
- You have wealth, connections, and with them advantages. When you talk, people pay attention. They praise you for your achievements or talents, whether you deserve it or not.
- Well, if that's you, then you're part of what I would call the lofty, at the top of the packing order. Now, neither positions are good or bad in themselves.
- [1 : 0 4] You are where you are, I suppose. And sometimes you might even find yourself at both ends, maybe at the top in an organization, but then at the bottom in society generally, or vice versa, something like that.
- But wherever you are, the two parables here today are intended for you. I think the first is for those who are lowly, and for the second, those who are lofty.
- Now, it's not obvious at first why I would say the first parable is for the lowly or oppressed, but I'll read it again, and then I'll explain. So, verse 1, Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.
- He said, In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought, and there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, Grant me justice against my adversary.
- For some time he refused, but he finally said to himself, Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.
- [2 : 1 4] And the Lord said, Listen to what the unjust judge says, and will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?
- Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?
- Now, I always like it when the Bible tells you what a parable is for. And it says so quite plainly in verse 1, doesn't it? First, Jesus taught them this parable to encourage the disciples to pray.
- But second, he also urges them not to give up, even when God appears not to be answering. And we need to hear that instruction, don't we?
- Because being prayerful in all things is something that needs to be learned. As humans, we need to train ourselves to turn to God habitually for all things.
- [3 : 1 8] And then when we do, not to give up. which is where I think I struggle with because I think I can normally remember to pray to God about something for the first time.

But, you know, maybe this is an unrealistic expectation, but I sort of feel that when I ask someone for something once, I don't need to repeat myself, do I?

I mean, if you're parents or teachers, you'll get that. Except my mistake is to think that God is my student or my child because he's not.

And that's where the parable comes in because in this parable, Jesus reminds his disciples just who they're praying to. You see, when we pray to God, we're not praying to a child or to our student.

Rather, we're praying to the judge of the world. He's not obliged to answer us, but he's absolutely the right person to be praying to because he is the one that will bring about all justice and righteousness in this world.

[4 : 29] And even though God does not need to answer us, actually, his desire is to do just that, to hear us. That's what he longs for us to do.

And so, even though we may feel at times that God is slow to respond, we mustn't give up. For you see, in the parable, if the widow is able to move the unjust judge who cares nothing for God, who cares nothing for justice, who cares nothing for this woman, then how much more God who cares for justice and who cares for us?

Jesus, therefore, is asking us whenever we pray to always remember God's character, to remember that he's loving and just and that he's actually faithful to his promises and his character.

But that, of course, doesn't mean that he will just answer any old prayer for us, but only in the way that brings true justice. That's the focus of the parable, isn't it? Jesus isn't saying that if we pester God long enough, then he'll eventually just give us what we want.

Rather, if you look at the things that are being mentioned, and particularly in verse 7, he says that God answers those who cry to him day and night for justice. God's promise is to bring justice for his chosen ones.

[5 : 52] He will not keep putting them off forever. And that's why I said earlier that this parable is really for the lowly. You have to remember that the disciples are people of no consequence.

In the Roman Empire, there were nobodies. And even in the Jewish hierarchy, they were nobodies. They were people without power. And so when Jesus addresses this parable to them, he's recognizing the lowly position from which they are praying, where they generally have no power to right what is wrong.

You see, if you're in the top of the pecking order, let's say you're a leader or a judge or someone with power, then even though you should pray and even though you do pray, you also have the power to effect change, don't you?

That's what people in authority have. And so while you may pray to God to help you lead rightly and justly, the idea of then not giving up is not quite applicable to you, is it?

Because once you pray, it's then your responsibility to bring about what you've just prayed for. But if on the other hand you're powerless and you're lowly or oppressed because of your lack of power, then the encouragement not to give up makes sense, doesn't it?

[7 : 09] Don't give up trusting that God will bring justice because you can't bring it about. Keep resting all your hope on Him in prayer. Even when you can't see that He's doing anything at the moment.

And Jesus promises now in verse 8 that God will see that they get justice and quickly. But of course what quickly means may not be what we expected to mean, do we?

You see, if you look in the Bible, God works to a very different time span. Take Abraham and Sarah. They had to wait many decades before their son was born.

Or Israel when they were crying out to the Lord in slavery in Egypt. It took more than a hundred years for God to answer. Even the promises of salvation at the time of Jesus' birth, they didn't come to pass till He died on the cross, did He?

30, 33 years after it was made. And so quickly as a promise from God is not what we expect. Quickly still involves waiting patiently.

[8 : 22] Which is why Jesus then asks in verse 9, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? That's how long we have to wait, isn't it?

That's how long we have to keep praying. Because justice will only finally come in full when Jesus returns. For that is God's ultimate promise that all things will be put right when Christ returns.

And in one sense, everything else in between from now to then is really, you know, a stop-get measure. You know, when someone gets, a murderer gets life imprisonment, it doesn't bring back the life that they took away, does it?

And often when we see one injustice being stopped, it often leads to or doesn't stop others from occurring, does it?

And think about your own life. did you realize that every little wrong thing you did, every sin that you did is actually an injustice to someone else? What about those that go unpunished?

[9 : 35] Well, Jesus says that when he comes again, it will all be dealt with. It will all be put right. And it will be put right in one of two ways. Either by sinners like us seeking refuge in Christ's death as the way justice is served on our behalf at the cross, that is, justice is served by what God Christ had already done on the cross in the past, or else, for those who refuse Christ's offer of salvation, then justice will be served by them having to give an account to the Lord.

And I don't know which one you would choose, but I am probably not going to take a bet on my own account. I would be claiming the blood of Jesus. And I hope you will as well, putting your trust in Jesus instead of what you can say to defend yourself.

But to the point of prayer, Jesus urges his disciples to keep his second coming firmly fixed in their minds when they pray. They are to remember that even if justice doesn't come, they mustn't lose faith in God, but to keep praying because it will come when Jesus returns.

And so it's that same prayer that Habakkuk had in his prophecy which Brendan read. We looked at the start and the end of that prophecy for at the start he complains to the Lord, doesn't he? How long, Lord, must I call for help and you do not listen?

He's saying, look around God and see the violence. How long must I cry out but you do not save? And yet, by the end of that prophecy, he finally gets God's mind just a little.

[11 : 18] He appreciates God's timing and so he says in chapter 3, yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity or judgment to come on the nations invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the field produces no food, though there are no sheep, no cattle, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will be joyful in God my Savior. Now, things must be pretty dark, isn't it, for them to get to no food, no produce, no sheep, no cattle. And yet, Habakkuk is saying, even when we get to that point, he's going to still have faith in God so that when God finally comes, he'll find Habakkuk living by faith or as he says in Habakkuk 2, verse 4, the righteous will live by faith.

So I wonder whether you are feeling like that right now, that life is treating you unfairly, that there are injustices in your life, that you've been crying out, feeling powerless, and yet things are not going your way.

Or perhaps you're feeling that on behalf of the church, that we're being given a hard time, being unjustly treated. Well, Jesus' word to us is this, pray.

And if you've been doing that for a while and nothing's changed, keep praying anyway. Keep praying because you're praying to the sovereign Lord. Keep praying because believe it or not, your faith in God, your continued faith in Him, is actually more important than the injustice you're suffering.

[12 : 59] Now, let me say that again. Your faith in God is more important than the injustice that you're suffering or witnessing. And for me to say that nowadays in society is rather a radical thing, isn't it?

Because we live now in a society that is hypersensitive to injustice, is it not? Now, I'm not saying this to try and dismiss injustice or to say that nothing should be done, but Jesus' word to the powerless is first and foremost to pray.

pray before you engage in social action. Pray as you engage in social action. Why? Because ultimately, we're not trusting in our activism or our arm resistance or our demonstrations to bring justice.

No, we're trusting in God to bring justice. He's the one that we need to rely on. So it doesn't mean we can't write to our MPs and petition and do all those kind of things.

It doesn't mean we don't speak up when the opportunity arises. But the litmus test is this. Does it take the place of prayer? Or do you still recognize that God is the bringer of justice?

[14 : 14] Do you still keep praying, keep looking to Him so that even if He doesn't bring justice immediately, you can live at peace because you know that God is sovereign?

But more importantly, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith among us? That's the point.

Will we still be trusting in the Lord at that time or will we have given up because we think God hasn't heard us and therefore He's unjust? Now let's move on to the second parable because here we now move to the top of the pecking order.

It's clear in verse 9 who the parable is aimed at. It says, To some who were confident of their own unrighteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. So this is a parable for the lofty, those who look down on others, those in high positions or who hold themselves in high esteem.

Now it's not all that hold high positions that are self-righteous, but there is a tendency, isn't it, when you're up there to be looking down on others. When others look up to you, when people listen to you as though everything you say is gospel, it's easy to think you're right, isn't it, all the time.

[15 : 33] And so Jesus tells them this parable, verse 10. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Now, nowadays, when we read this parable, we often have already a poor image of the Pharisees, don't we? We know that they're self-righteous hypocrites because of parables like this.

But back in the day when Jesus first told this parable, they would have viewed Pharisees very differently. Pharisees were looked up to in society in those days.

They were like spiritual gurus, treated like celebrities. What they said shaped views and opinions. They were seen as model citizens, moral compasses in society.

[16 : 41] By contrast, tax collectors were looked down upon. Yes, they may have money, they were rich, but that's because it came at other people's expense. They were, if to pardon my French, scumbags who did the bidding of the Roman Empire.

They were taking money from the poor and, you know, before they passed it on, keeping a cut for themselves. In other words, taking more money than they should. And so when the people heard Jesus' parable, the Pharisees and the tax collectors were actually acting according to society's expectations.

It wouldn't have shocked the people to think of the Pharisee approaching God in the temple and holding his head high. They would think, oh, of course he should. He's been fasting, he's been tithing, he deserves that.

And same for the tax collector. They would be looking at him and go, of course he deserves to be hanging his head in shame. You know, he's a thief, he's taking things that's not his.

And so that's not where the shock of the parable lies. Rather, the shock of the parable lies in verse 14 when Jesus makes his assessment on them. When he says, I tell you that this man, the tax collector, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

[17 : 55] For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. That was the shocking thing, that Jesus had turned expectations on its head to think that the sinful tax collector was favored by God and the righteous Pharisee rejected, outrageous.

Now, of course, Jesus wasn't saying that the tax collector was righteous. No, he was merely saying that the tax collector was repentant and that was what God was looking on with favor.

His humility was what pleased him as opposed to the Pharisee's pride. For you see, what the Pharisee has done is made a mockery of prayer, hasn't he? He doesn't understand that the very posture of prayer, that every time you come to pray, it is only because you depend on God.

Prayer is an act of humility, a submission to God and a recognition of God's grace, that apart from what God gives us, we have nothing, that we need him.

prayer was never a time to show off, to use it to look down on others. But I guess, again, that is sometimes our temptation, isn't it?

[19 : 15] It may not be prayer, but we often use our piety as a badge of honor, don't we? Oh, look how many times, how many opportunities I've had to share the gospel this year.

Lord, I thank you for these opportunities. Oh, you know, the amount of times I've spent in God's Word, the hours that I've really enjoyed reading God's Word. I thank you for that.

Now, of course, there can be a way of saying it that is totally genuine, but so often, we take all these things that we've done right as indicators that we're doing well before God.

And of course, in one sense, God is pleased with them, but they're never a recognition of our righteousness, of our superiority of others, or perhaps it's when people recognize us for our status or praise us for our achievements.

Whether it's Australia Day Honours, perhaps, which people seem to be fighting over, or whether you've just been promoted at work or you've become a school captain at school, or even becoming a pastor at church, these are all so easily used, aren't they, as badge of honor, as signs of superiority.

[20 : 23] And so, we need to remember that if we ever step up into these positions, that God allows us to do so, that it's not because we are more worthy than others.

Instead, we need to be careful, don't we, to guard against self-righteousness and pride. God has given these responsibilities to us to serve others, to do as Jesus did, who, even though He was blameless and righteous, had every right to look down on all of us, did not do anything of that sort, did He?

But laid down His life to serve us, called us His brothers and sisters. For if we fall into that temptation, then, as Jesus warns us, God will not take kindly to it, will He?

For our day of humbling, if we exalt ourselves, will surely come. But on the other hand, if we humble ourselves before God, then God will exalt us one day. And that, I think, is the wonderful paradox of God's kingdom.

You know, if you've been following with us through Luke, and this chapter is no different, we have this wonderful paradox that describes the person in God's kingdom. For on the one hand, this second parable tells us who are prone to pride to humble ourselves before God.

[21 : 46] We're not to even look up to heaven as it were, because we are truly sinners before God. And yet, in the first parable, which we just looked at, we're told to approach God confidently, boldly, audaciously, hold our head high almost as we look up to God in prayer.

Come to Him without fear of rejection. Ask, don't give up. Because, you know, it's like we have a right to ask. And of course, we're not doing that because we are good, but because of who God is, and because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

And so, even though we don't deserve it, we dare to call God our Father because of Jesus. And because God is our Father, He hears us and answers us.

I mean, thinking about this always reminds me of children, and mine in particular. You know, when children are young, they just have so much faith in their parents, don't they? They think that parents can solve each and every problem that they have.

I remember one year when one of my daughters had a rather challenging school project. I think it was something to do with natural disasters or something. But the project was to replicate, I think there were three choices, replicate either a volcano, a working volcano, a working tsunami, or avalanche.

[23 : 06] And so my daughter, she just chose a tsunami, thinking that, oh yeah, no problem, just get there to solve it. Work out how to, you know, build this model, I don't know, put water in it, and then have that wave motion.

But that's just the faith they had. I mean, I didn't do the project for her, you're not allowed to do that. And I think I sort of did an okay job with it, but you know, it wasn't perfect. She, you know, got by.

But they have such faith, don't they? I mean, when they're young and they're sick and they cry out to you in the night, you know, they expect you when you go to comfort them to feel better all at once, don't they?

Of course, when they finally become teenagers, they realize that mom and dad are just as human as they are and we can't solve anything. In fact, we better not try.

But that faith in us is the same faith that Jesus says we are to have in God. And the boldness to come to him is the same boldness that children have to approach their parents, to ask for miracles, even.

[24 : 10] Except, God is not like us, is he? He can perform miracles, even though it is in his time. And so, this is the kind of faith that is precious to God.

That's why we'll look at it next week. In the next passage, Jesus welcomes the children as they are being brought to him. In fact, he rebukes the disciples and he says, in verse 15, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. It's not that only children can enter, but it's only those with childlike faith that can enter.

Because to enter the kingdom requires a bold audacity to trust in God. And yet, at the same time, to be humble, to recognize our total dependence on him.

That is the paradox of the kingdom. And for those of us who do, then Jesus says, let's not give up even as we see injustice around us. No, let's keep praying.

[25 : 15] Let's keep looking to God with childlike faith. Trust that God will be the one to bring justice. If not now, then certainly when he returns.

And so, for us who do that, we also have to then look at our own lives and not be blind to our own sins of pride and self-righteousness.

That as we depend on God for justice, we also need to be humble ourselves and realize we are sinful and that we are ourselves perpetrators of little injustices to others and look to Jesus for our salvation.

Let's pray. Father, there are many things in this world that we see and we look around us and we wonder, Lord, how long? How long before justice is done?

And so, Father, we pray, bring justice quickly. But Lord, help us also to be patient, to keep trusting in you for that timing. What's more, help us to repent of our own sins.

[26 : 26] Help us not to trust in our own goodness nor to look down on others. for we are all sinners relying solely on the grace of God. And for those of us who are in leadership or have positions of authority, humble us and keep us from hypocrisy and self-righteousness.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.