

## Hearing the Call ... to Persistent Faith

Luke 18:1-14

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What is faith?

-For many people it is simply the power of positive thinking.

-For others it is intellectual ascent to the content of a Creed.

-For others it is about belonging, especially say belonging to a church.

-For others it is intuition – they say, 'Some people just have this inner feeling of faith while others don't.'

What is faith?

As we're talking about the Christian faith, I think the best person to define it for us is Jesus. And Jesus does just that in the two parables we have heard this morning from Luke 18.

Now the word faith only occurs once in the whole passage in v8, where Jesus says at the end of the first parable, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

However, both parables are talking about what it means to have faith in God and what the Bible calls saving faith. This is not just a vague general notion about God, but a faith whereby you can say I have a relationship with God, I know God. These parables are pointing to this type of faith.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is talking about being justified before God. The word justified simply means being in a right relationship with God. The apostle Paul talks about being justified by faith. This means it is our faith which puts us in right relationship with God rather than our ability to lead a righteous life. In a minute we will look in more detail and see how the Tax Collector fulfils this.

In the first parable of the persistent Widow, the saving faith in God is the woman's persistence in prayer. This is what would normally be called our sanctification. Sanctification comes from the same word as holy and it's about becoming more holy as we grow in the faith.

We are justified, put right with God when we believe in Christ; we are then sanctified as we walk with Christ and grow in holiness. An important aspect of holiness is growing in prayer and being persistent in prayer. But more about that in a minute as well.

-So the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is about hearing the call to faith which is our justification.

-And the parable of the Persistent Widow is hearing the call to persistent faith which is our sanctification.

That's the summary so you can see where we're heading, let's now look at these two parables in a little more detail.

Firstly, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. We have here two men who went to the Temple to pray. Both claimed to have faith in God but by the end Jesus says only one had a true saving faith. Only one went home justified before God. What made the difference?

Well let's look at the Pharisee. How can we describe his faith? He brought his achievements before God. He fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of his income to God. He did a lot more for God in his life than a lot of other people, especially robbers, evil doers and adulterers. We could sum this up by saying that he thought being religious and living a good moral life is what gave him his relationship with God. He therefore couldn't help but look down on people who weren't putting in as much effort as he was. He was probably thinking, 'God should me salvation because of the good life I live.'

My friends is this you? It is possible to have a very strong background in the church and think this is what justifies you before God. The Pharisee had a very strong background in the Temple. He would have known the Torah backwards, but he missed the point. He would have thought the heart of it was keeping the law, when in actual fact the heart of it was God's mercy and grace in the Exodus, in delivering the people from slavery in Egypt.

Likewise, for us we can think the heart of faith is - attending church, keeping the ten commandments, loving our neighbour etc. but actually miss the main point which is God's mercy through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Is this parable saying something very particular to you today? The faith of the Pharisee couldn't save him. Jesus says he wasn't justified before God! Hard words directed to someone who was so religious.

If you are hoping that being religious will mean that God will accept you in the end, then take time to reflect on this parable and let it sink into you and do its work in you.

Now for other people here it may be you got the point of this parable many years ago and you're trusting in God's mercy through Jesus' death and resurrection for your salvation. Praise God for that, but it doesn't mean this parable doesn't still speak to the seasoned follower of Jesus.

If you have made your way in the world and had some measure of success it is only natural to see yourself as superior to others. I know to make myself feel better about myself, I sometimes compare myself with people who I don't think are as good as me. There are times when I can be very judgmental. Do you struggle with that?

Or it maybe you have done some study in the scriptures and worked out what things like justification and sanctification are all about. It's very easy to think it's your reasoning power that has brought you understanding, and look down on other Christians who don't have it all so clearly worked out. It maybe 'mercy' is a great theological concept for you, but have you let it touch your heart in the way it affected the Tax Collector?

If any of these scenarios is you, then let this parable speak to you as well. Take time to reflect and let this parable sink down into you and do its work. Come to God afresh and confess your sin of pride and be humbled yet again.

So there are any number of reasons we may be like the Pharisee.

But what about the Tax Collector? How could we describe his faith?

Well, he's not comparing himself with other people. He's only comparing himself with the holy God of Israel. And on that basis he knows he is a sinner in need of mercy. He takes a very humble position, throwing himself on God's grace, looking for mercy.

Jesus says he is the one who went home justified before God. In other words mercy had been granted, sin forgiven, the slate wiped clean, He was put right with God, justified. This is what we mean by saving faith.

Please note how it is so different from all of those definitions of faith I gave you at the beginning. Faith is a word that can mean whatever you want it to mean. You can buy a poster at the gift shop which simply has the word 'faith' on it. You can read into it whatever you want.

When Jesus talks about faith he's talking about saving faith, trusting the mercy of God rather than our own efforts to be justified before God.

This is the point of the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

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So what about our other parable. The story of the Widow who pestered this judge in order to get justice. At first it may not seem like a parable about faith, but it is actually about the relationship we have with God through prayer. It is about the struggle of continuing to believe in a good God, even when our prayers go unanswered. Our ongoing faith in God, walk with God, is known as sanctification. Learning how to pray and being consistent in prayer, even when the going gets tough, is an important part of our sanctification.

There is one difficulty in the parable, and that is why would Jesus compare the God he describes elsewhere as a loving heavenly Father, with a judge 'who neither feared God nor cared what people thought'? And it seems like he was not particularly concerned for justice either, the only reason he finally gives into her is so that she won't come around and bash him up. He sounds like a bit of a mean, nasty, grumpy old man doesn't he.

So why would Jesus compare God to such a judge? Well the simple answer is, it is not a comparison of likeness but a comparison of contrast. Jesus is saying that if a horrible judge like this can give justice then how much more will our loving heavenly Father bring justice for his chosen ones.

The trouble is of course, that it is not always immediate. Weeks turn into months, turn into years, and our heartfelt cry to God can feel like it is hitting a brick wall. God seems shut for business and we can't get his attention.

Jesus knows this is how people will feel and that's why he tells this parable. If you have ever had tragedy or injustice in your life, then take time to reflect on this parable and let it sink down deeply inside you. If you are crying out to God for justice then remember that you are one of his "chosen ones" as it says in verse 7. In verse 8, "I tell you he will see that they get justice and quickly."

Unfortunately though, God's timeline is very different to ours. In God's economy 'quickly' doesn't necessarily mean tomorrow. V8 would seem to indicate that not until the Son of Man returns, will many of our prayers be answered. The challenge is for us to keep praying until then.

Notice in verse 8 how prayer is shown to be synonymous with faith. Jesus doesn't say, "When the Son of Man comes will he find people praying on the earth", which we might have expected given the parable. Rather he says, "When the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?" Prayer is an act of faith.

So I want you to see that both of these parables are about putting our faith in God. So let's take a minute to look at who this God is who Jesus wants us to put our faith in?

In the parable of the Tax Collector, God is holy. God is too pure to look upon sin or to have sin in his presence. The Tax Collector realises this and so keeps his eyes averted, he beats his breast and he simply cries out, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." The fact that Jesus says the Tax Collector "went home justified before God" shows us that God is indeed merciful and forgave him his sin. So in this parable we learn that God is holy and God is merciful.

In the parable of the Persistent Widow we learn that God is not like the unjust judge; that God hears our prayers, that God answers our prayers even if there is no immediate response, that God cares. And that God wants us to stay faithful in prayer until the Son of Man returns.

-The parable of the Pharisee and Tax collector is about our justification.

-The parable about the Persistent Widow is about our sanctification.

Both are about saving faith.

To pull this together let me finish with this illustration.

It is like being in a race.

-Justification gets us out of the starting blocks,

-Sanctification keeps us running in the race.

One of the problems people have shared with me over the years is that they're not sure if they're in the race. They would sort of like to be in the race but they are tentative. It is like they are spending their life warming up behind the starting blocks.

If that is you then look again at the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector and discover justification. And if you want to know more come and see me and I can point you to many other passages in the Bible as well.

Justification is like the starter's gun. It is the call to follow him. Are you hearing the call to saving faith?

Now it may be that you've been in the race for some time. You have thrown yourself on God's mercy and you do know that the Lord is good. But you are feeling weary. Prayers don't seem to be getting answered like they once were. Life may have dealt you some very hard blows recently.

If this is the case then look again at the parable of the Persistent Widow. Don't give up crying out to him day and night, because you are one of his chosen ones, very precious, and he is working for your sanctification.

I don't know about you but when I first heard Jesus call on my life I looked on it like the 100 metre dash, and I took off as fast as I could. But what I've come to realise over the years is that it's actually more like a triathlon. There are times when you get your second wind and times when you just have to fight through the pain. Persisting in prayer is sometimes like fighting through the pain.

So I come back to the question I asked at the beginning. What is faith?  
Don't settle for anything less than Jesus' understanding of faith!

-Are you hearing the call, to the faith that justified the Tax Collector.  
-Are you hearing the call to persistent faith, like that of the Widow.

It's all about saving faith – justification and sanctification.  
That's what Jesus wants for us.  
Put your faith in Him! Amen.