

“Cry to Him Day and Night” (Luke 18:1–8)

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When something is wrong, to whom do you appeal? In our house, we have two boys, and they play together well—for the most part. But they can also be rough with each other. And if they play long enough, someone will take another’s toy, or someone will call someone a name, or someone will hurt someone else. Usually, they try to sort out their differences—often with a bit of “street justice.” That is, if tempers flare long enough, one will hit the other. But sometimes, they’ll appeal to a higher authority. They’ll call to one of their parents. “Mom, Simon took my Lego.” “Dad, Caleb called me a name.” In fact, I wish they appealed to a higher authority before they started hitting each other. But, eventually, they will appeal to a higher authority.

We all want to do be able to do that at times. When there’s an injustice, and we don’t see that injustice being righted, we want to call upon someone who can fix the problem. That’s why we have that all powerful line, “Can I speak to your supervisor?” When you’ve reached that point, something isn’t going your way, and so you play the “I want to talk to the boss” card. That’s why we have a Supreme Court. When it seems that the Constitution is being violated, we can appeal to a higher authority, and the Supreme Court is the highest judicial authority in our country.

But what if the Supreme Court gets it wrong? To what higher authority can we appeal? What if there are injustices in other lands, ones to which our nation’s laws don’t apply? To whom do we appeal?

The good news is that there is an ultimate authority, one to whom we can always appeal. And that authority is God. And he stands ready, listening to his children. As someone said Wednesday night at our prayer meeting, “With God, there’s never a busy signal. The line is always open.” There are no waiting lines to talk to God. There’s no admission ticket that we need to pay to speak God. He is the ultimate judge, and we can appeal to him for justice at any time. And God has told us that he will bring about final justice, in his own time. And he calls upon us to pray that his kingdom would come, that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Today, we’re continuing our study of the Gospel of Luke, one of four biographies of Jesus found in the Bible. Today, we begin chapter 18. Last week, as we looked at the end of

chapter 17, we heard Jesus talking about how the kingdom of God is here already, though not in its fullest. It's already, but not yet. That means that people can come to the King of kings, Jesus, and bow down before him in faith. When people turn away from living as if they are kings, or as if other people are kings, and put their trust in the true King, they can be part of God's kingdom. Yet look around the world. It doesn't take much to see that many people don't live as if God is their king. If God's kingdom is like this, we may wonder if a better kingdom is coming! So, even though the kingdom of God is present, it's not completed or perfected here. But Jesus promised that it will come in its fullest one day. So, Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Luke 17:21).¹ But he also said that his disciples would "desire to see on of the days of the Son of Man [that's a reference to Jesus], and you will not see it" (Luke 17:22). Jesus suggested that things would be difficult for Christians in the in-between times, the time between his first and second appearances on earth.

It's important to remember that, because what we see at the beginning of chapter 18 should be read in that context. As we wait for Jesus to return, as we long to see "the days of the Son of Man," we will see injustice. As another day without Jesus returning appears, we may become discouraged. And here, in this passage, Jesus tells us to keep praying for that day of justice.

Without further ado, let's read today's passage. Here is Luke 18:1–8:

¹ And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. ² He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. ³ And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' ⁴ For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, ⁵ yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' " ⁶ And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This passage itself isn't very difficult to understand, but I did want to remind us of the context. This passage isn't about prayer in general. It's certainly not about praying for just anything. It's about praying for God to make things right.

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable, this little story, to his disciples so that they should always pray and not lose heart. The story concerns “a judge who neither feared God nor respected man.” Earlier in the Gospel, we’re told that the greatest command is to love God with everything we have and also to love our neighbor—our fellow man—as we love ourselves (Luke 10:27). Apparently, this judge didn’t do either of those things. We’re told he was an unrighteous judge. In Israel, judges were supposed to fear God and to care about justice, particularly for those who were vulnerable, people like widows. In fact, there’s a passage in the Old Testament, in 2 Chronicles 19, when one of the kings, Jehoshaphat, appoints judges and he explicitly tells the judges, “Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes” (2 Chron. 19:7). So, we get the sense that this judge was far from an ideal judge.

Yet this judge had power. He had authority. He could correct some injustices. And so we’re told that a widow comes to him. She says, “Give me justice against my adversary.” We don’t know who her adversary is or what injustice she was suffering. It was probably something financial. At that time, widows were particularly vulnerable. A widow, especially one without children, had no men to provide for her and protect her. The injustice might have concerned her late husband’s estate. Women generally were not heirs of an estate. When a man died, his wife could receive financial support from the estate, but she depended on the male heir to do the right thing.² Perhaps her adversary here was that heir. We can’t be sure, but it’s as good a guess as any.

So, this woman comes to this judge looking for justice. We get the sense that she came repeatedly to him. At first, the unrighteous judge doesn’t give this woman the time of the day, even though the Old Testament explicitly talks about how Israel should care for widows (Exod. 22:22–24; Deut. 10:17–18; 24:17; 27:19; Pss. 68:5; 146:9; Prov. 15:25; also James 1:27). Yet the widow keeps coming to him, demanding justice. Even though he doesn’t fear God or respect humans, he doesn’t like being bothered by this woman. She is wearing him out with her demands for justice. So, he gives her justice to avoid being bothered any more by her.

Then “the Lord,” Jesus, gives his disciples the point of this story. He says, even an unrighteous judge will grant justice if he’s bothered enough. How much more, then, will the

² David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 709.

perfect judge give justice to “his elect, who cry to him day and night?” The point is not that God is an unrighteous judge. The point is not that if we bother God enough for what we want, he’ll get sick of hearing our prayers, and to shut us up, he’ll grant our wishes. Jesus is making an argument from the lesser to the greater. If an unrighteous judge will grant justice from bad motives, then the perfect Judge will certainly grant justice to his children.

Jesus says three very important things in verse 7. One, Jesus calls God’s people “elect.” That means they are chosen by God. One of the amazing truths that the Bible teaches is that God has elected certain people to be his people. He has predestined them to be adopted as his children, not because they are so lovable or so good, but simply because he loves them (see Rom. 8:28–30; Eph. 1:3–14). If you’re a Christian, God wanted you even before you existed. He wanted you knowing all the sins that you would commit, all the wrongs that you would do, all the times you have failed to love God and to love others as you should. God knew all these things, and he still chose you. And that should give us confidence that when we pray to God, he will answer. He knows we’re praying—he knows all things. But because we are his chosen children, he will answer.

The second important thing Jesus says in verse 7 is that God’s elect “cry to him day and night.” I don’t think Jesus means that only if we pray to God at literally every moment, then he will listen to us. But we are told in the Bible to pray regularly. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul tells Christian to “pray without ceasing.” In Romans 12:12, he says, “be constant in prayer.” In Ephesians 6:18, Paul says that we should be “praying at all times in the Spirit.” In Colossians 4:2, he says, “Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.” As a church, we should be praying regularly, and we have confidence that some Christian somewhere on earth is always praying to God for justice. Individually, we should do this regularly.

The third important thing that Jesus tells us in verse 7 is that God will not delay in granting us justice. He asks a rhetorical question: “Will he delay long over them?” The answer is “no.” However, God will do this on his own timing. God’s answers to our prayers are always perfect. He always answers our prayers, even if the answer is “no.” But we don’t always know how or when he answers our prayers. Sometimes the answer is “yes,” but it comes later than we want or expect. But God’s timing is always right.

In another part of the Bible, in the apostle Peter’s second letter, Peter talks about how some don’t believe that Jesus will come a second time. If you stop and think about it, the claim

that Jesus will come again is hard to believe. It's hard to believe because, first of all, the Christian claim is that Jesus is no mere human, but he's also the Son of God. He's the God-man, truly God and truly human. Second of all, we're told that when he comes again, it will be in power and glory, and he will right every wrong. We're told that he will remove all evil, all sin, from the world, he will judge everyone that has ever lived, and that he will recreate the world to be a paradise, a perfect place where God dwells with his people in peace and harmony. There will no longer be pain, disease, wars, and death. It's hard to imagine all of that. And it's no wonder that people who aren't Christians would think this is just a fairy tale.

But Peter says it's not. Jesus will come, but he will come according to God's timing. Peter writes this:

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2 Pet. 3:8–10).

The point is that an eternal God has a different time scale than we have. We want things done now. But for God, who always existed, a day is a blink of an eye. A thousand years in our experience are like a day in his. We're told to be patient and to wait. The reason why Jesus has not returned is because God has given us more time for people to turn from their sins—to repent—and to turn to Jesus in faith. There is a day when Jesus will come, and God knows when that is (Acts 17:31). But if Jesus returned a hundred years ago, none of us would exist, and none of us would ever have the opportunity to be part of God's kingdom.

In the book of Revelation, the apostle John is given an image of all the people who died for their faith in Jesus. We read this in chapter 6:

¹⁰ They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

¹¹ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been (Rev. 6:10–11).

That cry, "How long, O Lord?" appears throughout the Bible. It is a cry for justice. How long, God, until you set things right? How long until Jesus comes to remove all sin from the world,

and all sin from our own hearts? How long do we have to live like this? The answer to those questions is, “Not long.” It may seem like an eternity to us, but not to God. God will not delay. His timing is right. Wait for it. In verse 8, Jesus says that God “will give justice . . . speedily” to his people.

But then Jesus turns the tables. He asks his own question. He says that when he, the Son of Man returns, “will he find faith on earth?” We ask that question, “How long?” and Jesus says, “Not long.” But then Jesus asks us what he will find when he returns. Will he find faithful people who are doing what has commanded us to do? Will he find people who are praying day and night for justice? Will he find people who trust that Jesus alone is King, that he alone is our Savior, that he alone is the perfect Judge who will right every wrong? Or will he find us putting our trust in lesser things?

This brings us to an important question that we should ask: What is the point of prayer? Earlier, I said that God is all knowing. God is omniscient. He has always known all true things. It’s not as though when we pray, we tell God anything new. It’s not as if we can say, “God, I have this great idea that you might not have considered yet. Maybe you should try this.” God already knows everything, including the content of our prayers. So, in that sense, we don’t need to pray.

But God has called us to pray. Why is that? It’s not to give him new information, or new plans. It’s not to inform him of our heart’s desire, because he knows that already. Why did God come up with the very concept of prayer? Why are we commanded to pray?

I believe the answer is that prayer keeps us connected to God. Prayer is simply talking to God. We don’t always have to request something of him when we pray. We can praise him. We can tell God we’re thankful for what he’s done for us. We can simply acknowledge who God is. We can think about his attributes and praise him for being almighty, all-knowing, holy, good, just, perfectly wise, and the creator of all things. We can tell God how we’re feeling and we can share with him our joys and sorrows. We can ask God for things. But whatever we say, he already knows it.

So, the real value of prayer is that it helps us focus on God. It’s a means of grace, something that keeps us in the faith and helps us grow in our faith. It’s a reminder of who is on the throne. God is all-powerful; we are not. God is in control; we are not. God is a perfect judge

who will determine what is right and what is wrong; we lack the wisdom, the knowledge of all evidence, and the moral character to perfectly judge situations.

Our problem is that we want to be the judge. We want to be the decider, the one in control. To see this, all you need to do is think about how people react to the idea that God is judge. A lot of people are turned off by that idea. I have actually heard some people who claim to be Christians say that God wouldn't judge anyone. Obviously, they haven't read the Bible. God is repeatedly called a judge. He's also a king. And, you might say, he's the legislative branch, too. He makes the rules, which are a reflection of his moral perfection, his righteousness. He commands us to follow his rules. And he will judge us for how we have done.

And this, believe it or not, is a good thing. One reason it's good that God is a judge is that it's a guarantee that all wrongs will be righted. All crimes will be punished. If we didn't have the assurance that God would do this some day, we would despair. We would look at this world, which has so much injustice, and think that justice is impossible. We would give up. We would become cynical and jaded. Or, we would try to bring about justice ourselves. How often do we see someone get away with a crime? Perhaps we don't see this in our own lives, but we see it in the news. There are many times where a man rapes or sexually abuses a woman and he gets away with it, or he gets some ridiculously light sentencing. There are times when evil people don't seem to be punished for their crimes. Hitler is a great example. He committed all kinds of atrocities and then committed suicide, never facing a judge and jury for what he did. Joseph Stalin, the leader of the USSR, is responsible for the deaths of millions of people who starved or who were sent to the Gulag. He died of a brain hemorrhage at age 74. He doesn't seem to have paid for his abuses. The list could go on and on. If there is no God who judges, these men will never be punished appropriately for what they've done. If there's no God, we may be tempted to seek our own "street justice," to become vigilantes who take the law into our own hands. And that would go very badly.

But because God is a judge who will punish every crime, we can rest assured that though evil people seem to get away with crimes, no evil will go unpunished by God. He will deal with everyone's sin. In the end, God will punish every sin, every evil. Nothing escapes his knowledge, and no one will escape his judgment. So, we have the promise that all injustices will be addressed. And that is a good thing.

There's another good thing about God being a judge. Everything will be evaluated. That means that everything has meaning. This past week, I happened to listen to a few sermons online. That's not something I actually do very frequently. But I happened to listen to a sermon by Tim Keller, who pastored a church in Manhattan for over twenty-five years. In the sermon, he referenced something he wrote about in his great book, *The Reason for God*. Keller mentions a play written by Arthur Miller called *After the Fall*. In that play, there's a character named Quentin, who looks back over his life. He says that when he was younger, he thought of life as a series of proofs. You try to prove that you're brave and smart, that you're a good lover and father, that you're wise, that your life has meaning. He said he expected that his life would receive some kind of judgment, some kind of verdict. He would be justified or condemned. But then he says this: "I think now my disaster really began when I looked up one day . . . and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself, this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench. . . . Which, of course, is another way of saying—despair."³ What is he saying? This character apparently is an atheist. He doesn't believe there's a cosmic judge. And what he realizes is that if there's no God, no great judge who gives a verdict, then there's no evaluation of one's life. And that means that everything is ultimately meaningless.

Imagine you are in school, and you work very hard to get good grades. You want some validation for the work you're doing. You want not only to be rewarded with a good grade, but you also want to know that you're right. You want your work to be recognized. But then, at the end of the semester, the teacher says, "I decided not to give grades." You would be upset if you worked hard. Now, if you didn't work at all, you might think you're getting a good deal. But most people want their work to have meaning. They want their lives to have meaning. That means we need to have our lives evaluated, to be judged. And we certainly want other people to be judged. All of us make moral judgments: "He should have done this; she shouldn't have done that." Where do you think that comes from? We're judgmental because God is a judge. And we need God to be a judge, or else there's no moral evaluation, and there's no justice.

We all want God to be a judge—at least a judge of other people's sins. But God will judge us for our sins, too. Earlier, I said that no one will escape God's judgment. That's not

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead, 2008), 163. The quote originally appears in Arthur Miller, *After the Fall* (New York: Penguin, 1964, 1992), 3.

correct. There are some who will escape God's judgment. The only way to escape is to come to Jesus. The fact is that all of us have done wrong. All of us have failed to love God and to love other people. We certainly have failed God's standards. If we're honest, we've failed to meet our own standards. We know in our hearts that we have done wrong. If we were to stand before God, we would be condemned. He would find us guilty and our crimes would be punished accordingly. And it wouldn't be pretty. Because we have a tendency to be selfish, we would always live as if we were king. We would always sin. And God can't have that. He can't have people in his world destroying everything that he had made good. God will remove sinners from his creation so that he can perfect it. If God didn't intervene, that means that each of us would be cast into hell.

But there is hope. We can escape condemnation if we find refuge in Jesus. If we turn to him, we will not be condemned. That is because he has already taken the judgment for the sins of his people. He has already paid the penalty for their crimes. Though he lived a perfect life—and he was the only one to do that—he died as a sinner. He bore not only terrible physical pain and suffering, but the wrath of God, something that goes beyond physical pain. This wasn't an accident. It didn't happen just because sinful people put Jesus to death, perhaps the greatest act of injustice ever committed. It was because it was God's plan. It was the Father's plan. It was the Son's plan. It was the Spirit's plan. From before the foundation of the world, the Son of God was destined to become man and die so he could save the elect from sin.

The question for us is, when Jesus comes again, will he find us faithful? Do we truly have faith in Jesus? If you're not a Christian, I urge you to turn to Jesus now. A day of justice is coming. It will be a day of reckoning. If you haven't put your faith in Jesus, whether you die or he returns in your lifetime, you will stand before him and you will be judged for everything you've ever thought, desired, and done. Jesus knows all the evidence. He knows all the ways you have failed. If you are not "in Christ," you will be condemned. The good news is that Jesus has done everything you need to be rescued from judgment. But you must trust him. I would love to talk with you personally about what this would look like for you.

One mark of faithfulness is prayer. But we don't pray to manipulate God. The point of this parable is not that if we badger God with personal requests, he'll give in. It's not that if I pray every day for money and good health, God will get tired of hearing me, and he'll say, "Fine,

I'll give you whatever you want, just stop bothering me!" God isn't like that. Jesus' point is that if we cry out to our Father for justice, he will answer us positively.

Jesus told us to pray that God's kingdom would come and that his will would be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10; Luke 11:2). We should pray that we would act as if God is our King. We should pray that others would do that also. We should pray continually for God to right wrongs, to fix the injustice that we see around us. God may lead people to do what is just in this life. Injustices like slavery have been addressed, often by Christians. I pray that injustices like abortion, racism, sexual abuse, and other evil practices will come to an end. But all evil will only be ended on that great day when Jesus appears. The apostle Paul has said, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Rom. 16:20). So, with Paul, let us pray, "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22).