



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

St. Luke 18:9-14

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August 15, 2021

This week there was a meme going around social media. It was a photo of Westminster Abbey and it was captioned, “The world’s great Cathedrals weren’t built by Christians looking for the rapture.” Well, obviously. Those cathedrals were built hundreds, in some cases more than a thousand years ago and the theological system of which the idea of the “rapture” is a part has only been around since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But what it was really getting at is that we often misunderstand the nature of the kingdom of God. What the meme gets at is the idea common today that the kingdom of God or the coming of Jesus are about escape from the world—and often with that, judgement and fire and brimstone falling on sinners. But the idea of Jesus as a means of escape from the world never occurred to the builders of the great cathedrals. What they built was beautiful and enduring, because the kingdom of God, inaugurated by the risen Jesus, is beautiful and enduring. Through the Spirit-empowered work of the Church, the good news goes out to every people and nation. Because the word of God and that good news about Jesus are backed by the power of God and the work of the Spirit, they *will*, without doubt be successful in doing what God has sent them out to do. The proclamation that Jesus is Lord renews and redeems until the glory of the Lord fills the earth as the waters cover the sea. The people of God have a mission. It’s not about escape from the world. It’s about bringing the power of the gospel to the world to redeem and renew it. And—

think of our gospel lessons these last few weeks—heaven rejoices as the gospel sets right what our sin once set wrong.

Brothers and Sisters, the Church’s mission—while unique in the sense that it is empowered by Jesus and the Spirit—our mission is a continuation of the mission the Lord originally gave to Abraham and his family: to make him known to the nations. And just as we don’t always get it right. Just as we sometimes end up with a skewed perspective, so did Israel. The context of our gospel today is, again, Jesus disputing with the Pharisees. Now, the Pharisees weren’t about escape. They understood the enduring nature of the kingdom of God. Where they went wrong was the mission. They’d lost their love for their own lost brothers and sisters and they’d lost the big picture—the making the Lord known to the nations part of their mission. They were righteous. They were faithful. They were obedient. (And by all accounts, they were.) But when it came to the lost—whether the lost in Israel or the pagan gentiles—that problem was to be solved not by redemption and restoration, but by judgement. When they looked at Jesus they saw that he had the power and authority of God with him, but this is what frustrated them so much. He was using that authority to redeem and restore when they thought he should be using it to judge and condemn. So they confronted him. And he turned that confrontation back on them.

God *will* judge sinners. Jesus was clear about that. But that comes at the end of the story. This is why God sent his Son into the *middle* of the story to provide a means of reconciliation so that sinners can escape judgement on that last day. Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. That’s one of the key defining values of his kingdom and it’s why the Pharisees and most of the Jews missed it. They were looking to be vindicated for their righteousness; they were looking for judgment; they were looking for fire

and brimstone on their enemies. In many ways, they were looking for the *end* of the story. So the Pharisees asked Jesus—in the passage just before today’s Gospel—they asked *when* the kingdom of God was coming. And Jesus turned the question around to get to the heart of the matter. More importantly, when the kingdom does come, *who* will be a part of it—and why.

To answer the question of “Who?” Jesus tells two parables. Look at Luke 18:1-3.

**And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’”**

Jesus has been talking about judgement and now he takes us into a courtroom. An ancient Jewish court was very different from a modern court, but we can imagine one of our own civil courts easily enough. You’ve got a plaintiff bringing a complaint against a defendant. Both of them come before a judge to have the complaint decided. In Israel there were no juries; every case was basically like a modern civil case where a judge makes the decision. Each side would come to make their case. A just or righteous judge would rule fairly and in accordance with the law and the person he ruled in favour of would leave vindicated or “justified”. The Gospels almost never address this issue of justification, but it becomes very important in St. Paul’s epistles. This court language and imagery is what St. Paul is drawing on when he talks about the justness or righteousness of God and about God justifying his people.

In the parable Jesus tells us about the judge and the plaintiff. This judge is a bad judge. In the Old Testament book of 2 Chronicles we read about King

Jehoshaphat. He wasn't perfect, but he was a good king who tried to bring the nation back to the Lord. He opposed the worship of false gods and idols and he cleaned up and reformed the judiciary. We're told specifically that he appointed judges and he gave them this commission: "Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. 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 Chronicles 19:6-7). That's the profile of a good judge, but Jesus describes someone just the opposite. The judge in Jesus' parable neither fears God nor respects man.

And in front of the bench Jesus places a widow. It's not without reason that throughout Luke's Gospel he uses widows as examples of piety and of people to whom God shows his goodness. Widows were often the poorest of the poor. They had no one to look out for them, which is why throughout the law, the Lord commanded his people to care for widows. But this judge does just the opposite. It's safe to assume that this woman's case had something to do with property or inheritance that was rightly hers, but that was being withheld. Other people would simply bribe the judge to give them justice, but this woman is too poor for that. All she can do is go before the judge over and over and over in the hopes that she can wear him down.

It's popular to take this parable out of context and to twist its meaning. A lot of people understand this parable to be telling us that if God doesn't answer our prayers, we need to keep praying. If we keep praying long enough, we'll wear down God the way the widow wore down the unjust judge. Brothers and Sisters, stop and think about what that says about the God we worship. First, the God of the Bible is a God who is sovereign. He's also a God who is perfectly good and perfectly

wise and perfectly patient. If God hasn't answered our prayers the way we expect, it's not because we need to wear him down. A god who can be worn down by our constant petitions is no god at all. No. If God isn't giving us what we've asked for, it's because what we're asking isn't what he wants for us. Jesus' point is that our prayer is meant to be an expression of our trust in God's goodness and wisdom and faithfulness. And we can trust him precisely because he is the polar opposite of the unjust judge of the parable. We pray and we don't lose heart *because* we pray to a God who is faithful and just and who isn't worn down or manipulated by our shallow, short-sighted petitions and complaints. Look at how Jesus continues the story and consider how dramatically this unjust judge contrasts with our perfectly just Lord:

**For a while [the judge] refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.' And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.** (Luke 18:4-8a)

The judge eventually gives in and does the right thing—he sends this woman away from his court justified or vindicated. He does what's right, but he only does it because he's feeling beaten down. Jesus uses imagery from the boxing ring: the poor widow eventually corners the unjust judge and forces him to do justly. Now, does that sound like God? Can we beat God down by our persistence in prayer? If that's how we're praying, friends, we're praying to an idol, to a false god. In contrast to the judge, Jesus points to God who is perfectly just and who is faithful to justify and

to vindicate those who cry to him out of their suffering. In contrast to the judge, who only did justly when forced to, God will justify his people speedily.

This is important. Consider the context. Jesus was preparing his disciples for a time of coming suffering and persecution. He knew that he was going to Jerusalem this last time to face his own death. He was probably considering the possibility that some of his disciples might be executed with him. Even if they weren't, Jesus did know that as they carried on his mission, taking his good news to the world, they would face persecution. Jesus promised them that they would suffer and be persecuted—the slave is not above his master. But in the midst of that, Jesus reminds them, the Lord will hear their cries and will vindicate them. "Keep praying," Jesus is saying, "keep crying out to God in faith, and know that he will vindicate you.

And that's just the point. Look at the last part of verse 8:

**Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"**

Prayer is an expression of faith in our perfectly good, perfectly wise, and perfectly just God, would he find faith when he returned in judgement to Jerusalem a generation later? And in our case, will he find faith when he comes in judgement to consummate his kingdom? We ask "When?": When is Jesus coming back? And Jesus turns the question back on us: Better to ask, will I be found faithful on that day?

This is the point of the second parable that Jesus tells. What does the faith of kingdom people look like? Look at verse 9:

**He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they**

**were righteous, and treated others with contempt:**

“He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves.” There were Pharisees in the crowd. They certainly “trusted in themselves”, but Jesus doesn’t just address the parable to them. The parable is addressed to everyone there who had this problem: to the Pharisees, to others, and even to his disciples. And he addresses it to us. The characters in the story may have changed over the two millennia since Jesus told the story, but you and I have this same struggle. Too often we trust in ourselves instead of God. Too often we are too sure of ourselves—too sure of our guaranteed place in the kingdom and sure for the wrong reasons and just as sure of the spot that others will have outside of the kingdom. Jesus goes on:

**“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ (Luke 18:10-12)**

The Pharisee goes into the temple and he sets himself apart from everyone else. As far as he’s concerned, he’s better than all of them. And he prays. But his prayer is nothing more than a boast of his own righteousness. And since people in those days prayed out loud, the implication is that he’s boasting to the other people gathered in the temple as much as he’s boasting to God. He boasts that he’s one of the righteous: not an extortioner, not an adulterer, not like the sleazy tax collector in the back. He boasts that he fasts twice a week—not just on the required days, but twice a week—and that he doesn’t quibble about tithing on just the things he’s required to tithe on, but on everything he gets. He boasts that he’s not “unjust”. And that

brings us back to the courtroom. What started out looking like a religious setting takes us back to the court. This man is certain of his status before God. He’s certain that were he to stand in the dock before the judge, he would be vindicated and his cause found just—because he’s not a sinner like all the others, because he does good, because he keeps the law. This man represents Israel. He was circumcised, he ate the right food, he kept clear of gentiles and unclean people and so he was pure. He’s convinced he’s in the kingdom, and yet he trusts only in himself. He embodies the rebuke the Lord gave his people through Isaiah: “this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13).

In contrast Jesus describes the other man:

**But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ (Luke 18:13)**

Here’s the opposite of the Pharisee. This man was a social and religious outsider. He collaborated with the Romans and spent his days in contact with unclean gentiles. He knows that he has nothing in which to boast, he knows he’s a sinner, and so he comes to the temple and throws himself humbly on the mercy of God in repentance. It’s an expression of faith in the one who judges justly. And so Jesus says:

**I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)**

Again, we’re back to the courtroom. As much as the Pharisee, like so many, went into the court confident of his case, it was the poor tax collector

who was vindicated—not for his righteousness, but for his faith. That doesn’t mean he won’t pursue righteousness from this point on. That’s not the point. Think of the parable of the workers. The Pharisee is upset because he’s worked long and hard through the heat of the day and now this guy who’s done none of the work receives the same denarius for an hours work. The Pharisee has forgotten the grace of God and, more importantly, he’s forgotten God’s desire for sinners—that he desires their repentance and rejoices over them when they do.

Now, when Jesus told this story, a lot of people would have been confused. The Pharisee should have gone home vindicated, not the tax collector. The tax collector was one of those collaborators who should have gone down in flames with the Romans and Herodians when the Messiah came. And this is just the problem with so many people who are so eager for the Lord to return and who are eager for judgement. Like the Pharisees, we’ve forgotten the grace of God and his love for sinners. And what Jesus is saying here is that this is precisely the attitude that kingdom people do *not* have. Kingdom people may well have assurance of their status before God, but they have that assurance not based on what they’ve done, but on their faith in Jesus. And kingdom insiders don’t look with eager expectation for their enemies to be judged. No, in fact, just the opposite. Kingdom people do good to their enemies, pray for them—pray for them to repent and turn to Jesus that they might be reconciled with God rather than judged when he returns.

Brothers and Sisters, God’s kingdom is about reconciliation and redemption. It always has been, ever since he called Abraham to himself, blessing him in order to be a blessing to the nations. Jesus brought that mission of blessing to its climax as he created a new people, his Church, to

be a light to the world that the whole human race might be drawn to the Lord and know him and go home justified by faith. That's our mission. And that means that our lives ought to be characterised by humility—by the knowledge that, like the tax collector, we are poor sinners redeemed by grace. We can stand before God only because Jesus because Jesus has taken our place on the cross and stands beside us in the heavenly court. And kingdom people, because of our humility, because we have experienced and known the love of God for sinners, will always be about redemption and reconciliation—about seeking not to condemn the lost, but to summon them to Jesus. Because kingdom people were once lost, because kingdom people know what it means to be lost, and because we desire to share this life we know only by grace with everyone around us.

But all too often we forget the true nature of grace. We look at the sinners around us and we start to think like the Pharisee in the parable and we start looking down on others. And it isn't a big step from looking down on sinners to longing for their judgement. Think of all the times we look at others with judgement and condemnation. Think of our attitude towards the people who hurt us. Think of our attitude towards the Mormon who knocks on the door or the Jehovah's Witness handing out cult literature on the street corner. Think about our attitude towards the people we hear on the street cursing up a storm with the Lord's name or the same-sex couple holding hands. Think about our attitude towards the members of the "wrong" political parties who are ruining our country or ushering in an era of persecution for the Church. Think of our attitude towards criminals and prisoners and our attitude towards the people in far off countries who follow false religions. What's our attitude towards all these people? Brothers and Sisters, the answer to that question reveals our

place in the kingdom. It reveals whether we're the Pharisee who went home condemned in his self-righteousness or the tax collector who went home justified for his humble faith. Yes, God's people hate sin and long for justice and we seek justice in this world—that's part of our mandate—but if we are truly following our Lord, we'll recognise and we'll remember that Jesus went to the cross, not to reconcile good people to God, but to reconcile sinners—*all* sinners, including you and me, including the people who hurt us, including the cultist interrupting our dinner to argue doctrine, including the kid dropping f-bombs and the same-sex couple, including Liberals and New Democrats and Conservatives and Greens, including criminals and prisoners. We have a duty to oppose evil in this world, to speak against it, to take action against it, but Brothers and Sisters, let us never be like the Pharisee. Let us never speak out of self-righteousness. Let us always remember that the final and enduring triumph over sin comes through the proclamation—the Church's proclamation and that means *our* proclamation—of the good news that Jesus was crucified and risen and rules as Creation's Lord—and that he rejoices to forgive and to be reconciled with his enemies. Let us long to rejoice with the heavenly court over every sinner who repents.

Let us pray: Lord God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*