

Luke 18:1-8

**18** Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. **2** He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. **3** In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ **4** For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” **6** And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. **7** And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? **8** I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

Great Ends of the Church IV: The Promotion of Social Righteousness

These past couple weeks we have been exploring the ‘Great Ends of the Church’ and asking what it means to be a church and what the church is called to. These past few weeks, Pastor Nicole has preached on about the church’s calling of the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God, the maintenance of divine worship and the preservation of truth. Our focus for this week will be the fourth great end: the promotion of social righteousness.

Now, the first question that might pop into your head when you hear this is ‘what is social righteousness?’ ‘Righteousness’ is one of those big religious words that we often throw around but often don’t take the time to deeply explore. The theologian Tim Mackey defines the Jewish word for righteousness, *tzedakah*, as the “ethical standard that refers to right relationships between people, treating others as the image of God”.<sup>1</sup> Now righteousness certainly applies to how we treat people on a personal level. Stealing from your neighbor or talking about them in a degrading way would both be violations of the command to be righteous. But righteousness also has a social component. It is concerned with not only how we personally are treating people, but also how the society around us is treating people. You cannot be righteous if you stand passively aside as other people are being cheated or degraded, even if you yourself are not involved.

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<sup>1</sup> Bible Project, “Justice”, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/A14THPoc4-4?t=85>

Another way of talking about social righteousness then is to talk about justice— about upholding the standard that all people be treated in the way that they deserve as image bearers of God.

Our text from Isaiah makes it clear that ‘social righteousness’ is one of God’s central concerns. Here God condemns the religious festivals and rituals that Israel carries out because they are not accompanied by justice. We should be careful to hear Isaiah’s words. Worship means nothing, if it is not accompanied by a love for our neighbor. There is always a deep danger that we as a church turn inward. That we become so focused on our own needs, desires and projects as a church that we ignore the pain of those around us. A concern for justice and the dignity of others must be a central concern of the church if it is to be faithful to the Gospel.

But what does this look like on a practical level? Because while it may be easy to affirm that Christians ought to practice justice and righteousness, it can be much more difficult to understand how we should live them out on a day to day basis. Justice can often feel like such a big abstract problem *out there*, that we often don’t know where to start when it comes to practicing it.

This is where I think our text from Luke is especially helpful— a text that certainly affirms the central message of Isaiah, but also one that reimagines it in some fascinating ways. Now on a basic level, the parable that Jesus tells is one that encourages his followers “*to pray always and not lose hope*” (Luke 18:1). But when you look at how the widow prays in the parable, it’s not at all what you’d expect. The widow’s prayer is not so much a one-on-one serene encounter with God, as it is an active, perhaps even violent, confrontation with the unjust authorities of her day. It is what my Professor Keri Day calls an “embodied prayer”, a prayer that is related through her actions as much as it is her words.<sup>2</sup> So what does this tell us about how we are called to justice as the church?

This is the first subtle reimagining that I think we see in Luke. While Isaiah makes it clear that we cannot worship without also seeking justice, Luke’s parable shows us that worship itself moves us to seek justice— and seeking justice is itself a form of worship. The way that we pray and carry out our worship services as a church should not be a form of escape or distraction

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<sup>2</sup> Keri Day, [*Sermon on the Parable of the Unnamed Widow*], sermon, Princeton Theological Seminary, February 1, 2022.

from the problems of the world, but rather should move us to confront the injustices around us. A clear example of this can be seen in the Civil Rights movement. Underlying much of the power of the Civil Rights movement, was the hymns and liturgy of the Black church. Before marches and throughout boycotts, protesters would flock to churches to hear sermons and sing hymns. It was this practice that allowed the protesters to stay united as a group and to peacefully resist the violence that was directed towards them. Now, maybe it's not possible for you to physically join a protest or movement at the moment. But one small thing that I think we can all do is examine our spiritual practices and ask: are these pushing me towards righteousness? Do my prayers focus on my own needs and projects, or do they open me up to remember the needs and struggles of my neighbor?

Luke also introduces a small but crucial distinction to how we are called to relate to the poor and marginalized. You see, while Isaiah calls us to plead *for* the widow, Jesus calls us to plead *as* the widow, that is, to follow the widow's example. It's easy as Christians to believe that we are the ones who have all the resources and all the answers. To see the marginalized and oppressed as problems that need to be solved. Yet in this parable the widow isn't someone who needs to be fixed, but rather someone who needs to be listened to. Oftentimes, the people who best understand the solution to injustice are the people who are being most hurt by that injustice. As a church we must take care not to simply impose what we think is needed on a community, but to listen closely and learn from the oppressed community itself about what changes need to take place to enact justice.

We are especially called to learn from the widow's persistence in pursuing justice. Now in order to understand the widow's persistence, we have to understand her situation. As a woman in the ancient world, she had very few legal rights to defend herself with and limited economic opportunities to provide for herself.<sup>3</sup> The parable doesn't make it clear exactly who she is defending herself from, but it's very likely that she is fighting for life. If this judge does not give her the justice that she deserves, she may be forced into a life of poverty and begging. This situation reflects the social position of the early Christian church and many Christians today who

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<sup>3</sup> I think this point sits as common knowledge, but I was reminded of it by Prof. Day's sermon as well as the commentary I read: Joseph A Fitzmyer S.J. "The Parable of the Dishonest Judge (18:1-8)", in *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV)*, Yale Anchor Bible, 1985.

are suffering under discrimination and violence. And to them this parable speaks a powerful word of hope: keep fighting, justice is coming!

But for many of us here, I think that we face a very different situation. Unlike the widow, we may not be suffering under any real oppression and may be living quite comfortable lives. And because we face no pressing threat, it is easy for us to put questions about justice on the backburner. It is easy for us, like the white moderates that Martin Luther King Jr addresses in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, to want to take things slowly, to not rock the boat, to seek out compromises that deny true justice.<sup>4</sup> And to us, I think this parable offers a word of challenge.

Jesus ends his parable by asking “*And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith upon the earth?*” (Luke 18:1-8). There is no question about whether justice will eventually be established. Christ will return, and Christ will establish justice. But what Jesus wants to know is on that day that justice arrives— where will we be? Will we be standing with the widow, the marginalized and oppressed? Or will we be with the unjust judge, only handing out justice when it becomes too inconvenient to do otherwise? Both as individuals and as a church, it is necessary that we ask where our faith really lies. Do our politics, our financial investments, the ways we spend our time and money reflect our faith in a God of Justice? Or do they reflect a different faith— a faith built around our own sense of security and power that comes at the expense of others?

This Sunday we are celebrating communion, where we remember how Christ died on the cross for our sins. But as we remember Christ’s death, let us also remember that Christ has risen and Christ is returning. We can find deep comfort that no matter the state of the world, no matter the brokenness of our country, Christ will return and Christ will bring justice. But with that assurance comes a responsibility. It is our duty as witnesses to the resurrection, to work towards the kingdom that Jesus is bringing. To “*seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan [and] plead for the widow*” (Isa. 1:17). Let us keep to the hope that we profess.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”