

Faith in the king

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[0 : 00] The reading today is Luke chapter 18 verses 1 to 8 on page 1056 in the Church Bibles.

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. For a while he refused, but afterwards 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. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?

[1 : 18] Good morning. Do keep that passage open. And there's an outline on the back of the server sheet to follow along on the screen behind me.

Let's pray as we start. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that we can come to you and approach your throne of grace with confidence that you will listen.

Please help us now to learn more about your character. Amen. It's nearly the end of January. One more Monday in January.

So here's a little quiz question. According to Sun Life Insurance, and I don't know why they're taking up this poll, what percentage of people in the UK give up on their New Year's resolution by the end of January?

What percentage of people give up on their New Year's resolution by the end of January? Have an answer in your head. And the answer is 43%, apparently.

[2 : 29] I think actually that's quite good. But anyway, 15% apparently admit to previously stuck with their resolutions all year long.

57% give up by the end of February. Over a quarter of Brits, 28%, last just two weeks. Sticking with something is hard work.

Sticking with something is hard work. Well, over the past couple of weeks, Jesus has been teaching about the kingdom of God. You remember our exam question from a couple of weeks ago?

Has the kingdom of God come? Yes, no, or other? Well, two weeks ago we saw part one of the answer. Yes, God's kingdom has come because God's king has come.

Salvation is available through faith in the king. Then last week we saw the answer was no. Not fully yet. The kingdom of God is coming in a future when Jesus, the son of man, returns.

[3 : 34] And Jesus gave us a resolution last week to desire that day. To not be distracted or attached to this world.

And to endure suffering. We look down at verse 33 in chapter 17. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life will keep it. We saw, didn't we, that standing shoulder to shoulder with Jesus, the son of man, is the right way to live.

The world will say we're losing our lives. It's pointless. We're wasting our time. But Jesus encourages us. And that we will end up keeping our lives. Now we could have left it at that.

But Jesus has the emotional intelligence and the pastoral insight to know that this will be hard. So if you look at chapter 18, verse 1.

[4 : 34] It's why he told them this parable. He told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. Just like New Year's resolutions.

I guess Jesus knows it's difficult for people in the first century and the 21st century to wait for his return. It's hard to suffer injustice and to wait for God's kingdom to come to depend on him in prayer.

And not being attached or distracted to this world. I grew up watching The Simpsons. And there's one episode where the dad, Homer Simpson, offers these words to his son Bart, these words of wisdom, who wants to give up the guitar.

He says this, If something's hard to do, then it's not worth doing. You just stick that guitar in the garage next to your karate outfit and your unicycle and we'll go and watch TV.

Now the fact that Jesus tells this story shows the real temptation that we could have a similar attitude.

[5 : 41] When it comes to waiting for God's kingdom to come. To actually give up. At rough time from others at school. At work it's difficult following Jesus.

At home when we publicly declare our allegiance to Jesus. Making sacrifices for the sake of Jesus. And the going out of the gospel message.

It's hard work. And so Jesus encourages us to keep going. And to keep praying and not lose heart. And the way he does it is not through a guilt trip.

But teaching us about the character of the one we pray to. So why should we keep praying? And why should we keep praying and not lose heart?

Because our first point. God cares. God cares and will give justice to his people. This parable is like a legal drama.

[6 : 39] And we're introduced to two characters. In verses 2 and 3. So if you look down at verse 2. Jesus said in a certain city there was a judge. Who neither feared God nor respected man.

Jesus is clear that this judge is the pantomime villain of the story. I imagine Al Pacino being cast in this role. Like from the Godfather.

Quite scary. Neither cares about God or people. And he's self-aware enough to know it. That he says so himself in verse 4.

That's what he's like. What a disaster is to have a judge who doesn't care about people or justice. And then the other character in the legal drama is in verse 3.

And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying give me justice against my adversary. Now to be a widow in Jesus' day was a vulnerable existence.

[7 : 44] If your husband died the chances are that your income died with him. And unless you had a son who could look after you or a brother who could take you in. You were very vulnerable. There's no welfare state.

There's no pension plan. There's no life insurance policy to fall back on. In this drama I imagine Dame Maggie Smith playing this widow. Tugging at the heart strings.

And the key issue is justice. That word comes four times in this parable. The widow has been wronged. Jesus hasn't filled in the particulars of this case.

And what's clear is that she is being wronged. She's defenceless. And she wants the judge to put things right in her case. And what is also clear is that she is doggedly persistent in her pursuit of justice.

In verse 3 she kept coming to the judge. Verse 4 even stronger. She's beating him down by her continual coming. We can imagine it can't we in the legal drama.

[8 : 53] The judge walks out. He heads to the Jerusalem Royal Courts of Justice. He gets to the end of his drive. And there she is to keep him company. On the walk to the train station.

To put her case before him. When he walks into court at the beginning of the day. He looks, takes his seat. And there is the widow. In the public gallery. By way of reminder.

Waving at him. He goes to lunch at his favourite restaurant. To find out that she's booked the table next door to him. To keep putting the case before him.

And then she makes sure that she's at the end of his drive again. At the end of the day. To make sure that. Well his final thoughts before bed is her case. I imagine she sends him letters.

Bombards him with tweets. It's relentless persistent pleading. In fact the expression beat me down in verse 5. Is a Greek expression that can refer to giving someone a black eye.

[9 : 55] That could be metaphorical. But it could be a physical threat. That this judge is facing. So perhaps it shouldn't be Dame Maggie Smith in a role. But a Joe Brown type figure.

Someone who takes no prisoners. Although if you see her around this week. Don't tell her I said that. But after her persistence. A breakthrough comes.

Have a look at verse 4. For a while he refused. But afterwards 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. This is a totally self-obsessed judge.

He's not worried about his reputation here. That's clear. He doesn't care what other people think about him. But he's tired of her persistence. So he acts to get her off his back.

[10:54] And Jesus' big point in telling this parable. Is that God is not like this judge. Verse 6. And the Lord said.

Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect. Who cried to him day and night. Will he delay long over them?

I tell you. He will give justice to them speedily. Jesus' point is seen in a compare and contrast. And the unrighteous judge gives justice when he doesn't even care.

And so the point is. Well how much more. Does God give justice to his elect. His chosen people. Who he loves and cares deeply for.

The implication. A lot more. If this judge gives justice to this person he doesn't really care about. Will God give justice to the people he does care about? Well of course.

[11:54] Now I take it that Jesus. Picks the image of an unjust judge. Because Jesus might be worried. That disciples might misunderstand the character of God. Worried that they could slip into the trap.

Of thinking that God is in some way like this judge. That he's not loving. That he doesn't actually care about me. That he doesn't have my best interests at heart.

But that couldn't be further from the truth. That Jesus wants to encourage us. That all those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus are God's chosen ones.

The children he loves. That really bolsters our assurance doesn't it? That we pray with complete confidence. That God is interested in us.

He cares deeply for us. Our prayers have been heard. But they are answered. And they will be answered finally and perfectly. When Jesus the King comes.

[12:57] Now verse 7 and 8 can bring up issues. Can't they? If you look down. Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will give justice to them. Speedily.

Jesus has just talked about a delay. And we could think here that he's talking in terms of timing. That Jesus is emphasising that return could come very soon.

But we then have to understand that. As in 2 Peter chapter 3 verse 8. God's. To God. One day is as a thousand years. And a thousand years as one day.

But God doesn't work in the same time scales as us. At 2,000 years. Yes is a long time for us. But for God. That's like 48 hours.

From Friday morning until now. But these verses could also be taken to mean that justice will come abruptly. As we saw last week.

[13:56] When Jesus comes. It will be an unexpected interruption of everyday life. Without specifying when that will be.

It's the next thing on the divine calendar. And when we anchor these verses with the. Proceeding verses in chapter 17. That seems to fit well doesn't it.

We saw last week in the Noah scenario. The flood came suddenly. Just as the destruction came on Sodom. So verses 7 and 8.

Say that God will certainly put things right for his people. Even though he seems slow to do so. And when he acts. He will do so swiftly.

When he comes. There will be no year long public inquiry. There will be no statement from Jesus press officer saying. I understand your cries for justice. But it would be inappropriate to comment further whilst the inquiry is ongoing.

[14:57] There will be none of that. There will be no independent review that's long overdue. When Jesus comes. Justice will come speedily.

And so when we've grasped the character of God. Who he is. Well the application is pretty clear. It's what Jesus has been saying. That God cares and will give justice to his people.

So keep praying. So keep praying. Not losing heart. As we pray for God's kingdom to come. Let's again remember Jesus' whole purpose in telling this parable.

Verse 1. That we ought to always pray. And not lose heart. Now these are not two separate suggestions from Jesus.

That prayer is always connected to not losing heart. Why? Because when we give up on prayer. We inevitably lose heart. And when we lose heart.

[16:01] We often give up on prayer. And let's again remember the kind of prayer Jesus speaks of. When we think about last week. This is praying for God's kingdom to come.

Praying for Jesus the son of man to return. And for God to give justice to his weary and beaten down people who are losing their lives.

Physically, metaphorically. You see, God's people. You see, God's people. We live in a world in which they are assailed, assaulted and sometimes annihilated.

And so in face of that, they must never give in. Lose heart or throw in the towel. That's what Jesus is saying. They must keep praying for God to put things right.

But this prayer requires unrelenting tenacity. I don't know if you've been keeping up with the post office scandal.

[17:00] It's a story that's like a black hole that's sucking everyone in, hasn't it? And it really affected lots of people. It's described by the public inquiries that the most widespread British miscarriage of justice in modern times.

More than 700. So I think that's about 900 actually. Sub postmasters and mistresses had their lives. Reputations ruined by allegations of theft and false accounting.

With many left bankrupt or in prison. And some tragically took their own lives. Well, if you've seen interviews with people who've suffered on the news.

It's heartbreaking. And it received renewed public outrage following ITV's drama about the campaign. Led by wrongly accused sub postmaster Alan Bates.

He has been persistently crying out for justice for decades. And others with him. Now that is the sort of attitude Jesus wants in his disciples in their prayers.

[18:10] Now they must not give in or lose heart in this matter. And so Jesus is not telling this parable to guilt trip us. But to encourage us with the character of God that motivates us to pray.

And so maybe you're on the commute. Or at the desk before work. Or with a bowl of cereal. Or a cup of tea. Or you're on the sofa. Or in bed at the end of the day.

And you've got your Bible open. And you're conjuring up the energy to pray. Well in that moment we can remind ourselves. Who is the God that is on the receiving end of those prayers?

Or it's Tuesday week. And the notice was given earlier. 7.30pm. Perhaps you're deciding whether to come to the prayer gathering.

Or do one of the other million things on the list. Well in that moment we can remind ourselves. Who is listening to our prayers? Who is listening that makes it worthwhile.

[19:11] To join with others in corporate prayer? Now is the God we pray to like the judge in the story. Indifferent to his people. Unconcerned about the world below.

No of course not. He is not like the judge. Instead the reality is that Jesus wants us to be certain that God is our father. As we'll pray later.

Our father in heaven. He is our father who hears our prayers. He listens. And resolves that one day he will come and deal with all injustice. He will put things right.

That is the God we pray to. Day and night. The American pastor Tim Keller said the only person who dares wake up a king at 3am for glass of water is his child.

We have that kind of access. We have that kind of day and night access to the Lord through faith in Jesus.

[20:14] Bishop J.C. Ryle says the name of Jesus is a never failing passport for our prayers. And so when we're praying we're not trying to twist God's arm.

And we're not trying to be like the three year old asking for something over and over and over and over again until they grind their parent down into submission. And they give something to them out of sheer desperation.

Instead our prayers are fueled by deep conviction that God is just. And that he is good. And that our cause is right.

Jesus wants us to be certain about the God we pray to. And that will keep us going. And yet did you spot he notes on an end of challenge.

He ends on a note of challenge. That second half of verse 8. Nevertheless when the son of man comes will he find faith on earth.

[21 : 16] It's not that we are saved by our prayers. Or accepted based on the amount we pray or what we pray. That Jesus queries whether he will find people praying.

Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And linking verse 8 with verse 1. Jesus saying that. That faith in him.

Trust and dependence in him. For salvation will show itself. In persistent prayer. And not losing heart. But again I take it that Jesus tells this parable.

Because he knows there are times. When prayer will be hard for his disciples. When we will be tempted to give it all up. There may be times when we have no emotional energy.

And no warmth of feeling to pray. And maybe a creeping conviction of pointlessness. Slithers into our minds. And we find our motivation has a slow puncture.

[22 : 21] But Jesus says his disciples ought always to pray. Crying out to God day and night. Now this is where one writer calls any way Christianity has to kick in.

You don't feel like praying. You imagine it useless to do so. But you do it anyway. And you do it because Jesus says so. His disciples must always pray.

There is often simply a certain doggedness about the Christian life. And yet we often fall out of the habit of persistent prayer.

Because there are seemingly little consequences to our not praying. If we're honest. Now we get in trouble if we don't turn up for work. Or school. Or if we don't pay our bills.

But it seems like nothing bad happens when we don't pray. So it becomes tempting to give it up. Life is busy. The squeaky wheel gets the oil as the saying goes.

[23 : 23] And prayer is usually not a very squeaky wheel. Everything else squeaks louder. And yet when Jesus wants to teach his disciples to pray and not give up.

He doesn't give us a list of practical do's and don'ts. That will probably lead us into more despair this morning I should imagine. Instead he simply reminds us of the character of our God.

And our status before him. That through faith in Jesus we are God's chosen people. He loves us. And he cares for us.

He is not an unjust judge. And when we are gripped by who God is and are standing before him. That will fuel our faith. Expressed in persistent prayer.

When we realize who God is. That he is our father. That we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Day or night. Well that is a motivation to keep praying. To not give up.

[24 : 25] Well so Jesus recognizes then. Because of his delayed return. We will be in danger of losing heart. And of giving up. And to motivate us to keep praying.

And to not lose heart. He refocused our thinking. On the character of God. He's not like the unjust judge. God cares. And he will give justice to his people.

And I'm sure that if we were to keep meditating on this passage. And to think about it in the week ahead. Well we might find ourselves longing more to pray.

At praying your kingdom come. To look at the situations around the world. And say Lord come and sort this out. I know you will. Please come and sort this out.

And though we may not see justice in this life. In every instance. When we are wronged. When others are wronged. We can have certainty.

[25 : 26] That God will bring justice fully and finally. When the son of man returns. And ushers in his kingdom. And when he does. His justice will be swift and sure.

And our suffering will seem short lived. Compared to the glory to follow. But in the meantime. Jesus calls us to keep praying.

And to not lose heart. So let's do that now. Let's come before him in prayer. Heavenly Father we thank you.

That you are not like this unjust judge. That you care deeply for your people. Who you love. Your chosen elect. Your children. And we thank you that we can cry to you.

Day and night. With how we are feeling. All our concerns. About our lives and the world. And we do so knowing that you are the one.

[26 : 26] Who brings justice. And you will do so fully and finally. When the Lord Jesus. The son of man returns. Please help us to keep praying. To keep focusing on that. And to not give up. To not lose heart. Amen.