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Luke 18:1 - 18:23



Gospel of Luke - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg provides an analysis of Luke 18:1-23, discussing the importance of persistence in prayer and humility before God. He uses the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge to illustrate God's nature as a just judge who cares for his children. Gregg emphasizes the need for humility and faith in God's goodness, and highlights the value of receiving Christ like an infant. Finally, he urges his listeners to strive for perfection and tell others about Christ, rather than settling for a comfortable life.

Transcript

Luke chapter 18 verse 1 is where we begin today. Then he spoke a parable to them, that men ought always to pray and not to lose heart, saying, There was a certain city, there was in a certain city, a judge, who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city, and she came to him, saying, Avenge me of my adversary.

And he would not for a while, but afterward he said within himself, Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me. Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said, And shall not God avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them? I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth? Or actually in the Greek, will he find the faith on the earth? Interestingly enough, the faith meaning presumably the Christian faith.

He sets this up by pointing out that the judge in question is not a good man. He doesn't have the fear of God, which means he doesn't really have any basis for morality in his life. He just would do what is pleasing to him.

He would do what is advantageous to himself. He's not acting upon higher principles than just what is convenient for himself. He doesn't fear man, which means he doesn't care what anyone thinks about him.

So, he's not going to be moved by the typical shame-based culture. He's just not

interested. He's totally apathetic about anything but himself.

Now, there's a widow in his town, and she has a need. She wants to be avenged of her adversary. Now, what does vengeance mean? Vengeance just means setting the scales right.

It may sound to us that it means to hurt or punish or damage somebody else. In the event of setting the scales right, sometimes a party will have to hurt. They'll have to go to jail or have to pay a fine or something like that.

This woman has been injured by somebody. We have to assume she's got a righteous case, and his problem is he just doesn't care. But she gets what she wants from him anyway because she does not give up.

Now, lots of people have been offended at this parable because obviously this is a picture of prayer. The widow is like a person, a Christian, praying. And obviously the judge stands in relation to her the way that God stands in relation to the praying person.

And they say, but this man is only selfish. He doesn't care about her. He doesn't care whether she has a just cause or not.

He just gets annoyed with her and says, finally, I'm going to get rid of this person by giving her what she wants. Now, this is troublesome because people sometimes get the impression that Jesus is saying that God is motivated this way or that God is selfish and that we can just kind of get him to, we can overcome his reluctance simply by pestering him. Now, Jesus, when he taught about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, he said, don't be like the heathen who think that by their much praying, their much speaking, they will be heard.

That is, the heathen felt that their gods were reluctant to help them, but that they could, in a sense, maybe wear their gods down by continually praying. And Jesus said, don't be like them. When you pray, just say, Our Father, which art in heaven.

And then he gives a short prayer, which actually can be recited in 10 seconds or less and indicates that it doesn't take an awful lot of praying, doesn't take a profusion of words. And so it seems to be a strange thing for him to almost look like it's the other way here. He's definitely talking about prayer.

But this is the same kind of problem that we have with the parable of the unjust steward back in chapter 16. Now, people have objected to that because in that, Christians are recommended to learn a lesson from this unjust steward, how that he did note that he had limited opportunity to prepare for his long-term well-being, and so he took certain measures. Now, the measures he happened to take were unscrupulous.

That's why he's called the unjust steward. This parable is usually called the parable of

the unjust judge. In one of the parables, the person who is providing sort of an example of a sort for the Christian is unscrupulous.

In this case, the person who seems to represent God is unscrupulous. And there have been some people, especially skeptical people, non-Christians, who have pointed these things out to show that Christianity doesn't really have a very high standard and that God isn't really very much caring. Now, however, you can't take one parable about an unjust steward and make that cancel out everything else the Bible teaches about Christian motives and Christian behavior and ethics and so forth.

Likewise, you can't take a parable like this or any parable and make the parable alone cancel out everything the Bible says about who God is and what his relationship with us is and what prayer is really about. And we have to recognize from all that Jesus taught elsewhere that he's not saying that God is like this judge. In fact, the subtext of this parable is that God is, in fact, not like the judge.

This judge is not like God. He doesn't care about the person with the petition. He doesn't care about principle.

He doesn't even care about justice in the matter. He just cares about himself. And yet, he can be persuaded.

God, on the other hand, does care. God is concerned about justice. And how much more, therefore, can he be persuaded? And this is what is being argued here.

I think it's the same with the unjust steward. Jesus said the sons of this age are careful enough, wise enough, crafty enough to look out for themselves. I believe the implication is that how much more should the believer who knows more, the sons of light who know about eternity, how much more should they be careful to make provision for themselves? In other words, the unjust steward is not a model for the Christian.

He's a model of somebody who has enough foresight to realize he needs to do something about his long-term future, and that should be even more the case with Christians who know something about eternity, who know something about what stands at the end of this life and what can be gained by taking the proper measures. And so here also, if a judge who doesn't even care about the citizens can be persuaded, how much more God who does care about his children can be? And that's what Jesus actually says. And he says in verse 6, Then the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge said, and shall not God avenge his own elect? Now, I believe when he says, and shall not God, God is in contrast to this judge.

He's not like the judge. He's unlike the judge. The unjust judge would say such a thing.

Think of how God is persuadable. God who, according to all the other teachings of Jesus, is a father to you. He is concerned.

Not a hair of your head will fall to the ground and perish without him. If fathers know how to give good things to their children, how much more? See, that's another kind of a teaching that Jesus gave about prayer. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said, If you, fathers, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, when they ask, how much more will your heavenly father? By implication, who is not evil? He's not saying that God is like you evil fathers.

He's saying that God is better than you evil fathers. And if you evil fathers can be expected to do the right thing to your children, how much more can God be? If an unjust judge, unconcerned about the issues, unconcerned about the person, unconcerned about the justice of the matter, if he can be moved by persistency in prayer, how much more can you expect God to respond? Because he is not unjust. The point here is arguing from the lesser to the greater.

If this is true of this lesser hopeful case, the woman's case is less hopeful than ours because the judge is not on her side. Yet, her prayers prevail. How much more then when the judge is in fact on our side and is our father? Can our prayers prevail with him? And that's the point Jesus is making.

And he says there in verse 7, and shall not God avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him though he bears long with them? Now, bears long with whom? With the person's praying, maybe. Maybe he's saying God may wait a while and he may hear your prayers and be putting off an answer for a while. It's very possible.

He may be bearing with your long prayers or frequent prayers or repeated prayers without answering right away. Or it might be that the ones he's bearing long with are the ones you're asking him to avenge you of, your enemies. God bears long with these people that we would like to see him remove.

But though he bears long with them, he will nonetheless avenge his people. It's unclear who they are. But the point is that he's saying that God may not immediately respond.

He may bear long with our enemies, more than we would, longer than we would. He knows the right timing. We don't.

Now, again, we shouldn't take all this quite literally. This is a parable. From our point of view, God may be waiting.

God may be delaying. It may seem like he's bearing long with our enemies when, in fact, he may have already sent the answer and it hasn't gotten here yet. That's what we find in Daniel chapter 10 when Daniel was praying for 21 days and fasting too.

When the angel finally got to Daniel and communicated with him, he said, I was sent 21 days ago. When you began to pray the first day, you set your mind and heart to pray and ask God for this. God sent me.

God didn't wait. God wasn't delaying. He sent the answer the same day.

But he said, I was resisted by the Prince of Persia in the heavenlies and I was not able to get by. So the problem was not in God's reluctance to answer the prayer, but it was in the interruption of service between heaven and here. There was interference from demonic powers.

Daniel's continued prayers weren't so much needed by God, but to, it was a warfare. I believe that Daniel's continued praying and fasting was contributing to the spiritual warfare in the heavenlies, which had not to do with God being persuaded, but with the enemy being defeated and interference being removed. And I really believe that that's probably a pattern of the way things are in prayer many times.

From our point of view, it seems like God is delaying, so we should keep praying. But it's not God who's reluctant. He is not persuaded by our much praying.

As he said during the sermon, don't be like the heathen who think by their many prayers, by their many words, they'll persuade their deities. God is not going to be persuaded by many words. The unjust judge might be, but God is much more eager to respond.

But there may still be need for persistence in prayer. And of course, there may be things we're praying for which the timing is simply not right. And when the timing is right, God will then respond.

Some commentators believe that the prayer here is referring to praying for the parousia, the coming of Christ. That the woman in question is the church praying for God to send Jesus back to earth. And obviously, he's not going to do that until it's the right time.

Just as he sent Christ the first time in the fullness of times, born of a woman. And also in the fullness of times or the proper time, he's going to send Jesus back. Our prayers are not going to make that happen before it should happen.

Although if there are circumstances that need to occur before that happens, for example, let's just say the evangelization of the world, or if there's something like that that has to happen before Jesus comes back, it may very well be that our prayers will have an impact on that because our prayers may hasten the evangelization of the world and our efforts too, and may in fact bring him back. But he's not going to come back until the conditions are right. And so it may seem to us we're praying without any effect.

We're praying and asking again and again that he doesn't come anyway. When John was writing the book of Revelation, he said, come quickly, Lord Jesus. I don't know if his praying for Jesus to come quickly made any difference or not.

But Peter does say in verse 8, verses 11 and 12, he says, therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in all holy conduct and

godliness looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with the fervent heat. He said that we can be looking for and hastening the coming. There seems to be some way in which we, by our behavior and our prayers, no doubt, which is part of our behavior, the ways in which we affect things in the world through our actions and through our prayers, by these means we may hasten or bring nearer or sooner the coming of Christ.

But nonetheless, he's not going to come until the conditions are in place. Our actions and prayers may bring those conditions into place and therefore hasten it. Now, I'd like to suggest that chapter 18 of Luke, in this parable, is probably not even talking about the parousia, the second coming of Christ.

Parousia is the Greek word for coming. It's used of the second coming of Christ. My own leaning is to think that he's talking about the destruction of Jerusalem.

And that won't surprise many people because I see that a lot of places where lots of other people are talking about the destruction of Jerusalem. And while I fully believe in a future second coming, I believe that some of the passages that we apply to it, we do so only because we're less in touch than we should be with the state of mind of those who are hearing Jesus speak. And he's speaking much more to their situation than we are aware. These people are praying, this woman is praying to be avenged.

Now, that doesn't seem very Christian to ask something bad to happen to your enemies. They've done something bad to you and you're asking God to settle the score and that means something bad is going to have to happen to them if the score is going to be settled. And it seems like we shouldn't wish for such things.

And yet, it's not unchristian to do so because we are in fact praying on a regular basis, thy kingdom come, thy will be done for all the bad people to either repent or be stopped. Stopped in some way. Their purpose is thwarted or even them being killed.

That's going to happen to everybody. Everyone's going to die. For God to take out those that are continuing to thwart the efforts of his kingdom to come about is something that is inherent in his kingdom coming and his will being done without there being some serious disappointments for those who are opposing the kingdom of God.

In fact, judgment upon them. If you look at Revelation 6, Revelation 6, 9 says, When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the land or the earth? Now, no one can argue that these people had bad motives in their prayers because they were in heaven.

These were perfected saints, the souls of those who had been slain. And they are praying that God would judge and avenge their blood. Now, you might think that this is a vengeful attitude that they had, but in fact, a Christian's prayers are not vengeful.

But they do recognize that in order for righteousness to prevail, those who have been persecuted, the Christians, have got to be stopped. There has to be an end to the persecution if righteousness is going to prevail. And to pray for that end of persecution is certainly not a selfish thing.

It's part of praying for God's kingdom to succeed and the devil's kingdom to come under the proper judgment. Now, I think Revelation and these martyrs are the ones that Jesus talked about where he said that all the blood of all the martyrs is going to come on this generation, he said. And he said Jerusalem is going to have to bear the guilt of it.

And Jesus indicated, therefore, that the righteous blood of those who were slain that was shed is going to be avenged upon Jerusalem in that generation. Jesus said that very plainly to the martyrs who were saying how long before this happens. And they're told it's only going to be a little while more.

That's, of course, what Revelation in general says, that the things in it are going to happen soon. And these martyrs praying for the settling of the score, for the avenging of their blood, this is not contrary to Christian praying and the spirit of even charity toward our enemies. Look what Paul said in Romans chapter 12.

Starting at verse 17, Paul said, Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath. That means give God's wrath room to move. For it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

Now notice Paul says we should not repay evil for evil. If someone has done us wrong, we shouldn't avenge ourselves. We should try to be living at peace with everybody.

Someone does you wrong, you don't take vengeance into your own hands. But you leave room for God to avenge. And he mentions, God has said, I will avenge, I will repay.

You leave vengeance to me, I'll take care of it. And that's exactly what the Christian should do. Should say, I will not avenge myself, but God, I leave it to you to avenge.

When will you do that? Realizing that vengeance is a necessary part of justice. The Christian prays for justice, but does not seek to enforce it at their own hand. David did not seek to kill Saul, though that would have been a just thing for him to do since Saul was trying to kill him.

He says, no, if the Lord wants to kill him, the Lord will take him out. I'm not going to do it. David left it in God's hands to do it.

He did not avenge himself. Now David, of course, was a man of war and he did fight a lot of wars, but they were not personal grudges being avenged. He was fighting the wars of the Lord, the Bible says.

Israel's wars against their pagan enemies. But when it came to his personal enemies, he didn't have any willingness to take vengeance into his own hands. He was a man like a Christian man.

But when you read David's psalms, some of them seem very vengeful. Those that are called the imprecatory psalms are always praying for God to judge the wicked. But that's just it.

He's praying for God to do it. He's not doing it himself. He's not avenging himself.

He's praying for God to do it. And that's exactly the right attitude for the Christian God. You know, there are wicked men destroying the world, destroying lives, resisting your kingdom.

Take them out. This is not an unloving attitude. It's basically saying, I'm not going to hurt them because you told me to turn the other cheek and you've told me to do harm to no one.

But God, I know you're going to do harm and I'd say the sooner the better because these people are hurting other people. You need to end their career. It's interesting that this prayer of this woman in the parable is for vengeance.

And Jesus doesn't say that's a wrong prayer. In fact, when he gives his own application, he says, and shall not God avenge. In fact, the specific prayer that he's talking about is a prayer for vengeance.

And I believe, no doubt, that in this particular case, he's talking about avenging his disciples and all the righteous blood that is shed by the apostates of Jerusalem. And it's, I think, I personally think he's talking about the judgment of Jerusalem when he talks about God avenging. Though, of course, since we live at that point, we can make a secondary application and say, well, and he's going to do the same thing the world over.

He's going to avenge all the wrongs done by every person in the world. There is a judgment day where everyone will receive what they deserve. But at the end of it, he says in verse 8, nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he really find faith on the earth? Now, I think what he's saying is will his people lose heart and stop praying? Remember, the first verse says he spoke this parable to them that men ought always to pray and not to lose heart.

It's not always that a parable is preceded by the author's explanation of what the main point is. Here, Luke tells us before the parable that the main point of this parable is to get people to not stop praying. Now, why would anyone stop praying? Well, because they lose heart.

They've been praying for something, the same thing, for a long time and it doesn't seem to have happened. Ah, well, what's the point then? Why keep praying if it's not going to happen? Well, he said realize that it's by continuing to pray that you may actually see the thing realized. And don't lose heart.

Don't stop praying just because it hasn't happened soon. And the question, when the Son of Man comes, will He find the faith on the earth? It's almost the same. Will my people have given up before I come and do what they're calling me to do? If I don't answer their prayers immediately, when I finally do come, will they have already given up? I hope not.

The idea is to continually to pray and not lose heart, not lose faith. But when He comes, He should find people still praying, still trusting. That He's going to set things right.

And sometimes that's hard to do when a lot of years go by. With the disciples, they went through decades and most of the disciples died before they saw the vengeance of God in 70 AD. But, of course, in our time, generation after generation after generation prays for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And it still hasn't materialized yet. However, our prayers no doubt advance the cause. And bring the result closer.

But when Christians decide, well, my prayers aren't getting anything done, I prayed for the same thing, nothing's happening. What if Daniel had stopped praying in less than 21 days? I believe his praying was that which broke through the resistance in the heavenlies. That it was his prayers that caused God to send Michael, the archangel, to come and assist the original messenger.

So that the original messenger could get through. This is certainly an important behind-the-scenes look at what happens with prayer. We pray, God sends the answer.

The devil resists the answer. Resists it coming. But our continued prayers, our persistence, is that which causes the prayers to finally be, to materialize.

The things we prayed for to materialize on earth. Now verse 9, Also he spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Once again, Luke tells us something about the purpose of this parable.

He doesn't always do that. And as far as I know, Luke and Mark, I mean, Matthew and Mark don't do that, but Luke sometimes says, okay, this is what this parable was about.

Then he tells the parable.

There were some there who trusted that they were righteous. No doubt they were the Pharisees. And they despised others.

We know from the stories that Jesus told in Luke 15 about the good, the prodigal son and so forth, that the attitude of some of the Pharisees was that these sinners were not worthy to come to God. But of course, they themselves were. They themselves were righteous.

But they despised and looked down on others. So Jesus said, Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. A Pharisee would have been regarded to be among the most righteous people in the society, the most diligent, the most conscientious law keepers in society were the Pharisees, at least in the public perception this was the case.

Tax collector was the person who betrayed his people completely, a total traitor, a total scum of the earth kind of person who barely had the right to walk among polite society at all. And here, one of each, a Pharisee and a tax collector, are both praying in the temple. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector, I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

Now this man, when he prayed, it says he prayed with himself. It almost, I mean, the wording almost sounds like he's just talking to himself, he's not really communicating with God. He's more or less just reassuring himself that he's a great guy.

He's congratulating himself. First about what he doesn't do and then what he does do. The things he doesn't do are pretty scandalous things.

The things he does do are religious rituals for the most part. And so he thinks that because of this he's righteous. Remember the parable is told to confront those who felt that they were righteous.

They felt that they were avoiding sins that God would judge other men for and that they were doing things that other men didn't do. Fasting and tithing more diligently than most. As if these are the things that commend a man to God.

As if even the sins that they named that they don't commit are worse sins than the ones they do commit. The pride and the, you know, hatred that they have for other people. Those sins are as bad in the sight of God as the ones that they were avoiding.

And so this man congratulates himself on the basis of things that God doesn't see as particularly, you know, evidence of him being superior to other people. And the tax collector, by contrast, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven

suggesting that he was humble and did not consider himself worthy even to look up. He was broken and contrite.

But he beat his breast, which is something someone would do in great agony. And the agony here is of his conscience, no doubt. Saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner.

It's interesting because the word be merciful, the Greek here means literally to be propitiated. In Hebrews 2.17 this same word appears. Hebrews 2.17 says, therefore in all things he had to be made like his brethren that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Propitiation is an atonement of sacrifice or sacrifice of atonement, I should put it. So the man uses the verb, that is the verb form of the word propitiate. It's like, be an atonement to me.

It's recognizing that mercy is not just granted without an atonement, but he's asking God to atone for his sins and to be merciful to him as a result. And he doesn't congratulate himself, he simply calls himself a sinner. He doesn't say, God I thank you that I'm better than other men because he's not, he just asks that God would propitiate for his sins.

And Jesus said, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be abased, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. This last line, of course, Jesus has said in other cases too.

That's when he talked about when you go to a feast, take the lower seats rather than the high seats because you may, if you take a higher seat you may have to be humiliated in front of everybody by being reduced to a lower seat. If you take the lower seat in the first place, you may be exalted by being elevated to a better seat. Jesus told more than one story, in other words, that made this same point.

It was a main point of Jesus' teaching. If you want to be exalted, you humble yourself. God will exalt the humble.

Humility is one of the main concerns that Jesus addressed. One of the main values that God has if he resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, as the scripture says three times, twice in the New Testament, once in the Old. Then it's very clear that humility is absolutely essential if you're not going to have God resisting you.

Who wants to court God's resistance? If you're going to arm wrestle somebody, you don't want it to be God. You don't need that kind of resistance against you. You want God on your side.

So being humble, humbling yourself, is what it's called for. By the way, the Bible never indicates that we should ask God to make us humble. He may do so, but when God humbles you, it's usually through some painful experience.

In the Bible, when God humbled people, it was usually not a pleasant experience for them to be humbled by God. But again and again, people are told to humble themselves. The word humble means to be low, to make yourself low.

Lower yourself in your own estimation. Lower yourself in your own interactions with other people. Put yourself below them.

Humble yourself, or else you may have to be humbled by God. And when God decides to make you humble, he makes it an unpleasant experience usually. It's more like humiliated than humbled.

And so this Pharisee, who didn't really, this was not a real story, this is a parable, but many of the Pharisees probably did have this attitude when they prayed. Any Pharisee that fit this description would be somewhat humbled by Christ's exposure of his arrogance in this parable. But the publican and the other sinners who didn't think themselves righteous, but were coming to God, looking to Jesus to be their atonement, to be their propitiator, they would in fact be saved.

And here Jesus used the word justified, a word that usually is found in the writings of Paul. We don't really find Jesus teaching in any explicit way, except perhaps here. The doctrine of justification by faith alone.

We do kind of see it hinted at. For example, when the thief on the cross said, Lord, when you come into your kingdom, you know, remember me. And she said, you'll be with me in paradise.

This man was obviously not saved by works, but by his faith in Christ. And Jesus indicated, you're in. You don't find much in the Gospels talking about justification by faith.

This is one of the places where you certainly do. Or you might argue here, it's justification by humility. Because the man humbled himself, he went home justified.

And perhaps the reason justification by faith does exist is because faith requires humility. To trust someone else to be your righteousness, because you can't trust in yourself. That's what faith in Christ means.

I don't trust myself, I trust him. I distrust myself. And that's humility.

People who trust in themselves, like this Pharisee did, they don't have humility, and they don't trust in God, because they trust in their own righteousness. Faith and humility really, if we're talking about a biblical kind of faith, are not very different things. They're related things.

Faith in God is an expression of humility. Saying, God, I don't trust me. I can't do

anything for myself.

I'll have to trust you to take care of me, and forgive me, and do all that things for me, to propitiate for me. That's faith, that's humility. And this man went home justified, and here's a very clear teaching of Jesus of justification by faith, or by humility, we might say, alone.

It says, Then they also brought infants to him, that he might touch them. But when his disciples saw it, they rebuked them. And Jesus called them to him, and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God.

Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, will by no means enter it. So, the disciples, even at this point, were looking down on certain classes of people, namely infants, as not worthy to be brought to Jesus. Now this is an unusual case, and no doubt the story is told, because it does point out that even the disciples, who perhaps by this time had gotten used to the fact that they have to be open to Samaritans, they have to be open to sinners and tax collectors.

I mean, after all, they couldn't have followed Jesus this long without having to deal with that. This is the kind of people that Jesus was receiving. This is the kind of people that Jesus was defending.

The disciples, certainly by this time, must have had their own prejudices very much chipped away, and they would not have continued with Jesus this long if they had not come to a place where they were acquiescing to the fact that these despised categories were okay with God, or could be okay with God, at least could come to God, if they were repentant. And yet the disciples still had some prejudices, and this is one that had not been confronted previously. People were bringing their infants to Jesus to be blessed.

Now, when people brought their sick to Jesus, we don't know that the disciples ever tried to interfere with that, or when a Samaritan or a sinner wanted to come to Jesus, a sinful woman who came to wash his feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair, we don't read of the disciples moving in saying, hey, get away from him, he's too good for you. But when people want to bring their babies, the disciples just thought, Jesus has better things to do than to be accommodating these sentimental parents and bringing their babies to him. Babies aren't that important.

They get more important as they get older and can do things, but when they're babies, they're the lowest class of citizens. Now, in some families, of course, the babies are almost like idols to the family, but that was not the way it was seen in that society. So that infants who have, of course, absolutely nothing to contribute, but only receive, receive, receive.

Babies that can't really be worth anything in terms of their contribution that they make

were perhaps the final category that the disciples had not yet come to view as being fully valuable as human beings. Prostitutes, tax collectors, Samaritans, they'd had to get used to the fact that those are human beings too. Babies, well, they hadn't really dealt with that prejudice of theirs yet.

And so, but Jesus corrects them. He says, let these children come to me. They are people too.

Now, these were not little children. They were infants. The word infant is the word that is used here.

People brought infants to him. He might've said the same thing about little children, but it just so happens these were infants. And the word infant in the Greek, I think, refers to somebody who does not have the capability of speech.

So a child before it's able to speak was considered to be an infant. And Jesus said, do not forbid these from coming to me. In other words, they have as much access to me as anybody else does.

They have as much right to come to me and receive blessing from me as anybody else does. They are human too and no less valuable. In fact, in some respects, more valuable because they have the kind of attitude that it requires to enter the kingdom of God.

An infant is someone who doesn't have anything to contribute, but only receives, receives, receives. A baby cannot do chores around the house. They can't cook meals.

They can't clean house. They can't do anything to justify their existence. They are simply there absorbing grace, absorbing the mercy of the parents, the love of the parents, and the service from the parents.

Now, in that sense, babies were a lot like this publican in that he didn't claim to have anything to offer God. That's what humility is. Humility is recognizing you don't have anything to offer.

You're just, you're dependent. You're dependent on others. And the Pharisee in the temple thought that he had a lot to contribute, that he was enriching God by his goodness and by his fasting and by his tithing.

He was doing God a favor. God was in a sense indebted to him for all that he was doing for God. The publican knew he didn't do anything for God.

He just needed to receive something. He needed to receive mercy from God. Now, infants are like that too, like the publican.

They don't offer anything. They only receive. They're totally dependent on the parent.

In that respect, their attitude, even though they're not even conscious of it when they're real little, their attitude is like that which everyone needs. If they're going to enter the kingdom. He said, unless you receive the kingdom of God as a little child, you will by no means enter it.

Now, the wording of that, when I was young, when I was actually a teenager reading this, I initially understood it wrong. I thought he was saying you have to receive Christ while you're a child. Unless you receive the kingdom of God as a little child, you're not going to do it at all.

Which made it sound like, well, is he saying that you can't receive Christ once you're an adult? You have to do it as a child? But obviously, I mean, I wasn't, I was not very enlightened when I was thinking that way. Obviously, he's saying you have to, even you as an adult, have to become as a child. You have to have the attitude that a child has of total dependency, not some arrogant sense that you're all that and that you've got a lot to offer and that people depend on you.

Now, you depend on God just like a baby totally depends on its parents. Unless you have that attitude, you won't enter the kingdom. And in that sense, it's very much like the publican in the previous story.

Now, I would point out this, that the last line of verse 16, Jesus, when he speaks of these infants, he says, of such is the kingdom of God. To my mind, this answers the question that we often ask or hear, what happens to babies when they die? Are they saved or are they lost? Well, these were babies. Many people assume that human beings are born under the wrath of God because of Adam's sin.

And therefore, anyone who does not have the opportunity to receive Christ in their lifetime, consciously, dies under that default wrath. That God's default position is anger toward humanity. And the only way you can escape it is by at least reaching an age where you can do something about it by receiving Christ, consciously believing in him.

Obviously, a baby that dies has not come to a place where it can understand or believe the gospel. And there are those who actually teach that babies who die go to hell for that reason. But Jesus seems to say the opposite.

The kingdom of God is made up of citizens such as these babies. These babies are the right stuff. In fact, if you want to get in here, you have to become like them.

It's very clear that Jesus does not indicate that the default attitude of God toward human beings from birth is anger and wrath. His default toward humans is always love. It's because God so loved the world that he sent his only son.

God is a friend of sinners. That's why he sent his son to them. It's the assumption that we are more righteous than others and others are so bad that they all deserve to go to

hell unless they do what we have done and accept Christ.

That assumption actually leads to the conclusion that babies who have not accepted Christ are not on good terms with God. Yet, there's many things in the Scripture that suggest that God is favorable toward infants and toward children. Paul, even talking about his younger life in Romans 7 said, I was alive once without the law but when the commandment came sin revived and I died.

Now, he's not talking about physical death. He's talking about spiritual life and death. I was alive before I knew the law when I was young.

Before I was at an age of accountability. He doesn't use that term but the Bible does speak of such a thing. In Isaiah chapter 7 I think it's verse 16, it talks about a child being born.

It says, before the child knows to choose the good and refuse the evil certain things will happen in the political scene. There's this period of time after the birth of a child that the Bible itself, God himself says, there's a time before that child knows to choose good and refuse the evil. I believe children do reach an age of accountability eventually and when they do their choice of sinning, their choice of pride and selfishness, their choice of rejection of God becomes a matter that God holds against them.

But I don't think that babies are in that state of wrath, under God's wrath. Jesus said the opposite, of such as these. That's what the kingdom of God is populated with, these, babies and people like them.

God likes babies. He claims them for himself until at least they get to the age where they reject him in which case he has to be of course just and fair and judge them. This default attitude of God toward children I think follows the principle that Jesus enunciated in John chapter 3 where he said in chapter 3 verse 18, he who believes in him is not condemned.

He who does not believe, and I think by this it means he who disbelieves, not someone who just never had a chance like a baby or someone who's never heard anything. But he that is disbelieving when they hear the gospel is condemned already because that person is not believed in the name of the only begotten son of God and this is the condemnation. Now why is a person condemned? Who doesn't believe? Because light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

So this is why people are condemned. Not because they don't know something but because they do. Not because they have never received the light but because they have received the light.

This is the condemnation that light has come to them and they love darkness instead. People are condemned according to scripture when they have light and they recognize

the light and reject it. That's the condemnation Jesus said and Paul said the same thing in Romans chapter 1. Romans 1 verse 18 says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Well if you suppress the truth if you consciously do that it's because you've heard the truth. You have received the truth and there's something you have to do with it. And if you suppress it, God's wrath is against you.

What about someone who hasn't received it? A baby hasn't received any truth. They haven't suppressed any truth. The wrath of God is against those who suppress the truth.

Like Jesus said, the light comes and they hate it and they seek to obscure it and they want to be in the darkness. That's not a choice that babies have made, but it is a choice that every human being does make at some point. At some point a person reaches the age of accountability and does make some decisions in favor of sin.

And they are culpable of that. Now some people say, but Paul talks about the default condition of sinners as being children of wrath. Which means, you know, recipients of God's wrath.

This is in Ephesians chapter 2. And I could imagine somebody bringing this argument back against what I've just said. Because in Ephesians 2, Paul says, And you he made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. Okay, so Paul speaks about himself and his readers that they were dead at one time in trespasses and sins and God has made them alive.

They once were walking according to their lusts, once walking according to the course of the world, and not as babies, of course. Babies don't even walk at all. But there came a time when every one of these Ephesians, and Paul himself, having reached an age of accountability, did make the wrong choices.

He is not saying they were born that way. Yes, he says they were by nature children of wrath, but one's nature is a dynamic thing. And I believe that it's not all the same.

I think that people become committed to sin through choices they make. Look what he says in Ephesians chapter 3, or excuse me, 4, in verse 17. Paul says, This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God.

Why? Why were they alienated from the life of God? Because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart, who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to licentiousness. The people who are alienated from God are people who have gotten past feeling. That means they had feelings, they had moral feelings earlier, but they've gotten past that.

They've hardened their hearts. The ignorance that is in them is not original ignorance, it's an ignorance that has resulted from them hardening their hearts, because they've gotten past the point of being sensitive to conviction. They're past feeling, and they have given themselves over.

Now, Paul is not describing babies, he's describing adults here. By the way, the Ephesians were adults when Paul preached to them. These people got saved out of paganism.

He's not writing to people who were born in a Christian family, because there weren't any yet. When Paul wrote this, this was the first generation of converts out of paganism. He's telling them their background was pagan.

He's not saying they were born that way, he's saying they gave themselves over to it. In their lifetime, they got past the point of moral sensitivity, they hardened their hearts and came to a point of deliberate, acquired ignorance. And because of that, they're alienated from God.

Now, what I'm saying is that I believe the teaching of Scripture is that babies are not born alienated from God. Paul says he and his readers were dead in trespass of sins before they were saved, but he himself at one time was alive before that. As Romans 7 says, I was alive once, without the law, but when the commandment came, it slew me.

That's when I became dead. He and his readers, as adults, had come to that point of being dead in trespass of sins, but they weren't born that way. They were alive once, earlier.

And I believe that a child is born under the grace of God. Yes, a child is born with a sinful inclination. Frankly, a wolf is born with the inclination to steal sheep.

From our point of view, that's a bad thing to do, but we don't blame a wolf morally for it. We might shoot it because it's a danger, but we don't expect that it should have chosen otherwise. We don't consider it to be guilty of anything.

It's an animal. It's doing what was its nature to do. A baby is born, I believe, with an inclination to sin, and I don't think God blames a baby for that until he's old enough to make a choice.

When a person becomes old enough to make a choice and be morally culpable, then

they can be blamed, and they are. And everybody who reaches a certain age, and I can't tell you what age that is, only God would know, but everyone who reaches the age of moral culpability becomes culpable and guilty and condemned and dead in trespasses and sins. Before that, like Paul said, he was alive in the sense that he later was dead.

Babies are not past that point, and they are the sort of people that we have to become like again. Innocent, really. We can never be innocent again because we are, we've had sin.

We don't become naive and innocent again, but we can become childlike. We can become trusting, dependent, like the publican who just depended on God's mercy, so a child just depends on the mercy of its parents. You have to become like that to be in the kingdom, because they already are.

The kingdom is made up of such as those. Now, Luke 18.18 Now a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? So Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good, but one, that is God. You know the commandments.

Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother. And he said, All these I have kept from my youth. So when Jesus heard these things, he said to him, You still lack one thing.

Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me. But when he heard this, he became very sorrowful, for he was very rich. Now this story is well known from the other two Gospels as well.

We won't go into it in great detail. We've covered it in Matthew and Mark on previous occasions, but we will not ignore it entirely. This man wanted to inherit eternal life.

Eternal, the word here in the Greek is *aionis*, and it's not clear exactly how this man understood *aionis*. Jesus was coming, proclaiming the kingdom of God, the kingdom age was at hand. And *aionis* can mean pertaining to the age, the age of the kingdom, the age of the Messiah.

I don't know if this man had a concept of a life that goes on after the grave, eternally in that sense. He might have, but if he did, I'm not sure where he got it. He may have thought so.

I mean, Jesus did teach about *aionis* life, and if people understood that to mean eternal or everlasting, which is one possible meaning of the word, then maybe he picked it up from there. Otherwise he might be simply saying, I've been looking for the messianic age myself. I want to have life in that age.

I want to have what it is that entitles a person to be part of the kingdom of God. And so

what do I need to do to have that? Now this man is said to be a ruler. We have to understand this means a synagogue ruler.

This is not some king or prince from another country coming to Jesus. This is a man, a synagogue ruler. We know he was a Jew because he had kept the Jewish law all his life.

He was not a pagan. And the persons who presided at the synagogues were called rulers of the synagogue, and this is what he is. There's quite a few rulers of the synagogue mentioned by name, including Jairus, whose daughter died and Jesus raised her.

These people were not rabbis. They were not Pharisees. They were simply guys who were chosen to kind of make sure the synagogue service went in an orderly way.

Sort of one who superintended the service. And so he was attached to the synagogue. He probably had been chosen to be the ruler of the synagogue because he was recognized as a law-abiding Jew.

And he was also rich, which also, you know, you always want those kind of people in your church, especially if they're going to tithe. And so he was the kind of guy that the synagogue congregation respected. They made him a ruler in the synagogue.

He was a law-keeper. He had a moral reputation. He had a lot of money.

Everything that would make him a good church member. You'd think everything that makes modern churches value a person is there. This man's got a good public testimony, and he's got money.

And he said, what do I have to do to have this life that you teach about, Jesus? He says, well, why do you call me good? He called him good teacher. Why do you call me good? Some of the Gospels read this a little differently. This response of Jesus is difficult because sometimes it says, why do you ask me concerning what is good? That's a little different thing, and different Gospels have Jesus saying different things here.

But this particular case, why do you call me good, of course, sounds like he's saying, I'm not good. Don't call me good. Only God is good.

But one could hardly expect Jesus to say that and mean that because he was, in fact, good. And he, on other occasions, said he and his father are one. If you've seen me, you've seen the father.

He wouldn't say, well, God is good, but I'm not. He himself said, I am the good shepherd. He called himself good, and certainly there's every reason to call him good.

There's nothing bad in him. He was perfect. He was sinless.

Why would he object to being called good? I think, perhaps, what he is saying is this.

Now, it is sometimes said that what Jesus is saying is either this, I'm not good, or I'm God. There's only one who's good, and that's God, and you're calling me good.

Either you're wrong to call me good because I'm not, or you're recognizing that I, in fact, am God. And since Jesus could not have been saying, I'm not good, this is sometimes taken to be an affirmation of his deity. Although there's another possibility, and that is that the man was simply seeing Jesus as another rabbi.

Any rabbi might be referred to as good teacher, presumably, if he's a law-keeping man. And Jesus is saying, well, the goodness that you are seeing in me is different than what you might think. You must know that all true goodness, the only absolute goodness, is in God.

And Jesus could be saying, you perceive me only to be a teacher of average goodness, like all the other rabbis. But you have to recognize that what you see in me that's good, or any goodness that I do possess, is simply the reflection of God, because I'm his messenger, and I speak with his authority. Since the other Gospels actually read this statement a little differently, it's difficult to know quite what to make of this strange statement.

And people have always found this statement strange. I do. Why do you call me good? Well, aren't you good? Why shouldn't I call you good? Of course he's good.

So he's trying to get some kind of a point across. The exact nature of that point is not entirely obvious. He's either seemingly saying, I am God, because only God is good, and I am, in fact, good.

Or he's saying, only God is good, and some of that goodness of God is seen in me, and therefore you should recognize that I'm not just a rabbi, I'm someone sent from God, and in whom his goodness is visible. My life, whatever goodness there is in it, is God in me. It's the goodness of God, and therefore, instead of seeing me simply as another man who has an opinion like another rabbi, I'm speaking from God.

My goodness, that you see, is a divine trait. In any case, that's not probably the most important part of his answer. He said, keep the commandments.

You know the commandments. Keep them. Now he's saying, if you want to come into the kingdom age, all you have to do is be obedient to God.

You know what the commandments are. And he lists some of them. Now, the ones he lists here are from the Ten Commandments.

He lists, do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not bear false witness, honor your father and your mother. These come from the Ten Commandments, and some people have said this means that Jesus confirmed that we need to keep the Ten

Commandments. There are people who say we should keep the Ten Commandments, though we're not required to keep the other laws in the law of Moses.

Just the Ten Commandments. They're permanent. And Jesus was confirming that here, they say.

I don't think he was. In fact, in one of the other Gospels, after this list, he adds one more, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. That's not in the Ten Commandments.

He is, in fact, stating certain moral responsibilities that human beings have, which correspond to things that the law says. But not only the Ten Commandments. When he included love your neighbor as you love yourself, he was saying it's not just a matter of keep the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments.

You need to keep the moral standards that God wants you to keep, including those that are embodied in some of these Ten Commandments. He didn't list Sabbath because that's not one of the moral requirements. That's a ceremonial requirement, but he did list love your neighbor as yourself, which is not one of the Ten Commandments, but is obviously a moral requirement.

The man said I've been doing all that from my youth, and no doubt he was. And Jesus said, well, there's something more that you need, and you'll have it if you sell what you have and give to the poor. The man didn't take him up on that.

And Jesus is not saying that in order to be saved you have to sell what you have and give to the poor. He said, this is something you lack. This man had a lot going for him.

He had been an obedient law-keeping Jew, and that's good. But he wasn't perfect. In fact, when it says Jesus said you still lack one thing, in one of the Gospel parallels it says if you want to be perfect or complete, then you sell what you have and give it to the poor.

And so he does indicate this man is a good man, but he's not perfect. There's one thing still lacking. And we have to be prepared for that.

God doesn't want us to just settle for being almost perfect. He wants us to continually improve. The goal should be that we would be just like Jesus.

It doesn't mean that God isn't happy with us as to what we've attained so far. He might expect nothing more of us considering how far we've come and how much time and opportunity we've had, but that doesn't mean just because we've been doing well that we should say, okay, that's good enough. He says, you want to be perfect.

You're lacking one thing. Let's take it another step. You are a good man.

I won't deny that you're a good man, but there's something more still, and here's what

you can do to fulfill God's will for your life, and that is you can be more generous to the poor. In fact, you can give up your possessions and do that and come and follow me, he said in one of the other Gospels. And so Jesus would be, in fact, and he says so here too, he's calling the men to follow him.

Jesus didn't call everyone to follow him. He didn't call, for example, the demoniac in Gadara to follow him. The man wanted to, and he said, no, you go home, tell your friends about me.

He didn't call Mary and Martha to follow him around. They stayed home as far as we know. He did call some people to actually follow him around to be trained because they would eventually be leadership in his movement.

He had to train leaders, and that's the ones he actually called to leave what they were doing and follow him. This man was actually being called to a ministry, not just to salvation, but to a ministry. Jesus did want him in his movement, and he did offer him a position of being a trainee to follow Jesus around, but he had to get rid of his present anchor that was keeping him from sailing with Jesus.

He had to get rid of his possessions and give to the poor. This generosity to the poor, if it was genuine, would be that which he lacked and needed to add to his spiritual resume, and the man wouldn't do it. That was the step the man wouldn't take, and so the man went away sorrowful, and it's interesting that Jesus didn't try to renegotiate a more acceptable deal with him.

This is a man that would be very desirable to have in your church in many respects. He's a good man, respected in the community, rich, but if he's not going to follow orders, if he's not going to seek to be perfect, if he's not going to seek to continually obey Jesus no matter what Jesus says at any cost, he's not the right stuff. He's not qualified.

And as much as Jesus, I think, was sorrowful to see the man go, he didn't change his conditions. Jesus was not desperate. Jesus is not desperate for friends.

Sometimes evangelists, when they give altar calls, they make it sound like Jesus is desperate. He'll take you, just come on any terms you want because Jesus needs you. Jesus is the poorer for lack of you, and he may well be, but if you come on terms other than his, he's still the poorer for you being there.

God is only glorified and only enriched in his kingdom if people come in total submission to him, totally available to him to do what he wants. And, of course, he doesn't tell everyone to sell all they have and give to the poor, but if that's what he tells you to do, you've got to be willing to do that too, or anything else he says. And this man wasn't willing to do that, so he failed the test.

And there's a response of the disciples we read of next, but we don't have time for it

now. We're at the end of our session, but when we come back, we'll talk about how the disciples responded to this situation and what Jesus said about it.