

Home Church Study Guide—June 6, 2010
A Gracious Invitation Rebuffed (Luke 18)

This week's readings include the focal point of much of the teaching in Luke. The question is central, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Jesus is doing all of this to lead us to a life of faith in God. Perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of Jesus' life is his unflinching trust in His Father. Jesus does not want His followers to ever give up on life and quit praying, and wants them to understand their special relationship to the Father.

The parable is one of absurd comparisons given for the purpose of making a point as strongly as possible. The story is of a judge who has no concern for justice. He has no fear of God and no concern for humanity. You get the idea you'd better have a large bribe or some kind of leverage or this judge will not give you the time of day. The widow, who has nothing to use, got his attention. She may have a very strong case against her adversary, but she has no hope of getting what she wants. Except that she refuses to give up. She just kept coming and wanted justice. The judge continued to refuse. Finally, and this is a humorous response, the judge lets you know he knows how terrible he is by admitting, "I don't fear God, I don't care about anyone, but this widow is wearing me out! I will give her justice just to get a little peace!" The point is that the judge is nothing like God! God does want justice, and He dearly loves humanity! And we are nothing like the widow. We are God's sons and daughters, and have access to the throne of God through Jesus! If even a widow with no power can get her way with an unjust judge because she persists, what we can expect God to do for His beloved children?

We need to have great confidence in God's response to our prayers! Especially in the matter of justice, we need to have faith that God will respond to cries. It may not be how or when we want Him to respond, but the question is "do we have faith that God is genuinely concerned for our well-being?" The answer needs to be a resounding "Yes". The importance of faith in God cannot be overstated. For too many, God is isolated in history, with no real presence in our lives. We must understand that we are part of the redemptive story! God is active, alive and worthy of our trust. He will care for us, and this should free us to pursue His will for us. There is great joy in knowing that God will provide. Even if we do not see His activity when and how we want it, we know that in the end we will be fully vindicated if we are His faithful children.

When Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, He had a specific group in mind. It is directed toward those who have a great sense of self-confidence, which also leads them to hold others in contempt. These two attitudes tend to go together. If we are very confident in our ability to do good, and to make a good living, and to have a good life—we quite naturally will hold in contempt those who do not have it together like us. I have often heard comments of contempt from church people about those who are poor or are struggling, "If they would just try harder, they wouldn't be in the position they are in." There is great danger in placing your security in your own goodness. You may not be who you think you are. Just because you are performing the visible signs of the good life in an exemplary way, does not mean you are living in the kingdom. An indispensable characteristic of kingdom life is total dependency on God. That is authentic faith. There is no room for self-achievement. We all fall desperately short. Some of us know it, others don't.

The Pharisee was doing all the right things and was quite proud of it. He was sure that he had exclusive claims to God, because he was doing right. Does this sound at all familiar? When you base your sense of righteousness on your own accomplishments, you will inevitably despise anyone who does not do what you do in the way that you do it. The Pharisee was at least thankful to God for his achievements, but God really has no purpose in this man's understanding of the good life. It was his by merit. Throughout Luke's gospel we see the irony—the Pharisees think they deserve God's favor and therefore do not receive it. The sinners know they have no hope of God's favor, so they receive it. One of the fundamental teachings of the kingdom is stated here, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." This is the true nature of life in the kingdom. Jesus Himself showed us the way to true exaltation which comes through humbling one's self fully and completely to God. Without emptying our lives before God, there can be no filling of His Spirit. In a culture that esteems highly the ideal of the self-made man, this teaching is difficult to swallow.

The next event reminds us of what truly matters in the kingdom. Women were bringing small children; the word here suggests infants, to Jesus for a blessing. In Jesus' day, such had no value. The disciples were not being mean-spirited by inhibiting these mothers approaching Jesus, they were merely responding as good disciples. They were responsible for protecting their Master's ability to do that which was important. Once again, Jesus surprises those who knew Him best. He wants the children to come to Him. He loves them deeply and wants to bless them. He also uses them to teach a great truth—only those who receive the kingdom like a child will enter it. Entrance does not require spiritual aptitude or attainment. Like a child joyfully receiving a gift, so must we accept the kingdom. Adults do not receive gifts well. "You shouldn't have", "this is too much" or "you've gone to so much trouble." A child smiles widely, grabs the gift, tears open

the package, and lets out a yelp of excitement. The free gift of the kingdom of God awaits those who will empty themselves of pretense, give up on the ideas of attainment, are willing to confess their desperate need for God, and will fully surrender their lives to God's direction. This is simple work for a child, but hard work for a self-focused adult.

Next we meet one who is commonly called "the rich young ruler," the picture of worldly and spiritual success by the standards of the day. He was not happy with his life. Otherwise, he wouldn't have fallen at Jesus' feet (a carpenter rabbi not fully approved by the Jerusalem leaders, in fact, hated by many) to ask, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Before we consider Jesus' answer, we must understand the nature of the question. The ruler wasn't asking about life after death—he was asking about life in the end-time messianic kingdom. It was the life offered in the giving of the law. Note Deuteronomy 4-6. The promise of the Law was life! Do these things and live! But the ruler apparently was one who had it all and was still very empty. He saw in Jesus that which he desperately wanted, so he began, "Good Teacher." Why did Jesus challenge the phrase "good teacher?" Jesus wanted to make sure the young man understood the only source of true goodness was God himself. Also, by addressing the teacher as "good", the ruler likely expected a light and palatable answer to his question, but Jesus did not oblige. Addressing goodness as coming from God, Jesus wanted the ruler to see kingdom life came from participating in that same goodness. He answers with the commandments, for if one would live by them, they would find life in its fullest expression. The ruler says, "I have lived by these teachings since my childhood." This was why he was so confused. The truth is, the ruler had not kept the commands of the Law, for if he had, he would not be asking the question. Jesus shows the problem is a violation of the first commandment that kept the man from life. He had other gods he worshipped before God.

It is important that we understand Jesus' answer, and, as you might imagine, much conjecture has been launched because of these verses. Do we, too, have to sell all that we have? The answer is, "it depends." What kept this young man from finding life was that he trusted in money instead of God. He was pursuing wealth instead of God. Jesus told him what he needed to do. Get rid of that stuff that you are worshipping, give it to someone who needs it, and then, if you want to find life, follow me. Use money for its intended purpose—to supply what we need—and follow me and you will find life. The man was crushed by this answer, but his mind was fixed and unchangeable. He would not give up false gods, so he walked away sorrowful. Wealth is written all over the pages of Luke's gospel, and it doesn't fare well at all.

Jesus is not talking about "heaven after death", he is talking about the availability of the kingdom of God now! We need to hear Jesus' warning. Without the miraculous work of God, we will not walk with Him. Why? We are all rich and have learned to place our trust in that which we accumulate. Jesus' response to us, if we were to ask, "How do we experience life in the kingdom?" would be, "You know the commands. What is keeping you from following them? Money? Get rid of it, and then follow me. Your career? Quit defining yourself by what you do—leave it, and follow me." Whatever it is that we are pursuing rather than Jesus is not worthy of our pursuit. If we would find life, we need to ask God to break us of dependence on anything but him, give it up, and follow Jesus. The apostles are just plain shocked. How could this be? How could Jesus turn the ruler away? He was faithful to God, right? He is the epitome of kingdom life, right? Wrong, very, very wrong. The people of Jesus' day equated wealth with God's favor. Sometimes we do the same thing. Jesus said, "get over it, wealth means nothing—except for the fact that it might keep us from trusting God. What is keeping you from walking in a loving and trusting relationship with God?"

The story of the blind beggar is another one of delicious irony. It is the blind man who sees Jesus—the crowds follow rather mindlessly. The Pharisees attack. When the blind man shouts, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me," those leading the procession tried to shut him up, embarrassed that one of such lowly estate would interrupt the walk of the Master. But the blind man knew this was his chance, and he believed. Jesus heard his voice, and in that tender moment, stopped and asked that the man be brought to him. Who would have thought? Jesus asks a question that calls for faith, "What do you want for me to do for you?" The answer is quick and without doubt, "Lord, I want to see." In a moment, the darkness that had enveloped his life was gone. In stark contrast to the rich ruler, the blind man immediately followed Jesus. He had nothing to leave behind. He knew who Jesus was, so he followed Him. Do you see?

"So What" for Home Church discussion:

1. Discuss the problem of "false gods." Consider reading Timothy Keller's *Counterfeit Gods*.
2. How much confidence do you have that God answers prayers? Discuss (Luke 18:1-8)
3. Do you struggle with "religious pride?" What can we do to overcome this? (Luke 18:9-14)
4. Why could the blind man see Jesus for who he truly was when others could not? (35-42)