

# Redefining God's People

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part V)

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## Luke 18:1-14 ESV

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 afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"

And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be

merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

## Luke 19:1-10 ESV

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.

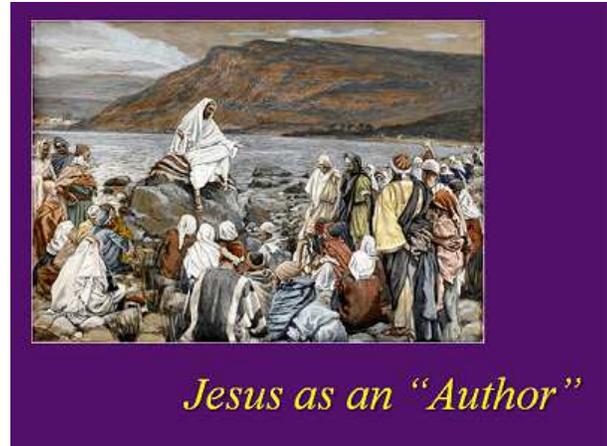
And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner."

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

As we continue our journey with Jesus through the gospel of Luke, we come today to passages from chapters 18 and 19. Again, as last week, we'll be looking at some of those parables which are so distinctive of Jesus, and which no other author has ever developed to such a remarkable degree.

I call Jesus an "author," because although we don't have anything he may have written himself we do have what he composed orally. In thinking about authorship in the ancient world we can't confine our perspective to material that was *written* when it was composed. Writing was a specialized skill in the ancient world, like computer programming today, so people relied on memorization to a greater extent. Much of the Bible first existed as what scholars call "oral tradition," and was written only later by compilers like Luke, who relied on sources who handed it down to them. In Luke's case some of his sources were eyewitnesses, as he tells us in his introduction; but in other cases, perhaps, the material was handed down orally for several generations before someone committed it to writing.

Here's another aspect of Jesus as an "author": when we read the Gospels we often find different variations of the same sayings of Jesus. What do we make of that — did some people who preserved Jesus' words get them wrong, so we might have a "right" version and one or two incorrect versions? I don't think so. Let's recall that, by most estimates, Jesus was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching his followers over a course of maybe three years before his crucifixion. Yet we could read aloud everything we know Jesus ever said in one day. I believe Jesus composed his messages about what God is doing, and his illustrations of how God's kingdom works, in the form of sayings he memorized. Then, as he traveled through Galilee and Judea, he repeated the same teachings many times in many places, with only minor variations here and there — which would account for the different versions we find in the Gospels, as people remembered his words from different occasions.



*Jesus as an "Author"*

The same thing happens today. Via YouTube I listen to several favorite lecturers on Bible history or interpretation. When I search for these speakers I find multiple presentations they've given, and often as I view them I hear the same ideas repeated in slightly different wording. Indeed, as I listened to one of these scholars recently there were places where I knew exactly what he

was going to say next, because I had heard him tell the same story two or three other times! That's because the lecturer was speaking to another audience at a different time and place. It was the same with Jesus; many things he said he must have said repeatedly to reach different audiences. After all, those people couldn't go to YouTube and listen to his teaching. He had to go to them with his message, because under the travel conditions of the day most of them couldn't go to where he would be speaking.

All of this is a long, and maybe not very necessary, introduction to what we're going to look at today from Luke 18 and 19: the parable known as "the unjust judge," the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, and the incident of Jesus' visit to the house of Zacchaeus. Last week we looked at the parables of

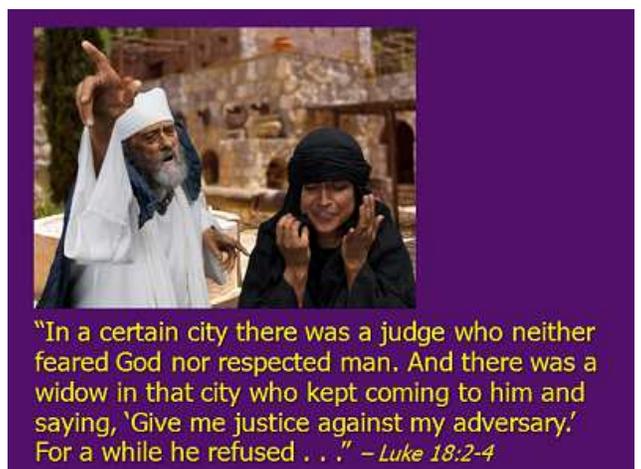
the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the "prodigal son," and we found a common theme: the return of what's been lost to the place where it belongs. The three passages we'll look at today also have a common theme, closely related to that motif of recovering that which was lost. It's the theme of *identifying those people who truly belong to the family of God*. You'll see what I mean as we progress.

So first we look at the parable Jesus relates about the "unjust judge." A widow has a problem with someone who's been doing her wrong, and she keeps going to a judge to plead for relief. Now think about the place of a widow in the ancient world; a woman has no standing in society unless she's attached to a man's household, so her problem doesn't count for much. Some man in her local community has been designated to arbitrate disputes between people, perhaps one of the elders. (This isn't Roman law, so it's not a tribune or similar official.) But this individual doesn't care much about the widow's problem, because as Jesus says "he neither fears God nor respects people." The widow can't afford to bribe him — which is what this "judge" may be looking for — but she keeps on pestering him. (Let's remember these aren't real people; they're characters in a story, so we have to imagine how Jesus wants us to think of them.) Finally, to get rid of this nuisance, the judge issues a verdict that relieves her problem. And Luke informs us that Jesus told this story to encourage his followers to keep on praying.



*Teachers often repeat the same material. . .*

*. . . differently on different occasions.*



*"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 . . ." — Luke 18:2-4*

## Do we really have to keep pestering God?



keep needling the judge. The Lord *isn't* like that judge, and we *don't need* to approach him that way! Unlike this judge, God is ready and willing to grant our requests, so we aren't being told to emulate this poor widow by continually pestering him about the same problems.

We *do* need to pray — that's why Jesus tells the story — but when we pray we do so not from the standpoint of this helpless widow, who has no real leverage against the corrupt judge. Instead, we *pray as God's elect*, the people he has chosen and called into his family. That's the point of Jesus' message about the kingdom of God: the Lord is rebuilding his family, or his "elect." And he will respond to those who call on him by *vindicating* them, recognizing them as his own. Some translations say he will "give them justice"; but that doesn't convey all that's meant here. The Greek verb Luke uses is *edikesin*, derived from the word *dikaio*s which means "righteous," or in a right standing with God. The Lord will declare his people to be "in the right"; that's his verdict regarding those who continually call to him in prayer. The judge in this parable is *adikias*, "unrighteous," having no bond or connection to the poor widow. By contrast, God will exercise his righteousness by declaring his people righteous, and by so doing he is vindicating them, *identifying them as his elect*, the members of his family.

So, friends, we ought always to pray — not that we should pray over and over again about the same problem but so we can keep that conversation going that establishes and vindicates us as members of God's family, his "elect" or chosen ones. We do need to pray, and ask God for help. The Lord has made us in his image with responsibility for our own lives and the world we live in, and he won't violate our sovereignty by doing something we don't ask him to do. *We need to ask*. But once we've asked God for a solution, once we've asked him to do what's right in our situation, we don't need to ask him again in the same way.

We can discuss the issue with him, of course; perhaps we can ask him to give us a further revelation, insight into what we might be able to do to become more open to his answers. But, as Paul said to the Athenians, "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), so he knows what we need even before we ask him. Prayer keeps that line of communication open so that we, as chosen members of his family, can receive what he wants to give us. We recall that Jesus told his followers, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Luke 11:9). This could be a *progression*: Ask for what you need, then start looking for it, and when you see it — take it!

Now let's turn to that second parable in our passage, Jesus' story of the Pharisee and the publican. He begins, "Two men went up to the temple to pray." Stop right there. Why did these two men go to the Temple to pray? Couldn't they pray just as well at home? Well, obviously, if they weren't praying in the same place there wouldn't be any story! But, more importantly, in first-century Judaism the Jerusalem Temple was the primary place where you prayed. When Jesus cleansed the temple he declared, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all

Usually, modern preachers interpret this parable as if Jesus is encouraging us to pray over and over about the same situation, because if we're persistent God will finally answer our prayers. The problem with this is that it makes God out to be like the corrupt judge, a deity who only begrudgingly grants our requests after we've been pounding on the door of heaven so long we've worn him down! Really, that can't be what Jesus means. He's made it clear that the Lord already knows what we need even before we ask him — see Matthew 6:8. Our Father is not a reluctant dispenser of justice, like this corrupt judge; instead, as Jesus asks at the end of this parable, "Won't God *quickly* grant justice to his elect, who are constantly in prayer?" Perhaps this is an "anti-parable." Jesus is telling us we're *not* like that persistent widow who has to



*We need to ASK — not so God will give, but so we can receive.*

nations" (Mark 11:17). After the resurrection, Luke tells us, the earliest Christians went to the Temple daily at the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1).



In the ancient world a temple was the place where the presence of the God was manifested, usually through an image of the god. Israel had no image, and it recognized that no building could possibly contain God. As Solomon prayed at the dedication of his temple, "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Indeed, as the creation account of Genesis 1-2 makes clear, for the Israelites *the whole creation is a temple*, and God's image in that temple is *people* — made in his image to signify whose temple the creation is! Nevertheless, the Jerusalem Temple was the focus for Israel's prayer life, because the Lord was enthroned there invisibly. In fact, the Hebrew Bible doesn't use the word "temple" for the structure in Jerusalem; it calls it *beit Yahweh* or *beit 'Elohim*, "the house of the Lord" or "the house of God." Praying individually at home, or with a group of friends, is fine. But

there is a place in our Christian life for coming together to pray in the house of God. And here, in our "house of God," the presence of the Lord is symbolized in the elements of Holy Communion, but more importantly *in each believer* gathered for worship — because the gathering of believers is a temple of the Holy Spirit, in which the presence of the Lord dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16).

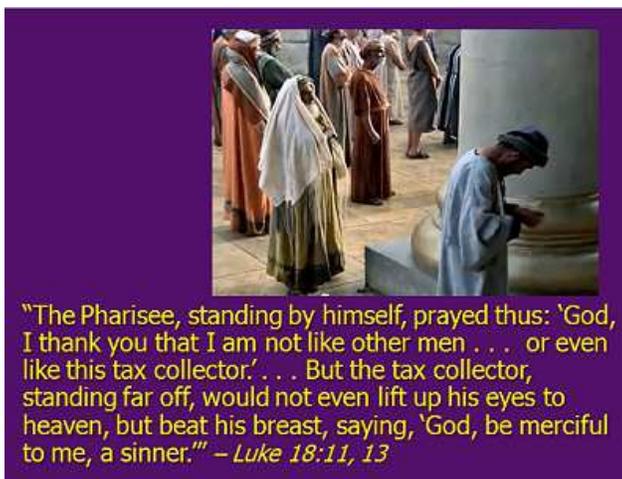
That was an explanatory sidebar, but let's get back to our parable. The two men praying in the Temple are a Pharisee and a publican. A Pharisee is a teacher of the Law of Moses, and beyond that he's a teacher of the "fence around the Torah," those rules and customs that go beyond Scripture to provide added protection, lest the people should not be completely faithful to what the Lord had told them to do. It was important to the Pharisees that they set the example for their fellow Jews of how to live, encouraging everyone to keep the Law so the Lord would be pleased with his people once again, forgive their sins, and restore their independence from an oppressing foreign power.

But as this Pharisee prays aloud to set the proper example, over here is this publican, a tax collector who has sold out to the very foreign power the Pharisees' prayers are meant to throw off! A publican was a Jew who had contracted with the Roman authority to collect a certain amount of taxes from his fellows. If he collected more than he owed the government, he could keep the extra, so some of these publicans became wealthy. But this particular tax collector knows he hasn't been true to the people of God. We don't know his situation — because, after all, these two men aren't real people, only characters in a story. But evidently Jesus wants his hearers to

view this publican as somebody who's really sorry about the choice he made to serve the foreign occupation forces; maybe he's caught in a tight spot and has no way to get out of his contract with the Romans.

In any case, Jesus is contrasting the prayer-attitude of these two men. Luke says Jesus tells this parable to people "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." In other words, he's actually telling it to the Pharisees! And this is how the Pharisee prays: "Thank you, Lord, I'm not like other people; I keep the Law of Moses, I follow all the regulations; I even tithe and fast; I'm not like this 'deplorable' over here, this tax collector!" But the publican's prayer is different: "God, I don't even dare look up to you because I know I've done wrong; please have mercy on me!"

And then Jesus makes the astounding statement that must have caused his Pharisee audience to tear out their beards. It's not the scrupulous Pharisee who wins the Lord's approval. Instead, it's the publican who "goes down to his house justified." What does that mean — that God approves of collaborating with your enemy, like a Quisling or a Benedict Arnold? No, indeed. The Greek word Luke uses here, which we translate "justified," is



*dedikaiomenos*, from that same word *dikaïos* that's used of the poor widow in the previous parable, and of God's "elect" who look to him in prayer. In that parable it means those who pray are recognized as members of God's

family, in constant conversation with him. And that's what Jesus is saying about the tax collector who prays, "God, have mercy!" The kingdom of God is here, Jesus has been saying. The Lord is returning to his people at last. And this humble man who doesn't gloat over his own virtue, but instead throws himself upon the mercy of the Lord, is the one God recognizes as truly belonging to him.

Jesus is rebuilding Israel around the message of God's grace. That's not a new message; it's the message of the Hebrew Scriptures as well. Moses told the people of Israel, It wasn't because there was anything special about you that God chose you, "but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers" (Deuteronomy 7:7-8). And Abraham, their father, did nothing to deserve being called by

God to begin a new family that was to bless all nations. It's by God's own initiative that Israel was called to be his family, to take his name before all people. So the message of grace is an offer made to all people who cry out to him, "Lord, have mercy on me, and include me in!" As Peter told his hearers on the Day of Pentecost, quoting the prophet Joel, "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21). And he added, the promise isn't just for you Israelites but "for all who are far off [that is, the Gentiles], everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39).

That's where you and I come into the picture. And we're never going to say, "Look at me, how faithful I've been to serve the Lord compared to these other people all around me." No, we're going to say, "I came into the family on the same basis as the publican — because I called out to the Lord for mercy, and he took me in. I came into the family because Jesus redefined Israel around the message of God's grace, and through his death and resurrection he extended that message to everyone, including me! I came in through Jesus, and not through anything I did to deserve being vindicated and acknowledged as one of God's own. So I, too, throw myself upon the mercy of God, and 'go down to my house justified.'"

This truth is borne out by our third passage this morning, from what we call Luke's chapter 19, the story of Jesus' visit to the house of Zacchaeus. Once again, we're dealing with a "deplorable," a tax collector like the man in the

parable. (And we remind ourselves that one of Jesus' twelve disciples, Matthew or Levi, was also a publican when Jesus called him!) This incident occurs at a key point in the Gospel narrative, for it occurs at Jericho down in the Jordan valley just north of the Dead Sea. Back in Galilee, in chapter 9 of Luke, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Now he's almost there, for Jericho is the last stop before he begins the climb up to Jerusalem and Mount Zion. Jericho is the last place to pass through in this below-sea-level territory Jesus has been traveling up to now. Like the two men in the parable, Jesus is about to "go up to the Temple." And as he begins the climb, he meets Zacchaeus.

We're all familiar with the story of Zacchaeus, which once again only Luke relates to us. Jesus is passing through the town, and crowds have gathered to see him. Zacchaeus isn't very tall and can't get a good look. Maybe, because he's a despised publican, his neighbors aren't eager to let him into the front row. So he runs on ahead and climbs a tree so he

"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other."

— Luke 18:14



### The Bible's Message of Grace



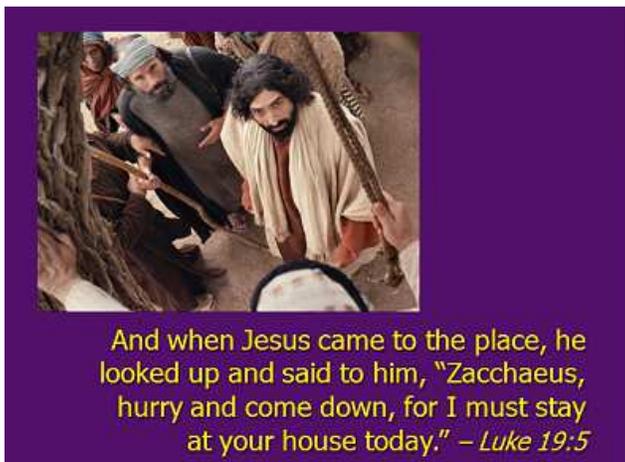
"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery . . ." — Deuteronomy 7:7-8



can at least see this man who has caused such excitement to build in his community. The word has gotten out: something special is happening with the message and mighty deeds of Jesus; God is "on the move" through this man, and Zacchaeus doesn't want to miss out.

And "miss out" he certainly does not, because Jesus spots him and calls to him. "Zacchaeus, come down — I've got to stay in your home today." Why pick the home of Zacchaeus? Perhaps dozens in this eager crowd would have loved to entertain Jesus for a night. But when Jesus sees what Zacchaeus, of all people, has done to even get a glimpse of him he knows that he's met a man who's desperately ready to hear and respond to the gospel of the kingdom of God. Again, like the Pharisees we've met before, people are complaining because Jesus chose to be the guest of this sinful traitor who has "sold out" to their oppressors.

But that doesn't stop Jesus, nor Zacchaeus, who welcomes him joyfully into his home. "This great teacher," Zacchaeus must be thinking, "upon whom everyone has set their hopes for the redemption of Israel — he's come to me, of all people, for hospitality! Such a demonstration of God's grace!" Well, whatever Zacchaeus was thinking, Jesus' visit had its effect. Zacchaeus determined to undo the wrongs he had done to his neighbors, perhaps by collecting from them more in taxes than he owed the Roman authority. "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus' response describes what Zacchaeus' decision has made clear: "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham."



What brought about the "salvation," or rescue, of Zacchaeus? Was it the good deeds he would be doing in making restitution to the people he had wronged? No, these actions weren't the conditions of his salvation, they were *the result of it*. Zacchaeus was saved when Jesus recognized him as a member of the family: "He is also a son of Abraham." Zacchaeus was justified, vindicated, "saved," in the same way as God's praying "elect" in the first parable, or the publican in the second. His salvation was to be brought back into God's family.

And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham." — Luke 19:8-9



Sometimes today, in the evangelical church, we present "salvation" in the narrowest possible terms, as if it's a transaction just between me and Jesus that entitles me to a ticket to heaven. I'm being blunt here: that's not the New Testament idea of salvation. To be "saved" means to be brought back into the family of God through responding to the same message of grace Jesus proclaimed: "God is on the move, his kingdom is here, he's inviting you to become part of his new people and enjoy the life of his new creation." We do that by doing what God's elect do: constantly conversing with God through prayer. We do that by saying what the publican said: "God, have mercy on me!" We do that by doing what Zacchaeus did: running to find Jesus, to welcome him into our life, because he's asking to come home with us so we can come home to the family of God.

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