

How We Enter the Kingdom of God

Luke 18:1-30

In a lot of ways, John 3:1-15 illustrates what we will study in Luke 18:1-30 this morning. First, let's remember our context, Jesus is still connecting *faith and the Kingdom of God*. He is going to pick up where He left off and keep driving the arrow of the gospel deep in the heart of the sinner.

In vv. 1-30, Jesus used two parables and two personal encounters to teach His disciples and us how we enter the Kingdom of God. Before we get into the text this morning, I want to do a little overview because I want you to be able to trace the redemptive thread through these verses and see Jesus' main point.

In vv. 1-8, Jesus teaches on prayer. Jesus concluded this first parable in v. 8 with the words, "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Now let me ask: *Where have we heard the phrase "when the Son of Man comes?"* It was in Luke 17:20-37 when Jesus was talking about the "Kingdom of God" and He used the phrases "in the days of the Son of Man" and "when the Son of Man is revealed" interchangeably with the coming of the "Kingdom of God." So, when Jesus says "when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?" He was talking about the coming of the *Kingdom of God and who will enter it*. The question Jesus is about to answer is how we enter the Kingdom of God.

Look again in v. 1, Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable on prayer because he wanted to teach His disciples to *pray and not lose heart*. To *not lose heart in prayer* is to pray with a *persistent faith that always has confidence God is going to do what is best in His time*.

Then Jesus followed this parable on prayer with another parable on prayer in vv. 9-14. In this parable, Jesus contrasts the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus showed us that we are to pray with a humble faith and genuine repentance because it is by faith and repentance that we are justified before God. "God be merciful to me a sinner." is a key phrase in the passage and I will show you how it is connected to enter the Kingdom of God as we work through the text.

Then in vv. 15-17, Jesus followed these parables by showing His disciples it is those with child-like faith, trust, and dependence in Him that enter the Kingdom of God. Note the phrases *the Kingdom of God* in these verses. Finally, Jesus concluded His teaching in vv. 18-30, with His encounter with the rich young ruler by saying *how difficult it was a those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God, to be saved, to be justified, or to have eternal life*. Again note these phrases: "the Kingdom of God," "who can be saved," and "in the age to come eternal life."

Now we come to the big question of vv. 1-30 which is: "how do we enter the Kingdom of God?" Remember the context, Jesus was just talking about the coming of *the Kingdom of God* in Luke 17. Finally, in vv. 1-30, He tells His disciples how to *enter the Kingdom OR how to be justified OR how to receive mercy OR how to be saved*. All of these phrases are referring to *how we enter the Kingdom of God*. Are you tracking with me?

Now that we have set the text up, let's work through the passage and answer the question: *how do we enter the Kingdom of God/how are we saved?*

I. We enter the Kingdom of God by faith (vv. 1-8)

Luke tips us off to the point of Jesus' parable in v. 1—"that they ought to always to pray and not lose heart." However, we must also remember that the main point of parables also come at the end of the parables. So, listen to how Jesus concludes the parable in vv. 6-8. He concluded by asking: *When I return will I find faith on the earth?* Jesus' lesson on prayer is also a lesson on faith. HOWEVER, there are other rich lessons in this parable.

Jesus also taught us that our prayer of faith is also grounded in the nature and character of our good, faithful and just God. Jesus says that God is not like the unrighteous judge who grows weary of hearing the same prayer over and over. Instead God is faithful, just, hears the prayers of His elect, and responds to them.

He also teaches us that God loves His elect! He wants to hear the prayers of the elect because He will give justice to their prayers speedily.

Application: Jesus wrapped up His teaching on this parable with a series of rhetorical questions that are designed to teach us all of the points He was making. Let's consider Jesus' rhetorical questions and make application with them:

1. The first rhetorical is in vv. 6-7a, *"And the Lord said, 'Hear what the unrighteous judge says. ⁷ And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?'"* Jesus teaches us a couple of things in these verses.

First, we must pray persistently because we are in a spiritual war. God's people have adversaries. Many times, they will abuse us and take advantage of us. Sometimes they will kill us or our loved ones. God does not always shield us or keep us from the harsh realities of the world. He has said that through many trials and tribulations will we enter the Kingdom. He expects us to be in the fight for the salvation of His elect. As we share the gospel, our adversaries will seek to do harm and often times they do harm. Our Savior was crucified, the Apostle Paul was beaten many times and ended his life in a Roman prison and yet in all of this Jesus and Paul gave glory to God. It is all part of God's sovereign plan to get the gospel to the nations.

Our problem is we often look at circumstances without faith. We fail to see things from God's perspective and remember He has a plan. Our part is to live by faith and trust Him even when it seems the adversaries have the upper hand. The truth is our adversaries never have the upper hand. God is always in control and He always has a plan.

We want justice and rightly so but our fleshly attempts at justice are usually to lash out with our words or violence. Our temptation is to take up arms or march on Washington or stage a protest or seek some law to give us justice when what we should really be doing is praying for our enemies. We should pray for the Christians in India who are undergoing persecution after the last election. The political party that is in control wants to purge the nation of Christianity.

Second, we can pray persistently because God is a God of justice. Jesus teaches us is about the nature and character of God: God wants justice just like the widow does. As a matter of fact, since justice is in the nature and character of God, He cares more about justice than we do. Often the justice we desire is flawed with sin and we can only give rough justice. God's justice comes from His perfect, holy, character. God's justice is always righteous, holy, and accurately applied.

The third things we see in this rhetorical question is that: We can pray persistently because God will always act on behalf of His elect people. This means we belong to Him and we have belonged to Him since before time began. Being God's elect means you were intimately known by God, you have been adopted by God as His special child, you will never be lost even though you may experience suffering at the hands of your adversaries.

Being God's elect also means that He has given you the gift of faith by His gift of grace. This gift of faith is a sovereign gift given by sovereign grace. Saving faith always saves and sanctifying faith always makes us holy and it is exercised in cooperation with the Holy Spirit of God. So, what this means is that to exercise your faith is to pray persistently—day and night if necessary. Being God's elect does not mean you simply rest on your status as a child of God and say, *"God is sovereign and He will do whatever He wants regardless of my*

prayers.” True, God is sovereign and He will do what He wants and He has called His elect to exercise our faith in prayer.

2. The second rhetorical question is in vv. 7a-8 and Jesus actually answers the question Himself, “*Will he delay long over them? ⁸ I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.*” Jesus throws out this rhetorical question because He knows we are weak. He knows that when we have been beaten down and we have been praying and nothing seems to be happening we tend to grow weak in our faith. The first thing to go is prayer that was why he began the parable with these words: “*to pray and not lose heart.*”

Here is the first point of application to this rhetorical question: God’s timetable for answering our prayers is not the same as our timetable. Brothers and sisters when suffering comes and it has been going on for years then we lose heart in our prayers. Our faith in God grows thin and we begin to question the justice and goodness of God. If we are not careful, we begin to think of God as the unrighteous judge who really does not want to answer our prayer.

There is a tension between praying and not losing heart and God will give justice speedily. The issue is we do not know God’s plan and timetable. So, when the answer does not come when we think it ought come then we must have faith in God, pray and not lose heart. We must, by faith, believe that God always does what best for us and for His glory.

Second point of application we see in this rhetorical question is: the size of your faith does not determine the speed of the answer to your prayer. Jesus has already said that *faith* that is as small as the smallest seed known at that time, a mustard seed, will move mountains. You see it is not the size or strength of your faith but if you have it at all and the evidence of your faith is seen when you continue to come to God in prayer believing that He hears your prayers and that He will answer it even when you think there has been a delay.

3. The last rhetorical question is in the last part of v. 8, “*Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*” Jesus concluded with this last rhetorical question that sums up the parable and ties prayer and faith together. Persistent prayer is evidence of faith in God.

II. We enter the Kingdom of God by humble faith and genuine repentance (vv. 9-14)

Jesus told another parable about prayer but this time Luke tells us that He aimed it to those “*who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.*”

Jesus begins in v. 10 by saying that two men went to the temple to pray, one was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. In the minds of those who were hearing the parable images were already being conjured up. They were already thinking that the Pharisee was the one who was obviously righteous because he strove to keep the letter of the Law and the tax collector, well he had no hope of ever being righteous so prayer would be a waste of time for him. They were probably thinking they could learn something good from the Pharisee’s prayer and nothing good from the tax collector’s prayer.

So, let’s listen to the Pharisee’s prayer in vv. 11-12. The Pharisees were at the top of the religious food chain. Everyone wanted to be like them. People thought that if anyone would be saved it would be the Pharisees. The Pharisee, in this parable, obviously thought he was all of that and a bag of chips so when he prayed he walked up to the front of the temple, nearest to the Holy of Holies and prayed through his resume so everyone could hear him. He listed all of the good things he had done and was doing. He also mentioned all the sins he was not doing. He wanted God and the world to know he was righteous. To top it off, as he was praying he pointed back at the tax collector and thanks God he was not like that guy.

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector was at the bottom of the religious food chain. He was a social outcast and the kind of person whom everyone loved to hate and he knew it. If you were going to put someone down you would call them a *tax collector or a publican*. I mean this was what the Pharisee did. It was like calling someone a Patriots fan. Everyone knew they were cheaters and thieves. Tax collectors extorted money from their own people on behalf of the Roman government. Not only were they thieves but they were traitors to their own people. It was as if they had denied their own Jewish ethnicity and essentially abandoned their faith in God.

The tax collector in v. 13 knew the condition of his own heart. Listen to his prayer in v. 13. So, the tax collector goes to the very back of the temple, as far away from the Holy of Holies as he can get and still be in the temple because he is ashamed of his sin. He bowed his head in humility and beat his breast and prayed, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner."* This was a genuine sinner's prayer.

The word *merciful* is the Greek word *hilaskomai*, which means *to propitiate*. It is the Old Testament word that meant to *"atone for at the mercy seat of God in the temple with a blood sacrifice."* *To propitiate* means that God's wrath was going to be poured out on sinners unless there was a blood sacrifice made that would cover the sin and satisfy the wrath of God thus turning it away from the sinner.

Here is how this worked. The priest went into the Holy of Holies in the temple on the Day of Atonement he would sprinkle blood on the mercy seat of the altar in which it contained the Law of God given at Mt. Sinai. When the blood was applied, the wrath of the Almighty, Holy God was satisfied because it as if the guilt of the sinner for breaking the Law of God was transferred to the animal and the righteousness of God was imputed to the sinner. At that time all of the people of Israel would pray, *"Lord be merciful to me, the sinner."*

So, what we see in this passage is that the tax collector went to the temple and stood very far away from the Holy of Holies and the holiness of God and asked God to propitiate his sin. He asked God to atone for his sins by covering the guilt of his sin and thus protect him from eternal judgment. The tax collector's prayer was the Old Testament pattern of prayer for sacrifice which is more literally translated, *"God propitiate to me the sinner"*¹ so that I may enter Your Kingdom and have eternal life.

Friends, we do not enter the Kingdom of God based on our own righteousness or justification but based on the atonement of Jesus Christ. He is our blood sacrifice. Jesus died for people like us: thieves, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and traitors. This is who we are. We are sinners.

So, to be justified by God we must own our sin; we must genuinely confess it to God and we must repent of it. We must place our faith in Jesus Christ as our atoning sacrifice who died on the cross in our place and for our sin, was buried and rose from the dead on the third day to free us from the power of sin over us.

If you have never confessed your sin to God, turned from that sin and turned to Jesus Christ in faith please do this today. Jesus is calling you through the preaching of the gospel this morning. Find a Christian friend and ask him or her to explain how to enter the Kingdom of God to you.

Application: Brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus propitiated God's wrath for our sin. He satisfied the wrath of God by His death on the cross because on the cross He took all of God's wrath for our sin.

Do you know what this realization should do for us as Christians and our church? It should humble us and create in us hearts of deep humility and grace. Hearts that are deeply humble toward God and gracious hearts toward one another. The work of Christ on the cross should make us hold others in higher esteem than

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Reformed Expository Commentary: Luke, Vol. 2, Chapters 13-24*, 261-264.

ourselves. It should create a culture of grace in our church where in our relationships we love not only in word but also in how we treat one another.

Jesus said in this text that the evidence of whether you really understand the doctrine of justification by faith and the atoning work of God is revealed in how we treat one another. He said those who trust in themselves hold others in contempt and exalt themselves. If this is how you treat people then there is one of two problems going on in your life.

First, it may be that you really do not know Jesus and the work He did on the cross to purchase your pardon for your sin. This may be the reason you treat others like you do.

Second, if you are a Christian, then you need to repent and understand apply what the Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 4:31-32, *“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* And also, what he said in Philippians 2:3-8, *“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”*

The Apostle Paul grounds this kind of humility in the humility of Jesus and His atonement on the cross. It is only a deep understanding of the gospel that creates a culture of grace in a church. Listen to what vv. 5-8 of Phil. 2 says, *“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*

Brother and sister in Christ if you are struggling with being humble, self-righteousness, treating others with contempt, a critical spirit, or self-exaltation then you must immerse yourself in the person and work of Jesus and ask the Spirit of God to press humility of Christ into your heart. Ask God to MAKE you humble.

III. We enter the Kingdom of God by being born-again (vv. 15-30)

Luke puts together Jesus' encounter with the children and the rich young ruler to drive Jesus' point home about how we enter the Kingdom of God. Look in vv. 15-17.

People were bringing children to Jesus so He could bless them. Like the tax collector, children were not considered to be of much value or status in Jewish society. We might say they were looked down on with *contempt*.

Jesus, knowing what was going on, seized the moment and taught them about how to enter the Kingdom of God. In v. 17 Jesus said, *“Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”*

Jesus tapped into the nature of what it means to be a child. Jesus was not saying that we must return to a time of innocence but that we must be dependent and trusting in God like a small child does his or her parents.

The texts specifically says they were bringing *infants* to Him. Infants are completely dependent and must have every need met by their parents and those who care for them. If you go back to the nursery this morning there won't be an infant laying over there saying, *“Hey, I pooped my diaper so I am going to go in here and change.”* Nope. If you go back there to work in the infants room my wife or Sara Knight will be holding babies, feeding them, and changing their diapers and then they will turn to you and hand you a baby and say, *“This baby pooped in his diaper, change it and then give him a bottle because he is hungry.”* The bottom line is babies must constantly look to their parents or those who take care of them to feed and care for them. Infants are dependent and humble because all they receive is help. You are not going to get your

one year old to mow the yard. They can't contribute and this is what Jesus says it is like for us to enter the Kingdom. We cannot contribute to our entering the Kingdom of God—it must be done for us by our Heavenly Father. We have no ability but God has all the ability.

Next, in vv. 18-30, Jesus encountered a rich young ruler who asked "*what must I do to inherit eternal life*" or we might say the question is "*how can I enter the Kingdom of God?*" This really is the most important question a sinner can ask and the rich man comes to the right person, at the right place, at the right time and asks the right question.

Then Jesus dissects the man's heart in order to lead him to the right answer. First, Jesus asks another rhetorical question: "*Why do you call me good?*" Jesus wanted to point out that only God was good but He did not deny He was not good so He basically said He was God.

Second, he draws out the man's knowledge of God's law when Jesus only quoted commandments five through nine in v. 20. To which the man said he had kept those commandments since his youth. Like the Pharisee, the rich young ruler was checking the boxes.

Finally, Jesus drove the arrow of the gospel deep in the young man heart when He simply told the young man he needed to sell everything and follow Him and then he would have treasure in heaven.

The one box the young man could NOT check was his love for God. He did not love God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. In reality, the young man loved his wealth and affluence more than He loved God. In his sadness, the young man looked at Jesus and then looked at his wealth and chose his wealth over Jesus.

Jesus turned to His disciples and said, "*How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*"

His disciples were astonished because they thought that surely the blessing of God rested on this young rich man and that he would go to heaven. Jesus disciples were actually disciplined and shaped by the mindset of that day, which believed that if you were wealthy and successful then God's hand of blessing was upon you.

So, in their astonishment, they asked Jesus, "*Then who can be saved?*" In other words, if this young man is not saved then it must be impossible for anyone to enter the Kingdom of God. *Exactly, because salvation must be accomplished for you.*

Jesus said, what is "*impossible with man is possible with God.*" It is possible with God because God gives the gift of new birth and in the new birth is the gift of humble faith and genuine repentance. In the new birth, is the faith to deny oneself and lose your life for the sake of the gospel.

So here is the answer to our question: *How do we enter the Kingdom of God?* You must be born again. It is impossible for you to make yourself be born again but it is not for God. The new birth is the promise of the new covenant whereby God removes a heart of stone and puts in a heart of flesh that beats for God. The first thing that happens in new birth is that the sinner cries out in faith to Jesus and repents of sin.

Friend if you are here today and you have never trusted Christ and you want to trust Jesus then please speak to me after the service.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, v. 28 is Peter being Peter isn't it? Listen to what Peter said in v. 28, "*See, we have left our homes and followed you.*" Peter was not checking the boxes like the rich young ruler. Instead, he was simply stating the fact that they wanted Jesus so much that they lost their lives for His sake.

To which Jesus replied, *“Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God,³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”*

Brothers and sisters, salvation is a free gift from God but it will cost you everything. Following Christ means that your whole life will be rearranged around Him as the center. He will make demands on your life. He will call you to follow Him in places where you never would go. He will call you to share the gospel with your family members who may reject you. He will call you to move to other parts of the country to see a church planted. He may call you to change jobs or become a vocational pastor. He may call you to leave behind loved ones and what is safe to go to a place that is not safe and plant a church there. He may call you to go to the other side of the globe to share the gospel with the nations.

At the SBC Annual meeting on Tuesday afternoon I watched whole families, men, and women, leave everything behind to go overseas for the sake of the gospel. It was a powerful service to watch them be commissioned to go.

Grand Avenue, I want you to know, we are a part of sending them to the nations. When we stand by them in prayer for them, go and visit them, and support them financially then their going is our going. Our sacrifice in their going is our giving dollars to support those families and to pray persistently that Jesus will give those missionaries boldness to share the gospel and that Jesus will save the lost by giving them new birth.

Let me close by saying that those commissioned on Tuesday are not the only ones Jesus is calling to go. Perhaps God is calling you to go to the nations with the gospel. If you believe God is calling you then I want to speak to you as well. Let me help you follow God’s call on your life.

It is no accident that Jesus concludes His teaching by reminding His disciples about His coming death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. Listen to what Jesus said in vv. 31-34.

I pray you grasp what Jesus was saying in these verses. You see, when Jesus talked about faith and repentance it was not generic faith and repentance but He is the object of our faith.

The Lord’s Supper is the visual proclamation of vv. 31-34 and it is the visual proclamation of our faith in Jesus, repentance of sin, and covenant with Him.