

# The Adjectives of Faith

## Luke 18:1-17

**Series:** The Journey to Jerusalem (Luke, Fall 2019)

**Preaching Date:** January 5, 2020

**Worship:** Faith in the Faithful One

**Key Sentence:** Let adjectives shape your faith

### **Outline:**

I. Persistent Faith (Luke 8:1-8)

II. Humble Faith (Luke 8:9-14)

III. Childlike Faith (Luke 8:15-17)

**Luke 18:1-14** And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Give me justice against my adversary.’ <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, ‘Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.’” <sup>6</sup>And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup>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!’ <sup>14</sup>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.”

<sup>15</sup>Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup>Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

## The Heart of Faith

### Luke 18:1-17

Welcome back to the book of Luke. After more than a year of studying Luke, with breaks for Christmas, Easter, summer series and stuff, we are now in the final stretch, chapters 18 to 24. This winter we'll finish the middle section that we've been calling the Journey to Jerusalem, and then study the passion section, chapters 19 to 24, ending the whole study just after Easter.

As we pick up today in chapter 18, I've got a key sentence for this message that is simple but important. "Let adjectives shape your faith." By the way, I'd been calling this message "the heart of faith," but yesterday I changed "heart" to "adjectives" to add emphasis. But if I'm going to use a word like "adjective" I ought to define it. Adjectives are words that describe or modify nouns or pronouns. A green ball, a happy puppy, a quick dinner. As one grammar website said "Without adjectives, we wouldn't know if you had a serene holiday or a disastrous holiday." In the same way, we will look today at how adjectives can describe or modify or shape our faith. Jesus doesn't want us just to have faith but to have persistent faith, and humble faith and childlike faith. He makes these points in three parables at the beginning of Luke 18.

The first adjective is persistent. The parable is called the parable of the persistent widow. Luke 18:1-8 *And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart. <sup>2</sup>He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. <sup>3</sup>And there was a widow in that city who kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' <sup>4</sup>For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'"* <sup>6</sup>*And the Lord said, "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. <sup>7</sup>And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? <sup>8</sup>I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"*

This is one of the few parables where the Gospel author gives the interpretation in advance. Luke says Jesus told this parable so we would always pray and never give up. This is the second parable we've seen where Jesus teaches something positive using a negative example. The parable of the unjust manager taught us to put God first. This parable of the unjust judge shows us the justice and mercy of God. It shows that in faith we can persistently pray and count on a merciful God to respond. Faith teaches us to always pray and never give up.

It's the story of a judge and a widow. The widow apparently has some just grievance against her adversary, and probably no male relative to plead her cause for her, so she needed the judge to pronounce justice in her favor. But the judge is an awful character, he does not fear God, nor does he respect men, so there is nothing to compel him by moral force to grant justice. He is just as likely, maybe more, to grant injustice. But the widow is persistent. She always prays and never gives up. She brings her case before him day after day. Finally she hassles the judge so much, that he says "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, <sup>5</sup>yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice."

And that's what God is like? He grants our requests just to get rid of us? Just to get us off his back? No. Jesus says "learn from the unjust judge," but learn that if this unjust man will grant justice due to persistence, how much more will God reward persistence. "Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?" Persistent prayer, bringing needs to God over and over again, perhaps for years, is a characteristic of true faith.

But there is a tension here. We are to persist in prayer, and never give up, yet we are to believe that God answers quickly those who cry out to him and does not keep putting them off. How do we resolve this? Part of it is that he wants us to recognize our dependence. We are supposed to be those who cry to him day and night. If he always resolved our difficulties, how could we learn this. Also, he is waiting patiently for the right timing. He is not putting us off but waiting until the time is right. Then Jesus will bring justice. This might be at some point in this earthly life, as he at times, miraculously transforms our situations, or it might be in the new heavens and new earth, the place of justice and right.

Either way God acts for our good and for his glory. Our persistent prayers are part of that story, evidence of the faith by which we stand. Jesus says in verse 8 "I tell you he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" This is the only explicit mention of faith in these passages, but I believe it's key. It's asking "will he find persistent faith," a faith that prays and doesn't give up, even in moments of difficulty and discouragement. I've always been impressed that in Hebrews chapter 11, the faith hall of fame, the author mentions not only those whose prayers were answered but also commends the faith of those who died still hoping for the answer to their prayers, a homeland yet to come, and those who were tortured, jeered, chained, destitute, lonely and mistreated. Their faith was not vindicated in the earthly sense, but they still won the victory of persistent faith. So the first adjective is persistent. Persistent faith is a long obedience in the same direction. It is a constant crying out to God not in despair but in hope, trusting in the now and not yet answer to our prayers.

The second adjective is humble. Luke 8:9-14 is one of my favorite parables, the Pharisee and the tax collector. *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:* <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>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.”

Many years ago as I studied this passage I saw that a key image of Jesus’ message could be “empty hands.” Like a criminal laying down his weapon and raising empty hands to surrender, there is tremendous benefit in laying down your weapons, laying down your achievements, and coming to God with empty hands. Because God is a God of grace, and Jesus teaches the truth of grace both negatively and positively. God will never justify those who trust in their own righteousness, but God graciously justifies those who come to him with empty hands. Notice the words justify and righteousness. Those two English words come from the same Greek root “dikaio.” To be righteous or just is to be right with God or in a right relationship with God. What I’m saying is that God will never declare righteous someone trusting their own righteousness. God will never find a person worthy of eternal life, worthy of fellowship with him, unless God himself does the work of righteousness in that person’s life.

Verse 9 sets the stage. It tells us this parable is addressed to those who trust in their own righteousness and despise everybody else. It’s clear as the story unfolds that the Pharisee represents this kind of person. But we know it’s not just Pharisees who have this problem. The truth is this parable was spoken to all of us, at least at times. I remember an incident in college. I went to engineering school at Stevens Institute of Technology in beautiful downtown Hoboken, New Jersey. I’d been a Christian since junior high, and involved in what I thought was a really good youth group. When I went to college, I went with a bad case of spiritual pride. I felt I knew it all and had done it all. When I looked at the Stevens Christian Fellowship, I thought I was much more spiritual than they. I made a horrible, prideful statement, that “I’ll be running this show in two years” Well, the Lord used the next two years to rearrange my thinking. He taught me on the one hand just how little righteousness I had, how little I was able to live the Christian life in a hostile environment. And he also taught me to appreciate the depth of these believers, and their commitment and reliance on the word of God, and that appreciation has shaped my whole life.

So Jesus is talking to me, to the kind of person who trusts in their own righteousness and looks down on everybody else. Maybe he's talking to you too. We don't consciously say "I'm better than everybody." We don't consciously say "I'm righteous enough for God." But the way we treat people, the words we use, the things we do, they all say to God, and even to others around us, "I've made it, I've got my act together." We unconsciously carry around this attitude of self-righteousness. Often we extend that to groups: our unspoken presumption is that our church, our social crowd, our group has a lock on righteousness and we rate as second-class those who have made other choices. I encourage you, as I encourage myself, to strive to recognize that self-centeredness, as sin.

In verse 10 Jesus says "a pharisee and a tax collector were going up to the temple to pray." Pharisees were very respected in that society. They were looked up to as both religious and social leaders. I had a professor at seminary who assured us that these were the kind of people you and I would be like to hang out with. They were the leaders of the conservative movement. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were despised and hated. They were greedy, unfair, traitors to their people, who cozied up to their Roman oppressors. In our culture, maybe the Pharisee is the successful businessman, the tax collector a drug pusher. The Pharisee is the faithful church goer, the tax collector the close-minded skeptic. The Pharisee you respect and admire, the tax collector you can't stand.

It's these two who go up to the temple to pray. If you're building a mental picture, don't imagine them going into an empty Temple courtyard. Instead, imagine a lot of worshipers attending a temple sacrifice. Morning and evening prayer was offered at the temple after the sacrifice when incense was poured over the altar of the Holy Place. A crowd was always present and these two go up with them. Jesus speaks first about the Pharisee and focuses on his attitude. Verses 11 and 12: "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. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'"

The problem with this Pharisee wasn't that he stood to pray; it was customary in Judaism to stand when praying. The problem is spiritual pride in that prayer. The Pharisee tries to affirm his own righteousness before God. Now Jesus knew the hearts of all people, and in his parable, the Pharisee uses two forms of self-justification still popular today. Picture the Pharisee standing with a sword in one hand, and a trumpet in the other. On one hand he's cutting down everybody around him, and on the other hand he's blowing his own horn. He takes up the sword saying "Lord, you should notice that I am much better than robbers and evildoers and adulterers. I am much better than this tax collector." He elevates himself by putting others down.

Don't we do the same? I magnify my worth in my eyes, by comparing myself to others and finding myself better: "I don't get drunk. I don't cheat on my wife. I don't rip off my employer. Why, I'm such an all around good guy, its no wonder God likes me." You say, "Now wait a minute, you're exaggerating." Of course I'm exaggerating. Jesus was exaggerating. This disease is so subtle we need a magnifying glass like this parable, to see it clearly. Don't you ever make comparisons? Will you unconsciously say at work tomorrow, "He's not as honest and hardworking as I am. He uses language I'd never use?" Or as you look at your neighbors "Their house is a mess. They don't take as good care as we do. Their kids are wild." Look down at your hand. You may find in it a sword, to cut others down. I do, too often. And it's a damaging attitude.

In the other hand I sometimes find a trumpet. I've got a list of every good thing I do, and blowing the trumpet, I announce my good deeds, before God, myself, and others. An old Hagar the Horrible comic had Hagar sitting with Lucky Eddie, and he says: "It's a tough world out there! You can't be shy! You gotta blow your own horn!" Lucky Eddie thinks, and says "What if you're not musically inclined?" The truth is, we're all inclined. Listen to the Pharisee, verse 12: 'I fast twice a week, and give a tenth of all I have.' Incredible. How can the Pharisee have the gall to try to impress his creator, God, with this petty list of good behaviors. He isn't even doing things God required. The law only says to fast once a year. The Pharisee fasts twice a week. The law says to give a tenth of major crops and income. The Pharisee gives a tenth of his herb garden.

God hates spiritual pride. The Pharisee could have known this if he had read his Bible. David had said in Psalm 51 "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." In Isaiah God said true fasting was to "loose the chains of injustice, and share your food with the hungry, and provide the poor wanderer with shelter." Is God against praying? No. Is God against giving? No. Is God even against fasting? No. But these deeds don't buy righteousness. And if they're done out of hypocrisy, or to buy God's favor, these very deeds will be despised by Him.

I imagine there's an old fashioned heavenly cash register someplace up there, where an angel sits and each time I'm like this Pharisee, he totals my heavenly bank balance. I say: "I go to church every week." Chi'ching, zero, no balance, no credit. "I go to Sunday School." Chi'ching zero. "I give my money." Chi'ching zero. Blowing my own horn gets me no credit with God. Deep inside I know that. I suspect you do too. It's only my own insecurity that makes me blow my own horn. I'm trying to convince myself God should see me as righteous. But God will not justify the person who tries to count on their own righteousness.

Instead, God graciously justifies those who come to Him with empty hands, like this tax collector. Verses 13-14: “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!’” Notice his attitude. Like the Pharisee, he stood to pray, but unlike him, he stood at a distance, he would not elevate his eyes toward heaven, and he beat his chest. The Pharisee came clutching self-righteousness in each hand. The tax collector comes with empty hands. He knows he’s not righteous, but a sinner. He throws himself on God for mercy. He’s the model for us. God delights when people come claiming no righteousness of their own. He loves to save by his free grace. When God responds to the humble faith of one who comes with empty hands, the cash register says chi'ching infinite. An infinite amount of righteousness is credited to your account.

Why is this? Well, it starts with this word translated 'have mercy'. The tax collector says: “God have mercy on me,” but the word really means atone for me, pay for my sin, hide my sin from your wrath. This tax collector, coming to the temple at the time of sacrifice, looks at that sacrifice and cries for atonement. Not just “God have mercy on me because you’re such a nice guy”, but ‘God, take notice of this sacrifice, and make it an atonement for me, a payment for my sins so I can be forgiven.’ Atonement is God’s action on our behalf to deal with our sin. Every other place this word is used in the New Testament, it talks about what Jesus did on the cross. 1st John 4:10 “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Jesus is God's mercy. Jesus is God's atonement. If we come to God saying “God, atone for me, a sinner,” then our account receives the infinite righteousness of Jesus. We are justified. The tax collector illustrates this fact, that God graciously justifies those who come to Him with empty hands.

Jesus says this plainly in his conclusion. “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.” The tax collector came trusting in God's mercy and that made all the difference. The way Jesus uses the word “justified” here, and the way Paul uses the word, it implies that God gives righteousness, by a free act of his grace. In fact, the teaching of this parable is remarkably similar to Romans 3 “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified - there's that word, made righteous - freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.<sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.” Don't let anybody ever tell you that Jesus and Paul weren't on the same wavelength. They were! They both teach that God graciously justifies those who come to him in humble faith alone, with empty hands.

So we've seen persistent faith. We've spent much of our time on this humble faith, because coming to him with empty hands is the key to our rescue. We'll close looking for a few minutes at the third adjective, childlike faith. Luke 18 verses 15-17 *Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup>But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. <sup>17</sup>Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."*

I said at the start that we were going to look at three parables. Strictly speaking this isn't a parable. It is a teaching in response to a circumstance. But it's parabolic in its force. Jesus teaches an attitude we ought to have, just as the two parables taught us attitudes we should have in our faith. This attitude is childlike faith.

It's a simple story. Jesus is teaching and preaching. The people began to bring forward their babies and children to have Jesus touch them. Probably they wanted Jesus to bless the children and to pray for them. But for some reason the disciples rebuked those who were bringing the children. One would suspect they felt Jesus was too important or didn't have time to waste it on little children. Truth is people in that culture didn't have much use for children, at least in public.

But Jesus did. Showing the loving character of his Father, he stops the disciples and calls the little children to himself. "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." What does Jesus mean, that the kingdom of God belongs to children? It's got to be something about a childlike attitude. It's frequently called a childlike faith. Children simply hear about Jesus, believe what they hear and come to him in trust. They do so without embracing the doubts that adults do.

Notice that Jesus rules out any attempt to hinder them. He's rebuking the disciples. "Don't stop the children from coming to me." Any kind of cultural sin or family sin that puts roadblocks in front of the faith of our children is deeply disapproved by Jesus. He said in chapter 17 "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! <sup>2</sup>It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin." If there is the slightest temptation to abuse or neglect in your family system, if there is anger, is there is thoughtless turning over of your kids to the impact of the culture, or a neglect of God's way and God's people, that will impact your kids' faith.

But verse 17 takes this concept of childlike faith one step further and applies it to each of us. “Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

In what way do we need to become like little children, in order to enter the kingdom of heaven? What characteristics of little children do we need to imitate? Many of you have little children, and I know you are thinking of some words in your heads that describe the admirable characteristics of little children. I suspect it is words like trust, dependence, innocence. Children are inherently dependent on their parents and even other adults, and moreover are willing to be dependent. My granddaughter Adelaide has been here this last week, and I’ve observed two things. First, when she meets a new adult, especially an adult male, she tends to shrink behind her parents’ leg, even to hang on to the pants leg, because she trusts her parents to protect her. But, second, if you show yourself to be trustworthy, a safe person and a safe place, a safe papa, then she will willingly come to you for hugs and protection and nurture.

That’s what we are to do with Jesus. We are not only to have persistent faith and humble faith but we are to have childlike faith that comes to him for protection and care, nurture and rescue. Jesus makes it clear that if we don’t come to him this way, we’re not rescued at all. Like the tax collector crying for mercy, we can come to him with empty hands, with no strings attached, without feeling like we have some merit that lets us bargain for our salvation. No. We come empty and we receive the care he offers innocently and openly, like little children. Furthermore, we persist in that trust. Once a child trusts you, they continue to trust you and heaven forbid we ever give them any reason to lose that trust. Once we trust Jesus, we continue to trust him. We have his promise that he will never give us any reason to regret that trust. Though our needs or circumstances that lead us into persistent prayer, though our own sins that accuse us of being unworthy may seem to test that trustworthiness, nothing, nothing, nothing is honestly able to refute persistent, humble childlike faith.

I’ve told the story many times of Polycarp, one of the earliest Christian martyrs, probably in his early years a pupil of the Apostle John. I think his martyrdom in old age is a tremendous example of persistent, humble, childlike. You remember what he said, don’t you? When pressed to recant Christ, he said “Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me.”

Persistent. Humble. Childlike. Faith. Let these adjectives shape your faith.