

Keeping the Faith

PHBF 02.21.10

TEXT: Luke 18:1-19:27

SCR. READING: Luke 18:1-8

****Words for kids: faith(ful), idol(atry), Jesus**

SERIES: From the Manger To the Cross For the World

ILLUS: Tiger's speech

I once heard, and I believe it's true, **it's not what you achieve in life that matters; it's what you overcome.** Achievements on the golf course are only part of setting an example. Character and decency are what really count. Parents used to point to me as a role model for their kids. I owe all those families a special apology. I want to say to them that I am truly sorry.

Earlier in **Luke 8:14**, Jesus taught that there is a kind of faith that fails to overcome. It's the faith that receives the word, shows a promising start, but never comes to maturity and bears fruit. The individual doesn't persevere because rival cares and desires choke out his/her **trust in, love for, and submission to** Jesus:

And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.

It's a strangely dramatic scene if you think about it, with hostile weeds banding together and rising up in the garden to strangle out the young plant. According to Jesus, it's a scene that plays out in the heart—the heart of someone who hears the gospel, responds well, seems to grow a little, but eventually drifts away. Why? Because obstacles have risen up, not from the outside, but from within. Distractions. Rival interests. Cares. Riches. Pleasures. And the way He says it, you get the sense that this could happen to any one of us.

It could. But Jesus is determined to see that it doesn't. So in Luke 18-19, He returns to this theme of a faith that endures, that survives the threat of strangulation by “cares and riches and pleasures of life.”

Notice the theme He sets out in vv 1-8. He has just completed this extended discussion of future events: how and when and where the kingdom of God is going to come. Now He does what the Bible ALWAYS does when it talks about the end times: He gets practical.

See, the key question about the end times is not Where? or When? but rather “Since everything is going to happen this way, what kind of person should you be?” What this means practically is that what we need is an eschatological *perspective*, not an eschatological *preoccupation*.

In this case, Jesus wants to instruct us as to the appropriate attitude in the present as we anticipate His coming in the future (cf. 17:20-37). His main point is to call us to a **tenacious, hope-filled faith, arising from two truths.**

- 1) God will always remain faithful, and He will bring justice.
- 2) Adversity is always a key part of the process by which God brings salvation (cf. 17:25, 33), so persevere like the widow.

v 1 “They ought always to pray and not lose heart” – Jesus is giving the antidote to quitting on your heavenly journey. He's not so much teaching about prayer – still less is He teaching that we should badger God into answering our prayers. Rather, He's using persistent prayer as a representative token, a symbol (a metonym) for *a whole life and heart attitude of persistent confidence in the sufficiency and goodness of God to meet our needs* (similar to how prayer is used in the next parable). This is shown by the application question Jesus gives at the end (v 8b).

v 8b Literally, Jesus asks if the Son of Man will find “the faith” on the earth when He returns, referring to the faith exemplified by this persistent widow – i.e., “this kind of faith.” He's not suggesting that Christianity might be wiped off the face of the earth. Obviously, that would be contrary to His teaching earlier that the Kingdom of Heaven is going to grow unstoppably from a mustard seed to a tree large enough for many roosting birds (Lk 13:19). The question is a challenge to individual disciples to keep on praying, waiting on God, trusting.

To help us remain faithful, He unmasks three obstacles, three dangers, distractions to our faith. All three come in the form of heart idolatry—something we put before Jesus in one way or another.

Idol 1: Counterfeit Saviors (vv 9-17)

The Pharisee vs. the Tax Collector and the Children

[Read vv 9-17.]

vv 11-12 The Pharisee's prayer begins like a thanksgiving psalm, e.g., Psalm 9:1 "I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds." The only difference is, he doesn't recount God's wonderful deeds at all; he recounts his own!

Who are these self-righteous people exactly?

v 9 Luke names Jesus' target as a specific type of person, not so much a social or religious class: "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt."

- 1) **They are convinced they are righteous** – i.e., when "wickedness" comes up for discussion, they see other people in that category and not themselves.
- 2) **They "trust in," depend on themselves.** In their mind, they are quite able to please God and honor Him without divine help. What they can do on their own is quite good enough, not just for themselves, but also for God. Notice in his prayer that he never asks God for anything.
- 3) **They disdain others.** Their first reaction to sin is recoil, followed quickly by judgment and withdrawal. Their world is clearly divided into "good guys" and "bad guys," with himself in the first group and just about everyone else in the other—a point that comes out quite clearly later: "I thank you that I am not like other men..." (v 11)

v 13 The quality that stands out about the tax collector is **his own sense of unworthiness**. When he sings "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me," he means it. He identifies with the word "wretch." He doesn't try to bolster his "self-esteem" with notions of "human dignity." His unworthiness and shame go so deep, he won't even lift his downcast eyes. Why is this a point worth pressing? Because it's not until you stand far off, eyes downcast, beating your chest in sorrow, hoping against hope that God might have pity on the likes of you that you will sincerely cry out for mercy.

v 14 The bad news of the gospel tells you that you are a wretch, standing far off, not worthy to lift your eyes to heaven, with heavenly mercy as your only hope. **The good news of the gospel is that heaven has mercy for self-proclaimed wretches like this. God justified this man.** "Justified" means "pronounced righteous." It's a legal term. It

means God declares the guilty innocent. How can He do that—it's contrary to justice? The guilty must pay for their crimes. If they don't, God ceases to be just; and if He ceases to be just, He ceases to be God. If He ceases to be God, the whole universe ceases to be, period. So if God justifies the guilty, everything else unravels. But somehow, He justifies the guilty, and yet continues to be God, continues to be just, and continues to hold the universe together. How?

We see a hint of the answer in the tax collector's prayer. The verb translated "have mercy" is literally "propitiate" or "be propitious toward." Literally, he prays: "God, please turn your wrath away from me." In essence, he is praying for God to declare him righteous by expressing His wrath somewhere else.

The issue here is "Who/What will you trust to justify you?" The Pharisee looks to himself. But this idolatry can take many forms. We look to anything to justify us, prove our worth, ensure our place, protect us from harm.

- Performance – my good job makes me worthy
- Health – my workouts preserve my wellbeing
- Control – I feel safe and secure when I'm in charge.

What makes you feel worthy/unworthy? What makes you feel secure/insecure? These questions unmask the heart idol of a false savior.

You can see how this idolatry would be an obstacle to faith. False saviors can't save, and as soon as yours gives way, your faith is shattered. Loss of health, loss of job, loss of control = loss of faith.

vv 15-17 What does it mean to "receive the kingdom of God like a child"? What is it that is commendable about children? Humility and dependence also seem to be included. Perhaps the fullest explanation is that children are blissfully non-self-conscious. The attention of a child is easily captivated and fully preoccupied by something, to the degree that they forget themselves completely.

Idol 2: Counterfeit Treasures (vv 18-30)

The Rich Ruler vs. the Disciples

v 19 Jesus remarks on the label “good,” not because He is a sinner, but because He wants this man to think about God’s absolute goodness. In just a moment, this man will affirm to Jesus that he’s been doing a great job keeping the commandments—i.e., that he himself is pretty good—and Jesus is trying to cut him off at the pass before he ever gets there. The implication of what Jesus says is this: since only God is good, we could never achieve eternal life by our own good works. Unfortunately, this young man breezes right by Jesus’ comment and misses His point altogether.

vv 20-22 Is Jesus affirming that we can inherit eternal life if we keep the commandments? No – that’s the exact opposite of what He’s teaching. He is skillfully trying to show this man how far he falls short of working his way into eternal life. When the man answers that he’s kept the commandments from his youth (v 21), Jesus takes another approach. He tells the man to liquidate his vast assets, invest in heavenly wealth by giving his earthly money to the poor, and follow Jesus (v 22). Why? Is this really necessary for eternal life? No – Zacchaeus only gives away ½ of his wealth, and Jesus declares him a Christian (19:8-9). Then what is Jesus doing? **He’s unmasking this man and showing him that he hasn’t even begun to keep the First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before me.”**

vv 23-25 The rich ruler’s sorrow at the thought of giving away his wealth shows that he loved his money more than he loved God. And lest we pity him too long and miss the application to ourselves, Jesus drives home the point: “It’s hard for rich people to get to heaven. Riches can’t save you, but they could quite easily damn you.”

vv 28-30 The disciples are the positive example of making Christ your treasure. **We can see that the point is not how much treasure they have sacrificed, but rather how they have merely traded one treasure for another. Earthly sacrifice is heavenly (and earthly!) gain.**

The issue here is “Who/What will you trust to satisfy you?” The rich ruler looks to his wealth. It could also be...

- A certain relationship – I can only be happy if I’m with...
- Comfort – If someone disrupts my leisure, they’re in trouble!
- Status, popularity

What makes you feel happy/unhappy? What makes life worth living/living hell? These questions unmask the heart idol of a false treasure.

How is this an obstacle to persevering faith? ***False treasures never satisfy, but they still have the power to draw us away from Jesus.*** How many people have wandered from the faith because they are seeking happiness in something other than Jesus?

Idol 3: Counterfeit Lords (19:1-27)

Zacchaeus vs. the Nobleman’s Servants

vv 7-8 Notice Zacchaeus’ key responses: repayment for fraud and benevolence to the poor. Both of these are required by the OT law. **Zacchaeus has submitted to God’s lordship** in his life in practical, specific ways (cf. also vv 5-6). Notice as well the way he received Jesus: “joyfully” (v 6). When you submit to Jesus’ lordship, joy is one of the first surprises you’ll enjoy.

v 14 The issue is Who will reign?

vv 15-26 The issue is Who served the master faithfully?

Those who serve faithfully will be rewarded. Those who refuse to serve will be left with nothing but shame. Those who rebel entirely will receive severe judgment.

The issue here is “Who/What will control you?” Zacchaeus submits to God’s law; the nobleman’s servants want to rule themselves.

- Money – dominates my life, controls my time, claims my kids
- Emotions – always acting based on how you’re feeling inside
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What controls you? What dominates your life, time, money? These questions unmask the heart idol of a false lord.

False lords are obstacles to persevering faith, just like false saviors and false treasures. ***False lords are cruel and oppressive, and faith wilts under the crushing load them make us bear.*** (contra Jesus – Mt 11:29-30) When your life is dominated by something other than God, it tends to consume all your resources and leave no room for God. No time to

read the Bible. No money to give to church. No interest in serving in a ministry.

So how do we break free?

The Idol Smasher (18:31-43)

The disciples vs. the blind man

v 34 Notice especially the disciples' lack of understanding—a point Luke emphasizes by stating it 3 times. Of particular interest is the second phrase, where it appears God has hidden the significance of what Jesus is saying from them. The disciples don't realize that Jesus means exactly what He says. Perhaps they are thinking that this is another one of His exaggerated statements, akin to "hating your father and mother" (14:26). Whatever is going on in their own minds, it is clear that **their lack of understanding is in part caused by God's hiding the truth from them.**

vv 35-43 The blind man's persistence (v 39) is a remarkable example of the persistent faith described in verses 7-8. But what makes this story so interesting and helpful to us is how it creates an ironic comparison with the disciples' lack of insight just prior. **The physically blind man cries out to Jesus to heal him and receives his sight. Similarly, only God can open the minds of the disciples to understand what Jesus means when He talks this way about His impending death.**

The point for us is that only Jesus can open your eyes to your heart idols and, more importantly, show you His own surpassing

- Sufficiency to be your Savior
- Beauty to be your Treasure
- Authority to be your Lord.

"Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me."

[Song: "Jesus, Thank You" chorus only]

Benediction:

Numbers 6:24-26 ²⁴ *The LORD bless you and keep you;* ²⁵ *the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;* ²⁶ *the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

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