

## HOW TO GET GOD'S ATTENTION

**Luke 18:1–17**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Luke 18:1–17 (NIV)

“Then Jesus told His disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said, ‘In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, “Grant me justice against my adversary.” For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, “Even though I don’t fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won’t eventually wear me out with her coming!”’” And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?’

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable, ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’

People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them,

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for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.””

On Palm Sunday, our attention is directed toward Jesus. His entry into Jerusalem on an unbroken donkey tells us that He comes as a king in peace. Otherwise, He would have been riding a stallion. It also suggests to us that He comes as a king with hidden power. That His miracles are often cloaked in humility, for who could ride an unbroken animal through such a tumultuous throng like this, were He not the king of creation.

Our Scripture today from Luke 18, however, is not a Palm Sunday passage. It finds us, therefore, dealing not so much with the attention that we give to God, but with the attention He gives to us. Reading these verses today gives rise to a question: who has God’s ear? How does one get God’s attention?

There are three people in our Scripture today that get God’s ear: a persistent widow, a penitent cheat and a little child.

These are the people that God listens to. These are people that were meant to be placed as part of our own personality. There is to be a widow in us, a penitent in us, and a child in us. Here’s how we get the attention of Almighty God:

#### **I. First, the persistent widow.**

This story of the widow who beseeches the unjust judge is probably one of the most misinterpreted parables of all the ones Jesus told. It is often used to substantiate the idea that if God says no the first time, you just have to keep beating down the door until He reluctantly says yes. As though God were the unjust judge Himself. That, however, is not the reason for the story. The story is framed by a verse that comes in front of it and a verse that ends it: verses 1 and 8. Jesus clearly tells us in this framing of the story what lesson it is designed to communicate. The

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lesson is that we always ought to pray and not give up. How long are we to pray? How long are we to hold out without giving up? Verse 8 tells us “until the Son of Man comes.” That’s how long we’re to hold out.

With that in mind, let’s look specifically at this story and how this applies to us. There is a great deal of injustice in the world. Perhaps living in Orange County we see less injustice here than most anywhere else in the world, but even in our society and within our life relationships, we see things that we do not feel are fair. Life, in fact, is not always fair. I periodically will be talking with someone and have to face something that is really bad. I’ll almost instinctively come out with the comment, “Life sometimes is not fair.” Babies are born addicted or deformed. Children are abused, abandoned, neglected. Infants die in cribs. None of these things are fair. Teens are cut down in auto accidents or wasted in addiction to drugs and alcohol. Young people get married with the best of intentions, and a few years later, wind up hating one another and hurting one another. Parents may do their best with their kids and yet the kids may trample on their heart. Husbands and wives may betray one another. And there is a sense of unfairness about that if you’re the victim. Older people may lose their life savings in a scam. The undeserving seem to get the breaks, while the people who are really trying to do what’s right get trampled deeper into the dirt. The weak and the infirm and the helpless and aged are shuttled off to live and die in human warehouses. No, so much of life is not fair.

And all the injustice of the world is really represented in this figure of the widow in Jesus’ story. She did not ask to be a widow. She did not deserve to have her husband taken from her. She is coping with that difficult unfairness of life. In Jesus’ day, she had almost no legal standing whatsoever. Therefore, even her home and property risked being taken from her and she faced

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forcible relocation in a much different environment, where she would be cut off from family and friends.

What are you going to do when life's not fair and when you have no power to correct the situation you find yourself in? That's what this story is about. And that's what this widow teaches us. For the moral of the parable of this widow is that she did not give in. Nor did she give up. She did not resign from life. She did not retreat into a corner and drown herself forever in tears of self-pity nor did she immerse herself in hatred and bitterness. She did a very vital thing. She decided to live. And when she decided to live, she decided that along with that, there must be a call for justice and she would protect the life she had and plead for her rights. Unfortunately for her, she had a crooked judge who neither feared God nor cared about man. But she wore him out, because she had decided to live, and she was not going to let injustice rob her of her dignity of life.

The judge finally, in Jesus' story says, "Yet because this widow causes me trouble, I will see that she gets justice, lest in perpetually coming to me she wear me out." It's very interesting. The Greek word for "lest she wear me out," is a word that means "the part under the eye." Or, that is, to give someone a hit under the eyes or to blacken their eyes. And the judge is sitting there, and this little animated lady one day is pleading her case again, and the judge is concerned that she is going to jump right over the rail and nail him, and if she doesn't do that physically she's going to do it with his reputation in the community. She has decided to live with vigor. Jesus' point is that if this widow can get justice from a crooked judge, how much more will God's chosen ones receive justice from a righteous God? Jesus' story is not a story that simply says we always get quick answers to prayers, because He says that His people cry out to him night and day. God may, in His mercy and grace, grant a miracle. But He does not immediately change the tide in

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every situation of unfairness, and it may be that some things will have to wait all the way till His coming. We would like quicker answers than His coming.

I'm reminded of the story of the soldier who was fighting in World War II. The battle was rather heavy, and he was out in the front of the frontline. The fire was such that he found a foxhole that had been deserted and dived into it. The bullets and shrapnel were whizzing so close to the ground that, with his own bare hands, he started digging in the ground to try to get an even deeper place in the foxhole. As he was digging down, he discovered a crucifix that had been left there by an earlier occupant of the foxhole. As he is digging away in mortal fear, suddenly another frame comes tumbling into the foxhole and he looks up from his digging and sees that it's another soldier. More than a soldier! It's an army chaplain. So the soldier who had first fallen into the foxhole looks at him and says, "I'm so glad you're here. How does this thing work?"

There are moments we'd like to hold something out and get it to work. What Jesus says in the tag line of His story is very interesting, "When I come again—when the Son of Man comes again—will He find faith on the earth?" Some say, "He's wondering if His church is going to exist or not." No. He's going to come for His church. His faith is going to be on the earth. In the language in which Luke writes there's a definite article there. The phrase can be better translated, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find *this* faith on the earth?" What faith? Widow faith.

Will He find widow faith on the earth? Will He find people who remain true to Him, even if the facts don't all fit? Even if life is not fair, will they decide to keep living? Will they keep prevailing? Will they keep praying? Will they keep going?

Jesus is telling His disciples that there's going to be an interval of time before the Son of Man comes. How are we going to cope, as God's people, with unfairness while waiting for His coming? Will He find that faith when He comes? For when He returns, He assures us in verse 8,

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they will get justice, and quickly! The word “quickly” there is the word from which we derive “tachometer,” which measures speed. It’s going to happen quickly, all at once. Everything will be set straight.

The story of the widow does not teach us that we are to wear God down with our praying, that He’s the reluctant one. But rather, it teaches us that we are to go on praying, lest we wear out. That we may be in danger of dropping out of life before we see God’s finishing touch.

Peter, in fact, tells us—later in the New Testament—that there is a reason why God delays the second return of Jesus, in that He’s not willing that any should perish, that when God moves in judgment in that day, He must move all at once, everywhere at once. Therefore, He delays so that more might yet come in. So we live in tension between the times. Hold on with widow faith.

This last week, one evening, we were out to dinner and we found out that the place where we were eating had an art auction next door, so we walked over there to look at the works of art. Actually, my wife walked over and I tagged along. The painting that was highlighted in that large room, filled with all kinds of paintings all the way around it, was the one that was under the spotlight up in front. It was one of these geometric designs that sort of looks like a Rorschach test. My son, in spotting it, immediately said to me, “Look. The face of Abraham Lincoln!” It was one of these deals that were geometric; the author was able to hide the face of Lincoln. I’m a little dull when it comes to stuff like that. I looked and looked and I walked up close, I looked all around it from every angle and I still couldn’t see Lincoln. I said, “You’re kidding me!” But a few minutes later, while we were at the very back of the room, just ready to walk out, I turned around to look one more time and sure enough, my distance had now given me perspective and I could see Lincoln’s face. I’d missed it because I was looking too much within the picture and not along the border of the picture.

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There are some events in life that are like that. You look at them from up close and they don't make sense. Jesus says, "You may need to go all the way, till the coming of the Son of Man, before it all adds up. Will you have that faith that will last?" That widow faith that lasts until the coming of the Son of Man.

### **II. The second person that Jesus points us to that gets God's attention is the penitent cheat.**

Two men go up to the temple to pray. In Jerusalem, you always go up. If you were in Jerusalem in those days, the temple was the up of the up. You went up to pray. One of these men was a collaborationist; he was a Benedict Arnold, a traitor to his people. He wasn't just an IRS guy. He was a Jew employed by the Roman government to collect Roman taxes and he was not liked. He's standing there to pray. Then the Pharisee, the nationalist, the conservative, the religionist, is standing there to pray. (You know, by the way, why Pharisees are called Pharisees? It's because when the Pharisee got up in the morning and looked in the mirror and primed for the day he said, "Fair, I see.") The Pharisee liked what he saw. I, for one, as a pastor, appreciate the testimony of the man who says, "I haven't robbed anybody, I haven't done any evil, I haven't committed adultery." Isn't that what the church is out to make? Moral people? "And not only that, pastor, I'm fasting for the ministry of the church. You know I tithe." What a contrast to the publican, who just shows up on Easter Sunday.

Then Jesus flips the values, and says the religious guy isn't religious at all. It's the publican that's got true religion. Why is He saying this? Jesus just stood the power structure of His day on its ear over statements like this. But Jesus identifies what the Pharisee's problem was. It was that he proclaimed his own righteousness. By Jewish law, he only had to fast once a year, but he's fasting twice a week. Why? To gain more power with God? No. To let people know he was spiritual. He's praying there, commending God for his own righteousness, and then looking

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down on other people while he's doing it. God will not hear our prayer if, in praying, we come to God with a haughty attitude or we come comparing ourselves favorably to someone else, as though we were better than another.

One rabbi in the era of Jesus prayed, "If there were only two righteous men in the world, I and my son would be these two. If there was only one righteous man in the world, I am he."

On the other hand, there is the publican. He is not justified, because he is a sinner. He is a penitent sinner. He would have gone home unjustified had he said, "God, I thank You that I'm not like that self-righteous prig over there, that Pharisee, who thinks he's really hot stuff with You. God, I'm a sinner and I'm proud of it. I carouse around, but at least I'm not a hypocrite. Thank You that I'm a dirty, honest sinner. Aren't You proud of me for being authentically honest and congruent with my relationships in life and knowing who I am?" Pride can be reversed.

I think about the hardest thing a person can do is to find God when they're turned off by a religious system. I admire this publican standing there, because right away it is the Pharisee that represents religion in its most impure state: haughty and proud, denominational, sectarian and all that kind of thing. He's standing there, and I think the publican has every right to say, "O, God, if this is what it means to be religious, count me out. I don't want any of this stuff." How many people do you and I know over the course of a lifetime that will say, "I would have followed Christ, but I was once in a church when I was young and you should have seen what they did to one another." Or, "I used to know this Christian, this pastor and then I found out what they were really like! How can you expect me to follow God when you have that kind of stuff going on?" What strikes me about this publican is that he didn't want to get into a religious institution. He wanted to get to God. If you want to get to God with a sincere heart, then the trappings of the institution will not detour you. If they detour you, you're only using it as an excuse to evade an

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authentic encounter with God. He wanted to come to God. He cried out, with his eyes to the ground, “God, be merciful to me.” And that’s all God asks. “Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me. O, Lamb of God, I come.” It’s not what I have, it’s not what I own, and it’s not the good works that I do. It’s not any of those things. It’s simply standing there and saying, “O God, I need Your help. I need You to do for me what I cannot do myself.”

God hears the cry of the genuinely penitent and saves him. I believe that man not only went down to his house justified, but I believe that he went back a different man, so that he, with an authentic testimony of himself, will one day say without self-righteousness, “O God, You know my life is dedicated to pleasing You and abstaining from that which is evil.”

### **III. The third person in this story that gets the ear of God is a child.**

Babies are being brought to Jesus, that He might touch them and place His hands on them and bless them. Jesus then uses that as an occasion to say, “Unless you become as a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

Before I was a father, I never understood this verse at all. Now, I think I understand it. And I began to understand it sixteen years ago, when my daughter was three. Many of you have heard me share this story but some of you haven’t. It’s my story with this text. Evangeline was three and I was driving down the boulevard one day. I kind of realized that there was a commotion going on in the back seat. She was back there by herself. Finally, I said to her, “Evangeline, what’s wrong?” She said to me, “Daddy, Jesus is kicking me in the tummy.” I thought to myself, “I didn’t teach her that theologically. What’s going on?” So thinking I had misheard, I said to her again, “What is the matter?” She said, “Jesus is kicking me in the tummy.” I kind of watched her out of the corner of my eye for a few minutes. I began to realize that what had happened was she had a stomachache. We had been teaching her that Jesus lives in our heart; she came to the

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conclusion that if Jesus is living in there, He must be doing some kicking. I thought to myself, “Kids are so stupid!” Then I thought of a phrase that Martin Luther used. Luther had problems with this verse. After Luther married, he and his wife had six children. They were not disciplined too well. Luther would be sitting at dinner, having his table talks with his theological students—that was a real place of learning, around the dinner table. His kids were bothering Luther one day, and he was commenting on this Scripture, “Except you become a child you can’t enter the kingdom of God.” He said in his Lutheran way, “Dear God, do we have to become such idiots?” I’m thinking about all this as I’m driving. Then I thought, “What did Jesus mean when He said, ‘Except you become as a child’?” I’d preached sermons on it and still not understood it. (I’ve done that with a few texts.)

Then it dawned on me what Jesus meant. I should have picked it up in freshman philosophy, but somehow I missed it. It suddenly became real and the whole kingdom of God opened to me when it became real. There are really two kinds of knowledge. The philosophers call it cognitive knowledge and affective knowledge. On a simpler level, I would call it relational knowledge and informational knowledge. Relational knowledge is when we know another person—Adam knew his wife, Eve. Informational knowledge is when we know about something or about another person. At the age of three, my daughter knew very little about me, her father. She did not know I was six-feet tall. She had no concept of what that meant. She didn’t know that she was not around when we were married. She did not know what a doctoral degree was. Because when I got my doctoral degree, three weeks later, when she got her certificate for attending daily Vacation Bible School, she got her doctorate too. So her informational knowledge was zilch. If you had given her a test that said, “If you pass this test, it will determine whether or not you are George Wood’s daughter,” she would have flunked any informational test. She could not have

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done it. But she was related to me relationally. She was my daughter. Then what Jesus was saying dawned on me—“except as you become a child.” There are many people who think you’ve got to know everything about God to have Him working in your life. You’ve got to have all the information. If you wait until you get all the information, you’ll die without ever knowing God. Like a child, just open your life to God.

That’s why a five-year old who opens his or her life to God will know God infinitely more than the wisest philosopher or theologian who only studies about God and never lets God in. There’s a difference between knowing God and knowing about God. Jesus says the kingdom principle is to be born again—to be a child. You must receive. You must establish a relationship.

When you have a relationship, there will be growth and information. So my daughter now, at nineteen years of age, knows what six-feet tall is and knows what marriage is and knows what a doctoral degree is. If she didn’t know those things, she would be mentally challenged, but she would still be my daughter. It may be that you will never know as much about God as someone else. I still don’t understand all there is to know about the Trinity. I think I understand a fraction of it. I don’t understand everything there is to know about the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man and how those two relate to one another. I just have to be like a little child. Like the great theologian Karl Barth was asked on an occasion, “What’s the greatest truth in life?” He said, “This is the greatest truth: Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It’s opening your life to Him as a child.

A little boy went to an evangelistic tent meeting that was being held in his community. Night after night he went. Every time the altar call was given to come and give your life to Christ, he didn’t go forward because he was afraid. Finally, the last night, Friday night, came and went and he still hadn’t responded. But as the lights were being turned off in the tent and the evangelist

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was getting ready to walk across the parking lot to his car, the little boy shot out across the parking lot to the evangelist and said, “You say that I have to invite Jesus into my heart.” And the evangelist said, “That’s right.” The little boy said, “I’m seven years old. How big is Jesus?” The evangelist didn’t quite catch where the boy was going, so he said, “Jesus must have been a pretty big man. He was a carpenter.” And the little boy then said, “If I invite Jesus into my heart, then won’t He stick out?” I can solemnly guarantee you that if you invite Jesus into your life He’ll stick out.

How do we get God’s attention? God’s attention is drawn to the widow in us. It’s drawn to the penitent cheat in us. It’s drawn to the child in us. These qualities aren’t just individual personalities. They are meant to be aspects of our existence. When you’re going through unfairness, say, “I know a judge who will straighten everything out and, until He does, I’m going to go on living. I’m not dropping out. I’m not resigning. I’m not caving in to bitterness, fear, or self-pity. I’m going on. I will prevail because He’s prevailing.”

It’s saying, “God be merciful to me.” It’s saying, “God really treasures that I am His child and am related to Him.”

### **Closing Prayer**

Father, help us to be such a person. Help each one of us to be a child. If there is one of us, no matter what age we are in life, that has not had that personal action of inviting You to be the Lord of our life, help us to do that, even this morning. We know, Lord, that faith with You is not a matter of going through a religious ritual or even being a member of a church, although those things, in their proper order, are desirable and helpful. Your first and fundamental goal for us is that You live in us and that we personally receive You and make You the Lord of our life. Help us to be that child in Your presence; that, while not knowing everything there is to know about

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You, nevertheless, knows you. Help us, Lord, to be that penitent, for all of us have sinned and done wrong. And if we try to compare ourselves with someone else, we're either going to be inflated with pride or deflated by comparison, because we'll think that there is no hope for us. Help us, Lord, to be that person who simply stands in Your presence and says, "God, I need Your mercy." Hear the cry of the humble heart. Lord, there are friends in this body today who are going through moments in their own life in which what is happening to them is really unfair. They don't deserve it. It's just like that widow in the story. She didn't deserve what had happened to her in life. Help each one going through that phase of life to make a decision from the depths, to live and to have widow faith in their life on the earth when You come. We ask this in Your name. Amen.