

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jesus Does Faith for Us

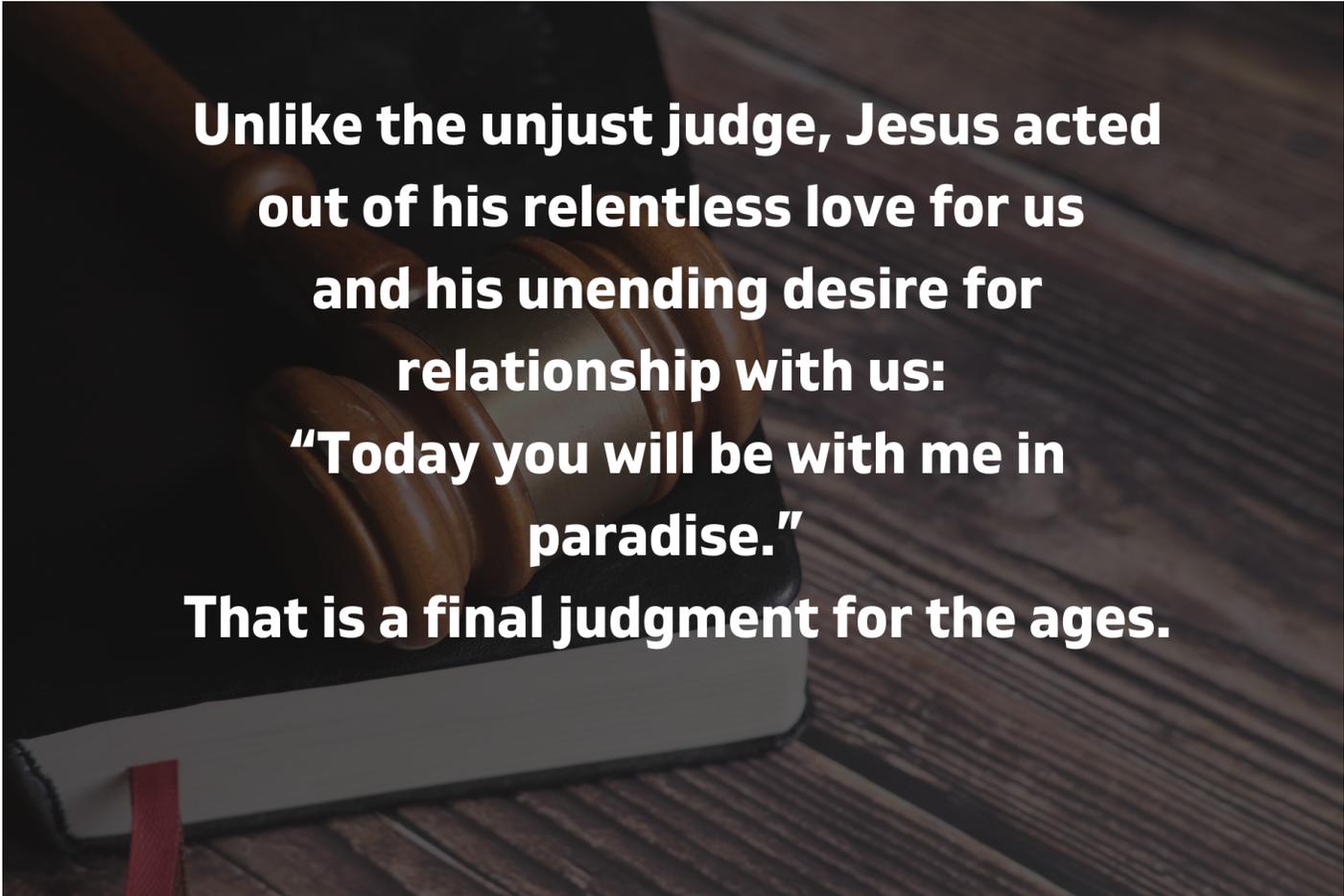
Luke 18:1-8

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Analysis by James Squire

1Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2He said, 'In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent." 4For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming." ' 6And the Lord said, 'Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?'

Author's Note: The disciples had been losing heart in the previous chapter, and they knew it: "Please, Jesus, increase our faith." To our ears, it sounds like they think that faith is a substance that can be measured, rather than a relationship that either exists or does not.



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DIAGNOSIS: Faith as a Commodity

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Tough to Keep up

You're a disciple, and your head is spinning. Jesus is out there healing lepers (17:11-19) and expecting his followers to do awesome things like seven-fold forgiveness (17:3-4) in the face of apocalyptic visions (17:20-31). On the one hand, you want what he has: “Increase our faith!” On the other hand, you want to stop and rest and assess whether this joy ride is for you.

And then Jesus holds up the example of the persistent widow harassing the unjust judge. And all you hear is an impossible standard: "See? Why can't you be more like her?" You begin to wonder whether following Jesus is worth it, especially when you feel scolded for expecting a modicum of praise for meeting expectations (17:7-10). "Jesus, you better increase our faith if you expect this much out of us!"

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Using Jesus Like a Gas Pump

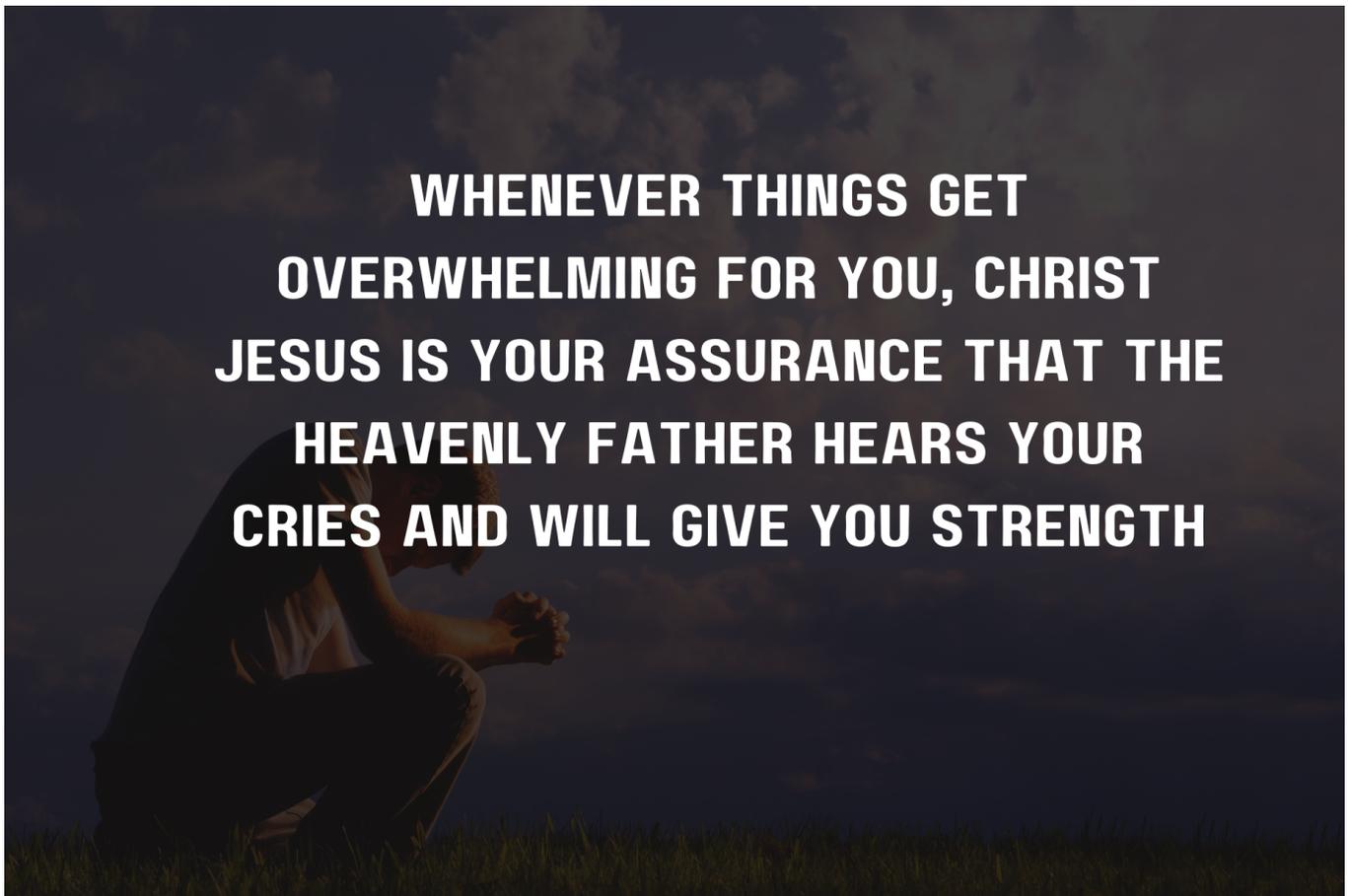
When you treat faith like fuel—that you need to fill up on regularly, like the gas tank in your car, it becomes a negotiation by which we retain control of the steering wheel of our lives. We see Jesus as a recruiter, and we are savvy enough to ask, "What's in it for me?" "If I'm going to do all this for you, Jesus, I need what you have to keep me going."

This isn't a relationship, it's a lifetime of transactions. What gets pumped up here is our sense of self-worth, as if Jesus should find us to be attractive candidates. "Hire me, Jesus, and pay me well. Provide a good working environment with plentiful resources, and I'll do the job for you. 9-5, right? I mean, I'm allowed to live my own life otherwise, right?"

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Relation-less Self-destruction

"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Jesus is not looking for day laborers or superhumans. He is looking for relationships. He is looking to win our hearts over. He offers himself as the one to be grasped and held onto, and yet he can sense that it is not natural for us to be open to that from the Son of Man. The unjust judge is the kind of authority we are used to dealing with. Such authority is annoying and exhausting, but we figure that's how the world works. Meanwhile,

Jesus is trying desperately to get through to us. But we're too busy banging our heads against brick walls trying to meet impossible standards and licking our wounds in the corner with a "leave me alone" vibe when we don't. Clearly, the Son of Man will not find faith on earth considering this repeated routine. He will instead find people destroying each other; not turning away from evil (17:27-37).



Jesus is your Assurance (from Canva)

PROGNOSIS: Faith as relationship with Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus the Just, Merciful Judge

Jesus came into our world to live among us. He learned our ways and our customs. He lived his life among us to bring good news

to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free (4:18-19). But he was viewed by some as an unfit judge, and by others as an unjust judge. Instead of appealing to him, those "somebodies" pushed back against him, ultimately ushering him to a punishing death on the cross.

Like the unjust judge, Jesus gave them what they needed: forgiveness (a new kind of justice), even the penitent thief who was crucified next to him. Unlike the unjust judge, Jesus acted out of his relentless love for us and his unending desire for relationship with us: "Today you will be with me in paradise." That is a final judgment for the ages. Today, you sinners will be with me in paradise because that is what you need. In death, he gave us his life. Much more than the unjust judge, who begrudgingly gave the woman worldly justice (18:7)!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Grabbing Hold of Jesus in Relationship

"Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?" He will now! Jesus, the one who died for us ungrateful wretches, reaches out his hands to us in the resurrection to say, "Do not lose heart. Pray always. I and my heavenly father will be there for you." Faith is not a substance to measure in a beaker. It is not an elixir that you have to drink regularly to pump you up. Faith is participating in an enduring relationship with Christ Jesus. It is Jesus saying to us, "Today you will be with me in paradise," followed by our response, "Yes Lord, I believe you are with me." Jesus says, take hold of me and never let go, and even with your tiny faith the size of a mustard seed, you will move mountains (17:6). You have me with you always. You have no need to increase your faith. I am your faith and I am enough.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Plentiful

Forgiveness to Give

Your head is no longer spinning. You still have plenty of opportunities before you to forgive, but you are in an enduring relationship with the prime forgiver. What overwhelms you is not all the burdensome requests for forgiveness that come your way, but the joyous overflowing of forgiveness that has been bestowed on you. Your experience of forgiveness is so abundant that you find it difficult to keep it to yourself. Unlike the unjust judge, you forgive because you love rather than simply to get rid of the penitent one who is pleading with you.

And whenever things get overwhelming for you, Christ Jesus is your assurance that the heavenly Father hears your cries and will give you strength. You have an eternal relationship with him that you can lean on whenever you need to, and he will always be there for you.