



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 15
Proper 20 (C)
September 18, 2022

[RCL] Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Here in the eighth chapter of Jeremiah, we hear directly from God's voice, as God laments the waywardness of God's chosen people. Watching as the people of Israel worship idols and turn away from their relationship with the Divine, God cries, "Grief is upon me; my heart is sick." God hears the shouts of God's people as they claim an absence of Holy presence and that not one among them will be saved. In response to this claim, God states, "For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken, I mourn, and horror has seized me," and we hear God's deep desire for relationship with God's chosen people. For even while lamenting Israel's infidelity, God consistently invites the chosen into continued relationship, one defined by abiding loyalty. God longs for reciprocity in that relationship of loyalty and mourns when that loyalty is forgotten or lost. Yet even amid lament, God's promise of loyalty remains, as well as God's invitation to participate in the loyal relationship that defines the covenant.

- Where in our lives have we turned away from the loyalty of God?
- How might we turn toward a relationship of loyalty with God?

Psalm 79:1-9

Is it possible for justice and mercy to both rule the day? It seems that the psalmist prays for just this as the psalm petitions for God to "pour out your wrath" and "let your compassion be swift to meet us." How, though, can wrath and compassion both serve in hastening the coming of the Kingdom of God? The psalmist asks God to deal wrathfully with those who have "profaned [the] holy temple," those who have destroyed that which is God's. Reducing Jerusalem to "a heap of rubble" must be answered for and amended, as it goes against the very heart of God. This raises the questions: What in our own time has been destroyed and turned to a heap of rubble that belongs to God? What systems still profane the holy temple?

As the psalmist shifts the tone toward the end of the psalm, we are taken again into the heart of God's promise of relationship, one marked by forgiveness and compassion. Committing to living as recipients of that compassion calls for an admission of "our past sins," as the psalmist names, and serves as a reminder that we are forever called to look to God when "we have been brought very low." Thus, we begin to see

the connection of justice and mercy, a Divine connection that, in serving justice by correcting the wrong of the destruction of the holy, gives us a compassionate, merciful, and eternal place to dwell.

- Where do we see that which belongs to God being destroyed in our own time?
- What do we see that calls for God's justice? What do we see that calls for God's mercy?
- How might we know when justice and mercy have both been served?

1 Timothy 2:1-7

What if we really prayed for everyone? While prayers for family, friends, and those we count as allies might come easily, that isn't always the case for those whom we've never met, those with whom we disagree, and those we perhaps consider enemies. Yet, this segment of the pastoral letter of 1 Timothy notes that if we claim the authority of God, including the "one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus," as followers of Christ, we are called to pray for all whom Christ came to save: all of humankind.

As 21st-century readers of this text, while we grapple with systems of oppression and injustice, it is worth noting and naming that those very systems have not afforded a "quiet and peaceable life" for all, as those "kings and all who are in high positions" have not sought a life of "godliness and dignity" for all. What do we do in the face of long-held structures that divide instead of unite, pulling us away from our shared salvation in Christ? Perhaps we do what we've always been called to do, and what we are reminded of here: we pray.

- For whom or what is easy to pray in your life? For whom or what is it difficult? For whom do you think it is difficult to pray for you?
- How might you begin to pray for those for whom it is difficult to offer prayers? How might that shift perspective, action, and relationship?

Luke 16:1-13

The parable of the dishonest manager sets the scene in true Lukan fashion: "There was a rich man," thus communicating the privileged corner of society in which the parable takes place. However, the rich man is not the focus of the story; his manager is the main character of this pericope. Having squandered away his master's property, the manager is set to lose his job. Unable to work and unwilling to beg, the manager searches for a way to fix his predicament. He rushes to two of his master's debtors and has them cut their debt, one as much as half, so that "people may welcome [him] into their homes" when he loses his job.

As the text continues, the master recognizes the manager's dishonesty and, in fact, praises him. Why would Luke include a story that seems to valorize dishonesty, even to the point of comparing and contrasting the shrewdness of the "children of light" (i.e., believers) with the "children of this age"?

Perhaps we are called to reflect on the (at least partial) forgiveness of debt that the manager offers the master's debtors. The story leaves open the details of the transaction, and we are left to wonder: Did the manager falsify records to give to the master, or did he pay them from his own account? This is, admittedly, a generous view of the manager's last actions on the job, but the fact remains—two substantial

debts were cut. Such a level of debt forgiveness can bring with it new life and freedom, and perhaps the debtors were given just that. The redemption found in the Kingdom of God, as the Lukan Jesus' parables proclaim, comes about in surprising, unexpected ways. Perhaps then, even the manager, if he is welcomed into homes as he hopes, will be redeemed, too.

- Have you ever been surprised by the way redemption has come about?
- How might we remain open to the possibility of God redeeming that which seems beyond redemption?

*This Bible study was written by **Andrew Gordon**, a seminarian at the Seminary of the Southwest.*