

Homiletics Analysis: Luke 18

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Luke 18 is a unified chapter of teaching and narrative organized around a single, pressing concern: what kind of person actually enters the kingdom of God? Jesus addresses this question through two paired parables (the persistent widow and the Pharisee and tax collector), a controversy over children (vv. 15–17), the encounter with the rich young ruler (vv. 18–30), the third passion prediction (vv. 31–34), and the healing of the blind beggar near Jericho (vv. 35–43). The chapter is not a miscellany — it is a carefully constructed argument about the posture, disposition, and radical dependence required of those who receive the kingdom. The persistent widow models unrelenting, faith-driven prayer; the Pharisee and tax collector expose the lethal difference between self-justification and God-dependent humility; the children are commended as the pattern of reception; the rich young ruler departs as the tragic counter-example of one who cannot surrender his false savior; and the blind beggar becomes the chapter's final positive model — a man with no assets to offer, crying out for mercy, and receiving sight. These movements are not random. They form a sustained argument from multiple angles.

This Text — Intent

God is using Luke 18 to strip away every form of self-sufficiency and to position the reader before Him in radical, humbled dependence. The chapter functions simultaneously as a diagnosis and an invitation. The diagnosis is devastating: self-righteousness, wealth, social standing, religious achievement — none of these opens the kingdom. The invitation is equally clear: cry out like a widow who has no advocate, like a tax collector who has no defense, like a beggar who has no sight, like a child who has no claim — and receive everything. The intent is not primarily to teach doctrines about prayer or wealth, though both appear. The intent is to produce in the reader a specific posture: the posture of one who knows he cannot save himself and throws himself entirely on the mercy of God in Christ. Luke 18 is an extended call to the kind of faith that looks like poverty, not achievement.

Subject Sentence: The kingdom of God belongs to those who come to God with empty hands, not full ones.

Primary Claim: God is calling everyone who reads Luke 18 to abandon every form of self-sufficiency — religious, moral, financial, social — and to receive the kingdom in the only

way it can be received: as a dependent, humbled, persistently crying-out beggar before a merciful God.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Parable of the Persistent Widow (vv. 1–8)

The most common misreading of this parable treats it as a general teaching on persistence in prayer — as though the primary point is technique: pray long enough and God will answer. This collapses the parable’s theological argument into practical advice about prayer habits. The parable operates by contrast (*a fortiori* / *kal wa-homer*): if an unjust judge who neither fears God nor respects men eventually grants justice to a persistent widow, how much more will a just God who loves His elect grant justice to those who cry to Him? The point is not that persistence earns God’s response — it is that God’s character guarantees it. The persistent widow is a model of faith-driven, unrelenting dependence, not a model of prayer technique. Luke’s editorial comment in v. 1 (“they ought always to pray and not lose heart”) and Jesus’ closing question in v. 8 (“when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”) confirm that persistence here is an expression of trust in God’s character and in the certainty of eschatological vindication — not a strategy for getting results.

The Wesleyan/Arminian tradition sometimes emphasizes human persistence as the operative mechanism in prayer, which can drift toward treating prayer as a form of leverage. The Reformed reading is preferred here: the parable grounds persistence in the certainty of God’s character and covenant faithfulness, not in the power of human effort. Persistence is the shape faith takes when it is certain of the one being asked.

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (vv. 9–14)

The dominant misreading in popular preaching is moralistic inversion: the Pharisee is wrong because he is proud, therefore we should be humble — and the lesson is “be humble.” This turns the parable into a virtue lesson on humility, which immediately reproduces the Pharisee’s error in new form (now we are proud of our humility). The parable is not primarily about the virtue of humility but about the ground of justification. The tax collector is justified not because his posture is better than the Pharisee’s but because he makes no claim on God at all — he throws himself on divine mercy with nothing in hand. The Pharisee’s error is not bad manners in prayer — it is that he is presenting his religious résumé as the basis of his standing before God. The phrase “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (v. 13) is a direct echo of the *hilaskomai* language of atonement — “be propitiated toward me.” This is not merely emotional humility; it is a theological claim about where one’s standing before God is located.

The Dispensational tradition generally reads this passage without noting its justification-by-faith content, focusing instead on prayer attitudes. The Lutheran tradition reads the

Law/Gospel distinction clearly here and generally arrives at the correct conclusion. The Reformed reading concurs with the Lutheran recognition of justification-language but situates it within the broader Lukan argument about kingdom-entry rather than treating it as a freestanding lesson on prayer posture. The parable is not saying “pray like the tax collector” — it is saying “only those who stand before God with nothing in their hands will be justified.”

The Rich Young Ruler (vv. 18–30)

Three interpretive divergences arise here.

First, the question of what Jesus’ command to sell all possessions requires of believers today. Some in the Anabaptist/radical discipleship tradition read this as a universal command requiring literal divestiture of wealth. The text does not support this universalization — Jesus’ command is contextually targeted: He sees precisely what this man’s idol is and names it. The command exposes the man’s functional savior, not a universal rule for all disciples. That said, the passage does carry a genuine universal implication: every disciple must be willing to surrender whatever occupies the throne Christ should occupy. The specific command is particular; the underlying principle is universal.

Second, the question of the disciples’ astonishment (vv. 26–27) and Jesus’ response (“What is impossible with men is possible with God”) is sometimes read as softening the challenge — as though Jesus is reassuring the disciples that wealth is not really a barrier. The Reformed reading is the reverse: the point is that no one — including the wealthy — can save himself, and salvation for any person requires the same divine impossibility-becoming-possible. The camel through the eye of a needle is not a metaphor for difficulty; it is a metaphor for impossibility. Human salvation is impossible. God makes it possible.

Third, Peter’s question in v. 28 (“We have left everything and followed you”) sometimes generates prosperity-gospel misreadings of Jesus’ response in vv. 29–30. Jesus promises “many times more in this time” — a promise about the community of the kingdom, not about material restoration. The prosperity reading imports assumptions the text actively resists.

The Blind Beggar (vv. 35–43)

This passage is sometimes treated as a healing narrative illustrating Jesus’ compassion or power, with the application being “Jesus can heal today.” While the passage does display Jesus’ messianic authority, its function in Luke 18 is structural and theological, not primarily demonstrative of a healing principle. The blind beggar is Luke’s concluding positive model: a man with nothing, no social standing, persistently crying out for mercy (“Son of David, have mercy on me”), silenced by the crowd but persistent, and ultimately received and healed. He models everything the Pharisee, the rich young ruler, and the self-sufficient failed to do. His healing is simultaneously physical and symbolic — he receives sight and “follows him,” the discipleship language of Luke. The Pentecostal/Charismatic

tradition sometimes treats this passage primarily as a template for healing prayer, which risks missing its structural function in the chapter's argument about kingdom-entry posture.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 61:1–3** — The LORD's Servant is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. Luke 18's blind beggar and the economically marginal figure prominently in this messianic program; the chapter shows it being fulfilled in real time.
- **Psalms 34:18; 51:17** — "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit"; "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." The Psalter grounds the tax collector's prayer and the beggar's cry in the character of God as one who receives those who come with nothing.
- **Genesis 18:14 / Luke 1:37** — "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" / "Nothing will be impossible with God." Jesus' statement in v. 27 ("What is impossible with men is possible with God") echoes these anchor texts; salvation, like the birth of Isaac, is a miracle — not a human achievement.
- **Romans 3:19–26** — Paul's extended argument that no one is justified by works of the law, that all are under condemnation, and that justification comes by grace through faith in Christ's propitiation. The tax collector's *hilaskomai* prayer in v. 13 anticipates Paul's justification-by-faith argument; Romans provides its full theological grounding.
- **Matthew 18:1–4** — "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The direct parallel to Luke 18:15–17 grounds the children episode within Jesus' consistent teaching: the posture of reception (not achievement) is the only posture the kingdom admits.

Aim: To confront every form of self-sufficiency the reader brings to God — religious, moral, financial, relational — and to show from Luke 18 that the kingdom is received only by those who come empty-handed, crying out for mercy, with nothing to offer and everything to receive.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Editorial introduction: Jesus	Luke explicitly states the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	teaches that people “ought always to pray and not lose heart”	parable’s purpose — unusual; frames the whole opening section
2–5	Parable of the Persistent Widow: an unjust judge ignores a widow’s plea until her persistence compels him to act	The judge’s character is emphatically negative — neither fears God nor respects men; contrast with God is the point
6–8	Jesus draws the a fortiori conclusion: God will give justice to His elect who cry out; but will the Son of Man find faith when He returns?	Eschatological frame — persistence in prayer is tied to faith awaiting Christ’s return; v. 8 is the interpretive key
9	Editorial introduction: Jesus tells the next parable to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt”	Luke again names the target audience; self-justification is the presenting sin
10–12	The Pharisee’s prayer: thanks God that he is not like other men; catalogs his religious achievements (fasting twice a week, tithing all he has)	The prayer is not addressed to God — it is a public résumé; note “with himself” in some MSS; the Pharisee’s god is a mirror
13	The tax collector’s prayer: stands far off, will not look up, beats his breast, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner”	<i>Hilaskomai</i> — be propitiated; a single, total appeal to divine mercy with nothing else offered
14	Jesus’ verdict: the tax collector went home justified, not the Pharisee; “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted”	Justification language; the reversal formula appears here and in 14:11 — a structural marker in Luke’s central section
15–16	People bring infants to Jesus; disciples rebuke them; Jesus calls for the children and rebukes the disciples	The disciples’ gatekeeping is a form of the same self-sufficiency — they are deciding who qualifies

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17	“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it”	Reception, not achievement; children have no claim, no résumé, no leverage — they only receive
18	The rich ruler asks: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”	The question itself reveals the problem — “what must I <i>do</i> ” — works-orientation from the opening
19	Jesus challenges “Good Teacher” — why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone	Not a denial of his own divinity — a probe: do you know what you are saying? If I am good, I am God
20–21	Jesus lists the commandments (second table); the ruler claims to have kept them all from youth	The surface answer is compliance; Jesus sees beneath it
22	Jesus’ targeted command: sell everything, give to the poor, and follow him — “you will have treasure in heaven”	Not a universal command — a surgical exposure of this man’s idol; his wealth is his functional savior
23	The ruler becomes sad — he is very wealthy	The idol holds; he cannot release it; he departs without comment or argument
24–25	Jesus observes how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom; the camel and the eye of a needle	Impossible, not merely difficult; the metaphor is deliberate hyperbole for total impossibility
26–27	Disciples ask “who then can be saved?”; Jesus answers: what is impossible with men is possible with God	Salvation is a miracle — no one saves himself; God accomplishes what human effort cannot
28–30	Peter notes the disciples have left everything; Jesus promises multiplied return in this age and eternal life in the age to come	Community of the kingdom is the “many times more” — not material prosperity; eternal life is the ultimate promise
31–33	Third passion prediction:	The most detailed of the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	Jesus tells the Twelve everything written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled — betrayal, mocking, flogging, death, resurrection on the third day	three passion predictions in Luke; fulfillment of Scripture is emphasized
34	The disciples understand none of this — it is hidden from them	Remarkable in its candor; their incomprehension is itself instructive — sight must be given, not achieved
35–37	A blind beggar hears the crowd, asks what is happening, is told Jesus of Nazareth is passing	The beggar cannot see Jesus — he is entirely dependent on others' report and his own desperate cry
38–39	The beggar cries out: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"; the crowd rebukes him; he cries out all the more	Persistence; the messianic title "Son of David" — he sees what the Twelve have not understood; the crowd silences him but cannot stop him
40–41	Jesus stops, commands the beggar brought to him, asks "What do you want me to do for you?"	Jesus asks the question; the beggar makes his need explicit: "Lord, let me recover my sight"
42–43	Jesus declares his faith has made him well; the beggar receives sight and follows Jesus, glorifying God; all the people praise God	Discipleship language ("followed him"); the one with nothing becomes the final positive model of the chapter

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–8	The Persistent Widow: Pray Without Losing Heart — Faith Trusts God's Character
2	9–14	The Pharisee and Tax Collector: Justification Belongs to the One Who Comes Empty-Handed

Division	Verses	Label
3	15–17	Receiving the Kingdom Like a Child — The Pattern of Kingdom Entry
4	18–30	The Rich Young Ruler: The One Thing That Blocks the Kingdom
5	31–34	The Third Passion Prediction: The Way In Is Through the Cross
6	35–43	The Blind Beggar: The Chapter’s Final Model — Cry Out, Receive, Follow

Subject Sentence (restated): The kingdom of God belongs to those who come to God with empty hands, not full ones.

Primary Claim (restated): God is calling everyone who reads Luke 18 to abandon every form of self-sufficiency — religious, moral, financial, social — and to receive the kingdom in the only way it can be received: as a dependent, humbled, persistently crying-out beggar before a merciful God.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) — Reframe what “qualified” looks like before God.

Luke 18 systematically dismantles every category we instinctively trust to qualify us before God — religious discipline (the Pharisee), moral compliance (the ruler), social standing (the crowd’s silencing of the beggar), and even childlike innocence is not the point of the children episode so much as childlike *receptivity*. The reader who comes to God with a mental ledger of reasons God should hear them — faithful church attendance, moral track record, charitable giving, theological correctness — is standing in the Pharisee’s spot. The category that actually qualifies is not achievement but dependence. Reframe the question from “Am I good enough?” to “Am I coming to the right person with the right posture?” — because those are the only terms Luke 18 recognizes.

2. (Affections/Worship) — Let the tax collector’s prayer expose what you are actually resting in.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” That prayer has almost no content — no theological argument, no track record cited, no plan offered. It is pure appeal. The question Luke 18 presses into the reader’s affections is not “Do you pray?” but “What are you resting in

when you pray?” The Pharisee prays longer and says more, but his prayer is essentially a monologue about himself directed toward a God he treats as an audience. The tax collector has one thing: the mercy of God. Examine what you are trusting when you approach God. If the mercy of Christ is not the only ground you are standing on, you are standing on something that will not hold. The beggar’s desperate cry — “Son of David, have mercy on me!” — is not a polished prayer; it is the sound of someone with no other options. That sound is precisely what God has said He will not despise (Psalm 51:17).

3. (Will/Behavior) — Identify and name your “one thing” — the thing you cannot give up for Christ.

Jesus did not give the rich young ruler a general command to be more generous. He looked at him with love (Mark’s parallel, Mark 10:21) and told him the specific thing that was sitting on the throne of his life where Christ should sit. This application requires specificity. What is the thing you are managing, protecting, or quietly excluding from Jesus’ lordship? It may not be money. It may be a relationship, a career trajectory, a reputation, a comfort, a plan for your children’s lives, a secret you are not ready to surrender. Luke 18 does not allow the comfortable generalization “I need to trust God more.” It requires naming the idol. Name it. Bring it to Christ. The ruler’s tragedy is not that he was wealthy — it is that he walked away without asking the follow-up question: “Then who can save me?” He did not stay long enough to hear verse 27.

4. (Mind/Belief) — Receive the passion prediction as the answer to the rich ruler’s question.

The passion prediction in vv. 31–34 sits between the rich ruler episode and the blind beggar, and it is not accidental. The disciples’ question — “Then who can be saved?” — is answered not by a theological lecture but by Jesus walking toward Jerusalem. What is impossible with men is possible with God — and the mechanism of that possibility is the cross. The Son of Man will be handed over, mocked, flogged, and killed, and on the third day rise. This is how impossible salvation becomes actual salvation. The tax collector’s prayer for propitiation is answered at Calvary. The blind beggar receives sight because the one who gave it will give his life. Luke 18 is not merely teaching about kingdom posture in the abstract — it is pointing to the one who makes kingdom entry possible at all. Do not read the passion prediction as a speed bump between two more interesting passages; it is the theological hinge of the chapter.

5. (Affections/Worship) — Let the blind beggar’s persistence shame your premature silence.

The crowd told the blind beggar to be quiet. He cried out all the more. There is something in Luke 18 that functions as a sustained rebuke of the kind of prayer life that gives up — either because God seems slow (the widow), or because we feel disqualified (the tax collector standing far off), or because the world tells us our need is not worth Jesus’ attention (the beggar). The chapter’s opening editorial note — “they ought always to pray and not lose heart” — is not a motivational slogan. It is a diagnosis of a temptation that afflicts every

believer: the temptation to conclude that God is not responding and to stop asking. Luke 18 ends with a man who could not see Jesus, was told to be silent, had no social standing, and had nothing to offer — and who received his sight and followed Jesus. Cry out again. Do not stop. The Son of David is passing by.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Luke 18 teaches that God’s character — His justice, His mercy, His grace — is the only ground on which any person may approach Him, and that this character is perfectly and definitively displayed in the person and work of Jesus. The chapter reveals that the kingdom of God operates on a logic completely inverse to human assumption: those who are full go away empty, and those who are empty go away full. This is not a sociological observation about the disadvantaged but a theological claim about the nature of grace — grace, by definition, flows toward those who have no claim on it. The chapter also teaches that human self-sufficiency, in whatever form it takes (religious achievement, moral compliance, financial security), is not merely insufficient for kingdom entry — it is actively disqualifying in the sense that it closes the hand that must be open to receive. Finally, Luke 18 grounds all of this in the approaching cross: the passion prediction (vv. 31–34) establishes that Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is the mechanism by which impossible salvation becomes actual, and the disciples’ incomprehension (v. 34) reminds the reader that even understanding this requires God to open eyes — the chapter’s final image.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Luke 18 is one of the most direct Gospel presentations of justification-by-grace-through-faith-alone in the synoptic tradition. The tax collector is declared justified (v. 14) on the basis of a prayer that offers nothing but an appeal to divine mercy — no works, no record, no promise of amendment. This is the doctrine of sola gratia in narrative form, and the Pharisee’s counter-example shows that the works-righteousness framework does not merely fail to justify — it actively distorts the soul, turning prayer into self-congratulation and God into a mirror. The chapter also embodies the Reformed emphasis on total inability (the camel/needle image) and sovereign grace (v. 27 — “possible with God”): no one saves himself; God accomplishes what no human effort can. The children episode reinforces the Reformed understanding that faith is receptive, not contributive — it receives what God gives rather than bringing something to the exchange. And the blind beggar, who is sovereign grace’s final exhibit in the chapter, comes with nothing, cries out in persistent faith, and follows Jesus in what Luke consistently presents as the pattern of discipleship — not a self-generated response but a response made possible by a divine word: “your faith has made you well.”

Main Takeaway

You cannot earn your way into God's kingdom, manage your way in, achieve your way in, or leverage your way in — and Luke 18 is one extended demonstration of that truth from every angle. The only posture the kingdom admits is the posture of the tax collector, the child, and the blind beggar: come with nothing, cry out for mercy, and receive what only God can give. Stop presenting God with your résumé and start presenting Him with your need.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Turning the Persistent Widow into a prayer technique.** The most common handling of vv. 1–8 reduces the parable to practical advice: “pray longer, pray harder, don’t give up.” This misses the theological engine of the parable entirely. The point is not technique — it is God’s character. The widow’s persistence is faith in the certainty of God’s justice, not a method for unlocking God’s willingness. A sermon that leaves listeners with prayer tips rather than a deeper confidence in God’s character has preached from the right text and missed the right point.
- **Moralizing the Pharisee/Tax Collector parable into a virtue lesson on humility.** Preaching “be humble, not proud” from this passage is the most common and most ironic failure: the listener walks away proud of their humility, which is precisely the Pharisee’s posture in new clothing. The parable is about the ground of justification — where one’s standing before God is located. The tax collector is not commended for a character virtue but for the theological content of his appeal: he casts himself entirely on divine mercy. Preach justification, not humility technique.
- **Universalizing Jesus’ command to the rich young ruler.** Handling vv. 22 as a command for all believers to sell all their possessions misreads the passage’s particularity. Jesus’ surgical command is aimed at this man’s specific idol. The universal principle is not “sell everything” but “be willing to surrender whatever is functioning as your functional savior.” Expositors must apply the principle universally while explaining the command’s contextual particularity — otherwise the congregation either panics about their bank accounts or dismisses the passage as “not for me.”
- **Missing the passion prediction’s load-bearing function in the chapter.** Verses 31–34 are frequently treated as a transition passage — something Jesus says on the way to Jericho — rather than as the theological hinge that answers the question raised in v. 26: “Then who can be saved?” The cross is the answer. “What is impossible with men is possible with God” is not a free-floating comfort statement — it is a claim grounded in the redemptive work Jesus is walking toward. Preach vv.

31–34 as the gospel foundation of everything the chapter has been arguing, not as narrative filler.

- **Treating the blind beggar as a healing narrative rather than a discipleship model.**

The beggar's function in Luke 18 is structural — he is the chapter's concluding positive model, exemplifying in a single figure everything the chapter has been commending: persistence in crying out, coming with nothing, appealing to Jesus' identity ("Son of David"), receiving by faith, and following as a disciple. Reducing the passage to a demonstration of Jesus' healing power, or to a template for healing prayer, misses the narrative and theological climax Luke has been building toward all chapter.

- **Failing to connect the chapter's argument to the cross.** Luke 18's sustained argument about kingdom entry by radical dependence rather than self-sufficiency must ultimately point to the one who made that entry possible. Expositions that end with "so come humbly" without grounding humility in the gospel — without explaining *why* God receives the empty-handed, which is because Christ bore the weight of what our hands could not carry — will produce either despair (I am not humble enough) or moralism (I need to become more humble). The chapter itself supplies the corrective in vv. 31–34. Use it.