

Go Home Justified

Luke Series #45

Luke 18:9-17

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We're going to study Luke 18:9-17, looking more closely at verses nine through fourteen.

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

This is God's Holy Word. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray.

Our heavenly Father, we come to You and Your Word today. We are grateful for the privilege we have that You are a God Who speaks for You have revealed Yourself through Your written Word. Thank You that Your Holy Spirit stands ready to help us understand what You want to speak to us. I ask that You would open our eyes to see what is in Your Word. Show us what You want to teach us. This is a weighty passage about two men, two prayers and two destinies. Father, would that we all hear this and respond in such a way that we would know what it means to be accepted by You. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen

For a little more than a year now, our family has been engaged in the college/university search process. Having sent our oldest daughter Olivia off to college last year and now with our oldest son, Clay, being a senior this year, we are in the midst of checking college catalogs and reading descriptions on-line. If you have gone through this process as a family or if you remember doing it yourself, you know it can be a pretty intense process. You have to get the right information. Once you've figured out the school you want to go to, the most important thing to

figure out is what is it going to take to get into that school? What will it take to be accepted by your school of choice?

Imagine going to a campus visit at the school you most want to get into, your favorite school. Some day you want to wear a shirt that says, "I'm an Alumni of 'this' University." You go to the Admissions office with your application in hand. You turn in your application and they say, "I'm sorry but you won't be accepted. You misunderstood the acceptance requirements. You were supposed to take the ACT but you took the SAT. You were supposed to write an essay on this topic but you wrote it on a different topic. You took all the wrong courses in high school. I'm sorry, you will not be getting an acceptance letter from us."

I see panic on some people's faces right now. Is this a bad dream for some of you? That would be so sad and so tragic.

How much more tragic to desire entrance into God's Kingdom—to want to receive an acceptance letter from Him in order to enter into His rest but then to be told, "I'm sorry. You didn't understand the entrance requirements. You're not going to make it in."

There is no more important question for us to answer than what will it take to enter into the Kingdom of God? What is it that will find acceptance with our God? What are God's entrance requirements? That is exactly what our passage is about. It's why Jesus told this parable. Let's look at it more closely and find out what God will accept and what God will not.

Let me remind you of where we are in the story line in the Gospel of Luke. We are in this large section known as Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. It's the biggest section in the book and covers about a third of the Gospel. It begins in Luke 9:51, "*When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*"

We hear again and again that Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. When you see "Jerusalem" you should not merely think about an ancient city. You shouldn't only think about the capital of the Old Testament religion. When you see "Jerusalem" in the book of Luke you should think of what Jesus says to His disciples in Luke 18:31-33:

³¹ And taking the twelve, he said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. ³³ And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise."

When it says "Jerusalem" all of that should just flash in front of you. Jesus is going to a place that is going to accomplish the mission for which He came to earth: to seek and save the lost by dying for sinners in their place; being raised to new life so that all who trust in Him can have eternal life. The reason that Jesus came was fulfilled at Jerusalem.

As Luke is taking us through the story line to Jerusalem, he's asking questions which cause us to ask questions.

- What does Jesus' Kingdom look like?
- How does one enter into His Kingdom?
- What does being a disciple look like?

As we observe Jesus, He's answering these questions for us. He's saying, "Don't assume you have My Kingdom figured out." Don't assume you know who's in and who's not. In the case of our passage He uses a parable to teach us this lesson.

Let's remind ourselves about what parables are. Jesus liked to tell stories and a parable was His favorite way of telling a story and making a point. A parable is a short story that is very carefully constructed. Almost every word is important to the meaning and the big idea. Typically a parable is trying to teach us one poignant truth. It's supposed to slap us upside the head. It's supposed to pack a punch and shake up our understanding of reality.

Jesus told a lot of parables and simple stories where things represented things. The seed represents the Word of God. The soils represent responses. They are sort of analogies. This parable is very realistic so it is more of an example than an analogy.

He talks about two real types of people whom we ought to be able to identify with: a good example and a bad example to follow. Jesus taught with a particular purpose, similar to the passage of Luke 18:1-8. "*And he [Jesus] told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.*" As we read this parable about two guys praying in the temple, we might say, "Here is another passage about prayer." However prayer is just the context of the passage itself.

Note why Jesus told this parable and note who His target audience is as stated in verse nine: "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*"

Now that is not two groups of people. Jesus isn't saying that this is for group A who trusts in themselves; who considers themselves to be righteous. And then group B who treats others with contempt. No these people are one and the same. If you are trusting in yourself and your own righteousness and what you do, you are naturally going to compare yourself to others—and probably compare yourself very favorably. You will end up looking down at others with contempt. "Why can't they be more like me?" This is one type of people Jesus is addressing here: people who exalt their own work and righteousness; people who exalt what they do and by virtue of that look down on others in comparison.

The parable is very simple but poignant. There are two main characters: the good guy and the bad guy; a villain and a hero. Just like the old time westerns where the good guys wear the white hats and the bad guys where the black hats. There is no gray here. The original hearers of Jesus' parable would have understood precisely who the good guy is versus the bad guy.

It's a little bit of a challenge for us because the good guy is definitely the Pharisee as Jesus begins the story. We are so used to Jesus busting the chops of the Pharisees and turning their thinking on end that we naturally look at the Pharisee and immediately think he's the bad guy. That is not how the original hearers of this passage would have understood this. They would have understood that the Pharisee was definitely the good guy. He was the religious conservative. He was the one who cared about the Scripture; the fundamentalist and the evangelical who wanted to honor God with all that He did and cared about God's Word. He was a leader in society and a leader among God's people. When you think of a Pharisee you have to think of someone you look up to because of their devotion to God. You might picture the woman who discipled you in college or your Care Group leader; or probably more accurately, a deacon. an elder or a pastor of this church (we won't say which one). The Pharisee was clearly the good guy. The tax collector was clearly the bad guy. You have to put away all notions of cuddly little Zacchaeus—"wee Zacchaeus climbing up into the tree for the Lord he wanted to see." That's nice but he wasn't a guy with whom you wanted to hang around. You wouldn't want to hang around with tax collectors. They were vile. Everything that the Pharisee prayed and said he was thankful for what he was not, this tax collector was.

First of all, he's not a tax collector—he's a tax extorter. That's how they did it. Another term sometimes used is publican, as in public servant. Tax collectors weren't out there to serve the public; they are out there to serve themselves and line their own pockets.

Remember how this worked? A tax collector bid on a certain district where he would collect taxes for the Roman government. Understand that these tax collectors were Jewish so right off the bat they were traitors because now they were working for the harsh overlord Roman Empire. They bid out a district of their own people. They paid for it up front and then went about collecting taxes from their own people.

Once they covered their expenses and what they paid to Rome, everything from there on was 100% profit. The whole system encouraged greed. As much as the tax collector could get above that, it was his to keep. Any way he collected was fine with the Romans as long as he turned in what he was supposed to turn in. The rest was his business.

Tax collectors were despised and despicable. They couldn't testify in a court of law. They would not be seen in the inner court of the temple—maybe in the outer court. When you think of

a tax collector you have to think of a drug pusher or someone who is into human trafficking. This is a despicable person.

There is a good guy and a bad guy in this story; two men and two prayers. Let's look at the prayer of the good guy—the Pharisee—in verse 11.

THE PRAYER OF THE GOOD GUY [the hero]

He begins by thanking God, “*God, I thank you...*” He's off to a great start! Thanksgiving is an important part of prayer. We pray prayers of thanksgiving in church, prayers of thanksgiving in Sunday School, prayers of thanksgiving when we gather on Wednesday nights. We will pray prayers of thanksgiving next week when we gather. Prayer is an important part of worship and the hero starts out pretty good by saying, “*God, I thank you...*”

Unfortunately that was the high point of his prayer. It goes south from there. A commentator from generations past said this about the Pharisee, “He glances at heaven but contemplates himself.” He gives God a nod and a wink but what he really wants to talk about is himself. It is clear that he sees himself in a league all his own.

Verse eleven says that he stood by himself to pray. Now that is a good translation but it's possible that you could translate that to say he stood and prayed to himself. I think there is some intentional ambiguity by the author so that in a sense we can read it both ways. He stood by himself. At the end of the day he was praying to himself and about himself.

Note that he begins by making comparisons to others. We see the contempt he has for others. He sees himself in a league all his own. He literally says, “God, I thank You that I am not like the rest.” The rest being extortioners, meaning people who are greedy. Tax collectors are like ravenous wolves; they take, take, take. “I am not ‘...*unjust...*’ I am not by nature a vile, evil, wicked, unjust man like a tax collector. I don't commit adultery. I am faithful in my sexual life, not like a tax collector.”

Then he comes right out and says it, “...*or even like this tax collector.*” “So I am in a league of my own. I am not like those guys plus look at the things I do for You, God.” Notice how “I” comes up about five times in what he says.

Verse 12 says, “*I fast twice a week...*” Do you know how many times it was required of a faithful Jew in the Old Testament to fast in a year? One time. Only on the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur. He's fasting twice a week so that is 103 times more than necessary. That's pretty impressive.

Verse 12 goes on to say, “...*I give tithes of all that I get...*” That is going beyond what the law would have required of him. There were tithes that had to be paid but he didn't literally have

to tithe a tenth on everything. You get the impression that if you gave this guy a stick of gum he'd tear off a tenth of it and put it in the collection plate on Sunday morning.

He was fastidious in his outward righteousness. That is the good guy in our story. He's the one who should be the hero when in fact he is the poster child for the reason Jesus told this parable. Elevating his own righteousness and looking with contempt on other people. He's trusting in himself and that his righteousness will make him acceptable to God.

We get the impression that this is not going to end well for this religious conservative, this play-by-the-rules kind of guy. Let's look at his counterpart, the bad guy.

THE PRAYER OF THE BAD GUY [the villain]

The presumed bad guy in this story is the tax collector. How is his prayer different? His prayer is different in every way.

Note in verse 13 his posture and demeanor. He was "...*standing far off*..." He probably would not have been in the inner temple court. Being a tax collector, knowing that he was unclean, he would have stayed in the outer court, outside of the temple. Maybe he was in the court of the Gentiles. He's standing far off as if to say, "I don't belong here and I am not pretending that I do."

It says that he, "...*would not even lift up his eyes to heaven*..." The normal posture for prayer in the temple in daily life would have been to stand with your palms upraised and to look to heaven, speaking to God—probably with your eyes open and out loud. He doesn't even look to heaven. He is ashamed. He feels a sense of shame before a holy God.

Then he beats on himself. He's at the end of himself; he's disgusted with himself. Before he's even said a word we have an indication of this man's remorse, contrition and his desire to repent.

It's one of the shortest prayers in the Bible. The prayer he prays is one of the simplest but one of the most profound. It's been noted that this prayer has three parts.

- The Sinner
- God
- A Plea for God's mercy

The Sinner. Unlike the Pharisee who identifies himself before God on the basis of the best that he has to offer, the tax collector identifies himself before God based on his sin. He understands what Paul wrote later in Romans 3:23, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" He understands that sin is not just what he does—an external behavior—but it's

who he is. He doesn't talk about what he does. The Pharisee talks about what he does in the positive but the tax collector doesn't even talk about the negative sin that he does. He simply says that he is a sinner. "I sin outwardly because I am a sinner in my heart."

Without a doubt he was everything that the Pharisee thanked God that he was not. He was a sinner and he knew it. He literally calls himself here "The sinner." He puts himself in a different category—a totally separate category than where the Pharisee put himself.

This man knows something that every person who is honest about his sin knows. "I am the biggest sinner that I know. The biggest sinner I know in the world is the one I see in the mirror every morning." This is why the apostle Paul called himself the foremost or chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15) and a "*wretched man*" (Romans 7:24).

If we are honest with ourselves we would have to admit the very same thing. That I am the worst sinner I know because I know what is in my heart. When I look at others like the Pharisee did, if all I see is their outward behavior I might compare favorably—if I only looked at the outward behavior. However when I make an honest assessment of the kinds of sins that are in my heart—the kind that no one sees like envy, greed, lust, malice, wicked thoughts—then I have to admit I know no greater sinner than myself. That is what this tax collector concluded. He freely confessed it to a holy God.

God. Who did this man understand God to be? It is clear by his prayer and posture that he understood God to be both holy and full of mercy.

We know he understood God to be holy because he wouldn't even look to heaven. He understood God to be the source of mercy because that is the one thing he asks for from God.

It is the word that he uses when he asks for mercy that tells us the most in this passage. I believe that it is the most important word in this passage. It's key to understand what God is looking for from men and women; what He will find acceptable. It is the key to understanding Jesus' mission—the mission for which He is journeying to Jerusalem to accomplish. It's the key to understanding the end of this parable when Jesus says that one man goes home justified and the other does not.

A Plea for God's Mercy. Between the man—the sinner—and God is his cry for mercy. If all he wanted to do was ask God for mercy he could have used the same word the ten lepers used in Luke 17:13 when Jesus cleansed them. The lepers went to Jesus and said, "*Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.*" This is a perfectly good word for mercy—have compassion on us.

However in this case, this guilty tax collector is asking for much more. He is literally asking God to “mercy seat” him—to make atonement for him.

In the Old Testament the concept of atonement was graphically represented by all that God had prescribed for the people of Israel in their Temple worship. The Temple was a representation of God’s presence on earth. It was a way for sinful people to have covenant relationship with a holy God.

Because God is just and is the just Judge of the universe, the penalty for sin is death. Sin disrupts our relationship with Him. The penalty being death, God made a way for sinful people to approach Him without having to die. He made it clear through animal sacrifice that He would accept a substitute in place of the sinner. The evidence that the sacrifice—the animal—had died was that there was blood. There was blood all over the temple every day. Day in and day out bulls, goats and lambs would continually be sacrificed and blood would flow because of sin.

There was one day a year—the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)—when the High Priest representing all of the people would bring one sacrifice for all of the people. He would go into the Most Holy Place of the temple once a year. The Holy of Holies was God’s throne room where the Ark of the Covenant sat. On top of the Ark of the Covenant was this lid known as The Mercy Seat. He would go in there once a year with blood and he would sprinkle it on the Mercy Seat and cover it with the blood.

Inside the Ark of the Covenant is God’s Law, the Ten Commandments. It convicts each one of us. We’ve broken all of God’s Ten Commandments numerous times. God’s Law is convicting us; saying we are guilty. However a representative—the High Priest—comes in on the people’s behalf and spreads blood over that. In the spreading of blood he is making atonement. He is “mercy seating” for sinners.

That idea of mercy seating has two sides to it:

- It’s to expiate, wash clean. To wipe the slate clean. To forgive sins.
- It also is to propitiate which means to turn away God’s righteous wrath.

God is angry about our sin. It’s not because He is some out-of-control megalomaniac in the sky Who gets ticked off and flies off the handle. His wrath is controlled and is specific. It is a result of Him being the holy Judge of the universe. If we are honest we would never respect any judge who was not holy and righteous and didn’t mete out the proper punishment for an offense. The problem of God’s wrath is that it is our problem.

The wonderful thing about the result of God’s love is that He sent Jesus to be the final sacrifice; to be the High Priest and the sacrifice to come into the throne room of heaven and offer

up Himself as the final Lamb—the final sacrifice—for The Day of Atonement for all the people; for all who would come to Him in repentance and faith.

The tax collector didn't know all of that yet but he knew that God would make atonement for those who humble themselves and come to Him looking for mercy and grace. That is why Jesus gives us the punch line in this passage that one man went back home justified and the other did not. There is a great reversal of fortune here because the good guy—the one we thought was wearing the white hat and who ought to have been the hero—does not go home justified. The bad guy—the guy who's dirty—goes home justified. He was accepted by God.

To be justified means more than that. It means to be considered righteous. Jesus is picking very specific words here. Jesus is going to Jerusalem. What is He going to do in Jerusalem? He is going to be the righteous One Who is sacrificed for the unrighteous so that we might be clothed with His righteousness through faith in Him.

Listen to what the Apostle Paul says about this as he describes that happened when Jesus died. What does it mean to be justified? Romans 3:21-25:

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [accepted, declared righteous] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood [as a Mercy Seat], to be received by faith...”

That is the point of this passage. Jesus wants to teach us through His Word that God accepts those who rely on His mercy. He accepts those who rely on His unmerited favor—His grace. He does not accept those who rely on themselves. This lack of righteousness is the greatest need of every human being. God is telling us that trusting in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ is the only way a person can find acceptance with God.

I must ask you this question: Do you trust in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ? Is that what you are relying on to stand before God, to enter into His Kingdom, to enter into His rest? It doesn't matter if you are more like the tax collector. You've committed all of those sins. It doesn't matter if you are more like the Pharisee. You've kept your nose clean and tried to play by the rules. Both need righteousness that is outside of them. All of us need a righteousness that we don't have but that God freely offers and is available to us through repentance of our sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

If that is not something that you know you have then understand that God's Word says to you, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden...” (Matthew 11:28). You are burdened down by your sin. You can relate to the tax collector as he cries, “God, be merciful to me. I am

the sinner. I can't hide. I can't say I didn't sin because I did. But You are merciful to me in Jesus so I come to You, repenting of my sin, placing my faith in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord, asking You to give me eternal life."

The only way to be accepted by God is to rely on His mercy. It's the call to enter Christ's Kingdom through repentance and faith. Jesus sums that up in a very clear statement—it's almost axiomatic—in Luke 18:14. He gives the Kingdom truth. Often parables are resolved in a Kingdom truth that we can latch onto: *"...For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

This principle goes beyond our entrance requirements to get into the Kingdom of God. I am sure that most people would affirm their inability to earn their own salvation. We also know that following Jesus involves change, becoming more like Jesus. It involves works that were prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10). Remember to whom Jesus was speaking here; those who had a tendency to rely on their own righteousness and look down with contempt on others.

Even after we come to Jesus in repentance and faith, trusting in His righteousness, we still have a sinful flesh to deal with. We still have a tendency to do just what Jesus was talking about here; to somehow smuggle our good works into our salvation and do so by comparing ourselves to others looking down on them.

In which areas have you been tempted to say, "God, I thank You that I am not like the rest?"

- God, I thank You that we are not like that family whose kids are out of control.
- God, I thank You that I am not like those people who water down the Bible and aren't serious about theology.
- God, I thank You that I am not the person who struggles with same-sex attraction.

In which areas have you been tempted to say, "God, I do this. Look at what I have done."

- I come to church even during a blizzard.
- I have made the best schooling choice for my family.
- I have read every book John Piper ever wrote.
- I never miss a Care Group meeting.

In doing so we can become a lot like the disciples in Luke 18:15-17 and forget the very nature of the Kingdom. The very nature of Christ's Kingdom is that we continue to come to Him as little children, dependent on Him, trusting in what He has accomplished on our behalf.

Philip Ryken says, "Once we are saved, his [tax collector's] prayer becomes our daily petition for grace: 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner.'" That needs to be our daily petition for

God's grace. It is why we walk through what we walk through Sunday morning. It's why we confess our sins. It's why we hear the assurance of pardon from God's Word. It's why we respond with song in worship for what God has done for us in Christ.

I urge you to go to the words of these songs as a means to rejoice daily in God's grace:

Arise, my soul, arise; shake off thy guilty fears;
The bleeding sacrifice in my behalf appears:
Before the throne my surety stands,
Before the throne my surety stands,
My name is written on His hands.

My God is reconciled; His pardoning voice I hear;
He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear:
With confidence I know draw nigh,
With confidence I know draw nigh,
And "Father, Abba, Father" cry.

(Arise, My Soul, Arise by Charles Wesley 1742)

Jesus, friend of sinners
A crown of thorns You wore for me
Bruised for my transgression
Pierced for my iniquities
The wrath of God that I deserved
Was poured out on the innocent
He took my place, my soul to save
Now I am His forever

(His Forever by Sovereign Grace Worship 2003)

Make these your songs today and every day. Have you heard us talk about being a gospel-centered church or preaching the gospel to ourselves everyday? This is what we are talking about. That the truth of God's unmerited favor in Jesus Christ is free and should be received by all who trust in Him. This is how we enter into a relationship with God but it is also how we walk everyday of the Christian life. We continue to go back to God for His mercy. We realize He is sustaining us, not based on our performance but based on Christ's performance through His finished work and His righteous life. That is the motivation for our obedience—the sole source of our greatest joy. Amen.

Let's pray.

God, we praise You for being a God Who is full of mercy. In Your great love You sent Your one and only Son, Jesus Christ, to die in the place of sinners, though He did not deserve it. He lived a perfect righteous life, in perfect relationship with You.

We thank You, Jesus, for going to the cross, looking for the joy set before You so that all who look to You in faith, all who rely on what You have done, all who come to You looking for mercy will find it.

Forgive us for trying to smuggle our own goodness and righteousness into our relationship with You. Help us, as we begin a new year, to rely even more on what Christ has done for us. Lord, we praise You that You've made a way to rescue and restore the foremost of sinners in such a way that all the glory would go to You. We pray this in Your name. Amen.

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