

This summer I have been preaching through a sermon series that I have entitled Masterclass: Storyteller, in which I am looking at the parables of Jesus, the stories that He told, and what we can learn from them about what it means to know and follow God. If you're unfamiliar with the term parable, the best definition I have found comes from Pastor John MacArthur: **A parable is an ingeniously simple word picture illuminating a profound spiritual lesson.** Jesus often taught in parables, using word pictures like "God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field" or "God is like a Father welcoming home a wayward Son." By using everyday language that was familiar to his audience, he ensured that the stories would stay with them long after he left. But he also used parables because the way they were told would cause the self-righteous and sophisticated to reject his teaching as basic, completely missing the deeper spiritual truth hidden in the story, while those with childlike faith would respond to Jesus and want to know Him better.

This morning, we will be looking at the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14. It's a parable Jesus told to correct some false assumptions about how one becomes right with God. It also has a lot to teach us about identity, the question of how you know you have value and worth. My prayer is that you will leave this time with any false assumptions of your own corrected, with a clear understanding of how one becomes right with God and where to find a healthy identity. Let's read Luke 18:9-14:

Luke 18:9-14 - *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ 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. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth **of all I get.**' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have merc on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ "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."*

From the opening line, we read that Jesus was telling this parable to challenge those who were confident of their own righteousness, and to show what justifies a man before God. Righteousness is the Greek word "dikaiosune"; it can be helpful to see righteousness as right-relatedness. The righteous individual is the one who is in a right relationship with God. And the word for justified is from the same root –

“dedikaiomenos.” Justification has to do with being legally not guilty before God. And so, Jesus is challenging those who were confident that they were in a right relationship with God but were looking down on everybody else. As we’re going to find this morning, there is something completely incongruent about those two realities. If you look down on others, you have missed something critical about what it means to be right with God.

And so, Jesus sets up two contrasting individuals in this parable: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Let me help you understand these two groups. The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders in Israel. If anyone would have been seen by Jesus’ contemporaries as being in right relationship with God, it would have been them. They had good motives – they wanted Israel to live their lives in faithfulness to God’s law, in the hopes that the Messiah would come to rescue them from Roman oppression. In fact, their name comes from the Jewish word for “separatist,” or “to separate.” The problem was that their desire for faithfulness caused them to be obsessed with observing the law, adding to God’s law many man-made laws of their own in an attempt to encourage everyone to walk in holiness before God. And evidently, as we see in this parable, their commitment to holiness also caused them to be confident of their own righteousness and to consider themselves superior to others.

By contrast, the tax collector would have been part of the most hated classes of people in Israel. Remember that Israel was under Roman occupation during this time. The tax collectors were Jewish men who were working for the Roman government, taking money from the Jewish people to give to Rome. They were usually corrupt, taking more money on top of the taxes for themselves. And so, they were seen by their contemporaries as traitors, dishonest and corrupt men. And so, you have this contrast: the Pharisee, someone who the crowd would have expected to be right with God, and a tax collector, someone who the crowd would have expected to not be right with God. If Jesus were telling this parable today, perhaps he would have used a pastor or priest contrasted with a rapist or drug dealer – someone who would have been assumed to be right with God contrasted with someone who would have been expected to be beneath God’s standard of righteousness.

So Jesus is telling this parable to challenge the attitudes of those who were confident of their own righteousness, sure that they were rightly-related to God, in order to teach them about what really make someone right with God. He tells this

parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector going up to the temple to pray. Let's look at the Pharisee first:

¹¹ *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. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

Now, some might admire this man for the confidence he has in his own goodness. He has clearly dedicated himself to following God's laws. In fact, he has gone above and beyond, fasting twice a week and giving a tenth of all he gets. But Jesus concludes that despite this man's piety, there is something about the way that he prays, and something about the attitude of his heart, that causes him to not receive God's justification. Even though he seems to be dedicated to God, he is not actually in a right relationship with God. Looking at the last line gives a clue why this is the case:

¹⁴ *"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."*

What is really going on here? This man is not truly praying to God; he is congratulating himself for his goodness, exalting himself before God and others. He believes that he is right with God because of his good works. He believes that his devotion towards God has earned him God's favor. But Jesus tells his listeners that all of this man's good works have not justified him; despite his piety, he is still guilty before a holy God.

On the other hand, look at the tax collector's approach to God:

¹³ *"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.'*

The tax collector does not exalt himself, but refers to himself as a sinner before God, and pleads for God's mercy. He does not even dare to look up to heaven, but in his remorse he beats his breast and prays for mercy. Every word, every posture of this man, reveals a heart that sees himself as unworthy, remorseful, repentant before God. And Jesus declares that this man, the tax collector, went home justified before God. This man, and not the Pharisee, left the temple right with God. The tax collector humbled himself, and God exalted him.

Can you understand how offensive this would have been to the religious people listening to Jesus? The Pharisees had devoted themselves to following God, to obeying and teaching His law, and here comes Jesus with the audacity to say that all of their good works, all their devotion, have NOT made them right with God, that God is not impressed by their piety. But somehow, this tax collector, this traitor, this corrupt and dishonest man, is right with God, despite his obvious sin, solely on the basis of his plea for mercy?

This shocking parable clearly has something important to tell us about how to become right with God. There are three things I want to highlight from this passage, three implications for us today:

1) Good works can not save anyone

Jesus tells this parable to illustrate what justifies a person before God, to show what someone must do to be not guilty before a holy God, what will put him or her in a right relationship with God. And the answer is clearly not good works, as the Pharisee in this parable would find out on the day he stood before God, expounding upon his resume. Good works will not save anyone. This is the clear teaching of the Bible. One of the best expositions of this is found in Romans 3:19-26, which we will look at a little at a time. Beginning in Romans 3:19-20:

Romans 3:19-20 - *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*

Paul tells us in Romans 3:20 that no one can stand before God with their resume of good works and be declared righteous. God is perfect and holy and can not tolerate sin. So unless you are perfect, do not bother to put your trust in your good works, for they can not save you. Do you really think that by observing the sacraments, that you will be saved? That God is keeping score of whether or not you were christened, took first communion, or were confirmed? Or do you really believe that praying a certain number of times a day and giving a certain percentage of your income to the poor is really what God has set up as a means to be right with Him? No! Every other religion or approach to God operates on the merit system – do these things and God will accept you, and you will be a righteous man or woman. But that is not what Jesus teaches here, and it is not the message of the Bible.

Going to church won't save you. Tithing won't save you. Serving the poor will not save you. Look again at verse 20: yes, the law shows us what a good work is, but it also shows us how far short we have fallen of God's holy standard, and as a result the main purpose of the law is to show us our need for a Savior. We have missed the mark; we have not measured up. **Trying to be saved by your works is like trying to jump the Grand Canyon, or high jump to the stars.** You may be the greatest jumper in the world, but you will still fall short. Similarly, you may be Mother Teresa or Billy Graham, but you will not be saved by your good works.

2) There must be atonement for sin

We have all fallen short of God's perfect standard, and we can do nothing about it by our own good works. And so if we are to be made right with God, there must be another way to receive forgiveness, cleansing, covering, payment for sins. In this parable, the tax collector asks God to have mercy on him, for he is a sinner. He has broken God's laws, fallen short of God's standards, and he recognizes that no amount of good works will save him from the judgment he deserves, and so he cries out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The word translated here as "have mercy on" is the Greek word "hilastheti." This was a word with great meaning to the Jews, as it was the verb form of "hilasterion," which was the word for the Mercy Seat. The Mercy Seat was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, which sat in the Jewish Temple. The Ark of the Covenant was a box in which was stored the ten commandments. It represented the law, the holiness of God. It was an instrument of judgment. But above the ark was the Mercy Seat, a lid of pure gold with figures of winged angels. This was where God dwelt symbolically.

Exodus 25:21-22 - Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the Testimony, which I will give you. ²² There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.

And once a year, on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the high priest would enter the holy of holies and sprinkle blood from an animal as a substitute, an innocent victim dying our place. And so, God would not see the law and our inability to measure up, but instead would see the blood of an innocent victim. His love and mercy would save the one who comes to Him through faith in that sacrifice of atonement.

What this means is that when the tax collector cries out “hilastheti,” “have mercy on me,” he is essentially saying, “Treat me as one who comes on the basis of the blood shed on the Mercy Seat as an offering for sins.” In other words, I am a sinner, and I’m asking you not to treat me as my sins deserve but to give my sins to a substitute and see me as righteous. And God does exactly that. He does not see the man’s sin, but instead gives him atonement for his sins, showing him mercy, forgiving him, justifying him, declaring him not guilty, righteous, right with God. The tax collector does not come to God with his resume, telling God the good things he has done. He does not come with excuses for his actions. He does not ask God to turn a blind eye. He simply confesses his sin and asks for mercy, asks God to put his sins onto a substitute. And Jesus declares that this tax collector went home justified. How is that a corrupt, dishonest tax collector can go home justified before a holy God when he deserved judgment for his sins? As Paul wrote:

Romans 3:21-26 - *But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through **faith in his blood**. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- ²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*

The tax collector went home justified because there is a way to be right with God that does not depend upon how good or bad we are. There is a way to be right with God, and that is through faith in Jesus, trusting in His atonement for our sins, his death on our behalf. The mercy seat and the sprinkling of the blood of animals points to Jesus and his death on the cross:

Hebrews 10:11-14 - *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

We are declared not guilty by trusting in Jesus’ death for us on the cross. Even though we have sinned, we are acquitted, declared not guilty. Not just pardon, but

we have been given a righteous status. We are in a right relationship with God forever.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - **God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Sir Marcus Loane: *The voice that spells forgiveness will say: 'You may go; you have been let off the penalty which your sin deserved.' But the verdict which means justification will say: 'You may come; you are welcome to all my love and my presence.'*

By God's grace – his free, undeserved gift – we are saved.

Ephesians 2:8-9 - *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.*

We were enslaved to sin, but have been redeemed – set free through the payment of a price. It is a free gift for us, but it was so costly for Him, for it cost Jesus His life. And that is how the tax collector, or any of us, becomes right with God.

3) The only identity that does not lead to superiority is found in the gospel

Remember how the passage began: *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:*

Because the Pharisees found their identity in their goodness, they looked down on those who were not as good, not as moral, not as dedicated to God as they were – people like the tax collector. And while we may not like the Pharisees, we are more like them than we care to admit. I believe that this pattern is true for all of us: whatever we look to in order to find an identity, to convince ourselves that we are valuable, will inevitably cause us to look down on others who do not measure up to us. Even if we're not aware of it, the attitude of our heart becomes, "I thank you God that I am a good parent, not like those terrible parents... I thank you God that I am a hard worker, not like those lazy people... I thank you God that I am so savvy on social media, not like those awkward or technologically clueless people... I thank you God that I am stylish, not like those terrible dressers... I think you that I am so open-minded, not like those close-minded bigots... I thank you that I am attractive, not like those ugly people... I thank you that I am intelligent, not like those idiots... I thank you that I am successful, not like those

failures... I thank you that I am woke, not like those oppressors... I thank you that I am Republican, not like those liberal Marxists... I thank you that I am a Democrat, not like those conservative fascists.

Wherever we locate our identity inevitably leads us to look down on others. CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote *“Pride gets no pleasure out of having something; pride only gets pleasure in having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about.”*

So how does the identity we receive as Christians differ? Like the tax collector, we are sinners who have been shown mercy. We are so sinful that nothing less than the death of the son of God could save us, but we are so loved that the Son of God chose to die for us. We are humbled and exalted at the same time. We know that we are loved not because we are better or smarter than anyone else, but just because God is merciful and chose to love us and die for us and reveal Himself to us. Can you imagine the tax collector looking down on the Pharisee or thinking himself superior? He knows he is inferior, but it will not matter – once he learns that he has been saved by grace, he will become both humble and confident in God’s for him.

As A.W. Tozer put it: *“He has accepted God's estimate of his own life. He knows he is as weak and helpless as God has declared him to be, but paradoxically, he knows at the same time that he is in the sight of God of more importance than angels. In himself, nothing; in God, everything. That is his motto.”*

Let me share three things the Christian identity does for us:

1) It frees us up to be honest with ourselves and others

When I know I am right with God, I no longer need to justify myself. I don’t need to convince myself or others that I am a valuable person. I’m already right with God, but not on the basis of what I have done. As Paul put it:

Romans 3:27-28 - *Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.* ²⁸ *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*

Knowing this, I can be honest about my failings. I can confess. I know that my self-worth is not based on my performance or how I compare to anyone else. I know I am right with God, forgiven, perfect in His sight. And so I can be honest with you about my struggles, my past, my fears, about the deepest desires of my heart, knowing that I already have the love and acceptance I need from God. And I can speak the truth in love to you, because I do not fear your rejection.

“It’s the great, confounding reversal of the Gospel of Jesus. If the word we preach is one of attainable perfection, of law, of justification by works, then when we fail, our testimony fails with it. But if we preach our deep brokenness and Christ’s deeper healing, if we preach our inability to take a single breath but for God’s grace, then our weakness exalts him and we’re functioning as we were meant to since the foundation of the world.”

2) Allows us to receive criticism

Many of us can not receive criticism, because it wounds our pride. We get defensive and want to criticize back. Or, we shut down and believe that we must be terrible people. But when we have an identity in Christ, we know that we are sinners saved by grace. We have no illusions about ourselves. We know we are sinners. And so we can receive criticism from others, because we know that we are so much worse than whatever the person sees in us. But we also know that we are saved by grace. And so criticism does not have to destroy us, because the one whose opinion matters the most has declared us not guilty, perfect in His sight.

3) Prevents us from looking down on anyone else

If our identity is as a sinner saved by grace, how can we look down on anyone else? Like the tax collector, we know that the Pharisee may be a better person than us. But we’re not saved by being better people. We are saved by grace, a free gift of God. When you get a gift, you don’t praise the recipient, but the giver. How can you look down on anyone else when everything you have is a gift? It’s like finding a winning lottery ticket.

1 Corinthians 4:7 - For who makes **you** different from anyone else? What **do you** have that **you** did not receive? And if **you** did receive it, **why do you boast** as though **you** did not?

In other words, God did not choose you because you were wise, or moral, or influential. He was not scanning resumes and choosing the most talented or worthy. He chose you because of His grace, an undeserved gift given by an unobligated giver. In fact, throughout the Bible God consistently chooses the most unlikely figures – youngest children, infertile women, slaves, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes. So how can we look down on anyone else?

Be careful that you do not allow anything in your life to become something you boast in and put your pride in over and against another person. Your boasting reveals that you have not truly taken to heart the gospel of salvation by grace, justification by faith, that your identity and self-worth are found not in your performance but in God's love and mercy for you as displayed in the death of Jesus on your behalf.