

Luke 18:9-14
Freedom from Self-Righteousness
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This summer, we are looking together at passages from the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus offers to us a very vivid and beautiful picture of what the Kingdom of God looks like.

Now, every day of Jesus' ministry, he came across people like you and me, real people with real struggles who were yearning, struggling, searching for real life. And whether they realized it or not, what they were all looking for was the Kingdom of God.

So far we've seen Jesus free people from anxious busy-bodiedness (Martha) and give them peace in being near him (Mary). Jesus frees people from the need to accumulate more always and frees them to give what they have because God's storehouses are always overflowing. Jesus frees people from the infirmities of body and the excuses of our minds and releases them to live into the healing he offers. These are just a few of the ways that Jesus is inviting you to experience and live into his Kingdom.

This morning, Jesus will address one of the most destructive mindsets that keeps us from experiencing his Kingdom: self-righteousness. What Jesus means to do is free us from this temptation to justify ourselves. Not only do self-righteous attitudes alienate us from God, but it literally cuts us off from community with one another. There is nothing more dangerous to a person than an attitude of self-righteousness, and Jesus will teach us about this in a story he tells in Luke chapter 18.

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 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!' 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."

The setting of this story is given in one single phrase in verse ten. Luke tells us that there were two men going up to the temple to pray, one of them was a Pharisee and one a tax collector. Now, you may already be beginning to make assumptions about these two men. One is a Pharisee, a man who is serious about following God. He is a man who is very comfortable in a religious setting. From Sunday School we're taught to mistrust the Pharisees, but all that title implied was that this was someone who was serious about their faith in God.

The other man is a tax collector. What you would have heard if you heard Jesus tell this story is that the tax collector is an immoral man who is a deviant and is on the outside of the religious circle of this day. Tax collectors were employees of Caesar contracted by Rome to collect taxes, and they

made their money by charging a little extra to line their pockets. But in the story that Jesus tells, they are both going up to the temple to do the same thing: pray.

When the Bible says that a person is going to the temple to pray, it does not mean that they are going into a quiet place to be present and talk to God. Commentator Ken Bailey reminds us that in this day, there were only two services that were offered daily, one at dawn, the other at 3pm. These men were going to the temple to take part in the daily sin offering and the atonement/forgiveness of their sins. But in reality, these two men were there for very different reasons.

Before I go any further, I just want to describe this service in a bit more detail. Each day at dawn or at 3pm in the temple precincts in front of the great altar, the Priest would light the lamps and come out from the Holy Place and would offer a lamb as a sacrifice, sprinkling its blood on the altar to symbolize the payment for the sins of the people. While this is happening, all of the people in attendance would be looking on and praying to God—recognizing that this lamb’s blood was spilled to cover and wash away their sins. The Priest would then return to the Holy Place and the people would continue to offer their prayers silently or out loud to God alongside all the other gatherers.

Jesus’ parable depicts two men, standing before the altar among the crowd, offering prayers to God. But the substance and posture of their prayers could not have been more different.

I want to ask you for a moment to do something with me. I want you to bring to mind one of your failings—maybe it was the last time you lost your temper with someone you loved, or maybe you returned to some old habit, maybe you didn’t do the thing you know you should have done, or did the thing you know you shouldn’t do. I want you to imagine it in your mind, and I want you to picture yourself talking to God. As you picture yourself talking to God, I wonder, in your mind’s eye, what does God look like? This matters deeply, because how we picture God in our time like this will have a profound impact, not only on how we view God, but on how we view others. Our view will either lead us closer to him and closer to others, or farther from him and farther from others.

Jesus tells us this parable to illustrate the difference in these prayers. Listen to how he describes the Pharisee: **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. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’**

This man stands before God and he calls to mind all the good things he has done: fasting and tithing (things we’re encouraged to do as well). Fasting is the decision to deny yourself the nourishment of food in order draw closer to God in prayer and trust. In this day, fasting was required only on the day of Atonement once a year; even for Pharisees, it was only required of them 12 times per year. This guy fasts twice a week, 104 times a year. Tithing is also something required by the Law of Moses, giving a tenth of their grain, their oil, their produce; and this guy didn’t just tithe that, he gave a tenth of everything he had.

There is nothing wrong with the things that this guy has done, but the problem in this story is evident, and I’ll bet you felt it when I read it, didn’t you? Doesn’t this guy’s attitude get under your skin? He’s real showy and pious, isn’t he? Doesn’t that kind of annoy you? Aren’t you glad you’re not like him? The truth is, we *are* him.

What he does with his good record is uses it as a way to distinguish himself among all the “other people” there that day. In this man’s mind, he has put everyone into two categories, one that he is in, and another in which all of those “other people” are in. While he’s saying this to himself, he’s looking at this tax collector. But he doesn’t stop there. Next he gets even more specific when he lumps together all human naughtiness into three categories: extortioners (those who steal from others); unjust (those who take advantage and use others for their own advantage); and adulterers (those who practice immorality and sexual perversion). Looking at the tax collector he says, “God, I thank you”...not for all the good things that you’ve done, but I thank you God for all the good things I’ve done.

What this man has done is turned God into nothing more than a Cosmic College Admissions Officer. He’s showing God his resume and saying to him, my credentials are better than these other peoples’, so I deserve admission.

Now the catch in this story is that you and I sit here and think to ourselves this guy is not very good, he’s kind of a religious snob, I’m glad I’m not...uh oh.

In verse 9, Jesus tells us why he’s telling this parable. It was for some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. What Jesus is teaching here is that self-righteousness and contempt for others go together like two sides to the same ugly coin.

Listen, because this is very important. When a person believes deep in their heart that God accepts them because of the good things they’ve done, they will **ALWAYS** regard others with contempt. When a man or a woman thinks of God as a cosmic admissions officer, he or she will always need others to be doing worse than they are. What this man is looking for is a reference group. This is a sociological term that allows us to measure ourselves against others.

It reminds me of that scene in Caddyshack when Ted Knight’s character Judge Smales is asking Chevy Chase’s character Ty Webb what did you shoot today? Oh, I don’t keep score. Well how do you measure yourself against other golfers? By height.

When we need to evaluate how we’re doing—whether it’s how much money we have, or how successful we are, or how well our family is doing—we get into this practice of comparing ourselves with other people. How many of you find yourself comparing yourself to others? How many of you think you compare yourselves to others less than others do?

What Jesus is teaching in this story is that the man or woman who trusts in themselves before God will always need a reference group around you of someone who is doing worse or failing more than you are. Rather than try to help them do better, you need them to fail so that you will be seen as better, and that is the definition of hating someone.

This man when he prays to God saying, “thank God I’m not like these others,” directly he’s thanking God for what he’s done, but indirectly he’s thanking God that these others have failed before God. And that is to regard another person with contempt.

But then we turn our attention to this other man. In verse 13, we read, **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!’**

His posture says it all: he's standing off on his own because he doesn't believe he's worthy to be in this group, he won't even look up to others let alone heaven because he's certain he's not worthy, and he beats his breast with the most basic and raw prayer any one of us can offer: "Have mercy, God."

When this tax collector with raw honesty cries out to God "have mercy," he's not just asking for a handout or a little extra help. Standing before this slain lamb, he is crying out for God to wash his sins away and cleanse him from his many and real sins.

And here's where Jesus gets to the heart of these two men's situations. One man is looking to himself in reference to others in order to compare himself with others to make himself look good and righteous and just. Another man doesn't even have the heart to look up because he knows that even his good deeds, as the Apostle Paul later will write, are like filthy rags, and he's looking for mercy, for atonement. He sees the lamb that was slain there before him clearly in the way it is meant to be seen, as God's gracious and merciful forgiveness.

For one of these men, God is the one who lets him into his exclusive club of righteous folks; the other sees God as the one who comes down into the messes we've made of our lives and who forgives us and lifts us up. When we look God and see His kingdom not as the people who are righteous all by themselves, but as the broken, blind, needy, sinful, poor who have been loved and forgiven into his loving embrace, we are set free to do the same for others.

The person who sees their place with God as being based on their own righteous deeds will always see others with contempt, and thereby will be incapable of loving others. But the one who understands the depth of their own sin and the magnitude of God's mercy will be able to treat them with love.

Maybe you've been watching the Olympics; we have watched a little bit. So our minds are focused on the one who wins the race, the one who finishes fastest and leaves the others in their dust. The Pharisee saw his relationship with God, the race of faith he was running in this way. He needed to finish first. But in doing so, he made it his mission to leave everyone behind. But this is not what the Christian life is about; it's not a race to be won, but a journey to share together. And when we see it this way, we don't have to worry about getting there first, or getting through unscathed. If the point is the journey, then it doesn't matter if we get join in other people's messes, because the point of the race is to experience God's love.

Finally, in verse 14, Luke tells us something very important: **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.**"

This tax collector, who was abhorred by everyone else, left that place that day justified—made right before God. And the other left just as he came: confident and boastful that he didn't need God's help, that he was just fine by himself. How is it that the tax collector was justified? Because when that priest brought the pure and spotless lamb, he was exchanging its purity for his impurity.

Jesus is that pure and spotless lamb, and only those who have eyes to see the truth about ourselves are ready to understand that the only hope any of us has in this world was crucified on Calvary and

whose pure and unblemished blood washes over us and makes us white as snow. Jesus is that lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

If you are here today and you feel as though you've made a mess of your life—if your family is broken, if your marriage is in shambles, if your thought life is trapped in an addiction to lust and greed, if you find yourself looking on at what others have with seething envy, coveting their home, their possessions, their family, their career—if this is true of you and you have the heart to admit it, and know there is nothing within you that is righteous, not even a little, then this word is for you.

Jesus is the lamb who was slain, and whose blood covers a multitude of sins. Jesus is the one whose righteousness covers you and goes with you when you leave this place. Jesus is the one who pronounces you forgiven and redeemed, who offers you new life, not because of the good deeds you've done, not because the virtues outweigh the vices, but because the blood of Jesus washes you clean.

What can wash away my sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.