

The Path to True Righteousness

Scripture Text: Luke 18:9-14

Introduction

So far in our look at the parables of Jesus, we have read stories about seed and dirt, wheat and weeds, and workers in a vineyard. Today's parable is not about any of those things, but about two kinds of people and two different ways of approaching God. This parable poses a question to us: What makes a person right with God? What do you trust for righteousness? Is it yourself? Is it the good things you do? Is it what others say about you? That is the issue before us in today's parable. Luke began the parable by telling us why Jesus spoke it.

Luke 18:9 *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*

Like the first parable in chapter eighteen on persistent prayer, Luke explained the purpose of this parable before he told it. Jesus spoke this parable to those who 1) *trusted in themselves that they were righteous* and 2) *looked down on others*. Maybe you know people like this. Maybe you have done this yourself. You think you are right with God because of all the good things you have done in your life: you come to church, you give your tithes, you pray everyday, and you read the Bible. These are good things and we ought to do them, but, do any of these things “make” you right with God? Are these things what put you in a good standing with Him? How about looking down at others? Do you look at other people and thank God that you are not like them? Maybe you think that because you do not do the same things they do, it makes you better in God's eyes. Maybe you say, “Well, at least I haven't done that? At least I am not like that person.” If you have done these things, then pay attention to this parable.

The Pharisee, the Tax Collector and Justification

This parable is about two persons in ancient Jewish society: a Pharisee and a tax collector. While we know about the passages concerning the Pharisees, how Jesus spoke against them, Pharisees were generally well regarded in Jewish society. They were examples of righteousness in the community, respected by all for their morality. They were the ones who kept God's law to the smallest detail. They would be the priests, the theologians, and the preachers of today. They were people of the Book. The tax collectors, on the other hand, were hated in Jesus' time, which may not be all that different today. No one wants to get a visit from the IRS. In the Bible, the tax collectors are often grouped with “sinners” not so much because they were traitors who collected taxes for the Roman government but because they were dishonest and collected more than they should. When asked what they should do, John the Baptist told the tax collectors, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” (Luke 3:12–13)

To compare these two groups, the Pharisees and the tax collectors, it might be like comparing the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court to a convicted felon. The Pharisee was the type of person you might invite home for dinner, the tax collector, you probably would not. However, like in other parables, Jesus surprised us. This story turns our expectations on their head. Like the first parable in chapter eighteen, it may seem that this parable is really about prayer. The Pharisee and the tax collector do pray, but the main purpose is not about their prayers. It is about how to have a right standing with God.

Luke 18:14 *I tell you, this man went down to his house **justified**, rather than the other.*

Jesus did not say that this man's prayer was answered, but that he went home "justified." Thus, the parable is about *justification - being declared righteous by God*. How to be justified to God is an extremely important concept and we need to get it right. Martin Luther wrote that justification "is the chief article from which all our other doctrines have flowed." John Calvin called it "the very hinge and pillar of Christianity." So what made the Pharisee, an example of good behavior in Jewish culture, not right with God, but the tax collector, a symbol of dishonesty and oppression, right with God? Let's look at what they did.

The Pharisee's Prayer of Self-righteousness

After Luke explained what this parable was about, we read about the Pharisee.

Luke 18:11-12 *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."*

On the surface, it may seem that the Pharisee had the right attitude. He thanked God and mentioned that he had fasted and gave tithes of all that he received. What was wrong with this? There are at least two things I would like to point out about the Pharisee's prayer that show he was not right with God:

- He Trusted in His Own Righteousness
- He Looked to Others to Validate Himself

1. The Pharisee Trusted in His Own Righteousness

The Pharisee's prayer was *self-righteous*. He was not really praying to God as much as he was telling God about himself, as if God needed to know that. He might have been really praying to himself, not to God. The Pharisee's prayer could have been acceptable if he were thanking God for protecting him from situations that would lead him to become a thief, an unjust man or an adulterer, but he did not do that. He saw his not having succumbed to those sins as his own doing. There was no thanks for what God had done but rather a list of what he had done. He mentioned "I" five times in this prayer - I am not like this person,

I did this and I did that. Rather than thanking God for what God had done for him, the Pharisee bragged to God about who he was and what he had done.

In fact, this Pharisee believed he had done more than God required. He had not only kept the law and did not need to ask for God's forgiveness, he had also fasted twice a week and tithed everything he received. He went beyond the requirement of God's law and tithed of all that he made. He might have well said to God, "Look at me! Look at what I have done." This is dangerous and wrong!

Proverbs 30:12 *There are those who are clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth.*

The Pharisee's self-righteousness was really *self-delusion*. He had self-esteem but not much God-esteem. It does not matter what we think of ourselves, but what God says about us. Scripture tells us that even on our best day, our good deeds are nothing more than dirty garments. We must have a proper view of our sinfulness, our standing with God, if we are to ever approach the throne of grace.

2. The Pharisee Looked to Others to Validate Himself

The second indicator that the Pharisee was not right with God was that he thanked God that *he was not like others*. He compared his righteousness with that of others, even the tax collector nearby. What is wrong with that? What is wrong with looking at others and saying, "Well, at least am not like that person?" The problem is that you are looking at the wrong person. It is like one piece of dirty garment comparing itself to another piece of dirty garment, when in fact they are both soiled. It is the pot calling the kettle black. We are not to look down at others thinking we are better because we do not do the exact same sins as they do. You and I are just as sinful as the next person.

The only person to whom we ought to compare our righteousness is Jesus Christ. Now, I know someone will say, "Didn't Paul tell others to look at him?" Yes, he did. But who was Paul modeling? Jesus Christ! If you look at other people to form a judgement about how good you are or how right you are before God, you are missing the mark. The standard you need to compare yourself is God's Word and the Person you ought to compare yourself is Jesus Christ. Beware lest you read this parable and produce a sigh of relief, saying to yourself, "Thank, God, I am not like that Pharisee." The moment you do that, you become the Pharisee.

The Tax Collector's Prayer of Humility

Jesus' audience at that time would have seen the Pharisee as someone to aspire and the tax collector as someone they should not be like. Jesus gave a surprise ending, though. He said the tax collector left the temple that day "justified," being declared right before God. What did he do differently from the Pharisee that made him right before God? We see it in his short but very profound prayer:

Luke 18:13 *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!"*

In what might be the shortest prayer in the Bible, we see that the tax collector did three things that made him right with God.

- He Humbled Himself before God
- He Acknowledged His Sin
- He Asked for Forgiveness

1. The Tax Collector Humbled Himself before God

To be right with God we must first humble ourselves before Him. We must never arrogantly presume that we have arrived, that we are better than anyone else, or that we deserve God's goodness. The tax collector stood at a distance indicating that he sensed a personal unworthiness to stand close to the sanctuary. He would not even look up to heaven. He felt unworthy to be in the presence of God. He was right! God is a holy God and cannot be in the presence of sinful humanity. I do not grasp this fully, but I believe it. We are separated by a great chasm of sin that rises with a stench so offending to God that He cannot even be in our presence. If we are to approach the throne of grace of our holy God, we must put aside any sign of pride or accomplishment and humble ourselves.

2. The Tax Collector Acknowledged His Sin

The second thing the tax collector did was he acknowledged his sin. When Job came into the presence of God, though he was an upright man, he said, "I am unworthy. How can I reply to you?" When the prophet Isaiah saw God seated high and exalted, he said, "Woe to me. I am ruined. For I am a man of unclean lips." After Peter recognized the miracle Jesus performed in catching fish, he said, "Go away from me Lord. I am a sinful man." Though he was the greatest missionary of the early church and wrote most of the New Testament, Paul called himself the greatest of all sinners. Each of these godly men confessed their sin and knew they were unworthy. So did the tax collector. He was so aware of his sin that he referred to himself not merely as a sinner, but literally as "the sinner."

This is extremely important. There are preachers out there who do not preach the judgement of God or man's sinfulness. To them, people are basically good and just need a little help from God. You need to watch out for that preaching because it is a false gospel that does not tell the whole truth of God's Word. God did not send Jesus Christ to give you guidance to live a better life, and certainly not to make you prosperous. God sent Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the only Name by which we can be saved, to remove the penalty of sin and to give you a new life in Him. We must be honest with ourselves and with God and realize like Jonathan Edwards once said, that we are "sinners in the hands of an angry God" and in need of a Savior. The tax collector did this.

3. The Tax Collector Asked for Forgiveness

The third thing the tax collector did in his prayer was to ask for forgiveness. He humbled himself to God, he realized he was unworthy and a sinner, and he then asked for God to have mercy on him. That is the kind of person that can come into the presence of God and leave restored and right with God. God is angry and He has every right to be, but He is also loving and merciful and wants to extend that mercy to you. In order to receive it, we must humbly come to him and ask for it. The tax collector went home that day with a new standing with God. He had a new relationship with God because he had humbled himself, acknowledged his sin, and asked for forgiveness. He went to the source of true salvation (not himself!) and received the grace he needed. So can you!

Conclusion

Do not be like the Pharisee who trusted in his own works to be righteous. He looked to his good works to prove his righteousness. He trusted in his own self and not in God. To be declared righteous before God, we must put aside our pride and trust solely in the saving work of Jesus Christ. Anything less than that is worthless. The last verse of the parable summed up the attitude we must have:

Luke 18:14 *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.*

The Pharisee exalted himself. The tax collector, on the other hand, humbled himself and was declared right with God. No-one enters the kingdom of God on the basis of his own righteousness. Apart from Jesus Christ no human being is justified. It is by grace and grace alone that we can ever come into God's presence. All of us stand guilty before Him, Pharisee and tax-collector alike. The difference, however, between those two men was not that one was righteous and the other a sinner. They were both sinners. The difference was the tax-collector acknowledged it, and he repented of his sin.

Will you go home today justified before God? Will you be declared right with Him? Do not look to yourself or your own accomplishments as validation for a right standing with God. Do not think that because you grew up in church, or said a simple prayer a long time ago, or have done much good that you are right with God. Look to Jesus Christ as the sole means for righteousness, for a right standing with God. We must first humble ourselves before Him. We must acknowledge our sin and agree with God that we need Him. Then we must ask God for mercy and forgiveness...and He is just and faithful to forgive us our sins.

This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!