

REDISCOVER JESUS, PART 67: “THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR”

LUKE 18:9-14

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Personal Introduction

Hi everyone. I'm Jeff - one of the pastors at HMCC of Jakarta. And it's my privilege to be preaching the Word of God for us today.

Sermon Series Introduction

We're currently in Part 67 of our sermon series called "Rediscover Jesus," where we're going through the Gospel of Luke together.

So let's get right into today's sermon about Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector...

Scripture Introduction

If you have your Bibles with you, please turn to Luke 18:9-14.

For context, in the previous passage, Jesus just told a parable to his disciples about a persistent widow and an unjust judge. And we learned that, unlike the unjust judge, God is perfectly just and He will give justice to His chosen people. And so, as His people, as we wait for God's justice, we're to not despair but instead persist in prayer.

The passage ends with a question: "when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Will he find that people are faithfully persisting in prayer, and trusting in Him? Or will he find that people are not trusting in Him and trusting in other things - trusting in themselves - instead?

In today's passage, Jesus continues with another parable, and it's specifically for those who don't put their trust in God alone, but in themselves instead...

Scripture Reading

Let's read Luke 18:9-14.

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."

This is God's Word.

The One Thing

***God does not justify those who trust in themselves
but those who trust in Him alone.***

Overview

- I. The Prayer of the Pharisee (vv.9-12)
- II. The Prayer of the Tax Collector (vv. 13-14)

I. The Prayer of the Pharisee (vv.9-12)

First, let me start with a story: in college, when I was taking Organic Chemistry (which was quite a difficult class), I received a not-so-good grade on one of my midterm exams. For reference, the standard for a passing grade was a C, which was 75%. Now I'm not proud of saying this, but I got a 64%. Now, I'd like to think of myself as a pretty good student. So you can imagine my surprise and disappointment when I received a D- on such an important exam.

Then the next day, the professor informed us that the class average was 54%. The majority of us technically failed the exam. And so because it was such a difficult exam, the professor decided that it would be graded on a curve. Which means that the grade that you'll actually receive will be in comparison of how others did. So because everyone else didn't do so well on their exam, my 64% was adjusted from a D to a B! Praise God! That was such a huge relief for me!

And this wouldn't be the only time that we'd have our exams graded on a curve. So whenever I'd get my exams back, the first thing I'd do was to compare it with my friends' to see how good or bad I did.

And I think this is something that we've all become very good at. How we determine whether we're good or bad - whether we're in the right or in the wrong - is by comparing ourselves with others. For college students, you're in the "right" if you're above a certain grade, but in "wrong" if you're below a certain grade. So then maybe you'll start feeling like you're better than those with lower grades than you, but then worse than those who got higher grades than you.

And over time, we might've developed other factors that we judge ourselves and others by. Now not only grades, but beauty, career, success, wealth, health, and so forth. And how I compare myself to others may be different than how you compare yourselves to others. We each have our own standard of righteousness - of what it means to be in the "right" and in the "wrong."

And no matter what our specific standard of righteousness is - we never really like to think of ourselves as being in "wrong" standing - we'd like to justify ourselves; to think of ourselves as being in the right.

So at the beginning of today's passage, even before Jesus begins to tell his parable, we're told who Jesus' target audience was. Take a look at verse 9 - Jesus is telling this parable specifically to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous."

- In other words, those who were self-righteous; those who relied on their own standard of righteousness, and those who believed in their own strength and capabilities to be in "right" standing.

Now, if we think of Jesus' audience, who usually has the tendency to be this way? It's not specifically mentioned... but most likely, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees here - because the Pharisees thought of themselves as righteous. They thought that they're better than others because they're able to follow the Jewish rules and traditions better than everyone else.

- And it's because they thought that they were better than others, that they treated others with contempt (with a lack of respect).
 - And that's how "self-righteousness" and "treating others with contempt" are connected.
 - As you exalt yourself, you're bound to leave others beneath you. And so treating others with contempt is a side-effect of self-righteousness.

Now, as we're hearing this, we may be thinking, "Oh this parable is for the self-righteous? This is not for me then. I'm not like a Pharisee" I don't need to listen to this message...

- But hold on a second... because hypothetically, if Jesus were to ask his audience, "alright, how many of you think you're self-righteous?" None of them would probably jump up and raise their hands, saying "me, Jesus! I'm self-righteous."

- And it's the same with us - most of us would probably say that we're not self-righteous... when deep inside... we all have this sinful tendency to be self-righteous.
- Think of a time when someone else gives you feedback, did you have defensive thoughts?
- How about a time when you've made a mistake? Did you try to justify yourself?
 - Perhaps you're always late to meetings, but then it's always the traffic's fault. I have to be honest, I've said that many times to justify myself...
- We all have this tendency to be self-righteous.
 - But that's the deviousness of our sin and pride. It hides deep in our hearts. We may think that we're not being self-righteous or prideful (at least not most of the time)... when in actuality, we actually are...

Just like the Pharisees - they didn't see themselves as being self-righteous when they actually were. They have blind spots.

- And we all have blind spots - things about us that we cannot see in ourselves, and that we need others' help to help us see.
- So through this parable, Jesus is trying to help us see our blind spots - to see our sinful tendencies to put our trust in ourselves instead of in God (and God alone).

So let's dive into Jesus' parable with an open mind.

In verses 10-12, Jesus begins his parable. He says this:

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.'

Now, immediately, as we're hearing this... some of us may already have alarm bells ringing in our heads.

- We hear the word "Pharisee" and we're immediately thinking that they're "the bad guys."
- And we hear the word "tax collector" and we're thinking that they must be "the good guys."

But this is actually not how Jesus' audience would've seen things during those times.

- They would've seen the Pharisees as "the good guys" - They're the religious leaders of the Jews; seen as the defenders of the Jewish way of life, and role models on how to live a life of righteousness.
- And on the other hand, they'd see the tax collectors as "the bad guys" - These are Jews who decided to work for the Roman government to collect taxes from their own Jewish people. And they'd often collect more than what was necessary so that they could pocket the extra money.
- So Jesus' audience would've seen tax collectors as greedy traitors; unrighteous men. While they'd see the Pharisees as the opposite: holy and righteous men.

Though the public may look up to Pharisees, what is Jesus revealing about the Pharisees' heart through this parable? Let's take closer look at the Pharisee's prayer:

- Look at verse 11 - The Pharisee starts off by thanking God (which is a good start), but then notice how everything that follows is about himself - about how he's better than others (better than extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, and even better than this tax collector).
- And why does he think he's better than them? Because of all the good things that he's done - because he fasts twice a week, and because he tithes (or he gives a tenth) of all that he gets to God.

This is not a model for a prayer of thanksgiving to God. This is more like an example of how to praise and exalt yourself.

- Because that's what this Pharisee is actually doing. This Pharisee is praising himself because he sees himself as justified - believing that he's in the right - and that he's righteous because of all these good things that he's already done by his own good works.

Inside this Pharisee's heart is pride; he's being self-righteous...

- He goes up into the temple already assuming that he's a good person. He doesn't even ask God for anything; it seems as though he has everything figured out already and he already thinks that he's in the right standing before a holy God. So it doesn't seem like he even needs God.

So from what we observe about the Pharisee's prayer, would we say that his trust was actually in God or in himself? I'd say it's in himself...

Notice three specific things about this Pharisee (that we can learn from his prayer):

- First, though he believes in God, the Pharisee relied on his own standard of righteousness - he believes that what makes him a good person is the fact that he's able to follow Jewish rules and traditions strictly - how he's able to fast twice a week and tithe all that he gets.
 - But interestingly, Scripture does not require Jews to fast twice a week. This was a rule or tradition that was added by the religious leaders at a later time. So this standard was not from God (it's not God's standard), but was actually man-made - created by the Pharisees themselves (it's their own standard).
- And second, the Pharisee believes that it's through his own ability that he can achieve all these standards.
 - He doesn't need God, he can be righteous by himself!
- And then third, the Pharisee judges himself (and judges others) based on his own standard (again, not God's standard). He compares himself to others - and because others have disobeyed the Jewish rules and traditions in which he was able to follow more strictly, then that's further proof for him that he's justified, and these other people are not.

So here we see what it means to put your trust in yourself:

- Trusting in yourself means to trust in your own standard of righteousness, and to trust that you can be in the "right" standing by your own work (by your own ability).

Now what does this all mean for us? Let's take a look at ourselves. We're believers, we acknowledge that we're sinners, we acknowledge that we need God's grace. But does this mean we're immune from being self-righteous? No!

Because even after becoming a believer, we still have the sinful tendency to be self-righteous. And this should be humbling for us, and it's humbling for me personally!

When I was a Pastoral Intern about a year ago, I was told by the other pastors that in a few months, I'll be given the opportunity to preach in front of the whole congregation. I was excited, but I quickly became very anxious. I started thinking of what I'm gonna say, how I'm going to sound, how other people would think of me...

During this time, did I put my trust in God? Yes, I did. But did I also put my trust in myself? Yes, I did. Though I say that I trust in God, this was one of the times when I didn't put my trust in God alone, but in God plus my performance. My performance became my standard of righteousness because I wanted to be seen by others as good and capable.

- Yes, I want others to praise God. But I kinda want a bit of the praise too. I was being prideful and self-righteous.

So this is such a sober reminder that - years after becoming a believer (and after becoming a pastor) - I'm still tempted to be prideful and self-righteous.

- So this warning (to not put our trust in ourselves) is not only for unbelievers but it's also for all of us believers - Because even when we've already put our trust in God, our sinful tendency is still to put some amount of trust in ourselves - in our own strength and abilities.
- So then what we tend to do is trust in God plus ourselves (just like this Pharisee, he believed in God and genuinely thanked God. But he didn't trust in God alone).

Now I have a question. What is it that makes you feel like you're worthy?

- Perhaps, like me, it's also in performance. Or perhaps it's in your physical appearance, level of success, a certain level of productivity, or career, financial stability, health, or maybe something else.

But there's actually a huge flip-side to our pride. Because on the other end of our pride and self-righteousness is self-condemnation and despair.

- If we exalt ourselves by comparing ourselves to others, then what happens when we see others meeting the expectations that we're not? What happens when we don't meet our own expectations?
- During those times, those of us - who put our trust in ourselves - are at risk of being in self-condemnation and despair.

Perhaps that's where some of us are at today. What is it that's making you feel like you're unworthy? Perhaps you're comparing yourself to others, and there's something that's making you feel like you're of lesser value (as if you're in the wrong, and not in the right). Now what does that reveal about your standard of righteousness - about how you define whether you're in the right or in the wrong?

What does it reveal about where you put your trust in?

On a related note, parents, please note that how you define what's right and wrong can rub off on your children, especially when you start comparing them to other children (whether those who are doing better or worse than them). We may inadvertently be causing our children to think that their worth is based on their performance or based on some other factors.

- And what this also means is that [kids/teens] some of the factors that we judge ourselves by might have been influenced by our family members and friends - by their different standards of moral righteousness, or performance righteousness, or productivity righteousness, or some other standards of righteousness that they may have...
- But again, this does not mean we should try to justify ourselves by blaming our family and friends (we'd miss Jesus' point if we do that).

Instead, let's acknowledge that we all have our blind spots - sinful tendencies to be prideful and self-righteous, and to have our own standards of righteousness.

So let's do that first. And next, the big question is this: What's God's standard of righteousness? And how can we be deemed right in the sight of God? Those are the big questions that we'll answer next, as we'll take a look at the prayer of the tax collector...

II. The Prayer of the Tax Collector (vv. 13-14)

Verse 13 says this:

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!'

So as the tax collector was praying, he bowed his head - he wouldn't even lift up his eyes to Heaven. And he beat his chest in sorrow. This man is not like the Pharisee who's praising himself. He's in sorrow.

His prayer is short, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." But his short prayer reveals a lot about his heart.

There's a couple of things that we can learn about the tax collector from his prayer:

- First, this tax collector is aware that he's a sinner - that he's sinned against a holy God.
 - And he's aware that he's unworthy before the creator of the universe - he's unworthy of even lifting up his eyes to Heaven.
 - He's aware that he's fallen short of God's glorious standard.
- And second, he humbled himself before God because he understands that there's nothing that he can do to earn his own righteousness.

- That's why he doesn't place his trust in himself - He didn't say, "God, be merciful to me because I've done all of these good things for you."
- He simply says, "God, be merciful to me" because he believes that only God can forgive him of his sins; there's nothing that he himself can do about it except to ask for mercy from a merciful God.

Here we see someone who's repentant - someone who does not trust in himself and does not trust in his own righteousness, but who's humbled himself before God - who realizes the seriousness of his sins, and who has the proper understanding of who he's sinned against, and a proper understanding of the only one who can forgive him.

In verse 14, Jesus says this:

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."

This man - the tax collector - is the one who is justified; who is deemed as right in the sight of God.

And notice how verse 14 says "rather than the other" - so it's not as if both the tax collector and Pharisee were justified. The tax collector was justified, the Pharisee was not!

Why is that? Jesus explains... Because those who exalts himself (who trusts in their own righteousness) will be humbled (will not be justified), but the one who humbles himself before God (who trusts in God and His mercy) will be exalted (will be justified).

And what Jesus is talking about here is not that we'll be humbled or exalted temporarily, but for eternity. Those who exalt themselves will be ultimately humiliated in Hell for eternity, and those who humble themselves before God will be ultimately exalted in Heaven for eternity.

Who we put our trust in (whether in God or in ourselves) has serious implications and consequences that surpasses our time here on Earth, and surpasses time as we know it.

Now the next question in our minds may be this: Then how can we have the same heart posture as this tax collector? How can we humble ourselves before God?

First, we need to realize that we're sinners - and that's by having the right understanding of God's standard of righteousness. So we've been talking about how we tend to have our own standards of righteousness, but what's God's standard?

This is what Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew:

Matthew 5:48 (ESV)

⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

God's standard of righteousness is perfection. And that's because God is completely holy - 100% good.

99.9% is not good enough.

But hypothetically, if God was to ask us why we deserve to go to Heaven, perhaps there's some of us here who would say something like this Pharisee: "Well, God, I've done my best to do good. I think I'm a relatively good person. I'm not a murderer, I'm not a robber. Compared to them, I think I'm a pretty good person. So I think I should go to Heaven"

But here's the thing... God will not judge us on a curve compared to everyone else, but He will compare us to His own perfect standard. Nothing less than 100% is good enough. 99.99% is not good enough.

- But what we're tempted to do is that we compare ourselves with others - we tend to think that 64% is good enough because we think there are others who are at 54% or lower. "So as long as I'm better than those guys, I'm okay."

But again, God will judge us by His perfect standard of righteousness, and God's Word says that all of us have fallen short of His glorious standard - none of us are even close to 100%.

- Just think about it... even when we try to do good things, there's always a small bit of motivation that's selfish or self-serving. Even our best intentions are usually not 100% good.
- Maybe we want to serve others selflessly, but actually... deep inside, we want to receive some recognition for ourselves selfishly...

We're sinners before a perfectly righteous and holy God. And what's the consequence of sinning against God?

God's Word says this in the book of Romans: For the wages of sin is death...

The consequence of our sin is death - eternal separation from God Himself - eternal punishment in Hell.

- And it's perfectly just and right for God to punish sinners for their sins.
 - (In fact, if He doesn't do that - if He doesn't punish sin, then He wouldn't be perfectly just).
 - So for us, that's the bad news... because of our sin, what we deserve is eternal punishment in Hell.
 - But God's story (and our story) doesn't end there...

Verse 14 says that this tax collector is justified - made right in the sight of God. How is this possible? Because God is not only perfectly just, He is also perfectly merciful and gracious.

- And where does His justice, grace, and mercy come together? At the cross...

Because God loves us so much, He Himself chose to take on the punishment that we deserve. Jesus Christ came from Heaven to Earth to save us from our sins and to defeat death.

- Jesus lived the perfect life that we could not - 100% righteousness, 0% sin.
- When he died on the cross, he died on our behalf as our substitute.
 - At the cross, an exchange took place... we gave Jesus 100% of our sin. And he gave us 100% of his righteousness.

For those of us who humble ourselves - who do not trust in our own righteousness - but in Jesus' righteousness... those who repent of our sins and put our faith in Christ... will not be punished in Hell, but will have eternal life in Heaven. That's the Good News.

- Because when God sees us, He'll no longer see our sin, but He sees Jesus' righteousness that's been poured out on us.

Jesus' atoning work on the cross is the completion of God's redemptive plan for man after their fall into sin.

Jesus is the only way.

- So those who trust in themselves (those who trust in any other way to be justified other than Jesus alone) will not be justified, and will go to Hell. Only those who put their faith in Christ alone, not Christ plus themselves, but only those who put their faith in Christ alone will be saved.

Christianity is not a do-more religion - it's not about doing more and more, and earning your own salvation by doing good works. It's not about our work, but it's about relying on the completed work of Jesus Christ.

That's why... only Christians can say that we're righteous (and that we're going to Heaven) without boasting in ourselves. Because we do not boast in our own work, but we boast in the person and work of Jesus Christ!

If this is your first time hearing the Gospel or if you have not yet put your faith in Christ, I invite you to talk to the person who invited you here or please talk to me after the service. I'd love to talk to you more and answer any questions that you have.

Now if we look back at the tax collector's prayer in verse 13, here we see the proper response of someone who realizes that he's a sinner before a holy God:

- Look at his posture, he would not lift up his eyes to Heaven - he realizes that he's completely unworthy to be in God's presence...
 - He beats his chest in sorrow.
 - He acknowledges that he's a sinner in desperate need of God's mercy.
 - And he cries out to God for mercy...
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- And then he receives it...
 - God gave him mercy. And because of his faith, he's counted as right in the sight of God.

And he goes home justified... And that's the end of Jesus' parable.

But for us... our story doesn't just end there; it continues. Because now, for those of us who have put our faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior, how are we now to continue to live our lives as those who have been justified by God?

First, it means that we live our lives with our security in Christ - not in our own works, and not in how things around us are going).

So if our righteousness is secure in Christ then our value and worth is also secure. We can live in full confidence no matter the situation.

- When things are going well, we praise God that all that we have is from Him.
- And even when things aren't going well, we know that our value and worth is secure, and that our salvation is still secure (so we shouldn't despair).

And in moments when we're tempted to compare ourselves to others who are doing better than us, then we can still praise God - we're all made uniquely with different strengths and weaknesses.

- That's ok if I'm not good at everything and if my performance fluctuates at times. My worth is secure in Christ and my righteousness and salvation is secure.
- And when we're tempted to compare ourselves to others who are doing worse than us, then we can also be reminded that we're no better than them.
 - Even if they're unbelievers, they're still made in the image of God.
 - And if they're believers then we know that they're worth the precious blood of Jesus Christ.
 - And if they're feeling down, perhaps we can be the one to humble ourselves before them so that we can help pick them back up, pointing them to Jesus.

That's the beauty of putting our trust in God (and God alone), the foundation of our lives is stable and secure - even in moments when our lives are shaky, God is stable and He's not going anywhere.

- And by His grace, God has also given us brothers and sisters - our church community - to help one another when things are shaky. When it seems as though our faith is failing, we have brothers and sisters who we can reach out to, who can then help point us back to Jesus, reminding us of the only one who is worthy of our trust.

So, again, how are we now to continue to live our lives as those who have been justified by God? First, it means that we live our lives with our security in Christ.

Second, it means that there should be continued proof of transformation in our lives; it doesn't mean that we continue to live in sin (and just do whatever we want because we're justified).

Because if we continue to live in sin without remorse, then that's not a sign of someone who's truly repented of their sins, and who's truly put their faith in God and is justified. That sounds more like the Pharisee who only says that they trust in God, but actually trust in themselves.

Look at the life of Matthew - one of Jesus' 12 apostles who used to be a tax collector. His life was transformed after Jesus. He left everything behind to follow him the rest of his days.

- And look at the life of Paul who used to be a Pharisee - he left his old life behind (he used to persecute Christians) and he then planted many churches and disciplined many brothers and sisters in Christ for the rest of his life.

They're justified for their trust in God alone, and they continued to live out their faith.

Trusting in God alone has a transformative effect. Our lives are forever changed. And we can now live with great confidence that our salvation is secured - that our righteousness is secured. Notice how verse 14 says that "this man went down to his house justified" - past tense - justified; it's already done. There's nothing more that he needs to do.

Jesus' work on the cross is sufficient - there's nothing more we need to do.

- The only thing we need to do is to trust in him and his accomplished work.

I started with a story; I'll close with another story... When I was a new believer, I prayed for God to speak to me - for Him to provide me with a verse that I can hold on to; one that can encourage me to continue in my walk with Him.

- Then, as I'm looking up verses on my phone, a couple of verses stood out to me - and this was one of the first times that I felt like God spoke to me personally.

The verses were from Proverbs 3:5-6:

Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)

⁵Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.

⁶In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.

These verses helped me to not trust in my own understanding or feelings. I hope that as we continue to persevere in our walk with Christ, we'll continue to not rely on our own understanding (our own standards of righteousness), but may we trust in God alone with all of our hearts (in His glorious standard of righteousness and in Jesus Christ, the only way that we're justified and counted as righteous).

To help us with our next steps, here are a couple of life applications (in the form of reflection questions).

Life Application

1. What is it that's making you feel worthy or unworthy at this time? What does that reveal about your standard of righteousness and where you put your trust in?
 - Perhaps it's in your physical appearance, or performance, or a certain level of success, a certain level of productivity, or career, financial stability, health, or maybe something else.
2. How does the Gospel of Jesus Christ affect your standard of righteousness, and where you should put your trust in?
3. Who can you share your reflection with?
 - Share your confession with God, and share it with one another.

The One Thing

***God does not justify those who trust in themselves
but those who trust in Him alone.***

Let's pray.