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Bridgeway Church
March 24, 2019

**Whose Righteousness Are You Trusting?
Luke 18:9-14**

What is the single most important question a man or woman can ask? Your response may be: “Well, that depends on whom you ask.” And you’re right.

If you were to ask a high-school senior, he/she might respond by saying: “The single most important question I can ask is whether or not I should go to college, and if I do, which one?” Yes, that is undoubtedly an important question, but the consequences of it are only temporal.

Another person might be in a position to ask: “Am I supposed to get married? And if I do, whom should I marry?” Again, yes, that is a critically important question, but like the one asked by the high-school senior, the consequences of it are only temporal.

There are any number of other questions that people ask, such as: “Where can I find a satisfying and well-paying job that will make the most of my skills?” Or, “For whom shall I vote in the next presidential election?” Or, “Will I ever be diagnosed with cancer?” Or, “Should I invest in the stock market?” And we could go on and on with a variety of pressing questions that people ask on a regular basis. But the one thing that they all share in common is that the consequences or results or outcome of the answer given to each is merely temporal. That is to say, the answer has repercussions for this life only. How one answers such questions has little if any effect on one’s eternal destiny.

That is why the single most important question that you and I could ever ask is: “How can I get right with God? How can I be reconciled and put at peace with my Creator?”

The answer to that question, unlike all the others, has *eternal consequences*. If you answer the other questions incorrectly or unwisely, at worst you may end up getting a bad education or suffer through a turbulent marriage or have to endure four years under an incompetent or immoral president. But if you answer this question incorrectly, you will spend eternity in torment, separated from God forever.

Two men, as different as two people can be, each asked himself this question. These two men were both sinners. They both realized that they needed to get right with God. But they responded to the question with two totally different and mutually exclusive answers, resulting in two totally different, mutually exclusive eternal destinies.

And we know this parable is primarily concerned with how a person can be justified or put right with God because of the way it concludes. Jesus says in v. 14 – “I tell you, this man [i.e., the tax collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other.”

Two Men

Who were these two men who “went up into the temple to pray” (Luke 18:10)? One was a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. It is fitting that Jesus says they went “up” to the Temple and again in v. 14 that the tax collector went “down” to his house. The reason is that the Temple in Jerusalem was constructed on a hill.

When did they go? Private devotions or prayers could occur at any time of the day, but public prayer was held twice: at 9:00 a.m. and at 3:00 p.m., in conjunction with the offering of a sacrificial animal. They were most likely praying during the course of public worship just as the sacrifice was being offered up by the priest.

Neither man thought it proper to stand near the other, but for different reasons. The Pharisee, because he thought himself too good to mingle too closely with a tax collector, stands off by himself. The tax collector, because he thinks of himself as too bad, stood “far off” (v. 13).

(1) Who were the Pharisees? The word itself literally means “separated ones.” They were a small but highly influential group of religiously zealous Jews who were determined to maintain the purity of the OT law and traditions. They were meticulous in their observance of every jot and tittle of the Law of Moses. As religious leaders in Israel, they went to great extremes to observe ceremonial purity. They were morally rigid and tended to look down their noses at those who were less diligent in abiding by the regulations, both written and oral, of the OT law.

That being said, it’s important to remember that **not all Pharisees were self-righteous or hypocritical or given over to legalism.** Some of them were both humble and godly and were simply seeking after truth and the best way to honor God. But in general, they are portrayed in the NT in a rather bad light. They tended to separate themselves from other Jews and, as Jesus said here in v. 9, they “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”

(2) Who were the tax-collectors? Tax-collectors, also referred to as publicans in the NT, should not immediately be linked to the IRS in the 21st century. Although they often performed the same functions, **tax-collectors in the NT are almost always portrayed in a negative light.** I’m extremely grateful for the godly, Christian employees of the IRS, some of whom are members here at Bridgeway.

During the time of the NT, the collection of taxes took two forms. First, there was a direct tax on land, most often collected by official representatives of Rome. That is not what Jesus has in mind here in Luke 18. In this story he is talking primarily about **Jews who worked on behalf of the Roman government.** Typically what would happen is this. A person would, in a sense, purchase a franchise on the collection of taxes in a particular area. This individual would pay Rome up front the amount of tax it required. As long as the specified amount was collected and sent to Rome, anything above and beyond that amount which a person might collect would remain with him. Thus, you can imagine the extent of corruption, bribery, and theft that was present in such a system.

Tax collectors were among the most despised people in the first century. They were looked upon as **traitors** insofar as they were Jews who served Rome to the detriment of their own people. The tax collector’s first loyalty was thus to the enemies of his own countrymen. But they were despised primarily because most of them were **extortionists.** There were no discernible controls on how much tax they might demand above and beyond what Rome required. In this way many of them became quite wealthy at the expense of their Jewish brethren.

It would be difficult to think of anyone in the ancient Jewish world more despised than a tax collector. They are often paired up with prostitutes whenever anyone wished to identify the most sinful people in society. It was forbidden among the Jews to have any social interaction with a tax collector. You wouldn’t be caught dead inviting one to dinner or playing a round of golf with him! He was classified as religiously or ceremonially unclean, being placed in the same category as pigs and lepers. No tax collector was permitted to give testimony in a court of law.

Today we speak of “drug dealers” and “murderers” as the lowest in our society. If one wished to refer to the most despised of all people in the first century, you would speak of tax collectors and “sinners” (a euphemism for prostitutes). For example, we read this in Matthew’s gospel:

“And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?’” (Matt. 9:10-11; cf. 11:19).

When Jesus wanted to teach his disciples about their responsibility to love others, he said this:

“For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt. 5:46).

In other words, Jesus selects for his story the two extremes in Jewish society: **the most religious (Pharisees) and the most irreligious (tax collectors); the most loyal and the most traitorous; the most admired and the most despised.**

To whom does Jesus speak?

One of the remarkable things about this parable is that Jesus didn't tell it to his disciples, although they would have undoubtedly been present. In other words, he doesn't talk to them about others. He spoke directly to the others, those about whom the parable was concerned. Jesus looks them straight in the eye and describes for them their own spiritual condition. In other words, Jesus did not tell this parable *about* or *concerning* those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Instead, he told it directly *to* them. He looked them squarely in the eye and said: "You are self-righteous. You are not righteous with the righteousness that God graciously supplies. You think yourselves to be righteous and in good relationship with God because of your own religious achievements." Thus, he was not talking about them but to them.

I should also point out that although Jesus uses a Pharisee as the illustration of someone who was self-righteous, he by no means limits it to them. His parable is directed to anyone, whether a Pharisee or not, who might trust in himself/herself and who looks with contempt on others.

In any case, these are people who were undoubtedly quite religious. They were known for their piety and apparent righteousness. But *they were people who had come to trust in their personal righteousness as the grounds for their acceptance with God*. And along with taking pride in their personal religiosity, they looked down their noses in contempt at all others who had not achieved the standard that they had set for themselves.

As an aside, let me say that interpersonal relationships at Bridgeway would be greatly improved if we stopped talking about other people and instead spoke directly to them. We are all inclined to go to someone we regard as a trusted friend and say: "Hey, I've got some concerns about Sally/Steve. Let me tell you what I've learned about them." No! If you've got concerns about Sally/Steve, go directly to them and gently but clearly address your fears.

In any case, the kind of people Jesus had in mind are later described by the apostle Paul in Romans 10:2-3. There Paul says: "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Rom. 10:2-3). Evidently what they failed to grasp is that justification entailed a trust in a righteousness that God alone provides in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Prayer of the Pharisee (vv. 11-12)

The first thing to notice is how the Pharisee refers to himself in the first person five times! "I" thank God that "I" am not like other men; "I" fast twice a week, "I" give tithes out of all that "I" get.

There is some doubt if the Pharisee even prayed at all. Some translations render v. 11 like this – "The Pharisee, standing, prayed to himself." If that is correct, he doesn't address God at all but instead talks to himself about himself! Following the brief reference to God, he never refers to him again. This would be pure self-congratulation. As one commentator put it: "He glances at God, but contemplates himself" (Manson). But it is more likely that the ESV has the correct rendering: "The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus . . ."

In any case, the fact that he separated himself from everyone else is an indication that he considered them unworthy to be in his presence. He is too holy for them. They are too unholy for him. It is another example of his self-righteousness and contempt for others. He is fastidious in his fear that he might incur ritual defilement should he accidentally brush up against a tax collector and thereby render himself ceremonially unclean.

There are three things to observe about this Pharisee and his prayer.

First, he considered his righteousness to be *moral*. "I don't extort people, like these tax collectors regularly do. I'm just in all my dealings. I don't steal or bribe or embezzle. And I'm faithful to my wife. I've never committed adultery. Other people, like that tax collector over there on the other side of the room, are dishonest and sexually promiscuous. Not me! Thank God!"

Second, he considered himself to be exceedingly *religious*. Unlike others, he meticulously obeys the Law of Moses. "I fast twice a week" (v. 12a). The Jewish people were only required to fast as a nation on the Day of Atonement.

They might also do so in a time of national crisis: drought, famine, plague, war, etc. But this man fasts twice a week, every week! He probably did so on Monday and Thursday because those were days when the market was open and people from all over the countryside would be in town. He wanted to be seen fasting as a demonstration of his piety (see Luke 20:45-47). Jesus issued this stern warning in his Sermon on the Mount:

“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. . . . And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. . . . And you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others” (Matthew 6:1, 5, 16).

Not only that, but he gives “tithes” of all that he gets. He not only tithed on his grain, wine, and oil, as was required of all Jews, but also on any income acquired through commercial transactions. In other words, he goes above and beyond the call of duty in terms of his religious conduct.

Simply put, he is saying: “I’m a really great guy!”

His prayer is less petition and more preaching! Nowhere does he confess his sins. Nowhere does he ask God for forgiveness. If he intends for his prayer to sound like preaching, it is likely that his audience is not only the tax collector but everyone else within earshot. His so-called “prayer” is little more than an insult, a rebuke to others for not having lived up to the standards that he has kept. The Pharisee compares himself with other people and comes out smelling like a rose. The tax collector compares himself with God and the stench of his soul is unbearable.

Third, what’s fascinating about this is that he appears to give thanks to God for his moral and religious accomplishments. “**God, I thank you** that I am not like other men” (v. 11). In other words, he appears to be saying that this righteousness was God’s gracious gift to him. He gives God the credit for what he has accomplished and also for what he has avoided.

Now, there is considerable debate about what this means. Most argue that his giving of thanks to God is purely *a perfunctory ritual devoid of sincerity*. There was no heartfelt gratitude to God. The Pharisee, on this reading, is only giving thanks that he’s not like others. He’s thankful that he can stand separate and at a distance from them.

Others insist that there is no reason why we shouldn’t take him at his word. He truly acknowledges that his moral and religious obedience are due to what God has done in his life. The problem isn’t that he failed to give credit where credit is due. He properly gives God credit. “God, I’m thankful to you for these things I’ve done and these things I’ve avoided doing.”

The problem is that he “trusts” in his righteousness. Even if he gives credit to God for producing it in him, even if he thanks God for enabling him to live a life of obedience to the Law, the problem is that his trust isn’t in God and the righteousness he has provided for us in Jesus. No, his trust or his confidence is in the righteousness that dwells within his own soul.

For those who take this view, that his gratitude was sincere and that he believed God had produced this righteousness in his life, the fatal flaw was that he put his trust and confidence in the righteousness that was *in* him rather than in the righteousness of Jesus Christ that was imputed *to* him.

The distinction I’m making here is the same one Paul made in Philippians 3. Remember that the apostle Paul was himself a Pharisee. His personal experience is a perfect illustration of both sorts of people that Jesus describes in Luke 18.

“For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my

Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:3-11).

This “righteousness from God that depends on faith” is *the righteousness of Jesus himself*: his perfect and sinless life, his total obedience to the Law, his voluntary sacrifice on the cross for sins that he didn’t commit. This is the “righteousness” that saves, not “a righteousness of my own that comes from” my obedience to the law.

So again, on this view, the view that his expression of gratitude to God is sincere and that he acknowledged that his personal righteousness was a gift of God’s grace, his problem was that he “trusted” in it. He looked within, inside his own soul to find the righteousness that would make him acceptable to God. He wasn’t a legalist, trying to earn his salvation. He thanks God for the righteousness that he believes is necessary to be justified and forgiven.

The point of the parable, then, would be that the only righteousness that brings justification or acceptance with God and forgiveness of sins, is *not* the righteousness that is *in* us but the righteousness that God provides *for* us. It is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that is imputed or reckoned to us by faith. *That* is the righteousness that justifies.

In sum, *the Pharisee was looking to the wrong righteousness in the wrong person*. He looked to his righteousness. He looked to himself. He should have looked to Jesus and his righteousness and declared: “My only hope for justification and acceptance with God is that I’m trusting in the righteousness of *another*, namely, Jesus!” John Piper put it this way:

“The issue is: Are you looking totally away from yourself? When you see yourself standing before the Holy Judge, and you know that to escape condemnation you must be found righteous in this all-knowing, infinitely-just court, what are you going to look to and trust in? I am pleading with you on behalf of Jesus this morning that for your justification you not look at or trust in what God has worked in you. But that you look at and trust in Christ alone and all that God is for you in him.”

The Prayer of the Tax Collector (v. 13)

He is said to be “*standing far off*,” undoubtedly far off from the Pharisee, feeling altogether inadequate when compared with this seemingly righteous man. He undoubtedly knows what the Pharisee thinks of him. No one enjoys lingering in the presence of someone who thinks you’re a jerk!

He is described as unwilling even to “lift up his eyes to heaven” (v. 13b). He is filled with shame and self-contempt. Listen to how Ezra responded upon contemplating his sins and those of Israel:

“And at the evening sacrifice I rose from my fasting, with my garment and my cloak torn, and fell upon my knees and spread out my hands to the Lord my God, saying: ‘O my God, I am ashamed and blush to life my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens’ (Ezra 9:5-6).

When people come to grips with their sin, they feel lowly, as if an outcast, misplaced, unworthy, and they drop their faces to avoid having to make eye contact with others.

This tax collector “beat his breast” (v. 13b). This is not a standard practice in the OT, but a symbol or gesture of what he believed he deserved from God. He struck himself as an expression of his belief that God should strike him in judgment. It is a gesture of extreme anguish.

He cries out to God: “Be merciful to me, a sinner!” (v. 13c). Literally, “be merciful to me, **THE** sinner.” He singles out himself from all the rest of mankind, just as the Pharisee did, but for a different reason. The Pharisee singled out himself for being righteous. The tax collector singles out himself for being unrighteous.

He does not say, “God, I thank you that at least I’m better than most other tax collectors. I may not measure up to that Pharisee over there, but there are a lot of other tax collectors who’ve stolen and embezzled more than I ever did.” No. He only sees himself as THE sinner among others.

Just as the Pharisee had identified himself as the most eminent of all religious people, the tax collector identifies himself as the chief of all sinners. I am the one in whom all sin has converged in an unprecedented way. ***Whereas the Pharisee thinks of how bad everyone else is, the tax collector thinks of how bad he is in comparison with everyone else.*** It’s as if he says: “When compared with me, no other sinners even exist!” The Pharisee considered everyone a sinner when compared with himself. The tax collector considered everyone righteous when compared with himself. The Pharisee felt no need and thus uttered no petition. The tax collector felt only his need and thus uttered only petition.

The word translated “***be merciful***” in v. 13 literally means, “***be propitiated***” to me. That is, be appeased, let your wrath against me be quenched so that I might be free of it. He knows he is deserving of divine judgment and he prays that God’s wrath would fall on another, a suitable substitute, the sacrificial lamb, and ultimately on the Lord Jesus himself.

It is entirely likely that he prayed this prayer at the precise moment the sacrificial lamb is being slaughtered in the Temple. “O dear God! Let that be for me! Apply its blood to my sins!”

The Contrasting Consequences (v. 14)

Only one of the two went home justified, that is, vindicated and declared righteous in the sight of God and thus forgiven of all sins. And ***it wasn’t the man who looked inwardly at his own righteousness. It was the man who looked outwardly, away from himself, and put his trust in the righteousness of another.***

We who are on this side of the cross now know how God provides a righteousness for sinners that is acceptable. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:21,

“For our sake he [God the Father] made him [Jesus Christ, God the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

How do we become righteous and acceptable in God’s sight? We do so by looking in humble faith away from self, away from the moral and religious deeds we perform or avoid, and we look in faith to Jesus. Again, Paul declares:

“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

It’s important that you see four crucial words in v. 14 – “***rather than the other.***” The self-righteous Pharisee who trusted in his moral and religious achievements, works that he even attributes to God, did not leave the Temple justified. It was the tax collector who cried out for mercy who went home justified.

In what can only be called dishonorable irony, the Pharisee, so proud of his reputation and merits, “is summarily dismissed as ‘the other’” (J. Edwards, 506). In a much happier irony, the tax collector who had been dismissed by the Pharisee, is in the end the focus of our Lord Jesus.

God, by his grace and through the work of the Holy Spirit, *will* make you righteous. He will empower you to live a godly and moral life. It’s a work in progress. It’s slow, but sure. But never look to whatever righteousness God has produced in you as the grounds for your acceptance with him. The only righteousness that avails with God is that of his Son, a righteousness that God has imputed or reckoned to those who put their trust and hope and faith in Jesus.