

How To Be Right With God

Luke 18:9-14

Pastor John Miller

Luke 18:9-14 says, “Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise 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, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In the oldest book of the Bible, Job, in chapter 9, verse 2, this question is asked: “How can a man be righteous before God?” I propose to you that is the most important question anyone could ever ask. How can I, a sinful human being, be right in the eyes of a holy, righteous God?

Look at verse 14. Jesus points out, “I tell you, this man...” referring to the “tax collector” “...went down to his house justified...” meaning “declared righteous” “...rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

So how can we be right with God? We’re going to learn that we’re right with God by coming humbly, in faith, broken, with a sense of our sinfulness, then we trust in Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross, rose from the dead, and we can be forgiven by God’s grace and mercy.

This parable is a beautiful story that has simplicity and profundity. It is packed with theological truth of how we can be right with or justified before a holy God. Jesus tells us in this parable that we, as sinners, can have hope to be forgiven. This parable is both searching and comforting. It’s searching for those who are proud and self-righteous, and it’s comforting to those who know they’re sinners and are unworthy. It’s a parable of contrasts. We’ll see it is a contrast of two men, two prayers and two results: one was proud, and the other was humble; one was praising his merits, and the other was pleading for mercy; one is condemned, and the other is declared righteous or justified.

Why did Jesus give this parable? Look at verse 9, which gives us the problem. What was the problem which precipitated the giving of the parable? “Also He...” that is, “Jesus” “...spoke this parable...” in the Greek, it is “parabole,” which means “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning” “...to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.” So their faith and their trust was in themselves and in their good works and religious deeds.

Also, they “despised others.” Despising others is the natural result of being self-righteous and thinking you’re saved by your own goodness. You look down on other people.

The Bible is very clear that there are only two, basic roads in life: one is the broad road leading

to destruction, and the other is a narrow road, which leads to life eternal (Matthew 7:13-14). And there are basically only two religions: one is a religion of saving yourself by good works or good deeds, and the other, in Christianity, is God saves us by His grace.

It's interesting that only Christianity teaches that a sinner can become right with God by grace and mercy through faith. It's not good deeds, not good works, not righteous acts, not by race or religion, not by rites or rituals. It is by faith in Jesus Christ. Only Christianity teaches that "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. It's not the labor of my hands that can fulfill the law's demands. Salvation is all of God.

Aren't you glad that when we get to heaven, people won't be strutting around with brownie buttons on, saying how good they were to get there?

"What'd you do to get here?"

"I sinned. He's the Savior and He forgave me."

I like John Newton's statement: "I'm a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior." And He saves us by His grace. This parable is teaching us a very important, doctrinal truth: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

We live in a world today that is full of people who have a self-righteous, save-yourself religion. I talk to people all the time and I ask them, "Are you a Christian?"

"Yes; I was baptized."

"I didn't ask if you were baptized; if asked if you are a Christian."

I asked one man if he was a Christian and he said, "No, thank God! I'm a Baptist." It's great to be a Baptist, but you need to be a born-again Baptist. It doesn't matter what denomination or affiliation you're a part of; you must be born again. You must have a faith in, and a relationship with Jesus Christ. You must have the life of God in your soul. A Christian is a person who is born again, a person who has a relationship with Christ.

So this Pharisee was religious, but he was lost. And Jesus gave this story to warn people, like this Pharisee, who trust in themselves and think they are righteous. They think their race, their religion, their righteous works or deeds, their rites or rituals will get them into heaven. And they despise others. This parable is for them.

The second section is in verses 10-14. So there are only two, main divisions. Verse 9 gave the problem which precipitated the parable. And verses 10-14 give the parable itself.

We will see three contrasts in this parable. The first is the contrast of two, different men, verse 10. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." So these two men both went to the temple to pray. One was a "Pharisee" and the other was a "tax collector" or publican.

First the Pharisee went to the temple to pray. What was a Pharisee? The word "Pharisee" means "separate one." During the inter-Testament period, the time between the Old and New Testaments, between Malachi and Matthew, the lay sect of the Jews, the Pharisees, started. They set themselves apart from everything and everyone else in order to live by and follow the law.

Josephus, a Jew writing under the Roman rule in the first century, said about the Pharisees: "They are a body of Jews known for surpassing others in the observance of piety and the exact interpretation of the law." So they set themselves apart unto God and devoted themselves totally and completely to keeping every jot and tittle of the law. They were the epitome of righteousness. They were the epitome of religion. They were completely devoted to keeping God's law and God's Commandments.

But at the time of Christ, they had degenerated to a mere, outward, religious system, and their hearts were far from God. God looks at the heart. God doesn't look at our outward appearance; He looks on the heart.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness" (Matthew 23:27). They were like a cup that you clean just on the outside; inside they were full of extortion, evil and wickedness.

So the word "Pharisee" actually became a synonym for hypocrisy. If you were to call someone a Pharisee today, you're basically saying that person is a hypocrite, a religious hypocrite. And the Pharisee in our story was one of these individuals.

The second man was a tax collector or publican. He collected taxes for the Roman government. That meant he was a turncoat, a Jew who worked against the Jewish people by hiring himself out to Rome to collect taxes. They would get a district they would collect taxes from, they were given a set amount of taxes they had to collect and anything collected over that amount they put in their own pocket. They were like the Mafia of Bible days; they were thieves, robbers, crooked, evil, low-lifers, couldn't even testify in court and weren't supposed to be in the temple—even though this man was in the temple.

So these two men were at different extremes of the spectrum; one a super, self-righteous individual, and the other one a secular, worldly, ungodly sinner disregarding others and basically a wicked, evil person.

Now Jesus got the attention of the listeners. How was He going to describe these two individuals as they went to the temple to pray?

The Bible says that “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). And it says, “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). So both these individuals were sinners. One knew he was a sinner; the other one thought he was a saint but was self-deceived.

Now let's move to their prayers, verses 11-13. The Pharisee's prayer is in verses 11-12. “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men...” then God just drops out of the prayer “...extortioners...” which means “robbers” “...unjust...” which means “unrighteous” or “wicked” “...adulterers...” which means “sexually immoral” “...or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”

This man was not praying to God; there are five personal pronouns of “I” in his prayer. He's praying within himself, to himself and for himself. The Pharisee has disguised his prayer and made it a self-congratulatory prayer. He was congratulating himself on how good and righteous he was. You can hear people clapping for him, and he's taking a bow.

Can you imagine going to church on Sunday, and the person sitting next to you starts to pray out loud and says, “God, I thank You I'm not like this wicked, vile sinner sitting next to me! I'm a saint; he's a sinner! What's he doin' here?!” Welcome to church; makes you feel great, right?!

So this proud, self-righteous Pharisee prays with no eye on God. Let me break it down for you. His posture is self-promoting pride; he stood and prayed within and to himself. Where it says he prayed “with himself,” it conveys the idea that he actually prayed “about himself.”

That's not the purpose of prayer! Prayer is to come humbly before God—“Our Father who art in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). We are sinners on earth, so let us come humbly before Him, and let our words be few.

So this Pharisees is prideful. And Jesus warned of this kind of praying in Matthew 6:5-6: “When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men....But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

That doesn't mean you can't pray publically. But it means that when you do pray publically, you shut out others and actually talk to God. You don't use your prayer as a time to brag about how wonderful and amazing you are. Jesus warned us about that. And this Pharisee had no eye on God.

This proud Pharisee also had a bad eye on others, verse 11. He said, “I thank You that I am not like other men.” And he even describes others: “extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.” He saw others' sins but did not see his own sins. It's pretty bad when someone can see others' sins but can't see their own. They are blind to their own sins; they can't see them. So the Pharisee had a good eye on himself.

He had no eye on God, he had a bad eye on others and he had a good eye on himself. In

verse 12 he said, "I fast twice a week." The law of God in the Old Testament demanded only one fast a year. Even the Pharisees at this time only fasted once a week, but he fasted twice a week; he doubled it. Oh, he was awesome! Then he said, "I give tithes of all that I possess."

But Jesus said that when you give to God, "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3). That means we are not to give for the applause of people. Don't give to be seen by men. Don't give to God for recognition from others; give to God secretly. God looks at the motive of the heart as much as He looks at the amount that we give.

This Pharisee was all messed up; he feigned to be right with God, but he was not a man who really knew the Lord. So he boasted of his own goodness and righteousness.

Paul the apostle could have been very similar in this regard. But in Philippians 3:5-6, Paul facetiously began to brag about his pedigree in the religious flesh. Paul said that he was, "circumcised the eighth day..." or he followed the right rituals "...of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews..." or "of the right race" "...concerning the law, a Pharisee..." or he had "the right religion" "...concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless" or "he kept the law perfectly."

But Paul had realized that he was a sinner; he realized from the law, which said, "You shall not covet," that he was convicted. So Paul said in Philippians 3, "But what things were gain to me..." all his religious pedigree "...these I have counted loss for Christ....[I] count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith" (Philippians 3:7-9).

Anyone who is trusting in their good works to get to heaven is misguided, misinformed and lost. It will not get you to heaven; you have to trust in Jesus Christ, who alone died for your sins, rose from the dead and Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). And you can't get there by rites or rituals, by religion or by good deeds; you get there by faith in Jesus Christ.

Now we'll look at the contrast in the tax collector's prayer, verse 13. "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'" This publican stood up, but he stood far off or outside the area of the temple. He didn't feel worthy to come to approach God. He sensed his unworthiness. He couldn't lift up his eyes in prayer. When the Jews prayed, they would open their eyes and look up to heaven. But he closed his eyes and looked down. He was broken and contrite. Beating his breast indicated that his heart was not right with God.

Then he said in his prayer, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" I like that. In the Greek, it's even stronger, which says, "God, be propitiated to me the sinner." This is where we get a lot of theological truth in this earthly story with a heavenly meaning that Jesus gave.

He stood "afar off." In the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the

poor in spirit....Blessed are the meek....Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:3, 5-6). How do we come to God? "Poor in spirit," humble, hungering for God. So the tax collector's posture was "standing afar off," his penance was smiting his breast and he prayed, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Notice the contrast between the two prayers. The Pharisee talked to himself; the publican prayed to God. The Pharisee proudly proclaimed his merits; the publican prayed for mercy.

I want you to understand what the publican meant when he said, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" The word "merciful" in the verb form is the same word used for the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. The Ark was a box overlaid with gold, and inside the box were the Ten Commandments, the golden pot with manna and Aaron's rod that budded. It was kept in the Holy of Holies. And there were two cherub angels carved in gold on the top. God's presence dwelt in the shekinah glory there. And once a year the high priest would go through the veil on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat to atone for or propitiate God on behalf of the people of Israel.

This is where the tax collector draws from in his prayer. So the word "mercy" is tied into the concept of the mercy seat. And the word in the Greek—and some translations render it this way—is "propitiation." So the tax collector is saying, "God, propitiate me!"

What does "propitiate" mean? It means that Jesus died on the Cross to satisfy the demands of God's holy, righteous law that was broken or violated. So when Jesus died on the Cross, He died not only for sinners but also for God the Father. How is that? He died to pay the penalty for our sins so that God the Father could be satisfied or propitiated in His anger and wrath toward sinners. "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

So how does God forgive us without justice and without us paying the penalty for our sins? He sent Jesus to die in our place. It's called the "substitutionary death" of Christ on the Cross; He paid for our sins on the Cross. Then God the Father could be satisfied, and He could justify those who believe in Jesus Christ.

That introduces us to another doctrine called "imputation." That means that God imputed our sins to Christ, who then paid for them on the Cross. Then He imputed Christ's righteousness to us, so that we now stand before God forgiven and free and as righteous as Jesus Christ. "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). And Paul described this whole propitiation and justification doctrine in the book of Romans. It's important to understand this.

So this sinner, this publican, basically said, "God, propitiate me! God, be merciful to me!" It was a short, simple, heart-felt prayer of faith. So God would answer that prayer, and he would go home forgiven. It was no righteous deeds, no good works; just repentance and faith in what God had provided through the Cross of Jesus Christ. So "Be merciful to me" means "Propitiate

me” or “Forgive me of my sins, for I am a sinner; I’m guilty and I need forgiveness!”

The publican doesn’t say, “I tithe, I’ve been fasting.” Actually he’d been ripping people off. But his prayer was short, simple and sincere in that he was a sinner.

I like the story in the Old Testament where the children of Israel had sinned and God had sent snakes. (That’s not why I like the story.) I hate snakes! They are so creepy! Snakes are bad! But I have a cute, little granddaughter who likes snakes. What’s wrong with her?! God have mercy!

So these Israelites were being bitten by snakes because of their sin. They cried out to Moses to have him talk to God to save them and forgive them. God then told Moses to make a brass serpent and put it on a pole. Brass is the metal of judgment. Today it is a medical symbol. And God told Moses to lift up this pole in the middle of the Israelite camp, and whoever looked at the serpent would be healed.

Can you imagine that? Somebody gets bitten and you expect them to die, but if they just looked at that pole they were healed. And people freak out when you say you just have to believe in Jesus Christ and you’ll be forgiven and go to heaven. “That’s all?! Just believe in Christ? Just trust in Christ?” He can forgive you and save you from the bite of the serpent, from the bite of sin.

The sinner comes to the throne of mercy as a sinner to be forgiven. Rock of Ages, stanza three says:

“Nothin in my hand I bring,

Simply to the cross I cling.”

This tax collector is simply pleading for mercy. “God, save me by Your grace.” Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves...” referring to salvation “...it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” What a great verse in the Bible! You should memorize that verse.

When David sinned with Bathsheba, murdered her husband, Uriah, and his sin had been exposed by Nathan the prophet, he wrote Psalm 51, that great, penitential psalm. He said, “Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions,” verse 1. It was a prayer of repentance and turning to God.

So there were two men, two prayers and now we’ll see two results, verse 14. Whenever Jesus uses the phrase “I tell you” to preface His comments, that means what follows is very weighty, really important. It’s emphatic. He said, “I tell you, this man...” which man? The tax collector, the man who called himself “a sinner” “...went down to his house justified...” a very important word “...rather than the other...” and here’s the principle “...for everyone who exalts himself...”

like the Pharisee "...will be humbled, and he who humbles himself..." like the publican "...will be exalted." This is foundational truth from the Bible.

We see the two results. The Pharisee went home unjustified, unforgiven and not saved. Why? Because he boasted in his goodness and self-righteousness. He brought things in his hands to God and tried to earn, merit or deserve favor—instead of just crying out to God for mercy.

"God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

The listening crowd would have been freaked out hearing this. "You gotta be kidding me!" To begin with, just having a tax collector praying in the temple would have freaked them out. "Now Jesus, you're telling us the Pharisee, the religious leader, went home unjustified and unforgiven, but that the publican went home justified and forgiven?!" Yes; Jesus said that the man went home justified who prayed the prayer of repentance. He had forgiveness and was saved. The listening crowd would be shocked at this.

I think the same thing will happen when we get to heaven. When we get to heaven, people will see you and say, "What are you doing here?!" You'll be able to say, "I was saved by God's grace!" John Newton said:

"Amazing grace! How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see."

How marvelous that is!

What does it mean to be "justified," verse 14? The word "justified" literally means "to be declared righteous." And the word "declared" is really an important part of the definition. I like the fuller definition given by the theologian, Charles Ryrie. He said, "Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner to be righteous, based on..." there's the word "propitiation" "...the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross."

To be a Christian, to be saved, you must be justified. And to be justified, you must be humbled and come to God as a sinner and confess your sins. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Justification is done, as we believe in Jesus, by faith. Abraham believed God, and God imputed it to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Habakkuk 2:4 says, "The just shall live by his faith." In Galatians 2:16 Paul says, "...knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be

justified.” There is no way you can be saved by doing good deeds. In Romans 3:27-28 Paul said, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” It is justification by faith. “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

Today you can be declared righteous by God. How? Through faith in Jesus Christ. You don’t have to perform. You don’t have to work up your soul in order to be saved. You don’t have to be good. You just have to have faith. You just have to trust. You just have to believe.

Again, the closing axiom is if you exalt yourself, you’ll be abased; if you humble yourself, you’ll be exalted.

You say, “Pastor, I don’t know if I’m right with God.” Or you think you’re good enough to get to heaven. Or you’re depending on your church attendance, your water baptism or your Christian heritage or even the fact that you believe God exists. The Bible says that “Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 1:19), but they’re not saved.

“My hope is built on nothing less

Than Jesus’ blood and righteousness;

I dare not trust the sweetest frame,

But wholly lean on Jesus’ name.

On Christ the solid Rock, I stand;

All other ground is sinking sand.”

So if you say, “I don’t know that when I die I’ll go to heaven, because I’ve never been born again or trusted in or received Jesus Christ as my Savior,” you might not have an assurance of salvation, you don’t have peace with God, you’re not right with God, or you’ve fallen away from God—you need to get right with God.

I’m going to invite you to pray. If you don’t know Jesus Christ, I want to give you an opportunity to receive Him as your Lord and Savior by inviting Him to come into your heart and forgive your sins, to make you a new creation, to declare you righteous. Today you can be justified, declared righteous by God.

If God has spoken to you through this message today, and you’re not sure you’re a child of God—maybe you don’t know that if you died today, you would go to heaven, you’ve never really trusted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior—I would like to lead you in a prayer right now inviting Christ to come into your heart and to be your Savior.

So as I pray this prayer, I want you to repeat it out loud, right where you are, after me. Make it

from your heart, inviting Christ to come in and be your Lord and Savior. Let's pray.

"Dear Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for my sin. I pray that You'll forgive me and come into my heart and make me Your child. Fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and help me to live for you all the days of my life. I believe in You. I receive You as my Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen."

If you prayed that prayer and you meant it, God heard that prayer and God will and does forgive your sins.

We'd like to help you get started growing in your walk and relationship with Jesus Christ. God bless you.

If you just prayed with Pastor John to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, we are so excited for you, and we'd like to send you a Bible and some resources to get you started in your relationship with the Lord. Simply click on the Contact link at the top of the page and tell us something like, "I prayed to accept Christ." We'll get your Bible and resources mailed out to you right away.

God bless you and welcome to the family of God.