

Humbly to God

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[0 : 0 0] So, Luke chapter 18 from verse 9. To some, to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly, I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. A certain ruler asked him, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone.

You know the commandments. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. Honor your father and mother. All these I have kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, you still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard this asked, who then can be saved? Jesus replied, what is impossible with man is possible with God? Peter said to him, we have left all we had to follow you. Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come eternal life. So, as I say, our question this morning is how we approach God. How do you approach God? By which I mean kind of on what basis, in what manner do you come to God? That's the question Luke's asking in this next section of his gospel, this section that we've read this morning. The theme of prayer kind of forms a bridge from the parable of the widow, the judge that we were looking at a fortnight ago. But in many ways, verses 9 to 14, this kind of starts a new section focusing on entry into the kingdom of God. And so from several different angles, 9 through 30 that we read this morning, it kind of considers from different angles approaching God's kingdom. And in many ways, each of those comes from what might be seen as an unlikely angle. So focusing on verses 9 to 14, the question is how will you approach God? If you died today, if you walked out that door and on the way back to your car you were hit by the bus speeding down the road, if you died today and stood before Almighty God and he asked you, why should I let you into heaven? What would your answer be to that question? Various surveys have been done over the years asking that question. And broadly speaking, the vast majority of people when they're asked that question, their answer is some variation on the theme of because I'm a good person. I go to church regularly. I try my best. No one can ask for more than that. I give money to charity, so on and so on and so on. R.C. Sproul, he recounts asking his own five-year-old son, asking him, why should God let him into heaven? And his answer was, because I'm dead. He should let me into heaven because I'm dead. We smile at the childlike naivete. And yet, yet how many people actually live with that as their functional reality? Salvation by death.

[5 : 10] I mean, think about it. However somebody's behaved, whatever somebody's attitude to God has been down through the years, what will be said by the majority of those offering condolences to the family in the days after someone's death? What will be said at somebody's funeral?

He's in a better place. She's with the angels now. He's not suffering anymore. You'll see her again one day. Now, I'm not saying that we ought to go and be blunt and brutal with those who are grieving.

But folks, let's not deceive ourselves either. God's word does not teach universal salvation. God's word does not teach salvation by death. God's word does not teach that everyone will go to heaven. Jesus is clear. Some are justified. Some are not. And therefore, it matters a great deal to examine this question, doesn't it? What is God's criteria? What basis does he admit people to heaven?

To help us think through these verses, there's another question that we could imagine God asking. As well as asking, why should I let you in? We could imagine him also asking, who else should I let in? And our answer to that second, who else should God admit to heaven, I think will help us to diagnose what we really think about the answer to the first question. So we're going to think about these under three headings this morning. The subtle danger of self-righteousness, the vital urgency of true humility, and the mercy of our God. So the question for you this morning, the question for each of us to ask ourselves, are you self-righteous? I suspect our instinctive response is no. Most of us, I imagine, we want in this parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee, we want to cast ourselves in the role of the tax collector, don't we? Most of you listening to me today, you instinctively reject the Pharisee, don't you? You know the Pharisee is the baddie of the story. But here's the thing, folks, that is not the instinctive attitude of Jesus' original audience. That's not their first thought when you talk about a Pharisee. We've been trained, most of us, by decades of church going. We've been trained to equate Pharisees with being arrogant and legalistic, those who are responsible for rejecting

Jesus and hounding him to his death. That's what we import into the idea of Pharisee. But as they listened to Jesus first telling this parable, without, by the way, the preamble of verse nine, those who were listening to Jesus, they would have heard verse 10, something more like we might hear, two men went to church to pray, one a priest and the other a prostitute. Now in that, you're expecting the priest to be the good guy, right? Except even that's flawed because we've heard too many stories of the reprehensible behavior of church ministers, and for that matter, we're as likely to think of somebody being forced into it against their will when we hear of prostitutes, as we are to think about somebody who's chosen a morally reprehensible lifestyle. But it's a little bit closer at least, because the Pharisees were, in the popular imagination, the good guys. The Pharisees are the people you look up to. The Pharisees are the ones who everybody wants to be like them. People wished that they had the Pharisees' advantages. So maybe this isn't quite as straightforward as we might first think. Consider what the Pharisee prays. He stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Now, he isn't really boasting in his own virtue, is he?

[9 : 20] He thanks God for these things. Isn't it right and proper to thank God for the good things that are in your life? Isn't it right to thank God for preserving you from sin? Presumably what he says is true.

Presumably he does refrain from robbery and adultery. Presumably he does fast twice a week and gives a tenth of his income. Aren't these good things to do? So you couldn't argue that this Pharisee lacks virtue, could you? You wouldn't say, oh, he's got a long way to go down the road yet.

Looks pretty good. No, the problem isn't that he's only just started walking down the road. The problem is it's the wrong road to be headed down. He's a long way down the wrong road.

The problem for this Pharisee is he thinks he's got it all sorted. The problem is even as he ascribes his virtues to God's gift, it's on the virtues that he relies. He says they come from God. That's well and good. But it's still the fact that he has these things that he's trusting in. So John Calvin says, we infer that men are not truly and properly humbled, though they are convinced they can do nothing unless they likewise distrust the merits of works and learn to place their salvation in the undeserved goodness of God so as to rest upon it all their confidence. So the question is, the question is, are you trusting God? Are you trusting Jesus and his merits alone?

Are you trusting Jesus' merits or are you trusting that there is enough in you, whatever its source, for you to be accepted? See, when I say that surveys asking why would God let you into heaven, that they mostly yield answers based on good works. That isn't only true in the public at large. [11:22] That's regular churchgoers as well. That's the response you get in most churches. And it's subtle, isn't it? It's subtle because you might believe that it's God that's changed you such that you now want to go to church, that you now want to follow in his ways, that it's God who's done it. And you attribute that change to God's grace, right? But still, if you then think that you're accepted on the basis that you desire these things, then you're trusting in the wrong thing. Do you see the subtlety of self-righteousness? Do you see the danger of it? It's subtle. So to help us root it out, to help us rightly diagnose it, here's two warning signs, here's two red flags from the Pharisee in this passage. And the first warning, the first red flag is quite clear. The first warning sign is his attitude to others, isn't it? We're probably quite well aware of this. Luke flags it up for us, verse 9.

He tells us this is the reason why Jesus told this parable. He told it to some who were confident of their own righteousness and who looked down on everyone else. And that's what this Pharisee does, isn't it? He looks down on others. He doesn't so much pray, thank you God for keeping me from adultery, as he prays, thank you that I am not like the adulterers. Even to the point specifically, I am not like that tax collector there, him. So, ask yourself that second question from back at the start. Who else should God let into heaven? Should God let in the thief and the adulterer? Should he let in the compromising traitor who goes and collects taxes for a corrupt, conquering regime? Who should God let in? Who should he keep out? Who do you look down on? See, when our attitude to other people is to say, he brought it on himself. When our response is to say, now she has to live with the consequences of her sin. When we think he's beyond hope. When we act like God would never accept her.

When these are our thoughts and our attitudes and our behaviors. Well, we have to recognize that behind those is self-righteousness. These are symptoms. This looking down on others is a symptom of self-righteousness.

And it gets even more subtle. Because how many of us, how many of us over the past few minutes have found ourselves thinking, thank you God that I am not self-righteous like that Pharisee. Thank you God that I am not like this person I know who's so self-righteous. He dares judge other people. That's me. I read Dale Ralph Davis's commentary. He puts his finger right on this button. [14:44] How many of us are self-righteous in our condemnation of the self-righteous? Oops. Well, there's our first red flag. Our first diagnostic question for self-righteousness. Not so much how do you view yourself, but how do you view other people? Who else should God let in? Here's the second red warning flag.

Look at what the Pharisee prays. Or rather, look at what he doesn't pray. God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Plenty of thanksgiving, at least for the recorded length of the prayer. What's missing? Confession.

There's no admission of sin and wrongdoing, is there? And what else? There aren't any requests of any kind, are there? He doesn't ask God for anything.

Now, it can be risky to read too much into an admission. And I'd rather you weren't listening to me with an attitude of, how did he not say anything about whatever it is that you've noticed in the passage?

[15:58] Or whatever the hot topic is that I forgot to pray about today? Or, you know, whatever it might be. Sometimes omissions are just omissions. But sometimes what's missing is really significant, isn't it?

Sometimes it betrays what's really there. And given what we are explicitly told about this Pharisee, I think it's fair game to then note this omission.

He doesn't confess sin and he doesn't ask for anything. Now, I imagine looking at you, most of you can probably see the red flag of a lack of confession well enough. Though as an aside, let me mention that sticking and forgive us our sins on the end of a prayer about something completely different doesn't really suggest you're taking your sin all that seriously.

But anyway, we're probably aware of the red flag of the lack of confession. Here's the trickier one, the lack of requests. I mean, how many of us would see that as a red flag to not ask God for anything?

We'd be more likely, wouldn't we, to think it's a red flag to ask for too much? I suspect. However, our prayers sometimes can be so focused on worship and thanksgiving and trusting God to meet our needs that we might think that virtuous.

[17 : 19] But my suspicion is that sometimes it's not that we're trusting God to meet our needs, it's that we don't think we need anything from God. My suspicion is that's the situation for the Pharisee.

So the Pharisee thinks he has it made. He thinks that one day we'll follow the next and so on and so on. He thinks there will always be food on his table. He thinks his needs and even his wants, he thinks they are met.

And so he doesn't ask. Well, that, I suggest, betrays an attitude of self-sufficiency, not dependence on God, and implies a dangerous self-reliance, which is surely not far from self-righteousness.

So, here's another potential red flag for you and for me. If you do not regularly ask God for what you need, then there's an error in your thinking.

I mean, it's there in the prayer Jesus taught us, isn't it? Give us this day our daily bread. Give us our daily needs. And for that matter, forgive us. Lead us not into temptation. Asking things from God.

[18 : 24] Time and again, the Bible tells us to ask God for that which we need. It isn't virtuous to neglect to do so. Actually, it's sinfully arrogant to fail to ask for what we need.

So, look for these red flags. Examine your prayers. Think back on the last week.

And examine your attitude to others. Examine your heart for that subtle sin of self-righteousness.

Now, if I find that self-righteousness, what then ought to replace it?

Well, wonderfully, in this parable, we have alongside the negative example of the prideful Pharisee, we have then the joyous example of the humble tax collector, don't we? See how he behaves.

He stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God's verdict, verse 14, this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

[19 : 36] So, let's ask another related question. I asked earlier, should God let in the thief and the adulterer into heaven? And we already asked whether we're in danger of looking down on others in our answer to that question.

But let's also make clear that when we implicitly say that he should let the thief and the adulterer into heaven, let's be clear on what basis he does so.

On what basis are such people to be saved? On what basis is this tax collector saved? On what basis are any of us admitted to the kingdom of God?

Only and always by the mercy and grace of God. What's the positive in the behavior of the tax collector? The positive is he knows his need.

He knows there's nothing in him to deserve God's goodness. He knows there's nothing that he should receive God's favor. He knows his own sinfulness. So, here's my suggestion.

[20 : 37] Count it joy and blessing to receive conviction of your sin. Count it grace from God for him to show you how much you need to be forgiven.

If you've seen in yourself this morning even, if you've seen in yourself the sins of pride and self-righteousness, if with honest reflection on the past week the Holy Spirit shows you where you have not thought and spoken and acted as you ought, if you are painfully aware of the good things that you have left undone, my friends, if you know your sin this morning, count that a blessing. Charles Spurgeon, he famously said, I've learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the rock of ages. Now, Spurgeon was talking more about the experience of suffering and the trouble than those things showing him his need of God.

But I think the same can be said of a knowledge of my sinfulness that shows me that I need the rock of ages. Shouldn't I thank him for showing me my need of him?

Well, friends, God in his kindness may teach us humility by increasing our consciousness of our sin. And this may also increase our sympathy for others, but first and foremost, it is to our own benefit that we know our sin.

[22 : 03] As the hymn puts it, all the fitness he requireth is to feel your need of him. And therefore, it is wonderful, isn't it, to see portrayed here the mercy of our God?

God's response, verse 14. This man, rather than the other, went home justified before God for those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Tax collector's sins were considerable, right? He collaborated with an invading army. He collects the taxes on behalf of the occupying forces and doubtless takes ample opportunity to line his

pockets, as he does say.

It's with good reason that tax collectors and sinners get kind of bracketed together in the Gospels. Have you ever thought about how odd that is, to pair an occupation with sinners?

It would sound pretty weird to say shop assistants and sinners, wouldn't it? We're too used to this phrasing. And yet, even this odd phrasing wouldn't have sounded odd to people in Jesus' day because they knew the tax collectors were the bad guys.

[23 : 12] Just like the Pharisees are the good guys, the tax collectors are the bad guys, the people who they hate, the people who God hates. That's who the tax collectors are. So this tax collector knows he's done wrong.

And everybody else knows it too. He knew he didn't deserve blessing from God. His consciousness of his own sin is such that he stands beating his chest, unwilling even to look up.

He doesn't even think he has the right to come and ask God. And yet he knows that the only thing he can do is ask God. He knows his sin.

For those of you who like kind of little linguistic tidbits, I'm assuming you're out there that it's not just me. For you, he says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Except actually, he says, have mercy on me, the sinner.

Like Paul calling himself the chief of sinners, he knows the depths of his sin. He knows how serious it is to the extent that he sees himself as the quintessential sinner, the definition of sin almost, the chief of sinners.

[24 : 24] This man received mercy. His sin was not too great. And so, my friends, your sin is not too great for you to receive God's mercy.

Just say, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Say that with meaning. Say it with an attitude of repentance, and he will do just that.

He will have mercy upon you. He will make atonement for your sins. The mercy of God. It was offensive to people in Jesus' day, wasn't it?

They didn't like the suggestion that the sins of others could be forgiven. And maybe that same mercy is offensive to us today too. Because maybe it means that those who we are all too keen to count as sinners.

Maybe it means that those with whom, frankly, we would rather not spend eternity, thank you very much, and those who we certainly wouldn't want to be associated with today.

[25 : 36] God's mercy may mean that these people will enter into his kingdom. These people may be recipients of God's mercy.

It's offensive. It might be personally painful. But this offensive mercy is also the best news in the world, isn't it?

Let's not lose sight of that. Because that same mercy is what you need. That mercy is what you and I need to be saved.

It is the only way by which any of us can be saved. Because we too say, God have mercy on me, the sinner.

My sins are ever before me. We need God's mercy. This is the only way. The only way that your sins and mine can be covered.

[26 : 35] This is the only route of entry into the kingdom of God. Salvation is all of God's mercy and God's grace. Hallelujah.

Good news. God's mercy. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for what you have won for us.

Thank you for your mercy shown to us upon that cross. Thank you for the forgiveness that we can know as individuals and as a community here together. Thank you that all you require from us is to know our need of you, to cast ourselves upon your mercy, to come looking for grace.

And so, Lord, when that mercy is offered to others and when that is painful for us, when it is offensive to us, bring us back to your mercy to us.

Bring us back to knowing our own need of you. Bring us back to rejoicing that we stand forgiven at the cross of Jesus.

[27 : 52] no condemnation. Eternal joy. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Amen.