

Kingdom mercy

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Preacher: Benji Cook/Edar Chan

[0 : 0 0] Jack and Joe were from the same village, but their lives couldn't be more different. Jack was brought up in the church. His parents were both elders and deacons, respectively, and growing up going to church was as natural as breathing.

He attended the youth group and started dating one of the girls there, and whilst other couples would sneak off behind the bike shed, Jack and his girlfriend would go to prayer meetings at the youth pastor's house for discussions about veganism and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Jack was on the music team and the coffee rota, and he was regularly asked to pray from the front of the church when there was a gap in the rota. The only time he would miss church or youth group was during exam time, but he figured he would be okay with God because he'd been to every single one the term before.

And as he settled down into the pew and picked up his pristine King James Version Bible, he felt a warm glow of self-satisfaction, knowing that God must be pleased with him and that he had fulfilled his duties for the day.

And as the sermon began and his mind began to drift, he noticed a man with a familiar face walking in. Wait, is that Joe?

[1 : 3 0] What on earth is Joe doing here? And he was right. It was Joe, slipping into the back row of the pews, well after the first song had already begun.

The smell of beer was on his breath. His fingers were stained with nicotine. In fact, Joe had just come from the spoons that opens at 9 a.m. down the road.

He was there early because he had been kicked out from his girlfriend's Jane's house early that morning. And the four-letter expletives ringing in his ear and the handprints across his face from Jane's slab still stinging.

Jane had found out that Joe had been sleeping with her friend and so Jane had finally kicked Joe out. Now Joe had never been to a church before.

The only Christian he knew was Jack from school. And Jack and Joe didn't get along. Jack thought that Joe was a waste of space.

[2 : 3 6] And Joe thought Jack thought that he was better than him. But all Joe knew as he slipped into the back of that church that morning was that he felt guilty.

A crushing sense that he was guilty. And even though Joe didn't understand the sermon, or most of the songs, there was one word he understood.

Confession. And he knew, he really knew in that moment, he needed to confess. And ignoring the prayers that he didn't understand, and the gawping looks from Jack and his mates, he squeezed his eyes shut and pleaded, Jesus, please forgive me.

Now on paper, Jack and Joe are polar opposites. Yet they both have one significant thing in common. They both, in that moment, in church, had faith.

But they had faith placed in two different things. Jack had faith in himself. And Joe had faith in Jesus. Now this section is all about the kingdom of God.

[3 : 5 1] The key verse that this section is explaining is chapter 17, verse 21, which reads, Nor will they say, look, here it is, or there, or behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.

And our subsection, which runs from chapter 18, verse 1, to chapter 19, verse 10, is all about, how do we enter the kingdom of God?

And the answer, is, faith. Have a look at chapter 18, verse 10. Two men went up into the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. Now the question is, what kind of faith? Faith in what? Is Jesus looking for a Jack kind of faith in himself, or a Joe kind of faith in Jesus, in him

alone?

And Luke puts our passage here, chapter 18, verses 9 to 14, to show us these two solutions right next to each other. One works, and one doesn't.

[5 : 02] Or to put it another way, we all have a problem. We have to have faith in something, but it has to be in the right thing. Now our passage has clearly religious overtones.

It's about a Pharisee and tax collector, and it takes place at a temple. Both men pray, so it would be understandable for the secular person, or someone who doesn't follow Jesus, to switch off at this point.

But allow me to draw our attention to that little word in verse 9, righteous. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Now we don't really use that word in English other than in negative sense, self-righteous. It's not a flattering thing to call someone, but when we realize that all that word really means is approval, well, suddenly, we understand exactly what that word might mean to us.

Here, as we will see, both men are seeking the approval of God. Both have faith that their approach is what will win God's approval.

[6 : 24] A Pharisee believes his life of effort and good deeds will please God. The tax collector believes asking for God's mercy will please God.

And as soon as we realize that this is the passage about approval, it becomes very sharp. Because here, Luke has encapsulated the entirety of human effort, and this is why the Gospel writers are such geniuses.

We either work for God's approval or we work from it. We either try and justify ourselves or we throw ourselves on God's mercy.

And it doesn't matter if you would call yourself religious or not. We all either work for approval or from it. If we live for our career, we work as hard as we can to get as much approval from it.

If we live for our looks, we will slave away in the gym or before the mirror. If we live for comfort, we will do all we can to protect our time.

[7 : 32] If we live for security, we will work as hard as we can to provide financial security and safety nets. If we live for that school grade, we will kill ourselves in revision to win the approval of that grade.

Do you see? We all have a God we live for, and we, unless we are a Christian, we work for its approval. And so, this is a story for all of us, because what if that's the wrong approach?

What if the God who made the universe doesn't want you to prove yourself? And more importantly, what if working for approval is fundamentally flawed and destructive?

And so, Luke holds up these two options, working for God's approval or asking for his mercy to show us the simple yet profound truth that working for approval does not work.

More than that, it is deeply destructive. And then he shows us a better way, a liberating way, that all God wants is us to stop working to please him and instead beg for his mercy.

[8 : 46] So Luke gives us two solutions, one that focuses on external behavior and one that focuses on repentance.

Or they can be simply seen as one, faith in ourselves, or two, faith in God. And so here we see the first solution exemplified in the Pharisee, and Luke wants to show us that it only leads to hatred and destruction.

The Pharisee is the social elite of his day. He is thrilled to make his way to the temple as it is where he feels most at home.

Verse 10, read with me again, two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stands by himself and prays.

Now immediately he distances himself, he is making a visible statement of his superiority. If you think approval comes from what you do, then you will distance yourself from the riffraff, those who could sully your reputation.

[9 : 55] He begins to pray in verse 11, thank you God, and then follows the strangest thanksgiving prayer in the Bible, perhaps also a candidate for the worst prayer in the Bible too.

Five times in two verses he uses the word I. Now let me read again verses 11 to 12. The Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I, fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get. Now he doesn't thank God at all. Did you notice that? He goes out of his way instead to highlight all of his excellencies.

He goes beyond the law. The law only requires you to fast twice a year. He fasts twice a week. The only law, sorry, the law only requires you to tithe money.

He tithes literally everything. And this is a man of supreme moral excellence. Now if he was around today, perhaps he would drive electric, recycle food waste perfectly every week, would have all the correct political views and an excellent career in the legal profession and he would judge everyone who didn't match up to his way of living.

[11 : 18] If we saw his life written on paper, we might want to meet him, befriend him even. But Jesus doesn't show us the Pharisee on paper.

He shows us the Pharisee in the flesh and the view is ugly, very ugly. because what we see is not moral excellence.

We see a man who despite appearances hates God and hates his neighbor. God is ignored and his neighbor is held in contempt. Do we see?

How does the Pharisee treat his neighbor? He thanks God that he is not like them. His superiority and arrogance are hard to stomach. And what does the Pharisee actually think about God?

He sees God as a means to an end, a vehicle for his own boasting. So, when the law states, love the Lord with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself, where does this morally excellent man actually stack up?

[12 : 24] He ends up hating both. He loves himself and his contempt for God and for his neighbor is evident. this is shockingly contemporary.

The viciousness expressed towards the wrong political views or the wrong lifestyle choices or the tweets dug up from years ago to be wielded as a weapon against those who said them is an all-too common occurrence in our culture.

The harm that people cause to one another in the name of being moral is all-too plain to see. So, to the skeptical in the room, Jesus is diagnosing us.

Whatever the guys, if you have faith in yourself, it is fundamentally destructive. It doesn't work. It only enslaves and causes hatred of God and hatred of man.

We need a different type of faith. So, let's look to the tax collector for Luke's second solution. Our tax collector friend couldn't be more different to the Pharisee.

[13 : 37] He's a race traitor. Tax collectors were the lowest of the low. They financially extorted their own people and gave those taxes to the Roman occupiers.

They will also take extra for themselves and line their own pockets. If we looked at the tax collector's life on paper, he is someone we would not want anything to do with.

But first of all, notice the difference in location. The Pharisee stood by himself. The tax collector stood far off. One, a statement of superiority.

The other, a statement of guilt. The temple had grades of holiness where the closer to the center you stood, the closer to the holiest place you were.

So, the tax collector, knowing this, stood far off. He knew he wasn't worthy to approach. And the Pharisee declared with a loud voice, thank goodness I am not like other men.

[14 : 44] The tax collector couldn't even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and prayed, God be merciful to me, a sinner. A world is encapsulated in his prayer.

First, that word merciful only comes up in one other place in the Bible, which is on your handout. In Hebrews chapter 2, verse 17, it reads, Therefore, he, that is Christ Jesus, had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Now, the word make propitiation for the sins is the same word as merciful in the tax collector's prayer. He's saying, in other words, Lord, please, I can't do this.

My guilt is too great. I can't pay my debt. Help me. And the second thing to note, the Greek is not actually a sinner, but the sinner.

In other words, he's saying, Lord, forgive me, because I am at my root, at my core, at my very inner being, a sinner.

[16 : 08] And the shocking verdict comes as soon as the man's prayer is given. Read with me verse 14. Jesus says, 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. You see, both men are seeking the approval of God.

Yet, one has a faith in himself, and the other has none. One has no faith in God, and the other only has faith in God.

And that is the great liberating irony of Jesus' kingdom. The religious man exalts himself, has faith in himself, thinks his excellence saves himself.

In the words of verse 14, he exalts himself. But where is God in that picture? He is nothing more than a cosmic cheerleader massaging the Pharisee's ego.

[17 : 17] And the Pharisee, where is his love for other people? He holds them in contempt. No, faith in yourself is a solution.

does not work. Yet the tax collector, despite all his vileness, all his betrayal and sin, he recognizes something the Pharisee doesn't.

He can't save himself, and so he throws himself on the mercy of God. Where is God in the tax collector's picture? He is his savior, his head, his only lifeline.

And other people? The sinner. He doesn't hold others in contempt. He knows he's a sinner saved by grace. Do you see?

Trying to save ourselves leads to hatred of God and man. Either you will be proud or crushed when you realize you cannot reach your God's standard. If you live for the God of career, retirement will break you.

[18 : 22] If you live for the God of beauty, old age will ravish you. If you live for the God of security, illness will mock you. No, we cannot live our lives in solution one.

Only in mercy, only in recognizing our inability is God alone recognized as Lord and Savior. Savior. Now, we started with Jack and Joe.

On the outside, Jack looked moral, but such an approach only leads to pride. Joe, on the outside, looks like his life disqualifies him from life with God, but his plea of repentance puts God in his proper place as Lord and Savior.

And it puts Joe in his proper place, a man in need of grace. And so Luke gives us these two options to seek our God's approval, faith in ourself or faith in God.

And the picture is as clear as day. Only faith in God truly saves. It's important to say to the Christian in the room, you are not the Pharisee.

[19 : 35] The Pharisee wanted to kill Jesus, and they did. That is not the Christian. The application for us is to rejoice at just how liberating it is that our God's heart is not one of prove yourself, because we know we can't, and wonderfully, he doesn't ask us to.

For those who aren't a Christian here this morning, is that not just what your heart longs for? To stop this horrible rat race of life, to stop striving, to stop longing, to stop trying to prove yourself? It just doesn't work. But there is a God who is willing to accept you as you are, not as what you hope to perform to be. And so, what kind of faith is Jesus looking for?

A faith in him alone, and thank goodness that is all he's asking for. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem.

[20 : 48] Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem. Jerusalem.