

Does it matter what anyone believes?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 September 2019

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 0 0] We're going to be reading from page 59, that's chapter 18 of Luke's gospel, and we're going to start at verse 9. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. 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.

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.

Let me add my welcome to Nick's earlier. My name is Simon Dowdy, and I'm the pastor of Grace Church, and a very warm welcome to you, indeed, as we think about this question, does it matter what anyone believes?

[1 : 2 2] I'd be grateful if you would take up the copy of Luke's Gospel again, because we're going to be looking together at that story that Jesus Christ told, so turn to page 59, Luke chapter 18, and keep a finger in there.

Does it matter what anyone believes? Well, when it comes to some things, it obviously does matter very much indeed.

Brexit, for example. I mean, why all the fuss if it doesn't matter? Or the football terraces on a Saturday afternoon. It matters what you believe about a particular team or schools.

It matters, doesn't it, what you believe is the right school for your child. At certain times of the year, it seems to be the only thing that parents talk about.

It matters. And yet, when it comes to the spiritual or religious sphere, there seems to be a disconnect. And our culture assumes it doesn't matter.

[2 : 3 6] Indeed, it may well be that you're here this morning, and that is very much your assumption. Perhaps we come from a position of certainty. We think, we assume, perhaps, that all religions lead to God, and it doesn't really matter.

You just take your pick, if any. Or perhaps it comes from a good desire for tolerance. We live in a multicultural society. Surely to insist that it matters what someone believes will only lead to discord and division.

Well, it may be that actually we come from a position not of certainty, but uncertainty. How can you really know what's true? How can you really know what isn't true?

If you can't, then, obviously, it doesn't matter what anyone believes. Well, it may just be that actually we'd rather not spend too much time thinking about it.

Life is busy. On the whole, life is working for us. And we don't really want to have to think about these things. And so, almost just for a quiet life, we say, well, you know, it doesn't really matter.

[3 : 46] Well, what we really need to hear is not so much the voices of our culture. After all, different cultures will come up with different answers. And no doubt what our culture, what our society says in 50 or 100 years' time will be very different from what our culture is saying today.

Now, what we need is an expert, which is why we are looking at this story Jesus Christ told from Luke's Gospel this morning. Luke himself was a doctor, not some tabloid journalist peddling fake news.

He makes it clear that what he has assembled here is an eyewitness account. He is meticulous about the details. That's something you might want to ask about in the question time afterwards.

And the person who stands at the heart of Luke's Gospel is Jesus Christ. As we've been reminded already this morning, Jesus Christ is both fully man and fully God.

The one who reveals God to us. The one who shows us what God is like. The one who, as he speaks, is speaking the very words of God.

[4 : 51] So, Jesus, does it matter what anyone believes? Well, let's see what he says in this parable.

And for those who would like to know where we're going, then we've got three points this morning. And you'll see them there on the service sheet. First of all, it matters. Have a look at verse 9 and 10.

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. Two men went up into the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Now, I guess most of us don't have particularly warm feelings about those who work in the tax office.

But perhaps at least we can respect them and we understand the work they do. Now, that was not the case in Jesus' day. Tax collectors were considered to be traitors and thieves.

[5 : 54] Traitors because they worked for the occupying Roman forces. Thieves because not only did they collect the taxes they were meant to collect, but they added a percentage and pocketed that for themselves.

In the first century, people despised them and cursed the ground on which they walked. The second character is a Pharisee.

And of course, as soon as we hear the word Pharisee, so often we think of someone who is self-righteous and who makes moral judgments about others. And yet the reaction amongst Jesus' audience would have been very different indeed.

The Pharisees were regarded as exemplary and upright members of the political and religious community. They worked hard. They were generous with their money.

They were scrupulously honest. They were very religious. They were just the kind of person, in fact, that you loved your daughter to bring home and later on to marry. In other words, if we want to feel the full shock of this parable, then we really need to change the characters.

[7 : 10] Verse 10. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a highly regarded pillar of the establishment, and the other a drug runner. And of course, it's at that point that the parable is so shocking.

Let's read on. Verse 11. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. 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.

And then the punchline. I wonder if you can feel the punchline. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

Justified. It's the Bible word which means to be declared in the right with God. As such, it anticipates the final verdict that God will give on the judgment day.

[8 : 22] One of them forgiven. The other unforgiven. Two very different men. They pray two very different prayers.

As we'll see in a moment, they believe very different things. Very different things about themselves. Very different things about God. Presumably, if it doesn't matter what anyone believes, then presumably, the punchline would be very different as well.

Either both of them would go home justified, or neither of them would go home justified and right with God. Notice, really, the difference is not about how the men felt.

After all, the Pharisee feels rather good about himself. He feels that all is well between himself and God. The tax collector, quite the opposite.

And I guess in this room this morning, there will be a whole range of us in terms of how we feel about ourselves, how we feel about where we stand with God.

[9 : 32] But strikingly, Jesus makes the point that what matters is not how we feel we stand, but precisely where we stand. And even more precisely, God's declaration, God's declaration of where we stand with God.

God's declaration of what matters is not how we stand with God. God's declaration of what matters is not how we stand with God. The author, Tom Holland, who lives just down the road in Brixton, has just released his latest book. It's called Dominion. And it's about how much Western society, Western culture, has been profoundly shaped by Christianity.

He makes the point that virtually all modern values, including the values which, in a sense, are the most avowedly secularist values, can be traced back to the Bible. For example, equality, fairness, two of the cornerstones of our modern liberalism have their roots in the revolutionary idea that everyone is created equal before God.

Now, as far as I'm aware, Tom Holland is not a Christian. And yet you're asking the question, does it matter what you believe about God? And his reply is, you bet it matters.

Just look at how Christianity has shaped Western values. Just look at how other belief systems have shaped other cultures and other societies.

[11 : 02] And yet, good as it is to live in a culture where the values of equality and fairness are embedded, can we see here that Jesus Christ is saying that there is something, an even greater reason, as to why it matters what we believe.

Because it leads to either being justified or not justified. To being in the right with God or not right with God.

To standing before him on the judgment day, either forgiven or unforgiven. And it's lovely to hear, wasn't it, from Helen earlier about how she moved from the one to the other.

And that is why it matters what we believe. Because Jesus identifies for us here what it is that is at stake. That's the crucial thing about Christianity.

It's not about whether it makes you happier. You may end up sadder. It's not about whether it makes life easier. It may make life harder. It's not about whether you like church. You may not like church.

[12 : 07] It's not about whether you enjoy the sermon. You may not enjoy the sermon. No, it's about where we stand before God in this life and in eternity. And of course, as such, it begs the question, doesn't it, what then was it that these two men believed that was so different?

Well, they believe different things about themselves and they believe different things about God. Let's just think about each one of those in turn.

First of all, it matters what you believe about yourself. Notice, will you, who Jesus tells the parable to, verse 9. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt, just like the Pharisee in the story.

Let me read it again. Verse 11, the Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I'm 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. Do you see how he compares himself that he's right with God and he does it by comparing himself with other people?

[13 : 25] Perhaps like someone caught speeding at 50 miles an hour through the middle of Dulwich Village and having been caught, he says, but at least I wasn't parking on the double yellow lines like all those people over there.

And that, of course, is a game that we can all play. We can make ourselves good by sounding off about others. After all, there are plenty of people, aren't there, who we can look down our noses at.

At least I'm not like Donald Trump. At least I'm not like Boris Johnson or whoever it is. I mean, it's not as if there's a shortage of possibilities, is it, that we can look down our noses at. Rather like the Sunday club teacher who taught this parable to her children in Sunday club and at the end she prayed, thank you God that we are not like the Pharisees.

You got there in the end. Yes. But then for good measure, notice that he then adds in his prayer the things that he has done which he thinks might impress God.

So the Old Testament law in the first half of the Bible said you should fast once a year. He fasts twice a week. So presumably that's because he feels that he's 104 times better, 52 by 2, 104 times better than he had to be.

[14 : 46] The law also said that you had to give away 10% of a prescribed number of things whereas he gives away a tithe of everything. In short, you see, what is he praying?

I thank you God that I'm such a great guy. I think that's how we can summarize his prayer. It's a great prayer to pray, of course, because it makes you feel good about yourself.

It boils you up. It makes you feel successful. It makes you feel safe. It's the kind of prayer as well that keeps other people in their place. Thank you God that I'm not like them. And it's the kind of prayer that keeps God at a safe distance.

And yet, it is a prayer that is built on illusion. The illusion that all is well between him and God. It's not based on reality. And that is why at the very end, Jesus says, verse 14, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

In other words, if you exalt yourself in this world, if you are unreal with God as this man is, then you'll be humbled in the next world at the judgment.

[16 : 00] You see, his prayer is really no prayer at all. It would be rather like going to your GP and saying, Doctor, I just thought I'd pop in and I've come to give you some really good news.

And I want you to know I'm absolutely fine. My heart's ticking well. My blood pressure's great. My diet is fantastic. And my sense of well-being is better than it has been for years.

And this man is like that. What do you say? What about the tax collector? Have a look at verse 13.

He can barely bring himself to address God as he cries out, God be merciful to me, a sinner. What does he believe about himself?

He's a sinner in need of mercy. Notice what he doesn't do. He doesn't come to God full of excuses. You know, you need to understand my background, my childhood, my family situation, the school I went to is all dreadful.

[17 : 02] You should have seen my friends. It's not my fault. He doesn't do that. Instead, he beats his breast. Here is someone who feels the depth of his guilt before God.

A man who knows that sin comes from the very depth of his heart. We tend to assume, don't we, that a sinner is someone who is portrayed for everyone to see on the front page of a tabloid newspaper.

The kind of person society condemns. And yet, the Bible's definition of sin goes much, much deeper. It is relational. It's about how we treat God.

It is about turning our backs on God and saying to him, I will run my life my way and I'll do it without you. It's what each of us does.

Each one of us. And things like pride and dishonesty and gossip and self-seeking all result as we try and keep ourselves at the center of our universe.

[18 : 12] In other words, both these men in the story are sinners. But only one recognizes it. The other one is blinded by his own respectability.

I guess it begs the searching question, doesn't it? Do we really know ourselves? Because Jesus says it matters what we believe about ourselves.

Finally, it matters what you believe about God. Look again at those words of the tax collector. God be merciful to me. Now that word merciful actually makes it clear that this isn't a kind of general, kind of vague request for God's mercy.

But actually it is a very specific one because the word merciful literally means God propitiate me. That means it's a cry that God would turn away his anger, his wrath, his anger at sin.

In other words, the tax collector not only grasps that he's a sinner but he also grasps that God is in the business of forgiveness. Just as the conversation in the doctor's surgery reveals something about how someone thinks of their doctor.

[19 : 34] When the patient comes in and says, Doctor, I just want you to know that I'm feeling completely fine, everything is really well, what do we expect any half-decent doctor to say? I'm really glad you're well.

Have a good day. Off you go. Of course not. No, what we expect any decent doctor to say is, well, while you're here, we'll do a few tests. Because doctors are in the business of saving people.

Indeed, Jesus himself likens himself to a doctor. Earlier on in Luke's gospel, he said, those who are well have no need of a physician, of a doctor, but those who are sick.

I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. If we believe Jesus came for the respectable people who think they're right with God, where does that leave us?

Well, either we find ourselves pretending that we are respectable, that we are right with God, or we find ourselves realizing there's no hope. Neither of those are happy places to be in.

[20 : 42] And yet, once we've grasped that Jesus came for sinners and to bring forgiveness, why, that is the road that leads to joy and confidence.

In fact, this whole chapter, Luke chapter 18, is about who does get to heaven and who doesn't get to heaven, who does stand in the right with God and who doesn't. Just flick over the page to verses 31 to 34 at the bottom of page 60.

We're here for the third time, Jesus tells his disciples that he'll be arrested and killed and rise again. And all of this in order to accomplish what the Old Testament had spoken about.

Because God had said he would send a saviour who would bring the forgiveness of sins. It's why Jesus came, to die on the cross, to bear the penalty for sin, the just punishment for sin.

A number of years ago, a friend of mine who works in the city up in the Old Bailey in the law court showed me around. And he took me, first of all, into one of the empty courtrooms and there was the seat where the judge sits, there was the witness box, there was the gallery where the onlookers and press can sit and there was the bench where the jury would have sat.

[22 : 06] And on our way out as we left that law court and went in the kind of public area just outside, there was this enormous commotion as a door opened from the next door law court and a man came rushing out surrounded by others and he simply dissolved in floods of tears, weeping with joy, completely overwhelmed.

it was the most extraordinary scene. He had just been declared not guilty. Well, in a far greater way, imagine that not guilty verdict on the judgment day before God.

It's what Jesus says, isn't it, at the very end of the story. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. If we humble ourselves, if we admit our sin, if we come to Jesus, for the forgiveness of sin, we will be exalted on that day.

Not because of any good that we've done, but because of God's great kindness and mercy. So how should we respond?

Well, at the very least, I hope we can see that it does matter what someone believes. It matters what we believe about ourselves. It matters what we believe about God. Now, of course, for some, that will raise the issue, well, I'm really not sure what I do believe.

[23 : 33] In which case, we'd love you to take away your copy of Luke's Gospel, and why not sit down and read it? It'll only take a couple of hours to read through, and ask the question, who is Jesus?

That's the key question. If Jesus is indeed God in the flesh, then he speaks with a completely unique authority. But it may be that others, and you're thinking to yourself, you know what, I've never prayed a prayer like this tax collector.

I've never done it, but I can see that I need to do it. And yet wonderfully, of course, Jesus assures us that this is precisely the kind of prayer that God answers.

So what I want to do, I want to finish. For those who would like to, and this won't be everyone, but it may be for some, I'd like to lead us in a prayer now so that we can pray this prayer if we would like to.

Let me read the prayer first, and you can see if this is the kind of prayer you'd like to pray, and then I'll read it through a second time. Let me just think to yourself, is this the kind of prayer that you would like to pray?

[24 : 45] Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I understand who Jesus is and why he dies.

I know that I don't deserve it, but because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me. From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

Christ. Well, if that's the kind of prayer that you would like to pray, if you've never prayed it before, but if you'd like to pray it, then let me read it again and you can echo the prayer in the quiet of your own heart.

Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died.

I know that I do not deserve it, but because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me. From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

[25 : 57] Amen.