

The Challenge of Pleasing God

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[0:00] And beginning in verse 9, when I get there.

I'm so used to electronic Bibles, I have a hard time finding my way around an old-fashioned! So here we go. Jesus, 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.

[1:11] For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. My talk is going to be, I guess the title of it is, Pleasing God, how we might please God.

God. On Facebook, I pushed it, we're good, it's recording. So, on Facebook recently, I was mentioning something about my children, and I happened to be kind of sarcastic about my kids, so I said something about how wicked they were, and what kind of beasts they were being that day. And, one of my friends from seminary, now I went to a seminary that was not a conservative seminary, it was very liberal. One of my friends from seminary saw what I posted, and she was quite upset, and so she sent me a message.

And she, you know, my friend, she has a very sweet, sweet woman. She has two twin girls, I think they're like four or five, just the cutest things you could imagine.

And, well, she sent me this note, horrified, and she said, you know, your children are special, they're innocent, they're sweet, how could you talk about them that way?

[2:34] How do you expect them, I'm quoting her now, how do you expect them to be good when you tell them they're wicked? Now, I was being a little sarcastic and having a little fun on Facebook, I wasn't being completely serious, but I decided to go along with my friend because I wanted to just see what she had up her sleeve or what she was getting at.

So, she again said, how do you expect them to be good when you tell them they're wicked? And I said, I don't expect them to be good. I expect them to be wicked.

Like me, like their father. And she said, don't say that. I went to seminary with you for three years. You're a good person. Anne's a good person. And I said, you don't know me. I'm not a good person. If you think I'm a good person, you have no idea who I am. She said, how can you be happy if you think that you're bad? I said, I'm happy.

I think I'm bad. And I'm happy. Well, my friend's thoughts, and the conversation went on and on, and I don't want to spare you the whole thing. But my friend's thoughts are aligned with what many in the secular world believe, and many secular therapists will tell you if you go to them, and that is that good self-esteem is essential to the good life.

[3:59] If you're depressed and someone sends you to a counselor, a secular counselor, more than likely, you'll be told that what you need to do is develop a better estimation of yourself.

Learn how to love certain aspects of who you are. Children from very early childhood on in public schools and even some private schools are taught very clearly and repeatedly, believe in yourself. Find your inner strength. You can do anything if you put your mind to it. Now, before I go on, I want to say there's definitely some truth to that.

We are made in God's image. We are valuable because we are his creatures and we're made in his image. And as image bearers, then we have reason to love ourselves in the same way that we love God.

We're made in his image. We are his image bearers. But what is the problem? And here I'd like you to go ahead and turn, if you can, if you have your Bible, turn to Romans chapter 3. And I'd like to give you God's diagnosis.

[5:13] You've probably read this before. But I'd like to give you God's diagnosis of the present human condition. Beginning there in verse 9.

Chapter 3 of Romans, beginning in verse 9. And I'll just start reading there.

Both Jews and Greeks, that's everybody. In Paul's way he's using this language here. It's everybody. Are under sin. As it is written, none is righteous.

No, not one. No one understands. No one seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together, they've become worthless.

No one does good. Not even one. Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

[6:14] Their feet are swift to shed blood. And their paths are ruined and misery. And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now, whatever the law says, it speaks to those under the law.

I'm speaking a few words there. So that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight.

Since through the law comes knowledge of sin. Now, just in case, having read that section, you think that that's just Paul being mean because he's being Paul.

Just note that most of those diagnoses that he gives of the human condition are quotations from the Old Testament. Paul's just bringing forward many Old Testament texts in the summation of his argument there that had begun in chapter 1.

Now, I want to make three observations, however, about what we just read. The first observation should be pretty clear. It's the diagnosis that all are understood as a universal diagnosis.

[7:27] It includes everybody. All have turned away. No one does good. Not even one. Secondly, I want you to note that the text implies a transformation.

Not a good transformation. A bad transformation. We've turned aside. We've become worthless. We've fallen from what God made us to be.

So we were made in his image, but there's something wrong. We've turned from that. And third, this is most interesting given what we just talked about. It's very pessimistic.

Raise your hand if you're taught this in Sunday school. I was taught in Sunday school by many very sweet Sunday school teachers that Scripture shows us how to be good.

And then Jesus came to be the example of how to be good. And so if we want to please God, we just do what Jesus did, and that will suffice.

[8:29] Didn't you talk about that? That's basically my Sunday school education right there. That was it. But I want you to notice that Paul writes just the opposite.

And what he says there, and especially in that last line that we read, No one will be justified in God's sight by works of the law.

So my Sunday school teacher says, hey, just be good. You'll please God. Paul says, no one. No one will please God. No one will be justified in God's sight by works of the law.

Why not? The answer he's already supplied is that no one is righteous. And so instead, instead, God gave his law in order to show us what we cannot do.

Not what we can, but what we cannot do. I would freak some Sunday school teachers out in our day and in my old days too. The law was given to reveal our condition.

[9:40] It needs to be revealed. Because on a regular day, I tend to think I'm awesome. I do. I think I'm a great guy. Especially when I look at other people around me. And when I look at you, I'm better than that guy.

I'm better than that guy. I don't do that. I don't do this. I think I'm awesome, generally speaking. Or at least I'm better than you.

Just kidding. I mean, and I do. I don't know if you do this or not. But I do tend to think of myself in relatively good terms.

I think of myself as a fairly generous person. A good and faithful husband. I never cheated on my wife. Awesome. I don't curse too much. I'm, you know, I'm a basically decent guy.

So when I read Romans 3 and I compare it to my life, I kind of think, now come on, Paul. Come on. Worthless. Give me a break.

[10:37] I'm not that bad. And then I think of some examples that we have of human goodness. Mother Teresa. My goodness. She's a compared.

I will say that compared to me, she's a better person. Gandhi, you can name your examples. In fact, when I'm a regular way of thinking about myself and my regular way of thinking about humanity, and I don't think I'm strange at all.

I think this is generally the way people walk around and think. I'm not so sure that Romans 3 is all that accurate. Does anyone ever hear, does anyone take part in the evangelism explosion about 40 years ago coming from D. James Kennedy's?

Yeah. About 40 years ago. Yeah. What was the first question you'd ask somebody? Why are you going to go to heaven? Yeah, if you died tonight, where would you go to heaven?

And if so, why? And it's kind of a diagnostic question. And what you're trying to find out is, what's this person relying on? And I've asked that question almost to a person.

[11:41] When I ask that to somebody who's not gone to church and doesn't know the right answer, they'll say something like, well, I did this. I did that. I helped out at the soup kitchen last week. I gave my last so-and-something. Some way of establishing their own goodness and righteousness is what you're usually looking for.

So, again, the Romans 3 diagnosis that we just read is not something that is generally accepted. And that even, I think, we ourselves have trouble accepting about ourselves.

And here I'd like us to go ahead and turn to Genesis chapter 11. And the reason we have a difficult time accepting that is because, in fact, we do externally tend to do some good things.

We can all be nice people. We can all exercise a modicum of virtue. Genesis 11 should be a familiar story.

The Tower of Babel, you might have a title there above it. Now, it's interesting, though, because when you turn, when you begin reading in Genesis 11, if you've been reading through Genesis up to this point, you already know something's wrong.

[12:51] Because in Genesis chapter 9, verse 7, God told Noah's sons to increase, multiply, and fill the land. And here they are about 100 years later, and they're all together in one place.

Right? And they're not filling the land or anything. They're just kind of sticking together here. So, you already kind of know something's wrong. Let's see what they decide to do here in verse 4. Come, they say, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let's make a name for ourselves.

I want to make three observations here, too. That first line, come, let us. Who are they talking to? Come, let us. I mean, there's nobody else. It's just one human community at this point. There's no one else around. They're not, doesn't seem, talking to God. They're talking to themselves.

[13:53] Second observation is more of a question. It has to do with the plan. And what is the plan? And the plan is to build a city and a tower with its top to the heavens.

Now, this is likely, given the language there, a ziggurat. Anyone heard of a ziggurat? Yeah. If you look, if you have your, you know, Sunday school material from you're a kid, you might have this picture of a tower going up into the sky.

That's not what was going on. They weren't trying to build a very tall tower to go past the heavens. They were just trying to build a ziggurat. Because the idea behind the ziggurat is, is if you build this thing and it becomes the stairway to heaven, the meeting place between man and God.

You build it. And then by ascending to it, you ascend to dwell among the divine or within the divine realm. So, what they're wanting to do is to make a place for themselves, important, in the heavens. For what purpose? This is the third observation. To make a name for ourselves. Now, again, a name for ourselves to whom?

[14:59] Who else is around? Now, that's a good, that's a possibility. Maybe they just want to, just for their own sake, to be, to puff out their chests and say how awesome they are. But it could also be, and I think, and I tend to think, I tend to go this way.

But it could also be that they want to make a name for themselves before God by their building of this tower.

And if so, that's an important echo that goes all the way back, if you will, to Genesis chapter 3, when our first parents decided that they wanted to make a name for themselves among the gods too.

Remember, they wanted to be like God, right? So, it seems like the same thing all over again. They want to establish a name for themselves before God.

And so, they begin to build. Now, just think about this. You have all humanity united harmoniously. This is like a Coke commercial from the 70s.

[15:57] Speaking the same language. Working toward the same goal. You kind of want to break out into song and hold hands and dance in a circle here. This is utopia.

Yeah. Everybody united together for the same cause, same purpose, same goal. No divisions. No fighting. Humanity in harmony and at peace.

Wow. I think if we would have walked up to the scene, we would have been amazed. Whoa. I want to live with these people. What a magnificent building this would have been too.

Because, I mean, you guys are doing a kind of a building project up there. And I don't know. I'm sure you haven't had any fights about that. But I'll tell you, a good shepherd. When we have anything regarding the building, there are lots of fights.

But not here. It's there in harmony. This is humanity in its best. The building would have been the probably most amazing feat of architecture yet seen.

[16:55] It is a beautiful edifice. What does God see, however? God sees this. Behold, verse 6. There are one people and they have all one language.

And this is only the beginning of what they will do. Now, you don't want to read this in the wrong way and think that God's afraid. Oh, no. These guys are going to come up and take me off my throne.

That's not what he's worried about. God's not afraid for himself. But this tower, as I said a minute ago, this tower is another human attempt to be like God.

To build our own thing. To establish ourselves. If completed, if God steps back and says, all right, guys. Keep building.

Go for it. If completed, we should have no doubt that humanity would swell up and puff out. And believe truly that they had made a name for themselves among the gods.

[18:00] And so, mercifully, God does not wish for that to happen. Now, we got to ask ourselves, is this a good work? Externally, again, it is the best work.

Most beautiful building ever made. But what drives it? Human pride. Again, a desire to make our way to God on our own. Or make our way to the gods on our own.

Babel reveals the truth about human virtue. That even though externally, I may be a kind of generous guy and do good things. And so might you. We can be nice and generous and even sacrificial.

Because God has shed his grace on all men and all women. Or human society would have no hope. But inside, our hearts are bent selfward. And we are bent on self-exaltation and self-indulgence.

And self-just ourselves. This is why God says, and this is maybe a perplexing passage if you've ever read it in Isaiah 64 verse 4.

[19:04] All your righteous deeds. Not your bad stuff. The good stuff. The stuff you do on a good day. All your righteous deeds are filthy rags in my sight, he says. That's a scary passage if I ever saw a scary passage.

It is impossible to please God by doing some good work. Even your best work on your best day.

There are, and I'm stealing this from John MacArthur, but I guess I'm saying it so I'm not really stealing. There are two human religions. Only two. No matter what they call themselves. There is a religion of human achievement, which says you must do these things, pray these prayers, take these steps, live this way, do this ritual, give this alms, and you will then be able to ascend to the divine.

And there is a religion of divine accomplishment. Only God is good. Only God can save. And there's only one religion on the planet that represents that second religion, and that's the religion of Jesus Christ that he gave us.

We have in the scriptures. So now, having given you that very long introduction, let's go ahead and turn to Luke chapter 18 and look at our parable for the evening. Beginning again in verse 9.

[20:30] You know, sometimes when you're reading and trying to exposit the scriptures, you've got to be very careful to make sure you set, lay down a good setting.

Because you could jump into a story that Jesus is telling or an event that's taking place, and if people don't understand the context, they could apply it, misapply it to the wrong, in a wrong way. But one thing I love about this parable is it's very easy work for the expositor. Because look there, verse 9. Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves.

Well, there's the context. This is who the parable is for. The Greek there for some is *tinās*, which is anyone.

It doesn't just mean certain specific people. Anyone who trusts in himself or themselves that they are righteous and treat others with contempt.

[21 : 29] So let me just ask you a question. Do you think you're a good person? Given enough time, if you're not now, but let's say you made some mistakes, but given enough time and effort, could you become good enough?

Do you believe the bad you've done can take away the good? Do you believe the bad you've done?

This is probably more likely for some of us. Maybe not you, but some people I've met. Do you believe the bad you've done can be explained away by some external circumstance?

My mom and dad were mean to me. The people I was raised with were really bad and they've corrupted me because I'm really good. Is there some excuse for you being the reason or for you being the way you are?

Well, if you've answered yes to those questions, this parable is for you. This parable is for you. The word there for righteous is to be conformed to the good.

To be conformed to the good. And since we're speaking in biblical categories here, can we guess what the good is? Anyone? You can speak. It's okay. Well, to be righteous, to be conformed to the good.

[22 : 42] And in biblical categories, the good would be God. Good. God, right. Yes, he is good. So that's why you see these commands all through scripture. Be holy as I am holy.

And then Jesus saying in Matthew chapter 5 verse 48, he says, be perfect. Therefore, as your father in heaven is perfect because he is the good toward which we are all called to be conformed. Psalm 24 verses 3 through 4 asks the question that we've been kind of dealing with the entire time. Who can ascend to the hill of the Lord?

And David, who's a psalmist in this case, answers the question. He who has clean hands, which means your external deeds are good, and a pure heart, which means you have pure actions and desires.

That's what this word righteous tends to mean in the scriptures. Have you come there yet? Have you come there yet?

[23 : 38] Well, notice also that Jesus pairs this self-reliance, this trusting in your own goodness with contempt. It's interesting. Now, if you work hard for something and you believe you've achieved it, what do you think of those who don't work quite as hard as you do?

That's right. I'll tell you. I'll give you. I'm going to brag on myself just a little bit because I've already exposed myself as a sinner, and so I might as well go the whole way and prove it to you. I have really good self-discipline.

So I wake up every morning at 4 in the morning and do my prayers, and then I work out. And I'm very good with my diet, too. If I don't want something, I won't have it.

If I decide I'm going to lose five pounds, I just do it. It's not a problem for me. And I've always been like that. And so sometimes when I'm at my worst and I'm talking to somebody else who doesn't have that quality, and they'll say something like, you know, I'm trying to diet, but I just can't resist cake.

I won't say this, but I'll think, yeah, what's wrong with you? Why don't you just say no? Come on. I can do it. Why can't you?

[24 : 57] That's just the sort of guy I am, I guess, you know. I'm just that kind of guy. Now, I'm sure that you – maybe I don't know what your particular source of pride is, but it does tend, in my life anyway, that when I am good at something, and even when I worked hard to do something, the byproduct of that is contempt for those who haven't quite gotten to my level yet.

And Jesus is pointing right at that potential. I did prison ministry for a while. When I first started my ministry down in Houston, I wasn't ordained yet, but I was doing prison ministry with the Coulson – the prison fellowship is what it was.

But to a man – I mean, we were in a pretty rough prison, but – and I had two or three guys I worked with in the course of my time in prison ministry. But each one, we'd start off our conversation. We'd start off our time together, and I'd say just to get to know the person, well, you know, why are you here? And they'll say, you know, I robbed a bank or I, you know, did something horrible. But it's always followed by, but – you know what that guy did? You know what, this guy – even in a prison, they're better than the other guy. So it's this kind of universal human quality when you think you're at a certain level is to have contempt on those who are not.

[26:17] So Jesus then is telling this parable for those who think of themselves or trust in their own righteousness and hold others in contempt. All right.

So verse 10, these two men then go up to a temple – to the temple to pray. The temple sacrifice – this is probably a daily thing. The temple sacrifices were held at 9 a.m. – this is probably in Jerusalem – and 3 p.m. every day.

A lamb was killed as a visible sign to everybody that sin was an offense to God and required blood sacrifice.

A lamb was killed in the morning. A lamb was killed in the evening. And then after the lamb is killed, incense is offered, and that's when the prayers ascend. People would gather – whole crowds of people would gather together for Jerusalem for these daily prayers.

Large crowds attended, including these two very different men. One, we're told, is a Pharisee, and the other is a tax collector.

[27:18] They came to the same place for the same purpose. Think about this with regard to church, you know. This happens, this doesn't. They came to the same place for the same purpose. But again, they're very different men.

Let's look at the Pharisee first. We have very negative perceptions of Pharisees because when we read the Gospels and the Pharisees are mentioned, it's always bad guys. But we've got to understand this parable or most of the Gospels, you need to set yourself back into the first century context in which Pharisees were the good guys.

Pharisees were seen as the elite, the zealous law keepers of Israel. Does someone remember the parable of Sodom – or not the parable, the account of Sodom and Gomorrah? Remember Abraham kind of trying to bargain with God there.

Hey, if there's ten righteous people, will you save Sodom? And, you know, God knew what he was doing the whole time. But that was the idea is that if I can find just a few righteous people, the whole wicked city might be saved.

Well, there's a similar idea in first century Israel that the Pharisees were going to be like those righteous men. And because of their righteousness, all of Israel could still be saved.

[28:30] And so even the wicked people were happy that the Pharisees were being righteous. They were seen as kind of heroes, national saviors. It's good to have the Pharisees around. They'll keep us all from – the fire is going to rain down from heaven.

We'll be glad to have these Pharisees here. Anyway, the Pharisees also consider themselves righteous as well. They understood themselves to be good and to have the same kind of mission, to rescue Israel from destruction.

The Pharisaic scribes, as you may know, constructed an extensive code of regulations that were basically interpretations of the Old Testament scriptures that to them had become equal to in authority the Old Testament scriptures.

Now, these regulations – and I want you to listen carefully here – these regulations were designed to keep you from breaking the law. I mean, there are a lot of them, but they were designed to keep you from breaking the law.

So who's read Leviticus 11? All right. Okay, Leviticus 11 provides a whole list of unclean animals. And God says, don't eat them.

[29:39] Don't eat those unclean animals, right? So the Pharisees say, all right, not only are we not going to eat the animals, but we're not going to go inside the house of someone who may have once eaten those animals.

We're not going to touch his clothes. We're not going to get near him so that we can make sure that we never break that regulation. The Pharisees would not drink milk drawn from a cow by Gentile hands because those hands may have touched something unclean at some point.

God says, don't commit adultery. The Pharisees refused to speak to a woman who was not their wife or mother or sister, not related to them.

And in that way, well, they're not going to commit adultery if you don't do that. So they constructed these traditions on top of the law to keep them from breaking the law.

Now, here's why this is important. What did Paul say the purpose of the law was? To reveal our sinfulness.

[30 : 47] To unveil our inability to please God on the basis of our own efforts. So what these traditions actually did was made it impossible for the law to do its work.

I mean, if adultery includes lust, we're all doomed, right? If adultery means lust too, then we're all done for and we can't even pretend that we're righteous.

But if it doesn't mean that, if it just means never talking to another woman, hey, it might be hard, but I can do that. I can do that. This is why Saul of Tarsus, if you remember in Philippians chapter 3, verse 6, says of himself when he was a Pharisee, as to righteousness under the law, I was blameless.

You can follow those laws. You can do it. All right, in contrast to the Pharisee, let's think about the tax collectors here. Now, you probably, again, have known of tax collectors, have heard many sermons about tax collectors.

I'll just give you a brief rundown. They collected taxes, obviously, from Jews for the Romans. And most of them, this is one of the reasons why they were so hated. One, because they were considered traitors because of that.

[32 : 02] But two, most of them employed armed thugs to help them extort the money. So think Sopranos. Think the mafia. Think, yeah, that's the kind of guys they were. And so what kind of people do the mafiosos hang out with?

Not very reputable characters. And the same thing with tax collectors. Because they were outcasts in society, they hung out with other outcasts. And so, you know, the regular friends of the tax collectors would be the prostitutes and the sinners and all the people that everyone else considered scum.

And so you can imagine, again, the scandal when Jesus went to eat at Matthew's house. So they were despised and they were considered outcasts. But the one thing about them that's interesting is that these are people who had no illusions about themselves.

It's a great benefit about being an outcast. I mean, yeah, a great benefit about being Tony Soprano, I guess, is you don't – it's hard to look at yourself in the mirror and say, you know what? I'm like, Jesus, I follow that example every day.

It's hard to do that. So you've got to ask yourself, just walking into this parable, who of these two men is in a better place to hear the law? To hear the law.

[33 : 10] All right, so upon arrival, they split up. The Pharisees, standing by himself, we're told in verse 11, prayed thus. Now, don't think much about us standing up. That was just a common way of prayer, kind of like our kneeling and whatever.

You'd stretch out your arms and you'd lift up your head and you'd pray aloud. And that's, again, not – it wasn't a proud thing. It was just the way people prayed back then. Silent prayer was not done much. People usually did pray out loud in those days.

And the Pharisee could have probably been heard then. So he stands by himself. Now, notice not far off, just by himself. Notice the contrast between the tax collector. The tax collector stands far off or is far off.

The Pharisee is just by himself, close enough to where people can hear what he's saying and see what he's doing, but not mixed in with the crowd. Now, you can – there are some – maybe some excuses for his standing far off.

The crowds are risky. You never know who might be in that crowd and what that person might have touched. They – I think the Pharisee might have said, Hey, you know what? Who lights a lamp and puts it under a bed?

[34 : 13] Isn't it better for us to display our righteousness for all Israel to see so that we can be the examples of goodness for Israel? They might have said something like that. Who knows?

So anyway, so he begins to pray. God, I thank you. And that's important. Boy, you know, sometimes his prayers looked on as a bad – all awful. Hey, he starts off well. Hey, this is a good start.

God, I thank you. And that he's right to thank God for every blessing in his life. God, thank you. The Pharisees understand that God has revealed the law.

God has given men breath in their lungs and strength in their arms and the ability in their minds to know the law. I mean, think about the Tower of Babel. If God hadn't made the mud, we couldn't make the bricks.

And that's kind of the same thing here. Thanks. Thanks, God. You gave me the material I needed to build my tower. Thank you.

[35 : 14] Well, let's see what he thanks him for. I'm not like other men, extortioners, the unjust, the adulterers, or like this tax collector. He's pointing over to this guy on the side here. Now, we've got to ask ourselves, just internally here, do you think this guy's being dishonest?

No. I mean, he's not being insincere, is he? I'm glad you see that. I think it's an honest, authentic even, prayer. He's really meaning what he says.

And I think that according to what he has been taught, according to Pharisaic regulations, he's right. He's not an adulterer. If he's following the regulations, he's not even talking to another woman.

He's not an extortioner. I mean, the Pharisaic regulations command scrupulous generosity. This guy was a social justice guy. He would have been giving money to the poor.

He's not unjust. He's not unfair. He's probably not taking a loan and charging exorbitant interest because he knows that's wrong. He's not doing that. He's got integrity in his business.

[36 : 17] He charges no money. So the boast that he's making here is a sincere one. He really thinks that he is thanking God for this good product that he has, he, the Pharisee, has produced.

And what we see here is that, and this is the sad thing, and it sometimes happens in our churches, and maybe it's happened to you or someone you know, we see here is that this man's religion has shielded him from the weight of God's law.

I know so many people who say, you know what, I would, in fact, I'll tell you real briefly, I know a man who his son was heavy into drugs, dealing and doing and all kinds of other stuff, and then he becomes a Mormon.

And my friend was happy because he's out of all that junk. Now, I understand because, you know, his life was in danger being in that junk, but at the same time, he's just gone from one lie to another. He's just gone from one way of hiding from God to another way of hiding from God. Religion can do that.

[37 : 36] Religion can focus your efforts on building your perfect tower. And it can blind you to the truth that it's possibly a tower for your own name.

And that's a problem. Well, he goes on. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. The Old Testament requires one fast a year on the Day of Atonement.

There's no other fast required, but the Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday, and they said they did it because they believe that Moses went up on Mount Sinai on a Monday, and he came down from Mount Sinai on a Thursday.

Now, if you were a cynic, you might also note that Monday and Thursday happened to be the market days in Jerusalem, and that's when everybody showed up in Jerusalem. And so everyone bought food in the markets in Jerusalem, and everyone was eating in Jerusalem.

So if you're fasting on Monday and Thursday, everyone's going to notice you're fasting, right? Perfect days to fast. And hey, Moses came up the mountain on Monday and came down on Thursday.

[38 : 38] The Old Testament requires tithes to support the temple priests. The Pharisees tithes, even the seeds of their spices, Jesus tells us everywhere, and their herbs.

The Pharisees, this picture of this man, and it's a real one, he exceeds every human standard of moral achievement. He is a better man than me.

He's a better man than you. He's a better person than most people you will ever meet in your life. He's a good, moral, virtuous man. Now, I want you to just ask some questions about this prayer.

What don't you see here? Does anyone see a request here? Do you see him crying out for anything? See forgiveness, goodness, or grace, or help even, or guidance, or anything?

No. He doesn't need any help. He's arrived. I mean, if you're not sick, I guess you don't need a physician, right? If you're not lost, you don't need a shepherd.

[39 : 46] If you're not in debt, you don't need any money. I'll tell you, one of the most frustrating things as a pastor, and maybe, I don't know if your pastor has run into this or not, but I have run into

this, is every once in a while, someone will come to me and they'll say, you know, Matt, I spend about 30 minutes in prayer a day, and I only pray for other people.

And, you know what I want to say? Don't do that! What are you? Are you crazy? Do you not need to throw yourself down and ask for God's help every single moment of the day?

Of course you do! Don't be this guy! Don't just pray for the people. I don't mean, don't go away and say, well, Father Matt said not pray for, no, pray for other people, but, my goodness, pray for yourself!

Cry out for mercy and grace and power and guidance and help! Every day, you need that! Anyway, sorry, that was not in my text. Okay, so verse 13, the tax collector's standing far off, and the word's, *macroth*, that means he kind of found a dark corner.

He's trying to avoid being seen. He wouldn't even lift up his eyes into heaven, which is, again, the normal posture. His posture is one of shame, of self-abasement.

[40:59] Notice also in verse 13 that he beats his breast. The breast, for the Jewish person, is the seat of the self. Beating the breast, beating the heart, is to say symbolically, I loathe myself.

Now, this is where the contemporary therapist, or maybe even sometimes a contemporary Christian, would step in and say, no, no, no, no, no, you have to love yourself.

You know, if you don't love yourself, you can't love anybody else. You gotta embrace yourself.

Come on! Now, just step back and let's list some good things you've done today. Joel Osteen would flash his smile, and off you go.

But notice, you know, this prayer of this man, Jesus does not correct the tax collector in any way. This tax collector is beating his breast, is a sign of self-loathing, and this prayer, as we're going to see, is held up as the model.

The good thing to do. Alright, so he says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, literally, it's the sinner.

[42:16] It's not a sinner. He's not saying, hey, I'm just like, well, I'm just a sinner. He's like, I'm the sinner. He sees himself as the kind of epitome of sin. He has nothing to offer.

Just compare this to the Pharisee. He has nothing to offer. No goodness to point to. And so he begs. That's what he's doing here. He's begging. Be merciful to me, he says.

And the word actually there is a *lesterion*, which doesn't mean be merciful. It means really propitiate me. Propitiate me. Do you know what propitiate means? It's an old word associated with the sacrifice in the Old Testament.

It means the wrath of God being satisfied vicariously. By a sacrifice. Isaiah 53 promises propitiation. I'll just read one verse. He, the coming suffering servant, was crushed for our iniquities, and the punishment that brought us peace, was on him.

[43:22] I think the tax collector knows this promise. I think in this parable, Jesus has this guy looking forward to that coming one who will be crushed for his iniquities.

And he knows he needs that. And so he says, Lord, I'm the sinner. Propitiate me. I need that sacrifice. I cannot save myself.

There's nothing I can do. You, Lord, go away, must save me. Now look at Jesus's verdict in verse 14. And it would have shocked the hearers.

It probably doesn't shock us because we've heard this parable so many times in our lives. But this would have shocked the people who heard it. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified. He was talking about the tax collector. This man went down to his house justified rather than the other. Now that word justified is the same root. The word righteous, we looked at earlier, being conformed, to the good, to God.

[44:30] This tax collector went home to his house righteous before God and not the other. Now that right, that justified is in the passive perfect form, which I'll just tell you what that means.

It means it's something that has been done to him already with lasting permanence. It's something that's been done that will not, that endures.

It continues to go on. Jesus is saying, God has justified that man. He is now able to ascend the hill of the Lord.

He doesn't have clean hands himself. He doesn't have a clean heart himself. But God has justified him and counted him as righteous.

Now, Jesus goes on, and we'll see how that happens in a minute, but Jesus goes on and says, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now, in the Old Testament, to exalt is not just to boast. It's to be exalted, it's to ascend, to enter into

God's realm.

[45 : 38] The same kind of thing that people were trying to do in Genesis chapter 11. Those who attempt self-exaltation, Jesus is saying, those who attempt to climb up to heaven, those who attempt to please God on their own means, will be cast down.

It is rebellion. But the one who agrees that he is helpless and hopeless and cries out to God will be raised up.

Very simple lesson. God propitiates the sins of those who cry out to him for propitiation, for mercy, who recognize and see themselves as sinners in need, desperate need of a saving God.

And to all who cry out to him, we know this later from biblical rest of the scriptures, we know it's not only that God takes your sins and he propitiates them on the cross of Christ, he also takes the righteous life of Jesus.

Jesus was not, unlike my Sunday school teacher said, was not just an example of goodness. Jesus' life was lived for me and for you so that the good works that he did count not just as kind of some divine showing off.

[46 : 57] Hey, watch this. I can do that. No. They are lived as a perfect man on your behalf so his goodness and his righteousness is imputed to you and credited to you and given to you as if it's yours.

The moment you do as this man has done and humble yourself and cry out to God for mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. Now, all right, so we're wrapping up but I'll just say two things.

One, I imagine that most of you in this room, if not all of you, have done this. That you have at one point in your life come down on your knees and said, I am insufficient.

I am helpless and I am hopeless. Lord, propitiate me. I receive your son Jesus as my savior and my Lord. Now, if that's you, I just want to caution you this being Lent because sometimes in Lent we get our bricks out.

You know, we start building up our towers again, right? So, I'm going to fast really well on this Lent and I'm going to show God just how awesome I am and if not God, I'll show my neighbor how awesome I am because I'm going to be just, stop that.

[48 : 08] I don't know what kind of personality you have but one discipline that I recommended to my parish this Lent and I know you've probably already chosen yours but if you fail this could help you, all right?

Is rest in the finished work of Jesus. Rest in the finished work of Jesus. If you have something you're doing, do whatever it is you do during Lent because you love the God who has already justified you and that justification is going to endure for eternity.

Do what you do for love. Not out of fear or trying to earn anything. Now, for those of you who, and again, I don't think that anyone here falls in this category but just in case because I'm a preacher and I have, I've got to say it, if you are here and you do believe that you are good and you are trying to establish yourself before God's throne and you believe that you've built a nice tower, do not use Lent to build that tower higher.

You need to repent. You need to see yourself as a sinner in need of God's saving work. You cannot do it.

You will not do it. And the more that you depend on yourselves, the longer you depend on yourself, the longer you are in danger of being cast down because you're exalting yourself. Repent.

[49 : 46] God made you. He loves you. He sent his son to die for you. All you must do is lay yourself down and receive the work that he's already done and I pray that you will do that tonight if you haven't already done that.

Receive his propitiating work and the righteousness of the son of God. All right. That's all I have for you tonight. So I'm just to push this button to the