

God's Kingdom Attitudes

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[0 : 00] Good morning. Please keep your Bibles open to that reading, Luke chapter 18. We're going to go through from verse 9 to 30. So we're going to cover the reading that we just did and more. I got my Australian citizenship in 2023. The process took years because they had to make sure that I was an upstanding person. In fact, that's what it usually takes to enter any community or society, whether that's becoming a citizen of a country or getting into a work community like a company. So when you apply for a job, for example, you need to prove that you can be depended on because you have a good reputation, good skills, good achievements. Imagine you're applying to enter a country or a company and during the visa application or a job interview, you say, there's nothing good in me. I'm a sinner. I'm a very bad person. You wouldn't be able to enter the country or the company.

But in our passage today, we will see that it's the opposite with God. To enter his kingdom, we need to realize our sinfulness and our helplessness and that we can't be depended on.

And we will see why. So the passage begins with a parable in verse 9 to 10. 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.

So here two characters are introduced and Jesus's original audience would have seen the moral contrast between a Pharisee who's an upstanding citizen, a spiritual leader of Israel, respected by many, and a tax collector, an often corrupt person who worked for the Roman government, hated by the community.

In fact, in all of the Gospels, tax collectors are often paired with sinners and prostitutes. And so the initial assumption is, as this parable starts, if they both go to the temple and pray, only the Pharisee's prayer would be heard. He's the morally superior one.

[3 : 04] Verse 11 to 12. God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. I thank you. Again, those who heard this from Jesus would have agreed.

Yep, they would have thought the Pharisees are righteous. Everything he prays about here is true. The Pharisees did those things. In contrast, verse 13.

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.

Pay attention to the contrast between the prayers. The Pharisee doesn't request anything. He simply thanks God.

[4 : 22] Well, isn't that good if we are thankful and not demanding? Yeah. But why? Why doesn't he request anything? Because he feels self-sufficient.

He thinks he's there. There's nothing more he needs to do to acquire the kingdom of God. His self-righteousness is enough. It has done it all.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows that he's helpless. He doesn't even dare approach God or to look up to heaven. And his request, just one.

Have mercy on me. It literally doesn't just mean forgive me. It literally means atone for me.

He knows that his sins are so many that they can't be forgiven. They need to be atoned for. Erased. Remember, like the goat during the Day of Atonement.

[5 : 24] Thrown away somewhere in the wilderness. Forgotten forever. That's what needs to happen. His sins can't be forgiven. They need to be forgotten.

Erased. And here is the surprise. Verse 14. Jesus says, I tell you that this man, the tax collector, rather than the other one, went home justified before God.

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. The word justified there means considered right in God's eyes.

Now, the original hearers would have been shocked to know that God would consider this sinful tax collector right, upstanding, but not the morally righteous one.

The morally righteous Pharisee. What? How? How can someone so sinful be made righteous just by begging for mercy?

[6 : 36] Can someone so morally upright be rejected by God? Surely that doesn't make sense. It doesn't seem fair.

In fact, a few years ago, when I was leading a Bible study at another church, a guy came and asked this question. Can a murderer be admitted to God's kingdom just because he begs for mercy?

While someone morally upright, like, I don't know, for example, the Dalai Lama, be rejected just because, just because he doesn't believe in Jesus.

That doesn't seem fair, does it? And so we read on. There's another story. Verse 15 to 17. People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them.

When the disciples saw these, 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.

[7 : 49] Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And so in this story, people are bringing babies to Jesus, but the disciples rebuked those people because back then, children were considered unimportant in the society's eyes.

But I think that's still true in so many cultures today. Growing up in Indonesia, I remember every time there was an important guest, my parents always hid us in our bedroom.

We were hidden away. We were not important. But Jesus welcomes the children because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these, belongs to people who are like children.

What does that mean? Well, verse 17 is important. Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

That's what children do, isn't it? They don't have the capacity to work for anything and so they receive. They receive food, clothes, help, without trying to repay.

[9 : 11] As we grow up, we have learned to feel uncomfortable when receiving things because receiving humbles us. it makes us feel that I can't get it for myself and therefore I have to ask for help.

That's uncomfortable. But children don't care about receiving because they know they can't get anything by themselves. They are dependent on the big people to get them things.

And here we see a small hint as to why the tax collector is justified but not the Pharisee. The tax collector knows that he is completely helpless.

It's like a little child trying to reach something on the top rack. Can't do it. He's a sinner. He can't save himself. His sins are just too many.

He is dependent on the mercy of God and so he asks and he receives. The Pharisee on the other hand thinks his righteousness can save him.

[10 : 25] He is not dependent on God. He is self-sufficient and so he doesn't ask and he doesn't receive. Instead of receiving the kingdom of God the Pharisee thinks he can earn it.

He can work for it and build a stairway to heaven with his self-righteousness. And so God lets him. God doesn't give him the kingdom. But the problem remains. Surely a murderer can't just receive the citizenship of the kingdom of God just by begging.

And surely someone morally upright deserves to have the citizenship of the kingdom of God. Why don't they? We are so trained to think this way because that's how it works in this world.

The government of Australia thinks I'm morally upright enough to be admitted as a citizen. why can't I be admitted into the kingdom of God by my moral righteousness as well?

[11 : 42] So we read on to the third story. Verse 18. A certain ruler asked him, Dear teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Now here's another ruler and like the Pharisee, I think he wants to build a stairway to heaven. He's asking Jesus, what must I do to inherit or to merit or to achieve the kingdom of God?

How can I be upright enough to merit the kingdom of God? Verse 19. Why do you call me good?

Jesus answered. No one is good except God alone. Now Jesus here doesn't affirm or deny that he is good. He merely points out that no human being is good enough.

Only God is good. Now we know that Jesus is God and therefore he's good but that's beside the point. Jesus' point is no one is good enough to inherit eternal life.

[12:43] Only God is good. Only God can meet his own standard of good. No human being can meet that standard.

Don't even try. But if you still insist on trying to build a stairway to heaven, here is what you need to do.

Verse 20. 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. So here Jesus lists the commandments.

If you want to build a stairway to heaven, do them all. Now we know the Ten Commandments which have two categories. The vertical commandments that pertain to one's relationship with God.

Like there shall be no other God but the Lord. Don't use the Lord's name in vain. And then there are the horizontal commandments that pertain to one's relationship with others.

[13:49] Now these Ten Commandments can be summarized by the two great commandments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your strength.

Vertical. And love your neighbor as yourself. Horizontal. Now Jesus mentions only the horizontal commandments here.

Probably because in the Gospel of Luke the horizontal is the fruit, the expression of the vertical. That's why in another place in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says, if you do these things to these people here, you do them to me.

But if the ruler wants to build a stairway to heaven, he'll need to do them all. And here is how the ruler answers. Verse 21. All this I have kept since I was a boy.

I've done them all, he says. There's nothing more to do, nothing more to learn. I've built the stairway to heaven. And so Jesus says, prove it.

[15:02] Verse 22. 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.

Prove it, Jesus says. you have said you've done them all, you have loved God with all your heart, and loved your neighbor as yourself. Prove it. Sell everything, give to the poor as an expression of your horizontal love.

You have loved your neighbor as yourself, right? And then follow me as an expression of your vertical love towards God. Surely, if you love God with all your heart, then God, the treasure in heaven, is enough for you.

Sell it all. Verse 23, when he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy.

He can't do it. Turns out, he hasn't loved God with all his heart, or loved his neighbor as himself. The stairway to heaven is an illusion.

[16:09] And so Jesus says, verse 24, 25, 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. It's impossible for a camel to enter the eye of a needle.

try it if you don't trust me. But the rich trying to enter the kingdom is even harder. Why?

Because both the Pharisee and the rich ruler depend on themselves, their own status, wealth, and self-righteousness to get into the kingdom.

And it's impossible to enter the kingdom of God using those means. It's impossible. And this is how impossible it is.

[17:12] Imagine, imagine if the ruler said yes to Jesus' command. He didn't love his money anymore. He wanted to love God and others.

So he sold everything and gave it all to the poor. What would happen? He would say to himself, or at least he would think, I did this.

I follow the command. I succeeded. Thank you. Thank you, God, that I am not like those other rich people who depended on their wealth and hoarded material treasure on earth. And then he would not feel the need to follow Jesus.

He would think he could save himself using his obedience. He is self-sufficient now. He doesn't need God. and then he became the Pharisee.

Impossible, isn't it? 16th century theologian John Calvin says, the human heart is a factory of idols. We destroy one idol, in this case, wealth, and we produce another, self-righteousness.

[18 : 29] this is why if we try to strive for the kingdom in ourselves, we fail miserably. It's impossible.

We can't do it. We can't build a stairway to heaven. In fact, the last time human beings tried to build a stairway to heaven was the Tower of Babel.

And it was done not out of obedience, but out of pride. It's impossible to enter the kingdom using anything from ourselves. Our moral uprightness, our wealth, our status, our intelligence, impossible. And so, in verse 26 to 27, those who heard this asked, who then can be saved? Jesus, it's impossible. Jesus replied, yes, but what is impossible with man is possible with God.

It's impossible for humans to build a stairway to heaven and to enter into the kingdom. But God has made it possible. How? We can't get up.

[19 : 42] So, God came down in the person of Jesus and he lived a perfect life loving God with all his heart and all his mind and all his strength because he is the beloved son of God.

And he loved his neighbor as himself. He loved even his enemies perfectly. He did it all.

The only one who did it all. And then he died for our sins. And this answers our previous question about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Can someone so morally upright like the Pharisee be rejected by God? Yes. Because his moral uprightness is not enough to meet God's standard of good.

To love God with all ourselves? To love our neighbor as ourselves? Impossible. All the time? Impossible. Even the most morally upright person can't do it.

[20 : 52] sin. But can someone so sinful be made righteous just by begging for mercy? Yes.

In Jesus. Because Jesus has died and he has paid the punishment. The tax collector prayed, have mercy on me, atone for me.

Isn't that what Jesus has done? Jesus built the stairway to heaven. In fact, he is the stairway to heaven.

And he gives it to us if we follow him. Because if we follow him, we get in Jesus. And that's why after Jesus' death and resurrection in the book of Acts, when the people ask the same question, what must we do?

The answer is repent and be baptized. That's all we need. Repent, which means recognize that you are sinners.

[21 : 59] You can't save yourselves. And be baptized. Because baptism is a symbol of your union with Christ. The stairway to heaven.

And today we witness the baptisms of King Sophia and Jundi. And that is what baptism symbolizes. Dying to our sins in Jesus' death so we no longer have to pay for our sins.

And rising to new life in Jesus' resurrection. And thus we inherit all that Jesus has achieved in his life.

Friends, the kingdom of God is not achieved. it received because it has been achieved by Jesus alone. So what about us?

Are we still striving to enter the kingdom of God using our own righteousness? Or do we recognize our helplessness and beg God for mercy?

[23 : 09] do we think, oh, I'm a good person, I'm an upright citizen, I'll go to heaven when I die? Do we ever think, thank you God, thank you, that I'm not like those sinners who support the LGBTQ agenda and abortion?

Thank you that I'm better than them. Thank you God that I'm not like those addicts and gamblers. Or do we recognize that we too are sinners falling short of God's perfect glory?

And every day we ought to live a life of repentance and continually ask, have mercy on me, God, for I am a sinner and without your grace in Jesus, I can't do anything, I am worth nothing.

Are we assured that we enter the kingdom simply because of Jesus? Nothing else. We receive the kingdom, not strive after it.

That's great news, isn't it? And second, because we don't rely on ourselves or on anything we have, we can use everything for the sake of the kingdom.

[24 : 36] We don't need to sell everything like the ruler. What Jesus asked of him does not apply to all Christians. We don't need to sell everything, but we do need to use everything for the kingdom as a response to God's mercy.

That means if God puts it in our heart to use our money for the kingdom, we say, yes, Lord. if God puts it in our heart to use an empty bedroom in our house to sponsor an orphan, we say, yes, Lord.

If God puts it in our hearts to use our profession as a missionary overseas, we say, yes, Lord, even though that means potential danger.

Seventy more Christians have been found beheaded in Congo. last week, God might want us to go to dangerous places, and we say, yes, Lord.

Or even if we have to let our children go, so they have to go on a mission field, we say, yes, Lord. Because we don't put our hope in any of these things, we put all our hope in Jesus who has lived and died for us.

[25 : 57] and so we use them all for the sake of the kingdom. And if that sounds scary, it is. But listen to how the story ends in verse 28 to 30.

Peter said to him, Lord, 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.

Jesus affirms, yes, you have followed me and again you will receive. There is that word again, receive. Eternal life in the age to come in the new creation.

We don't have to strive for it. We can receive it. And here on this earth, a family, a church, a bigger one. Those who have abandoned all hope in what they have shall receive a lot more through the loving community of the church where people give and receive, love and be loved, comfort and be comforted.

So let's pray now. thank you for the reminder, Lord, that we are sinners and we can't achieve the kingdom of eternal life by ourselves.

[27 : 29] But we thank you as well that Jesus has come down here to achieve it all for us and so we receive it from him.

In Jesus' name we thank you and we pray. Amen.