

Justified by God

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Preacher: Cedric Moss

[0 : 00] Psalm 32. Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

! For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, your hand was heavy upon me.

My strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found. Surely in the rush of great waters they shall not reach him.

You are a hiding place for me. You preserve me from trouble. You surround me with shouts of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.

[1 : 11] I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Luke 18, verses 9 through 14. 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, extortionist, unjust, adulterous, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week.

[2 : 18] 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.

Here ends our scripture readings for today. Thank you very much, David. I want to begin this morning by asking a question. It's not a question to be answered out loud, but to be answered in the quietness of our hearts.

The question is this. On what basis does anyone make it to heaven? Or to put it another way, how are people saved?

And it's legitimate to ask the question either way, because only those who are saved make it to heaven. And all things considered, friends, this is the most important question that we'll ever consider in this life.

[3 : 43] There is no more important question than this question. And this passage that we come to this morning in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 to 14, we find the answer to this question.

And I want to consider what this answer is, because really in this passage we find what the answer is and what the answer is not.

But before we do that, would you bow in a moment of prayer with me? Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that in your mercy you brought us to this place.

But although we all made a decision to be here humanly speaking, you're the one who providentially works in our lives. And you have brought us to experience all that we have experienced and will experience this morning.

Lord, most of all, you have brought us here that we would hear your voice in the preaching of your word. Lord, you speak to us this morning.

[5 : 15] And Lord, you know where each one of us stands in our relationship with you. And I pray that wherever we stand, we will hear your voice.

I pray, Lord, that you would use me as an instrument in your hands. And I pray that all that is said and done this morning will be for the honor and glory of your great name.

It's in Christ's name we pray. Amen. No doubt some of you are familiar with this parable that Jesus taught about the Pharisee and the tax collector.

But I suspect some of you might be hearing it for the first time. But whether you're hearing it for the umpteenth time or you are hearing it for the first time, does any part of this parable surprise you? My guess is that few of you, if any of you, are surprised by anything in Luke's account of this parable that Jesus told almost 2,000 years ago.

[6 : 29] But this morning I want to point out that this parable is very surprising. It was surprising to the people who comprised the original audience to whom Jesus told it.

To our modern heirs, it might be interesting. But in Jesus' day, it was surprising. And I pray that by the end of this sermon, we would all find it surprising.

But to help us to see the surprise in the parable, a little bit of background is needed. First, the parable is a short story that tells a moral or a spiritual lesson.

And Jesus used parables extensively throughout his ministry on the earth. He used parables to teach about what the kingdom of God was like and what the kingdom of God was not like, what the kingdom of God was all about.

And in the day of Jesus, the prevailing view was that people who were religious were righteous, and they were the ones who were on their way to heaven. And people who were not religious were on their way to hell.

[7 : 51] And in the day that Jesus spoke this parable, the best example of a righteous person was a Pharisee. And the best example of an unrighteous person was a tax collector.

And Jesus used these two characters in this parable that we are considering this morning to teach us an important question about how people are made right with God.

But it's important to see that Jesus didn't tell this parable in a vacuum. He didn't tell it based on a whim. He told this parable purposefully to a select group of people who were before him.

And Luke tells us this in verse 9. Look again at verse 9. And you'll see the reason. Luke says, He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

So Luke tells us that Jesus directed the parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and they treated others with contempt.

[9 : 11] But while Luke tells us why Jesus told the parable, the original audience didn't know that. Luke is narrating something for us and he introduces it to us.

But those who were standing before Jesus on that day, Jesus just spoke the parable. He knew why he was speaking the parable, but they didn't know why he was speaking the parable. We know why he spoke the parable because Luke tells us why he spoke the parable.

But those who were before Jesus that day had to wait until the end of the parable to see the surprise and to understand why Jesus told the parable.

And friends, if we truly hear what Jesus says this morning, we would be surprised. For those who might be taking notes, I've organized the sermon under two simple headings.

And they're based on the two characters in the parable. The first one is the Pharisee. In the day of Jesus, the Pharisees were considered to be the most righteous people in society.

[10 : 24] They zealously sought to keep the Ten Commandments and all the other laws of Moses. And they even went beyond that and they created 600 other laws which they committed themselves to keeping.

And in this parable, Jesus portrays the Pharisee as the Pharisees generally portrayed themselves. Notice how the Pharisee is portrayed. Notice, first of all, his posture. We're told in verse 11 that the Pharisee stood by himself. He didn't want to stand by other people because he assumed that he was better than them.

He was certainly better than the tax collector. Who was at the temple. And notice, second, his prayer. He began by comparing himself to others and listing the sins they committed and declaring himself to be better than them.

He declared that he was not like extortioners or the unjust or adulterers. He even compared himself to the tax collector.

[11 : 35] And the sense that Jesus wanted to give was that the tax collector could hear the Pharisee. And so the Pharisee says, I am not as this tax collector, meaning that he was nearby.

The idea is that he could hear the Pharisee pray. The Pharisee didn't say, I'm not like that tax collector, somebody in the distance, but he said, I'm not like this tax collector, meaning that the Pharisee, sorry, the tax collector certainly would have been in airshort, he could hear the prayer of the Pharisee.

And not only did the Pharisee pat himself on the back for the specific sins he didn't commit, he also patted himself on the back for the sins, for the specific righteous things that he engaged in.

He said he fasted twice per week. And to see the extent of the discipline and the zeal of this Pharisee, at that time, you were only required to fast twice per year.

Sorry, once per year. Once per year. And that was on the Day of Atonement. And so here we have this Pharisee, he is fasting twice per week when he was only required to fast once per year.

[13 : 04] In the hearing of those who were before Jesus, they would have thought, wow, what self-denial. They would have marveled at this Pharisee who was fasting twice per week.

He boasted about his tithing. He said he tithed 10% of everything. And what's remarkable about the Pharisees is the Pharisees, many of them in that day, they even tithed their food.

So they would go to the, they would go to the ground and they would get the produce, tithe off that, and then they would get their food and they would tithe off that. They would try to be so exact.

They would go into their gardens and they would look at the herb and try to see the increase and they would try to determine what's 10% of that, something they were not required to do. And so not only did this Pharisee live a morally pure life, he went above and beyond the requirements of the law in areas like fasting and tithing.

The second character that Jesus used to make his point is the tax collector. As the Pharisee was the iconic example of a righteous person, the tax collector was the iconic example of an unrighteous person in Jewish society in that day.

[14 : 31] Being a tax collector in Jesus' day required a special kind of person. tax collectors were the most despised, they were among the most despised people in Jewish society.

They were viewed as traitors because they had sided with the Romans who occupied the Jewish lands and they were collecting taxes on their behalf.

And the common practice was that tax collectors would collect far more taxes than were legitimately owed and they kept the rest for themselves. And the Romans didn't care so long as they got the taxes they wanted, they could care less what the tax collectors did with the difference.

And there was no exact way of determining taxes. They didn't have exact methods of doing it. They did as they pleased and the Romans didn't care that they were enriching themselves.

And so tax collectors were seen as traitors. They were seen as the ones who sided with the Roman authorities. They were viewed as greedy and dishonest and lacking in character.

[15 : 44] And evidently, in Jewish society, tax collectors were identifiable. That would be the only way that the idea of the Pharisee being able to recognize this other person in the temple coming to pray as a tax collector.

And so tax collectors were isolated. They were rich. But they were isolated and they were despised. So what's surprising in this parable? Well, the first surprise is that a tax collector went to the temple. That was laughable in Jesus' day because the last place that a tax collector would be thought to be found is in the temple. People could see him going to pray, that is.

People could see him going to the temple maybe to harass someone for taxes, but certainly not to pray. In fact, in Jesus' day, it was not even normal for ordinary people to be going into the temple to pray.

[16 : 54] But what was not surprising was that was the way the tax collector approached God in his prayer. That was not surprising. He approached God as one who was aware that he was a sinner.

He stood far off. He was at the back of the temple. He didn't feel worthy to even lift up his eyes toward heaven. Instead, as an expression of shame and contrition before God, he beat his breast and said, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

He knew he had no good works to commend, and he didn't focus on himself and compare himself to others like the Pharisee did. He knew he was a sinner, and he knew he needed to be made right

with God.

So knowing all that we know about tax collectors in the day of Jesus, what would cause a tax collector of all people to go to the temple to pray?

Or to relate the question to our day, what would cause anyone who we believe is far away from God to seek the Lord?

[18:12] To seek the Lord as in walking, perhaps, in a church that they have not graced perhaps for decades in their lives. What would cause a person to seek the Lord?

The reality is that sometimes unexpected people seek the Lord. sometimes some of the people that we believe are so far from God, some of the people we believe have no interest in God seek the Lord.

And why do they do that? Why does anyone, why would someone like a tax collector who could be out collecting money with all of his friends and all of his colleagues, why would he show up to the temple to pray?

Friends, the witness of Scripture is a left to ourselves. We cannot and therefore will not see our sin and we will not see our need for God's mercy.

And so the only reason that anyone would seek the Lord is because God has moved on his or her heart in mercy and caused him or her to see his sin and need for mercy.

[19:42] That's the only reason. That is the only reason. That is the only reason that anyone seeks the Lord. But while it was a surprise that the tax collector went to the temple to pray, Jesus shared with the crowd an even bigger surprise.

And it's found in verse 14 as he concluded the parable. Look again in verse 14 at what Jesus says. I tell you, this man, referring to the tax collector, 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. I think it's important to recognize that Jesus is not just talking about pride and humility.

He is not just giving us some rule for living, some noble rule that we should seek to follow about being humble versus being proud. No, instead, Jesus is telling us something about the kingdom of God and about how people like you and me are made right with him.

the big surprise for them was that this tax collector, this despised one in society, that this one who would go to the temple and cry out for mercy walks away justified when the iconic example of righteousness in their society walks away unjustified.

[21:39] this in their hearing was shocking. It was shocking.

How could a despised, greedy, caraculous tax collector simply walk into the temple and pray, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, and leave the temple accepted by God and justified by God?

God. And the Pharisee is rejected by God. This parable is about how we can be justified in the sight of God.

It's how people are accepted by God. Those who come to God believing in their good works and their self-righteousness will cause themselves to be rejected by God.

For those who humble themselves before God, acknowledging that they are sinners, that they have no righteousness of their own, they will be accepted by God.

[22:57] And so this morning, if you're feeling good about yourself, about the good things you do and the bad things you don't do, and that is your confidence for acceptance before God, and the reason that you believe that when you die you'll go to heaven, friend, you then would be a modern day example of the Pharisee in the parable.

Or to put it another way, if you place salvation value on the righteous things you do, and on the sinful things you don't do, then you're a modern day version of the Pharisee in this parable, and you will find no justification before God.

Scripture plainly says to us in Romans 3.20 that by the works of the law, no human being would be justified in the sight of God. And so no amount of doing what the law commands and not doing what the law forbids will justify us in the sight of God.

And the reason is that we cannot perfectly keep the law. The reason is that if we are able to keep the law to 99.99999 percent perfection, that's not good enough for a holy God whose standard is perfection.

But on the other hand, if you are aware that you have no personal righteousness to commend to God, if you see yourself as someone who is totally and wholly dependent on God's mercy to be

justified in his sight, to make it to heaven, and you cry out to him for mercy, then you are a modern-day version of the tax collector in this parable.

[24 : 56] And to be sure, it doesn't mean that one has to be living a sinful life. Not at all. You might be a morally upright person, you might be seeking to do what is right every single day, but in order to be like this tax collector, we have to see our acts of righteousness, as what the Bible describes them as, filthy rags.

in the sight of a holy God. It is not until we recognize that there is nothing good about us, nothing good in us, nothing good outside of us that we can do, that is how we come to a position before a holy God like that tax collector and recognize I need God's mercy.

I need God's mercy. mercy. That is the only way. Friends, the only path to being justified before God and accepted in His sight is the path of mercy.

mercy. But there are people who try another path. They try the path of merit. They try the path of merit like the Pharisee. I do all these good things and I don't do all those bad things and I'm not like all those other people.

And they try to merit what cannot be merited. They try to merit the salvation that God gives freely to repentant sinners. The Bible teaches us that all of us without exception have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and this includes self-righteous people like the Pharisee.

[26 : 46] We're all sinners. The best of us are all sinners and the only path that justifies sinners before God is the path of mercy.

And mercy is God withholding from us the punishment that our sins deserve. Mercy is a holy God who cannot overlook sin withholding the penalty of sin from deserving sinners like you and me but he doesn't do it in a vacuum.

He does it because he has poured out his wrath for sin on his son on the cross so that all those who put their trust in him he's able to forgive them on the basis of what Christ has done on the cross that Christ has absorbed the punishment for those sins.

and the good news is that all those who put their trust in Jesus Christ will know the joy of salvation the joy of salvation that the psalmist David rejoices about in Psalm 32.

David a man who when we often think about him think most of us we tend to think more about the notorious sins he committed his adultery with Bathsheba his murder of her husband and yet here he is writing in Psalm 32 the joy and the blessing of knowing forgiveness when he says blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven whose sin is covered blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit these are the words of King David he knew firsthand the blessedness of God's forgiveness and this is true for all of us who put our trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins and so this morning it doesn't matter who you are it doesn't matter what sins you may have committed if like the tax collector in this parable you honestly acknowledge before the

[29 : 14] Lord that you are a sinner and come to him humbly and sincerely seeking his mercy you'll receive it scripture is very clear all those who come to God he will turn none of them away and coming to God is not coming in front of a building coming to God is not reciting a sinner's prayer no one led the tax collector in this parable in a sinner's prayer but God moved on his heart and convicted him of his sin and he cried out for mercy from God and this is the promise to all who would cry out to the Lord to all who would call on his name and that can be done in the quietness of our hearts where we find ourselves this morning but first it is to recognize that we have nothing that we can bring of merit to a holy

God because our best deeds are filthy in his sight and that we are to to to to to!

! I when you get my age and the age of my classmates you attend more funerals tend to think of death more we find ourselves perhaps visiting the hospital more and we see others who are near to death and the reality is that one way or the other whether the Lord comes in glory or he calls us in death all of us will stand before him and we need to be found with the righteousness that he accepts which is the righteousness that he freely gives us and truth be told we need to be ready for both of them we need to be ready for the

Lord's coming in glory we need to be ready for the day that he calls us in death and so this morning what I know many of us have trusted in Jesus and those of us who have trusted in Jesus we know the joy of salvation and we also have a desire to see others who do not know the Savior to come to know the Savior and so this morning if you're here present or you are watching online I say to you find yourself like this tax collector and recognize that you have no merit before a holy God in and of

yourself it is only the mercy that he offers to us that gives us the hope of eternal life and a hope of being with him forever and so I say to you if you don't know Jesus cry out to him like this tax collector and say

God be merciful to me a sinner and there's any desire in your heart to do that this morning rejoice because God is already at work friends we are so lost in sin and trapped in sin that left to ourselves we would not see our sins and left to ourselves we would have no desire for God's mercy so if God is working your heart this morning hand out a blessing and respond and say God be merciful to me a sinner let's pray Father we thank you for the good news of the gospel that has come to us through Jesus Christ thank you Lord for those of us who have come to know your mercy and we ask that you would move on the hearts of all those who are outside of

[33 : 51] Jesus Christ God would you convict them of sin convict them of righteousness convict them of judgment to come we ask that you would do this in Jesus name amen amen