

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

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[0 : 00] Well, please turn back with me to the passage we read, if your Bible's with you, whatever devices you have, whether paper or otherwise. We're turning to Luke 18, verses 9 to 14, the well-known passage that I'm sure you've read many times, maybe even heard many times.

But the Word of God isn't exhausted in the telling of what Jesus teaches about being right with God. As we see the great words of the tax collector, the man who craved mercy, who sought mercy, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, in contrast to the man who sought no mercy from God, the Pharisee. And then as we continue to think about this whole theme of mercy, to see the Saviour who gives mercy, the Saviour who shows mercy. On Sunday evening, in our service on Sunday evening, we were exploring the great truth of the God of all grace.

The God who shows his favour, who shows his undeserved grace to those who are his. God who freely gives to his people his love, his saving grace, his choosing love, his blessings in love, his blessing of salvation.

[1 : 27] God who in his grace gives life in all its fullness. But we were also reminded last Sunday evening, not just of God's grace, but of God's mercy.

That attribute of God that really shows God's goodness, God's goodness to those who are in distress because of their sins. That mercy that comes from the God of all mercies.

It's that mercy that reaches out to the repentant sinner. The one who knows he's saved but comes to God, that God would touch his life, that God would show pity on him as he repents of his sins. And the repentant sinner coming before God, craving his mercy. Craving that God would keep from him what he deserves. God's wrath and God's anger.

And it's really that aspect of who God is and his mercy. That's what we're going to look at this morning. And well, as you see there, this great short parable. But this parable that teaches us so much about a right relationship with God.

[2 : 40] As we see it, so on the screen there, as you see again, the man who sought no mercy, the Pharisee, the man who craved mercy, the tax collector, and the Savior, the Lord Jesus, who shows his mercy.

So what about the man who sought no mercy? Well, you've read the passage and you know that there's nothing more contrary and opposite to grace than graceless arrogance.

You know, that arrogance that's seen especially in self-righteousness. You know, that righteousness, that self-righteousness that really draws attention to yourself.

That attitude that places self at the center of your life and has no respect for God, has no respect for others, has no humbling of self before God, and absolutely no concern about others at all.

Not even, in fact, the very self. No concern to be humbled before God. It's that graceless arrogance that Jesus wants us to see in all its ugliness.

[3 : 52] That mindset that actually shows the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of any life that seeks to please God with some kind of, you know, show of self-righteousness.

But in fact, shows that that person is utterly, utterly devoid of true saving grace. And so Jesus here in this parable, he brings out really two aspects of mankind.

Two aspects that, in fact, would have absolutely shocked those who heard what Jesus was saying. You know, Pharisees were seen to be the religious supreme people, the elite, people who were expected to know all about God, all about what it means to honor God, whereas the tax collectors were despised.

And yet, as you see in the parable, it's the Pharisee who's condemned by Jesus and the tax collector who's seen to be right with God. But what do we see then in the parable?

Well, we see, first of all, this man who sought no mercy from God, this man who thought he could earn approval from God by all the right things that he did, the man who thought he had no need of mercy from God.

[5 : 17] He was so super spiritual. He had no sense of sin in his heart. He had no sense of needing the pity of God and that pity to be relieved of his sin and even the guilt of sin.

He was the religious leader of the day. This Pharisee going to the temple, doing what he did for, I'm sure, many years, engaging in prayer, the posture of prayer.

But notice, doing it in a spirit of pride. 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 I get. Here's a man who's so well educated. He's educated in Jewish law.

He's educated in Jewish practice. He's a ruler of the synagogue. And he keeps to the rules of that place of worship.

[6 : 19] He keeps to the rules to the nth degree. He's got no concept of the need for God's mercy. And he thinks he's doing all the right things. Well, he's praying.

He's fasting. He's giving a tenth of all his money to the synagogue. And what more could he do to win God's favor? He's doing it all as we think.

But by the very words that we're hearing in that prayer, he actually condemns himself. Because he's showing that graceless arrogance in his refusal to call on the God of mercy for mercy.

Because, as we'll see more closely when we look at the tax collector's prayer, See, calling on God for mercy shows that you know that you're a sinner.

And you know that you're lost unless God shows you the mercy of forgiveness for your sins. And you'll call on God to keep you. To keep you from what you deserve.

[7 : 20] You'll call on God to keep you from his wrath. And when you're calling on God for his mercy, you'll show that you know that God is a God of justice. You'll know that God is absolutely just in dealing with sin.

And when you're calling God for his mercy, you'll show that, yes, you truly do desire and crave his forgiveness for all the many times you've been focused on self.

For unjust condemning of others. Self-righteous arrogance. The sin of relying on your own works. Rather than relying on God's perfect work in the Lord Jesus.

But you see, the Pharisee here, he asked for no mercy from God. He was so blind to himself. He was so blind to self-righteousness.

He was so blind in his, even in his unjust condemning of others. Even condemning that other man that was praying in the temple. He was so blind to his own arrogance and relying on his so-called good works to please God.

[8 : 28] As we read there, as Jesus said, just prior to his telling the parable, the Pharisee was showing that attitude of heart who trusts in themselves.

They trust that they're righteous in themselves. And at the same time, treat others with contempt. And for that, seeking no mercy from God, that Pharisee would be given no mercy from God.

And that's a warning. That's a warning to each one of us. Get rid of your self-righteousness. Get rid of everything that thinks that you, you know, you don't need to call on God for mercy.

I need to call on him for mercy each day. You need to call on him for mercy, for God to forgive you your sins. Because his mercy shields you from his wrath.

It's that mercy that reveals that God is good. Good to those who cry out to him for mercy. As the second man in the parable, the tax collector, the man who was utterly distressed because of his sins.

[9 : 36] This man who craved mercy, 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.

Just in your mind's eye, picture that scene. The temple there in Jerusalem. And then all of a sudden this man appears. His head isn't lifted up to heaven.

His head is downcast. His whole demeanor coming into the temple is one of humility. That humbly coming before God in prayer. He doesn't look at anybody.

His whole business is with the Lord to whom he comes before in prayer. And no doubt he's a very well-known person in the community.

A tax collector. Well, if he's a tax collector, he's going to work for the Roman occupiers. And if he's working for the Roman occupiers, he's going to be sneered at by others who don't like the Romans occupying the land.

[10:41] And he's going to be sneered at by the local businessmen who think that he shouldn't be working for the Romans in the first place. And think also that he's taken too much of his cut as the tax collector in his business.

So that man will be despised in the community. But that man's business that morning isn't in tax collecting. That man's business isn't with those who are accusing him of all sorts of things. That man's business is prayer. Prayer to God. Because he knows he's a sinner. And he knows he's committed sin against God. And he knows that he deserves God's wrath and God's curse. But he's pleading mercy from God. He's in absolute distress of his heart. Because he knows that sin's caused that distress. And he knows that there's no one else to whom he can go to for relief. I mean, he knows that his condition is absolutely distressing. And he knows that he's lost unless God shows him mercy.

[11:47] And so in that posture of humility, as your head is bowed, as we do in our own prayers, our head bowed in reverence before God. Well, there he is, his head's bowed. And he beats his hand against his breast there.

At that act of despising of himself. And he utters these great words of the repentant sinner. The sinner who's craving mercy from God. God be merciful to me, a sinner.

There's nothing self-congratulatory in these words that he's giving to God. There's nothing, you know, of any indication that I'm better than the other person. Look at that other person.

There's nothing of any disdain of another person in this prayer. There's no, you know, calling on God. Look at me, how religious I am. Look at all the many good things I've done.

No. All that you're hearing there in that short prayer, but that prayer that reaches heaven itself, what we're seeing is a heart that knows that God will give mercy to calm his troubled soul.

[12:53] He knows that God is the God who can show pity on him. And he's calling upon God for his mercy. You know, Jesus has given us in this parable, he's given us this example.

It's not for us to somehow pity this man for his condition. Jesus has given us this example to teach us, to teach us about our own condition, our pitiable condition before God.

And to know that the only remedy for the wretched condition of our hearts is to come before God, to come before him. And to know that by his mercy, he soothes that aching heart.

And he heals that broken heart, that heart broken by sin. So, what do we learn then from this tax collector's prayer? Well, of course, we learn about the reality of sin in the human heart.

And you learn that sin has to be acknowledged before God. And you learn that God is willing to hear the repentant sinner come before him and cry out for mercy.

[14:02] But, of course, the Pharisee, he wouldn't recognize sin in his own life. I mean, the tax collector, he was so aware of sin. The sin that God hates.

The sin that God forgives him as mercy. That's what the tax collector knew. But what about you? Who do you associate with in that parable?

Do you associate with a Pharisee who sought no mercy from God? Or do you associate with a tax collector who cried out for mercy from God?

Well, just speak to your heart. Examine yourself. And ask yourself, the sin that you know in your heart, does that so distress you? That you know that you must cry to God for his mercy.

That you can't do anything else but call upon him. Or do you side with the Pharisee? The Pharisee who admitted of no sin before God.

[15:02] He admitted of no sin in his life. There was no distress in his soul for sin. But instead there was this, we might say, rather self-satisfied smugness.

It might have fooled those who were others who knew him as the Pharisee. It might have fooled them. But he didn't fool God. You know, one of the many blessings that I think we've had in lockdown, there's many blessings, but I think one of them, has been the opportunity, the time really to examine ourselves.

To look at our hearts. To test our hearts. And, you know, reflect on who we are in relation to God. You know, these months that we've spent, and thankfully we're getting through, are over.

These times when, you know, the times that we had the more time to reflect on our lives. Did you use these times to reflect on yourself?

Even the more to cry to God for mercy. That you were so much more aware that you are a sinner before God, and so much more aware of the need to cry out to God for mercy, and in crying out to God for his mercy, to be grateful to him.

[16:16] I pray that you use that time well. But don't, you know, don't let it pass by. Coming to this new chapter, in many ways, in the life of the church, the life of our nation.

Continue in that attitude of examining yourself, testing your heart, seeing if there's any sin within, and coming before God, the God of all mercy, and crying out to him.

You know, even if we look even beyond ourselves to others, there are many examples of others that teach us about examining itself and crying out to God for mercy.

And maybe I'll have mentioned this example before, but I'm going to do it again because I think it's worth repeating, worth bringing home this whole dependence on the believer, coming before God, coming before him for his mercies.

As I mentioned next weekend, God willing, I'll be up in the north end of Skye. I'll be taking communion services up there. God willing, we'll be having a communion service here on the 12th of September.

[17:23] But before that, I'm going to one of the places that I spent many, well, driving through anyway when we would drive from Uig up to Harris many, many times.

Anyway, in the autobiography of the late Professor George Collins, George Collins was the professor of church history at the Pre-Church College many decades ago, certainly in my own lifetime.

But anyway, Collins wrote an autobiography. And in that autobiography, he wrote of an elderly gentleman from, well, from the north end of Skye, a man called John Ross from the very far north, a place called Kilmaluig.

And Collins was taking a communion service in that part of Skye. And this old man, he was very ill actually. This man reminded Collins of a sermon that Professor Collins had preached many years before.

And actually Collins had forgotten what the sermon was. Collins had to be reminded of the sermon. And the text that Collins actually had preached from that morning, the morning of the service many years before, was this very text we have this morning.

[18:34] God be merciful to me, a sinner. And the old Skye man, as I say, was very, very ill. And he told Professor Collins that these words of the tax collector were actually the very first words, the very first real prayer that he ever uttered.

And as George Collins writes in his autobiography, it seemed that John Ross had never offered sincere prayer until the Holy Spirit had revealed his deepest need of God at the throne of grace. But John Ross wasn't finished in his great testimony of God's mercy and grace. He said to Collins these words.

He said, Oh, God be merciful to me, a sinner. He said these words. Many times I've used them since. I'm now in my deathbed, and they suit me still.

Even as he knew he was dying, he still prayed each day, God be merciful to me, a sinner. And whether it's a godly saint from the north of Skye, or whether it's a believer here in West Lothia, or indeed wherever in the world, the words that that tax collector, or certainly Jesus spoke of a tax collector saying 2,000 years ago, these words are still prayed.

[19:56] These words come from a heart that truly knows his or her deepest needs before God. And that person coming before the throne of grace for God's mercy.

Actually, we were reminded of that on Wednesday evening in our midweek meeting. We heard one of the passages we were looking at, Hebrews 4, 16, where the writer says, Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace.

You see, the prayer of the tax collector there in the temple in Jerusalem, that prayer suited him. That prayer suited that old man in Skye.

That prayer suits all who come before God seeking his mercy. That man in Skye, well, he's now in glory. He's now in glory. He knew the Lord as his saviour, and he beholds his saviour face to face. But what about you? Is that your prayer this morning? God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Well, what a Jesus reaction to all this.

[21:12] What's the verdict? What's the outcome from God's perspective in relation to the Pharisee and his mindset and the tax collector and his attitude to God?

Well, as we saw at that point, the saviour who gives mercy, Jesus saying, verse 14, 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.

This is Jesus speaking. This is Jesus speaking with authority, the authority of the Son of God.

He's the divine and only saviour because he says, I tell you, or I'm saying to you. This is not anyone speaking. This is the Lord Jesus.

And what he's saying then is truth. So if Jesus is speaking, we hear him closely because what he says has eternal implications for every one of us.

[22 : 16] Well, what's he saying? Well, look at what he is saying. He's saying the repentant sinner, the one who comes to the throne of grace and repentance of his sin, who looks for God's mercy, he'll receive God's mercy.

And the way that it's written in the passage, you can see it's God is giving his favour to the repentant sinner. It's God's, as opposed to what God does for the one who's not repenting.

We're seeing God's actions in response to these two people. So to the one, the person who comes before God in all humility, the one who seeks God's mercy and pardoning of his sins, he'll be declared justified.

He'll be declared right with God, righteous. It's that act of God towards the repentant sinner, the one who seeks God's mercy in forgiving of his sins.

Declared righteous before God means, as Jesus says here, that repentant sinner is going to be exalted, going to be lifted up. It's that great reversal.

[23 : 27] The person who couldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven, exalted to heaven. But the person who exalted himself, the Pharisee and all, like that Pharisee, who exalt themselves by their own reckoning of righteousness, well, as Jesus says, are going to be cast down.

But the person, the person who casts himself, casts herself in God's mercies, you're given mercy. Are you casting yourself in God's mercy?

Are you doing it each day? Are you coming before him pleading his mercies? Or are you just convinced of your own self-righteousness? And that even the very thought of crying out to God for mercy is just something that you wouldn't even think of.

Because those who in this life are so ashamed of their sins, those who can't even lift your eyes up to heaven, well, one day you will see the Lord Jesus in heaven itself.

And you'll know, as Peter wrote in his first letter, chapter 5, verse 6, where Peter said, humble yourselves, therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you.

[24 : 46] But those people who have no shame of sin, who've only got, we might say, self-conceit of the worst kind. That self-conceit of self-given righteousness.

I'm not going to know exaltation. Not any kind of being raised to glory unless they repent. But instead, as Jesus says, know eternal humiliation, and eternal condemnation by God.

I pray that you will be those who are truly humbling yourselves before God, crying out to him for mercy. I know that in due time, those who cry out to God for mercy will be exalted, brought into his heavenly kingdom.

For the humble are exalted. For the humble will reign forever and ever. And do so with the Lord Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

Let us pray. Our Lord, our God, our Heavenly Father, forgive us, Lord, our sins. Forgive us, Lord, for those times when we don't cry out for mercy.

[25 : 59] When rather we congratulate ourselves for whatever merits we think in ourselves, and yet fail to see that our very merits themselves are as filthy rags.

that Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to come before you and to know that you are the God of all mercies. Hear us as we continue in worship before you now.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.