

The Way of Pride

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Preacher: Rev. Will Gray

[0 : 00] So good morning, everyone. As we've just said, we're beginning a new series today called Walking with Jesus, where we'll look at six parables, six of these special stories that contrast different ways of living.

And these stories really ask us the question, what does it look like to walk with Jesus? And some of the answers may surprise us. And that's part of the point.

In these stories, Jesus challenges our pride and self-righteousness and calls us to walk with him in humble faith, relying on his grace and righteousness and being changed from the inside out so that we reflect God's love and mercy in our lives.

And we begin today with this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. This is really a story about righteousness. It's a story about righteousness.

And righteousness is a tricky thing to define or pin down. It's both moral and relational. A righteous person is someone who is approved by God, who is just and upright in their character, and who walks in a right relationship with him.

[1 : 23] And in this parable, Jesus reveals that those who receive God's righteousness are those who are broken by their sinfulness, who come to him with empty hands and humble hearts, seeking to receive his grace in Jesus Christ.

This is the foundational gospel truth we find in this story. So let's turn to the passage and unpack together what it means.

And you might want to follow along in your bulletin. It's Luke 18, verses 9 to 14. So in verse 9, we hear who Jesus is speaking to.

Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable, this story, to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Pride is a subtle disease, isn't it? It causes us to be confident in ourselves rather than in God, and it causes us to look down on others, on those we're called to love and serve.

[2 : 35] If you heard verse 9, if you read verse 9 and thought, that's good, it's not me, I'm not that person, unfortunately I have bad news for you.

This issue of pride, of self-righteousness, it's not something that was contained in just a few Pharisees in the first century. This is our story too.

This is the human story. We love to justify ourselves. And most of us are quite good at it as well. In preaching on this passage, Tim Keller points out that this desire for approval is universal.

One person may seek approval by crafting a perfect spotless identity online. Another may ride the waves of changing cultural trends.

Another might boast about their traditional values. And some of us here today might ironically thank God that we are like none of those people. But the point is that we want to be accepted.

[3 : 46] We need, there's something deep within us that needs to know that we will be found righteous, that we'll be accepted and loved. And so here's the question, where do we look for confidence?

Where do we look for righteousness? And that brings us to this brilliant little story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Two very different men who go up to the temple to pray, both looking for righteousness.

And to get inside this story, I want us to consider three Ps for each of these characters. The person, the posture, and the prayer.

The person, the posture, and the prayer. So we begin with the person. How would Jesus' first hearers have responded to Pharisees and tax collectors?

And it's probably good to start off by saying that it's probably very different than we would. We tend to look down on the Pharisees. We tend to see them as self-righteous hypocrites, the people who rejected and killed Jesus.

[4 : 56] Now, this isn't altogether fair or altogether false. It's certainly more complicated than this. But the point is that in the Jewish community, for Jesus' first hearers, the Pharisees were held in honor.

They were highly respected because of their commitment to scripture, their obedience to God's law and the Jewish traditions, and their desire for religious renewal.

And the Pharisee in this story, he fits the bill. I mean, in almost every respect, he's a good guy. And if we're honest, most churches would love to have this guy as a member.

I mean, think about it. He knows the scriptures. He's honest. He's faithful to his wife and family. He's generous in giving to the temple and to the poor.

He's disciplined in prayer and fasting. And I mean, we could work out some of the rough edges on his people skills once we get him in the door. But tax collectors, on the other hand, were hated.

[6 : 08] They were despised. They were lumped in with the worst sinners in society. They were seen as traitors who exploited their own people for personal gain and to prop up and support the pagan Roman Empire who were oppressing them.

On top of this, there's a good chance that the tax collector was actually guilty of everything that the Pharisee prayed about. Almost certainly extortion or theft and injustice, and possibly even adultery. If you were to ask a first century Jew, one of the people in Jesus' audience, which of these two men would be accepted by God?

It would be an easy answer. It's the Pharisee. Of course, it's the Pharisee. How could it possibly be the tax collector? And yet when we come to the end of the story, Jesus tells us that the tax collector went home justified rather than the Pharisee.

So what could possibly be lacking in this Pharisee that can be found in the tax collector? And our second P, posture, begins to answer that question.

[7 : 33] If you notice in the parable, both men stand alone, but for very different reasons. The Pharisee sets himself apart from the crowd because of his excellence.

He takes the place of honor near the altar where everyone in the crowd would be able to see his wonderful devotion as he lifts his eyes to heaven and prays to God.

But the tax collector's shame keeps him far away. He rightly considers himself unworthy to come before God's altar, to come into the presence of God and his people and pray.

It's possible he remembered Psalm 24. The tax collector doesn't think he measures up to this, and it's destroying him.

In his sorrow, he forgets about all customs, all respectability. He can't lift up his eyes to heaven. His eyes are downcast, and instead he beats his chest in a display of raw emotion that was normally reserved for grieving women at funerals.

[9 : 12] The Pharisee's posture conveys confidence, belonging, and pride.

The posture of the tax collector conveys sorrow, unworthiness, and shame. But finally, what do these two men actually pray?

The Pharisee thanks God that he's not like other people, including the tax collector. And in one sense, this is an entirely reasonable prayer.

I mean, these aren't exactly role models. Extortioners, the unjust, adulterers. If God in his grace keeps us from these destructive sins, that's something to be thankful for.

And yet his prayer reveals what is lacking in his spiritual life. Repentance, and an awareness of his need for God's saving grace.

[10 : 16] Did you notice that the Pharisee doesn't ask God for anything? He doesn't ask God for anything, because he doesn't think that he needs anything.

This is the man who trusts in himself that he is righteous and treats others with contempt.

He is confident that his morality, his status, makes him acceptable before God, but he's mistaken.

Now, what about the tax collector?

We already know that this man is deeply, painfully aware of his sin and unworthiness. And when he finally speaks, he doesn't actually say much, does he?

He says far less than the Pharisee. He has only one request. He says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[11 : 14] God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And this simple prayer draws us into the very heart of the gospel.

Because Jesus doesn't actually use the common word here for mercy. This tax collector isn't simply asking for God's favor or kindness.

He is asking for forgiveness. He's actually asking that God would atone for his sins. That he would provide a worthy sacrifice that could take away his guilt and make him righteous again, acceptable and reconciled to God.

Earlier in Luke 5, Jesus said that he came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. And in this beautiful moment, as Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem, as he's coming nearer and nearer to the cross, where he would be pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, where he would give up his life as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, Jesus tells this story about a lost and broken man who knows he is unworthy, unfit to come before God, and makes no plea, no defense, no justification for who he is or what he has done, but ask God for one thing, to forgive him, to atone for his sins, to make him righteous again.

And in a stunning turn of events, at least it certainly would have been stunning for the folks who are listening to Jesus, Jesus says that this man, the tax collector, went home righteous, justified, accepted by God, not the Pharisee.

[13 : 30] So to draw this together, what does this mean for our walk with Jesus? Well, one of the things that can certainly keep us from walking with Jesus is the belief that we need to help him out along the way.

Those of us who were raised in churches that preach the gospel likely know that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ. But there's this nagging thought, isn't it?

That it surely can't be that simple. Surely we have to bring something along for the journey as well. An acceptable amount of righteousness, or at least effort.

Because after all, God grades on a curve, right? So as long as we stay kind of above the class average, we hope we'll be okay. Maybe some spiritual disciplines.

They're very good things. Good references from neighbors or other church members. Maybe even our few hundred followers on social media. The thing is that that's not how it works.

[14 : 40] Our hands are not clean, and our hearts are not pure. We can't ascend the hill of the Lord. We're not worthy to stand in his holy place.

So then how can we receive righteousness from the God of our salvation? Well, we have to receive it like the tax collector. Like him, all that we can offer God is a broken and contrite heart that is grieved by our sin, and that desires to know the grace and goodness of our God.

And the good news is that God will not despise or reject this offering. He will not despise a broken and contrite heart. There's one line in the hymn Rock of Ages that I think sums this up beautifully. Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. This is the incredible gift and mystery of walking with Jesus.

We offer him our broken but repentant hearts, and he clothes us in the perfect righteousness of Christ and welcomes us into his family as sons and daughters.

[16 : 12] We come to him with empty hands, and he fills us with more than we could ask or imagine. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Amen.