

The Way of Pride (PM)

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[0 : 0 0] So, we're starting a new sermon series, which we're calling Walking with Jesus. It's going to take us into the fall. So we're listening to Jesus' parables on how to walk with him, ways that we can live our lives.

In the Bible, God's faithful people are described as those who walk with him. In Deuteronomy 30, just before the Israelites entered the Promised Land, Moses puts it like this.

So what exactly does walking with Jesus look like?

How do we choose life? And that brings us to our parable for tonight, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. So, verse 9, Jesus tells a parable.

What is a parable, you might ask? We got one answer for the kids, a story within a story. And a parable is an accessible, quick little story, something told to teach a particular lesson.

[1 : 4 6] Parables are teaching stories. Sometimes the lesson is easy to see, and other times less so. Parables teach us lessons, but the lessons are not just on any topic.

A parable is a teaching story which reveals something about reality we could not discover on our own. Parables are teaching stories which illuminate.

They are concerned with wisdom. We see the world rightly through the parables of Jesus. And that also means that parables are told to draw us into something, to participate in the reality being revealed.

You cannot unsee the revelation of a parable. It confronts and demands something from us. When you see it, when you understand what the parable is saying to you, all of a sudden, like King David before the prophet Nathan, you're on the hook.

You have to make a choice. So parables are teaching, illuminating invitations to participate in God's reality. Invitations to walk with Christ, the one who is the way, the truth, and the life.

[3 : 0 6] And so our parable tonight. So Jesus tells a parable. And he tells it to a particular audience, which reveals something of its purpose.

The people he is speaking to are those who trusted in their own righteousness, treating others with contempt. Sounds like a tough crowd. There is nothing quite like the arrogance of a self-righteous person.

Maybe you know a few. The sure sign of a self-righteous attitude is you look down on others. The other becomes, in some way, less than you.

Less intelligent, less responsible, less considerate, less creative, less productive, less reliable, less punctual, less interesting, less compassionate, less kind, less patient, less truthful.

You get the idea. It is inevitable we make comparisons between ourselves. But when self-righteousness creeps in, we take that observation and we turn it into an evaluation of that person's worth.

[4 : 10] We move from taking a stance about their actions to criticizing the person themselves. We stand in judgment over them and treat them with contempt.

In effect, we regret that God made them. Now, in our current moral climate, this happens on social media all the time with cancel culture.

And it's expressed very directly in the contempt of the Pharisee. We pray, God, thank you. I am not like the other men. Thank you that I am better than that.

And one consequence of this attitude is a personal focus on moral perfection. When we treat others with contempt, we ourselves become defined by our actions, lest we fall into the pit and join all those undesirable people below us, those folks we despise so much.

If the worth of others is determined by their behavior, the only way I can remain worthy is by earning it and staying on top. So I eat healthy, give to charity, volunteer my time, sort my recycling, get good grades, chase that promotion, work out regularly, dress, smile, support the right causes.

[5 : 29] It's a terrible treadmill of performance. But if you trust in your own righteousness, there is no other way to be. Another consequence of this attitude of self-righteousness is isolation.

When the Pharisee goes up to pray, in verse 11, you'll notice he is standing by himself. And his posture reflects his desire to be away from the others who don't measure up.

Because when the people around you don't measure up, you cut them off. What could they possibly offer you? Few can join the self-righteous person in this rarefied atmosphere of their perfect life.

And at the same time, another reason that self-righteousness isolates is because if or when you do fail, in your self-righteousness, you have no one to reach out to.

You need to build up a wall so that no one can find out about your failures. So you can maintain the illusion to yourself and to others, you're on the top of your game. You have control of your life, you're going places.

[6 : 37] To have the compassion or the support or the understanding of someone you think is below you, that would be unthinkable and the bitterest of blows.

In them, your own imperfect humanity would be reflected back to you. And from them, you receive a gift which you yourself did not possess. In self-righteousness, there is no vulnerability or humility, only isolation.

This is the first way, the way of pride, the way of death. Left to our own devices, this is exactly how the human heart operates.

We are all, in varying degrees, self-righteous. We all, at different times and in different ways, pray in our hearts, God, I thank you that I am not like that person.

I thank you that I am better than that. And we trust in our own good works. But there is another way.

[7 : 43] And Jesus shows it to us in this parable. It is the way of the tax collector, the loser. In Jesus' time, this sort of person lived on the fringes of society because they served as agents of the Roman Empire.

They collected taxes from the people of God to strengthen the assets of the oppressing nation. From the perspective of the Pharisee, the tax collector is a traitor, actively undermining his people.

So the tax collector stands humbly and in humiliation at a distance. From the center of the temple where the people are gathered for prayer.

There isn't exactly a modern equivalent for us today because we're not being ruled directly by a foreign nation. But it would be a bit like someone working for a predatory lending company that keeps people in poverty.

Or maybe a casino manager who's actively laundering dirty money. Undermining the local economy. Fully aware that he is a sinner. That people despise him. He hesitates to even approach the sanctuary.

[8 : 52] In his humility, he is not even able to lift his eyes as he prays. Instead, he cries out, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

Now, there are three things that I find really striking about this tax collector. The first is his honest admission that he is a sinner. He recognizes there are things he did which he ought not to have done and things he didn't do which he ought to have done.

which is why he is beating his breast, an ancient gesture of repentance and sorrow. He recognizes there is no health in him and he is in anguish.

And so, secondly, in his wretchedness, he asks God to have mercy upon him, miserable offender that he is. He recognizes his faults and recognizes that apart from God's good will, no one can be delivered.

But repentance is more than just recognizing you are wrong, that you are a sinner. Repentance also involves the making of right. And there is an interesting little detail in the original text, which is in Greek, that is worth paying attention to for just one moment.

[10 : 15] And I am very grateful to Will, over there, for reminding me of it when we chatted on Friday about this passage. The detail comes in that little word, mercy.

Have mercy on me, a sinner. Be merciful to me, a sinner. Another way to translate that would be God, graciously atone for me. Put me in right standing with you.

He is asking for forgiveness and reconciliation. And that brings us to the third thing I find very striking about this tax collector, which is that he stands at a distance from the temple.

The Pharisee presumed he had the right to enter God's presence because of his good works. But tellingly, once he's in, he stands alone. No one is there with him.

In contrast, the tax collector, this cheat, this traitor, he stands at a distance waiting to be made right with God so that he might approach and draw near to the Lord.

[11 : 28] Now, we were just in the songs of the Ascents recently as a congregation. And as I was reflecting on this tax collector, the psalm that immediately came to mind for me was Psalm 131.

So I'm going to read it for us now. Here it goes. O Lord, my heart is not lifted up.

My eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother.

Like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. And so the tax collector stands and he hopes.

He hopes he will be forgiven and delivered from his sins. Hopes that he might draw near to the presence of God. And then the parable ends.

[12 : 42] Or does it? It's a story within a story. Jesus himself steps into this man's hope and pronounces his forgiveness and tells his listener, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. The one who humbles himself will be exalted. Jesus himself, the one whose death atones for our sins and puts us in right relationship with God, answers the tax collector's prayer and proclaims this sinner justified.

And this is what it looks like to walk with Jesus. Not under our own strength, not trusting in our own righteousness, but in his abundant and great mercies.

Brothers and sisters, we are miserable sinners. sinners. We cannot trust in our own righteousness, but we can trust in the righteousness of Christ.

Because of him, we are atoned for. Because of him, we are forgiven. So let us walk with our Savior, bringing the message of his forgiveness wherever we go.

[14 : 05] To God be the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.