

Luke 18:9-14 "God, I Thank You That I'm Not Like ..."

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Some of you may have noticed that Old Dominion beat Virginia Tech yesterday. I figured that was a non-controversial football game to bring up. Big upset though. Back in March, there was an upset of historic proportions.

Underdog University of Maryland, Baltimore County, defeated top-seeded Virginia in the first round of the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

It never happened before. 16 seed over a 1 seed. After reviewing the two teams' resumes heading into the game, only about 2-3% of the country picked UMBC to win that game.

Most of them probably accidentally. This parable that we are going to look at in Luke 18 this morning is meant to be as shocking as that game.

[1 : 10] And it is hard for us because most of you know that when you hear Pharisee and tax collector, you expect Jesus to pick the tax collector to be on God's team because we know Pharisees are no good.

That's not the way it would have been in Jesus' day. Nobody thought that way. The Pharisees were esteemed as paragons of religious virtue.

You would have really liked them. They are the ones who were committed to God's word, who took His word seriously, who followed God's law.

On the other hand, even the outsiders hated the tax collectors. They didn't see them in the temple very often. If people listening to Jesus had to make a pick between the two, the Pharisee and the tax collector for a spiritual victory, at least 97% of them would have picked the Pharisee.

I want you to feel this surprising challenge from Jesus. So let me give you a modern day picture before we read the parable that He tells.

[2 : 26] Imagine that you were sent to Southwood on a Sunday morning and you were told there are two guys there named Bob. Random name, Bob. And only one of them is a Christian.

If you pick the right one, you get a hundred bucks. You win the game. So you show up early and you ask for Bob. Immediately, you're pointed to a long-time elder in the church.

He's actually just coming out of the prayer room where He has been even before you arrived. You start to look Him over, you notice there's a check tucked in His Bible.

It's there every week, actually. And you think, wow, He looks like a pretty good guy. You start to ask around about Him. You hear that He's actually a pillar of the community.

He's run a very successful business for many years. He's an outspoken Christian in the community. His business supports many of the poor and needy with its profits.

[3 : 28] You're about ready to go ahead and submit your vote. But you ask if there are other bobs around. Oh yeah, there is another guy visits pretty often.

He's never joined the church. You learn later that he's not sure they'd have him if he wanted to. He doesn't seem to be around today. Right as you're about to give up, someone says, there he is!

Bob's coming in late. He smells like freshly mown grass. In fact, you and Elder Bob both recognize him as the guy you drove by that morning on the way to church.

He's been doing odd jobs around town for years. Started this and that. And someone whispers to you that the last business he started up actually was shut down for doing something illegal with taxes.

That's all you've got to go on. You need the prize money. Which one is the Christian? Whom do you pick? Now turn to Luke 18 at verse 9.

[4 : 41] Kids, I know that sometimes it's hard to listen to me for 30 minutes anytime, especially on Sundays. Can I tell you something? The most important time for you to listen, the whole time for you to be listening really carefully is right now.

Because we're going to read God's word. And that's so important. This morning, kids, if you like to draw, it might help you to draw a picture of what Jesus talks about of two different men. Listen as Jesus describes them and see if you can draw what you think they might look like. And I'll tell you something else to add to the picture a little bit later. But right now, just pay attention to God's holy word.

Jesus 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.

[5 : 51] Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. 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.

Let's pray together. Father, we come to ask for your help. Holy Spirit, soften our hearts.

Help us to hear even things that are hard for us to hear. Work on our hearts. We pray that we might trust you more. Love our Savior more.

In his name, amen. Amen. Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

[7 : 09] Is Jesus talking to me? A recent survey of U.S. college seniors asked them how they did getting along with other people.

Were they below average or above average? Exactly how good were they at doing life? 60% put themselves in the top 10% of people.

25% put themselves in the top 1%. They're pretty crowded up at the top. Hard to squeeze 25% into 1%.

We have this tendency to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, don't we? It's even worse on Sundays.

Sundays, when I was a kid, found my travel baseball team in the tournament championship almost every weekend.

[8 : 15] Without me. My parents decided that in an effort to follow Jesus, prioritize the worship of God, the community of His people, and the rest provided by that day, that I wouldn't play then.

My heart often took that as an opportunity for spiritual pride. I mean, after all, when you look at the guys on the team, most of them didn't even go to church.

Then a few of them went to church and played in the game afterwards. And then there was me, the holiest one left.

I really liked that feeling. And that others thought it about me too. So in high school, I avoided things that my friends got into.

And I especially looked down on them when they got caught. I was above that stuff. I thought. I was focused on winning character awards and out-arguing them on theology.

[9 : 20] That I could handle. Certainly, I did not smoke, drink, chew, or go with any girls who do. I didn't even date anyone.

No comments as to why that might have developed. But I got to college. And while my friends slept in, I walked over to the hall kitchen each morning for a quiet time with my Bible.

And this nice little commentary book I happened to find on my shelf still. I felt pretty good about myself.

And yes, I was cool too. Mercifully, during that time and over the years, God has humbled me and is humbling me.

His word will do that. Even to the proud. He's brought me face to face with my heart so that I knew for sure I wasn't better than anyone else.

[10:32] Even if I was still pretty decent at making myself look like I was. But this tendency to spiritual pride, thinking I'm pretty good or at least better than the next guy, is a big part of my story. It still nags at me and something I wrestle with. We were talking last week in our small group about where our selfishness shows up in our marriages. It's different for all of us. For me, I still love to out-serve my wife so that she owes me something and I feel superior to her. I'm often serving me by serving her. In my spiritual pride, I like to feel like I'm right. And at least a little bit higher up so that I can look down on someone else. That means Jesus spoke this parable for me. Maybe for you too. It's a really serious issue though, even though we've chuckled a couple of times.

[11:44] Because spiritual pride can be a deadly disease. Only one of these men is on God's team eternally. And it's not the one we might think.

We dare not be presumptive about ourselves. We must take an honest look at what Jesus says. So what do we learn here about spiritual pride? First, it finds comfort in external morality and ignores the heart. Verse 11. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am 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. It sounds good at first, right? The guy's going to church and praying to God. Thanking God for his own goodness that he performs better than others.

[12:55] The Pharisee makes a list, doesn't he? I love lists. How is he not like other people? How does he know that he's on God's side and he can talk with them?

Well, no extortion. No dishonest practices. No adultery. No filthy tax collecting. On the other hand, fasting 100 times a year when God's law requires one time. And tithing off of everything. Not merely crops, maybe herbs too. Sounds pretty good, right? A list like that sounds like most southern evangelical Christianity. Ask many of us what makes a good Christian. It's a pretty good list. Does God want him to quit tithing? To start extorting and committing adultery? No. No. No. But let me ask us something. What is he missing? It's the heart, right?

[14:06] You don't hear any of that. All these things could be true of him and he could be full of anger, lust, envy, greed, and many more things.

See, the activities weren't the problem for me either, right? I don't regret a moment of keeping the Lord's day holy.

Avoiding immorality. I don't regret a single morning in God's Word. And what he's taught me through that. Serving my wife. Y'all, good commands from a good God. Where'd the problem come in? My heart. My heart, deceptive and wicked, twisted those things from what they were supposed to be.

What markers for me of my need for God and of his good care for me as his child that I could trust him. And it took them and it twisted them into markers for me and others of my spiritual success.

[15:17] Pride. Pride does that in our hearts. It's ugly. And it's not that actions are irrelevant to him, but God cares deeply about what's going on in our hearts, doesn't he?

Focusing on external lists can lead to pride, especially when we write the lists. It covers over an ugly internal reality.

Jesus said as much in Matthew chapter 23, Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. It's the heart first that flows into the actions.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness.

[16:19] So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Yikes!

The heart is the priority to God, for from it flow the issues of life, our actions and our words. When we really look honestly at our heart instead of merely the external morality, we are sure to see our sin as the tax collector does.

I see my need for God here, not my success for God, he says. Okay, kids, if you've drawn two men, or if you're still working on that, now draw two hearts.

They're different, aren't they? What's in the Pharisee's heart and what's in the tax collector's heart? See if you can draw so that we see what we usually don't see when we just look at the men on the outside.

Jesus pushes us here. He wants to help us see our hearts. Where we are boasting, as Ron has said.

[17 : 33] Where we have spiritual pride. He says, look for where you treat others with contempt. Where you look down on them as not measuring up.

This is the point at which I ask you to consider if he's talking to you too in this parable. Verse 11. God, I thank you that I am not like other men. Extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Who makes your list? You've got to ask yourself. Whom do you look down on? Is it the poor person you feel is lazy?

Or uneducated? Who ought to take more responsibility? Someone with a different ethnicity? A different political affiliation from you?

[18 : 39] A different sexual orientation? From you? A different substance addiction? From you? See, it's often someone whose specific struggle is a little different from mine.

Isn't it? Maybe you can't stand the people who talk too much in small group. The non-denominational Christian with their loose theology.

The people who always have to be on the inside and know everything. Maybe you've thought or even said, bless her heart, she doesn't know how to dress for church.

At a church that loves grace as we do. For you, it may even be the people who know too much theology.

Whose kids memorize the catechism. The guy who wears the suit even in the summer. And you've even thought to yourself, once they really get grace, they'll be more like me.

[19 : 46] Is that the good news of Jesus? I think I've probably hit everyone in the room by now.

But the danger is that you may think I haven't hit you. See, pride's like that, isn't it? By its very nature, it blinds us to its existence.

It tells you, that's not pride, it's just being right. Told you I was an expert at this one. It's just loving God more.

It's just taking the Bible seriously. Being a serious Christian. Listen, let me warn you.

You may be right as far as the external actions go. But is your heart twisting them into merit badges that they were never meant to be?

[20 : 47] How do you know? How do you identify pride that you can't see? Let's take Jesus' test.

Treating others with contempt. What does that phrase mean? What would that look like or feel like that might indicate spiritual pride is present?

Y'all, I wouldn't dig if eternity wasn't at stake. I know this is painful, but go there, will you? Will you consider if you've thought or felt these things? You're probably looking down on others, whatever person or group of people, if you don't involve or invite them into your life.

That's treating them with contempt. They can stay over there, I'll live my life. If you're not. If you're not. If you find yourself impatient with them or lacking compassion for them.

If you speak with others like you about how they frustrate you. If you find yourself feeling superior to them.

[21 : 59] If you pray for them, but never talk to them. All those would be indicators. Red flags of spiritual pride.

You've not said the words, but your heart says, God, I thank you that I'm not like. Can you finish that sentence?

Let me ask us something. I know you're not like them externally in whatever way it is, but is your heart as different as you'd like to think? See, I realized I wasn't as different from my high school and college buddies as I wanted to be and pretended to be.

They were desperate to fit in and belong and resorted to big bottles, for example, to do so. And using booze and girls to feel important and valuable is wrong.

God's Word warns us against that and tells us to trust only Him. My heart longed for exactly the same thing.

[23 : 14] But pursued it through big books. And using theology and morality to feel important and valuable is also wrong.

God's Word warns us against that too and tells us to trust only Him. Again, I'm not saying the actions don't matter, but I am saying my heart had a lot more in common with them than I wanted to admit.

Are you willing to consider that possibility this morning? To look honestly at your own heart? Would you do that? Be warned, when you do, there won't be anyone left to look down on.

It'd be a little scary. It's actually where the tax collector finds himself, isn't it? He's seen the ugliness of his sin.

He knows he deserves to be separated from God. He can't even look up to God, but beats his chest in humble repentance. I'm not worthy.

[24 : 23] Mercy. Mercy. He calls himself sinner. Almost certainly even better translated, the sinner.

No one else to look down on. He's not comparing himself to others, is he? He's humbled before the holy God.

Needy. Desperate. Dependent. Repentant. And that, paradoxically, brings him near to God.

We'd have thought maybe God was way up there, and so this takes me away from God. But in his humility and desperation, he actually finds himself near God.

There's no other record of good deeds. No other evidence of probation. Revelation, verse 14 says, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified.

[25 : 20] This man went down to his house justified. Right with God. What good news! Right? If you're here today, and you find yourself crying out, God have mercy on me, unworthy sinner that I am.

God says that's all you need to be right with him. All the fitness he requires is to feel your need of him.

Come to him this morning just as you are and find him to be just as he promises to be. Merciful. Gracious. Loving.

This is gloriously good news of great joy. There is hope for you. No matter who you are, there's great hope for you. Don't miss it.

A Savior for sinners. Just as the man whose life of thievery was so bad that he deserved to be crucified, in his last breaths, calls out to Jesus and hears the words of great assurance, today you will be with me in paradise.

[26 : 33] Nothing else required, right? So this traitorous tax collector, who can't even imagine looking up to God, he stands far off and finds God moving toward him.

As he cries for mercy, the humble one is exalted by a gracious heavenly Father who welcomes sinners. Come home to your Father this morning.

But the parable is told primarily to challenge the Pharisee, isn't it? Jesus is not content to leave us in our pride, is he?

No, he wants to expose it so we see the danger and our need of him. He's gracious even to us, even to say hard things to people like me who may appear just fine.

Do we love our outwardly just fine neighbors like that? Are we content that they're comfortable now even if eternity promises to be much less so?

[27 : 57] See, shockingly, the comfortable, confident Pharisee does not leave church right with God even though he looks like it. His spiritual pride distances him from God.

We see it happening in his own words where his prayer begins with God but then it's all about himself. I, I, I, I, I, I. And the text can even be read to say he prays to himself.

It certainly reflects that he's living for himself. He thought he was separated from other people, didn't he? Jesus tells us he's actually separated from God.

He leaves not on God's team, distanced from a God he doesn't believe he needs anyway. It's hard to read this passage and not realize that in God's family many I think are in aren't and many I think aren't may well be.

Our spiritual pride can keep us from God even while we sit in church. In case you hadn't noticed, that's been something I've had to wrestle with all week.

[29 : 24] Not to mention all life. I've seen this week enough spiritual pride in me to keep me from God for a long time.

Perhaps you have too. And that's eternally serious, isn't it? Where do we go with that?

