

Vision Series 2017

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[0 : 00] The Russian Leo Tolstoy was a great novelist, apparently. I've never read him, but apparently he's one of the most famous novelists in the world.

I know who he is. Historians would say that he's potentially the greatest novelist of all time. I don't know because I don't read novels as a general rule.

I read biographies of novelists instead. But with things like war and peace, which I do know about, to his credit, that's pretty impressive.

He wrote something about Anna, somebody at some point as well, if you're familiar with him at all. But he's Russian, and we call him Leo Tolstoy because we can't pronounce his Russian name, for those who are English.

But it would seem that he believed the press about himself also. He thought that he was pretty special. There were certain things I did read about him.

[0 : 57] For instance, this prayer that he wrote in his diary. Help, Father, come and dwell within me. You are already dwell within me. You are already me.

A historian, Paul Johnson, wrote, There are times when Tolstoy seemed to think of himself as God's brother. Indeed, his elder brother.

Tolstoy once wrote in one of his diaries, Read a work on the literary characterization of genius today, And this awoke in me the conviction that I am a remarkable man.

Both as regards capacity and eagerness to work, I have not met a single man who was more morally as good as I.

Obviously need to get out a little bit more, I think. He wrote that he felt in his own soul an immeasurable grandeur.

[1 : 59] He regarded himself as above the rest of humanity as part of a historic apostolic succession of moral superiors like Moses and Abraham and Jesus.

And down the line you get to Tolstoy. It could be said, borrowing from today's, the opening words of today's text, that Leo Tolstoy was confident of his own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.

The irony of his words is that he got this version of a superior, moral superiority, because of his love of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount and his parables.

I'm not sure if he read Luke 18. Confident of his own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.

Last week, we started this journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. We saw there, quite clearly, that Jesus demands commitment from those who would follow him.

[3 : 21] We saw that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem is our journey as he sets his face to Jerusalem to go there and die. We must set our face to die to ourselves with him.

Luke 9, 23, 24 could not be any clearer for the disciple of Jesus. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.

Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. Daily, taking up your cross. Daily, taking on the position of a dead man walking.

Dead to self, alive to Christ. So when Jesus set his face to walk the Calvary Road, he was not merely taking our place, where we are just the spectators in it, watching him do it.

He was also setting our pattern. He was both our substitute and our pace setter. And so the question for us is why?

[4 : 30] Why would I want to get on this road with Jesus when his call upon my life is so massive? The radical call, the radical claim of Jesus is extremely costly.

The highest possible price, the surrendering of our lives. Why would you want to do that? Now, last week I touched on the answer to that question.

And tonight I want to drive down into it. I want to use this text that's in front of us in Luke 18 as my launching pad, if you like.

I want to dig deeper because what we're seeing in this text here underlies everything about radical. and everything that's going to flow from this about radical, what it means to be a radical disciple. So we've had the call last week and now the radical foundation for that call. And the core issue with this is how to get right with God.

[5 : 42] It's spelled out in verse 14. I tell you, it says, I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. That's the core issue.

How to get right. And so to help us understand that issue clearly, to understand what it means to be declared right before God, what it means to be justified, Jesus tells this story about two extraordinary men.

And these men are drawn by Jesus so starkly. They're set against each other so that we can see the issue. They're characterized so clearly as black and white.

We know from verse 10 that these two men go up to the temple to pray. But as it says in verse 14, only one of them goes home okay with God. Only one of them is a friend of God's at the end of the experience.

One of them, we are told, is a tax collector. The other one is a Pharisee. Now, we need to sort of pause for a moment. And it's really crucial for us not to get this all mucked up right from the start.

[6 : 50] Because if you're familiar with the Bible at all, and you've read through the Gospels, you will know that Jesus constantly goes, clash, clash, clash to every Pharisee. Jesus and Pharisees didn't get on.

Jesus said, the harshest words from the mouth of Jesus was directed to the Pharisees and the scribes and the teachers of the law. A group of three people, Pharisees, just copped it from Jesus. Woe to you. Curse to you, Pharisees. And so, we just automatically think that the Pharisee is the bad guy. But not in first century Palestine for the followers of Jesus who heard these words from Jesus' mouth for the very first time.

Peter, James, John, and the rest of the boys. The Pharisee was deeply respected in first century Palestine. They were a pillar of the community. Trustworthy. Very generous to the poor and needy. And we can see in the text here, he says, I'm a good guy and I give a tenth of everything. Very, very generous. They were not men who made their money out of religion.

[7 : 53] They were regular church attendees who were deeply, deeply serious about their commitment to God and obedience to God. On the other hand, you've got the tax collectors.

And they are lowlifes. They are very greedy. No one would socialite with them. Tax collectors were considered absolute filth because they were traitors.

They were Jewish people who teamed up with the occupying Romans, joined forces with the occupying Romans against their own people.

They had sold out their families, their friends, their nation, their religion, their God for the sake of money. And so the Romans came in, they occupied, and they said, we're going to charge a 20% tax on everyone in this area.

And to collect the taxes, they recruited these people who were Jewish people, put their hands up, and said, yeah, I'll collect taxes from my own people.

[9 : 04] And the Romans gave them permission to put their cut on top of that. Whatever you want, whatever it is that you, you know, you want to buy yourself a fancy camel, you know, put an extra tax, you know, you want to buy yourself a bigger house, put whatever tax.

So a tax collector could add whatever they wanted on top of that. And when they went in to collect the taxes, they had the Roman soldiers with their spears, protecting them and ensuring that the people handed over the money.

Tax collector would hand over his dollars to the Romans and keep the rest for himself. So this guy, as far as their friends, their nations, the other Jewish people, these are scum.

They were not welcome in any place of worship. Tax collectors historically were known when they didn't have the Roman soldiers around them, were very vulnerable and they were known to be stabbed to death in broad daylight in marketplaces and people would not come to their aid at all.

You would spit on them and kick them while they're dying. Step over them to buy you apples or whatever it is that you buy. And they hated the tax collectors.

[10:21] And so here we have, these are the two men, the pillar of the community and the absolute scum going up to the temple to pray. Most likely, it's one of the two daily worship services that took place in the temple.

One was at dawn, one was around three in the afternoon. They were both services of atonement offerings. And each service would begin in the inner sanctuary, sorry, outside the inner sanctuary at the great high altar where the sacrifice of a lamb for the sins of Israel was made.

The service would include the sound of a silver trumpet and the clanging of cymbals and the reading of a psalm. And the officiating priest would then enter the outer part of the sanctuary where he would offer incense and he would trim the lamps.

And at that point, he would take the blood of the sacrifice, disappear into the building to offer the sacrifice of atonement. And when the priest disappeared in the building by himself in the inner sanctuary, it was time then for those who gathered into the outer courts to offer private prayers to God while the offering of atonement was being made.

And here, we read the private prayers of our two characters. Forget who these two men are on the outside and what the perceptions of society are of them.

[11:51] Their prayers reveal their hearts and the heart is what God sees. Pharisee prays like this. Father, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men.

Robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even that scumbag tax collector sitting over there. How dare he? I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all that I get.

It's like he's praying and just hugging himself and man, I'm a great guy. He praises himself.

He adores himself. He starts with, God, I thank you, but instead of thanking God for what God has given him, he's thanking God for what he has given God.

He's thankful for that. And he does it so spiritually. He spiritualizes his self-righteousness. He says, God, thank you. God, I thank you that I'm okay.

[12:54] And then he goes on and explains how different he is from other people. And the problem with this Pharisee is that his evaluation of himself is based on the wrong standard.

He's using the wrong measure. He compares himself with other people. I'm okay, God, because there's always someone worse than me, especially that scumbag tax collector over there. That's what we do with morality.

We always, ironically, when it comes to wealth, we don't think we're wealthy because we can always find people richer than us. When it comes to morality, we always look down the line and find people who are morally worse than us, which makes us feel more comfortable about ourselves.

We always default towards an inflated view of self. We're like filthy coal miners, you know, five kilometers below the earth's surface in all the darkness and coal dust and dirt and mud and stuff, comparing ourselves with each other, imagining who's the most cleanest in this environment. Who cares? You're all filthy. We compare ourselves with whoever makes us comfortable regardless of our own filth, regardless of our own sin and corruption.

[14:17] And in this case, the Pharisee is feeling great because, well, there's the tax collector just over there. You see, a religious person is easy on themselves and they're hard on everyone else.

That's a religious person. Easy on themselves and hard on everyone else. God's assessment, the true tape measure, the true line of the human condition is quite different and his diagnosis is what Sam read out to us in Ephesians 2.

Let me read it to you. As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts and like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

And you see the diagnosis in Romans 3. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away.

[15:29] They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

No one righteous, no one who seeks God. Worthless, dead, that is the natural human condition left to our own devices.

We are dead in our sins. And so the core of human nature is not basically good and we just need to mine the goodness out of it somehow and let people flourish.

It is in fact fundamentally bad. We are spiritually bankrupt. We are spiritually dead, born dead to God because we are born sinners.

And so therefore, spiritual life is impossible for something for us to conjure up in ourselves because corpses cannot help themselves.

That doesn't mean that we are as bad as we all can possibly be because God is gracious enough not to totally remove His sovereign and gracious hand from our lives and leave us to our own devices. What it does mean though is that sin has totally marred every aspect of the human life.

[16:39] Every aspect. We've got nothing to offer God. We've got nothing to contribute. Not only do we not have any righteousness in our account but we've actually got a massive debt in our account.

We are spiritually bankrupt. We are deserving of God's wrath. Far from being a good person, every person sits under the wrath of God.

And so we don't need God to make up the difference between our deficiencies and what He requires. We need God to provide a remedy for our guilt, for our rebellion, for our sin, our pollution and our offenses against God.

What we need is radical mercy. We need radical grace to provide a satisfaction for God's justice to cancel a debt that we cannot pay.

And that is what this low-life tax collector understands. Everything on the surface and on the inside tells him that he has no reason to look to himself for hope.

[17:56] And his prayer is simple. Have a look at it there. He beats himself on the chest and he says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And see what Jesus says at the end of that about this prayer, verse 14?

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. Now the word justified there means to be approved, legally declared, innocent of all wrongdoing and to receive the approval of God.

And this lone life, it says, is right with God and the pillar of the community, the paradigm of virtue goes away not right with God.

And you see this if you've read through Luke's gospel, you'll see this again and again in Luke's gospel. In Luke 7, there's a Pharisee and a sinful woman.

In Luke 15, there's a father with two sons. One son stays at home, always does what he's told. And then there's a younger brother who rejects his dad, says, I want nothing to do with you but I want my share of the hidden runs off, spends the money in wild living.

[19:11] And then here in Luke 18, we have a pillar of the community, we have a traitor and in every case, the good person, we have a good person and a bad person, the bad person is saved, the good person is lost in every one of those stories.

There are two ways, two ways to be your own savior and Lord. There's two ways to reject God and be your own God.

One way is doing what the tax collector has been doing, living any way he wants, thumbing his nose at God and frankly, using everyone else for his own end.

That's one way of doing it. It's obvious to most people. The other way to reject God and be your own God is to be very moral, very righteous, very dutiful and then saying, well God, look at me, now you owe me God and you people, you now owe me too.

You owe me the respect I deserve. And the mark of someone being their own savior, their own lord, their own God, despite all of how they might look on the outside, is that they look down on everyone else.

[20:41] You see, religious people, Pharisees, the self-righteous, the superior, are easy on themselves but hard on everyone else.

So why is it that this bad person goes home right with God and the good person gets lost as it is with the rest of Luke? It's not because one is good and the other is bad.

It's not because God, you know, doesn't condemn, you know, God doesn't condemn people for being good and saves people because they're bad. It's not like, you know, it's not like he specifically just saves all the bad people.

It's because the good person doesn't know they are in fact bad. They don't know that they are rotten and in need of a rescuer. They ought to know it because according to Luke 18, at least one of the symptoms of our desperate need of a rescuer is that we judge and condemn everyone else around us who do not meet our standards.

We look down the nose at other people. That's the symptom of someone who needs a rescuer. And here, in this story, as in the others in Luke, the bad person knows that they're bad.

[22 : 09] And see the prayer of this tax collector? God, have mercy on me, the sinner. That is in fact a better reading. It's not a sinner but the sinner. He's not trying to find comfort in the fact that, well, you know, we're all in the same boat.

He doesn't say, sure, I've made my mistakes but I'm no different than anyone else. I'm only human after all. He says, God, I am the sinner. I am the model sinner. I'm the essential sinner. He doesn't care how he compares with other people.

He's not looking at other people. This guy knows that he's not okay with God and he cries out in despair and he pleads for mercy. You see, the religious person is easy on themselves and hard on others.

The disciple of the Lord Jesus is hard on themselves and easy on others. Now, it's interesting here in this text that the word mercy is an unusual word.

The common word for mercy that's used in most of the New Testament is different than the word here. And what it's saying, and it's used only in one other place apart from Luke 18 in the New Testament, this tax collector isn't asking God for sympathy.

[23 : 30] He's not asking God for compassion. He isn't asking God to give him a break. The word for mercy here, as I said, is found in one other place and it means to appease or to turn away someone else's anger, to propitiate someone else's anger.

So the tax collector in this moment is not saying, oh Lord, come on, let me off the hook, let bygones be guy gones, you know, I'm not that bad after all. He's crying out to God in this moment as he sits in the temple courts and the sacrifice for atonement is happening.

He's crying out, Lord, atone for my sin. I need your anger to be turned away from me. He understood his true condition.

The wages of sin is death according to Romans 3 and he's asking God to pay that wage for him. Pay it for me.

He wants atonement. You see, because in this moment the fog of his self-righteousness and his self-justification has finally parted and he now sees who he truly is.

[24 : 48] He finally sees that there is a God who created him and keeps him alive every second. He finally sees that he should do absolutely everything for this God. He sees that this God should be loved more than anything else that no one should be obeyed more than this God.

He finally sees that he hasn't even got close to that standard. He finally sees that if anyone was as ungrateful to him as he has been to this God, he would cut them off forever.

He sees that that's exactly what he deserves. that's what he deserves from this God. To be cut off from the source of life and hope and peace and so he cries out, God, please pay that wage for me. the other place in the New Testament where the word for this word for mercy is used is in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17 and it tells us why Jesus was on this road to Jerusalem.

Talking about Jesus says for this reason he had to be made like them fully human in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement, he might make mercy for the sins of the people.

[26 : 32] In other words, God is infinitely holy, he hates evil and sin but he came to earth in the person of the Lord Jesus and he lost everything.

He lost his glory, he lost his invulnerability, he lost all of his riches, he lost his place beside the Father, he was tortured, he was mocked, he was ridiculed, everything was stripped from him, even his clothes were stripped from him.

He was killed, abandoned by his disciples and he was doing it for you and for me and for humanity and for this tax collector to make atonement for our sin.

He was paying the wage of death for the sins of the world. That is the radical grace of God.

And we heard from Ephesians 2 the natural state before God before is that we are dead in our transgressions and sins but in the very next verses in Ephesians we have the hope of grace but you've got to love the word but but because of his great mercy for us God who is rich in mercy

made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions it's by grace you have been saved.

[27 : 53] We were dead in our transgressions but God intervened and gave us life. We were dead in bondage to sin but God intervened and released us. We were objects of wrath but God intervened and he poured out his anger upon himself.

God who is rich in mercy intervened. Our condition was hopeless but God intervened in grace. The grace of God is his love freely given shown towards guilty sinners contrary to their merit and in fact in total defiance of all their demerit.

that has nothing to do with us it's got everything to do with the character of this God and the radical grace and generosity of God is the great exchange. 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 says for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ though he was rich speaking about internally rich with the Father perfect with the Father yet for our sakes he became poor he became human for everlasting from that point on so that through his poverty we might join into the everlasting relationship of the Father that's 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 2 Corinthians 5 21 God made him who had no sin sinless to be sin for us so that in him we might become sinless the righteousness of God God's radical grace is the foundation and the motivation of his radical call the radical call to take up our cross and follow him it's his grace radical grace self-righteousness leads to a life of looking down your nose at everyone else judging people condemning people the religious person is easy on themselves and they're hard on everyone else but the grace fueled disciple of the Lord

Jesus is hard on themselves and easy on others on everyone else you see God's radical grace to us in the Lord Jesus leads to a life of radical grace it leads to a life of abundant generosity and graciousness towards other people in fact I would say grace and generosity in every area of life free abandonment in every area of life so that we take up our cross and we follow Christ we've got nothing to lose he's been given everything and we see that happens for one tax collector in the very next chapter I don't want to kind of steal too much of my message which I'll probably preach on in a few weeks about this guy very next chapter it's just as Jesus gets right on the very edge of Jerusalem and what we introduce there is to a young not a young bloke a little bloke who is described as the chief tax collector he's the chief scumbag he's the chief low life he is the lowest I mean he's lower than a snake sliding on the ground this guy there's no one worse in society than Zacchaeus self-centered totally greedy rejected by all the recipient of scorn and hatred and vitriol and then Jesus comes along and Jesus is the only person who looks at him he's the only person who speaks to him and Jesus picks him out loves him and so overwhelmed by the grace of Jesus to him Zacchaeus just overflows in abundant generosity from that moment nothing Zacchaeus holds nothing back that is a disciple who's taken up his cross and following Christ we will never take up our cross we will never obey that call we will never take up our cross and follow Christ as his radical disciples until we recognize our appalling natural condition without Jesus and truly rejoice in the wonderful news of his radical grace we will always hold something back from him until we fully understand and appreciate that he has never held anything back from us