

Luke 18:9-14

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we're looking at Luke chapter 18. So if you want to turn there in a Bible, that would be great. Looking at one of Jesus' parables.

Last week we looked at the parable of the persistent widow, teaching us that we should pray always and not lose heart. Jesus talks about his people who cry out to him day and night.

So that parable encourages us to pray and to keep on praying. And this parable that we're looking at tonight teaches us how to pray, the attitude with which we should come before God.

In particular, humbling ourselves and exalting God rather than vice versa. So Luke 18 verse 9 to 14, let me read this parable for us.

18, Luke 18. Yep, page 877 in the Pew Bible. There we go.

[1 : 10] Luke 18, beginning at verse 9. He 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, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all 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. This is God's word. Well, appearances can be deceiving.

[2 : 43] Recently, I was looking on Craigslist because I was trying to help somebody who was looking for a new apartment. And I've never had to use Craigslist to find an apartment, but maybe you have, or maybe you've done that along with somebody else.

And if you've done that, you know that the photos posted and the descriptions listed do not always match the reality of the property.

So, some experiences I've had, a friend of mine said, oh, I saw this house that's posted for rent.

And it happened to be a block down from where we used to live.

But in front of the house was a for sale sign. He said, but no, on Craigslist, it says it's for rent, not for sale. Well, it was a scam. It was a complete scam.

It wasn't for rent at all. The person who was posting on Craigslist didn't even own the house.

Another one, my wife and I, this didn't involve Craigslist, but my wife and I, several years ago, were just sort of looking at houses in New Haven.

[3 : 50] And we weren't even really wanting to buy one, but we just wanted to sort of see what was out there. And so, we talked to a realtor. And the realtor said, here's a few houses. Let me take you this one. So, we walk up to the second floor.

And literally, from one side of the room to the other, you could almost slide down. Like, there was at least a two-foot difference in height, and there was no steps. The floor was, the house had settled into the ground.

And so, the floors had become completely warped. Of course, you would never know that from any description that was posted about it. But even the realtor said, after looking at that, you don't want to buy that house. I could go on, but you get the point.

Now, what we see in this passage is that appearances can be deceiving in church as well. The Pharisee, there's two, this parable's pretty simple, right?

There's the Pharisee and the tax collector. Two guys, they both go up to the temple, they both stand there praying, and the Pharisee had an appearance of righteousness.

[4 : 52] Now, if you've read the Bible a lot, or if you've been in church for a long time, and you hear the word Pharisee, you might think that means a hypocrite.

Someone who just pretends to be religious, but they really aren't. But in Jesus' day, that's not what people would have thought. So, the Jewish historian Josephus said, the Pharisees are, described the Pharisees as, a class of Jews, a group of Jews, who consider themselves the godliest of the nation, and the most rigorous followers of the law.

For the most part, that's who they sought to be. The name Pharisee means either separated ones or holy ones. And that's what they sought to be, is separated and holy unto God.

So, the Pharisees knew the Bible, and they studied it very carefully. Unlike the Sadducees, who was another Jewish group at that time, the Sadducees only believed in the first five books of the Bible, the books of Moses.

The Pharisees believed in the whole Scripture, the whole Old Testament, all 39 books. The Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, believed in the resurrection.

[6 : 06] They believed in angels. They believed in demons, because the Bible talks about them. They believed in all those things. They could explain to you all those things. They could explain to you about God's sovereignty, and human responsibility, and how they fit together.

And they had good explanations for that. And they not only adhered carefully to all the Scriptures, but they also knew the history of, the interpretation of them.

And they followed the oral traditions of the rabbis. Besides that, the Pharisees were honest, and law-abiding citizens, unlike the Zealots, who were violent revolutionaries.

They were well-respected in the broader community, unlike the Herodians, another group who were sort of involved in corrupt political schemes. Right? The Pharisees, it seemed like they were the best group of them all.

They were honest, law-abiding, upstanding citizens. They knew the Bible. They believed in God. This Pharisee was faithful in his marriage.

[7 : 05] He says, I'm not an adulterer. He paid his workers. He said, I'm not an extortioner. He, um, and he didn't just do the minimum that God's law required. He went over and beyond.

He fasted twice a week. Now, the law only required people to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees had developed a practice of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and praying, as part of their devotion to God.

And he says, I tithe on everything I get. Now, again, strictly speaking, the law only required tithing on flocks, crops, wine, and oil.

Sort of the main things. But the Pharisees even tithe from their herbs. Right? They'd pick their mint from their plant, and they'd make sure to tithe. One piece of mint for every ten pieces they took for, you know, nine pieces they took for themselves.

Right? They were very careful. They did all these things. The Pharisee seems quite confident and comfortable coming into the temple to pray.

[8 : 07] He stands. He prays. He walks confidently. He feels comfortable when he comes in. Right?

So if you think of a Pharisee, you think of like a regular churchgoer, someone who lives a moral life, someone who has a good reputation, someone who goes above and beyond what God's law requires in some ways.

He's the kind of person that you would look at and think, if anybody is a righteous man, that would be a righteous man. On almost everyone's definition.

Now, contrast, the tax collector. So the tax collector would have worked for the government. And back then, the government was the Roman Empire, and everyone agreed.

There was no disagreement. Everyone agreed the Roman Empire was oppressive and unjust. And the tax collector's profits came from extorting, the extortion of their own people.

[9 : 12] The way that many tax collectors' jobs worked was, their boss would say, you have this area of land, from Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, to Nazareth, or wherever.

Right? These three cities, and the area in between them. And at the end of the year, you need to deliver to me 10,000 denarii, or whatever. Right?

You know, a million bucks. So you go collect your taxes. And your salary is whatever you collect, on top of that. And so the tax collectors, many of them became very rich, because they found ways to get a lot of money from the people.

And so, you know, there were lots of things that the different, the different Jewish groups, the different Jewish rabbis, disagreed on. But one thing they all agreed on, in Jesus' time, the rabbis agreed that it was okay to lie and deceive tax collectors, because they were considered so corrupt. And they were in the same category as thieves and murderers. Like, tax collectors, thieves, and murderers. Those kind of people. You don't, you don't even have to tell them the truth, because they're so corrupt, and so unreliable, and so wrong.

[10:38] Wrong. So, a Jewish man who collected taxes would have been expelled from his synagogue, disqualified from being a witness in court, and seen as a disgrace to his family.

Tax collectors were despised and hated. So, let me just give you a few modern examples, some of them might resonate more with you than others, about what a tax collector might have looked like. So, think about the owner of a strip club, or the CEO of a casino that intentionally seeks to make money off compulsive gamblers, or a slum lord, or a slum lord, who never fixes up his rat and roach infested houses, and just wants to make a lot of money off him, or a drug dealer, who runs the streets in the hood, or the big dude, who owns the pawn shop, who's probably connected with the mafia.

Yeah. That's what a tax collector would have been like. He was working for a shady business, and he was benefiting from it.

And when this guy walked into the temple, you can see he wasn't used to being there. I mean, if this was the temple, this isn't a temple, it's just where we meet together, but if this was the temple and he walked in, he would have sat in the back right behind that pillar, where nobody would see him, and nobody would notice him, because he felt like, I don't belong here, and I'm not used to being here.

[12:16] Now, that's why the end of Jesus' parable is so surprising. Look at verse 14. Jesus says, I tell you, this man, the tax collector, went down to his house justified.

That means righteous. That means right with God. That means forgiven. That means accepted into God's family. Having God's stamp of approval. That's what justified means.

Rather than the other. Jesus is saying, at the end of the day, the tax collector was righteous before God, and the Pharisee was not.

You see how surprising, and even scandalous of a story this would have been, for Jesus' hearers. Right? Especially for any who were Pharisees.

Now, why? Why does Jesus say this? Jesus sees the reality that goes deeper than the appearance.

[13:29] See, if you look at what the Pharisee prays, his prayer is all about himself. He starts with the word God. God, I thank you.

And then he just starts talking about himself. Do you notice how many times he says, I? God, I thank you that I am not like other men. I fast twice a week.

I give tithes of all I get. God, I thank you that I am. It's all about how, what he does makes him better than everybody else.

Verse 11 could even be translated, it could be translated, the Pharisee standing by himself, prayed, or it could be translated, the Pharisee standing, prayed to himself.

right it's interesting the pharisee's prayer puts himself in the center and god on the edges the tax collector's prayer is the opposite tax collector humbles himself in light of a holy god he says god be merciful to me a sinner now the pharisee's prayer is much longer than the tax collector's tax collector's prayer is very short and it's not wordy he's probably not used to praying a lot but he gets right to the point of it god be merciful to me a sinner and he uses a very interesting word when he says be merciful it's the word that is usually translated god make atonement for me it's the word that was used to describe what the high priest did when he went into the holy place once a year and he offered a sacrifice to cleanse the people of israel from all their sins and he went and he offered that sacrifice before what was called the mercy seat called the hilasterion and that's the same word that's called the mercy seat sort of where god offered his forgiveness to the people through the sacrifice that the priest offered on their behalf and the people received mercy as a result and that's what the tax collector says god make atonement for me make a sacrifice for me to make me clean she doesn't come parading his own accomplishments he has he knows that he has nothing to offer to god he comes simply empty-handed saying god have mercy on me that's the only way i can come before you is if you have mercy and if you cover over my sins by a sacrifice and at the end of the day jesus said he went home justified before god he was right with god at the end of the day and jesus i mean how amazing is that jesus doesn't say well at the end of the day the tax collector

was a little closer than the pharisee no he doesn't say at the end of the day the tax collector had made a couple steps in the right direction and maybe if he kept on making steps in the right direction then he would be approved and accepted and forgiven by god no he says he went down to his house when he left that temple god he was right with god and the pharisee despite all the good things he did wasn't now what do we take away from this i want to say three things three applications three things that we can take away from this passage number one it's a word of warning it says jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt and so this parable is perhaps primarily a warning it's not just what you do that matters it also matters why you do it you know there are many things that can motivate people to act in ways that look good and appear righteous

[18 : 24] two of those things are pride wanting to preserve your own reputation and fear of other people wanting to please others and wanting their approval and if you combine both of those things those two things put together can motivate you to do a lot of good things well because you know if there's something that's you're tempted to do that's bad but you think that you'll be found out and it'll be embarrassing then you're not going to do it because you don't want to be embarrassed or if you think people will look at you in a more negative light you won't do it because you think somebody's not going to think so well of me I mean if you put just those two things together pride and the fear of man fear of other people that can motivate all kinds of good things it can motivate fasting and praying it can motivate tithing right especially the way the Pharisees did it very publicly so that everybody knew it can motivate you to come to church maybe not so much here in New England right you don't get a lot of social props from coming to church here but in some places right that's the respectable thing to do on Sunday sometimes people come up here from other parts of the country and that's really the reason they went to church their family did it or most of their friends did it or you know it just sort of feels like the right thing to do and you you know and then you come to a place like this and you have to examine your motives you have to say why do I come here see it's not just what you do that matters it also matters why you do it and this is also sometimes why people who seem to be very good and moral upstanding citizens sometimes get caught with horrible things whether it's a crime that lands them in jail or a secret sin that nobody knows about or a pattern of abusive or controlling behavior behavior that lies under the surface it's because the things that are motivating to do all the good things all the things that make them appear good in some circumstances let's say if if somebody gets if they get criticized they're gonna blast you off because don't you dare criticize me right or maybe you get the silent treatment as a result so there's a warning it's possible to do everything the Pharisee did and go home not right with God and facing ultimately God's judgment and punishment and that's a that's a a serious warning now how can we know well I'll get to that later how can we know if we're if we're falling into that Pharisee trap

I'll get to that in a minute so it's a word of warning but it's also a word of hope it's a word of hope for people like the tax collector if you feel like when you come to church or when you hang out with Christians if there's some part of if there's a big party that feels like I just feel like I don't quite belong here I don't I know that I don't measure up and some other people you look at them and they're clearly more mature than I am and I just I just don't know whether I really belong here and so maybe some days you don't come to church because you really feel that and so you stay away or you don't pursue Christian friendships because you feel that shame and you know deep down inside you're not worthy to come before God and come among his people there's a word of hope for you because Jesus said the tax collector went down to his house justified before God that God looked upon him with favor and mercy and grace and that word justified it's a it's like the judge's gavel right if you ever had to deal with the courts or if you've gone with people to court what happens the first time you go to court they continue it then what happens the second time they continue it again right and again and it's not unusual to have right five six seven eight court dates dealing with the same thing because they take a long time to make decisions that word justified is as if you walk into court before God and the judge slams the gavel down and says you are not guilty you can go free

I mean how liberating that is if you come into God's presence and you know that you don't deserve to be there and you know that you're actually guilty and yet you hear in Jesus Christ God the Father saying to you Jesus Christ has made atonement for you and so I will have mercy on you it's the most liberating thing in the world I mean it's amazing if if you've ever been in a court case and you've or you know someone who's been there right and they've been under the weight of this fear

of what's going to happen am I going to get thrown in jail am I going to have to pay a fine how am I going to pay the fine I don't have any money anyway and you get that verdict not guilty set free how much more if that is the verdict that you have before the God who created all things before the judge of the universe and that's what Jesus says we can have through him so there's a word of hope for tax collectors

I mean just consider some of the people we consider great leaders in the Bible just three Moses well when Moses was young and impulsive he killed an Egyptian he murdered someone who was beating up on his fellow Hebrew now yes was he trying to do justice yeah but did he murder someone yeah he murdered someone and so he had to run away for 40 years he had to face some of the consequences of that but God wasn't done with him and God took Moses who was prone to impulsive anger and made him into the leader of God's people or think about David when he was middle aged and didn't have quite enough what to do and he fell into adultery with Bathsheba and then he arranged for her husband to be killed great King David a man after God's own heart and that's what he did a horrible evil thing or Paul who had persecuted Christians and when Stephen was being stoned he stood there giving his approval personally you know nearly all of the great leaders in the Bible had some pretty serious character flaws and or moral failures nearly all of them but what happened what's the difference

I mean the Bible says the wages of sin is death but what happened so that their sin did not result in death and judgment if you look at King David King David wrote a psalm Psalm 51 he wrote the psalm I quoted Psalm 32 that I quoted at the beginning of the service but he also wrote Psalm 51 and if you look back there Psalm 51 page 474 in the Pew Bible the psalm begins this way well it's the title says the psalm a psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him Nathan had confronted him after he had gone into Bathsheba after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and David said have mercy on me oh God according to your steadfast love according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin

[27 : 54] David didn't make any excuses he didn't come to God and say but God I've been a pretty good king I've been a really good king I mean you know when Saul was coming after me I didn't kill him I mean yeah I sort of messed up here but but you know I've still done a lot of good I really deserve to be blessed for all the good I've done no he doesn't do any of that he says have mercy on me oh God according to your steadfast love and he goes on I know my transgressions my sin is ever before me against you and you only have I sinned have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment he goes on he doesn't hide his sin he doesn't excuse it he doesn't explain it away he has both a general sense of his sinfulness and a specific concrete understanding of his specific concrete failures what I want to end with is my third point of application it's a word of warning it's a word of hope but what's the difference what's the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector right and how can we tell how can we how can we have how can we see in our own hearts what that looks like and I think one thing we see in in David's psalm and in the tax collector is he has both he has a sense of his own sin both generally and specifically now some people have a sense of their own sin generally so they'll say oh yes

I'm a sinner you know yeah I'm not perfect I acknowledge that but then if you actually ask them so are there any but if you if you listen to them they never actually admit any particular things that they've done wrong if you ask them you know are you a sinner before God they'll say yes I am but if you confront them about something specific they've done wrong then they'll say but well I had a reason for doing that and I have an explanation for this and really no it wasn't that now other people are the reverse other people will sort of reluctantly admit that they have committed sin in very specific areas but in general they would say but generally I'm a good person I just okay I did I admit it I lied I was wrong I shouldn't have said that but generally

I'm a good person David has both a sense of his general sinfulness he says against you have I sinned even from my mother's womb I've been born in sin but he also confesses yes I committed adultery yes I did that that's one of the ways we can see that the Holy Spirit is actually bringing conviction to our hearts and shining his light in our hearts is that we have both a general and a specific sense of our sin okay if you look at the tax collector in the parable he calls himself a sinner right he has a general sense of sin and then if you look at Zacchaeus in the next chapter who's also a tax collector he confesses a very specific sin you know if I've defrauded anyone I will pay them

back he's actually willing to make amends so if you combine those two you see both but I think that's one way we can tell the Holy Spirit is working in our hearts when we have both a general and specific sense of sin second thing the Holy Spirit produces is the fear of the Lord and that word the fear of the Lord is used throughout a lot of the Bible and it doesn't just mean being afraid of God and it doesn't mean being terrified by God and running away from him it means having it means having God at the center of our picture and living in reverent obedience before him but it also means

Psalm 130 the end of Psalm 130 sorry the middle of Psalm 130 Psalm 130 verse 4 verse 3 and 4 says if you oh Lord should mark iniquities oh Lord who could stand in other words if God kept a list of all our sins no one would pass the test but he says but with you there is forgiveness that you may be feared so the fear of the Lord is the kind of fear it's like the kind of fear that a child would have if they were wandering into a busy street and their parents suddenly snatched them out of traffic and they realized that if their parent hadn't snatched them out of traffic the bus would have run over them and so what do they do after that they start listening to their parent they start obeying their parent they start trusting their parent even when they don't understand what their reason for their parents commands they have a right kind of fear of their mother or father and that's the kind of fear of the

Lord that the Bible is talking about that's the kind of fear of the Lord the tax collector had he stood at a distance he beat his breast and the way those verbs are written it's an ongoing action it's not just a one time demonstration but it's an ongoing posture of repentance and confessing his sin and acknowledging he's unworthy to stand before God so he has a kind of a fear of the Lord knowing who he is in light of God's holiness and then knowing who he is in light of God's mercy so sin general and specific fear of the Lord and three our attitude our attitude towards prayer and other good works let me end with you can turn to

[34 : 44] Philippians I want to end with a verse from Philippians because Paul in Philippians chapter three page 981 if you're looking at a pew bible Paul describes himself as a Pharisee that was the school that was the apostle Paul was trained in he would have fit the description of this guy who came to the temple fasting twice a week giving tithes of all I get he knew the scriptures he was an upstanding citizen of course he persecuted Christians because he thought that he should at one point but but this is what he says in Philippians chapter three verse seven and on he says whatever gain I had in other words whatever gain I had whatever privileges I had from being born into a certain family whatever moral accomplishments I had as a Pharisee whatever gain

I had I counted as loss for the sake of Christ indeed I counted I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish and here's where it is not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but that which comes through faith in Christ the righteousness from God that depends on faith you see the apostle Paul found righteousness from God not by his efforts and his works but by faith in the work of Jesus who had died on the cross for him and who had been raised from the dead he found justification before God just like this tax collector you see at the end of the day Jesus is not saying that you have to become like a tax collector and join the mafia or work for a shady business or do all kinds of crazy things or go to jail right

Jesus is not saying you need to do that what he's saying is you need to have that same humility that that tax collector showed I mean isn't it amazing that Paul the Pharisee right Jesus is saying the tax collector went home justified and the Pharisee didn't but yet Jesus saved Paul the Pharisee man who was good in all kinds of ways and who obeyed the law and yet he brought him to his knees at the foot of the cross so that's the point of this parable as Jesus says in the end everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted let's pray Lord Jesus we thank you for this parable and we pray that you would help us by your Holy Spirit to take it to heart as a word of warning against trusting in our own righteousness and treating others with contempt as a result but

Lord that we would receive it also as a word of hope and promise Lord this is what you came to do you came to lay down your life for sinners like us and everyone who comes to you can know that forgiveness that the tax collector knew and Lord I pray that every person in this place would not leave here without knowing what the tax collector knew being justified before God Lord we call out to you have mercy on us and make us so that we do so that we're aware of our sin and so that we do all the good works that you've called us to do out of a fear of the Lord more and more Lord not to

promote ourselves not to bring our accomplishments before you but simply to say thank you for what you've done for us we pray this in your name amen