

# Being Christian - Who do you put your trust in?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let me say just before I come to the Bible reading, and then we'll come to the Bible reading. It was probably two or maybe three years ago, three years ago I think it was, of an evening that I did this series, The Good God. Each message, each message for seven weeks was evangelistic.

Each message was there where a person would come and hear the gospel and of course could respond to the gospel. I also noticed that when I did that series that no one brought anyone to the series. It seemed to just go by and people can barely remember it now. What series, The Good God? I don't even recall that happening. So I'm going to be absolutely clear. This morning and the following mornings, moving forward on Sundays, I'm going to be addressing what it is to be a Christian and what it is to become a Christian. What it is to be a Christian and what it is to become a Christian over these next few mornings moving forward. So being Christian, I'll give it a series name if you want, but essentially it'll be a focus on those two aspects of what it is to be a Christian and what it is to become a Christian because effectively they go together. I'm doing this for a couple of different reasons. One, because I think it's right that we re-establish our focus on the gospel, that the gospel is there to save people, not just for Christians to hear. I think we need to get, we need to re-address that as a church, as a people individually and as a church, we need to re-address the fact that we are partakers of the divine nature with a gospel message that God expects us to witness. Not necessarily evangelize, but at least to witness to that fact. So there's going to be an avenue open and the avenue to the gospel is going to be a Sunday morning over these next few weeks. It'll be an avenue for people to come and hear what being Christian is like and what the gospel is and what life with God is like. Being Christian also, because I think none of us are beyond the need to have our faith looked at from scripture to see just exactly where we are. Okay, it's not a judgment call, but it is a measurement. So we're opening up an avenue so that there is an opportunity for people to at least hear the gospel. And over the next few weeks, you're going to be seeing more of this, hopefully, in all the ministries in the church, that there'll be opportunities, avenues opening up where you're going to have a direct point at which you can bring someone to for them to hear the gospel. They may choose not to, but at least you have that option. It's going to be a very clear option. The non-Christianity will be the main push behind this because it's so simple and easy. But as we go forward over these next few weeks, in the mornings in particular, there it is. I've laid open an avenue wide, narrow enough in terms of the gospel, but wide enough for you to understand that there's the option. So we're going to begin by looking at Luke 18 in this focus on being Christian and how to become a Christian. So Luke 18, verse 9 through to verse 14. So Luke chapter 18, beginning at verse 9, now hear God's word.

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, God, I thank you that I'm 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 health justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Well, may God bless his word to our lives this morning. And we'll come back to that after this next hymn.

[ 5 : 14 ] If you'd like to turn again, please, to Luke 18, verses 9 through to 14.

And as you do, and as you begin to read, you'll notice that Jesus has made the meaning of this parable really easy for us by telling us what the parable means at the very beginning.

He says in verse 9 that he told this parable because there are people around listening to him who trusted in themselves, in their righteousness, treating others with contempt. But effectively, the key issue here is that they're trusting in themselves. And when Jesus tells us a parable and then tells us what the parable means, we know that we can't go too far wrong. We can't go wrong at all, hopefully. If we end up with a conclusion of not trusting in ourselves and trusting in God, then we know that we've arrived at the right conclusion. If we've got to the end of the parable when we're still trusting in ourselves, then we know which person we are in the parable.

The whole idea here is, who is your trust in? Is it in yourself or is it in God? God is drawing our attention to the fact that these two men are praying, and yet the parable itself is not actually about prayer. It's about trusting in yourself and why not to do it. It just so happens that you get to notice who's trusting in themselves and who isn't trusting in themselves through the medium of prayer. Jesus is using prayer as the sort of framework, as the background for you to understand what it is to trust in yourself from a person who doesn't trust in themselves.

This means that it's entirely possible that as you read this parable, that you'll be able to see yourself in one of two people. And it may not actually be the person you think it is as you start reading.

[ 7 : 33 ] You know, when we watch films, we all desire to be the hero rather than the baddie. But it does seem that there is a temptation now with anti-heroes, you know, those heroes that are slightly edgy. They don't keep all the rules, but they keep enough for you to be able to like them.

Those kind of anti-heroes. That seems to almost crept into a Christian's mentality that Christians can live this kind of edginess, that we can follow God enough, but there's that slight edge to us that makes us appealing to others perhaps in the world. Well, no such thing here.

It's simply you either one who trusts in God or one who trusts in themselves. I want you to notice also that Jesus tells this parable bang in the middle of two other points that he is making that actually has an impact on the parable. In other words, you can't read this parable without taking into consideration the parable that precedes it about the persistent widow who keeps going to the judge and keeps getting turned away because she's seeking justice, but the judge doesn't want to take any notice of her. In the end, he does simply because she just will not go away. And then, of course, you have children who are trying to get to Jesus after this parable and they're held back by the disciples. And Jesus tells this parable about trusting in yourselves, bang in the middle of both of those, because he's making a very important point.

To take this parable on its own without understanding the persistent widow and the children is to miss the point of the parable and certainly to miss the point of where it is placed. In both cases, or rather in all three cases, there are people being overlooked. The persistent widow is overlooked by the judge who's higher and better than her, at least in the world's eyes. You've got the tax collector in his prayer who's overlooked by the Pharisee. It's just not as good as me. And then, of course, you've got the children who want to come to Jesus who are overlooked by Jesus's own disciples holding them back from coming to Jesus. In all three situations, you have a person or persons that are kept at a lower level above someone else. Now, that matters a great deal when you actually come to understand this parable, because God is trying to demonstrate to you which type of person he pays attention to. And, of course, it's not the person that the world often thinks that it is. Jesus does not draw attention, by the way, in this parable to the prayers that are prayed. Neither does he draw our attention to the fact that they have their prayers answered. You don't read a parable here on prayer because it's not on prayer.

It's on about trusting in yourself or trusting in God. And the answer is not found in have they received an answer to their prayer, but actually who has gone home justified? Who has gone home in the right relationship with God? And so it's absolutely possible for somebody to not belong to God, to come to church, to come to church, not belonging to God, and then to leave and go home belonging to God because of a prayer, or at least because of a right attitude towards God himself.

[ 11 : 09 ] But on the flip side, it's also entirely possible for someone to come to church believing that they belong and be told by God here that they go home not justified. They go home not in the right relationship with God. Now that's a serious issue, isn't it? It's more serious, I feel, for someone to believe that they belong and not know that they don't than it is for someone who knows that they don't belong and still doesn't belong. You know, at least you can address one and not the other, because the other, you have to convince them that you're presuming too much. You're trusting in yourselves rather than in God. So here's a summary of the parable as it goes. This parable, as I said, comes directly after the persistent widow and right before the children who want to come to

Jesus.

The persistent widow is held back by an unrighteous judge. He doesn't want anything to do with her or her plea for justice, just keep her away. And then the children who want to come to Jesus are kept from coming to Jesus by disciples who think, no, this is only for grown-ups. And, you know, that's lasted throughout the church history that, you know, some things are only for grown-ups. And that's not the case here. And then in the middle, you have two men that go up to pray, but the point is not about prayer. The point is about who you're trusting in. One is the Pharisee and the other is the tax collector. Now, the Pharisee stands by himself because he sees himself set apart from the tax collector. And in many ways he is, but not for the reasons that he thinks. He is a different person, but he's not set himself apart in the way that he thinks he is apart. He's right to say that he's not like other men. And you'll notice that he thanks God that he's not like other men. I thank you, God, that I'm not a thief. I thank you, God, that I'm not an extortioner. I thank you, God, that I'm not like these other men. I thank you, God, that I'm not like a tax collector.

Now, I can't find anything wrong with that type of prayer. I mean, he's given all the praise to God for not being like other people, for people that are clearly, you know, not that, you know, an extortioner is hardly a high moral value, is it? You don't look at an extortioner as someone who has a good standing in society. And so here he is thanking God that he's not like an extortioner.

He's not like a man who beats his wife. He's not like a wife who's always drunk. He's not like a sinner that's just stealing things out on the street. And he gives God the praise for this.

[14:03] And yet, in this parable, there seems to be a problem with praying like that because of how he's going about doing it. So it seems at first we can give him a little bit of credit for thanking God that he's not like that until you realize what it is that he's actually doing.

He's drawing all the attention to himself and he's giving God the praise, but notice what he's actually doing. The tax collector, on the other hand, doesn't even come close. He stands a long way off. He doesn't even lift his head to God in prayer, perhaps because of the shame that he feels. You can't look God in the eye.

Someone once said that when a person is in debt to God, as we all are, that you can seem to outrun him for some point, but at some point you're going to have to look him in the eye.

And meeting God is simply looking him in the eye. You can either look him in the eye as a justified person or you look at him in the eye as a debtor.

[15:15] And this man here comes, he doesn't lift his head and he simply prays, verse 13, be merciful to me, a sinner. And Jesus directly after this says that this man, rather than the other man, goes home justified. He goes home in the right relationship with God.

That out of the two men, this is the man who's highly praised. This is the man who is justified. This is the man who is right with God, not the other man.

Why? Well, he adds, for everyone who exalts himself, verse 14, will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. What does that mean?

In other words, the person who trusts in himself will find out that his trust isn't worth anything in the end. And the person who trusts in God will find out that his trust means everything because of who it is in.

Now, Jesus here is drawing your attention to the difference between these men in how they trust. And how they trust is seen in how they pray.

[16:25] The first man is trusting in himself. I thank you, God, that I'm not like other men. It's not immediately clear why that is the case, but you'll see why in a moment. And the second man doesn't trust in anything in himself.

He's not got any kind of goodness whatsoever to come before God with. And he simply says to God, be merciful to me. I've got nothing in my hand I bring, you know, simply to the cross I cling, is what he's saying.

I have nothing. And it's this man who goes home justified. And the difference is in how they pray. Now, the reason why this is important, and the reason why it is placed between the persistent widow and the children, is to draw attention to the fact that in all three cases you have a group of people who are overlooked by others.

The persistent widow is overlooked by the unjust judge. He just doesn't consider her worth listening to, worth paying attention. In fact, the only reason he does pay attention to her in the end is because she will not go away.

[ 17 : 33 ] She's persistent. She keeps pestering him until she gets what is just and right. And Jesus actually says at the end of that parable that when he returns, is it likely that he's going to find people on earth like that, who have that kind of faith, who have that kind of persistence in seeking justice for whatever the justice may be related to.

And then, of course, on the other side you have children. You know, the idea that this is only for grown-ups has been around for a long time. The idea that somehow children cannot express genuine faith until they're a particular age has kept many children from the faith.

You know, the idea that you're not allowed to baptize children until they're perhaps 12 or 13 ends up, normally, you end up longer down the line with loads of children who are not baptized and who have departed from the church.

And so, keeping children away, it says in Scripture, don't do it, and yet, over the years, many churches have done that very thing and then wondered where all the children have gone.

So, people can easily be overlooked. And they can be overlooked simply because, you know, this isn't for you, this is for someone else, this isn't, you're not old enough yet, you have to wait, you have to prove to see if you're really genuine.

[ 18 : 59 ] And there's a whole list of things that step in. And, you know, we have to make sure that people don't abuse the graces that God gives.

But at the same time, we have to take people's desire to come to Jesus, desire for justice with the seriousness it deserves.

And so, what you have here is that in all three cases, it is completely possible for a person to live according to their own standards and not God's standards.

But the unjust judge can say, well, this is the way that it is, I have no other standard above me to tell me that it should be any different, therefore, I can treat you any way that I like. There's nothing to tell me that I have to treat you differently than the way that I'm treating you.

Now, of course, when you understand that there is a standard above that, God, then we recognize that there is now a standard by which we have to treat people with. The same with children.

[ 20 : 02 ] Now that we recognize that above a parental standard, there is a God standard, that a parent recognizes that their standard is not the governing standard for their children, but actually God's standard is.

And the disciples need to understand that. They're keeping these children away, and this is their standard. Yeah, but your standard is harming something that could be very fruitful.

You're holding people back from meeting Jesus. So we have to understand that God's standard is the guiding standard. When you understand this, you begin to notice why these two men pray the way that they do.

Once you've understood that people can live in their own standards, according to their own standards, and to the standards of God, then you begin to understand why the Pharisee prays the way he does, and why the tax collector prays the way he does.

So, number one, if I can put it this way, by what standard do you live your life by? The Pharisee prays that he's not like other men. So far, so good, you might think.

[ 21 : 13 ] I'm not an extortioner. I don't do any of these things. But he's actually trusting in himself. And the point is this, that wherever there is a standard, there is a top and a bottom.

Wherever there is a standard, there is a top and a bottom. Wherever you have grades, there is a top and a bottom. Now, I want you to notice then the difference between how the Pharisee prays compared to how the tax collector prays.

You can either pray from the top down or from the bottom up. And what the Pharisee does is he prays from the bottom up, but the tax collector prays from the bottom down.

And that's why he goes home justified. That's why he goes home having trusted in God. The Pharisee prays from the bottom up in this way. He lists several type of people that are lower than him.

And so he can't help but see himself as better. Everything that he lists is lower than him. He measures his standing from the bottom up rather than from the top down.

[ 22 : 20 ] At least I'm not like this person. At least I'm not like that person. I'm not an extortioner. I'm not this. I'm not that. And so he elevates himself. He exalts himself by measuring himself from the bottom up.

All he does is he lists a load of people that are lower than him. He doesn't list anybody who's higher than him. He just lists loads of people that are lower than him.

I'm better than the man who does bad things. I'm better than the man who beats on his wife and gets drunk and the wife who gets drunk and the children. I'm better than these people. I thank you God that I'm not like that.

And in one sense, it is better to be someone who doesn't steal than it is to be someone who does steal. It's better to balance the books than it is to be an extortioner and sort of racket the books in some way.

In one sense, he is correct that there is a standard here and you're able to measure that those things are worse than these things. But he comes to God in that fashion as though he's praying bottom up.

[ 23 : 34 ] That he measures the standard of his life compared to the lowest point rather than the highest point. And therefore, he cannot help but see himself better than other people.

At least I'm not like that person. He may even say, well, I may be bad, but I'm not as bad as that. And these people are elevating themselves in their own goodness, but there is no measurement to indicate how far down from the top they are.

They may be a few inches above the bottom, but they could be miles away from the top because of how they measure their life before God.

I may do some bad things, but I'm not as bad as them. His whole prayer is built on a measurement that is from the bottom up. He makes that very classic mistake.

The tax collector, on the other hand, when he prays, he prays from the top down. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[ 24 : 46 ] In other words, he measures his life before God by the standard of God. Not by people below him, but by God who is above him.

Then, in measuring his life by God who is above him rather than people who is below him, he then begins to have a true reflection on what his life is like before God.

That I'm a sinner. That I may actually be better than some people. But before God, I'm a sinner.

That I may be better than that person or this person or those people.

But that's only when I measure from the bottom up. The moment I measure as I'm meant to measure from the top down. God. Then my prayer follows.

Be merciful to me, a sinner. The Pharisee doesn't pray with one eye on how far up from the bottom he is. He prays with full attention on how far down from the top he is.

[ 25 : 52 ] His concern isn't about how far up from the bottom, but how far away he is from God. Now he begins to realize.

And this is why Jesus says that this man is the man who goes home justified. The Pharisee draws attention to himself, of course. And the tax collector draws attention to himself.

But entirely different ways. One does it bottom up. The other does it top down. It's absolutely right to think that there are some sins and crimes that are worse than others.

The reason we have jail sentences that are longer for some things than they are for others is because we have a reasonable understanding of what is just. You know, it could all do with dealing with.

But at the end of the day, even God, in his word, reveals that when the final judgment comes, that there is greater judgment on some than there are for others because of the nature of their sin.

[ 26 : 57 ] And some sins are far worse than others because of the nature of their sin. Not all sin is the same. Jesus said, just in case you're going to know it is, no, it really isn't.

Jesus said that greater is the sin in him who brought me to you. Jesus indicates quite clearly that some person's sins are worse than others because of the nature of them.

Judas' sin was worse than the others because of he knew more. When he betrayed Jesus, he knew more. That's why it was so great.

But even that's not the standard. That is only to measure from the bottom up. The moment you measure from the top down, then you begin to pray this prayer.

Lord, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. The moment I see my life according to the standards of God, my only plea is for mercy because I've not met those standards.

[ 28 : 02 ] I may be able to prove that I'm better than other people in some areas of life, but I cannot prove in the slightest that I have somehow met the standards of God.

And so my only plea is to plead for mercy. Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. And when I've sinned against God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

When I've done this or that, be merciful to me. Think about this in terms of money. Imagine that you've taken money off another person illegally and you said that you'd pay them back and then a couple of months down the line, you have no means of paying them back whatsoever.

You're now in a position of debt. And you have no way of paying that debt back. And you say to the person who lent you the money, can you forgive me my debt?

Well, you will immediately know that the debt does not disappear. Someone has to absorb that loss. Someone has to absorb the loss.

[ 29 : 16 ] And if the person who lent the money is going to forgive the person from paying them back, they have to absorb that loss. If they've lent them £10,000 and they've only got £4,000 back, they have to absorb the loss of £6,000.

They absorb it themselves. It's just gone. In forgiveness, it's gone. And so when this man cries out to God for mercy, what he's actually asking God for is to absorb his debt.

He recognises that the prayer doesn't take it away. It's not as if it can be scratched off. Because it's a debt, it has to be absorbed. When a person prays to God for mercy, then he recognises that someone has to absorb the judgement for the sin.

God never lets sin go unpunished. And yet here I am standing, not being punished for my sin. Here I am knowing that on the day that I meet God, I am not going to be judged for my sin.

And so the question is, how is it possible for God not to judge me for my sin, and yet my sin still be judged? If that debt still has to be paid, who absorbs the debt?

[ 30 : 36 ] And of course, that's the person of Christ. That God gave his son to pay our debts. That God gave his son to take our judgement.

When we are asking God for mercy, what we are effectively asking for, whether we realise it or not, is for God to absorb the debt. All the wrong that I have done before you, everything that I have taken, everything that I owe, everything that I am not, I seek your mercy.

But in seeking for your mercy, what I am actually asking for, is for you to carry that debt. And so when we read of Christ going to the cross, taking his sin upon himself, and exchanging our sin for his righteousness, what we have is, he takes our debt upon himself.

God then judges that sin in him, because all sin must be judged. And in return, the righteousness of Christ is given to us. Not only are we debt free, but we have been credited with the righteousness of God.

Okay, it's not as if that our debt has just been taken away, but rather we have been credited with justification. We have been credited with the righteousness of God. That's the great exchange.

[ 32 : 02 ] That's what takes place. Here. So this man, this tax collector, who comes before God, calling out for mercy, is actually asking for all of that.

That God, will you absorb my debt? Not trusting in himself to be able to pay it back, but trusting in the mercy of God who could pay it for him.

That's why this is not about prayer. It's about trust. Christ. The first man doesn't do that, because he measures his life from the bottom up, not from the top down.

So here's the exhortation. You have come to church this morning, and you have prayed this morning. And the question that you're faced with is, who have you prayed like?

Have you prayed like the Pharisee? I thank you, God, for this, that, and the other. I thank you. Or have you prayed like the tax collector? And so all of a sudden, we begin to think, oh, hang on a minute.

[ 33 : 08 ] I thought that I was the other person, and it's quite easy for me to be the person that I not, that I didn't think that I was. So easy it is for us to fall into the prayers of the Pharisee.

I thank you, God, for everything that I have. I thank you that I'm not like my sister. I thank you, God, that I'm not like my brother. I thank you, God, that I'm not like them. And that may be absolutely true.

That may be absolutely true. That you are better than them. I'm not questioning that. What I'm questioning is, is in what is it that makes you better?

Yourself? Or is it in God who justifies you, who makes you righteous, who makes you great, who makes you beautiful? When I think about myself, it's easy to walk around with my head down.

But when I think about what Christ has done for me, it's no longer that easy. The moment I focus on myself and my past, yeah, I'm not, I'm going to keep absolutely quiet.

[ 34 : 15 ] One minister met with me the other day. He says, we've been trying to look for you for ages. We've heard about you. Your name's been passed around, but no one can find anything else out about you.

I said, great. That's exactly the way that I want it. Because there's stuff I don't want getting out. All of it has been forgiven by Christ, of course, but this is why I've been exiled to Scotland. I'm not even allowed back in Cornwall anymore. Now, I can walk around with my head, if I think about it, I can walk around with my head down, easily done. And then I can justify myself saying, yeah, but I'm not as bad as someone else I know.

And I give myself that little boost. I give myself that little dopamine fix of making myself feel better by looking at someone else worse than me. And going, actually, I'm all right.

And then I realize that after I've given myself that boost and I'm feeling great and I look at someone worse off than me, that I then begin to realize that I'm trusting in myself and not God.

[ 35 : 24 ] God will make you great. Men, you were made for glory. Women, you too, were made for glory. You're made to be the very beauty that you are in Christ Jesus.

Men, you're made to be strong in broad shelter. That's who God made you. Now, the world is not going to want to fashion you after those models. It's not even one that's going to measure your life in that way.

The only measurement that you should be concerned with is the top-down one, which says, if you've come to God in prayer, mercifully, is that you are justified in Christ Jesus.

So the call is simple. humble yourself to God in prayer, seek his mercy, and go home justified. Not in your own good works, not in your trusting in yourself, not in the fact that you think that you're better than other people, which you might be.

Don't measure yourself from the bottom up, measure yourself from the top down, and ask yourself whether or not you meet God's standards. And if you don't, plead for his mercy. And then you will.

[ 36 : 34 ] Not because you have met them, but because it has been credited to you in Christ Jesus. God gives it to us in Christ. We don't have to work for it. It's given to us as we reach out in mercy.

So notice as we finish, the person who is not justified is the Pharisee. The Pharisee is the person who gives lots of money to the church, and he's not justified.

The Pharisee who prays a lot, even so that people can hear him, and he is not justified. This is the man who trusts only in his own goodness, and he goes home not in the right relationship with God. But the other measures himself from the top down, asking for God's mercy and receiving it. So the call is simple. Come to Jesus.

Come and humble yourself, asking for God, asking from God what only God can give, and leave here in the right relationship with him.

[ 37 : 39 ] So come to Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.