

The Humble Will Be Exalted

In the opening chapter of Luke 18 we learned key characteristics of God's elect. Two primary and defining characteristics are consistent and persevering study of God's Word and prayer. Rather than being overcome by trials, tribulations and persecutions, God's people persevere and the result is stronger and deeper faith. Also, when everything is going smoothly, they are not lulled to sleep by everyday activities but continue to have a zeal for Christ even in the mundane activities of life through the consistent practices of study, prayer and serving others. Whether one's life is experiencing trials or the mundane, persevering in study and prayer is Jesus' directive for His followers for these will keep them focused and faithful. It is these dedicated souls throughout history that have made up Christ's remnant church.

Today's focus in Luke 18 is verses 9 to 14 and Jesus continues the focus on prayer, where we observe two people who offer to God very different prayers. Both prayers reveal the condition of the hearts of these men. One man felt he had enough righteousness within himself to be justified before God and the other realized his utter hopelessness and placed himself on the mercy of God. We may learn several things from this text but the main point Jesus brings into view is what does it take to be justified before God? Understand, our eternal lives depend on the answer to this question. Therefore, I ask you to consider this question as we study God's Word today. Ask yourselves, "What is required to be justified before God?"

One other thing to bear in mind, is just because this parable uses a Pharisee as one of its examples of prayer, he represents all lost legalists and religious

elite. In telling this parable, Jesus does not turn to the Pharisees and address them directly. Jesus is telling this parable to the entire crowd for them to hear and consider. Today it is the same, this parable is for all to hear and consider who they are spiritually.

Let me begin with prayer.

Two Men Before God

Please hear God's Word for us today at Canyon Bible. Reading Luke chapter 18, verses 9 to 14, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." ¹³ 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!" ¹⁴ 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.'" (Luke 18:9-14 ESV) Here we see two approaches to prayer and God.

Two Motivations

Luke gives us the rationale for Jesus telling this parable in verse 9 stating, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt." Jesus presents this parable for two reasons; first, there were some in the crowd who trusted in their own righteousness as the means to justify themselves before God. Second, those trusting in their own

righteousness treated others contempt. They trusted in their own righteousness in spite of what God's Word teaches. So, we can have the same baseline, I want to define, what justification is.

To establish what justification is, I take us to the writings of Apostle Paul because God's inspired words are so much better than my own, I begin in Romans chapter 3, verse 21, **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: *here is a key principle*²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and **are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,**²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, *another key truth*, so that *God might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.²⁸ For we hold that **one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**” Paul also addressed justification in chapter 5 of Romans in verses 1 and 2, saying, **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.² Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”** Paul makes crystal clear justification is not by birthright in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 2, verses 15 and 16, Paul begins with his birthright saying, **“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners;¹⁶ *here is another key truth*, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ,** so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in**

Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.” So, there we have it, Paul lays out in these verses what is justification; it is not by birthright nor through one’s own efforts, but through faith in Jesus Christ alone. To be even more clear I want to define justification theologically. I am using Wayne Grudem’s definition from his Systematic Theology published in 1994, *“Justification- is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.”* So, to be justified before God is God declaring us righteous because He has forgiven us and credited Jesus’ righteousness to us.

In our parable this morning Luke begins with Jesus’ purpose for this parable, *“some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”* A Pharisee enters the temple believing he has sufficient righteousness within himself to be justified before God. The second point Jesus makes about the self-righteous is while these people were trusting in themselves, they also were making the mistake of comparing themselves to others for they *“treated others with contempt.”* Do we not often observe others work at elevating themselves by putting down others? Is it not the attitude of someone who believes they are righteous or better than others to work at staying one step ahead by putting others down? Rather than seeing Christ as the model of righteousness and being humbled by what Christ has done, they often fabricate a system in their own mind that places them one step ahead of others. They think they are acceptable before God because their heart tells them *“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”* This is the opposite of who Jesus is and asks us to be. Paul defined who we are and how we should think of ourselves and behave towards others. Reading from the 2nd chapter of Philippians, verses 1 to 4, *“So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in*

the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” The same mind and the same love come from Living the Word of God and He enables us to live in humility before Him.

Please understand beloved, just because you can make right a few things about yourself does not make you right for heaven. Just because you are not a thief and you are fair and faithful to your spouse does not make you right for God’s Kingdom. The truth is found in Romans chapter 6 “For the wages of sin is death...” This is the bottom-line truth for all people. Doing good things will never make you more acceptable to God than a thief, a cheat or an adulterer. However, the verse continues with our eternal hope, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Salvation is found by believing in Christ alone as your Savior.

Two Natures

It was the common practice for people to go to temple to pray. In the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 11, verse 17, we find Jesus quoting the prophet Isaiah (56:17), “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations?’” Jesus’ parable here in Luke 18 begins with what was normal, “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” Jesus uses this ordinary scene to teach us about justification.

As we have learned before, the Pharisees were the religious elite of Jesus’ day. They had built an elaborate system by which they sought God’s approval through hard religious work. They were to be society’s model of religion. If anyone should have been justified before God, in the eyes of Jewish society, it

would have been the religious Pharisees. After all, they followed the letter of the Law. In the minds of the religious leaders, it was a them-verses-us scenario or those who God loved and everyone else who were to some degree separated from God.

The other man Jesus mentions is a tax collector. Tax Collectors were famous for their thievery and the fact that they served Rome before Israel, they were resented by their fellow Jews. They were considered the worst of all sinners and like their Roman master they were considered ruthless and immoral. You could not get much worse than being a Roman tax collector in the minds of the Jewish people. So, in the people's mind, if there is anyone who should not be justified before God, surely it was a traitorous and sinful tax collector.

Both Luke and Jesus were known for reversals of what people thought was normal and right, and here Jesus sets the stage with the Pharisee and tax collector. The people were ready to hear about the righteous and unrighteous before their God. Jesus will turn their thoughts upside-down for He will show them a deeply religious person can be lost and a sinner with a repentant heart can be saved. Jesus continues by wanting people to examine the prayers these two men offer, for a prayer can reveal much about a person's heart.

Two Forms of Prayer

Prayer of the Self-righteous

Jesus opens with the prayer of a self-righteous man in verses 11 and 12, "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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'" At first glance the crowd would

see truth in this statement as they knew Pharisees were righteous men compared to these other sinners and the tax collector. From our own view point we might quickly say this attitude certainly does not apply to me or we might even think to ourselves, “Praise God I am not this Pharisee.” Do you see the trap in this thought? As we continue to delve into what Jesus is saying we might find it hits close to home.

To begin with this Pharisee had good theology for he does not believe he could acquire these good “god-honoring” traits apart from God giving him the ability to be good. So, in this regard, he was, what we would say, reformed in his view of God. From our perspective 2000 years later this Pharisee was not a Pelagian. In the 4th century A.D. the monk Pelagius developed a heretical theology which holds that original sin did not taint human nature and humans have free will to achieve perfection without divine grace. This Pharisee was not even a semi-Pelagian with the belief that God helps people who work at being righteous and seek His help by their own free will. This Pharisee was orthodox in the sense of understanding that if there was anything good accomplished it was a work of God for, he says, “*God, I thank you.*” He gave thanks to God that he was not “**like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.**” He is saying he is honest, just and faithful to his wife. God has worked morality in his life – so, what is the problem?

This man was a model of a religious and moral life. He went over and above the one required fast a year on the Day of Atonement, this man was truly religious for he fasted twice a week. He was a tither of all that he got. So, he was religious and he thanked God and gave back to God. We have no reason to doubt any of what the Pharisee said. Again, the people were asking in their minds, what is the problem? He was doing good things and credited God with the ability to do them.

The problem is clear; this Pharisee trusted in himself and in his works to make him righteous. He believed in himself and his works to get into heaven. Believing in himself had also made him prideful and arrogant toward others. He thought that God would be satisfied with a righteousness he had attained on his own. As the prophet Isaiah said, **“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”** (Isaiah 64:6) Good works for the wrong motives do not please God.

Please do not miss this principle. It would be similar to a Christian today trusting in their own efforts to secure their sanctification. In other words, we must never look to ourselves as the source of our righteousness or that our works secure our salvation. It is all Christ from start to finish. One thing all the cults and false religions have in common is salvation by works. Justification comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. It is never Christ plus our efforts or works. Even when we begin to see the work of Christ in our lives and His power conforming us to His image, we are not to look to ourselves as a source of goodness. We must never trust in ourselves for justification but always, in humility, see that Jesus has done it all and even though we become more like Him each day and we can look back and see how He has grown us spiritually from the time when we were first saved, we still trust in Him and not in ourselves. Even after someone has been a Christian for 50 years or more that person must still, in humility, rely on Christ and the mercy of God and cry out daily, as the tax collector did, **“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”**

Sadly, I know people like this Pharisee, people who would admit that Christ saved them but now think they are pretty holy and are depending on their own righteousness rather than on Christ. A very clear mark of one who trusts in themselves is condemning others. As the Pharisee declared, **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men ...”** Raising oneself up by putting others down is common

for the self-righteous. To think that righteousness comes through not engaging in a specific sin or that it comes as a result of doing some good things is to totally misunderstand the righteousness given by God's grace through Christ. As Jesus made clear in Matthew 5 verse 20, **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”** So, even this righteous Pharisee stands condemned.

It is an easy trap to fall into, have you ever said to yourself, “Praise God I am not like those people? I am glad I do not do the things those people are doing – boy has God blessed me.” Something you must understand; not sinning does not make you righteous. I know many unsaved people who are honest and moral. I know good people, honest people, upright and moral people, but because they have not trusted Christ with their lives they are still destined for hell. Paul wrote of this in his letter to the Galatians, reading from chapter 2, verses 15 and 16, **“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, now listen as Paul ends with this clear proclamation because by works of the law no one will be justified.”** Doing everything one can to not sin and reach perfection will not gain them heaven.

Let's take some time to examine the second man and his prayer.

Prayer of a Broken Sinner

In verse 13 we read, **“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!’”** Here is this short prayer we observe a humble heart. Here we observe one who has been broken because of sin. Notice with me, he stands far off and looks down at

the ground and he beat his breast in anguish over his sin. He does not come to the front and look up into the heavens and thank God that he is not like others. His posture in prayer is the posture of one who is afraid of God's judgment because of sin. He is not proud and confident in himself. If this tax collector is going to ever have any hope for a right standing before God it will be because God alone places him there, so he cries out **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"** He is not trusting in himself; he is not righteous because the conviction of God has shown him. He knows he is not righteous.

There is a big difference between these two men; the Pharisee thinks of others as sinners and himself as righteous. The tax collector thinks of himself as a sinner seeking God's mercy.

Two Principles

Having laid out the approach of these two men Jesus now applies two principles. Taking up Jesus' words at verse 14, **"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."** Jesus begins with **"I tell you"**, this says, his voice is one of authority for He is the Son of God.

The man who saw his total depravity was the one who Jesus declared to be right before God. The one who saw himself as righteous and saw everyone else's sin was the one who was not justified. Do we all understand what it means not to be justified? It means that the Pharisee is going to hell. It means that this deeply religious man is headed straight to hell. This means good and moral people who do not believe in the true Christ, those who are religious and belong to false religions are destined for hell. This is why we need to share the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ with the lost.

I pray that we always place ourselves in the arena of God's mercy and grace like the tax collector who was cut to the heart because of his sin. No matter how long we have been Christians we must always remember that it is by Christ alone that we are justified. Now, it is important that we strive to live a life that is growing in faith and growing in Christlikeness. We must turn from sin and strive to live a holy life. However, all through the journey of life we must rely on Christ and never think we have achieved enough righteousness to trust in ourselves.

The sin that our Lord warns us about in this parable is the sin of self-righteousness. As believers, when we become more Christ-like there is the danger of beginning to trust in ourselves. The life that Christ commands to us live is a life of always realizing that we need Him for everything, from beginning to end it is all Christ, completely Christ and Christ alone.

The true cure for self-righteousness is self-awareness of who we are in Christ. Once one lets the eyes of their understanding be opened by the Spirit of God, they no longer think of their goodness. As the Spirit lets one see the condition of their heart and what the holy Law of God requires, the result is self-conceit, self-promotion and self-righteousness begins to die. That is when one sees they are unworthy sinners and cries out as the leper did in Leviticus 13:45, We shall lay our hand on our mouths, and cry with the leper, I am "[Unclean, unclean!](#)" God save me!

My beloved, here is who we are to be; living in humility and living our lives dependent on God's mercy through Christ and not living thinking we can make ourselves righteous. Let us leave this text and be encouraged at the promise God gives to all who see their sin and run to Christ for mercy. My beloved, our prayers

may seem weak at times, but let us remember the tax collector who prayed, “**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**”

I close with the words of Apostle Paul who brings all these thoughts together in the paragraph at the end chapter 5 in the second letter to the Corinthians, verses 16 to 21, “From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ **Therefore**, *Paul is saying, therefore, knowing all that I have just spoken and taking it into your heart – here is who we are in Christ, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” To this I say Amen and amen!*