Text: Luke 18:9-17
Title: Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector, and the Little Children
Truth: A sinner is justified before God by repentant faith alone.
Date/Location: Sunday January 12, 2025 (rev. May 28, 2017) at FBC

Introduction

We have learned about persistent prayer—both from Luke 11:1-13 and Luke 18:1-8 with the persistent friend and the persistent widow. We learned that we must pray and not give up. We are to continue this until the Lord returns. After that, we will likely receive new instruction about how our prayer life should look in light of the very presence of Jesus on the earth. I suspect that we will be interacting with God even more than we do today!

Abraham is a perfect illustration in interceding for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18–19). We read of righteous Abraham asking for deliverance for a city that was almost entirely given over to sexual immorality. What compassion Abraham had! His prayer seemed persistent to the point of rudeness before the Lord of all the earth! But God graciously remembered him, though not answering the prayer exactly in the way Abraham expected.

We move on to another parable which prominently features prayer. But this time, persistent prayer is not the point of the parable. Instead, what the Lord says serves, among other things, as a warning to us about the *manner* of our prayer. We can pray long hours, but if we are not praying *to God* and *in humble faith* then our prayers amount to nothing. If we are not *penitent*, God will not hear our prayer.

Turning to Luke 18 again, let us read verses 9-17.

I. The Target Audience of the Parable, 18:9

A. Verse 9 says that Jesus spoke a parable specifically to people who trust in themselves, that they are righteousness, and who looked down upon others. Just think of this: Jesus is speaking directly to these folks. He is not speaking to others about them; He is not complaining to a friend about them; He is talking right to their faces. And He is saying to them—note verse 14—that you are not justified. That is direct!

B. A believer's attitude is completely opposite of self-righteousness.

1. Instead of trusting in themselves or their own righteousness, the truly saved person distrusts himself (2 Cor. 1:9). He has no confidence in

the flesh (Philippians 3:3). He recognizes his own heart is desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). He acknowledges that he is a sinner (Ecclesiastes 7:20, 1 John 1:9). He agrees that he is in fact *not righteous* (Romans 3:10). He does not go about trying to establish his own righteousness (Romans 10:3-6). In fact, he wants to know Christ and have Christ's righteousness instead of his own (Philippians 3:8-9). He knows that he cannot save Himself. He cannot sanctify himself (Proverbs 20:9). He trusts in the Lord, not in himself.

2. The born-again person esteems others better than himself (Philippians 2:3, Romans 12:10). He loves his neighbors (Matthew 5:43) and even his enemies (5:44). He certainly does not look down on other people, no matter what their ethnic, social, or economic status, because they are created in the image of God and God loves them.

II. Lesson #1: Do not be Like the Self-Righteous Pharisee, 18:10-12

A. Setting. In verse 10, Jesus says that two men went up to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector.

1. The immediate understanding of the audience was that the Pharisee would be praying well and that he was righteous. The tax collector probably should not even bother showing up because he was too sinful, and beyond help. However, with God, no one who is penitent is beyond help.

2. We are blessed that we need not go to a temple to pray. We need not even orient our bodies toward a specific location to pray. We can pray anywhere at any time about anything, as long as we approach God through Jesus Christ. If we reject Christ, we cannot pray to God!

B. First of all, do not pray to yourself. That is what this Pharisee did. He was talking to himself event though he addressed God. Maybe the Pharisee was his own little god? Instead, you must pray to God!

C. The Pharisee said, “God, I thank you that…” But this was no thanksgiving. This was only boasting. He had no request in his prayer. He had no praise for God, no confession to God. There were no “ACTS” in this prayer!

D. Do not excuse yourself because you are not badly wicked in your works. This man justified himself because he did not do “the bad sins” like other people and he also did good things like fasting and tithing.

E. Do not compare yourself to others. You will always find someone worse than yourself, and you will always be able to find a way to justify your

behavior. Even if you are the lowest of the low, you can find a way to "justify yourself" compared to others.

1. I read a shocking story this week about Kermit Gosnell, the horrific abortionist in Philadelphia. He wrote a manifesto from prison in which he used five Bible verses in order justify his murderous ways.[1] His use of Scripture was like what 2 Peter 3:16 says—because he twisted the Bible to his own destruction. The point is that anyone can justify themselves as being "righteous."

2. The fact that you do less sins or different sins than someone else does not help you in the least to win God's favor. You are still a sinner who falls infinitely far short of the divine standard for human conduct.

F. Here is how you could be just like the Pharisee: "Thank you God that I am not like this Pharisee…I don't compare myself to others. I don't pray to myself." If you said that, you would be doing the exact same thing he did but replacing "tax collector" with a different kind of villain, with the exact same effect.

In any way in which you have self-trust, you are like the Pharisee. This attitude is connected to despising others and exalting oneself. You might think in comparison to others: I'm good; I'm smart; I think and most other people do not think; I'm educated; I'm wise; I have common sense; I'm a salt-of-the-earth type guy; I'm knowledgeable about current events; I know things that other people do not know. In this way, you have a superiority complex.

G. Do not rely on your own "good works" to be right before God. Else you will be deluded, self-deceived like this Pharisee.

III. Lesson #2: Be Like the Penitent Tax Collector, 18:13

Note that the section title is "be like THE tax collector," not, "be like A tax collector." There is a world of difference! Compare Matthew 18:17.

A. Reverent in His Stance, v. 13a. The tax collector's reverence is evident from the fact that he stood at a distance from the temple. He wanted to come close, but not too close because he recognized his own unworthiness in the presence of the holy God. Compare with Peter in Luke 5:8. Despite the distance, God knew this man's heart!

B. Lowly in His Gaze, v. 13b. The text says that he would not even look up to heaven. He was ashamed of his behavior. For an excellent parallel to this,

[1] http://thecripplegate.com/5-verses-used-to-justify-abortion/

read Ezra 9:1-7. The man was not concerned with how he compared to others. He only saw himself in comparison to God, and it was not good.

C. Anguished in His Heart, v. 13c. His contrition was manifested when he physically hit himself on the chest in a sign of self-loathing. “I hate my sin!” It expresses grief, remorse, or disappointment—in this case, all with oneself. The tax man was grieved over his sin, remorseful over the wrong he had done, and disappointed in himself. This is an outward manifestation of a truly repentant heart.

D. Dependent in His Attitude, v. 13d. He cried out for mercy from God. He had to trust God for mercy because he could not earn it himself. Rather, he had done everything to not deserve salvation. Far from earning salvation, he had “un-earned” it. He was like Philemon's Onesimus.

1. Some say that it is invalid today to pray the way this sinner prayed. They say that God has already been merciful by offering His Son in the place of sinners, so you need not ask him. I would never tell someone to NOT ask God for mercy. I would encourage him or her to do so, and I would also encourage them to recognize that God has in effect already answered their prayer in Jesus Christ.

   God cannot be propitiated by mere asking; there must be an objective basis for his propitiation, and that happened in Christ (Romans 3:25). So, God IS propitiated. This much is true, at least in a provisional way. See Hebrews 2:17 and 1 John 2:2, 4:10.

2. But just because Jesus died for sinners does not mean that God is happy or satisfied toward a sinner who has yet to repent. It is valid and necessary for you to cry out to God for mercy. That is what it means to “call upon the Lord for salvation.” That mercy only comes through Jesus Christ. It is insufficient to call out to some generic god for some generic mercy. One must know Jesus Christ. This sinful man did something in his prayer that the other did not—he *asked for something*, namely *mercy*.

E. Obviously, the tax collector was as different as possible from the Pharisee. One went right up to the temple and the other stood far off. One talked to himself, and the other was reverent and prayed to God. One was haughty and the other was humble.

IV. Justification by Faith Alone, 18:14

To be justified means to be granted righteous standing before God, and then declared and treated as such. It is the opposite of condemned.

A. Notice that Jesus said, “This man went down to his house justified.” This means that the man left the temple, and he was right with God. He was saved. He was given a righteous standing before God even though he did no works, he did not earn salvation, he did not deserve salvation. He was only able to *receive* it. His justification was a pure gift from God, given instantly upon repentant faith. He did not have to wait for it, do anything else to ask for it, or work for it. His penitence put him in a place where he could receive it. The Pharisee was in no condition to receive justification.

B. This same thing—to be justified—can and does happen today. I wonder if it has happened in your life. Have you ever had a time in which you cried out to God for salvation like this tax collector?

C. This doctrine of justification by grace through faith is unknown among much of humanity. The need for it is unknown, but then when the need is grasped, God's revealed method is largely unknown as well. Truly spiritual people are concerned with the question, "How can a man be right before God?" (Job 9:2). And they also rejoice at the answer: "We are justified by faith in Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:24, 5:1, 5:9, 8:30; 1 Cor. 6:11).

D. This teaching is reviled by the Catholic Church to this day. "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary that he be prepared and disposed by the action of his own will, let him be anathema. (Trent, VI, canon 9). Again, "For faith, unless hope and charity are added thereto, neither unites one perfectly with Christ nor makes one a living member of his body" (Trent, VI, ch. 7). This clearly does not square with the plain teaching of Ephesians 2:8-10. We adhere to Scripture, not a dogma of any earthly so-called church.

E. The section ends with the well-known axiom that whoever exalts himself will be humbled (self-righteous types) and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (tax collector types).

V. Let the Little Children Come to Me, v. 15-17

A. Undoubtedly, parents were bringing their infants to Jesus for a blessing. They sensed correctly that the man of God had something to offer them, and they wanted the best for their children. Their minds were not first on getting the “American Dream” for their children. They were not bringing them for riches or fame, as evident from Jesus’s preaching. Maybe their motivations were not entirely pure, but I think we can take something

from this: we as parents do the best if we bring our children to Jesus. We ought to have that desire, not primarily desire for their material prosperity, or even their physical prosperity, or fame, or whatever. Let us bring our children to Him.

B. Unfortunately, the disciples rebuked them. They thought this was a waste of time for Jesus. “He has better things to do.” Jesus did not think so! I remember the story of a pastor who did not like children, and that troubles me. If you are to be like the Lord Jesus, you will appreciate and love little children.

C. Imagine the situation: the parents coming to seek Jesus, the disciples turning them back, the parents turning around to walk home, dejected, sad, disappointed. Then they hear the voice of the Savior call them back. He also spoke to the disciples, commanding them to allow the children to come.

D. Among other reasons, the Lord said, “for of such is the kingdom of God.” It is this kind of person—a person who is *like* a dependent, helpless child, an infant is the one who will enter the kingdom of God. The children had an innocent kind of faith toward their parents and others, not jaded by long years in the world. Like the children, the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom and the meek will inherit the earth (ruled by that kingdom).

E. These little ones are just like the tax collector who cried out to God in helplessness to be mercied from Heaven. If you and I do not receive Christ (the king of the kingdom) like a trusting small child, we will not enter it. Criminals and bad parents take advantage of the trust of a little child. But God will never take advantage of your trust in Him. He is always perfectly trustworthy.

F. If everything is operating roughly as it should, does a small child doubt the care of her mom and dad? That child’s knowledge of their care is built-in, intuitive. The youngster implicitly trusts mom and dad, meaning that she believes the parent is trustworthy without any doubt or reservation. They will not intentionally harm the child. This is the kind of trust that we have in the Lord. How can you doubt God’s care? Perhaps you do not know Him well enough yet and need to know Him better.

Conclusion

The two people in the parable are prototypes of many people. Perhaps you are more like the one than the other. Who are you: self-righteous or penitent? Praying to self or praying to God? Boasting before God or asking God? The Pharisee exemplified an unsaving approach to God. The

tax collector a great example of a saving response to God. He was under conviction about his sin; he prayed to God; he asked for mercy. That is what *you* can do if you have never done so in your life.

Here is another question: the Lord uses a parable of comparison, and the Pharisee also used a comparison in a prayer. What is the difference? The **parable** of comparison by Jesus is far different than a **prayer** of comparison by a sinner because the Lord was using the comparison to teach us humility, with the goal that God would then be able to exalt us with salvation. The Pharisee was using the comparison to exalt and elevate Himself. God refuses to exalt those who exalt themselves. They only deserve to be put lower.

Then about the children, I found this convicting paragraph by commentator Geldenhuys (p. 454-55 in *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*):

> Notwithstanding the unambiguous manner in which Jesus commands that the little children should be brought to Him and that no obstacles should be placed in their way on coming to Him, it still continues to be the great weakness of most Protestant churches that spiritual ministration to children is taken in hand far too superficially. Jesus said: "Suffer little children to come unto me", but in the life of the church too often nearly ninety-nine per cent of its time, money, and strength is devoted to ministration to adults, whereas to the children is devoted only a fatally insignificant portion. Only those congregations which, by effective services for children, Sunday-school libraries, etc. take heed that the command of the Saviour is obeyed can hope to be flourishing congregations in the future."

Is it true that this is a weakness in the church broadly? There might even be many children's programs in churches, but are they accomplishing *spiritual ministration*? Does the church entertain or instruct the children? Does that weakness mark *our* church, and to what extent, and what are we going to do about it? Do we teach them to be humble and to call out to God in repentant faith? Or are we, whether accidentally or not, teaching them to be self-righteous?

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