

Luke 18:9-17

We mercifully find ourselves with another parable where we are told the meaning of it. Or at least we are informed of who specifically it is told against. Which I think is a pretty decent interpretive clue that maybe “to trust in yourself that you are righteous and to treat others with contempt” are not good things. Right?

What does that look like? Well, Jesus tells us about the two men who go to God in prayer. We note of course that one is a pharisee, and so we immediately insert “bad guy” here. But that’s not how this would have come across then. The pharisees were so put together. Their lawns were manicured, their houses were neat, they had successful careers, nice cars with crosses on the backs of them. In fact, they did everything for God. They said their prayers, had good attendance. If there was someone who God smiled upon and showed favor, it was certainly these guys.

Which is the striking twist of the parable. Because Jesus tells us God is not smiling at them or that he likes their prayers at all. Ever think about that? That God might not agree with that thing you pray for? Now, I am not saying to lie to God in your prayers and try to manufacture some fake-but-acceptable prayer. Especially since, and perhaps this is part of the point of the parable, he already knows your heart. So be honest with him, by all means. But then perhaps can we let his word inform us and shape us? Unlike the pharisee who outwardly was so put-together but inwardly

was twisted and selfish. And here's the point, the pharisee used his outward put-togetherness to feed his inward selfishness.

Now we might think, "Ok I know how to fix that!" Change his outward put-togetherness. Have him go rob a bank or commit adultery then that will fix him. But no, that isn't it. The problem of the pharisees was not that they sought to do God's law, it's that they weaponized God's law to earn themselves favor with God, and to swat other's down with it. And so the fix is not to stop seeking to do God's law, the fix is to acknowledge that your ability to keep it doesn't earn you anything – and if it doesn't earn any of us anything, you can't really use it to beat someone down with can you? Paul makes the same argument in Eph. 2 when he says we are saved by grace, not works, so no one can boast. It would be like bragging about how much monopoly money you have in your wallet, "Ok, good for you? It doesn't get you anything."

And so the next question our sinful minds go to is, well if it doesn't earn me anything, why do it? Because it is good and right! But is the pharisee concerned with what is good and right about God's law or just looking good and right to others? That's pride. Furthermore, the proud person when they do that good work according to God's law is not concerned about its rightness but simply concerned with the selfish idea of how they will look having done it or how they might avoid God being mad at them.

Do you see that? It's subtle. Why do you help the old lady across the street?

Because it earns you something before God? Makes you feel better about yourself?

Well then isn't it all about you? What about the poor old lady? You have made her a means to help you.

Are you exhausted yet?

Well you should be. Because The game of earning favor with God, of looking better than the person next to you in the pew is exhausting! Every other religion in the world is "what must I do to be saved?" And that either breeds pride (Oh, I've done enough!) or despair (Oh no, God must hate me!) It does not breed peace. And yet we try to shoehorn this into Christianity. And we are clever about it, "Oh, just do your best, God knows you aren't perfect." Except God's law does say "be perfect!" "Well, just do what is in you and God will honor that." Have you done all that is in you? You haven't watched a movie when you could have been feeding the poor now have you? So you haven't done all you could. Uh oh. "Well I haven't killed anyone!" Hmm, now you are starting to sound like a pharisee, "I'm not a tax collector!" And are you exhausted again? You should be. Because you are shoe-horning your pride into Christianity and there is simply no place for it. None.

Jesus makes it clear today. Be like a child. Can't tie their shoes. Can't make good decisions. You eat, you sleep, you go to the bathroom. That's you. And if you

think you are better than that, in a cruel twist of our sin just wait 10, 20, 30, 40 more years and guess what you will be able to do: eat, sleep, and, well diapers again. Where is your pride then? How mighty are you then? Going to pull yourself up by your bootstraps then? Going to command the meeting? Going to charm the people? Going to solve all the problems? No, you'll be a child again and when you die you will be forgotten in three generations. Have a nice day with your pride.

We fuss and fret over traffic and money and how regal we are with our skills. And the Lord laughs at our pride. We are overgrown children. Whining about how things aren't fair and don't go our way. And we come before God and expect anything from him because we haven't stabbed someone, "wow good job."

Paul writes the law of God stops all mouths before God. Not one, not one person can stand before the King and say, "well, hear me out for a second..." Sorry, no. You sinned, you know the wages of it. God will not let sin go unpunished, he would not be just if he did. So it doesn't matter how put together you are, pharisee, you are playing a game you cannot win.

Yet one of those men left the temple justified. Right with God. With God as his ally, his friend, his Savior. And he didn't manipulate God. He didn't earn brownie points with him. No, he was honest with him and looked to him for mercy. He admitted he was needy, that he was wrong. That's right. To say you are a sinner is

to say you are wrong about things. We don't like admitting that do we? We live in a climate where we have to spin, to wiggle, to self justify, "Gotta win that facebook argument." The pharisee comes and says, "thanks for making me so right. God, wow, you're awesome to have made someone like me, so compassionate and wise." The second man comes and says "God, I am all wrong, have mercy."

One of them sees the whole perspective of who they are before a Holy God, one is honest. And that's the one that leaves justified.

Because our God rejoices in humility and the truth. And the truth is, Christian, you are a sinner. Not a garden variety, not-too-bad, pretty good person sinner. But a bad one. That deserves bad things. And when you realize that with pain and tears, or confess it and the fact that maybe you aren't as beat up about it as you ought to be. That's an honest prayer. One that God likes to hear.

Because our God rejoices in the truth. But, God be praised, he rejoices in mercy too. Which is why the One man who was never wrong and was perfect went to a cross. The one man who could honestly say, "Father, I have done your will." The One man who could say, "I have earned heaven." Well that man put heaven aside and went to whips, and betrayal, and nails, and a spear, and a tomb. For you. To

wash you clean of your sin. To take the punishment that God's justice demands for your sin, upon himself.

And the sacrifice was accepted, the proof is in the Lord's resurrection. Which means that your sin is gone and his perfection is yours. But there's no boasting in that for us, only boasting in Jesus and what he has done for us out of love.

So there is no need for silly games. Exhausting and phony competitions, get them out of here. There is honest confession before God. And honest to goodness mercy.

That is it. That's it. It's so freeing. We are free from the silly games, free from trying to earn God's favor. Guys, he already likes you. Go to him and that's it.

And then when you go out there and you see a lady who needs help across the street help her not because of some manipulative or selfish means to an end, but help her because it's the right thing to do and a way to show genuine love to her.

And when you do that and your motives are still a bit cloudy, because maybe you were trying to impress those people watching or whatever, well take that to the cross and leave that there too. Be free of it.

This is the Christian life. Come and honestly confess. Receive free pardon.

Guys this is so many fewer steps. And it leaves us a bit of time to live and rest.

Rest in God's work for you his child and whether you are 1 or 101. He has done all the work, he gives you heaven for free, and we can be confident in it. In fact, if it

was up to us we could never be confident of it, because we screw so many things up. But he did it. So we can be confident of our salvation. IF you, Christian, with faith in a Risen Lord, baptized in his name, if you die tonight you go to heaven and that is not arrogant, because it says nothing about how good you are – it says everything about how Good He is. God be praised.