

*Luke 18:9-14*

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

*Luke 18:9-14, 2016*

I think it is important for us to bear in mind to whom Jesus is speaking when he tells this parable,

and this will help us to stay focused on the point of the story.

He is speaking to “some who trusted in themselves,” and in the process uses a Pharisee and tax collector as the characters in his story;

a Pharisee who typically is presented as one who is against Jesus, and who by his religious training in preparation for being a leader in the church, understands that it is adherence to the law that saves,

even while Jesus is standing right in front of him and a tax collector who is characterized by the evil he does as an agent of the Roman Empire,

a betrayer of his people, and a thief who collects more than is due so he can line his pockets with the extra.

But in the gospels it is the tax collector who repents and conforms his life to Jesus’ teachings and becomes his follower,

Matthew being the prime example.

In today’s parable we have one of each standing before God offering their prayers in the temple.

The Pharisee’s prayer begins with thanks and then quickly beaks down to lifting himself above others and listing his righteous acts;

Thank you God I am not like those other people.

I fast and give a tenth of my income.

The Tax collector presents himself to God as the sinner he is and pleads for God's mercy.

He, the tax collector, is the one who went away justified and the Pharisee as he came, righteous.

Why is this important?

That word "justified" is an important word in the context of the church and faith, but in that context can be a little hard to understand.

Let me give you an example with this one definition of Justification:

*the gift of righteousness, membership in the promises of God that your sins are forgiven, you have eternal life with Him and the Holy Spirit lives within you through union with Jesus Messiah in the fellowship of his body the church.*

Now, if you want to flush all that out it is going to take a while. In fact there are books written on this very thing.

But we don't have time to write a book so we have to get at this another way,

and I think Jesus helps us out here.

The dictionary says to justify is to show the justice or rightness of a person, or demonstrate adequate grounds or reason for some act or conduct.

In this case it would be to present justification or good reason,

for God's people to be able to have a relationship with him or receive God's mercy.

This is what the Pharisee tries to do. He tries to justify his relationship with God first by being better than others and then by fasting and giving.

The Pharisee is trying to demonstrate adequate grounds or reason for his relationship with God, maybe even for receiving God's mercy,

through what he does, by his own actions, his unwavering adherence to the law,

as if God will take that into account.

In our eyes looking from this side of the cross and resurrection, and knowing what we do about Jesus, it is easy to condemn the Pharisee,

but please do not lose sight of the fact that this Pharisee is a deeply religious man living by the faith he has been given through the Tora,

the law, the Hebrew understanding of God's word.

The point is, for Jesus it is no longer adherence to the law that demonstrates adequate grounds or reason for relationship with God, or God's mercy.

He is on his way to Jerusalem where he will die for this very thing. He knows what, or who, will justify.

The tax collector presents no justification for himself or any demonstration of adequate grounds or reason for God to have a relationship with him or to have mercy on him.

He only gives himself up to God's mercy.

It is now God who justifies and that is the point of the lesson.

But, we have to be careful here in how we let this parable inform and shape our own attitudes and behavior.

It is true that the Pharisee needs to quit focusing on his good works, but it is also true that the tax collector needs to pay more attention to his works.

They seem to be on opposite ends of a spectrum in this regard,

but on the real issue of justification by God's mercy and grace they are in exactly the same place.

They are both focused on themselves.

One commentator I have studied points out that this parable is a setup, its a trap.

If you take this parable to heart and hear the Pharisee's bragging and become humble,

it can become pretty hard to not also be grateful you aren't like the Pharisee and the first trap is sprung.

At the same time, if you hear the tax collector's confession as an example that you ought to live fully aware of your status as a sinner and in complete reliance on God for mercy,

it can be pretty easy to go on living in that mercy and justification without repentance, without changing your life, remaining the same tax collector you have been,

and the trap is sprung again.

The gospel is not about you being good by your own merit, or a sinner and one who does not deserve the merit of God's grace.

None of this is about you.

Even when Martin Luther was in his room in the early days of his time at the monastery torturing himself over his unworthiness of God's love and grace,

longing for the loving, gracious and merciful God he sought,

he was really making his situation about himself until his confessor came along and said to him,

“Get up and go do something!”

It was in the work that God called Luther to, and that Luther was faithful in,

the study of God's word, that he found what he was searching for,

a loving and merciful God.

This parable, and the whole gospel and Reformation attempts to

“...shift our attention from ourselves,

our piety or passions, our faith or our failure,

our glory or our shame—to God,

the God who delights in justifying the ungodly through the sacrifice of his own son, laying all our sin on him,

and welcoming the outcast, and healing all who are in need.”<sup>1</sup>

In our parable the Pharisee goes away from the temple righteous, and the tax collector goes away justified.

You will leave here today, some righteous and some justified.

The difference is your awareness that what matters is not what you have done or may do,

but what God has done for you in the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

In that awareness then, all you can do then is ask God to change our hearts and give thanks.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pharisee, the Tax Collector, and the Reformation*, David Lose, Working Preecher.com, October 21, 2013