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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Luke 18 - The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

Some of you are aware that I am in school. For those of you holding on to finish high school, college or university, let me just say, it never seems to end. Here I am at the age of 55, still reading books and working on papers for school.

In one of my current courses, I was tasked with a rather interesting assignment. I was to go to an area of my city where people gather and simply observe them. It may sound rather creepy but I tend to be a bit of a people watcher so it intrigued me. The intent of the project was that as a pastor, it is important to understand the context of the people I minister to.

Where would you go in the city of London to observe a group of people? A mall like Masonville? Maybe a sports arena or a London Knights game? You can tell a lot about a person by the way they cheer for a sports team, can't you? Or maybe you would go downtown to Dundas Street to observe. I thought of all of those places but then it occurred to me, to really observe a large group of people interacting with one another, what better place than Costco! On a Saturday afternoon!

Anyone a Costco regular? What would you expect to see there on a Saturday afternoon, mass chaos? That is what I was expecting. So about 1:00pm on Saturday October 13, I made my way to the Costco on Wonderland Road. I had my hat and dark sunglasses ready to go undercover. Just as I was imaging, the roads to get into the store were jammed and the parking lot was filled. I pulled into a space about a half a kilometre from the front doors and ensured my step counter was set. As I walked into the store entrance, I grabbed a cart, put on my shades and ball cap and off I went. My plan was to push the cart slowly around the parameter of the store, watching and observing and then I would make my way to the food court area.

Observing people can give you the munchies. I would grab a cheap hot dog, position myself at a table and continue my experiment.

Does it sound as creepy to you as it does to me, just saying it out loud? This may make it even creepier. I had a pad of paper and pen propped on the cart with some tips on: "How to properly watch people", sent to me by my seminary professor! Here were some of the things I was looking for:

Do the people seemed rushed or relaxed? What does their body language indicate? Are they nervous, excited, worried, bored, happy? What are their facial expressions? What do you think they believe about themselves? About God? What are their greatest fears and worries? On and on it went, and as I pushed my cart, I would periodically scribble thoughts on the pad of paper based on what I saw around me.

Let me just ask those who shop at Costco. If there was a drone flying around inside the store while you were there with a camera focused on you, what do you think it would capture? What would it reveal about you? Your thoughts? Your feelings? The way you went about shopping? Do you mind if I read you some of the observations I jotted down as I had a "bird's eye" view of the people?

The overwhelming "aha" moment for me in the entire experience was despite the chaos in the parking lot and streets around Costco and the amount of people in the store. I was amazed by how quiet it was. In fact, I could hear the wheels of the rickety shopping carts more than noise or voices of the people. Everyone seemed so subdued. It almost felt like a funeral parlour. People shopped for their goods, very orderly and patiently, politely weaving their way through the jumble of other carts and shoppers.

If there was any frustration or impatience it was well hidden. Only once did I see someone demonstrate being a little miffed at being cut off. Even those that came with family or friends seemed to speak in muffled tones, as if they were required to speak softly like they were in a library.

There were very few smiles. Most were serious, or bored. The stone faces and movement of most people almost seemed robotic. Most just appeared to be going through the motions. Leaning on their carts as if to prop them up after a busy and tiring week. The greatest joy I saw demonstrated the whole time I was there, was from two young boys, twins I think who were crammed side by side in the cart at the checkout line. They were giggling and poking each other with unbridled glee as their parents try unsuccessfully to stifle their exuberance.

There seemed to be little interaction between the shoppers. In fact, at one point, I mentioned to a man wearing a Toronto Maple Leaf hat that I liked his hat, but my words almost seemed to startle him, like it had awoken him from his zombie like state. Even at the checkout, there was little banter between the shoppers and clerks beyond the usual exchange of pleasantries. In general, everyone just seemed to be caught up in their own little world, even as they were surrounded by hundreds of other people.

It was fascinating. That trip to Costco really challenged me. How much of my life is purely about me? So caught up in my own little world, that I am not aware or in touch with the lives of those around me?

Am I living the best possible life that God has in mind for me? Or is the rat race of our society, wearing me down, tiring me out so that I don't even notice or engage others as I am pushing a cart around a crowded grocery store? What about you? Are you living your best life? That is a bit of catchphrase I have seen circulating on social media but I like it. Are you living your best life?

It is interesting that in the bible, there is a story that Jesus tells his followers about how to live the best life possible. It is the story, or more precisely, a parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which is found in the Gospel of Luke.

You may remember that last weekend we launched a new message series on the Parables of Jesus entitled, "What's the Big Idea?"

The word parable in the Greek, literally means, "to set beside" similar to the English word, comparison. In the culture of Jesus day, things were often explained not so much in statistics or definitions but in word pictures, in comparisons; parables, "to set beside". When teaching in parables, Jesus was speaking a language that the people of the day could relate to and they often had an emotional impact that made them more meaningful and memorable. At least to those who had softened hearts and were open to listening and hearing what Jesus had to say.

At the same time, the parables often remain a mystery to those with hardened hearts because parables require the listener to be self-aware, humble and be willing to put themselves into the story. This is why many times in scripture when Jesus told a parable, the Pharisees and scribes (the upper crust of Jewish society, the religious elite), didn't seem to get it. They went away scratching their heads. They were too proud to see themselves in any of the stories Jesus told and they were often shut out of the deeper spiritual truth he was getting at.

In Luke 18:9-14, the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is actually a comparison of two men, they are "set beside" each other so that Jesus can illustrate who it is that is living the best possible life.

If you have your bibles you can turn to Luke 18. Notice right at the start, in verse 9, Jesus is describing the audience he is addressing on this day.

Luke 18:9

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else:

If we look back even into Luke 17, we know that Jesus told a series of parables and his audience would have been made up of his closest followers, his disciples, but there were also Pharisees in the crowd. As I said, Pharisees in Jesus' day were mostly middle to upper class male civic leaders. They would have held a position of respect in this culture and were known to hold strictly to the teachings and traditions of God's word as revealed

in the Old Testament. The Pharisees had a tendency to reduce their relationship with God down to a legalistic list of rules and rituals. It was a burden and expectation that they often placed on everyone else. Your relationship with God is defined by how well you follow the rules. Are you a rule follower?

This has been my experience with rule keepers. They are usually high in predictability that is you usually know what to expect from them; but they are generally lacking in compassion.

My mind is somewhat focused on my daughter Leah these days. She is 39 weeks pregnant. She is due anytime. We are a little excited. I was thinking of her birth this week. As you know, Carolyn and I adopted Leah but the cool thing is that we were at her birth. Leah was born on June 14, a Friday afternoon, we took her home on the Sunday.

At the time, Carolyn and I were both school teachers and in those days, 27 years ago, there was no such thing as maternity or paternity leave for adoption. So, we were scrambling to find a way to arrange for one of us to be home as we finished off the school year. Unfortunately, my principal was a rule keeper. She was genuinely happy for us, but she consulted the staff handbook and informed me that I was eligible for exactly one, personal day. That was it. Fortunately, Carolyn's principal was a little less of a rule keeper, a little more compassionate and she was able to stay home with Leah for the remainder of the school year.

That is a picture of the Pharisees. Legalistic, rule keepers. Predicable. But their expectations tended to weigh everyone around them down. In the gospels, Jesus saved some of his harshest criticism for the Pharisees for promoting this type of rule keeping lifestyle.

In fact, in Matthew 23:3-6, Jesus warns his disciples not to be like the Pharisees when he says;

Matthew 23:3-6

So practice and obey whatever they tell you, but don't follow their example. For they don't practice what they teach. 4 They crush people with unbearable religious demands and never lift a finger to ease the burden. 5 "Everything they do is for show. On their arms they wear extra wide prayer boxes with Scripture verses inside, and they wear robes

with extra-long tassels. 6 And they love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues.

Jesus seems to imply that for the Pharisees, it was all show. Their motivation to live the way that they do is for outer appearance, for the applause of people, not of God. It is not the best life possible because it is self-serving. They are only interested in their own little world.

Who would be our equivalent today? Who are the Pharisees in our society? The truth is, any of us can be a Pharisee. It doesn't matter our occupation or social standing or even how many times we come to church. When legalism trumps the love of Jesus in our lives, we can be Pharisaical. As hard as it is for me to admit, I can fall into this trap occasionally. Do you know when I can become most like a Pharisee? When I have left little margin in my life, when things just get too busy and I am rushing from one thing to the next. That is when I can become too self-absorbed and too focused on my own little world.

Monday was a busy day for me. I was trying to fit too many things into my schedule, but I knew I also had to get to the polling station to vote. I figured I would have a gap of time around 6, I could whip in, whip out and still make it to my 6:30 commitment.

I parked my car at the church where I was to vote and made my way into the large room where there were four stations set up with the letters. The idea as you know was that you go to the station that includes the letter of your last name to get your ballot. In my case it was the H-N.

I don't know about the rest of the day but at 6 pm, there were zero people in line for Station A-G. There were zero people in line for Station O-T. There were zero people in line for Station U-Z but there were ten people in line for Station H-N. I was the 11th. I felt my face begin to warm. The line progressed at a snail's pace as the lady registering the voters engaged in small talk with each person.

I learned that her children attended school with the children of the lady six ahead of me. I heard that the guy four in front of me walks by her house every day and they had never had a chance to meet. Apparently now was there chance to meet! The man two in front of me forgot his voting card, so she had

to look him up and there was a bit of panic for a moment as she thought that he was at the wrong polling booth but no problem, she could find where he needed to be. GRRRRR.

Any trace of compassion I had when I arrived had now been replaced by agitation and anger. I had done everything right and brought all my things. Why did I have to wait because someone wasn't prepared and can't this lady dispense with all the friendly chit chat and just focus on the job at hand? Doesn't she know there is a line!

And then it struck me. What if there was a drone flying over this polling station with a camera focused on me? Or what if someone was in the room doing a school project on people watching? I quickly glanced around for someone in a ball cap and sunglasses! What would they observe about me, my gestures, my behaviour, my face? What would it tell them about my life? Too busy? Too legalistic? Too caught up in my own little world with little compassion left over for those around me?

Love and grace fell by the wayside at 6:00 pm at that polling station and I became self-righteousness. I somehow thought that my time and attention was more valuable than anyone else' in that room. Self-righteous. Have you heard that expression? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines self-righteous as being, convinced of one's own righteousness especially in contrast with the actions and beliefs of others : narrow-mindedly moralistic. A rule keeper.

Look again at the trait of the audience Jesus was addressing with this parable.

Luke 18:9

Then Jesus told this story to some who had great confidence in their own righteousness and scorned everyone else:

It was to those who identified themselves as righteous, self-righteous, that Jesus was talking to here. Those who believed that the best way of living was with moral superiority and arrogance. Jesus uses this parable to flip their world upside down and define what it really means to live the best life in the Kingdom of God.

Let's look back at the text and unpack the parable a little bit.

Luke 18:10

“Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a despised tax collector.

Let's just stop there. It is important for us to understand that when Jesus started this parable in this way, it would have prompted some reaction from the listeners. You couldn't get a much better contrast in this culture than a Pharisee and a tax collector. Remember a parable is to “set beside”, to compare.

One, the Pharisee would be considered ultra-moralistic and pious and the other, the tax collector would generally be thought of as dishonest and a bit of a schemer. In Jesus' day, you would expect to see a Pharisee in the Temple praying at the appointed prayer times. They held fast to the letter of the law. The Tax Collector on the other hand, would have generated a different response from the audience around Jesus. Tax Collectors were thought of as traitors by the Jewish people because they collected taxes for the Romans and often overcharged their own people so they could skim a little “off the top” for themselves. They were linked with robbers and murderers in this culture as those who could not be trusted.

It would not have been shocking to see a Tax Collector praying in the temple, but it would have been a little less expected than the Pharisee.

But in Jesus' story, we have both a Pharisee and a Tax Collector praying in the temple. There is a contrast here. Next, Jesus draws attention to the content of each of the men's prayers.

Luke 18:11

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that I am not like other people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! 12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

That is quite a way to start a prayer. The Pharisee's posture is noteworthy right off the top. He was standing, off to himself. He is alone. Given his background we could presume that he standing alone not because he wanted to concentrate on God better.

No he was concerned about his own purity and was standing away from those in the temple whom he perceived to be unclean, the sinners. He didn't want to mix with any of that! His prayer begins with him calling attention to himself. He appears too arrogantly thank God that he is not like the smattering of criminals and riff raff of society that seemed to be surrounding him on this day. He particularly makes note of a certain tax collector that perhaps he has spotted across the temple courtyard. Thank you Lord, that I am not as despicable as him! Rather than being concerned about God's opinion of him or any of his own shortcomings, this Pharisee only cares about comparing himself to others. He then goes on to remind God, as if God needs reminding, of just how good he has been. He has been sure to fast, over and above what was required of him by law. He tithed not just on some of what he has but, on everything.

For those listening to this parable from Jesus, this portrayal of the Pharisee would not have been far from the norm of what the people would have expected in this day. Yep, that sounds like a Pharisee. They were caught up in their own little world and they were looked up to, believe it or not.

Contrast that to the posture and content of the Tax Collector's prayer.

Luke 18:13

"But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, 'O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.'

The Tax Collector stands off in the distance perhaps recognizing his unworthiness to join the ranks of the rest of the group of Jewish people praying in the temple. He seems aware of the judgemental eyes that may be following him. His posture was one of humility in this day. He appears distraught over his sins and failures before God. So ashamed, he could not even look up, his eyes remained fixed to the ground.

Jesus makes a point of saying that this man, beat his chest, which in this culture was usually only done by women. It was a sign of humility but men generally saw it as a sign of weakness. In his prayer, the Tax Collector asks for mercy.

He is so overwhelmed with a sense of his own inadequacy and sin before God and his need to be forgiven, that he could not help but cry out in humility, God, have mercy on me! The nuance of the word mercy implies that the Tax Collector was asking God to save him.

I sometimes wonder if we have lost this sense of our need of God. We get caught up in our own world. Our life revolves around us and we kind of place Jesus, over here. Maybe, we too have become like the Pharisee. A little arrogant and self-righteous. Maybe we have become a little entitled. We have lost our sense of gratitude, humility and need of God. Lord, have mercy on me! Have you ever started a prayer like that?

What does humility look like for you? It is the posture of the Tax Collector in this text? Who do you think of, when you think of a life of humility? It is becoming increasingly more difficult to find good examples, isn't it? It's hard to find those humble role models to emulate in our world today. We live in such a narcissistic age with our reality TV, fixation with "selfies" and the number of friends we have on Facebook or followers on Instagram.

Maybe things have not changed much since Jesus' day. Do you know that in this ancient culture of the bible, one of the worst things that could be said about someone, particularly a male was that he was humble? That was considered a quality of a slave, not a free man. That is why the bible has so much to say about pride and humility. In Biblical times, people were generally living selfish, isolated and lonely lives. They were caught up in their own little world and living only for themselves and compassion for others was lost. The people were not living the best life God intended.

Contrast that to the life Jesus calls his followers to. It has always been a little counter cultural. What is it that counts for our best life?

Our best life comes through submission and surrender to Jesus. Our best life in Christ means going lower. To be lifted up, you actually need to go lower. It is a life of Humility.

Clearly in this parable, Jesus is presenting the two men as polar opposites, which they were, but he is also setting the people up for a surprise twist at the end of the parable.

In *Luke 18:14*, Jesus drops this bombshell.

I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus delivers the punch line.

It was the Tax Collector who went home justified; the one who was deemed to be living the best life according to Jesus. It wasn't the Pharisee with all his attention to works and effort and rule keeping. This conclusion would have stunned the crowd but Jesus is driving home a deeper spiritual truth. Even the most religious person can miss the real purpose of life in the Kingdom of God.

The fatal flaw of the Pharisee is that he thinks he can be obedient to God and still have a lack of compassion for those around him, like the tax collector. He thinks he can obey the letter of the law but ignore the intent, that is, to love your neighbour as yourself.

Here is the thing, when our hearts are set on Jesus and we are pursuing him with our whole lives, then humility and love cannot help but be genuine expressions of our faith to a watching world. But when you put yourself as number #1, your life is not just fake news, it is fake “good news”. Did you see what I did there?

In verse 14, Jesus states the key to living the best life in the Kingdom of God is to humble ourselves. It is then, that we will be exalted in the eyes of God.

Our best life comes through submission to Christ. To surrendering fully to him and then inviting him to lead and guide us.

I have mentioned this before but it bears repeating. In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, the word for humility actually means to take a knee. To be humbled is to kneel. In the ancient days, when someone knelt before a conqueror or a king, their entire focus was on that person and not on themselves. That is the scriptural idea behind humility.

The prevailing attitude in our society today, perhaps like Jesus' day, is that humility is more of a

weakness. To be humble in our world is to be a doormat. Humility infers that you are taken advantage of or walked upon and of course, we can't have that!

So all the self-help books and on line life coaches tell us to be more aggressive. Be more assertive. Take control of your life! Stand up for yourself! Don't let someone else get the upper hand! We see where that has gotten us, right? This pervasive attitude has actually created a culture of entitlement and paranoia in our world today. Just look around.

As I have pondered the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, through the lens of our culture and context today, do you know what conclusion I have come to? What's the Big Idea?

I think we need to become less focused on our own little world and turn to Jesus. Just like the Tax Collector. And express to him with our whole hearts how much we need his mercy and forgiveness and invite him to give us eyes to see, and a heart of compassion for the people around us.

Do you want to know the secret to living your best life possible? I am going to save you thousands of dollars on life coaching right now. So pay attention. Our best life comes with surrendering to the one who demonstrated the greatest act of humility known to humankind.

Jesus Christ left the right hand side of his Father in heaven, and came to earth as a human being. Even though he was without sin, he took upon himself the sins of the world; your sins and my sins. He died on a cross. It was a death sentence usually reserved for a criminal, the lowest of the low in that day. That is what Jesus did for you and for me. Jesus didn't stay in the grave. He was resurrected from the dead after three days and then invited us into this new and resurrected life that is available through him.

The only way to receive this new life is not to earn it. It is through surrender. To recognize our shortcomings, our sin and surrender them to Jesus and invite him to take control of our lives. When we do that, do you know the way that Jesus calls us to live? To step out of our own little world and love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

To take a knee before Jesus and the people He brings into our lives every day. It is humility,

humble living and as we see in the parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the Tax collector, it is the best way to live.

Our best life comes through submission to Christ. Surrender to God can lead us to freedom from an unhealthy focus on self.

So, are you living your best life? If not, what is standing in your way? Are you too busy? Is there too little margin in your life? Have you lost that “lovin’ feelin”, the compassion you have for others? Are you too busy rule keeping?

All that can end today. You can surrender your life and humble yourself to the creator of life and invite him to have mercy on you, and give you eyes to see and a heart to love those he has placed all around you.

Amen.

Points to Ponder

What’s the Big Idea? ~ Luke 18:9 -14 The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Share some examples of a time when you have had a chance to observe people in a familiar setting. What do you think their facial expressions, mannerisms and behaviour said about their lives in that moment? Think of a place you have been this week. If people were observing you in that setting, what would they have said about you?
2. Discuss what the phrase, *Are you living your best life*, means to you.
3. In general, would you say that you are a rule keeper or a rule breaker? Discuss the pros and the cons of each of these ways of living.
4. In what situations do you find that you are more likely to live in your own little world with little compassion left over for others? Describe an experience you have had lately when you were living in your own little world. Did you have any learnings from it?
5. Can you describe someone who is an example of humility in your life? What traits does that person possess that exude humility to you?
6. Who do you find you resonate with most in this parable, the Tax Collector or the Pharisee? Why? What are some things you can put in place *to live your best life* in the Kingdom of God?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for surrender in each of your lives and to be able to give to Jesus those things that are holding you back from living your best life in him. An action item: Spend some time in a setting that is familiar to you and simply observe people. What do you see and how can you bring the good news of Jesus to that setting?