

Luke 18:9-14

Justified

Scheduled to Preach Live on 1/10/2021

We are in Luke 18 today.

In this passage, Jesus is going to tell a parable about two people, one that has true faith and one whose faith looks very pure, but it contains a subtle mutation of the real thing that makes it a false thing.

And if we pick up this strain, it is deadly to our faith, to our souls, and to our church.

When it prevails in our community it is deadly to our church unity. Deadly to our collective joy. Deadly to our love for one another and for our neighbor. Deadly to being the kind of compelling community the church is supposed to be.

When it is in us personally it is deadly to our spiritual vitality, our prayer life, our hope, and in its fullest form, to our souls.

It kills our worship. It sucks us dry. If we find our Christianity isn't working - it isn't changing us, sanctifying us, making us more gracious, more humble, deepening relationships, freeing us, it isn't giving us peace, patience, and kindness, it is more than likely that it has mutated into this false form.

If our Christianity isn't making us more loving, if it isn't increasing our wonder and amazement and astonishment at Jesus and His gospel, if it isn't growing us - it is probably becoming like the false faith of the one man in this story.

And this replacement for Christianity is not at all rare. It is endemic to our church, and probably every church. There are non-religious strains of it that infect every heart at times.

You have almost certainly had this disease, and you probably still have some of it now, and I know that I do.

So there should be something that strikes all of us in this passage. If you don't feel at least a little offended by this passage, you probably don't understand what Jesus is saying. Because this passage has some shocking elements for church-goers that we need to take to heart.

So in five verses today Jesus packs quite a punch:

Luke 18:9 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."

So there are two people in the temple praying, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee, the religious leader, basically a Jewish version of a pastor, approaches God one way, and leaves unjustified. The tax collector approaches God another way and leaves justified.

So before we get into the elements of their faith and what makes the difference, we should briefly talk about that word, "justified" in verse 14.

It's a word that means "declared righteous," or "approved of as righteous". It's used in Romans to mean redeemed or made a Christian or saved.

Romans 3:23-24 "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,"

In 1 Corinthians, justification is the thing that makes us Christians and transforms us:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 “9 Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, 10 nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

So you were one way, he says, but then you were justified. And that made all the difference in the world.

So what's at stake with the tax collector and the Pharisee here couldn't be more significant. Because of the faith of the tax collector he leaves that temple redeemed by God. Because of the mutated faith of the Pharisee, he leaves unjustified.

So this is a big deal.

So let's look at what the Pharisee believed that made his faith a mutation of the real thing. Let's pull out the nuances of his faith so that we can be on guard against it in us and among us. And then we'll look at the tax collector's faith so we can stoke faith like that in us and among us.

And I know we've given this caution before, but it's an important one.

Don't assume the Pharisees are the villains we could never be like.

We tend to read these stories, and we know the Pharisees are the villains, so we just read assuming they're the worst people and we wouldn't be like them. We see ourselves as the other characters in the story, but never the Pharisees. But then we miss the whole reason for the warning.

The Pharisees, in the eyes of the religious people in Jesus's day, were the good guys. They were the best citizens, lovers of the Bible, involved in their church (the synagogue), leaders in the community, educated, and winsome. There were far more stuffy and legalistic religious people than them, they were more popular religious leaders, a breath of fresh air. They were the good guys.

But their faith became so mutated that it kept them from God, even though everyone thought they were the closest people to God. Churchgoing people today have a better chance of being the Pharisee in this story than the tax collector, so let's look for this Pharisee in ourselves.

So what was wrong with what the Pharisee believed?

First and foremost, he had:

A. A Mutated View of God

Which is usually the biggest problem in our lives - we don't really know who God is.

He's partially right, he thinks that God is holy, but, in his mind, God is obviously not too holy. Because he thinks he can approach God with his own holiness as a ticket to God.

He went to the temple to pray (Luke 18:20). So he is there to approach God, he is there to be heard by God. And to be heard by God he brings his resume'. He thinks, "I'm good enough to draw near to God on my own."

He had a mutated view of God: God wasn't big enough or holy enough.

Now his Bible, which he knew and loved, described a different approach that the prophets of old had to God. It describes Isaiah seeing God and saying this:

Isaiah 6:5 "5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!""

It describes Job hearing from the Lord and then saying, **"3 Then Job answered the LORD and said: 4 "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. 5 I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further." (Job 40:3-5).**

There's a humble silence and a sense of being undone and unworthy to approach God in those who knew Him best.

But this Pharisee comes approaching God with his resume' of righteousness. As if with his own righteousness he could get to God.

This is a major problem for religious people like us: we think our own righteousness is enough to get us accepted by God or to get us a hearing with God. Paul described people who think this way in Romans 10:

Romans 10:1-4 “**1 Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**”

Verse 3 is a key - if we are ignorant of the righteousness of God, we will seek to establish our own. If we have a wrong view of God and His holiness, we will think we can establish for ourselves a holiness that gives us access to God.

And, what makes this mutated faith extra deadly is that, on the surface, it looks like it improves us.

People who are trying to establish their own righteousness will look like wonderful Christians, just like the Pharisee looked like a wonderful religious person because of how he established his own righteousness.

People who believe this try hard to be good, as we should, and on the surface it makes us relatively good people.

He thought God could be approached with human effort, and he made a ton of effort. So he looked good, and being ignorant of how holy God is, approached God like his own effort was his ticket there.

Which is connected to the second mutation in his faith. He had:

B. A Mutated View of God's Law

God's law is any command that God gives. It is summed up in the ten commandments, but it's any do or don't given to us by God.

And God's laws are good and the right guide for our lives. But they were never meant to make us OK with God. God's law is good, but it can't justify, it can only condemn.

Because God's law spells out God's righteous requirements for us, no sinful person could use the law to say "look, I'm pretty good."

And if I think that I've been good enough to keep God's law so that when I pull out the law it will roar in my defense, I've missed the whole message of the law. The law will not roar in my defense, it will roar against me. It will condemn me, it will point out my sins and failures.

In the Pharisee's prayer, there was no mention of his sin, and no mention of his need for forgiveness. Which should be the first thing he mentions if he is judging himself by God's law.

This is a problem with Pharisees, we think we don't need to be forgiven much.¹ We think external obedience is enough, when in reality God looks on the heart.² He thought his obedience actually put God in his debt.³

So what was on his resume that made him think he was a law-keeper and that he was righteous on his own - look at his prayer again in 11 and 12:

Luke 18:11 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.'

First he says he is not an extortioner. Matthew translates this as "ravening" like a ravening wolf - someone who preys on people. He says, "Thank you God that I'm not ravenous, I'm not out to get anybody."

He's not unjust, and not an adulterer.

¹ See Luke 7:47 and its context.

² 1 Samuel 16:7

³ See Luke 17:10

He is concerned about justice with the way he lives, and he's concerned about sexual purity.

This is a well-balanced guy - you rarely see both of those concerns in one person.

Fairly often, people care about one or the other, at least in recent history within evangelicalism.

In the youth group I was in in high school, there was rightly a strong emphasis on sexual purity. We did true love waits, many waited until marriage, we were striving for sexual purity - and rightly so, God's law calls us to that.

But there was very little talk of doing what's right for those getting beat up by life: about advocating for child slaves, or for the poor, or anyone life seems rigged against. It just rarely came up.

But I know there are other circles with a strong emphasis on doing justice out in the world, caring for the poor, and in those circles, there is often an acceptance of sexual immorality, living together before marriage, treating adultery with kid gloves.

Now I'm obviously painting with broad brushes here, plenty of people care about both issues, but we tend to polarize. And within our camp we make out boast in our obedience.

These areas of obedience are ways of justifying ourselves (to ourselves, and we think, to God.) They define us. They are a source of pride. They are a way of being better than other other people, just like they were for the pharisee.

So if we are striving for sexual purity, we say, "Thank you that I'm not like people who have sinned in this area." If we are striving for justice, we say, "Thank you that I'm not like the people who just don't get it when it comes to politics - thank you that I'm not like those moron liberals or those idiot republicans. I'm not like these morons who think christianity is only for some other world." And we boast in the social media temple, constantly sharing

stories about how awful and dumb some Christians are - "I am not like these people."

And our perceived obedience or our thought that "I really get it" becomes a source of pride and a source of contempt for others. Remember why Jesus told this parable to begin with:

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt

This is the heart of the Pharisee: I am the good one, and I have contempt for the other. And that contempt based on my goodness relative to their failures is the heart of a Pharisee.

And again, the problem is not striving for obedience:

Doing justice is good, being faithful to our spouses is right and commanded, sexual purity is to be strived for, loving neighbors through just laws and wise voting and improved justice system - that's all good stuff!

The problem is believing it justifies us, that it makes us acceptable, and it creates in us a spiritual pride, and that we treat others with contempt.

The pride that says "I care about justice so I am good." And the pride that says "I'm righteous because we waited until we were married, I don't look at porn, I've mastered my lust, I've always been faithful to my wife. I'm not like these pervs." It's all what comes out of the heart of the Pharisee.

Whether our way of self-justification and feeling better than others is a woke way or a very moralistic way, we are being Pharisees if we think we can justify ourselves at all.

And it's so subtle. It's subtle with this Pharisee. Because notice that Pharisee isn't technically on the surface taking credit for it - he's giving God the credit for doing this in him.

In verse 11 again he says, **"God, I thank YOU that I'm not like other men..."**

God absolutely gets the glory for this. I can't boast about this - God did it.

And honestly I can't say I don't pray like this. Every time another pastor that's caught in a scandal shows up in my news feed, so about weekly, there's often, in my heart, "God, thank you for protecting me from falling like them. Thank you that I've been faithful to my wife. Thank you that I haven't sinned like Carl Lentz or Ravi Zacharias. There but for the grace of God go !!"

This is a guy who, if he's bragging, is humble-bragging- thanking God for that. He's acknowledging that even his obedience came from God.

But the problem was that he was still justifying himself. He thought that what he did and didn't do is what made him right with God and better than others.

He was still relying on those God-wrought good works in His life to give him a ticket to God.

He wasn't confessing sin and trusting a Savior, he was trusting in the things He did, by God's power, to make him justified.

He didn't think God's salvation was the only way he could approach God. He thought his goodness was. And he gives God a mention, but this prayer is still all about his own goodness.

One commentator said, *"he glances at god, but contemplates himself."*

Verse 12 goes on to talk about some of his awesomeness that he's contemplating:

I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

Before this verse, he talked about his obedience to God's law. He didn't steal, he didn't commit adultery, he is just. But here he says "I fast twice a week."

Now in God's law, you were required to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. There was one penitential holiday when you fasted. The rest of the year you could eat. The day of atonement was a day to afflict yourself with fasting. One day a year.

This guy is fasting twice a week. Which you're allowed to do, you can fast all you want. But you're not commanded to.

This guy took his religious custom which was neutral, not ordered by God, and imported it into his identity as an elite religious person. It's where he got his justification.

And we do this with so many things - behaviors that we have preferences for that we import into our sense of own goodness and superiority.

And there are so many ways we do this - we take things that are fine, but extra and preferences, and we say this is what differentiates us and makes us better. "I don't drink any alcohol." That's fine, and a decision many Christians make - a decision that can be made for the glory of God. But because that's not commanded in God's word, it doesn't add to our virtue somehow.

"I only live in a certain type of neighborhood," "I'll only drive a car that costs no more than this," "my kids will only go to certain schools," "I'll only evangelize in one way (relationships, street-preaching)," "I only gather for church in homes," There is no end to the number of not-commanded things that Christians can do for good reasons that become the reason we think we are elite.

There will always be plenty of things we do or don't do that make us different from other Christians. But if they're not commanded in scripture, that's all they do - they make us say some people do different things. But for the Pharisee, they put those other people beneath them. I'm not just different, I'm better.

This guy not only used God's law to justify himself, he used his own extra laws to add to his sense that he was right with God and just not like other people. His extra fasting and extra tithing made him better.

(By the way, that also revealed a deficient view of God: God wants me hungry, God wants me lacking.)

He had (A) a mutated view of God, (B) a mutated view of God's law.

And the consequence for all of us when we don't know who God is and we don't understand His word is that we also don't know ourselves or others very well. With a wrong view of God and a wrong view of bible, you'll never know yourself or the world. Fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom.

So he also had:

(c) A Mutated View of Himself and Others

You see it in how he approaches God: he stands by himself (as opposed to the tax collector who stood "far away." He thought he was in a class by himself, above the others.

And in case we think that's reading too much into where he stands, he says it twice: "God, I thank you that I'm not like others...and I thank you that I'm not like this tax collector."

Jesus told this parable, again in the intro:

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

His faith was a mutated form of the faith because it caused him to think of himself as a cut above the rest. He got it, he did it, he was simply better and justified because of his works.

Jesus ends this whole story in Luke 18:14 **"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."**

He exalted himself - he was lifted up above others. It was us and them for him.

I don't rob, they rob. I don't commit adultery, they do. I get it, they don't. I am better. So he separated himself, even in where he stood, from other people.

He stayed away from all of those people that were beneath him. Because people like that could pollute and contaminate a man like him.

This kind of separatism is endemic to the Christian community and a classic characteristic of a Pharisee. I sense a deficiency in you, so I have to separate completely so I won't be polluted. Or just because of a sense of disgust with the people who don't get it like me.

We won't read books by people we might disagree with, go to church with people we might disagree with, feel any sort of fellowship with people who don't share all of our opinions and values.

I am not like them.

Can't eat the meat and spit out the bone, where we know we all have strengths and weakness and we can learn from one another. We separate and say "I'm not like that idiot."

Does our faith do that? Does it exalt us and separate us from others? The Pharisee loves to feel superior, loves to look down his nose. Treats others with contempt.

Do we think of ourselves as in a class by ourselves? Because of our morality? Our wokeness? Do we feel like we are always superior to them, and they are the problem?

There's a strong pull in the human heart to want to think of ourselves as elite: the people with elite, rare, spirituality, or elite, rare knowledge.

The pull toward conspiracy theories is often caused by the gratifying feeling of not being like other people - I get what they don't get. I love how it feels to really be in the know. I know what only a very few elite people know. I am not like other men!

I know there are occasionally real conspiracies (evil people conspire and lie). I'm not against healthy skepticism and testing all things. But the #1 predictor that someone will believe a conspiracy theory is that they believe another unrelated one. If you believe the air we breathe is modifying us because of chemtrails you are more likely than others to believe 9/11 was an inside job.

There is a kind of person who loves to know what those others don't know. What kind of person? Often, A Pharisee.

This Pharisee, and Pharisees like us, are often prone to think “I’m not like other people.” It’s a false view of ourselves.

We are like other people.

This guy was not self-aware at all. He was just like other people, with a fallen human nature in rebellion against God. He wasn’t aware that his best works, his best knowledge, his best deeds were tainted with sin and did nothing to enable him to stand before a holy God. *He trusted in himself that he was righteous.* When you don’t know God, you can’t know yourself.

And again, beware of assuming “I’m not a Pharisee.”

They’re not some other type of creature from us. They are nice churchgoing religious family-oriented lovers of the Bible. They’re popular and well respected, well educated, influencers.

So we should be really open to the possibility that we are them.

I love some of what what they love. I love being somehow better or more in the know than others. I love the Bible, but I also love being known as someone who loves the Bible. I call people to obey a law I don’t fully keep myself. I check many of these boxes. So let’s not assume “I’m the good guy in the story.”

So lets ask, “Does my morality make me better than others in my mind? Than the abortionist? Than the uneducated? Than the politically opposite of me? Do I carry myself with a spiritual pride? Can I hardly speak what I believe to be true without implying the stupidity or inferiority of my opponents?”

Jesus is driving hard at spiritual pride here. It’s a deadly false Christianity.

But the other guy in the story, the tax collector, couldn’t have been more different in his approach.

Now if you were to compare the moral record of the Pharisee and the moral record of the tax collector, the tax collector would lose in a big way. The

Pharisee would be the Bills, the tax collector would be the Dolphins. This is a blow-out.

The tax collector was a legitimately wicked guy. He wasn't a good citizen, his whole job was to fundraise for Rome, the occupying enemy. And to do that fundraising, he extorted, he used violence, he shook people down. He was legitimately slimy. You'd want to live next door to a Pharisee, not to a tax collector.

But the tax collector ended up justified.

So what was his approach?

Luke 18:13 “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!'”

1) He stood far off.

The Pharisee stood like he was a cut above the rest, but the tax collector knew he wasn't worthy to approach God. In where he stood, in his posture, in his body language (he beat his breast) - he wasn't right and he knew it.

2) He saw God as holy

He didn't draw near. God is perfect and holy.

3) He saw the law as condemning

He rightly read the law and knew it condemned him. God certainly wasn't in his debt. He knew the law of God would roar against him, not in his defense.

4) He didn't see himself as better than others -

How could he with the condemnation of God's law hanging over him? He was rightly humbled by the law.

And he says, “Be merciful to me, a sinner.”

And it's interesting that he doesn't use the normal word for mercy here. Asking for mercy is basically asking "Don't give me what I deserve."

But this word here that he use is *hilaskomai*, which means something closer to "atone for me," or "be propitious toward me."

And the difference there is that mercy is when you let someone go and don't punish them for their sin. This tax collector understood that he was too bad for that kind of thing.

Atonement had to be made.

And in the law of God, before the death of Christ, atonement was made one a year. On the ark of the covenant there was a mercy seat, or the hilasterion, which was the cover. And each year a sacrifice was made and the blood was poured on the hilasterion.

It was their way of saying, "The people deserve death, but this substitute was offered in their place on the hilasterion."

This guy says, "hilaskomai" - something like "atone for me" or "make propitiation for me."

There's gonna need to be atonement if I'm going to approach God.

Hebrews 2:17 "17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

The one who atones by His blood, the one who is our substitute, who takes the punishment we deserve so that we can live, and so we can approach God, is Christ.

The only way to approach God can't be through our resume, but through the blood of the atonement.

And on the Day of Atonement, the people would fast. It was a day of affliction. A day to be small.

And if our approach to God and others is through our own “bigness” - our resume, our morality, our better-than-you-ness, our spiritual clout, our knowledge - then we enter and leave his presence entirely unjustified. We continue in our arrogance, in our lack of self-awareness, in our haughtiness, in our spiritual pride, and eventually in our condemnation.

But if we approach lowly: confessing sins, utterly dependent on the sacrifice of Jesus as the only thing that gives us a hearing with God, we are justified.

If our Christianity is creating in us pride, self-reliance, contempt for others, distance from other Christians, and a haughtiness, maybe a glance at God but a contemplation on self - it is not the real thing, it's a mutation of the true faith. IF we have no ability to maintain any Christian relationships because we inevitably separate because we are better - it isn't the real thing.

If we always feel the need to strut our spiritual stuff, display our superior knowledge, flaunt our resume's, we have picked up a mutated strain of false Christianity.

But if it's creating a humility, a reliance on His grace, a really big view of the cross, a movement toward others in their weakness not away from others. A glance at the self but a contemplation of God in his holiness, his cross, his grace, and his mercy - that's the faith of the justified.

Luke 18:14b “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”