

GETTING RIGHT WITH GOD

Luke 18:9-14

Good morning!

As you are aware by now, Pastor Matt is in Michigan for family visitation today following his aunt's passing following a rough recurrence of cancer. The Memorial Service is tomorrow, and we can keep them all in our prayers. Pastor Matt was already scheduled to be away on vacation with his family the following 2 weeks, so we'll see him back in the pulpit to continue his series on the Ten Commandments on March 23rd.

Pastor Brad Diekema will be in the pulpit for the next 2 weeks. But for today, you'll just have to do with me.

Seriously, it really is a joy it is to be preaching again today! Thank you, Pastor Matt, for asking me to step in on short notice.

Actually, the message I have for you today is one that I've been chewing over in my head for some time now. I hope and pray you'll be blessed by it.

The text for today is one we all know and doubtless most of could recite from memory. It's Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

Hear now the reading of the Word of God from the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 18, beginning in verse 9:

Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Word of God. For the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray:

Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open,
All desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit,
So that we may perfectly love You
And worthily magnify Your Holy Name,
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen

Before I delve into the real meat of this passage, it bears stating again that the bible is both complicated and rich in meaning – so deep that we could literally spend our entire lives in intense study and still be learning more on the day we die. Yet the core gospel message is so clear and easy to understand, a child can grasp it.

And as we'll see, both aspects are present in this simple parable from the lips of Jesus.

First, the simple.

I'm a sinner. You're sinners. How on earth can a sinner ever enter into the presence of a Perfect, Holy God? To enter heaven, the place of sinless perfection? Without ever having our sin dealt with? Our only hope is grace and mercy of God.

The tax collector in this parable personifies this reality: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

He confessed his sinfulness, was remorseful about it, and knew his only hope was the grace and mercy of God.

And he went home justified before God.

It's that simple.

But this is where the second, deeper aspect comes into play. And for that, we're going to have to put on our thinking caps and appreciate the meaning of some technical, theological words.

But before we do that, let's walk through the first half of our text and look at the Pharisee.

Jesus first shows us who he's addressing – those who were confident of their own righteousness and were therefore looking down on everybody else.

Notice the "everybody" else. Jesus is addressing self-righteous people who see themselves as superior to everyone else, in their own eyes as being worthy of divine favor, as being better than everyone else. How arrogant! And how ignorant!

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 10:12, states that such people are not wise.

...When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

Sadly, we do that all the time! It's the human thing to do.

I'm not as bad as the terrorist, the mass-murderer, or the rapist. I don't go running around robbing banks or shoot everyone that disagrees with me. And neither do you.

We could quite literally spend all day, and then some, discussing this, couldn't we? But you get the point.

Self-righteousness comes naturally to each one of us. It's as easy as breathing. We're infected with it. And we must acknowledge it.

It's sadly far easier for us to identify with the Pharisee in this parable than it is with the tax collector. Because the deeper problem is the attitude of the heart. The idea that in our self-righteousness, we are "good" people.

The dominant idea in all world religions is that good people have favor in the sight of God. That if you are a moral person, you are acceptable to God. If I'm good, I deserve to go to heaven; if I'm bad, I don't.

People spend their entire lives trying to be good enough. And religions of the world are based on this premise.

And it really does boil down to this: either you can earn favor with God; you can be good enough to achieve a right relationship with God; you can earn salvation by being good; you can do all the right things to please God ... or you cannot. You're either good enough – or you're not.

Put whatever religious label you choose to it – Islam, Jehovah's Witness, Mormonism, even Classic Roman Catholicism, whatever – the fundamental belief of looking to your own goodness, your own righteousness, your own morality, your own achievement to one degree or another is at the root of all these religions.

Authentic Christianity – biblical Christianity – teaches the exact opposite.

Isaiah tells us plainly that my righteousness, your righteousness, is nothing more than a filthy rag in God's sight.

"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

Isaiah 64:6

And in Romans 3, beginning in verse 10, the Apostle Paul combines several passages of the Old Testament to spell out for us what our natural, sinful human condition is:

As it is written [*pulling from the OT*]: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

That’s our natural, unregenerate, sinful human condition ... no one does good, not even one.

That’s “good” as defined by God’s standard of goodness. Perfect righteousness.

We just don’t believe it, do we – it’s a tough pill to swallow, isn’t it?

There are churches that design worship services for the “seeker”. We call them “seeker-sensitive churches”.

But the bible says there is no one who seeks after God - and all we need to do is look to what Adam and Eve did in the Garden after they ate the forbidden fruit, don’t we?

What did they do?

They hid themselves. They ran away from God. That’s the natural, sinful, human condition.

God isn’t the one who is hiding. We are.

It isn’t until we are regenerate that we come to God and worship Him in Spirit and in truth. The unregenerate will never do that.

“Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”

John 4:23

That’s why our worship services are designed for the believer. But that’s a message for another time...

The Pharisee in this parable personifies the world’s religions. He is finest example, the epitome of everyone who believes that their own goodness is what matters, is what counts, and is what will get them into heaven.

We see it all the time, don’t we?

“Sure, I might do wrong every now and then, but I’m basically a good person”.

“He or she has a good heart”

“The good outweighs the bad”

...or words to that effect

Again, comparing ourselves to others.

The Pharisee in this parable does exactly that – compares himself with “sinners”, including the wretched tax collector – and boasts about what he does to please God.

Sadly, his heart was far from God.

And so, as Jesus uses the Pharisee as the epitome of self-righteous arrogance that appeals to the human race, he then uses a tax collector as the epitome of the worst of the worst.

Tax collectors were seen as nothing better than pond scum. People to be utterly despised and hated.

In those days, tax collectors were collaborators with Rome and as long as they collected what was due to the Romans, they were free to extort what they wanted for themselves. So, they did and were hated for it.

But Jesus also tells us that this tax collector was remorseful and was contrite of heart.

We’re told he couldn’t even look up to heaven but instead stood at a distance and beat his breast.

In Ezra’s Prayer of Confession for the people, he prays:

“I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens...”

Ezra 9:6

The act of lifting one’s face is often associated with seeking favor or forgiveness. And while the Pharisee is pictured doing that in this parable – though plainly not to seek forgiveness – the tax collector, just like Ezra, couldn’t do that. Such reluctance indicates profound humility and recognition of sin.

So overwhelmed by sin and guilt it was felt physically.

In Jewish culture, beating one’s breast was a gesture of extreme sorrow and penitence. Expressing inner turmoil and regret, often associated with mourning or deep repentance.

The only other time the bible explicitly speaks of beating the chest is at the cross after Jesus died. In Luke 23, we’re told:

“When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.”

Luke 23:48

Surely, never in all of human history was there a time when there would have been more profound anguish than this. And it was expressed physically by beating one’s breasts.

Have we ever experienced such heartfelt anguish of soul? Where words escape us and instead the only sound that escapes our lips is a groan that comes from deep within?

I know I have. And I have little doubt some of you have, too.

That's the depth of emotion Jesus is attributing to the tax collector. Deep, deep anguish being felt over his sin. Again, the epitome of heartfelt sorrow and repentance over sin.

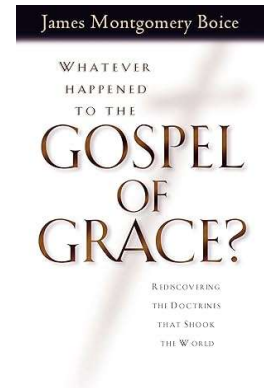
And all he could say is: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Now, that's a prayer! And it's a prayer God takes enormous delight in answering, "YES!"

This is where we need to take a slight detour and go back to look at some theological terms and concepts.

Not to worry - we can do it. 😊

Just as an aside, I'd like to commend to you a book by James M. Boice. "Whatever Happened To The Gospel of Grace?", particularly Chapter 5, "Christ Alone". He writes about the Reformation's 5 Sola's we see on the wall hanging here. Fantastic book. It really helped me cement my thinking about some of this.



Let's just keep this to four terms or concepts.

1. JUSTIFIED / JUSTIFICATION

First, "justified". We often hear it defined as "just as if I'd never sinned". But that really doesn't do the word justice.

If I were "justified" in that sense, I would basically be back in the Garden like Adam – innocent, but not yet righteous – facing the test of whether to eat or not to eat the forbidden fruit. What would I do?

I know there are those who believe they wouldn't have eaten it, but remember, Adam was God's perfect choice as the representative of all of humanity. He did exactly what I would have done, and to deny that is to say that God's perfect choice wasn't perfect.

Legally speaking, to be justified is the opposite of being condemned. A criminal receives from a just judge the verdict of "guilty" and is condemned with a punishment fitting the offence.

In this legal sense, a verdict from a just judge of "not guilty" is when the one standing trial is indeed proven to be innocent and in fact not guilty.

You see the problem? How can a just judge – in this case, God – declare a guilty person, the sinner, to be "not guilty" and still be a just judge?

That's what "justification" is all about. The means by which the Ultimate Just Judge can legally, at the bar of His own Perfect Justice, legitimately declare the sinner to be not guilty and therefore be justified.

To really grasp that one, we need to understand three more terms or concepts.

1. JUSTIFIED / JUSTIFICATION ✓
2. EXPIATION
3. IMPUTATION
4. PROPITIATION

And it's not difficult.

Theologically and biblically speaking, expiation is the removal of sin. The prefix "ex-" means out, just like exit. The way out.

Sin removed – expiation.

1. JUSTIFIED / JUSTIFICATION ✓
2. EXPIATION ✓
3. IMPUTATION
4. PROPITIATION

But our sin doesn't just go off into outer space. It goes TO Christ. Our sin is transferred TO Christ. Our sin is "imputed" to Christ. He is counted guilty of our sin instead of us.

1. JUSTIFIED / JUSTIFICATION ✓
2. EXPIATION ✓
3. IMPUTATION ✓
4. PROPITIATION

And since He is now counted guilty, He can take the punishment for that sin. He is treated as having committed every sin imputed to Him, though indeed He had committed none of them.

As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

2 Corinthians 5:21



Sin removed. But not yet righteous.

And that's precisely why Jesus had to live a perfectly sinless life from birth until he died on that cross. In His humanity, He earned true perfect righteousness. He obeyed the Law of God perfectly.

He loved the Lord our God with ALL of His heart, ALL of His soul, ALL of His mind, and ALL of His strength every minute of every hour of every year of His entire life.

He did what Adam should have done, but didn't.

And that righteousness – His righteousness – is what He gives to me. To you. To anyone who will simply believe and trust in Him. He provides us with righteousness by imputation. Like putting on a new cloak, we can wear His righteousness and be counted righteous in God's sight. He treats us as perfectly righteous, though, indeed, in and of ourselves, we are not.



- A. Sin and curse removed – expiation.
- B. Sin transferred to Christ – by imputation.
- C. Righteousness provided by Christ – by imputation.

And then there's the concept of "Propitiation".

Religions the world over and for far back have had a concept of having to deal with the anger of a deity. Sacrifices have been made – and continue to be made – to a pagan deity to assuage, or persuade, to appease the deity to not be angry.

And there are many in the world today who look at that as utterly preposterous and ridiculous.

But the God of the Bible IS angry at sinners. He is a Just and Holy God and sin cannot be just swept under the carpet and ignored. It must be dealt with.

A day of reckoning is coming. The Day of Judgment is real and its time is fixed. It is yet to come, but it *is* coming.

The question is – when is the judgment of my personal sin going to be? It is a guarantee that it will happen. The timing of it is the issue.

For all those who put their personal trust in Jesus – that judgment, that day of reckoning, that punishment happened on the cross.

On the cross, God looked down from heaven and saw the most concentrated mass of sin and evil the world had ever known – including my own sin – and unleashed His divine wrath against it.

Jesus Christ bore in Himself the punishment for my personal sin because He loved me. And the same goes for anyone who believes in Him. Who truly put their personal trust in Him.

The very real wrath of God that I justly deserve is turned away from me and onto Christ.

The wrath of God I deserve is “propitiated” for me.

In Christian jargon, that’s what “salvation” is all about. Being saved from the wrath of God by God Himself. Being saved **from** God, **by** God.

Honestly, I find it unfortunate that the word propitiation has been removed from many modern translations of the bible. Instead, the phrase “sacrifice of atonement”, “atoning sacrifice” or similar words are used instead. It makes a difference to me, at least, that learning the meaning of certain words makes a real difference in understanding Scripture.

I’m glad to see, though, that the ESV does keep the word “Propitiation” in its text. It’s a word that’s rich in meaning and used throughout Scripture as you can see on the screen here:

In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the **propitiation** for our sins.

1 John 4:10

He is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world

1 John 2:2

...whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

Romans 3:25

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.

Hebrews 2:17

So, we can complete our list ...

1. JUSTIFIED / JUSTIFICATION ✓
2. EXPIATION ✓
3. IMPUTATION ✓
4. PROPITIATION ✓

Sin and curse removed – expiation. Sin transferred to Christ – by imputation. Righteousness provided by Christ – by imputation. Turning aside of God’s wrath – propitiation.

And now from the throne room of God, His Judgment seat, God can and does declare me justified. My sin has been dealt with and the righteousness I need has been provided. Not guilty. Justified.

Apart from that, I would have to stand in His presence as a self-righteous sinner and I would be toast.

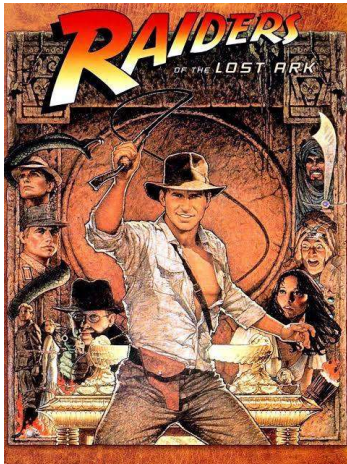
Just like Isaiah declared when he stood before God in Isaiah 6:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

Isaiah 6:5

That will be the position of everyone who refuses to embrace and trust Christ. Undone. Ruined. Cursed.

If there is anyone here who has never really done that, it’s not too late. Just ask Him.



Have any of you watched the 1981 movie “Raiders of the Lost Ark”?

I loved that movie as a teenager. I watched it numerous times. In it, Harrison Ford stars as Indiana Jones, a globetrotting archaeologist vying with Nazi German forces to recover the long-lost Ark of the Covenant which is said to make an army invincible.

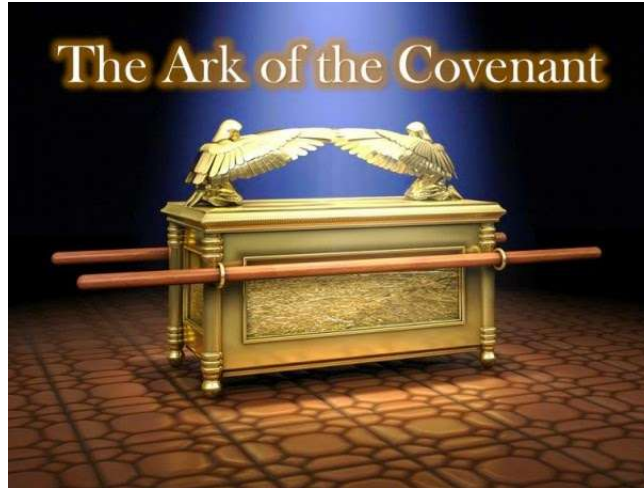
Which is really quite ridiculous, obviously. Especially when you remember what happened to the Philistines when they captured the Ark for the very same purpose and instead, tumors and boils broke out amongst the various tribes until they sent the Ark back to the Israelites on an oxcart.

Anyway, it made for an entertaining movie and as teenagers, we were pretty excited with it. So excited in fact that I told my Grandad in England about it.

He talked with my parents and was simply stunned that they let us go and see it. So, he went to see it for himself and, needless to say, he wasn’t impressed. It wasn’t what he thought it was but was vastly relieved all the same.

He thought the movie was entitled “Ladies of the Lost Art” and I’ve no doubt his imagination was something I can’t repeat here.

Anyway, the object here is the Ark of the Covenant. It was the focal point of the Israelite's worship in the Old Testament and located behind a heavy curtain in the Most Holy Place of the Jewish tabernacle, or the Tent of Meeting during their wilderness wanderings. And after Solomon's Temple was built, it was located in its very center, in the "Holy of Holies".



Credit: <https://www.shalomadventure.com/torah/articles/ark-of-the-covenant>

In Exodus 25, we're told that the Ark was a wooden box about a yard long made from acacia wood and covered with gold. The box had a cover on it which was called the Mercy Seat or the Atonement Cover. On each end of the Mercy Seat, and facing each other, were two cherubim whose wings stretched upward and outward, almost meeting directly over the Ark. And the space between the cherubim is where God met with Moses.

There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.
Exodus 25:22

Inside the Ark were the stone tablets of the law that Moses had received from God – the "Testimony", and eventually a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod which budded.

The imagery here is highly significant. The picture is one of judgment as God looks down from His position between the cherubim at the law – the same Ten Commandments that Pastor Matt is preaching through in these recent weeks. We have broken that law and so as God looks down, He sees sin which cannot be ignored. He must act out in judgment.

But this is where the Mercy Seat comes in – which is why it was called the *mercy seat*.

In Leviticus 16, we're told that once a year, on the Day of Atonement – Yom Kippur – the high priest would have 2 goats. On one he would place his hands, symbolically transferring the sins of the people to it, and drive it outside the camp, symbolically sending their sins into the outer darkness. That was the scapegoat.

And the other goat was sacrificed. The high priest would take its blood into the Most Holy Place and carefully sprinkle that blood onto the Mercy Seat.

Now, the imagery is quite different. As God looks down, He no longer sees the law of Moses which we have all broken; instead, He sees that an acceptable punishment for sin has been meted out. Remember, the punishment for sin is death – the soul that sins shall die.

God is satisfied. His wrath is turned aside, and so propitiation has been made. Now, God's loving forgiveness goes out to all who come to Him by faith in that sacrifice.

We know on this side of the cross that all the OT sacrifices point to the ultimate sacrifice that Jesus made. And today, we have the benefit of the New Testament to expound for us the doctrines of the atonement, not the least of which is the book of Romans where the doctrine of justification is clearly spelled out for us.

But in Jesus' parable, Jesus had not yet died. The tax collector didn't have the benefit of the book of Romans.

He did have the OT sacrificial system, though. And he understood it. And the language Jesus uses in this parable shows that he did.

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. The New Testament in Greek. And the Greek translation of the OT is called the Septuagint. It's particularly helpful to understand that with this text because the word used in Greek translated as "have mercy" or "be merciful" is not the same as elsewhere.

For example, in English, when the tax collector asks God for mercy, it's no different than what the blind beggar asks for from Jesus in verse 38 of this same chapter in Luke.

He called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Luke 18:38

It means exactly that. He was asking Jesus to be merciful and grant him his sight, which Jesus did.

But the language in the parable is different. In the Greek, the word translated as "have mercy", or "be merciful" means to propitiate, to appease, to make propitiation, or to make satisfaction.

The tax collector is not just asking for mercy, he is asking God to be propitious to him. He is begging God to take away the wrath he so justly deserves. He deserves it. He knows it. And he acknowledges it.

His only hope was God's mercy to not give him what he deserved.

The tax collector's prayer literally reads: "God, be 'mercy-seated' to me, the sinner". "God, be propitious to me, the sinner." He was coming to God on the basis that mercy had already been

meted out by God through the sacrifice. He was pleading in prayer to God that he be treated on the basis of the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat. Asking for merciful propitiation.

And God delighted to do so – YES! ... so, the tax collector went home justified before God.

Loved ones, Jesus Christ IS our propitiation. His blood was spilled for us. He died for us! And God's wrath against us is propitiated because of it when we put our trust in him.

I love the word "propitiation", don't you?

That's how we're made right with God. It's got nothing whatsoever to do with how good I am or how good I can be. It's got nothing whatsoever to do with what I can do, how many Hail Mary's I can say, or how much money I can donate.

It has everything – EVERYTHING – to do with what Jesus did for us.

Nothing – NOTHING – in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

And if you look at the cross, it's all we need, isn't it?

The vertical post can symbolize propitiation, and the horizontal post can represent both expiation and imputation.

Simply to the cross I cling.

Thanks be to God, who delights to say YES!

Let us pray...

Benediction.

Jesus: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, give I unto you. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." *[John 14:27]*

Go now, in peace, to love and serve the Lord.