

Part 58: Sex, Grace and God

Tyler Velin | Luke 16:14-18

July 2, 2023

In 1982, Michael Jordan led the North Carolina Tar Heels to a National Championship. Even if you're not a sports fan, I'm sure you can discern why the Tar Heels won: they had Michael Jordan. The key to their success seemed pretty obvious.

However, Michael Jordan attributed his success to something else. When he entered NBA and began to play for the Chicago Bulls, underneath his NBA shorts he wore his shorts from that National Championship Game at North Carolina.

Jordan assumed that since he wore the shorts in a successful season, that the shorts were the key to his success. So he kept wearing them. It shaped his life. In fact, urban legend is that it actually shaped the NBA itself. It's said that the league shifted from the classic short shorts to the longer ones so that Jordan could hide his second pair of shorts better.

I use this extreme story as an example of what each of us naturally does in our own life. When we think something brings us success or salvation, that thing naturally begins to shape our lives.

In the book of Luke we are in a portion of Jesus' teaching where he is illustrating how radically reorienting eternal salvation is through the gospel. Last week Jesus showed us that if money cannot save us, then we can be radically generous. If we are saved by mercy, not money, then our lives are not shaped by a love of money but instead a radical sense of generosity and stewardship.

Today's text begins with the Pharisee's response to that idea, and it's a response many people may have if they don't believe the gospel really saves. In fact hearing how the good news of Jesus changes the lives of Christians might sound as silly as Michael Jordan wearing two pairs of shorts.

But, Jesus is going to show us today that all of us wrap our lives around what we think saves us and if what saves us is anything less than the gospel of grace, it tends to produce more slavery than salvation and more legalism than love.

This is our main point today: **What you think saves you, shapes you.**

Jesus is going to show this shaping force universally through two contrasts and a case study. First he's going to show us **God's Affirmation vs. Man's Affirmation** then he's going to highlight **Faith's Power vs. Force's Power**. And lastly, in what might seem like an odd little verse, we will see **Sex, love and grace**.

The German reformer, Martin Luther, once gave aspiring preachers 10 Commandments for gospel preaching. Some of them dealt with the means and manner of preaching, but one of them cuts straight to the chase. He says if you are going to be a preacher of the gospel, "suffer [ready] oneself to be mocked and jeered at by all."

In our world we often think that if we can just say the gospel right, just love people the right way, or care for people the right way we will be accepted by all. But here on the heels of Jesus himself teaching

on generosity of all things, Luke opens up saying, **(Luke 16:14)**: “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.”

Last week we saw that all of our actions flow out of our beliefs, and here the Pharisees mocked Jesus because they were lovers of money. What they believed about money shaped how they acted towards Jesus. Christianity will never make sense of our actions until it makes sense of our hearts.

This is our first point today as Jesus shows us the first contrast: **God’s Affirmation vs. Man’s Affirmation.**

Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "seeing is believing." That's the hope of the Pharisees. Money was seen as a sign of God's favor. So for the Pharisees, if they could adorn themselves with all the trappings of money, men might see them as rich and in so doing everyone might believe that the Pharisees were doing things right—that everything was ok.

Jesus says to the Pharisees **(Luke 16:15)**, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your heart. For what is exalted among men is an abomination before God.”

For the Pharisees, money was the means to get what they wanted. They wrapped their lives around money because they wanted to be seen by others as rich so that others would think, “Those guys must really be living right by God.” You can see a modern day equivalent of this with people who buy name brand purses or luxury items with the logo plastered on them as if to say, “I can afford this.” Or you can see it every Saturday at the Farmer’s Market where you can see the “Missoula Starter Pack” of a Subaru, a Patagonia fleece and some Birkenstocks or Chacos. It communicates to others, “I belong here.”

What’s interesting to point out is the word Jesus uses here. He says, “You are those who *justify* yourselves before men.” This puts a biblical category to ordinary life. To “justify” something is to get at the root of “justification.” Justifying something is to bring something which was out of alignment, into alignment.

The Pharisees needed to be seen. Our need to be seen, our desire to be justified, assumes something. It assumes that apart from some sort of affirmation of where/who we are, we will always find ourselves out of place and out of sorts.

Jesus doesn’t argue with them about their desire to be justified, but instead he points out how their solution doesn’t actually bring them the peace they want. Why? Because only God can see the heart. Therefore the justification of man is always and only a superficial solution. It can never soothe our heart, but it can enslave.

The Bible tells us there’s two reasons why we shouldn’t live as if men can justify us.

The first is that we are lousy judges of character.

In the book of 1 Samuel, Israel is ultimately presented two options for a king. The first was a man who was tall, handsome, strong and powerful. The second was a small runt of a man who spent most of his time in the fields writing love poems.

The first man, King Saul, was largely applauded by the people but was a failure of a king. The second, King David, spent his early days earning the respect of the people but ended up being a man after God's own heart. We know why this happened because in **1 Samuel 16:7b** God says, "For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Here's why this is an important realization: we often want more than anything the praise of man, but doesn't the newspaper tell us that the praise of man is meaningless and powerless to actually do anything? It's often the most praised politician who has the affair, the most cheered movie star who overdoses, the most lauded CEO who gets a Netflix special on embezzlement.

Man's affirmation of you cannot bring you peace because it cannot fix your heart. But what it does instead is enslave us. Instead of realizing the powerlessness of justification by man, we double down and become more desperate for it.

We just came out of Pride Month, and what is our world screaming for? Justification! We are saying, it's not enough for you to tolerate me. It's not enough for you to love me as an image bearer. You've got to celebrate me. Social historians have tracked the way in which the LGBT movement began with the premise that what they did in private didn't need to influence society to how it is now one of the most publically aggressive ideologies. Why is that? Because what you think saves you, shapes you. Affirmation is never enough, we always need more.

Now it's easy to pick out the flaw of a culture you may not agree with. But remember, Jesus isn't talking to godless people here. He's talking to the religious people. He's talking to people in church.

But it's here we learn the second reason why man's affirmation can't justify us. Because our problem is sin. Jesus says in verse **15**, "For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

We love, exalt, and do abominable things which are against God. Therefore man's opinion of us can never actually bring our conscience any peace. This is the beauty of what Jesus is saying here. He's actually saying, "You should care about what other's think, you should find your peace in affirmation, but it's only in the sight of God, and his affirmation that you will finally have it."

When I work with people who wrestle with depression or self-condemnation their surface need is almost always to have me tell them that they are ok. But man can't change you. Man's justification can't solve your problem. But I can point them to the gospel where through faith all that is wrong is made right at the cross and God's affirmation really changes us.

To come to faith in Jesus Christ is to be justified by Jesus in the sight of God. That changes us because it acknowledges the problem in our heart and does something with it. Our paranoia is finally fixed. We no longer pander to the superficial and always changing standards of man, but we cling to Jesus and are shaped by what the cross says about us not what the crowds say about us.

Paul says in **Romans 5:1**, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Jesus shows us where we find this affirmation, but next he's going to show us how we have this affirmation—that is how we might believe we are justified with confidence.

Here we see the second contrast **Faith's Power vs. Force's Power**.

Speaking again to the Pharisees, Jesus says, **Luke 16:16-17**, "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void."

Jesus here begins to talk about the law, and how it was shaping the hope and life of the Pharisees. He speaks of the law in two ways which seem contradictory. He says it is both temporary and timeless.

He says it's temporary because the Law and the Prophets were until John the Baptist came and once John the Baptist came, the gospel of the Kingdom was preached. In other words Jesus is saying the natural flow of the Old Testament was to lead people to the gospel of the Kingdom of God revealed in Jesus himself.

But secondly, the law was timeless in terms of what it revealed about God and what he asks from us. The law holds up the immense holiness, beauty and righteousness of God and says, "Be holy as God is holy." Now we can scoff at that at first, but remember our hope in affirmation is only as good as the quality of the one giving it. If my wife said "make us something special for dinner tonight," my kids might affirm my air-fryer chicken nuggets, but their affirmation means very little compared to the loveliness of my wife's.

So what the law did was teach people how they ought to act in light of a holy God. And it made provisions of sacrifices for when they failed to live in such a way. In this way the law condemned the Jews by pointing out they can't live right enough by God's standards. The need for a sacrifice assumed they couldn't "justify" themselves by the law alone.

Paul says this is true for all of us and this nagging reality is revealed in our own heart and conscience. He says (**Romans 2:14-16**) "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day, when according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

Life and the law reveal to our own hearts that we don't measure up. We have faults and fears that we need to justify. The solution which brought peace in the Old Testament was the Kingdom of God. In that kingdom our burdens would finally be cured because God would eliminate all that opposed us.

Each of us in some way, shape or form, have our own idea of what this kind of kingdom would look like. We want to be free from our sense of guilt in the negative, or we want to have the presence of what is lacking in the positive. We shape the whole of our lives to build towards that end. But, how do you get into that kingdom? How do you get that peace?

This is where Jesus gives us this contrast. Did you see it? Look back at **Luke 16:16**, "the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it."

Depending upon your Bible translation they might translate that last clause in the positive, which still undermines the Pharisees lack of response to the gospel. However I think the ESV translators have rightly kept a negative connotation by saying, "everyone forces his way into it."

Remember we just saw right before this a dishonest man try to arm-bar his way into the kingdom.

We have also seen that the Pharisees themselves are desirous to enter this kingdom of God but they try to enter it by elaborate prayers, public acts of righteousness and copious purity rituals. The problem is not that people don't want the kingdom of God. It's that they don't know how to get in.

This is so true for us. Our default to get into the kingdom of God is force. Sometimes we try and force our way in by emphasizing our rights: "My parents were Christian and I went to church, let me in," "You're supposed to be a God of love, let me in." Or we force our way in by our works. I'll often ask someone what it means to be a Christian and they say, "I need to live in a way that pleases God. I need to honor him."

Yes, we should seek to do all those things, but those things do not get us entry. The kingdom can't be taken by force. It's only taken by faith. Notice what Jesus said. He said, "the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it."

We want to work, but the gospel is preached. We can't force our way into it, we must faith our way in. If you think you can do it by your power, even with a hat-tip to Jesus, you won't make it. Your life will be consumed by action, but it will do nothing to bring peace to your affections.

In the original story of Cinderella the prince is wandering around looking for the girl who fits the glass slipper. Whoever lost this glass slipper had won the affection of the Prince and therefore access to the kingdom. So when he appeared at the house of Cinderella, the wicked step sisters tried to force their way into the slipper. In the Disney movie the comically try and squeeze their toes into it, but in the original book do you know what they did? They began to cut off pieces of their feet in order to force their feet into the slipper. It didn't work, and all it did was leave a bloody mess.

What we think saves us, shapes us. If force saves us, force and fear will rule us. That's the best your works will do--they are never enough and you'll exhaust yourself in the process. But instead the message of the gospel is that you know the one who fits the slipper, and he's brining you with him.

That's how powerful faith is. Faith qualifies us for the kingdom of God not because it lowers God's standards, but because it gives us the standards of Jesus. That's the good news, that's how we become justified and affirmed by God. As James says, (**James 2:5**), "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him."

We can't force our way into the kingdom because it can only be taken by faith in Jesus Christ.

It's here that Jesus concludes with this small case study to drive his point home. If the standards of the law are eternal, then we will always be condemned apart from grace. In verse **18** Jesus quotes from the law saying, "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery." And here is our final point this morning, **Sex, love and grace**.

Here Jesus combines both themes of fear of man and legalism as he leans into the culture of divorce.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses permitted divorce provided a man go through the process of legally pursuing it. Over the years, religious officials began to argue and debate over what this process looked like and what qualified divorce. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses gives an example of man who divorced his wife because he found “some indecency” in her.

The debate was, “what qualified indecency?” There were some who took the side which Jesus himself did in Matthew 19 that “indecency” was some sort of gross sexual misconduct or adultery.

But broadly speaking some defined indecency as simply burning a meal. So naturally the culture of divorce in this day was both debated and rampant. Many pursued divorce, many granted divorce. In fact reading all Jesus says about it, it seems that divorce was used as a sort of legal system of sexual promiscuity allowing people to go from bedroom to bedroom with the affirmation of the law.

The thrust of Jesus’ teaching here is not to define divorce and remarriage. But Biblically speaking there are three ways in which a marriage bond is legitimately dissolved and divorce may be permitted: death, gross sexual misconduct (porneia), and desertion (1 Cor. 7).

Remarriage then, in any context takes pastoral sensitivity and godly wisdom. Life includes lots of sorrows and hardships all of which can be disorienting. And if you are someone who is in a circumstance where you are considering divorce, or remarriage, or maybe you’ve remarried in a way that Jesus just called adulterous please come and talk to an elder, or maybe even reach out to your community group leader. These situations are filled with both gravity and grace and we need the help of others to navigate them.

But Jesus' larger point here is that God has so designed marriage to be a lifelong relationship between a husband and a wife. Outside that specific circumstance sex always incurs the weight of sin.

In fact Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage in Matthew was so weighty that after the disciples heard it they said, "If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." In other words, if we can't marry and have sex with whomever we wish, why do it at all? What we think saves us, shapes us.

It was true in Jesus' day, and it's true in our own. If you want to step on people's toes, if you want sneers and jeers, start telling people who they can and can't have sex with. Jesus says in Matthew 5 that anyone who looks at another lustfully is guilty of adultery in the heart. For some of you in here, just hearing what I've said about biblical remarriage, you might be ridiculing me in your own heart.

But to be worked up in such a way makes Jesus’ point. Jesus makes it clear any sex outside of marriage is sin. He's intentionally showing us how even in this one area none of us are able to be free from sin.

And he's doing so to show us that we need grace. We all need grace.

If that's you, come to Jesus, hear the message of the gospel and know that Jesus justifies us--he affirms us. He doesn't heal our wound lightly. He doesn't declare to us that "You're good" when you're really not. He wants us to realize that we are broken, we've participated in broken things, we done sinful things, we've desired sinful things. If our hope was in the standard of perfection that we could achieve we are doomed.

So what do we do? We repent at the good news preached to us in Jesus and we find grace. Grace abounding. Grace that changes our affections. Grace that shapes our lives.

You see these men were lovers of money-but they weren't lovers of others. They loved money, but they couldn't love their wives.

A culture of love, a culture of marriage, can't be sustained by anything less than a love of Jesus. What saves you, shapes you. If we have been affirmed and justified by our own works, then we will be justified to condemn others where their works don't match up. John Henderson says, **"Living under law in marriage makes us naturally gravitate toward divorce...Divorce offers a decisive way to deliver judgment and condemnation."** There's no greater legalism than divorce.

But if we have been affirmed and justified not by our works, but by Jesus work and his desire to give grace then we are shaped by that. Grace enables us to endure difficult times, sinful moments, and subpar performance because Jesus overlooked our performance and gave us his.

If we are saved by performance we are shaped by performance. But if we are saved by grace, we give grace. Only those who love Jesus love like Jesus.

And guess what? When the love of Jesus shapes our life, we look weird to the world. They will sneer, ridicule and mock us. Our lives won't make sense to them.

Celsus, a 2nd Century Greek Philosopher was quoted as mocking Christians and their "distain for wealth and success, considering it irrational and foolish." If Jesus saves you, your use of wealth looks odd to the world.

One early Christian historian spoke of another 3rd Century philosopher who said, "Porphyry derides Christian insistence on chastity and celibacy, arguing that it goes against the natural order and the continuity of human life." If Jesus saves you, your use of sex looks odd to the world.

The Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck says, **"The gospel may be on behalf of man, but it is not *from* man—not in accordance with his wishes and thoughts; therefore, it is always rejected and resisted by him when he is left to himself."**

But God has not left us to himself. He has sent us his Son who is the gospel. He has opened our eyes by faith to what really saves us: Jesus Christ. So while we might look odd, out of place and foolish to the world—we know the good news and are lovers of God and lovers of others.

I want to leave you today with a quote from the author James. K.A. Smith that perfectly summarizes Jesus' critique of the Pharisees and his commission to his disciples: **"Jesus' command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his--to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all--a vision encapsulated by the short hand, 'the kingdom of God.'"**

If faith saves us, faith shapes us. Let us be people shaped and sustained by what really saves.