

Part 64: Getting Righteousness Right

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In 1992, a group of friends wrote a song capturing the potential relationships have to expose us. The chorus goes like this, "If you want to destroy my sweater, hold this thread as I walk away. Watch me unravel, I'll soon be naked. Lying on the floor, I've come undone."

I'm no music history scholar, but I'm pretty sure Weezer wrote this song while reading Luke chapters 17-18. As Jesus' disciples and his critics are following him on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus is unraveling the metaphorical clothes that covered the crowds. He is slowly, but faithfully, exposing the way in which what seems most natural, most safe, and makes the most sense to our own minds is out of place with the realities of the gospel. Just as the author of Hebrews 4 speaks of the word of God, he's laying us exposed and bare.

This is bad news for those who think ignorance is bliss, but it's good news of those who want something better than fraying sweaters and false hopes. Jesus is continually unpacking a significant statement he made back in chapter 17 when he said, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it."

There's an upside down-ness to the gospel which only make sense when we understand how the gospel reorients our realities. It undoes us, only to remake us. In our passage today we see a guy who seemed to have it all right--but he got it all wrong. We see another man who did it all wrong--but who got it all right. And we see the words of Jesus who warns us of the right people who are in the wrong and comforts the wrong who can by mercy, be made right.

A primary theme we've seen so far in the book of Luke is that what you think saves you, shapes you. And Jesus' parable today continues to drive that point home. What we are going to see today is simply this: **The gospel is for those who need it, and you need it.**

Jesus makes this case today in a parable form, and in his story we see three points. First, we will see the Pharisee and **Blind Self-Sufficiency**, then by way of contrast with the tax collector we will see **Obvious Sinfulness** and then as Jesus gives his verdict of these two men we see **Merciful Salvation**.

But as we begin I just want to offer some framing thoughts here, because Luke helps us out by revealing to us the specific issues into which Jesus gives this parable.

We see this in verse 9 when he says, "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt."

So what we see initially here is that righteousness is the target. Righteousness is what the people wanted, labored for, thought they had, and misunderstood. All of us have probably heard that word, "righteousness" before. But most of us probably have no idea what it is, and if you do have an idea of what it is, it's probably not associated with something that people are desirously seeking out.

Righteousness hits our ears a bit like the word, sodium chloride. It sounds academic, potentially dangerous, and complicated. If I told you the food you ate was covered in sodium chloride you'd probably pause at first, until you remember that sodium chloride is just salt. It tastes good. It's helpful, it's wonderful. The world loves salt. And the world loves righteousness.

While righteousness is commonly used in religious circles, the word itself simply communicates a sense of right alignment, consistent standards, and ordered behaviors. It's fairness and justice, peace and provision.

Righteousness is right-ness. Everyone wants right-ness. We may interpret it differently: the person seeking an abortion wants righteousness, she wants a world where the risk, unknowns and threats have been realigned—the person clamoring for gender affirming surgery wants righteousness, they want the structure of their flesh to be brought in alignment with their thoughts—the college student going to frat parties and seeking sexual conquest wants righteousness, he wants to have his behavior recognized by the society which seems most life giving—the spiritualist wants righteousness, they want the world to live at peace feeling connected and integrated with itself and each other.

The hope held out for the Christian in scripture is righteousness. We all want righteousness.

Why? Because God who created the world is himself, righteous. He is perfect in every way. He is loving, he is just, he is pure, he is true, he is generous, he is Trinity.

And because we are made in his image we find our greatest peace in his righteousness. But there's a problem, and here's why everyone looks for righteousness under every rock and stone. That problem is that Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they became unrighteous by breaking their relationship with him through sin. Now we are left treasure hunting in a world filled with dollar store goods looking, seeking and pining for righteousness.

So Jesus here is speaking to those who think they've found it on their own, and in themselves and he reveals the culture shaping force of what you believe about righteousness. Which means this: you better make sure you understand what you believe about righteousness.

It's in this context of desiring and trusting in self-righteousness that Jesus gives a parable about two men going before God. Jesus gives us the context of this parable in **verse 10** saying, "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

Years of reading the Bible has sullied us on the Pharisee, but far from being perceived as the bad guy, the Pharisees was the stud of the day. He was the good guy. The tax collector on the other hand, was the villain, he sympathized with Rome, he was most likely a robber—and he was the perceived outsider for all who heard this parable.

Typically, Jews would gather at the temple in both the morning and in the evening for the daily burnt offerings. And here's why we need to pay close attention to this parable because it was in the context of both men seeking, coming, and speaking to God that a godlessness was actually exposed. So what's the difference?

First with the Pharisee we see a prayer of **Blind Self-Sufficiency**.

Hear Jesus' words in verse **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. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'"

There's something that none of us want to hear, but all of us need to hear. There are no more accurate indicators of your relationship and thoughts on God than your participation in prayer and Bible reading. You can't avoid it.

This doesn't mean that prayer and Bible reading are the works that make a good Christian. Faith in Jesus makes us Christian, but more than almost anything else, your relationship to these two practices reveal what you believe about God and yourself. That's why Jesus used it here. He's revealing a false understanding of salvation and he's using two portraits of prayer to illustrate the divide.

Each prayer reveals beliefs about God, about the individual themselves, and their beliefs about others.

First, notice how he speaks to God. Jesus uses the typical verb when he says, "he went up to pray," but I think he's intentionally leveraging the irony. This is just as much a prayer as your venti mocha cappuccino frappe with sprinkles and whipped cream is a coffee. Sure, he says God, God is in it. But he's hardly praying to God. What he is doing is talking about himself.

In fact in this whole prayer, he never once asks or credits God for anything. He thanks God. But what is he thanking God for? He's thanking God for three things that he himself has done: how he is not like others, how often he fasts and how much he gives. Though he is coming to God, where does he hope to find his righteousness? In himself.

There is not one grammatical verb in this passage in which God is asked or acknowledged for doing God things at all. And here's the reality behind this: It's really hard to pray sincerely when we trust in our own performance, productivity or perfection. Why? Because we have nothing to pray about.

I wonder how many of our prayer lives are crippled because we can't for the life of us think of ways in which God is worthy of worship or adoration? I wonder how many of us wrestle to pray because it seems like an obligatory check-in on Grandpa before you can get back to doing your important work? I wonder how many of our prayers are robust and wordy because with the presence of our language we are trying to cover up our lack familiarity or intimacy with God?

Remember Jesus already taught us how to pray earlier in this book and what does he tell us to begin with, **Luke 11:2**, "Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come." This man is talking to God about his own name. But prayer doesn't fly with big people, prayer doesn't flourish with your kingdom desires. Prayer begins, ends, and is sustained by a Father who is hallowed and set apart over all things.

If this man has his righteousness in himself, then he doesn't really need God for anything.

But, the words of his prayer also reveal how he treats others. What is the only thing he's grateful to God about (**Vs. 11**)? That he's not like, "the others." He's not like the extortioner, the unjust, adulterers, or even like that silly tax collector.

If righteousness is contingent upon our own self-sufficiency—that is to say if we fail to understand the scandal of the gospel of grace, then we will always view others as either tools or threats.

What do I mean by that? Well, take for instance the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4. Cain offered God a sacrifice of his field, but Abel went above and beyond and offered from the best flock and the choicest portions. When God delighted in Abel, what did Cain do? He killed Abel.

Why? John tells us in **1 John 3:12**, "Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous." You see Cain failed to realize that the problem was not between his own heart and God, but between Abel and himself. If he wanted peace then, he had to eliminate the threat. He needed to get rid of Abel.

Kids what happens when your sibling gets affirmed for something they did? Do you often tell mom and dad the ways in which they didn't do it as well as was thought? Pointing out the faults? That's because you think your sibling's obedience is a threat to your own efforts. Adults, what happens when someone else gets the promotion over you? When someone else gets to go on a first date with that one girl over you? When someone gets the house you always wanted? They become threats pretty quickly don't they? Our right-ness is threatened, and choices will be made.

That's why Jesus says that those who trusted in themselves treated others with contempt. That's not only seeing people as threats but also as tools. Sometimes, we move towards people who are suffering, we care for those who are in need, not because we love them but because we want to be judged in comparison to them.

That's what these Pharisees did. They wanted to be around, but distinct from these "others" so that their righteousness would be obvious. They were tools to leverage their own comfort in how good they were. I'm not fast in comparison to most men. But I am faster than my wife. So every now and then I like to race her just so I can feel fast. It's like the old adage, "How do you outrun a bear? Make sure you hike with a slow friend."

Take a moment to assess your relationships. How many of you hold back from discipleship, or confessing sin because you're worried that you will look less righteous than others? How many of you are quick to feel like you're involved in care but at the end it's merely a care for your own self-esteem?

You see this Pharisee stood by himself. He was with others, but he wasn't near anyone. If the righteousness of God is primarily found in you, then you will always keep the unrighteous others at a distance.

But the posture of the Pharisee was not only in contrast with others, but in confidence before God. He stood alone before God.

Here we see how he views himself. The gospel simply means, good news. We like to say that the gospel is the good news the Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. But this man, his righteousness, his good news, is himself.

He has done it. He is not like the sinner, he is generous, he is faithful. His prayer at the end is nothing more than a mirror to which he chants in the temple, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all."

Or as Augustine describes: "God made me man. I make myself just." He's just hoping for God to recognize and rubber stamp the man so that he can prove he earned the righteousness of grace.

This man did good things. The point of Jesus' message is not, "Don't tithe, don't fast, be an adulterer, be unjust, be an extortioner." Those things are objective in their own sense. But what this man is doing is placing his trust in the external fruits of his own work, none of which are perfectly righteous in themselves.

The Greek tense Jesus uses when he says these men trusted in themselves is a tense that communicates perfect and complete trust. It's not that this man denied grace! He came to God. But what his prayer revealed is that grace was for those who deserved it, and he did enough to deserve it. But Jesus already spoke about this in **Luke 11:39**, "You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the dish but on the inside are full of greed and wickedness."

It's not the outsides only that count. But also the insides. Where the insidious remnant of self-sufficiency remains, perfect righteousness will never dwell.

John Calvin says it this way: "**Thus, we are drawn into a foolish and inflated view of our flesh. And then, trusting in our own flesh, we brazenly exalt ourselves before God Himself, acting as if our own abilities are sufficient without his grace.**"

When our own righteousness is trusted, Jesus' never will be. In the church today it's awfully easy to be this Pharisee in more cleaned up ways, we acknowledge God, we pray to God, we talk of God, but our perfect trust is that God would accept us for what we've done for our own righteousness. But brothers and sisters, the gospel is for those who need it, and you need it. We need God's righteousness, but it has to come apart from our works, it must come from a total disregard of our own merit.

This is where we examine in brief the prayer of the tax collector where we see **Clear Sinfulness**.

Jesus continues (**vs. 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.'"

And here is the contrast: The Pharisee robed in observable purity prayed about his surpassing righteousness, the socially scandalized and notoriously corrupt tax collector prayed about his obvious unrighteousness.

The posture of this man couldn't be further from the Pharisee. The Pharisee stood near, but on his own. The tax collector stood far off. In the midst of the congregation he began his petition not standing on his own merit, nor in proximity to the altar of sacrifice, but began his whisper on the fringe hoping for what he could hardly believe possible.

Even the verbs draw a distinction: the Pharisee (**vs. 11**) prayed, the taxed collector simply said. This contrast is meant to show that most people would have seen the two prayers and praised one and scoffed at the other—the one that looks meek, meager, and meaningless is true prayer. Why?

Well, notice *his view of God* is seen in his very opening words: "God, be merciful." Instead of placing himself and his work at the center of his pursuit of righteousness, he placed God on the mercy seat. If righteousness were to be his, it would be according to a work of God not by work of his own.

If the gospel was for those in need, he was in need. He realized that neither his wealth, nor his worldly position was worth anything in regards to righteousness. But it was God who stood in the gap, and it would have to be God who would act.

Second, *we see his view of others*. What does he say about others? Nothing!

When it comes to our prayers for righteousness other people don't matter. His problem was not others. This man avoided Cain's shortsightedness. How often are our prayers directed at the problem of others instead of prioritizing our own hearts as the problem? Abel was removed, but Cain's heart problem wasn't.

But the best step towards mercy is to stop praying about the "theys" and "thems" and pray for the "mes" and "mys." Here is a man who prays to the Lord, for himself, because of what he knows about himself.

And here, *we see his view of self*.

He stands far off from God because he knows he is far off from God. He is as Paul calls Elymas, "an enemy of righteousness" (Acts 10:13). He saw himself as one thing, having one quality: he was a sinner.

This man was right with Rome, most likely right with his bank account, he was right with his friends, but he was not right with God and that was a weight too much to bear.

He beat his chest, he lowered his gaze because he understood that apart from God's merciful giving of righteousness...nothing is ever right.

But here is the wonderful declaration Jesus makes in the end. The only qualification this sinner brought was his sin. But when sinners bring their need to the altar of God—that's the only qualification God will accept. Here is our final point this morning: **Merciful Salvation**.

Look at what Jesus says in **Luke 18:14**.

Now there's two beautiful inversions that we can miss if we aren't careful. Did you notice how the Pharisee spoke of people in verse 11? "I thank you God that I am not like the others." But what just happened here? Jesus said, "This man, not the other."

The Pharisee has become the other. He has become the very person he thought he wasn't. Instead it was the other, the sinner, the tax collector who is the man in a positive sense.

And secondly what has happened to this man? He has been justified. That verb "justified" in Greek is connected to the adjective "righteous" in verse 9. In verse 9 some trusted in their own *dikaio*s but here it is this tax collector who was *dikaio*s, justified. Here, this man, the sinner, was declared righteousness.

But it gets better. Just as the verb tense in verse 9 was the perfect active tense (communicating that the self-righteous perfectly trusted in their own false righteousness), here, this tax collector is justified in the perfect, passive sense. In other words Jesus declared that this man now had a perfect and complete trust in his justification. That perfect and complete trust, that hope of righteousness was not in what he

did but in what he was given by another. Someone else in a perfectly trustworthy and unassailable way had given him the right-ness he was desperately seeking.

Do you know who that person was?

You see the sacrifices that would have accompanied these times for prayer were in Hebrew called the '*olah* offerings, or in English, *the burnt offerings*. Numbers 28 tells us that these were to be offered daily in the morning, and in the evening daily

But Leviticus tells us of the significance of what would happen here. **Leviticus 1:4** says that the person brining the offering is to "lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him, to make atonement for him." And once the animal was burnt on the altar verse 9 tells us that this offering would rise to the Lord as a pleasing aroma to God.

The blood of the animal, would float to the Lord, and it would please God. By doing this, atonement was made. It was an offering for the sinner, in hopes that God would be pleased with those whose sin was displeasing—that God's anger would be turned away by the blood of the sacrifice.

So this man, standing far off in the crowd, far from the righteous glory of God knew his sin and he saw that blood, he smelled that burnt flesh, and he beat his chest and prayed with all his might: Let it be for me.

Let that blood, please God, let that blood cover my unrighteousness, may that blood be for me. Let that blood be the affirmation not of God's displeasure, but of God's pleasure in me.

Brothers and sisters, there are many people who will try and tell you that the doctrine of Jesus' atonement, that he died as a sacrifice to save sinners who were far off, was nothing more than a doctrine invent by the church in the ages to follow Jesus.

But here it is, from the mouth of Jesus himself. Four times the phrase, "have mercy on me" shows up in Luke. In all four of those, it's the verb, "have mercy." But here, Jesus himself uses a different verb, it's a verb that is only used in this way twice in the whole New Testament.

Once it is here, the other is in **Hebrews 2:17**, where the author speaks of Jesus saying, "Therefore, he had to be like his brothers and sisters in every way, so that he could become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation (atonement, NIV) for the sins of the people."

The cry of this man was not merely for mercy, but mercy by the means of atonement. The favor of God, a disposition of love, a free gift of mercy was by means of another. And the very Jesus who in this passage declared this metaphorical sinner just is the same Jesus who will always and forever answer the real prayers of real sinners who cry out for a real mercy.

John Chrysostom once said, **"If we pray with humility, smiting our breast as the tax collector, if we utter what he did, if we say, 'Be merciful to me a sinner,' we shall obtain all.** The gospel is for those who need it, and we need it. We need to be made right, and there's only one way to get it, only one person who can give it, and it's not you.

It's not me, it's not your job, your spouse or your bank account.

It's the mercy making man Jesus Christ. Would you come to him? Would you cry out to him?

In Micah 6 the prophet shows the lengths in which a man offers to go for righteousness—he offers up thousands of offerings, he says he will offer up even his firstborn son for his sin, but how does God answer him? **Micah 6:8**. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Come humbly to Jesus right now. Have you done this? Have you laid aside your trust in self?

I want to close with the beautiful reminder from the John Calvin: **"The cross destroys the false notion of our own strength that we've dared to entertain, and it destroys that hypocrisy in which we have taken refuge and pleasure. It strips us of carnal self-confidence, and thus humbling us, instructs us to cast ourselves on God alone so that we won't be crushed or defeated. Such victory is followed by hope, since the Lord--by providing what he has promised--establishes His truthfulness for what lies ahead."**

The gospel is for those who need it, and we need it.

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