

Gods Mercy To The Sinner

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[0 : 00] Well friends, would you turn with me please to the passage that we read in Luke's Gospel, Luke's Gospel in chapter 18.

Luke's Gospel in chapter 18. And reading again at verse 14. Luke 18 and at verse 14. Where Jesus says, 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. As we prepare to come to the Lord's table tomorrow, I want us to focus on this. This well-known parable, this well-known story of the Pharisee and the tax collector and what it has to teach us about our standing with God, our standing in the Lord as we prepare to come to his table. We're going to be looking at verses 9 down to 14 of Luke chapter 18 under three headings. We're looking at the parable and then the prayers and finally the principle, the parable, the prayers and then the principle.

[1 : 28] First we have the parable and that's in verses 9 and 10 where Jesus delivers a parable about two men and their standing before God. Two men and their standing before God.

Now in verse 9 Luke sets the scene. Jesus is journeying toward Jerusalem. He's journeying toward the cross. If you go back to chapter 9 and verse 51 Luke tells us that Jesus had resolutely set his face like Flint to go in that direction.

Nothing is going to come between him and lay down his life for his people. And as he travels toward Jerusalem, he notices that some of those who are traveling with him have very hard, proud, critical spirits.

They believe themselves to be righteous. They believe themselves to be in a right standing with God, a good standing with God. And not only are they seeing themselves as being in a right standing with God, we're also told that they began to treat others with contempt. And Jesus knows that such attitudes have no place in his kingdom. And so he's going to address this issue very personally, very publicly, very pointedly in a parable.

[2 : 37] Now a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. And everyone loves a good story, but Jesus parables sort of like irritants. They get under your skin.

They catch you off guard. They make you uncomfortable. And this is one such parable that really gets under the skin of those who are hearing it. In verse 10 Jesus speaks about two men who went up to the temple to pray.

Now there were two daily services in the Jerusalem temple, one at 9am, the other at 3pm. And Jesus speaks here about two men who went up to the 3pm service.

And there's a number of things that these two men have in common. They both go to the same church. They both go to the same service. They both stand apart from the rest of the congregation. They both engage in prayer. And as they engage in prayer, they both address the same God. But there's one crucial difference. We're told that one of the men is a Pharisee.

[3 : 38] That is, he is a nationalist who longs for God to send his promised Messiah and restore his kingdom. He's a social conservative and a religious conservative who strictly obeys the law of God.

The ancient historian Jassifus describes the Pharisees as a certain Jewish sect that appear more religious than others and interpret their laws more accurately.

So there's the one character. The other character is a tax collector. And this man isn't opposed to Rome. Rather, this man is employed by Rome and gains his income through demanding higher taxes from his own people.

He's a despised and hated character. This man would be mentioned in the same breath as his sinners and prostitutes. We might say that there's a hushed aura as the Pharisee wanders into the room and there is an uneasy tense atmosphere as the tax collector also wanders into the room.

And the key question that Jesus wants his hearers to consider is which one is righteous? Which one of these two men is in a right standing with God?

[4 : 53] In other words, which one of these two men will go to heaven when he dies? Now friends, at this communion weekend, I really want to consider verses 11 to 13 with you, but it's important that we note why Jesus told this parable.

Jesus is addressing people who thought that they were religious, thought they were righteous, and who looked down on others. Now I'm not saying for one minute that that attitude is in the congregation of Carlway, but it can easily enter just one individual or one group of people or even it can seep into an entire congregation.

I remember hearing a long standing member of one particular congregation on the mainland and they came up to me and they started complaining about their riffraff. That is so worthy used.

I'm not exaggerating the riffraff who were coming into their services. I remember a family telling me that they would never go to a particular congregation because its members had made them feel worthless and guilty about their past.

In his book, what's amazing about grace, Philip Yancy tells the story of a woman, a prostitute who had really hit rock bottom and she meets a church worker.

[6 : 12] And the church worker says to her, have you never thought about going to the church for help and she replies, church, I was already feeling bad about myself and they just make me feel worse.

You know, friends, it is easy to criticise people and talk about people and gossip about people and the things that they have done or that we assume that they've done and feel pretty good about ourselves in the process.

And that is the kind of attitude that Jesus hates and that Jesus confronts. I don't think anybody puts it better than Ray Ortland, who writes, a church should be a place where the gospel is proclaimed, a place where there is good news for bad people through the finished work of Christ on the cross and the endless power of the Holy Spirit, where there is constant immersion in the gospel, wave upon wave of grace and truth according to the Bible.

And that's a wonderful thing. That's what church should be. The minister getting up proclaiming the gospel, but Ray Ortland goes further and he says, but a church should also be a safe place.

A non accusing environment, no embarrassing anyone, no manipulation, no oppression, no condescension, but respect and sympathy and understanding where sinners can confess and burden their souls, an environment where no one who is seeking the Lord has anything to fear.

[7 : 45] Now is that what church is about? Where the gospel is proclaimed, but not simply proclaimed, but exhibited among those who are gathered?

At this communion weekend friends, I want to ask the question, what is our attitude toward those who are inside the church and who are outside the church?

How do we treat them? How do we want them to feel? Think about it friends, if someone was to come in off the street and enter this congregation tomorrow, how would you want them to feel?

Would you want them to feel that they really need to get their act together, or would you want them to hear of the gospel of a Christ who accepts his people freely in him and whose acceptance is seen even in the way that the members treat those who are coming into the congregation?

That's what Jesus is driving at as he starts to deliver this parable. And then he goes on second to speak about these two prayers in verses 11 down to 13.

[8 : 55] He describes the prayers of these two men concerning their standing before God. It's important that we note the context in which these prayers would be offered. Every afternoon the priest would select a lamb to be sacrificed.

It would be a lamb without blemish, free from defect, and it would be washed. Its throat would then be cut and its blood would be sprinkled on the temple's altar, and the remainder of the lamb would be offered as a whole burnt offering to the Lord.

And after his sacrifice, those who gathered in the temple would be encouraged to engage in their private prayers and devotions. They've been reminded that they could only approach God on the basis of a sacrifice.

They've been reminded that they couldn't call upon the name of the Lord without an awareness of their own guilt and his grace. And it's at this point that we come to the prayer of the Pharisee in verses 11 and 12.

And in his prayer he speaks about his moral behaviour. He says that he's not like other men. He's different and he laments the lack of holiness in others.

[10:00] He's different and he laments the lack of godliness in others. He's different and he laments the worldliness of professing Christians. And in his prayer he claims that he's not an extortioner, or unjust, or an adulterer.

And then you can almost picture the scene, it's a very vivid part of it. He almost as it were looks across the room and he says, and I'm certainly not like that tax collector.

He speaks about his fellow worshiper in a disparaging way. His words drip with contempt. This man is confident in his impeccable moral behaviour.

But he's not simply confident in his moral behaviour because he goes on to speak about his religious behaviour. He fasts twice a week. Now in the Old Testament the law said that you only fast it on the day of atonement once a year.

And this Pharisee is so religious he doesn't fast once a year or once a month or once a week. He fasts twice a week. And he gives a tenth of all he gets. Again the Old Testament law said that you were to give God a tenth of your crops.

[11:11] This man is so religious he gives a God a tenth of everything he has. This man is confident in his impeccable religious behaviour. This is a man who goes beyond the call of duty.

And did you notice the way that he thanks God for the way that he is? I thank you God that I'm not a southern man. He's thanking God for helping him, enabling him, equipping him, empowering him to live this moral and religious life.

As he considers other men and women round about him, he sighs to himself, he prays, there but for the grace of God, bow I.

This man rejoices that God has made him such a great guy, made him such a holy man, made him such a righteous man. This man is an awesome man who gives off a whole aura of holiness.

He can imagine him transferring his membership to a particular curc session. They find out that he's a man who can pray in public, wonderful. They find out that he's a man who's moral.

[12:19] There's no skeletons in his closet, great. They find out that he's a man who's religious, a man who's very generous to the church, a man who's going to give a tithe, a tenth of his great income, great.

The elders would be inclined to say, well that's certainly a good guy. This man will be a great asset to our congregation. Let's make him an elder as soon as possible. In fact, let's not make him an elder.

Let's make him the session clerk. Let's really put him on a pedestal. But there's one major problem. And the problem is his whole focus is on himself.

In two short sentences, he manages to use the personal pronoun I five times. He shows no awareness of his sin, only this air of spiritual smugness and superiority.

If we were to ask him the question, why should God let you into heaven? We know what his answer would be. I'm moral. I'm religious.

[13:22] And I thank God that I'm the way that I am. When I arrive at the gates of heaven, God will have to cry out to his angels, throw wide these gates, open these doors, let this righteous man enter.

As Charles Ferdinand says, this man thought he was too good to be saved. This brings us to the second prayer. And that's the prayer of the tax collector in verse 13.

This man's a bad man. He's a crook. He's a cheat. He's a swindler. He's a scoundrel. He's a man who's wasted his life, wasted all his spiritual privileges.

And look at what he does. Like the Pharisee, he stands apart from the rest of the congregation. But unlike the Pharisee, he can't lift up his eyes to heaven.

All he can do is continually beat upon his breast. It's a shocking image. In Jesus' day, women would beat on their breasts as a sign of grief over the death of a husband or a child, but a man would rarely beat on his breast.

[14:28] In fact, one of the few instances we have of a man beating on his breast is when David experiences the loss of his son Absalom and he beats on his breast and he says, Absalom, my son Absalom, if only I had died instead of you, my son Absalom.

And here is this man and he's beating on his breast. Now listen to what he says, he calls himself a sinner, except our English translations don't really capture the weight and force of this because in

Greek he doesn't call himself a sinner, he calls himself this sinner.

He's in a class by himself, a category of his own. Like the Apostle Paul, this man can say, I am the chief of sinners.

And he cries out that God would be merciful to this sinner. That word mercy comes from the sacrificial system that this man has just witnessed.

It speaks about a sacrifice that would cover over a person's sin and not only a sacrifice that would cover over a person's sin, but a sacrifice that would divert the very wrath of God from that sinner.

[15 : 43] This man, this sinner is crying out, oh God, please would you cover my sin and don't simply cover my sin, but remove your anger, remove your wrath, remove your condemnation from me.

That's all I ask. I'm not asking for anything more. I'm just asking that you would divert your anger from me and that you would cover my sin, that you would have mercy upon me.

Now friends, within two weeks, think of it, within two weeks of Jesus delivering this parable, he'll be crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem.

He'll be examined by the religious leaders, by the Roman governor, by the puppet king Herod, and they will all testify to his innocence. We saw it this morning, the crimeless, blameless, spotless, peerless, macheless, lawless, righteous son of God.

He is the perfect lamb of God. He is the lamb without blemish. He will be nailed to the altar of Calvary's cross.

[16 : 55] From 12 p.m. until 3 p.m., while the priests are offering their sacrifices in the temple, he will hang in the darkness under the wrath of God, under the judgment of God, under the dereliction of God, in the place of his people.

Jesus is the sacrifice who covers the sin of his people. Jesus is the sacrifice who diverts the wrath of God from off his people.

Jesus is the sacrifice who receives the judgment, the wrath, the condemnation, the very hell of God instead of his people. And the writer to the Hebrews tells us that he is the once for all sacrifice, no other sacrifice needed, no other sacrifice required.

He has done it all. What do you say in response to this? What do you do in response to this?

When you hear of the sacrifice, do you shrug your shoulders? Do you say, well, that's very interesting? Do you say, well, that's something for us to fill up a Saturday evening in Carly up for half an hour with no friend?

[18 : 07] You sing rock of ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee, not the labor of my hands, can't fulfil thy lost demands.

Could my zeal no respite, no? Could my tears forever flow? All for sin could not atone, thou must save and thou alone.

That is the Christians prayer, that is the Christians plea, that is the Christians profession. They say, I have sinned, but Christ has died and he's died for me.

Not simply Christ has died, but he's died for me. And if he died for no one else, he would die for me.

We cast our minds, can't we, back to John Newton and you remember how he was that brutal slave ship captain and he was wonderfully converted and toward the end of his life when he was beginning to suffer from memory loss, he said those very famous words, although my memory's fading, I remember two things very clearly.

I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great saviour. At this communion week, I want to ask which of these two men in this parable are you, because at the end of the day we only fit into one of two categories.

[19 : 29] Are you resting on your performance when it comes to your standing with God? Or are you resting on God's merciful provision when it comes to your standing with Him?

Which one of these two men are you, friend? If you were to come before the judgment seat tonight, friend, and the Lord was to say to you, why should I let you into my heaven?

What would your answer be, friend? Would you say, well, I've been moral, I've been religious, and you know what, Lord, I attended every preparatory service that this congregation had?

Or would you simply say, all I can plead, Lord, is the blood, the blood of Jesus? The blood that would remove your wrath and the blood that would cover my sin?

Which of these two men are you, friend? This brings us third and finally to the principle verse 14.

[20 : 36] And here Jesus outlines the principle concerning the standing of these two men before God. At the beginning of verse 14, Jesus gives the verdict. You remember that Jesus is addressing those who think that they're righteous and they're looking down on others.

And He's given this very pointed parable about two men, one man as a Pharisee, he's a moral man, he's a religious man, he's a man who speaks to God about his exemplary behaviour, the other man's a tax collector, he's a sinner who simply beats on his breast and cries out that God would be merciful.

And the question is, which of these two men is in a right standing with God? Jesus is asking, which of these two men should God let into heaven? Now we all know the story, we've just read it and probably every one of us grew up with this story in Sunday school.

But imagine hearing this parable for the very first time. Imagine hearing about a man who was devoted to his wife and wasn't simply devoted to his wife but was also devoted to his church. A man who never put a foot wrong publicly or privately. And then imagine hearing about a man who lived only for himself and cheated others to get on in life and one day he found himself staggering into church and sobbing that God would be merciful to him.

[21 : 56] Which man should God let into heaven? And it's now that Jesus delivers the punchline where he says, I tell you that this man, this tax collector who cried out for mercy, went home justified.

The word justified is a legal term. It means to be pronounced righteous. It means to be pronounced to be in a right standing, freed from condemnation in God's heavenly courtroom.

It is where God looks upon you as though you had never sinned. In fact, it goes even deeper than this because it's as if God looks at you not only as if you had never sinned, but as if you have obeyed his law perfectly, righteously, completely, totally and complete fulfillment.

This man has been acquitted of all the charges that stood against him. This man has been spared the punishment that awaited him. This man has been considered to be acceptable in the eyes of God.

Instead Jesus goes even further as he says rather than the other. Or you know, friends, those are terrifying words.

[23 : 09] This moral fantasy, this religious fantasy isn't justified. He isn't acquitted. He stands condemned. And at the close of verse 14, Jesus gives the hard-hitting principle for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.

But the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Friends, listen to what Jesus is saying. We will never be saved. We will never be justified.

We will never enter heaven when we are caught up with thinking about how good we are, how moral we are. We will only be saved. We will only be justified.

We will only enter heaven when we acknowledge how sinful we are, how empty we are. And when we humbly throw ourselves on the grace, the mercy, the provision of God that is found in Christ.

The whole focus of this parable, friends, is about a right standing with God in Christ. A right standing in the present where we can know what it is to be forgiven and freed from condemnation and wash completely clean all through Jesus and His sacrifice.

[24 : 28] A right standing in the present, but you know, friends, it's also about a right standing in the future. In that hymn Rock of Ages, the hymn writer sings toward the end about soaring to world sun known.

His life has ended. He's before God's throne. He's seen the face of Jesus. He's in the company of the angels and all God's redeemed.

And what does he sing when he's in that environment? Does he suddenly start singing about how moral he is at last? Does he start singing about how religious he is at last?

The hymn writer says, no, my song will still be Rock of Ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee because friends, even in glory, our acceptance before God will be solely found in Jesus, God's merciful and gracious provision.

Even in glory, every blessing that we enjoy will be in Christ and through Christ. That is why the perpetual song of the redeemed is worthy Islam who was slain because they never, never, never outgrow their need of Jesus.

[25 : 50] Never. When we enter into glory, we will need Jesus. We will rely on Jesus. We will cling to Jesus.

We will hide ourselves in Jesus as much as we ever did. Knowing that every blessing we have is in him and that friends is what the Lord suffer is all about.

It's a meal where we celebrate that he is our God and we are his people. We are in covenant together. It is a meal where we collectively and corporately thank the Lord for this great work of his and saving us, saving us in the past, continuing to save us in the present and how he will save us in the future.

It is a meal where we publicly received Lord's provision for our salvation. James Durham describes it like this, in the Lord's Supper, God says to us, take my son's blood to wash you who are guilty and filthy.

And in the Lord's Supper, we say with trembling lips, I am content Lord to let this blood wash me.

That's what we're doing tomorrow.

[27 : 09] We are simply saying I am content to let Jesus be that merciful provision for my salvation.

It is a meal that celebrates friends, our standing before God in Christ both now and for all time.

My friend, if you are in a right standing with him, if you are in Christ, then there is nowhere else you should be tomorrow but at his table.

This is a table that you come to saying, it's not about my performance, it's about my Lord's provision. This is a table you come to saying, Jesus is my peace, and he is my peace, and he is my protection, and he is my pardon, and he is my propitiation, and he is my perfection.

This is a table you come to publicly saying, Jesus is my all. Well as we close, I want to ask friend, have you received a Savior?

[28 : 26] Have you received a sacrifice for your sin? Has your guilt been covered by him? Have you been washed in the blood?

Where are you friend? Still under the judgment of God. There are only two places to be.

You are either under the judgment or under the blood, one of the two. And if you are still as it were under the judgment, you have time even now to cry out friend, and with this tax collector, God be merciful to me.

Wipe away my sin, remove your wrath, you still have time to cry out friend, but I would urge you and plead with you, not to leave it till it's too late.

Amen. Thank you.