

December 1, 2019  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Luke  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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## THE SUBTLETY OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS Luke 18:9-17

Any contemplation of or discussion of the kingdom of heaven is likely to generate this important question, “How do I get in?” It is a logical question. It is the same kind of question people all over the world have asked about America. In ages past, the way to get into the “kingdom” of the United States was to make application, gain approval, come to the country, and then complete the process of citizenship. Of course that has all changed. Now the way to get into America is to illegally cross the border and then demand all the blessings that are supposed to be reserved for bonafide citizens. Are you comfortable with that breach of law? Not if you are a citizen of this fine nation.

The question about entrance into the kingdom of God is quite similar. There is a right way to get in. Then there is the popular way. Throughout the history of humanity there have been two religions—the acceptable religion that God authored and offers, and the false religion developed by Satan and carried out by sinners who are held captive by Satanic pride. There is the true religion in which God provides His own sacrifice as the only means for entering His kingdom. And there are all the other false religions that teach that sinful humans are capable of earning enough credit through their righteous acts to force God to open the gate of His kingdom and allow them to enter.

There are two religions and only two. There is the religion that acknowledges that nothing less than perfection is necessary to enter the kingdom of God. That perfection was accomplished by God the Son. The only people who enter God’s kingdom have trusted God’s promise that in Christ’s sacrifice He took the penalty for sin upon

Himself, though He had kept God’s law perfectly. And we trust that God graciously offers that righteousness to us, even though we do not deserve it.

The other religion teaches sinners to have faith in themselves. It teaches that a sinner is capable of doing enough good works to please God. That is the lie of Satan. But wait, doesn’t the Bible teach that we are supposed to try to please God? Didn’t we read Jesus’ story just a few weeks ago in which He said, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty?’” (Luke 17:10)? Didn’t the psalmist say that if we praise God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving that this will please the Lord (Psalm 69:31)? Isaiah wrote that the Lord’s servants who keep His Sabbaths please Him (Isaiah 56:4). Paul encouraged us to be focused on the things of the Lord in order to please Him (1 Corinthians 7:32). Indeed “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6).

The true citizen of the kingdom of God seeks to please God because God has been kind and gracious to draw him or her into the kingdom. That is humility. It takes great humility to acknowledge that we are unworthy of kingdom citizenship. It takes humility to accept God’s gracious provision of salvation. It takes humility to deny self and take up identification with the shame of Christ’s cross.

That explains why the Bible places so much emphasis on humility. Even in the Old Testament God described His desire for the nation of His people with these words: “*If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land*” (2 Chronicles 7:14). In the New Testament (Matthew 5:3-10), we discover Christ’s description of people who have entered His spiritual kingdom where He is king by traits like, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (v.3). “*Blessed are those who mourn*” (v.4). “*Blessed are the meek*” (v.5). “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*” (v.6). “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (v.10).

Humility, the abandonment of self-reliance, and deep, genuine, full dependence on Christ alone is the hallmark of those who have the righteousness of Christ credited to their eternal account. That is the

chief trait of those who are citizens of Christ's spiritual kingdom and will be citizens of the eternal kingdom. Self-righteousness is the trait of proud sinners who errantly believe they can, in their sinful condition, accomplish enough to ingratiate God and force Him to allow them to enter His kingdom. That is the fallacy of the vast majority of humans in history who have practiced the many different kinds of religion. Self-righteousness is sickening in God's sight because it is an effort to set aside the blood Christ sacrificed in order to apply His righteousness to the unrighteous sinner.

### **A Common Problem. (v.9)**

In this text, Jesus addressed the common problem of people being self-righteous. *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous (v.9a).* The story addressed people about whom there was a question of trust. Again, Luke recorded a parable, a story Jesus made up. The story is about the kind of thing that could happen, and probably something similar to what Jesus and others had observed in the temple. But the purpose of the story is to drive home a very important truth about the kingdom of God.

The story is directed toward those who trust themselves. Before we get too excited about Jesus uncovering the bad guys, we need to admit, "Who doesn't trust self?" In fact, on the other end of the spectrum, we are often concerned for people who have no self-confidence. People like that are reticent to step out and accomplish good. We typically honor the self-confident people who trust their abilities to perform and do. The confident athlete, musician, writer provide us with entertainment which we enjoy. The confident soldiers, statesmen, and politicians built this great nation.

However, the people of God must always be careful not to exercise pride and expect honor for it. Self-confidence is a very slippery slope. It is true, on the one hand, that we should always seek to do our best, to do the best we can with what God has given us. But on the other hand, it is very easy to slip over the edge and become very satisfied to trust ourselves and our abilities.

Here is a story about trust in self that brings up the question of righteousness. Worse than self-confidence that is out of bounds is that

the people Jesus addressed with this story were confident in their ability to be righteous. In the previous story, Jesus told about the judge who finally was goaded into rendering a verdict of justice. This story will also center on the idea of justice. But here it is couched in the term righteousness. Justice and righteousness in the New Testament are built on the same Greek word.

We know that there is the human standard of righteousness. Righteousness among humans is that which we all pretty much agree is good, right, and suitable. Our human laws express the human assessment of what is right and acceptable. Human judges are supposed to render verdicts in keeping with the boundaries of what we agree is good and right. Okay, that is a standard of righteousness.

But then there is the righteousness of God. This is the eternally right and perfect standard. True righteousness is the expression of God's character. He is good, and right, and just, and nothing short of perfect. And that is a problem for mere humans. No human can possibly achieve God's standard of righteousness no matter how much work we try to do. Therefore, in the last day, all sinners will be judged on that very issue.

In *The Revelation* John saw the future and wrote, "*And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done*" (*Revelation 20:12-13*). At the final judgment, assessment of righteousness will focus on "what they had done," or works of righteousness or unrighteousness. Jesus prophesied that sinners in that judgment will argue the same thing. "*On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'*" (*Matthew 7:22*).

Jesus addressed the Pharisees primarily with this story. They are the classic expression of self-righteousness. They were convinced that they loved God, no doubt more than anyone else did. They argued that they were so concerned about obeying God that they made up 613 rules about how to be righteous. The problem was that in practice

their rules superceded the clear teaching from God. Their rules broke God's rule that in reality no one can keep all of the Law. But the self-righteous people were proud of their ability to keep their rules.

This same self-righteous attitude has always been a problem. Many religious people ignore the simple requirements of God's Law. They do this by virtually reinterpreting any given law of God to make it appear they are keeping it when they are not. Worse is that many religious people are pretty good about keeping their own rules while breaking God's rules consistently. For example, there is no shortage of religious people who attend church pretty regularly, give an offering, sing the dear old hymns of the faith, but all the time gossip about others, are biased against those who they disagree with, are jealous and envious of even other churches, and daily criticize the authorities God has placed in their lives. Ask them how they expect to get into heaven, and they will give you a long list of all their charitable deeds.

Jesus prefaced this story by stating that the self-righteous people despise others. He told it to and about those who trusted themselves to be righteous, *and treated others with contempt (v.9b)*. Self-righteous people tend to make inaccurate comparisons with others. The comparison started with the errant opinion in their minds that they were right. Sometimes that they alone were right! They had full confidence that they understood the truth.

Nothing has changed very much in this arena. Many religious people who are convinced that they have truth figured out, compare the rest of the people unfavorably. In their minds, they must be wiser, more faithful, more perceptive of truth. Teachings about end times and the future kingdom are so clear to them. That all people are born sinners is very obvious. Those poor sinful people who do not believe in heaven or hell and who live in sin are pitiful. In fact, other religious people who do not believe and live just like they do are also pitiful.

Because they are convinced that they alone (or only a select few) are right, they respond to others with contempt. The self-righteous people who trust their theological position and belief, implicitly consider others to be contemptible. Of course sinners who break God's law are of no account. But neither are other religious people who don't keep their preferences.

When we view others with contempt and despise them, we don't care to be around them. They are not worthy of our company, and worse, we fear if we get near them, the infection of their sin will make us ceremonially unclean. When we refuse to associate with sinners, we are demonstrating that we hold them in contempt for not understanding our standard of righteousness and not trying to achieve our standard of righteousness.

### **A Parable About the Problem. (vv.10-14)**

Jesus told the story about a self-righteous person who praised himself. (vv.10-12) The guy thanked God that he was not contemptible. *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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'" (vv.10-11).*

The story is the picture of two men going to the temple precincts (not into the actual building) to pray. Picture the modern scene of devout Jewish men with their acceptable shawls, robes, and kippah gathered at the Western Wall praying. The Pharisee was standing by himself, away from others, while he prayed. It is likely that he adopted this position of separation partly in order to call attention to himself. It is also likely that he was separated because he didn't want to take the chance of being infected by someone who was less righteous than himself. But, would there actually be a sinner in the temple precincts? Why would a sinner be in such a place?

The Pharisee prayed a prayer of thanksgiving. He was so thankful that he was not like other men. He had a thorough list of the sins he did not do. He could especially point to that tax collector over in the corner. Wait! What was a wicked, evil tax collector doing in the temple? He was a sinner who might infect the Pharisee.

Notice that the self-righteous man didn't thank God for delivering him from slavery to sin. Self-righteous people are convinced they stay out of sin because of their strict discipline, their adherence to their rules that identify and catalog sins. So in reality, the man was praying to himself and thanking himself for becoming so righteous.

Furthermore, the self-righteous man reminded God how faithful he was to keep rules. *“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get” (v.12)*. It is likely that the man actually did these things. God commended people in the Old Testament times for fasting and giving a tithe. But no good works are valuable apart from a regenerated heart. Good works that do not flow out of a broken heart that has been renewed through God’s grace are useless.

Truly righteous works are the evidence of the branch attached to the vine. Jesus taught, *“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4-5)*. This means that God the Father places us “IN” Christ at the moment of salvation. It is a miracle.

Because we are in Christ, we will produce fruit that reflects Christ’s character. If we are not in Christ, but very disciplined, we will produce fruit that looks very much Christ-like (good deeds, kindness, sacrifice, etc.) A key to the difference between self-righteous works and true righteousness that flows through Christ is motivation. The self-righteous person thinks, “I must do these things in order for God to allow me into heaven.” The person who is in Christ thinks, “I must do these things because it is the character of Christ who alone guarantees my entrance into heaven.”

In contrast to the self-righteous person, Jesus praised a contemptible person (vv.13-14). He pictured the tax collector begging God for mercy. *“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!’” (v.13)*.

He, being a tax collector, was indeed a sinner. They were notoriously unfaithful and dishonest. They, by the government’s orders, made their living by cheating their fellow Jews. The good news is that the sinner acknowledged his wicked condition, calling himself a “sinner.” That is confession. Confession is saying the same thing about myself that God says. This is acknowledgment that I am not righteous and I cannot be righteous. We come to the point when we confess that we have tried many times to be righteous and have failed.

The sinner begged for God’s mercy. The Greek word translated “mercy” comes from the picture of the mercy seat, which sat on the ark of the covenant, where the priest splattered the blood of the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. It is a picture of God withholding the justice that is due us because of our unrighteousness. Here it is a cry for God to cover over, to take away the penalty of our sins and to be appeased. Notice that the sinner has nothing to offer God for the appeasement. It is all up to God. And God promised that mercy in the blood of Jesus Christ which He shed to pay for sins.

The man who was contemptible in the self-righteous man’s eyes was humble. He stood afar off knowing that he would impact others negatively. He knew what others thought about him. He refused to hold his head up high, which pictured his reticence to impose on God. He beat on his breast. The guy demonstrated everything Jesus said in the Beatitudes. He admitted spiritual poverty, mourned for sin, was meek, hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and wanted a purified heart.

Jesus used the actions and attitudes of the humble man in the story to explain the principle of justification. The principle is, *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (v.14b)*. We know from experience that often people who exalt themselves in life are humbled in life. But ultimately, this humiliation will take place in eternity. What will be more humbling than for a self-righteous person who has tried so hard to keep his own rules to discover that he will spend eternity in the lake of fire? What could be more humiliating than to hear the Judge of all the ages say, “Your works are useless. Depart from My presence into eternal punishment”?

When we are born again, God drags us through the narrow door of Christ, and we are stripped of all arrogance, pride, and self-sufficiency. We might even live life in Christ being persecuted, unliked, or worse, which is certainly humiliating. In fact, humility is the character of the Christian life because it is to be Christ-like. But ultimately we will be exalted. Exaltation in the world of sin is not likely for truly righteous people. But in the “kingdom” we will reign with Christ. And in eternity we will be fellow heirs with Christ. That is some pretty serious exaltation.

Jesus also explained the result of this contemptible man's humiliation. *"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other"* (v.14a). The Pharisee was stuck with his self-righteousness. The repentant sinner was justified. This also means that at that moment God clothed him in the righteousness of Christ. God declared him to be righteous. And from that moment on, God looked at him as possessing Christ's righteousness, which alone is true righteousness. How much joy is there in going home righteous?

### **Example of the Problem. (vv.15-17)**

The account of Jesus receiving the little children is a great illustration of the matter Jesus just explained. It reveals that even the disciples, Christ's followers, can act self-righteously (v.15). In the story, we read how people sought Jesus' blessing for their kids. *Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them* (v.15a). This is a reminder that almost everyone loves infants. The parents, viewing Jesus as a great teacher at the very least, a miracle worker at best, wanted Him to touch their children. Probably the idea of receiving a blessing was behind their actions.

Despite natural love for children, they were not accounted as valuable in the kingdom. The kind of kingdom these people were looking for was all about political savvy, military power, strength, and human wisdom. What good is a baby in that kind of kingdom?

Well, the followers of Christ thought they knew best. *And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them* (v.15b). The disciples also were mixed up about the kind of kingdom the kingdom of God represented. Therefore, they seriously reprimanded the giddy parents for imposing on the King of the coming kingdom.

The King used the unsavory situation to teach the very important lesson that only child-like people can enter the kingdom of God (vv.16-17). We must not conclude that Jesus meant to say that the kingdom of God belongs to children. *But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God"* (v.16). Jesus capitalized on this very expected response to drive home the lesson He just taught about humility versus self-righteousness.

Jesus rebuked the disciples. He wanted to teach the more important lesson that the kingdom of God belongs to people like children or infants. Notice His word *such*. Jesus did not mean that only children will get into the kingdom or that all children will get into the kingdom. Rather the lesson is that only child-like faith qualifies for kingdom entry. *"Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it"* (v.17).

How one accepts the truth about the kingdom of God will determine if he or she gets in. We must interact with the kingdom of God like a child. Again, a child in that culture was generally not important. They could not contribute to society. That is why reaching adulthood in that culture was a big deal. In short, the child was a big "nobody." Can we say, "Humility"? The infant especially was incapable of making it on his own. He or she was fully dependent on others to survive. Can we say, "Faith"?

The people who get into the kingdom of heaven will have faith in God who promises. We must die to our own self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, and self-assurance. We cannot force our way into heaven, and we cannot force God to let us in. We must be like sinners who acknowledge how bad we really are, and we must be like infants who depend wholly on God to enter the kingdom.