

One Instrument: Faith Alone

Five to One: How the Reformation

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Father, all of us in here tonight are those who are prone to wander, prone to leave you and prone, Lord, to trust in anything and everything other than Jesus. And Father, we as we read this parable recognize very quickly that we have much more in common with the Pharisee than we do with the tax collector and that scares us, so reassure us tonight, reassure us of that world-changing, Bible-centered, God-glorifying, Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered doctrine of justification by faith alone which you set forth so clearly for us tonight in this passage. For the glory of Christ our King, we pray in his name. Amen.

Luke 18, beginning at verse 9. This is God's holy, inspired and therefore inerrant word.

9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 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, the sinner!' 14 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."

The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of the living God will stand forever and ever.

Brian and I did not plan this, I promise, but we both have illustrations having to do with hearts. I didn't realize that. We don't plan that ahead of time. But as I was preparing for this, I came across the story of Pistol Pete Maravich who most of you all will know was the all-time leading men's basketball scorer in college basketball, something like 3,500 points, and what's amazing is he did that having a red shirt season and before the three-pointer. So in about three years he scored that many points, just a phenomenal record, and in 1988 he was playing a pick-up game in Pasadena, CA and he dropped dead of a

massive heart defect, and what was really scary is a few hours before he had told the guys he was playing with, "I feel great. I'm feeling really good." They asked him how he was doing and he said, "I feel great." And what that illustrates is the tendency of what can happen in our physical lives the same way that it can happen in our spiritual lives and that is this, we can look fine on the outside and be really really astray on the inside. And that's what happens here in this parable tonight. At the heart of our heart problems, our spiritual heart problems, is what we see in this Pharisee and that's the deadly notion that we can be right with God by what we do, and Jesus wants to destroy that notion tonight. He wants to lay it to waste. He wants us to forget about that forever.

And here we are in Luke's gospel, chapter 18, and really we're culminating here and have reached a culmination point but he's still kind of doing this, he's working his way down south to Jerusalem where he will die and be raised again, and as he does that he's telling these parables along the way as he teaches and we're in this section where he has been rebuking the Pharisees. It started back in Luke 15 with probably three of the most beloved parables in all of Scripture, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and then the parable of the prodigal son, and then through 16 and 17 he continues this teaching against the Pharisees and their tendencies, and he has one more shot for them right here because they were the ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and held others in contempt. And when you're reading through parables like this, Jesus will often tell you the purpose of that parable before, or the author will tell you the purpose of the parable before the parable itself and that's exactly what Luke does. We don't have to wonder. We don't have to guess. Jesus is telling this parable to people who trust in themselves.

So what I want us to see tonight is this doctrine of justification by faith alone, and I'll explain that here in a second, in these verses and we'll look at them under two headings. In the first place in verses 9 through 12, justification by faith plus works. Justification by faith plus works. And then in verses 13 and 14, justification by faith alone. Justification by faith alone.

Well, look with me there again at verses 9 through 12 at justification by faith plus works. "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: '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. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'"" You see the character of a self-righteous person right off the bat here, and when we consider the doctrine of justification by faith alone, we need to be clear on what our terms mean. Justification is a word that's used all the time in the New Testament. Jesus uses a variation of it here in verse 14, "this man went down to his house justified." It's a legal term in the Greek and in Hebrew. It's a term that means to be declared righteous. So when you read it in other settings outside of the Bible, it's a courtroom term. It's a term that says, "This person was found in the right if they're justified, and if the person is not justified, they were found not in the right." It's a declarative term. It's not the process of becoming righteous, it's a declaration in a courtroom setting and therefore it's all the more urgent for us to understand it because all of us are going to find ourselves faced with the prospect that

God is the judge and he doesn't grade on a curve, and apart from Jesus there's no clemency, there's no quarter, there's nothing but justice, and when the hammer stroke of God's justice falls, it falls without mercy.

So this is an urgent parable for every one of us and Jesus wants us to be clear so he gives us a contrast and we have to understand, once again, how shocking this parable would have been to the original hearers. We've mentioned this before but a lot of times when you hear about the Pharisees and you read about them and if you've grown up around church, it kind of gets like painted this way, the Pharisees are the ultimate bad guys and they would have been recognized as such. If it's like an old Western movie, the Pharisees had the black hats, the mustaches, the ride into town, and they're going to be like the immediate bad guys. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Pharisees were the ancient equivalent in Jesus' day of evangelicals. Unlike the compromising Sadducees, they never gave up on the inerrancy of Scripture. The Sadducees who you read about, they didn't accept all of the Old Testament. The Pharisees stood on that. They're the ones who were going against Rome and all the compromise with the culture around them and saying, "No, we're going to keep the biblical religion." Let me put it this way, if you had a baby at the time that Jesus was born, you if you had a son would pray that your son would grow up to be a Pharisee, and if you had a daughter you would pray that your daughter would grow up to marry a Pharisee. They were the most well-respected people in their culture around them in the Jewish religious culture. They were the ones who everybody said, "If anybody's right with God, it's these guys." And don't think that they were these kind of smug, self-righteous guys, all of them. Some of them certainly were but a lot of times they were really deceived and it should terrify us that when we read the New Testament there's a whole lot more of us in the Pharisees than there is in the people that Jesus says, "You're okay with me," which he never said to the Pharisees.

And so look at this character of self-righteousness here, look at how Jesus describes this guy. He looks down on others. He's standing by himself, the word Pharisee means separated one. He's living that out. And we know he's in proximity of this tax collector because of the way he prays. He notices this guy here and, again, just so we understand the contrast, the tax collectors were the ancient equivalent if we could put it this way, of an embezzling, child-molesting, greedy, mob boss. Think about the worst person you know, that you would look at that person and go, "No way. No way that guy has any prayer." That's what the tax collectors were like. Why were they hated so much? Because they had to collect the tax for Rome and because they had all the power of the Roman government behind them, they took a whole lot more. So think about it this way, imagine you're in first century Jerusalem. You don't have enough to feed your family day by day and you see the tax collector coming down the road, your heart sinks. You go, "Oh, I only have a day's wage to feed my baby." And he comes and goes, "Yeah, I'll take that and everything you make next week too." And then he gets into his Mercedes and drives off. That's what it would have been like.

And so this Pharisee starts looking down his nose and says, "I'm better. I'm separate." And he's sincere about this. Don't miss that. He didn't see himself as a hypocrite. He saw himself as right with God. He saw, "This guy is absolutely no question wrong with God."

And so did everybody else listening. Jesus had their attention at this point. And then notice how he focuses on himself. Did you see that pronoun there a whole bunch, "I"? "I fast twice a week." The law did not require you to do that. Not only did he go beyond what the Old Testament required in the fasting, he doubled it. I do it twice a week." You've got these other guys who are compromisers that do it once a week, I double down on that. I tithe everything I get."

And notice the self-congratulatory note of his prayer, "Thank you, God." See how sincere he is? He thinks he's praying. "That I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers," and here's the apex, you thought extortioners were bad, you thought adulterers were bad, "or even like this tax collector." There's the worst of them all. "Thank you, God, that I am not like them. I'm all good and it's all because of you, God." Don't miss that. He's not saying, "I did this on my own," and that's why we have to understand justification by faith plus works, being declared right with God by what you do plus faith and grace, that plus we talked about, how awful it is. And friends, you can't miss this, here's the difference once again between Christianity and everything else, and particularly the most dangerous form of other religion which says, "Yes, you need grace. Yes, you need faith but you need something else with it." That's what Luther in 1517 and onwards was against. That's what the Reformation was opposed to was that you had to have faith and grace plus these things. And when they opposed the ancient medieval church which, by the way, still teaches the same thing, still to this day, when they opposed that, they were doing so because they read passages like this and said, "No, no, no, no, no. It's not faith plus works, it's faith alone," as we'll see in a moment. But don't miss how easy it is to be deceived. This Pharisee said, "No." He's not saying, "I did this on my own steam." He's saying, "You did it for me, God. You made me better than them. Thank you, God."

Isn't that easy to fall into if you're a Christian here tonight? Isn't it easy? Maybe you never verbalize it but you say it in your head, "So thankful I'm not like that." That's what this Pharisee is doing, he's just praying it out loud and here's what happens when you relate to God like this. First of all, you start to judge your standing with God by your service to him. So if everything's going well for you in your spiritual life and you feel like you're keeping up with what you should be doing, then you'll be happy about being a Christian, but the moment life falls apart and it doesn't work out the way that we thought it would, then we become bitter and disillusioned.

Another result of relating to God like this is we begin to be very judgmental towards those who are not like us. We begin to look out with an "us versus them" mentality. We begin to look out and see people around us who don't match up to what we think righteousness should be. Mind you, we're not really being biblical at all but we're just looking out on them and saying, "They don't measure up." We become judgmental. Then when you become judgmental, you're really eager to find fault in others, really eager to debate things. If I can just encourage us to one thing here tonight, let's just all of us here promise we're not going to debate anything on social media. Please, least of all, biblical doctrine. Sound bite debates have no place in really good theology and that spirit that

loves and relishes the fight is a spirit that's foreign to somebody who understands what Jesus is talking about here.

Then Jesus gives us this tax collector. The record stops here when he says this originally. It's like it stops. Everybody listening goes, "No, no, no, no, no, not gonna happen. Don't believe it." But look with me there in the second place at justification by faith alone. "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!' 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."

Look at his posture versus the Pharisee's. The tax collector standing afar off. Why is he doing that? Because by God's grace alone he's come to realize he's awful. He's come to the awareness he can't go to the temple on his own merits, he can't say, "I tithe of all I get. I'm right with God. Everything's okay. I'm just fine." He can't do that and he knows it. He's painfully aware that he's a loser, as it were. He's painfully aware that he has no business being there in and of himself.

Then Jesus tells us he wouldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven but beat his breast. What does that mean? It means he's mourning for his sin. Beating one's breast then was a sign of extreme grief. He's sad for his sin. He's not sad at the consequences of his sin, he's not sad at what it's going to cost him to follow Jesus, he's sad because of the fact that he's a sinner. He's sad because he knows that he has no chance with God unless God shows him mercy.

And that's why he prays the way he prays. "Be merciful to me, the sinner!" There's so much going on here. I thought about just preaching on these few words because our English translations are good but there's something here that we've got to recognize. When he says, "Be merciful to me," he uses a word that's not used very often and it really translated means make propitiation for, or be propitious toward, and those are other big words. What does propitiation mean? What's he praying? Propitiation is a great biblical word that means a sacrifice that turns away wrath. Specific term. Term that's meant to communicate something about who God is and who we are and how we're right with him. When he says, "Be propitious towards or make propitiation for me," he's saying, "I deserve your wrath, God. Me. I deserve to go to hell for what I've done. I deserve your everlasting punishment for my sin. And the only hope I have is that you will provide a sacrifice that turns away wrath." And boy, is this scene pregnant with imagery because he's at the temple, he sees the altar where the sacrifices are made by the priests, those sacrifices which again and again preach the gospel to the Old Testament saints in blood and in hair and in filth and in hooves, and he sees these sacrifices being offered and says, "I need that. I need you to provide. I need you to be to me like you were to Abraham." When he took Isaac up in Genesis 22 to the mountain and God stops him and says, "It never entered my mind for you to do that, Abraham, here's a ram." And Abraham says, "This place is Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide." And this tax collector gets that. Boy, does he get it. He says, "I have no hope of escaping your wrath unless you provide the sacrifice to turn it away."

And think again also who's saying this. It's Jesus, the one to whom all those sacrifices pointed, the one who would be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, the Lamb of God who was sacrificed for sinners like him and like you and like me, the one who would be the very propitiation. This man, you and me need. That's the one telling the parable.

Then he says, "Be propitious to me, the, the sinner!" He's very specific. Not "a," that I will honestly say I don't want to make you distrust your English translations, that's not a good translation. Every translation has its faults. This isn't a good one, it should be very much the definite article, "the." He says, "I'm the chief of sinners. Nobody's worse than me, God. You can't find somebody who deserves less of your grace. You can't find somebody who's the least of all candidates for your grace more than me, God, the sinner."

And so what Jesus wants us to see is that God alone can save us and all of us are "the sinner," and, my friends, justification will be a word and a doctrine lost in the sands of time in an obscurity to us until we come to this same posture as the tax collector. That's why Jesus finished the way he did, "Everybody who exalts himself will be humbled." What was the tale of the Pharisees but one day after another of self-exaltation? And God has designed the universe to be a place where there's no room but for one person to be exalted, and that's him, that's God. And so every time we exalt ourselves, we're competing with God. Anybody want to take those odds? "I want to go up against God. I want to do my thing over against him." No.

And Jesus says we have to understand that if we pray this prayer, the true sinner's prayer, that we can expect the same result. This man did nothing. He knew he couldn't do anything. He didn't say, "I'll be right with God and declared righteous if I tithe, if I fast." Notice he said, "No, no, no, just be merciful. I trust you." And he didn't even know about the cross. The cross hadn't even happened yet. We live in a more privileged position than he did. All he had were the types and shadows that he saw at the temple and those were enough for his faith and it was enough for God. It wasn't his works. He couldn't do any. It won't be our works, it'll be us throwing ourselves on God's mercy and saying, "Turn away your wrath by the Lamb. Turn away your wrath by him taking it on himself for me because I have no hope unless you do that, God. None."

And so Jesus makes it clear it's grace alone that saves us and the instrument, as the older theologians put it, the empty hand that connects us to that grace is the empty hand of faith that brings nothing in it, it just receives, it just takes hold, and the only way it does that is because God's grace makes that dead hand alive to receive by faith and by faith alone the glory of what Jesus did for us. That's what he wants us to see.

This has implications for our lives. It has massive implications for our lives. Let me run through them for us quickly. I want to diagnose real quick self-righteousness, how do you tell if you're like this Pharisee. First, you focus on external tests of righteousness. You know, we tend to think especially here in the deep South, like if you don't cuss and don't watch R rated movies and dress a certain way and listen to certain kind of music, and

don't smoke and don't drink and don't dance a certain way, then you're probably pretty righteous. Here's the deal with that. 1. Culture is changed. 2. Jesus never does and neither does his standard of judgment and determining righteousness has nothing to do with cultural standards some of which may be good. But determining what is righteous and what passes God's test has nothing to do with external righteousness, nothing to do with our tests, everything to do with his law and what does that law say? You shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect, and that's why legalism of any stripe is such a mistake because it always lowers the requirements that God has for entrance into his kingdom. It always lessens the demand and puts it in a list format as if a list leads to righteousness.

No, friends, when we come and behold God's perfect standard, it should crush us like it crushed this tax collector. When we finally come by his grace alone to see what he demands, we'll see, "I've not done any of it. My heart isn't right. That's the problem. Even the good works that I do are tainted by sin. I've got a massive heart issue and I need heart surgery. I need God to put me right with God because I can't do it on my own." If we ever think we're doing all that we can, let's go back to Luke 17 when Jesus says, "When you've done everything." Everything. Anybody want to take him up on that? "I've done everything, God. That's me." No. He says, "If you ever get to that point and you say when you've done everything say, 'I am an unprofitable servant.'" The standard is perfection and so we need perfection, not a substitute, false, lower, not even close righteousness, and the only way you get that is through Jesus, his perfect life every day, every day walking the dusty roads of ancient Jerusalem, walking along, never having an impure thought, never being sinfully angry, never being lustful, never being greedy. Nothing but perfection and every time he got up or went to bed in his perfection and sinlessness, he was doing it because he loves you and he's offering his life as a substitute to turn away his wrath. Every day the perfection you need is found in Christ alone.

And another sign of self-righteousness might be that you can't stand criticism. How do we react when people criticize us? Don't we all become expert defense attorneys, kind of like why we're awesome? Just come by my house if you want to see that in action. You can come by my house and see it when I get any kind of criticism from kids or family or wife and that's deserved, I am an expert defense attorney on why I am awesome and I should not be receiving that criticism. Why? Because all of us naturally live like that. We all become defensive because we're all trying to justify ourselves, we're all trying to find a way to be right with God on our terms and not his terms.

And so we become defensive and therefore we never let people see the real us. That's another sign of self-righteousness, by the way. We never let people see the real us. We cover it up and we love to cover it up and we're good at it, really good at it, especially down here. We've got everything as an armor around us to say, "I'm great," and inside we live as Thoreau put it, lives of quiet desperation and Jesus wants that to stop tonight. As one author put it, in Christ you have nothing to protect and therefore you have nothing to lose. What do you have to protect? What do I have to protect? What does it mean when somebody says something to us that maybe is a critical thing? That's where our self-righteousness shows up. As one other biblical theologian put it when he talked about

criticism, he said to people who get really defensive, he said, "Cheer up, you're worse than you think you are." Isn't that right?

All of us, all of us are that bad. All of us the tax collector here. That's us in this story. That's who Jesus says goes home justified. That gives us one thing that the gospel should bring to all of our lives and so rarely does: freedom. Freedom from a lifestyle that tries to perform and relate to God that way and relate to others that way. Freedom to be you. The world is offering all kinds of false freedom. Only the gospel gives you the freedom to say, "I have nothing to protect and therefore in Christ nothing to lose."

It's a sport's story kind of thing tonight, sorry about that, but one other thing that I read about this week, you can really tell where my interests are, my Bible study time, Barry Bonds. I remember watching him hit the homerun 756 that broke the all-time record. What I didn't realize is the guy that caught the ball, I read about this this week, Marc Ecko in 2008 took an internet poll and he said, "When I give the baseball to the Baseball Hall of Fame, should I put an asterisk on it?" Because Bonds was accused and I think subsequently found guilty of using steroids, so is there an asterisk to this record? Overwhelmingly people said yes. So that's what he did. He took the baseball and put an asterisk on it and gave it to the Baseball Hall of Fame, and what this author noticed is that all of us are like Bonds in that sense, we all have an asterisk after our name. We all are sinners. We all need Christ. We all have that asterisk and the problem with the Pharisee tonight was he didn't think he had an asterisk, and what Jesus wants us to see is that the greatest news for asterisk people like us is that by faith and by faith alone we can be united to the one who has no asterisk after his name, who lived a perfect life and died a substitutionary death to turn away his wrath so that we can go home tonight in the same condition that tax collector went home in this parable, right with God solely by his grace alone, solely by faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone, revealed in the Scripture alone. Amen.

Let's pray.

Father, thank you. We would never make this up. It had to come from you. Forgive us for our self-righteousness, forgive us for loving to try to make ourselves right with you. Make us the kind of people as we leave here tonight that mourn our sin, mourn our condition, and throw ourselves totally on your grace by faith alone.