

We are continuing in the series this fall on the Parables of Jesus. Last week we looked together at the issue of the parable of the Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price. And specifically, when we looked at this parable Jesus was illustrating that this pearl, this treasure, is the kingdom of God. It is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that kingdom is not itself a bordered land where one needs a passport to get into. It isn't typically how we think of a kingdom. It is the rule of Christ that is established through a very different kind of work---not by weapons or warfare, as we traditionally know it, but it is through Christ conquering sin and death on the cross. What does it mean, then, to be in that kingdom? It is something of great price, something that comes as a gift which is entirely free. But as we talked about last week, it will cost us everything---because it is beyond all calculation in its wealth, goodness, and glory.

This week and next week we're going to be looking at a couple of parables that tell us a little bit about, then, what does the interior of living in the kingdom look like? What should be the fruit of those who come into a relationship with Christ? And so this week we're looking specifically at the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, as Jesus, in this very simple parable---much like last week's being a rather straightforward parable, it is itself very application driven. Jesus gives us the interpretation. It is to drive us to what ought to be the fruit of those who come to know Christ, and that is humility. It is a mighty simple parable, but it is powerful in its impact.

So hear now God's word. Luke 18:9-14.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men---robbers, evildoers, adulterers---or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

"I tell you the truth, that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This is the word of God. Thanks be to God. Will you pray with me. Lord, we thank you for this parable. You are doing something so straightforward in this teaching. You are laying it out for us in such obvious ways. And yet, Lord, something being obvious does not make it easy to live out. We pray that by your Holy Spirit, through the power of your Word, and through the work Christ, that you would work out in us the fruit of what it means to know you. And may what characterizes us is humility. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

So this morning what we're going to do, is we're going to look at *The Setting and Characters*. There are two very interesting characters that Jesus uses here, and this setting is important because what Jesus is doing is turning things upside down. This would have been completely shocking to those who heard it the first time. Secondly, we're going to look at *The Two Prayers* individually, and thirdly, at *Jesus' Comment*. Then particularly, I want to give application to four groups. Maybe not everyone will be included in one of these four, but my hope is that the Lord will use it for us.

So let's look then at *The Setting and Characters* that Jesus has given us here. Luke, in fact, sets up the parable through his investigating those who heard the parable and what was taking place in the context into which Jesus was speaking. It is Luke who first contributes to the setting that we have before us when he says the words: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." I mean....you could just stop there. And so what he's doing is he's using this word that is translated for us, that literally means he was directing this toward those trusted themselves. Now, if we were to have had just that verse, what would have

been conjured up in the minds of those who would hear such a setup, they would not have thought this is what was coming next, for Jesus introduces us in the parable to two characters. You have the Pharisee and you have the tax collector.

So to understand the shocking nature of the setting and what Jesus is doing, let's look together briefly at the characters. Because I'm sure there will probably be plenty here this morning who have heard the word 'Pharisee' or the word 'pharisaical', but what in the world does it mean? Well, the Pharisees were a small sect among the Jewish Israelite religious culture. They were known for their rigid and strict adherence to specific laws given to them from the Old Testament as well as any oral interpretation that also oftentimes went together with the law. Particularly they paid attention to the laws of purity and of Sabbath, as well as prayer and tithing. Now connected to this, there was not only strict or rigid adherence to these things---not just to what was law---but also to that which was largely considered by many as voluntary, which I'll get to in just a bit. What they were known for is also separating themselves. They would have nothing to do with those who did not practice the very things that they practiced.

Now they were definitely an audience that Jesus seems to be particularly targeting. But we need to be clear: Jesus does not mean to say that this Pharisee which he is painting for us in this parable ought to be representative of all the Pharisees. That would not be the case. Nor should the tax collector which he paints for us in this parable necessarily be representative of all tax collectors. But they are representative of two states of hearts: one of pride, one of humility.

But we have here not only the Pharisee---the Pharisees were definitely following Jesus---they were interested, but they were also very concerned, fearful, that what Jesus was teaching would turn their worlds upside down and often they would find themselves at loggerheads with Jesus. But then we have the tax collector. The tax collector is interesting because the tax collector would also have been Jewish. You see, we're talking about a time during which the gospel was written under Roman rule in Palestine. So Romans, being smart, they did not re-create the tax collecting wheel. They simply used the networks of Jewish leaders within Palestine and pulled them in to serve the Roman Empire as tax collectors among the Jewish people who already had relationships within the farming networks and the business networks within Palestine.

So here you have a Pharisee who would've been considered a friend of God, culturally speaking, and you now also have a tax collector who would have been considered the opposite of the friend of God, who would have been considered an enemy of God. Why? Because one: he's a turncoat. He's being unfaithful to the Jewish people. He's serving the very people who are ruling over the Jews. So: unfaithful. Not only that, the tax collectors, as a general idea, were not known as scrupulous folks. Take payments under the table, keep some back for them, charge higher than they ought to, kickbacks and the like. They used it for their own power.

So the setting is a temple---The Temple. They're going up to pray. Now there would have been different times during the day in which they would pray: there was a morning prayer and an afternoon prayer and an evening prayer. We don't know which one. But here you have two Jews: one culturally a friend of God, one culturally an enemy of God. And now Jesus paints this parable to the listening audience, and what he's getting ready to unpack will take everything that they thought was the case and turn it upside down. For the one who was the friend of God---so they thought---ends up being an enemy of God by the end of the parable. The one who starts off as the enemy of God ends as the one who is the justified man.

Let me assure you that this was a hard word. These are the very things that served to provoke, though Jesus was not trying to provoke, per se. He was speaking truth. But when Jesus spoke truth, he did it in a way that they would not expect, to grab their attention. He is taking the religious

leadership of Israel and using a parable to expose something that is ungodly. I can assure you that that would have caused Jesus some trouble. But it's meant, in some ways, to get up underneath our skin.

So let's see what Jesus does by giving us *The Two Prayers*. The two prayers come in quick succession. First we have the prayer of the Pharisee. Let me read this to you again and pay particular attention to the pronouns. "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee [verse 11] stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men---robbers, evildoers, adulterers---or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" I...I...I...I...I. He refers to himself in this prayer five times in a verse and a half. And the way it's set up for us---Jesus sets up the prayer by saying [the Pharisee] prays about himself. But the way it's translated for us in English it sounds like yes, he certainly is praying about himself; but in some ways, the way it's working in Greek, it's like he's praying to himself. It's like he's standing in front of a mirror, as it were. I....I.....I....I..I. So what he's doing is he's using prayer as a means to establish his righteousness. What is righteousness? Righteousness is doing good, doing right. So he's coming before God and declaring what is his goodness. And he prays to himself about himself, and God is merely the audience, not the recipient.

But there's also something else going on in his prayer. Not only is he praying to himself and referring to himself and then comparing himself to the unrighteous, he's also using the Old Testament as a starting point. Why? Because he tells us that he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of 'all I get,' he says. What's interesting about Jewish practices is there were two voluntary fast days during the week. Note the word 'voluntary'. There were deliberate and law-commanded days of fasting, the Day of Atonement being one of them. But here what he's saying is---remember he's a Pharisee, so he's rigidly applying himself and adhering himself to the fasting and so forth. He's turned the voluntary days of fasting into 'his doing good.' And he's presenting it before God. *You see, God? Forget voluntary. I'm doing it.* Then he says he gives a tenth of all that he gets. Now, there were obviously laws within the Old Testament---Leviticus---that teaches in regard to what one is to give a tenth of. But what he does, he goes beyond that. There was a common practice among Pharisees that not only did they give a tenth of their income, they would also give a tenth of their herbs. Even as they would prepare a meal, they would set aside a tenth of that.

Now on its face, quite frankly, it looks pretty good! It's very respectable. Remember, he is to be considered a friend of God. He's righteous. But what we see is that what is his righteousness, is not God---it is himself. And we see it in his position. Now the text doesn't tell us specifically where he was standing in the temple, but we can infer by where we learn the tax collector is standing. It says he was at a distance, he was far off. The implication being the tax collector is far off, the Pharisee is right up here in the front row. [Which I don't know what that says about you right now, but I just want you to know you are doing pretty well...Okay, so what we understand... you're Presbyterians not Pharisees, right, so you stand...] So what you have, is that you have a Pharisee who stands up and tells us, and speaks about himself. So we hear it in his position. We also hear it in his posture.

And then we have the tax collector. In a very short phrase we hear these words: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God have mercy on me, a sinner.'" What is interesting about this prayer is it's not in the active voice, it's in the passive voice: Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. What's very different is he's not praying about himself, he's not establishing anything. He simply comes as one who is needy, one who is broken, one who recognizes---if you will, in the midst of the words it's all there---desperation. But also his position: he's far off, his eyes are down. It's a parable, right, so you can't go too far with this, but if you could, imagine what was going through his mind as he's beating himself up. One of the things he's recognizing is, he's thinking back: what money has he taken, how has he padded his own pocket. But now he's coming before the Lord, naked and broken and saying, Lord, have mercy.

Here we have Jesus taking this setting and he's turning it upside down. And he's saying, look---if you will---that to be in the kingdom, to know me, to follow me, is to understand what's going on here. What's going on in this parable, Jesus then comments, he interprets it for us. And here's what he says in his comment, verse 14. He says, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Jesus is going to the heart of the matter. What he's driving home is that the kingdom that he is bringing about is no respecter of persons, no respecter of race, no respecter of profession, no respecter of the things we so easily use to define ourselves and to define others.

What it is characterized by is the heart. The heart that is ready to receive, not the heart that is set on achieving. Do you see the difference? The kingdom and coming into the kingdom and living life in the kingdom is not about achievement; it's about receiving. Which is why Jesus uses this phrase: I tell you the one man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. I don't know what the setting would've been. Perhaps was it people talking, were they trying to figure out what Jesus was saying? Why, I will tell you, I imagine that by the end of this comment everything came to a complete halt. *Are you kidding? That guy?* Jesus uses somebody out of the culture which they would have despised as the one who humbles themselves before God. And the one who would have been considered righteous and respectable and the friend of God is the one who doesn't know God and who will not be exalted.

Jesus is teaching us something profound and here's what it is: the justified man. What Jesus is describing for us here, this word 'justified' is *dikaiōō*---'justified' or 'justification' is part of the same word---it's already been used a little bit earlier for the unrighteous, or the unjustified. But here, 'justified' is in seed form, which we will see later on in the New Testament, particularly Paul, who unpacks for us the doctrine of justification. Justification is where God declares someone who is unrighteous, who has no good in themselves, which is---Paul tells us---no one [that is, everyone is unrighteous]. It is God who declares someone righteous who is good in his sight, not because of anything in them, but because of Christ, whose righteousness is spotless, whose death on the cross and resurrection is the one through whom and by whom and on whom God then uses to declare all those and this man here, who comes to him broken and needy and in desperation, simply praying for mercy---is the one who receives that justification, the declaration of righteousness. That is in seed form, though Jesus is not breaking out here the doctrine of justification, as it were, but he is definitely showing us it by the way of a story picture (a picture story...you get the point).

Jesus is establishing something, and here I want to say---for those of you who profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ---I want to say as clearly as I can, justification is where you acknowledge your need before a holy God, that you are unrighteous, you're a sinner, and you need mercy, and you appeal to God at this man does. And if you appeal to God for mercy and for forgiveness and pardon of sins through Jesus Christ, God declares you as righteous. You are justified before a holy God because of something Jesus has done on your behalf.

But let me say something. Justification isn't something that we learn as something that we just look to when you first become a Christian. It is something that the Christian and the entire life of the Christian is built on, you see. It isn't that you come in by justification and you live the rest by having hope in your faith. Justification is not having faith in your faith. Let me explain. I have this quote, and I want to read it. It's very good. "Too many Christians..." The writer is Joel Beeke and he says this: "Too many Christians live in constant despondency because they cannot distinguish between the rock on which they stand and the faith by which they stand on the rock." Faith is not our rock. Christ is our rock. We do not get faith by having faith in our faith or by looking to faith, but by looking to Christ. Looking to Christ is faith. Nor is it perfect faith, great faith, fruitful faith, strong faith that justifies. If we start qualifying our faith, we destroy our gospel. Our faith may be weak, it may be immature, timid, and

even indiscernible at times, but if it is real faith it is justifying faith. Our degree of faith affects sanctification and assurance, but not justification.

The value of faith is the one in whom it is invested. The value of faith is not itself. It's the one that it unites us to---Jesus Christ. Let me explain. Our faith ebbs and it flows. There are times that we walk with great strength and trust and vitality and hope. But then Monday happens. Diagnosis is given, the surgery is waiting for us and uncertainty on the other side. The children are growing, but we don't know how in the world they're going to be able to provide for themselves. You would hope to have a child, but now you're unable. You thought the job was certain, but now it's gone. The relationships which you had invested in, which you thought were so close, only required the change of ZIP Code for them to fall apart. You see, in this life our faith ebbs and it flows, but that doesn't change the justifying work of Jesus Christ. The rock of Christ is not dependent on the quality of your faith. But I hope at the end of my days, be they 70 or 80, may God so bless---I hope that by the end of that time I'll be able to look back and say boy, when I was 43 I was so caught up in still being self-defensive and fearful, but now I see how God has rescued me from it. I hope I grow! I hope my faith is more discernible. But that doesn't make me more justified. It doesn't make Christ's work more powerful. It flows from it. So when I do feel weak, when I can't discern my faith, when others challenge me, where do I turn? We are to turn to Christ, as does this tax collector. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner. And nothing else.

The root of humility is the worship of the one who is our foundation. What Jesus demonstrates here in this justified man---he demonstrates what he honors, and that is, he honors a humble heart and humility. But humility is not something we aim at directly. You see, the tax collector, as he comes and he prays, he doesn't say, God, see how humble I am; have mercy. No. Humility is a byproduct of a divine work. So humility is the byproduct of worshiping the one who has done it on our behalf, who is our strength in our weakness, who turns our weaknesses to glorify himself, who reveals our strengths as really gifts of his grace. Jesus is demonstrating for us that this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is driving us to find our goodness not in ourselves, but in Christ alone. And the inevitable fruit is humility.

But what about application? I want to apply this to four groups. And I apologize to you if you don't fit in any of these groups, but it's what the Lord was laying on my heart as I prepared.

The first group. I want to specifically appeal to those of you, like myself, who became Christians and who have been around the reformed and Presbyterian world, theologically speaking. My ministerial background is not within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, it's within the PCA. So much of what I'm going to say I found to be present within that denomination, but I will say I have found it also within our own. It doesn't take much, if you're like me and you enjoy reading theology and you enjoy investigating it---it doesn't take long to go onto the blogosphere of very capable---not all, but very capable theologians---and hear the discussions. What becomes very apparent is how quickly those of us within our reformed tradition create reformed, if you will, sectarian rivalries. *You're faithful to the Westminster Confession of Faith, but you, not so much. You have this theological bona fides, but not you.* You hear it, because sometimes as they respond to each other, the comments are dripping with sarcasm, which maybe those who are involved in the discussion might get it, but what about all the people who might end up on these blogs who see the comments? There are descriptions---because I was able by God's grace to plant a church within the Redeemer network of Tim Keller back in---there are people who write about Tim Keller who never worshiped once in his church who think they know what he's teaching, and it is...nothing could be further from the truth.

But it also goes the other way. There are those within that denomination and within our own who don't trust each other because we're trying to test out *Are you reformed enough?* It is so easy that our theological convictions and our desire and passion for theology---and oh, should we be passionate

about it---can also easily become a tent of our own making, and if you don't belong, there's the door. And pride can describe us more than the humility which John Calvin, our forefather in the faith, said ought to be the reaction of those who see such a great grace and gospel of Jesus Christ. May we be careful of our theological sectarianism.

Let me also speak to those who have known Christ for a long time, perhaps as long as I've been alive. As you have conversations with those in this room, or in our foyers, or in different ministries, who haven't known Christ so long, be careful that you don't look down your nose. Don't forget that your maturity in the faith was not of your doing. It is the work of Christ by his grace that has carried you through from beginning to last. You have not reached your station of your faith by the strength of your intellect or the degree after your name. For the church that you are member of, it is Christ from beginning to end. And may those who are immature in the faith, who are young, see the humility of those who walk with Christ as the fragrance of the gospel that works its way out because of mercy shown to them, and may they desire to grow and learn from you because mercy, and not pride, is what goes before us, that we may not forget.

Thirdly---and here I want to speak to my generation and to the generation behind me---there is something that has seeped into the church that is part of the water [we drink] and the air that we breathe in our culture, it is a culture of cynicism. I read an article this last week that was pointing out this very issue. The writer says this: George Carlin once said that inside every cynical person, there is a disappointed idealist. Think about for a moment. He says we need to see the church for what it actually is, not what we thought it would be. We have to acknowledge that our disillusionment with the church is an admission that we had illusions about it. Did we uncritically believe the church would be a utopian oasis? Did we lapse into cynicism when it failed to live up to our expectations? Every community that you will ever enter into in this ruined world will eventually disappoint you, embarrass you, and break your heart. This includes your marriage, your family, the company you work for, and even your closest friends. What makes you think that the church won't let us down in a similar way? A lot of what makes us cynical towards the church goes away when we abandon our illusions about it. But let me say it is not just abandoning illusions of what we thought the church would be that will enable us to escape cynicism. It goes back to worship. This cross that we have here is to remind us that Jesus Christ gave of his body and his blood for the bride of Christ, the church. And she at times is marching in strength and trust and beauty; and other times the bride is limping. But she is still the bride of Christ. And my generation is oh, so good at cynical criticisms, but I will tell you behind cynicism is a heart of pride. *You see, I told you the trick would be that way.*

DA Carson wrote this, and we must remember: The church is not a band of natural friends. It is a band that is together, not by common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs or anything else of the sort. The church is made up of natural enemies, Christians who have come together because they've been saved by Jesus Christ. They are a band of natural enemies who love one another, for Jesus' sake. If you struggle with cynicism and you look at the church, and you say, *Oh, it's so imperfect.* Yes, she is, but He is perfect. We hurt and break and bruise one another, but that is why we believe the gospel. Because when we do, the gospel can be at work, we can go and reconcile, we can go and apply the body and blood of Christ which we say we trust in and seek reconciliation with one another and don't just talk about it. The gospel gets to be at work. So be careful of cynicism.

But fourthly. The church is always made up of a spectrum of people. And there are some here---our Pastor Allen Harris, who said he was a moralist, I'm not sure what he would mean by that, but it's this...I think that's what he means---it's very easy for us to get caught up in what we do. And yes, there are some here this morning who have a strict observance of the Sabbath. You'll go home today and you'll go to no stores, you won't watch any TV, you won't go to any restaurants---and that is the way you practice the Sabbath. And then there are others here on the other side who might say---I'm

not pointing to you directly, but there are people on the other side who say, *You know what? That's just moralism. That's so Old Testament. I can go to restaurants. Does Jesus really care? We can go to the mall. You know, we're fellowshiping, right?* (Just not Chick-fil-A, you can't go there on Sundays, but that's another problem. But we can go to Five Guys, right?) So what we do is---here's what happens, here's what happens. There are plenty of those within my generation and younger who look at those who perhaps have a more rigorous observance which they are within the Christian church and the Bible are at freedom to do.

But we must be careful of what one writer calls 'bidirectional self-righteousness'. It's not just the moralists who look at the people who aren't so moral or who aren't so strict and say, *Well, you're just not as holy.* Let me assure you that those who avoid moralists and legalists look over there and go, *Boy, I sure am glad I'm not as uptight as you.* But that is as much self-righteousness and trusting in your observance at what it means to follow Jesus as theirs. Jesus's church is big enough, y'all, right? It's big enough for homeschoolers and public schoolers and private schoolers and whatever is in between, right? Let us get off the dime of just suggesting what the differences can be in the church. And let's be careful that we do not elevate that which is tangential and should operate in the area of Christian freedoms that might come about through strong convictions---nothing wrong with that---but something which is tangential becomes the main thing. When it becomes the main thing, my opinion, my conviction becomes the main thing---the law. And the law often becomes the hiding place for pride. We must be careful to not judge one another and end up in our own self-righteous huddles.

Jesus said if you want to enter into the kingdom, if you want to see the fruit of what it is to live in the kingdom, it is housed within a simple prayer: God have mercy on me, a sinner. May God make us a place with a fragrance of grace and mercy, and forgiveness is real because the fruit is breaking out. Amen?

Let's pray. Father, I pray, help us to be mindful of our pride in the places where it rears its ugly head. That we come to you all equal, sinners, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and through Christ alone do we find our goodness, our righteousness once and for all. Lord, help us to receive this gift and live it out by your grace. Help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.