



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1282
Luke 18:9–14
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November 7, 2004

Making Your Way to Heaven

Let me begin this morning by asking you, “Do you want to get to heaven?” I thought I would start with a simple question. The harder question is how do you plan to get there? How will you make your way to heaven? I imagine that if you asked that question of a dozen people on the street, you would probably get as many answers. And yet, the answer is vitally important to each of us. Every one of us needs to be able to answer that question for ourselves and then live our lives accordingly. Is there some special knowledge I need to attain? Does it require great effort and sacrifice on my part? Is there a mystical path to follow? Do I have any ability to influence my ultimate destination? Whatever the answer, however foggy or clear, we all should be concerned about how we plan to get to heaven.

There is a story of a fiery evangelist who gave a stirring message about preparing to meet God in heaven when you die. He gave an invitation at the conclusion and challenged everyone in the audience, “If you want to go to heaven, then stand up right now!” Most of the audience stood up. The evangelist repeated his challenge. This time everyone stood up except for one young man. So the evangelist walked over to where the man was seated and shouted, “Young man, don’t you want to go to heaven when you die?” The man was a little flustered but finally spoke up and said, “Well sure, when I die. You sounded like you were aiming to take a busload there tonight!” He definitely wanted to go to heaven but he assumed he still had time to figure it all out. But we never know what danger or peril lies ahead. And now is always the right time to learn what God tells us about how we can make our way to heaven.

And that is our focus this morning. We are going to look at a passage of Scripture where Jesus Himself gives us the answer the question, “How does a person make their way to heaven? In Luke 18 verse 9-14, Jesus tells his audience a parable. Now a parable is a unique style of speaking or writing. The word literally means, “a throwing along side.” It has been described as an “earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” Parables come in many different forms. This one is in the form of a story. It expresses truth by revealing a specific incident and calls attention to the attitudes and outcome of the people involved. Jesus commonly used the story parable to teach truth to his hearers. The subject matter and characters of a story parable were always familiar, so the audience would easily understand the meaning.

When we try to understand a parable, there are four principles we need to observe in order to interpret it properly. First, the parable provides insight into some truth about the Kingdom of Heaven...the sphere over which the sovereign God rules. So, this parable is going to tell something about how we can become members of His kingdom, of His family. Next, we need to observe the immediate context of the parable. Jesus is explaining the answer to some problem or question and we must

be sure we understand His reason for telling the parable. Thirdly, knowing the context, we must allow the content of the parable to show us the main point Jesus is making about the problem or question being presented. Finally, we must do our best to put ourselves into the shoes of Jesus’ original audience. We must seek to hear and understand the parable from their point of reference. We need to think in terms of their history, culture, and the customs of their day. When we observe these four rules, we can move from the real life illustration of the parable and apply it to an unknown reality of the kingdom of heaven.

The first thing we need to notice is how Jesus sets up this parable in verses 9 and 10: **“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.’”**

Jesus starts his story by taking us right to the heart of what he wants to teach. He’s going to be talking about righteousness. God is righteous and those who want to know Him now and in heaven must be righteous. But on what grounds can we claim this necessary righteousness? Some people in Jesus’ time felt that they were responsible to live a righteousness life on their own merit. Others felt it was hopeless and that they could never achieve this righteousness from their own effort. I’m sure today in this room, both those two beliefs are present. This parable is targeted at that first group. Those who trust in and “are confident of their own righteousness” due to their own efforts. They are convinced and persuaded that they are righteous.

Now confidence is a good thing but being confident about your own righteousness isn’t. Righteousness refers to upright and excellent standards and actions as seen in and measured against God Himself. But there is a problem with what they are confident of and how it affected their attitude. They looked down on others. They despised and treated others with contempt, ridicule, and rejection. Is this how the God whose righteousness they claim to possess acts toward us? No. You see it is not good enough to be good. To be righteousness means you are without sin. And clearly, these people exhibited the sin of pride among others.

So, Jesus sets out to clarify how one can claim and truly be confident of their righteousness. The story He is going to tell involves two men and they are praying at the Temple. The Temple was in Jerusalem and the area included the Temple itself with the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, as well as the surrounding area of the Inner and Outer Courts. The Old Testament reveals that God actually took up residence with His chosen people the Israelites, first in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple mentioned here.

Now, let’s understand who these two men are and what they represent. We need to know that they are at opposite ends

of the social spectrum. The Pharisee or the churchman was a respected religious leader in the community. However, finding themselves at the other end of the spectrum, tax collectors were somewhat the equivalent of local government officials. They were often dishonest, taking more than the Romans required, and considered traitors by their countrymen. So, these two very different men have come into God's presence to worship and pray to Him. As we'll see later, one will be the rejected and the other will receive righteousness.

As the story unfolds, we see the behavior and prayer of the first man, the Pharisee. Pharisees were a dominating force in the Hebrew culture of Jesus' world. Their name meant "separated" They accepted scripture and tradition as authoritative, affirmed traditional theological doctrines, and championed the strict observance of the Jewish law. Although they only numbered about 6000, they held widespread influence and in many ways typified Jewish thought and practice of the day. Watch and listen to how he presents his claim to righteousness in verses 11 and 12. **"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.'"**

Let's look at this man and his claim to righteousness. He prayed standing and, although this was an accepted and common posture for prayer, in this case, it appears that his purpose in standing was to bring added attention to himself. And then we hear that his prayer is "about himself." He opens his prayer using the format of a psalm of thanksgiving, in which God is praised for something He has done. But he abandons the expected form and turns the rest of his prayer into a psalm of thanksgiving for what he has done for God. He makes no request of God nor does he give Him any honor. In his understanding of religion, he believes and acts as though it is all up to him. You can almost see him anticipating a standing ovation or at least a hearty "amen" from God.

We do not hear him acknowledge any personal sin nor his need for God nor dependence on Him. No. After an initial mention of God's name, the spotlight shifts to the Pharisee himself. His prayer contains a list of sins he does not do. He is not a robber. He does not swindle or use violence to gain money. He does not involve himself in evil practices. Nor has he ever committed adultery. He bases his claim to righteousness on avoiding bad things.

He also provides a list of good things that he does do. He fasts and abstains from food for religious reasons. Jews were required to fast once a year on the Day of Atonement but he fasts twice a week. This was the habit of those who wanted to show their religious fever. He also tithed. But he didn't just tithe; he gave a super tithe beyond what the Law prescribed. Deuteronomy 14 named only certain items that were to be tithed but this Pharisee tithed from all he gained.

His claim of righteousness is based entirely on external evidence. Due to his own efforts, he declares himself better than others and more worthy of God's attention. He puts himself in the "class of the elites." But

here he betrays his true attitude. For all of us may have reason to thank God that we are different than others but we never should believe that we are better than others. If we do, we have made ourselves judges over them, and revealed our pride.

It is tempting to compare ourselves to other people who we feel do not measure up to us, at least in our own eyes. This pride leads us to trust in our own abilities instead of trusting in God. Another result is that we tend to regard others with contempt in our thoughts and disrespect in our actions. The Pharisee indulges himself in self-vindication, seeing himself as a blessing to God. He claims he has outperformed anyone else in the race of righteousness.

What he is doing is similar to the story of the two men hiking in the back country who encountered a grizzly bear. The startled bear immediately charged. The man in front turned to run. As he did, he saw the second man sitting on a log, taking off his hiking boots and lacing on a pair of tennis shoes. The first man screamed, "Are you crazy? You're never going to outrun a bear!" But the second man called back and said, "I don't need to outrun the bear, I only need to outrun you!" But if this Pharisee wanted to claim righteousness based on his own efforts, he didn't need to outperform the tax collector next to him, he needed to outperform God. God is the standard and measure for righteousness.

We actually have no reason to doubt the claims of the Pharisee. He probably did abstain from all these bad things and do the good things he claims. But these initial worthy practices had hardened his heart into prideful self-righteousness. It is good to avoid evil and do good but the danger is that with every good deed, Satan stands ready to fan the flame of pride and independence from God. And this will bring our ruin.

In the next verse, Jesus introduces us to the second man, the tax collector: **"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.'"**

Right away, we see a contrast between the two men. His body language and attitude as he approaches God is completely different. He stands to pray but at a distance, most likely in a corner of the Outer Court of the Temple. He feels unworthy to address God and be in His presence. He cannot lift his eyes to heaven. When a person prayed, it was normal to look expectantly to heaven. But again he is so convicted of his sin and sense of unworthiness he is unable to do this. It's as if he can't look God straight in the eye. A person beating their breast was a common physical expression of sorrow and remorse. His dejected body language is visual testimony to his dejected spirit. He feels his shame and separation from God due to his sin.

But now listen to his prayer. It is short, much shorter than the Pharisee's. He acknowledges God but he stays focused on God, unlike the Pharisee. He pleads for mercy. It is the Greek word for propitiation and means "let your anger be removed." He asks for mercy because mercy is all he dare ask for. He makes no claim of any righteousness on his own. The New International Version says he identifies himself as "a sinner" but, because a definite article is used, a better translation is "the sinner." Paul expresses the same sense of total unworthiness when he describes himself as "the chief of sinners." By calling himself "the sinner," he, like the Pharisee, puts himself in a class of his own. But it is not the "class of the elites," rather it is the "class or the unworthy."

His mention of "mercy" is key to understanding this

parable. It is a request for atonement to secure forgiveness that can bring reconciliation with the person he has offended...God. The tax collector is alluding to the annual Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement originated during the time God redeemed Israel from their bondage under Egypt. The atonement was accomplished by sprinkling blood on the top and side posts of their doorways. The actual Day of Atonement was established at Mount Sinai, when the nation strayed from God (Leviticus 16). It was one of Israel's national events.

Let me describe the ceremony and how it was essential to the life of the nation. First, because the High Priest was sinful and unclean like other men, he washed himself, dressed in special clothes, and then offered a sacrifice for his personal sins. Once his own sins were covered by blood, he could represent the people. He then selected two goats. The first goat was sacrificed for the sins of the people, the redeemed nation, and the blood collected in a bowl. Then he would enter the Holy of Holies, the inner most part of the Tabernacle. Remember, this was God's dwelling place on earth. Next, he sprinkled the blood on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, which was also called the "Mercy Seat." Do you see the connection? The blood was necessary to atone for the sins of the people during the previous year.

The blood was the propitiation, meaning it was the way the people regained favor with God, which had been lost due to their sins. After the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat, the High Priest left the Holy of Holies and returned to the second goat. He would confess the sins of the people over the goat and then have it led away into the desert. The sacrifices and actions on the Day of Atonement signified the removal of the people's sin. When their sins were removed, God could continue to dwell with them and claim them as His own people.

The Day of Atonement was given to Israel as a foreshadowing of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. His death on the cross was our propitiation. It brought us back into favor with God. We can offer nothing, no sacrifice of piety or service for our sins. We must come to Him on the basis of the sacrifice that Christ has already made for our sins. 1 Peter 2:24 tells us that the body of Christ is the place of our propitiation and Hebrews 9:22-28 tells us that the blood of Christ is the means of our propitiation.

Now there were other sacrifices individuals made for their own personal sins but they were only effective because of the offering made for all the people on the Day of Atonement. When an individual sinned intentionally, there was no offering or means to remove the sin except to put oneself under the blood offered for all the people on the Day of Atonement. This is what David did when he sinned with Bathsheba. His sin was intentional and he could only cry out to God, "Have mercy on me, oh God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." The tax collector was doing what David did. Recognizing his utter inability to claim righteousness from himself, he was putting himself under the cleansing blood of the offering made on the Day of Atonement.

Now let's see how Jesus gives His hearers a surprise ending, in the last verse: **"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 makes an amazing statement. It is the tax collector who was justified and not the Pharisee. To be justified by God

meant God had credited him with being righteous. He had not earned it on his own but rather, in spite of his sins, he was forgiven and thereby made righteous. He could not change his guilt but God could and did declare him righteous. The tax collector's justification was immediate, before he got home or had time to make any change in his behavior. His attitude and confession in prayer had made him accepted by God.

This is just the opposite of what the crowd would have expected Jesus to say. It was a surprise ending. They would have expected the Pharisee would be justified and righteous, because of his good deeds. However, all the Pharisee received was the façade of his self-justification before men.

Jesus concludes with a promise and a general rule that all of us need to keep in mind. It applied to the Pharisee and the perceived sinful tax collector: And it applies to us today. If you exalt yourself in your own efforts, God will measure your righteousness against His and you will be brought low. But if you humbly acknowledge your guilt and need of the righteousness that can only be granted by God, you will receive it and enjoy a relationship with Him forever.

So what can we learn from this parable about how we make our way to heaven?

First, I don't need to worry that my deeds won't be good enough to get me into heaven. While we all should want to serve God, our service is only a response to our having received justification and not a means to earn it.

Second, because making it to heaven doesn't depend on me, we don't need to worry about how we compare to the person next to us. This isn't a competition. God deals with each of us individually.

Third, I need to resist slipping into the attitude of the Pharisee. Whatever God enables us to do, it is no cause to judge others and consider ourselves superior.

Fourth, a proper understanding of my sins and shortcomings should cause me to approach God humbly. If we have nothing to offer, we have nothing in which to have pride. He will exalt us...it's a promise!

Fifth, God grants me righteousness when I acknowledge my need for His justification. The Tax Collector was justified before he got home. His sins were forgiven and so will ours be.

For some here today, this is all new. You haven't spent much time answering the question of how you make your way to heaven. But through this story, Jesus has given you the answer. It is by humbly approaching God and asking for mercy. As we've seen, that mercy comes through the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross.

Let me tell you a quick story about a judge and a janitor who had worked in the same building for years. The two had developed a casual friendship and late one night, the judge was leaving his office while the janitor was just putting away his bucket. As the judge passed and bid the janitor good night, the janitor motioned to the judge that he would like to talk. The janitor said, "Sir, tomorrow my son will come before you in your court. He is accused of a crime and I'd like to ask you for a favor...". But before he could complete his sentence, the judge interrupted and said, "Don't worry, I'll be sure he receives justice in my court!" At this, the janitor cried out, "No, I don't want justice, I want mercy! You see...he's

guilty.”

That's how it is the first time each of us comes to God. It's as simple as that. Humbly come to God confessing your personal inadequacy to earn righteousness and ask Him for mercy. God will grant you immediate justification and the righteousness you need to make your way to heaven. You become His child. You can pray the same prayer that the Tax Collector did...right where you are, right now.

For others of us, we have enjoyed a relationship with God for years. We know how to make our way to heaven and we have been justified and granted a righteousness from God. But perhaps like the Pharisee, we've lost our way. We have sinned and aren't sure what to do next. The answer is the same for us as it was for the Tax Collector. Return to God humbly and ask for His mercy, based on the sacrifice Jesus made for us. You know, this week I had to come before God and do just that. It was not an insignificant sin either. I was broken. But I took it to Him in lowness of spirit and asked for mercy. And based on the sacrifice of His Son, He exalted me.

I embraced His grace. That was the title I almost used for this message, “Embracing Grace.” The opposite would be to “abase His grace.” That's what we do when, because of pride, we refuse to acknowledge our need for His mercy and cling to our own ability to gain our own righteousness. Embracing grace is a choice we need to make each day, even each moment of our lives, until we finally see Him in heaven.

I have just one more story, I promise. It's about a couple who, when first married, would sit together side-by-side in the car. Twenty years later, the wife, sitting across the seat by the passenger window, looks over to her husband and asks, “How come you don't sit by me anymore?” The husband paused, looked over at her, and replied, “Well, I never moved.” God never moved either...we did. We moved from embracing His grace to abasing it. We need to return to Him, humbly acknowledging the inadequacy of our efforts and the need for His mercy and righteousness. And guess what? He will restore us.