

Luke 18: 9-14

Dr. Stanton Samenow, a behavioral psychologist that specializes in criminal behavior wrote a short, but fascinating article ten years ago about some of the inmates he counsels. He talks about an inmate who refused to step on a bug because he “didn’t want to end a life,” even though he had killed three people in his life. Samenow recalls a teenager who said, “Anyone who knocks down an old lady in the street and steals her purse should be hung.” It just so happens that this teenager had broken into a woman’s home, terrorized her, and stole all her valuables, which according to the teenager, was okay because he didn’t physically hurt her. Samenow tells of a man convicted of brutally raping someone saying, “Anyone who messes with little kids should be put to death.” The point of Samenow’s article is that, contrary to what some psychologists and counselors believe, inmates and convicts don’t need to be told that they, deep down, are good people. *They already think that.*

We have a word for this kind of thinking: Self-righteousness. Most modern Americans wouldn’t call themselves “righteous.” Many probably wouldn’t really say “righteousness” is important to them, or that they even know what that is. And then they would go into debt to buy a car or house they can’t afford so that those who see them think more highly of them. Most Americans would say “righteousness, what’s that?” and then twist the truth in their conversations to make themselves seem smarter, more successful, more innocent than they actually are. How many of us have lost sleep or dreamed about the right school, the partner, the right boss approving of us, admiring us? We desperately desire to be admired by the admirable, loved by the lovely, approved by those who are great and successful. We are searching for worthiness, approval, innocence, respect, clout. This is what the scriptures refer to as “righteousness,” and we’re all looking for it. This isn’t a prison thing, or a cultural thing. It’s a human thing. And Jesus gives us two ways a person can try to attain that righteousness. He tells a parable about two men. Two prayers. And two very different endings to their stories.

1. The Pharisee

The word “Pharisee” doesn’t have the negative connotation that it has today. The Pharisees were the heroes of Jewish culture. Every Jewish boy wanted to be a pharisee when he grew up. They were the most patriotic, generous, devoutly religious, upstanding citizens in Israel. If you had a neighbor lady whose son or grandson was a pharisee, you were going to hear about it. They were the pride of their families and of their nation. The absolute best in every way. This pharisee knows it. He’s a good guy, and he’s not wrong when he says that he isn’t a murderer or an adulterer or a thief. He’s generous! He helps people! He’s a great husband and philanthropist and a fantastic neighbor. Well, not only is he a great guy in the eyes of his neighbors, but apparently God should be grateful for him, too! He gives a tenth of EVERYTHING he owns to the poor, not just the regular stuff that the Bible tells him to give. All of his spices, his materials, everything that he had, he gave a tenth of it to those less fortunate than him. And he fasted twice a week instead of just once a year like most people, showing how devoutly religious he was. Do you know what he’s doing? Firstly, he’s saying, “God, I’m better than all those sinners, and thank you for that.” But now he’s saying, “God, *I’m better than you.*” God never commanded his people to tithe off every little thing they had, just their money and crops. God never

commanded them to fast twice a week- just on the Day of Atonement. He's saying, "God you are so lucky to have me on your team. You must be so happy that you created me. Thank you for making me the way I am!" And he walked away and lived out his entire life knowing that God was so happy with him and thankful for how he lived his life. And when he died, he went straight to hell to burn and to suffer for eternity because his good wasn't good enough for God. Even with all his good works, his faithfulness and philanthropy and patriotism and loyalty, he wasn't good enough. Not righteous enough.

My friends, be very careful how you talk about others. Even Christians are constantly tempted to compare ourselves with others- to the murders and thieves and tax collectors and the Pharisees of our day. "I might not be perfect, but I could be worse. I may not be the best spouse or parent, but at least I'm not abusive. I might be kind of selfish, but at least I don't steal anything. I might not be perfect, but at least I'm not a racist, or a bigot, or a self-righteous pharisee who thinks he's better than everyone else." (notice the irony?) If you are here today, and you know you're a good person because of what you've done and haven't done, why are you here? You don't need Jesus. You don't need this church. This church is for sinners. For murderers. For adulterers. For selfish people. For tax collectors.

2. The Tax Collector

The tax collectors were the scum of Jewish society. Jews saw tax collectors the way we see human traffickers, or kkk members, or terrorists. They were an embarrassment and rightly so. They sold out their country, their people, their God for silver. They worked for the Roman oppressors and collected taxes for them, which were always way too high and kept everyone poor. If that weren't bad enough, tax collectors would usually take too much and pocket the "extra" for themselves, impoverishing their own people so that they could have a big, fancy house while their neighbors struggled to feed their children. He's been spitting at God and destroying lives throughout his entire existence- and he knows it. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't compare himself with anyone that he thinks is worse than him. He doesn't try to be acceptable. He begs for mercy, and more. The word that is translated, "have mercy" isn't the normal Greek term that is typically used for when people say, "Lord, have mercy." This word is hard to translate into English. The word he uses comes from the word translated "Mercy seat."

In the Temple, there was a room in the middle called Holy of Holies where the presence of God was. Once a year one priest could enter the presence of God, but before he did that, he would have to sprinkle the blood of a lamb on the mercy seat, a platform above the ark of the covenant. If he didn't, he would die the moment he entered that room, and so would everyone that tried to get him. The death of the lamb satisfied the wrath of God over the sins of that priest, so that the priest wouldn't die when he entered God's presence. His sins were atoned for. While the tax collector is praying, he is seeing animals being slaughtered for the sins of people and is saying, "God, do that for me. Make it so that I can be in your presence. I know I'm not good enough. I know that I don't deserve anything from you and I know how angry you are with me. But I am asking you to take your justified, righteous anger on someone else instead. I need a sacrifice. I need blood to be shed on my behalf. I need someone to pay for my sin with his life." It's this sad, immoral, conniving, treacherous excuse for a man, not the good pharisee, that

leaves the temple righteous, holy, good with God. It's him that is able to stand before the throne of God and be accepted. How? Because God answered that tax collector's prayer with a "yes." Jesus, telling this parable, knew what he had come to Earth to do. He was that sacrifice. He was the only person who had the right to say, "I deserve to be in heaven" because he is God himself. And he suffered the wrath and anger that God has over our sins. He was tortured and murdered when it should have been us. He was pierced for OUR transgressions. Crushed for OUR iniquities. The punishment that was on HIM brought us peace. By his wounds, we are healed. That's why when we stand before God's throne, we, along with the tax collectors, can stand with confidence not in ourselves, but in the blood that was spilled and the life that was taken when it should have been us.

A few weeks ago in Bible class, we discussed the question: "Is Christianity hard or easy?" It's a loaded question, meant to spur on discussion. Some answered, "well, yes! We are saved completely by grace! We don't earn anything from God. Jesus paid it all!" True. Some answered, "Well, it's also really hard, because it says that we are called to a life of humility, forgiveness, generosity, patience, selflessness, serving others." That's hard! Very true! And yet, even more difficult than the rules of Christianity, the rules that God asks us to live by, is admitting that we haven't followed them and will never be able to follow them up to God's standard. This is what Jesus is getting at with his final words: Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Those who attempt to justify themselves, those who think that because of their relatively moral behavior, their success, their status in society, their beauty, their earthly glory, their religious actions, their works, that they are enough will find out what they probably knew deep down anyway- it's not enough. Think about that- why would a Pharisee feel the need to brag about himself before God? Do you see really tall people going around telling everyone that they are tall? Of course not! They don't need to! They are just tall. Why then would the pharisees, and all of us be so tempted to brag about our righteousness? Because deep down, in the deepest corner of our hearts, we know it's not enough. But what if you gave that up? What if you went to God with nothing, nothing to try to please him, nothing to make him say, "wow, you're pretty good," nothing except a plea: "Save, forgive me, love, accept not because I'm good but because you're good. Take your punishment that I deserve and put it on someone else because there is no way I could ever be good enough for you." Sure, those words would taste like vinegar in your mouth, that's a hard thing to admit, but God's answer is always, "yes." And you are exalted, you are truly, absolutely, perfect, holy, beautiful, innocent, enough. It was all for free the whole time. Is that easy? Sure. So easy no one can do it! But this is what makes Jesus different. This is what makes Christianity different than any other religion. This is what makes us different. We are not pharisees who have their lives together. We are tax collectors who have hurt, bruised, lied, cheated, and served only ourselves, and yet we are more righteous than we would ever dare hope. And that means I don't need to be better than anyone, and neither do you. I don't need to brag about myself, and neither do you. We are exalted, we don't need to exalt ourselves. My friends, find your righteousness in Christ, and in Christ alone. Amen.