

Sunday 4th July 2021
Luke 18:9-17
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Let us come to God in prayer in advance of thinking about His word.

Come Holy Spirit, soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit, help us to follow Jesus.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

It's sometimes said that Christianity cannot be true because the four accounts of Jesus life just seems so varied and contradictory and it's true that if you look at the different accounts Matthew,, Mark Luke and John they have very different material. Sometimes one has one story and one has another and you're like "Why are these differences guys?" but to say that these differences undermine the truth of Christianity is to reveal simply that you don't understand or appreciate the purposes and style of the authors because the authors are trying to help us capture something of the wonder and vastness of Jesus and His kingdom and what it means to follow Jesus. As such, in the book of Acts, one of the great themes he tries to convey is that of a great reversal and it comes across in stories.

We're very familiar with Luke as the only author to speak of shepherds who are visited by angels and go and see the baby Jesus. Luke is the only author to write about parables of Lord, sheep, coins and two lost sons, and in all these examples and many more besides, in his account of the life of Jesus he tries to help us see that with the coming of Jesus a great reversal began and is on-going, that those who were welcome, those who were written-off, are welcomed, and those that which was wrongly honored is shown to be empty and replaced with something better.

The same is true of our passage today. We've just begun a series on stories of power and parable but don't make the assumption that it's only in the big displays of God's power that people their attention was grabbed because, in fact, these parables of Jesus were equally awe-inspiring, these parables unsettled people, these parables made it clear that a great reversal was going on, and it began because Jesus and His kingdom broke into the world and in our parable today we have two individuals, we have the pharisee and the tax collector, and we probably know that the pharisee was known for their religious observances and their exact interpretation of Old Testament law we probably know that they are the epitome of faithfulness to God and that they had a moral and religious life that was beyond compare.

Indeed, the pharisee says today that he gives a tenth of all he gets and fasts twice a week. Now fasting in the Old Testament was only required once a year and yes, the Old Testament expected tithing on what you earned but we know from other stories of the pharisees that they probably even tithed the herbs they grew in their garden and they might tithe the produce they bought just in case the person they bought it from had not tithed. These individuals, the pharisees, were head and shoulders above everyone in obeying the laws of God. He is probably held in high regard by everyone. He is the person everybody wants to emulate.

On the other hand, we have the tax collector, the most hated of sinners, the worst of sinners, because they had sided with the Romans against God and His people. They were seen as leeches upon society, traitors, and no one honored them, no one aspired to be them, and Jesus picks these two characters to speak of His kingdom to speak of the reversal of His kingdom because Jesus recognizes He needs to speak into His day and to His time and to challenge those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. Jesus wants to help them see that a great reversal has begun and that what was wrongly honored is seen as empty and is being replaced with something else, because, at the heart of this parable as well as the story about the little children and if you go on to the story about the rich young ruler, the heart of the issue and all these stories is what are the conditions for entering the kingdom of God.

What are the conditions? What makes us right or justified before God? Is it really just observance? Is it success and self-sufficiency? Is it the group you belong to? What makes us righteous such that God accepts us? And to help unpack that Jesus, in His parable, shares the prayers of these individuals and in doing so helps us see their hearts.

The pharisee says "God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

He's basically saying "God, I thank you that I'm so great." He lists the things he avoids and the things that he does and his heart is revealed as proud, as self-sufficient. There's no sense of sin, there's no sense of need, there's no humble dependence upon God. His words revealed that he thinks he's earned it, he's worthy, the doors are open to the kingdom of God because he is due by God Himself, and in all likelihood, you can imagine people, although they're so jealous of the pharisees, you can imagine them going "Yeah, you know he's got it right." He knows what he's doing, his life, his heart, his religious observance, they're ticking all the boxes and God would welcome him and I wish I was him I honor him.

And yet, Jesus goes on "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."" We can see that he's under conviction of sin, he won't come any closer, he's at the very edge of the temple and he dare not come closer because he is aware of his current state, he will not even look up to heaven which was the way they prayed but rather, bows his head and he beats his breast as a sign of sorrow and in what he says there's no great list of all the things he's done, there's no self-congratulation, there is simply an awareness, one simple awareness "God have mercy on me a sinner." Now mercy here has a particular meaning which is easy to not know or gloss over and the word for mercy here is used in the scriptures of appealing for God's forgiveness to 'cover over' the sins of the individual and for that covering over to be through sacrifice rather than earning it yourself.

Now at this point in the story people will be thinking "Yeah right tax collector, you've not a chance, you've not a chance, you don't deserve it, God has cast you out, you will

never be welcome” but then what does Jesus say? “I tell you that this man rather than the other went home justified” made right before God, for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Jesus is saying that assumed appearance means nothing, the group you belong to, the social status you have, mean nothing, self-reliance and religious performance mean nothing, what counts is humble, sober, recognition of who you are not in comparison to one another but to God in His holiness and to see in that light that we need God's help, that we have to come humbly and in dependence to God because we can't fix it and overcome it ourselves. No, this would have shocked people. it would have shocked people, this is a great reversal no one expected, and in fact, such was the shock at what Jesus was undoing and overthrowing here, that people actually did seek to kill him for it because what had been honored was shown to be empty and He was completely challenging those who were confident in their own righteousness. Nevertheless, Luke time and time again speaks of this great reversal. He begins his account with shepherds, dirty stinking shepherds, and they first meet Jesus rather than the high and mighty and Jesus in chapter 15 will go on to speak of a God who leaves the 99 and goes searching for the one, and a God who is like a father and welcomes back the son who wanted the father dead, such is a great reversal that is going on through Luke's gospel as he portrays Jesus and it's there too in the story about the children Jesus said “Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” Jesus is saying that just as children bring nothing, they don't try and say “Oh Jesus, look how great I am” they're just coming and he's trying to help us see that just like children come with nothing before Jesus, the sinner who's accepted is the one who simply comes in child-like trust, in humility, and asks for mercy bringing nothing, it's that person who goes home right with God.

And I wonder friends, on what basis do we approach God? on what basis do we seek welcome into God's kingdom? Is it upon our achievements? Is it the years of service we've given to church? Is it the good deeds we've done for the community? Is it how well you live out God's commands? Is it the group you belong to, the rights you've performed, the things that you know that maybe other people don't? Is it because you're better than that person down the street? On what or in whom is your faith?

Do you come with simple faith and humility like that of a child, because in our last series on grace we saw that God has made a way for us to be forgiven and in grace He gave Jesus as sacrificial atonement that same word and idea of mercy, that covering over of our sin so that we could be forgiven?

Friends, in what or whom do you trust? Is your faith in Jesus or in something else? because God says, God's word says, that our righteous acts count for nothing before His judgment throne, it's all marred because of sin and what or in whom are you trusting? And in case there's someone here or at home who recognizes that they've been trusting in the wrong things I want to give us an opportunity before we go into one final point in the sermon, to respond, to pray, to ask God for mercy and grace, this day and if you're in that place, if you know that you need to come to God and have His

sacrifice cover over your sin so that you're right with God, why don't you pray this prayer with me just now. So, let us pray:

Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for the things I've done wrong, and I take a moment in the stillness to name anything that's upon my conscience just now before You.

Lord Jesus, please forgive me. Thank-you that You died on the cross so that I could be forgiven.

I choose now to turn from everything I know is wrong and ask You to cover over my sin and set me free.

Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit. Thank-you that You promise the gift of Your Spirit to live in me that I might follow You all the days of my life.

Thank-you Lord Jesus. Amen.

As I always say, if you've prayed that prayer for the first time, if Jesus would become your Lord and Savior for the first time, come and speak to me, share it with someone else if you don't want to share it with me, because by sharing it you help to strengthen your faith, you help to strengthen the step of faith you've taken today.

Okay now, many of us will be familiar with the story and everything that I've said. You're like "Yeah, old news Scott. I've known this. I know that Jesus is the way of salvation. I know that it's all of Grace." But this parable still has something for you and I because in the example of the pharisee we see that pride leads to a heart that judges, pride leads to a heart that looks down and rejects and in the example and heart of the disciples we see something equally worrying because these individuals are not appreciating what they've found in Jesus, they're showing that by their poor treatment of others they too are prideful because let's remember that these disciples are a ragtag bunch, they are not the cream of the crop, they don't have it all covered, some are fishermen, one's a tax collector, come on, and so together they're displaying such terrible pride they are not appreciating what they have received, the grace and mercy they've found in Jesus, and we're not seeing in their lives the fruit of God's kingdom yet and how they treat others. So, here's the lesson and question for us that one in response to the grace we have received is compassion, welcome, forgiveness and the honoring of the other seen in our lives.

If we have received grace then the scriptures teach that disciples are to grow in humility and forsake pride and I want to give you three examples from the writing of Paul although many more could be added. Paul says "If you have an encouragement from being united with Christ in humility, value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests be each of you to the interests of the others." in Colossians "Bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone forgive as the Lord forgave you" and then in first Corinthians that chapter where Paul writes about the body but as a picture of the church and he says "Those parts of the

body that seem to be weaker are indispensable and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honour God has put the body together giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it so that there should be no division in the body but that its parts should have equal concern for each other". Time and time again the scriptures reveal that in response to the grace we have received we are to show compassion and welcome and forgiveness and to honor one another.

So, is it, is it? Because in my experience of many churches nowadays and training and other places beyond, churches are terrible at showing humility. We so often have a lack of compassion and welcome and forgiveness and especially terrible at honoring one another. One commentator put it this way "The difference between pride and humility: pride preaches merit, humility pleads for compassion; pride separates by putting others down, humility identifies with others recognizing we all have the same need; pride destroys through its alienating self-service, humility opens doors with its power to sympathize with the struggle we share; pride turns up its nose, humility offers an open hand."

And the question is, in our lives, is it pride or humility that is seen in our shared life? Is it pride or humility that is seen?

I wonder if you've heard or thought any of the statements I'm going to put up on screen:

Those children are not showing proper respect in the Sunday service.
This organ music is boring.
Why is our worship style so dated?
When will the younger generation step up? back in my day I was juggling.
I'll never forgive them and I'm never going back.
There is no reverence for God here.
When will what I want be prioritized?

I wonder if you've heard or thought or said some version of these statements?

Because in my years as a Christian I have, I've probably thought them and I've certainly heard them, and often they start with an issue we perceive as important and yet that issue and are identifying with that issue so get the better of us that we move from the place of compassion, a place of humility wherein there is compassion and welcome and forgiveness and honoring of one another, and we let these issues take our eyes off Jesus, and we move to a place of pride and that's why all our hymns today were focusing on Jesus, we're coming before the sovereign, awesome God who has given His life for us and in light of Him and that there is no room for pride, there is no room for any of these statements to be said, none, none.

And so, is it pride or humility that we see, that we share? In our tensions that we have had in the two and a half years I've been here over worship is it pride or humility that prompts it, and the correspondence I get through the door, is it pride or humility? and

how we talk about one another behind our backs, is it pride or humility? do we criticize or do we honor one another?

Tough questions, and my expectation as your minister is, if you hear someone saying this, in love I'd like you to challenge them because iron is meant to sharpen iron. We're not meant to just allow this to slide. I've already said this to our elders but I say it to every one of us, we need to move from pride to humility, if we are saying these things about one another or even to one another because we will not see the great reversal of God's kingdom in our day without moving to the place of humility, and God may very well say "You've had it Brightons, I will not bless and this church will not last" He did it with Israel, He may do it with us,

and the choice is ours, the choice is ours.

So my prayer is that not only will we humble ourselves before God and so with childlike trust find salvation in Jesus, may this humility also be seen and how we treat one another publicly and in the hidden secret place where you think no one sees you because God sees, such that the great reversal of God's kingdom might be seen in our lives and in the Braes area.

I pray it may be so. Amen