

“Grace Alone”

Luke 18:9-14

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Jesus told a parable to **“some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:”** The parable has two characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. The purpose of the Pharisees was to be passionate interpreters of prophetic tradition. They longed for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven with all nations streaming to Zion to worship and enjoy God. This particular Pharisee was a model citizen, faithful worshiper, and overflowing with love. He went above and beyond the law. He fasted twice a week so he could share his food with the hungry. He fasted as a sign of his penitence. He fasted to advocate for social justice for the poor. He gave a tenth of his income to the temple. This Pharisee took Jesus teaching to heart and was striving to love God and his neighbor with all his heart, soul, and mind. Think of the Pharisee as a generous, faithful, loving seminary professor.

The tax collector was a thief, overcharging for taxes and keeping the difference. The tax collector was a traitor serving the oppressing Romans instead of his fellow Jews. The belief was that tax collectors committed treason against God for ultimately they served the emperor who was considered by the Romans to be a god. The tax collector was considered to be the worst of sinners. They were banned from Jewish social and religious life.

Who would you rather be in this parable? All of us have a lot in common with the Pharisee. **“Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."**

It is a shocking parable, counter cultural, and totally upside down to what we expect. The model citizen, faithful worshiper, good guy was not justified by God. The slimy, mean criminal was justified by God.

Justified is being in a right relationship with God. By God's grace Jesus sacrificed for us taking upon himself all our sins and all the punishment for our sins. Again by God's grace alone the righteousness of Jesus is imputed in us, given to us by God.

The tax collector is justified before God, because he recognizes that he is a sinner in need of God's grace. He knows he needs the free gift of God's forgiveness. He is humble—self-aware that he has absolutely no standing before God and can make no claim to Divine favor.

The Pharisee does not recognize his dependence on God. He has an "I can do it myself" attitude. He self-exalts himself, reasoning that he is good enough to earn at least a little of God's favor. He trusts in his works, his love, his service, his generosity. He believes in self-righteousness. He believes he can receive some righteousness by his love. Thomas Merton said. "Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real."

The parable begs the questions. How do you trust in yourself instead of God? How are you self-righteous? How can you trust God's grace alone?

Brett Younger took this parable and updated it with modern day characters. I have adapted his words. Two people go to worship. The first is a social worker. He is married and has two children. He is generous and committed. He is a man of integrity. He tries to live God's will, love God and others. He is faithful to his wife, patient with his children, and loyal to his friends. He is the kind of person the church needs. He gives money weekly, teaches a class, invites his friends, visits the sick, and feeds the hungry. On the rare occasions when he misses a Sunday, he listens to the sermon on the internet. When he comes into the worship space, he thinks about worship. He closes his eyes and prayerfully centers with God. He sings with grateful passion. He opens himself to the Holy Spirit and scripture striving to live God's will. He leans forward during the anthem uniting his heart in soaring praise to God. He thinks about how truly grateful he is for the life and blessings God is giving him. He is persistent in prayer. During the silence he prays: "God, I thank you that my parents brought me to church, taught me Bible stories as a child, and planted in my heart a love of God and others. I thank you that I am able to give ten percent off the top, volunteer each month with Habitat for Humanity, and work with the after

school program." Then as he is praying he thinks about a man who is sitting a few rows behind him, "And I thank you that I'm not like other people who have not been so blessed."

It sounds like a good prayer. What could be wrong with seeing that you have been spared certain problems and giving honest thanks? But, as New Testament scholar Paul Duke points out, there is a word in his prayer that is destructive. He does not give thanks that God has spared him, he thanks God that he is not like another person: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people." Is that really the case? At that moment the man stops praying and starts comparing. He measures himself against his neighbor and is pleased with the difference. It is the sense of comparison that ruins the prayer. He has moved from words of gratitude to words of self-righteousness. It is a subtle line, and we almost never notice when we cross it, but most of us do it all the time. It happens every time we think in terms of "us" and "them", "me" and "you." We like to think that we are a good person. Comparing ourself to this person's fault and that person's sin enables us to rationalize we are a pretty good person. It is so easy to think: "I don't do that, they do; I don't talk like that, but they do; I do this and they don't." God must be happier with me. It is a slippery slope for soon these thoughts lead to I am right, you are wrong, which leads to judgment which leads to I have earned a snippet of God's favor, which leads to I am entitled to blessings, which leads to my faith, my works, my life has earned me a room in heaven.

Can you imagine ever praying something like, "Thank you that I'm not like a politician," "Thank you that I am not like a democrat," "Thank you that I am not like a republican," "Thank you that I'm not like those fundamentalists," "Thank you that I'm not like those liberals," or "Thank you that I am not like those who have a disability, or disease or hardship," "Thank you that I'm not like those people who never go to church or that I'm not attending a mega church or that I do not believe like that televangelist," or "Thank you that I don't need to pay attention to this worship service for I am already faithful"? Our capacity for comparison is astonishing. We want to earn at least a little bit of God's delight with our works. The moment we compare ourselves then think that we are a little bit better than another soon we slid down the slope to believing our love, our serving, our giving puts us in better relationship with God, to slide even further believing a snippet of justification is our doing so we relay a little bit on our self rather than God.

Interrupting the silence asks. “What are we hiding? What’s underneath all that, “Look at me, look at what I do, what I have and who I am not like”? Who is the Pharisee trying to convince? God or himself? His prayer is directed not so much to God but to himself. He is keeping score. Anytime we begin keeping score of our own life or the life of another we need to know that something deeper is going on. Score keeping is the way we either deny or try to overcome the feeling of emptiness, the loss of meaning, the brokenness of our life. It is a symptom that we are standing in the place of death. We use it to deny death, to escape, as a way of convincing ourselves that we are okay and our life is fine.

Also at church is a seedy night club manager. He has been through two divorces. His first wife left him because he beat her. He was never sure why his second marriage ended, but his drinking was a big part of the problem. He has three grown children—none of whom have much contact with him. That is fine, because he does not want to talk to them either. He is unfaithful to his current girlfriend, apathetic toward his children, and dishonest with the few friends he has. He cheats on his taxes, encourages illegal behavior and is a cruel boss. He has never joined a church. On this Sunday somehow he wanders into a worship service. He doesn’t bother to prepare for worship. He doesn’t know the songs. He is too bitter to sing. He has never and will not give an offering. But during the silent prayer, he looks at his shoes and whispers, "God, have mercy. I’m wasting my life." He is wrong about almost everything, but he knows the only way he will be saved is by God’s grace. He is not comparing. He expresses his raw self before God. He is looking at his heart, his life, and he is embarrassed by what he sees there. He knows what he’s done and what he will do again and begs for God to clean up his life.

Both of these people pray about themselves, one compares himself to others and trusts in his efforts to please God while the other pleads for God’s grace. Jesus concludes the parable with a concept that seem completely upside down to us. The social worker since he relies on his works, his love, his self-righteousness is not justified. None of us can earn or deserve anything from God. He will be humbled. The night club manager clings solely to God’s grace; therefore, his is justified by the free gift of God love and exulted.

What if the parable was longer? Out of gratitude for God’s grace will the night club manager turn over a new leaf? Probably not. Presumably he will spend the coming years similar to his past. We want him to put his life together, stop hurting others and join a Bible study. We would like for him to become more like the social worker. What if the night club manager only

prays once more his entire life on his death bed? His entire life he did almost no good and an abundance of sin; yet, he prays for God's mercy. What is God going to say to him then? There is no reason to think that God is going to say anything different than upon his first prayer. He is justified and exulted.

The night club manager stands afar with his head down and mutters, "I'm never going to get this right, have mercy on me God." God is merciful to the broken who rely on God. When William Sloan Coffin was asked to summarize the gospel he answered: "I'm not okay; you're not okay, and that's okay."

We all are invited to be justified by the grace of God. You don't have to be good, wise, or even faithful.

When you perceive God's grace in this parable, it is a wonderful message. It is okay that we will never get it right. We do not have to compare ourselves to others or do works to feel good about ourselves if we realize how God feels about us. We are failing and will always fail to be the good loving person God created us to be; however if we listen to God, we will hear words of grace and Jesus righteousness will permeate us.

Today is Reformation Sunday, a celebration that we are saved by God's grace alone. Martin Luther believed God's love is a gift. God's love was there in creation. God's love is given in Jesus. God's love is freely given over and over again in our daily lives. You can't earn it or win it. You can only receive God's love in joyful gratitude and then live into the glorious freedom of God's love. This belief was rejected by the church that often proclaimed and set up a system of ways in which people were encouraged to earn and buy God's love.

The reformers proclaimed God's gift of salvation freely given, that authentic religion is receiving and being grateful for the grace of God. The other side countered that religion is activity, works, beliefs, practices, designed to produce a sense of salvation; thereby, creating some self-righteousness.

Reformer John Calvin is still radical today for his belief that even faith is a gift of God. Take baptism, for example, it is not what us humans do that has any effect. It is all the grace of God, the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not a sign of what we are doing to earn a spot in heaven; rather, a sign of what the Holy Spirit is doing in a person's heart that justifies them and makes them a member of God's family. There are no boundaries to the work of the Holy Spirit or the grace of God. All may be welcomed into heaven.

Besides grace alone, reformed always reforming, was a key slogan of the reformation. It is a humble, God reliant slogan. We reformed Christians are to question everything: institutions, creeds, statements of faith, the church itself—because only God is God. Everything human requires constant reformation. We are able to only grasp the most-minute snippet of God's will for us and God's glory. A true Reformed Christian understands that no church, no denomination, no religion, no theological statement is perfect. Therefore they do not compare; rather they pray, debate, pray, vote and repeat over and over again in hopes of getting a little closer to God's truths. This is why the reformation started public education, so all can read the Bible, debate and pray—so together we can realize our need for God's grace, so together we can rely solely on God. God, be merciful to me, a sinner! Amen