

Pride, Prayer and Humility

Luke 18:9-14

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This is one of the scenes from the Life of Christ. It's a scene that probably happened in real life, but Jesus tells it as a parable. And this is what the Gospel of Luke chapter 18, beginning in verse nine, says.

He (that is Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated 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 or two himself prayed. Thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I've asked twice a week I give a tithe of all that I get. But the tax collector standing far off would not even lift his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Let's pray for a moment.

Lord, give us ears to hear. We need this word, Lord Jesus, that you gave us a word that warns us about the danger of exalting ourselves. We know better. And yet, because of our proud nature, we're prone to it. Heal us in a loving and kind and gracious way. We ask in Jesus name, you men, please be seated.

If you like to know what's coming, we're going to notice that Jesus speaks to people who trust in themselves. Some who trust in themselves, it says. And he tells a parable about two people, one who trusted himself, a self-righteous Pharisee, and the other one who doesn't trust in himself an unrighteous tax collector. And then we'll see how the Lord calls us all to humility, especially in the Lord's table. But I want to begin with a letter that someone wrote on their 70th birthday some years ago, a letter to his son. He started this way.

I am this day, 70 years old and a monument of divine mercy and goodness, though on a review of my life, I find much, very much for which I ought to be humbled in the dust. He continues to his son, my direct and positive sins are innumerable. My negligence of the Lord's work has been great. I have not promoted his cause, nor sought His glory and honor as I ought. I am yet still retained in his work, for I trust in him for acceptance through the blood of Christ Jesus alone.

The man who wrote this letter was a cobbler who went to an education up to the eighth grade. Despite his humble origins and little training, he believed he was called the Gospel Ministry and presented himself to the Church of England. He was English for ordination. They examined him and they decided he was unfit because he couldn't speak well enough to preach. And so we studied and worked for a while and came back and was examined again and was declared again

to be unfit for the gospel ministry. He accepted this. He accepted their judgment and still believed that somehow he could serve the Lord. Indeed, although he couldn't master the English language for some reason, he could master other languages. And while he was trying to become a better speaker in English, he learned Hebrew and Greek and Latin and German and Dutch. And he thought, you know, maybe, maybe I have an ability here. You might have heard of this man. His name is William Carey. He's sometimes called the founder of Modern missions. Now, you know, in the news constantly, we have the term or the phrase anti-colonialism. And some people look at missionaries now with a little bit skepticism. They were colonial masters. But William Carey knew from day one that the colonial impulse would not start the church in places like India where he went. In fact, the Colonial Trading Enterprises did not want him to enter India. He had to sneak in illegally because they were afraid that the preaching, the gospel could cause upheaval and interfere with their profit-making enterprise. He snuck in and he began to start churches independent of European influence. He wanted churches that were self-propagating, self-governing, self-sustaining. And the way to do that, he knew, was by translating the Bible into the language of the people. And again, he had a little bit of a knack for it. And so began to study the languages of India. And of course, you probably know this India has lots of people in over 200 languages. And so he set to work and over the next few years, he learned languages that have essentially no connection to each other. They're all brand new, not like Dutch and German. He learned Bengali or Raja, Marathi, Hindi, Assamese and Sanskrit, the six most common languages spoken by tens or hundreds of millions of people and translated the entire Bible by himself with few resources in all six languages.

And when he was done with that, he decided he should learn a few more languages. He learned 29 more and translated the New Testament into 29 additional languages, New Testament in 35 languages, whole Bible and six. And yet somehow, he thought he had not served the Lord enough. We wondered at this because, you know, most of us, if turned down for gospel ministry twice and then translate the Bible into 35 languages, most of us would say, You fools, I proved you wrong. You underestimated me. I've had a greater career than any of you.

That wasn't his attitude at all. Instead, he said, I'm a sinner, a testament to God's mercy, God's grace, God's goodness. Maybe he was depressed, maybe he had low self-esteem, or maybe he had taken the Gospel fully and deeply and richly to heart. Because Jesus told a parable to some people, some people who trusted in themselves and had a propensity to look down on others, which is a very human propensity. Pride despising others is one of those diseases that resist, secure. You know, if you're a physician, there are some diseases you can cure and there's some you can't cure. You manage like dermatological problems. You don't solve skin rashes forever. You treat them, you minimize them or diabetes - You don't cure diabetes, you manage it, you take steps. And then there are other diseases that can be cured or not. But pride is like one of those diseases that never entirely leaves us because we're prone to pride. It's easy to see it in others, hard to see in ourselves. You know, if you're a procrastinator, everybody knows it. And if you have a temper, everybody knows it. But if you have pride, it's quite, insidious. You may not even see yourself.

That's why Jesus told this parable. Can I just tell you, as I expound this, since I use a medical analogy, I stand before you as a cardiologist with heart disease. I have the illness that I detect in you in myself. We all have a problem with pride.

Now. The parable actually is the second in a pair of parables and the first parables about a woman, a widow who suffered injustice and can't get justice. She goes to a judge over and over again pleading for justice. He doesn't care. He's not interested in true justice. But because she persists so much, he says, I'll just give her what she wants and that parable is told so that we would pray persistently. This parable is told so that we might pray correctly with the right spirit. That's what Luke Chapter 18 is about, and it tells us about people who go to pray in the temple. Now, to go to pray in the temple really means to worship in the temple. And there was a time when people would go and worship in the temple. It was nine in the morning, 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. and people went to the temple to pray and to worship, private worship we would say today -- they went there at that time because that's one. The priests offered their sacrifices and the thought and it's a good thought is that at nine the Lord has told the priest to sacrifice and cover since the three he has. And so our sins are covered and God will not look upon us to judge because our sins have been covered and we can pray at those times. So people came at that time to pray.

They went up to pray and two very different men went up to pray, a tax collector and a Pharisee. Now it says of the Pharisee that he kind of looked around at the people nearby and the Pharisee scans the crowd and sees no one better than he and the tax collector scans the crowd and sees no one worse than he -- Pharisee thinks is the best tax collector, thinks he's the sinner. And they go to pray and off they go. And it's expected that a Pharisee would go. There were righteous people, people who tried to keep the covenant, tried to follow the law. And it's not expected that a tax collector go because tax collectors were not like people who work for the IRS today or IRS, whether national or for the revenue systems of Alabama. That's all very proper and done legally. In those days, the tax collector was a traitor to his own people. He worked for Rome and he got what Rome demanded and extorted if he could more for himself and got rich off the backs of his own people. And so tax collectors are not expected to go to the temple because they were living in perpetual sin according to the perception of the day. But they go up to pray, they go up to worship, and the Pharisee plans to worship.

But I don't know about you if any of you ever gone to worship, planning to worship and found your attention wandering, does that ever happen here? You plan to worship, but it doesn't quite happen and you start to pray. And yet somehow your prayers don't quite get right. And that's certainly what happens with this Pharisee. I'm not calling you Pharisees. Don't misunderstand. He's praying. It says in the text, Can be translated by himself or to himself? If it even be translated, the original could be translated by himself to himself, or it could be even toward an about himself. Now, why are those the options? Well, if you look at what he does, he does stand by himself. I mean he is scanning in the crowd and looking at people and judging himself as superior in the Pharisees actually did not like to get too close to you to literally bump into a

sinner or something, physically wanted to not touch a sinner. And so he was standing away by himself because he's better than the rest in his mind. But he's also praying about himself. He's telling God how good he is. He's saying, I'm better than other people. Hey, God just want you to know in case you haven't noticed, I fast twice a week, dawn to dusk. It's impressive. The law says you should fast once a year. He says, Well, I'm going to do it twice every week. And God, I want you know I've been doing it. Can I just tell you if I fasted twice a week, I would work it into my conversations. You all would know if I fasted twice a week. I hope you wouldn't know, but I know I would fail. I would tell you. So I get it. He also tithes every last thing he gets. It means he ties his income and he also tithes what he purchased is in case the person from whom he purchased it didn't tithe it. So he's a double tither and a double faster. And he's praying about himself and is kind of praying to himself is self-congratulatory. I'm not like these other sinners. Notice he doesn't really praise God. He tells God how awesome is he? He thanks God for making him awesome. That's not much of a prayer. He doesn't ask for anything. He doesn't plead for mercy. Probably prays it out loud. People prayed out loud most of the time. People probably heard him praying this way.

Bernard of Clairvaux, who lived a long time ago and wrote a song or two that we still sing, said it's worth noticing how he went about speaking. Bernard said that he does not say, God, I thank you for your grace in my life. He says, God, I thank you that I am not like other men. So he gives thanks. I'm quoting now, not that he's good, but that he is different. Not so much because of his own virtues, but because of the vices he sees in other people. by contrast the humble, see themselves as they are and blush as they stand in God's presence. So he says, Thank you, God, I'm not like other men. Even extortions and unjust people and swindlers like this guy over here, this miscreant. How did he get in here? How did that tax collector get in here to worship God? And so, as Jesus said, he despises the rest, He keeps the law, He tithes, he price is looking down on others and he's praying and he's not praying. He's telling God how great he is. He's telling God he passed the test. He deserves a promotion. He deserves an A on the report card, he is so awesome he can hardly stand it. So he tells God.

Now, nobody here who's a believer is a Pharisee because a Pharisees, proud and a believer is humble. But it's possible for little shreds of Pharisaism to enter us as we forget who we are in Christ. And so it's worth asking, "Do we ever do that?" And it is possible to do that. It's possible to end up saying things that are maybe innocuous in themselves, but they can end up being proud. I have a sort of a friend who sends me I'm going to tell you more about him a couple of weeks. But on his anniversary, the anniversary of giving up alcohol, he sends me a note and says, It's another year. Now, you can say that humbly, as he does, saying Thanks be to God, I've been sober for 12 years. Or you can say it just once. You know, I beat alcohol. I've been sober for 12 years. I'm awesome. And you can say what Christians sometimes say ... there but for the grace of God go, I just thing people say and you can say it with absolute sincerity. You can look at somebody who's committed terrible sins and say, God, you preserved me from that. Thank you. Thank you for keeping me from going down that road. It can be a very humble prayer and it can be a very proud prayer. You can scorn other people. Look at that person. I'm so glad I'm not

like that loser -- it can have the spirit of this Pharisee. So I ask you, I don't condemn you. I ask you to examine yourselves for your prayers.

Let me say it a different way. Christians are largely disliked in secular circles for being holier than thou. My comment on this is I certainly hope we are holier than thou -- some my secular friends live pretty messy. Lives by was messy. I don't mean they don't put their clothes away. I mean they sin terribly and they don't seem to care. I hope I'm holier than they are, but I also hope that we don't have a holier than thou attitude, that we understand that any holiness we have is because God redeemed us and set us in a better place and put us on a better path and sent friends and mentors into our lives so that we're not speaking too much of ourselves.

That's part of this man's problem. You know, somebody said once and it's been repeated often - - humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less often. This man speaks 27 words in the original language, and five of them are "I". So he's almost 20% the word I. That's a lot of I talk. There's nothing wrong with doing your duty. There's nothing wrong with fasting. There's nothing wrong with tithing. In fact, those are good things to do. But Jesus says when you perform your religious service, he says it just in the very preceding passage. Chapter 17 of Luke, He says, When you do it, don't expect praise or kudos. Just say, I've done my duty. I've done what you asked me to do. Head down, Lord, I've been glad to do my duty. Thank you for telling my duty. And we can do the opposite. You know, we can look at somebody else's marriage has gone into shipwreck and say, you know, I'm a good husband, I'm a good father, children, rebellion. I've been a good dad, I've been a good mom. Or maybe your sister or brother rebels, you say, you know, I'm the one that's clean. And by the way, just as a comment, I'm not going to talk about politics here except very obliquely. So here's my oblique comment about politics, very oblique. One thing we can boast about is voting. And by the way, I don't just vote. I'm an informed voter. And I even go to the primaries and after the primaries over, I pick up the debris from all the things that were handed out that people threw on the ground right away. I'm quite the guy. I'm a good dude.

People find their identity in these things in being different and better. So, you know, people from New York City are kind of proud of being from New York City. But it's one thing to come from live in Manhattan, another the Bronx. And some people are proud. They're engineers. But it's one thing to be an engineer, another thing to be a Nasa engineer. And maybe people are proud of their military service. They certainly get in the plane early. Good for them. But some people are officers and other people are regular and some officers are colonels and generals. And you can find your pride in that. Scriptures are a mirror to us says, Do you see can you see yourself here ever? C.S. Lewis comments on this passage.

Pride gets no pleasure of having something, only of having more of it. But the proud Don't say I'm good. They say I'm better than you are. They don't say I'm rich. They say I have more than you do. They don't say I'm strong. They say I'm stronger than you are. And that is no way to live, no way to find your identity, nor is it your job to find your identity in promotions And going to Harvard or having your child go to Harvard. We find our identity and belonging to Lord being

created His image. The Bible says No one can boast before the Lord. God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble. And that's, of course, who we read about next. We read about a tax collector who's so different.

He's as different as he can possibly be from that Pharisee-- think -- the Pharisee stands and the tax collector stands at a distance that says they can see each other. But the tax collectors in the back because he doesn't think he's worthy to get up to the front and the Pharisee congratulates himself and the tax collector condemns himself and the Pharisee condemns others, and the tax collector confesses his sinfulness and pleads for grace. And the Pharisee stands up and vaults himself to heaven. And the tax collector will not even lift his eyes to look up to God. He's so humbled. That's the contrast in his prayer. His prayer is God be merciful to me, a sinner or really could be translated the sinner because he doesn't see a bigger sinner than himself. God be merciful to me.

Now I want to make sure you know that the Bible, New Testament is two very different words for mercy, two different concepts. It's almost a shame we use the same word for these very different concepts. The first concept is what we call traveling mercies. That is to say, Just Lord, be kind to me, be gracious to me, help us as we drive to Nashville to have no accidents and no road closures, which I've never seen, by the way, on the way to and from Nashville must have happened sometime in human history. But we can pray, Lord, give us traveling mercies to Nashville and help my plane or my train or bus or whatever it is that's traveling. Mercies. And when we're sick, we can ask for God to be merciful and to heal us. In fact, just a few verses later, a blind man says to Jesus, Be merciful to me. That is to say, Please heal me. I want a favor from you. I want a favor I don't deserve. That's the first meaning of the word mercy.

But the second word for mercy, it's a totally different word. And the original is the word that signifies God covering and atoning for and offering a sacrifice for sin. And that's the word he uses. Be propitious to me. Offer a sacrifice so that my sins, which are many, are covered redeeming. That's what we celebrate at the Lord's table today, that Jesus shed his blood, broke his body for us, not just because people didn't like him, but because it was always God's intent. He would be the high priest. He would offer a sacrifice once for all to cover all sins of humanity for all time. And that's what he asks for. And he receives it. What does Jesus say? Jesus says, this man, this man was justified? Justified means right before God. Justified means God. The judge looks at him and says, Innocent, cleared of all charges because not of his works, because of the work of Jesus Christ. And Jesus is always pushing this. He's always pushing people who are self-righteous and always receiving people who are humble.

You know the story of the two sons, the unrighteous son we called the prodigal and the self-righteous son, the older brother, who says, Hey, Dad, I've been I've been slaving away for you all these years. And he's got a bitterness toward his father because people who are self-righteous are often bitter because they don't get the credit they think they deserve for all the good they've done.

And Jesus is always tender to people who bring their troubles, their sins, their darkest doubts to him. Why? Because, as he says, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Meaning I will exalt them because and in its deepest essence is a religion that teaches us to humble ourselves.

Listen, as we come to Lord's table you understand that behind the Lord's table is God's understanding resolve that the only remedy for people in this world is to send His son. God. Did not send a set of videos. He didn't He didn't write four books and say, here, read these books and do everything in the books. He didn't say, download this program and you follow this program and I'll be right. No. The only remedy for human rebellion and failure and sin is that the Son of God had to come into this world and die. That means our situation is pretty dire apart from Christ. So Christian is by almost by definition a person who is humble, who knows I was created in God's image. I started at a great height, and I failed terribly. And I can be restored again. But I have to humble myself. I say, Jesus is the only, the only remedy, you know, that our goodness, our virtue makes us miserable, don't you? Our sense of how good we are. Where does where does racism come from? Doesn't it come from people thinking my groups better than your group? My ethnic group is better than your group, and class consciousness. My group of people, you know, my educated, professional people that follow. We're better than your people. That's where tensions in society come from. I don't want to be political. I'm not being political. I'm just going to name something for a second. You got a lot of protests going on in campuses and they're kind of being stopped to some extent. But while there's something good about them and that is a desire to honor the lives of noncombatants, children, for example, who live in Gaza, that's good. If you read what the protesters say, there's a tremendous amount of animus, just borderline hatred for people. And then hatred comes out of the idea that I know I'm 19, I'm 20, I know more about this world than you do you, you educators, you trustees of the school. You're a bunch of dunderheads and we know better than you do. And we're angry at you for not divesting yourself of investments in Israel and so forth.

Self-righteousness breeds anger and division and pain of every kind, and humility leads to exaltation. The tax collector says, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner and God is merciful. He doesn't look down on other people.

Somebody may say, how can you go home justified when he hasn't done anything except say the words God be merciful to me. I mean, don't you have to show your sorry? Of course you have to show you're sorry. Of course you have to show your sorry. If that tax collectors really sorry for what he's done, he'll stop doing it just as a gossip. Lord, I've been gossiping. We'll stop gossiping. now in the brilliance of the author that God set aside. Luke. Luke actually gives us an illustration of this. In the very next chapter. Everything hangs together. The very next chapter we don't have a tax collector in a parable. We have a tax collector in real life. His name is Zacchaeus. You might know his story if you're church people. You know that Zacchaeus was a wee little man and wee little man was he? And he climbed up in a sycamore tree and the Lord

passed his way and said, I'm going to go to your house today. You may have forgotten that Zacchaeus was just a tax collector but he was a chief tax collector.

And when Jesus comes to his house and he repents, he says, If I've defrauded anybody of anything, and he certainly has, I'll pay it back four times over the losses, pay it back twice. He said, I'm going to double it. I'm an impoverish myself, making up for the wrongs I've done for all these years. Good for him. That's not what gets him right with God. It's because he's right with God, because God's mercy has changed his heart that he then lives a different way. You don't live a different way and get God to accept you. God except you and then you live a different way. It's all the difference in the world between those two. And so Jesus says, Humble yourself before the Lord and He will lift you up, humble yourself. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. So humble yourselves before the Lord. You know what that means? It means that we go through life and we get a little bit proud. And then something happens and it humbles us. You've been humbled over many things. I was humbled one time when I got a 360 job review, you know, all the people around me evaluated me and it wasn't quite as good as I had hoped or expected. And I thought, I'm humbled and it's good to be humbled, but it's even better to humble yourself. Not to wait for some humility thing to happen to you. You think you're a great parent and then your child does something outrageous in public and you're humiliated. It's better to humble yourself before the Lord and then he will lift you up. That's what that's what God does. That's what happens in communion. We humble ourselves. We say, Lord, my only hope is your gospel. He will lift you up and make your face shine. He'll give you assurance that yes you are, You're accepted, You are beloved. You are my son. You're my daughter. Yes. You were made and now restored in my image. And there are many things you can do from that position. But don't be proud of them. Just give thanks for them. Give thanks for what Jesus has done for us are lots of reasons to be humble.

William Cary looked at his personal sins and he looked at his failures at work. We could look at our personal sins and our failures at work and humble ourselves even as we come to the table, meditate, have a little time to meditate, meditate on your sins, but don't just meditate on your sins. Meditate on this that the Lord has lifted you up. The Lord loves you and gave His son for you and lifts you up. Now, as we go to Lord's table today, I want to make sure that you understand what we're doing here.

Every believer who comes today should take these elements that you may be closer to Christ and more thankful for all that Jesus has done and is doing for you. If you're a little bit weak, if you're troubled by your sins, but you're repenting of those since then, come. This is not a table for those who are perfect. This is for a table. It's a table. It's a meal for those who trust Jesus and confess their sins and want to be set and are set back on solid ground. This table is not, as Pastor Reeder used to say, this is not Briarwood Presbyterian church's table. It's the Lord's table. If you're a member here in good standing, by all means come. If you're a visitor here and you're a member of another church, you professed Christ professed Christ truly and really call on him, then this is for you.

You may have strolled in from Amsterdam if you trust in Christ. And this table is for you. You're welcome here if you need the grace of Christ. Jesus died for us while we were still sinners. And if you believe that and know that, then this table is for you. If, on the other hand, you're not a believer, may I say not a believer yet? If you're not a believer yet, then please don't do symbolic what's not in your heart? That is to say, don't take these elements as if you trusted in Christ when you don't. We're so glad you're here if you're not a believer, but we ask you to remember. You're not a believer yet and come back next time. We have communion as a believer, and we'll be delighted to receive you at this table.

So during this time, I invite you to consider who Jesus is and who you are and to give thanks for it.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word, for this word that describes what you've done and how we should respond to what you've done and who you are. Prepare our hearts now, our minds, our hands to take these elements not in pride, but in humility, joy, gratitude for all that you are and all that you do in us and for us, we pray. In Jesus name, Amen.