

Luke Chapter 18 v 9 - 14

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Lord, we would be quiet before you just to remember what it is that we do.

It is an awesome thing to call down, as it were, the eyes of the Almighty upon us. And Lord, we only dare do that because we come in the name of our Saviour, the one that you have provided for us, to be our substitute, to be our sin offering, to be the basis on which the guilty can be acceptable to you.

Lord, we know so little of our own sinfulness, yet you've taught us something, and sufficient that we know that we are not good enough to come on our own basis.

But we gladly come to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, because you have invited us to call you Father, and assured us that through your dear Son, we are in an intimate and peaceable relationship with yourself.

And Lord, we pray that one of the things that you do for us this morning is to excite us all over again of what an amazing thing it is that sinners can be brought into the friendship of the awesome and majestic and holy God.

[1 : 48] Lord, we pray that your children may feel your smile upon them this day, and that we might delight in your grace and have confidence in it, Lord, such that we view all that happens to us through your promises rather than the other way about.

Lord, may our faith be grown here this morning. May our humility grow. May our sense of wondering at your grace, may that increase.

Lord, we bless you that we can join our voices with the spirits of just men and women made perfect, with angelic hosts, and we even dare to believe that by your grace our worship is as acceptable as theirs.

Notwithstanding, Lord, there is so much amiss. We pray, O Lord, that we may learn to do your will with all the enthusiasm, wholeheartedness, and speed with which it is done in heaven.

And we pray, O Lord, that you would teach us so to be thankful to you, so to love you for your grace and for all your goodness, that we might become those whose every moment is set upon the delight of serving you.

[3 : 29] Lord, how we need your grace to change us. We're very conscious, Lord, that we live in an unbelieving world, in an unbelieving age. We live surrounded by people who are strangers to your grace, and who largely succeed in closing their eyes to all that you've shown them of yourself.

And Lord, that is one of the frightening things, that human rebellion can be so wholehearted as to even, as it were, write you out of every situation, even though you are God over all and you've made yourself clear to all men.

Lord, we pray especially that we ourselves might be delivered from that spirit of unbelief and indifference to you that so pervades our society.

Lord, we grieve for the blindness and hardness of those about us, as those who know that they would be in exactly the same position if it were not for your grace.

We thank you for the day when so many of us here came to discover your mercy, to come face to face with you. For some of us, a tremendous shock.

[4 : 51] To discover that you're real. Discover that you're holy. Discover that you're interested in us. To discover your mercy and your grace. Lord, it was an extraordinary thing and a great life-changing shock.

And we thank you, Lord, that you have come to us and stayed with us and been extraordinarily patient. And your spirit continues to work to make us more of what you would have us to be.

And we pray that even this morning that work may be continued. But we especially pray, Lord, that your grace might come to some heart here this morning for the very first time.

A wonderful way in which all heaven will rejoice. And Lord, how desperate we are in need of seeing such evidence of your mercy and kindness to us.

Do not wait until we are what we should be, Lord, to bless us in that way. But rather, further that transformation in us by the sight of what you are doing for others.

[6 : 05] We do pray for this church, Lord, that your blessing may rest here. Pray that your people might be faithful and more faithful. We pray for those who lead in the church, for those who are elders here.

That you would help them and give them spiritual wisdom. And ever more sensitive, tender hearts and consciences.

They may love your work and serve you wholeheartedly. And be a great encouragement and help to all in the church and indeed through this town.

Lord, so we pray that you would be with us in our service this morning. Bless those who are visitors here. Lord, may none go home without being blessed.

Without being helped to understand your word and your grace better. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. If you have a Bible, please turn with me again to Luke chapter 18.

[7 : 24] Luke chapter 18. We're going to look at the same few verses that I spoke to the children about.

But I'm going to read the whole chapter at a canter. Because all that is here is really helpful if you're going to get a grasp on this little story that Jesus told.

So, at some pace, I'm going to read Luke chapter 18. Sorry, it's on page 1051. It's the third of the parallel accounts of the life of Jesus at the beginning of the New Testament.

Luke chapter 18. And we're reading from verse 1 on page 1051. Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

He said, In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, Grant me justice against my adversary.

[8 : 37] For some time he refused, but finally he said to himself, Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.

And the Lord said, Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice and quickly. However, When the Son of Man comes, Will he find faith on the earth?

To some who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

[9 : 48] I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. 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, the sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

And those who humble themselves will be exalted. People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them.

When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and 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. A certain ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

[10 : 57] Why do you call me good? Jesus answered, No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony.

Honor your father and mother. All these I've kept since I was a boy, he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor.

And you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When he heard this, he became very sad because he was very wealthy. Jesus looked at him and said, How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.

Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard this asked, Who then can be saved?

Jesus replied, What is impossible with man is possible with God. Peter said to him, We have left all we had to follow you. Truly I tell you, Jesus said to them, No one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and in the age to come, eternal life.

[12:18] Jesus took the twelve aside and told them, We are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles.

They will mock him, insult him and spit on him. They will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again. The disciples did not understand any of this.

Its meaning was hidden from them and they did not know what he was talking about. As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening.

They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He called out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me. Those who led the way rebuked him and told him to be quiet.

But he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, What do you want me to do for you?

[13:20] Lord, I want to see, he replied. Jesus said to him, Receive your sight. Your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God.

When all the people saw it, they also praised God. God bless to us the reading of his word. So we're going to have a look at this little paragraph, verses 9 to 14 of Luke 18.

And Jesus tells this little story about two men who go to the temple to pray. And surely it is one of the most important stories Jesus, or anybody else, ever told.

Why do I say that? Well, it concerns people coming to worship, very different people. But with the same purpose. And we're here this morning to worship the living God.

So it's relevant to us. And it deals with the question of whether our worship is acceptable to God. Or more accurately, whether we as worshippers are acceptable to God.

[14:31] And is there any more vital question that anybody could ever ask in coming to worship? Is my worship, am I acceptable? to the living God?

Does he find pleasure or displeasure in me? This story is told by a man of unique authority.

I read to you the whole of the chapter. This is the miracle worker. This is the man who dealt so graciously and spoke with such wisdom and authority.

So he is speaking about a vital subject of knowing that you're right with God with real authority. Not only that, but the story contains a very sobering warning that not all who worship the true God in ways that he has laid down are actually acceptable to him.

This is not about paganism. This is about people who went to the place that God had told them to go in order to pray.

[15:40] But not both of the men. Only one of these men was acceptable to God. This little story is wonderful too because it's followed by a universal test so that you and I could know whether we are acceptable to God.

Notice what he says in verse 14. Literally, for everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

So it's an absolute test for every human being. You can know this morning as to whether you are welcome with God, acceptable to him, and heaven bound.

Because Jesus gives us a test here. And he gives us a test in connection with a vivid, very clear story that is so helpful so that we can grasp exactly where we stand with God.

And then, on top of all those reasons for listening carefully to what Jesus says, the whole thing comes with a very clear warning that it's very easy to be deceived about this issue of whether you are right with God.

[16:59] He warns, in fact. You see, most people would have said two men went to the temple to pray, a Pharisee, oh yes, he'd be acceptable to God, tax collector, no hope for him. And the truth

was absolutely different to that, the complete opposite.

So we're being warned here that it's very, very easy to be wrong about this question of how, who is acceptable to God, how we can be acceptable to God the judge, to the Holy One who rules over all. So we need to listen carefully to Jesus this morning. Let me just tell you where I'm going. I'm going to show you the danger signs of self-deception, secondly to answer what needs to change, and then just a few closing words of encouragement about the grace of God.

So firstly, we'll think about some danger signs that cause people to be self-deceived about whether they are pleasing to God or not.

And Jesus talks about a poisonous cocktail here in verse 9. He talks about people who are not pleasing to God and they're characterised by two things, being confident in their own righteousness, their own goodness, that basically they're good and secondly, joined to that is a tendency to look down on everybody else.

[18:39] And what we are dealing here with a tendency again and again and again. Description of people who are not pleasing to God.

These are the danger signs in religious people, people who go to church, people who worship God or believe themselves to worship God but are not acceptable to Him.

This tendency, firstly, to think well of yourself. It's very interesting, isn't it? We live in a society that believes that self-esteem is tremendously important.

In this area, in this question of acceptance with God, high self-esteem is a complete and utter disaster. God never accepts people who think well of themselves.

That's what Jesus says here. should be good. Especially when that is combined with a critical spirit. A general tendency to look down on other people, to think of yourself more highly, to think that you're better than others.

[19:48] that's the poisonous cocktail that's the danger signs of being self-deceived about whether you're acceptable to God or not my friend is that you so what are the signs what do the ingredients really look like well let me explore it a little more with you the people that God doesn't accept tend to be more aware of other people's faults than they are of their own like this man God I thank you that I'm not like other people robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like this tax collector now please notice there is a danger because there is a smoke screen here that makes this man look acceptable he is not simply saying

I have made myself the person I am he actually thanks God he is saying there but for the grace of God go I but still his opinion of himself in Jesus' eyes the man is still being self-righteous even though he says Lord I thank you that I'm not like these other people so the first danger sign is to be more aware of other people's faults than you are of your own and that spirit is often boosted as it was in the Pharisee here by a kind of telltale conceit based on the fact that he compared himself to other people people we do it all the time don't we we think that if we are not as flawed as others then we'll be acceptable to God that is not the standard you read the Bible from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation it's never the standard the standard is not average human behaviour or good human behaviour it is what God declares to be right this man imagined not only that he was better than others and maybe he was but that's not the standard he also had a kind of sense of achievement he told God about some wonderful things that he was doing he said I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get

Jews are only required to fast once a year and what you had to tithe what you had to give a tenth of to the Lord's work was lay down it wasn't everything but this man went further than what the law required in these areas and so he patted himself on the back he thought he felt very good about these things and you kind of look at it and you think well how pathetic is that how pathetic to imagine that the living God would be hugely impressed by the two things that he mentioned and yet the tragedy is that we do much the same we can easily imagine that we have things which are sort of super over and above what God could possibly expect of us another telltale sign of this man's spiritual condition is that he prays without asking God for mercy comes into the presence of a holy God he's a conscious of sin but it's other people and he never ever asks for God's forgiveness for anything what a marked difference between him and the tax collector it's not necessary to imagine that he thought he was perfect it was simply that he didn't think that there was anything in his life which was serious enough to need confessing he had no sense of shame whatever and certainly no sense of needing a saviour in fact one of the saddest things about this man is that he prays without actually asking God for anything you notice that he goes up to the temple to pray he makes that

journey and when he gets there what does he ask the almighty for nothing at all you say well he's a contented man well maybe he is maybe he's a really contented man but the issue is he's no reason to be content with himself and it suggests very strongly that his religion is a performance it's going to pray which is the important thing not the actual opportunity that gives him to ask

God for the things that he needs it's as if the act of praying is more important than what he's said or what he's asked for it's a ritual to him my friends these are disastrous signs that we see here absolutely disastrous signs when we're more aware of other people's sins than our own when we have this conceit about being good and want to parade our goodness before others and before God when we compare ourselves with other people all the time rather than with what God wants when we never ask God for forgiveness for mercy for anything in fact when we don't actually pray for anything we have no sense of need these are disastrous signs so disastrous that you'll notice in verse 14 that the

Pharisee was not justified what does that mean well he was not right with God God did not accept him he was still bearing his sin he was he was strolling casually towards the day of judgment with no sense that he was in any danger whatever it's an absolute disaster of which this Pharisee was alarmingly totally ignorant now it wouldn't be so bad would it if this man was unique but Jesus tells this story to imply that there are vast quantities of people who think themselves good enough for God because they are by any standard better than other people but the truth of the matter is very far different they're not acceptable to God because God sees everything he knows the heart so secondly what needs to change what needs to change well one thing supremely needed to change for this man he needed to become alarmed by and ashamed of his own sin because it's quite clear here isn't it that in order to be acceptable before God we need to reach the point where we are alarmed by and ashamed of our own sin the contrast is remarkable between these two men in the story everything about the tax collector shouts that he deeply feels his shame he is embarrassed and alarmed by what he is himself like he stood at a distance he'd come to the temple but he didn't get any nearer to a holy God as it were he couldn't look up to heaven you know what it's like the child who is your child or grandchild who is being told off and so often suddenly they have this tremendous interest in their bootlaces all of a sudden and they're shuffling about they can't they can't look you in the eye because they feel ashamed and this is what this man he feels profoundly ashamed by what he is he beat his breast that was his sign of absolute misery and a sense of horror of his situation and all he could say speaks to

[29 : 38] God as the other man speaks to God but this man really speaks to God he's got something to ask and he feels it passionately God have mercy on me literally the sinner and Jesus says there is absolutely no hope unless you get to that that's what it means to humble yourself before God unless you get to that situation unless you get to be alarmed about what you are and desperate for forgiveness there is no hope how do people get like that how do people get from being like the self confident self righteous Pharisee to being like the tax collector there's a big clue here literally verse 11 says in the version that I was using it's in the margin and it's not it doesn't appear at all in the 2011 version but the text literally says

God have mercy on me the sinner that's how he sees him so how does he get to that well what you need to appreciate is the Pharisee stood up and prayed literally to himself not just by himself but to himself ok he talked to God he used God's name but he wasn't really engaged with the living God it was as if he was talking to himself because when people engage with the living God which is what the tax collector does then they become aware you cannot come face to face with God without being made aware that you are sinful that there is something wretchedly wrong with you it's part of that experience of meeting

God who is holy God who is burningly pure God who hates sin and as I say Jesus implies from the way he describes the Pharisee as he speaks literally to himself because he doesn't engage with God when people engage with God that's what changes them when they start to grasp something of what God requires something of God's burning goodness and purity that's when they discover something of a sense of sin and a realism about themselves and start to view themselves as the tax collector who calls himself literally the sinner this man has no awareness of anyone else or anybody else's sin all he is conscious of is his own badness that's because he's come face to face with the living

God and people ask me the question and it's a really important question what is enough sense of sin and guilt in order that I might be sure that I am acceptable to God you know how deep does this

have to go how profoundly aware do I need to be of my badness what is sufficient sense of sin it seems a very intimidating question but actually it's a very simple question the answer is very simple you've obviously got to know that your sin is a big issue to God this man knew it didn't he was ashamed before God literally the word he uses it's a very unusual word for mercy this is a word that is connected with the day of atonement it means Lord turn aside the wrath you have towards me that's the sense of what the man says and Jesus deliberately uses that word you need to have a sense that your failings are big in

God's sight and to know that only mercy will do there's no other solution this man doesn't ask he doesn't imagine there's something he can do to make up for what he has been and he knows his need of a saviour of a substitute that's the language he uses provide somebody as it were this is the sense of the word that he uses provide somebody to turn aside your wrath from me he has some grasp of what the old testament teaches that somebody must pay for sin and if human beings cannot pay for it and we cannot do anything to reconcile ourselves to God we cannot make up for the failures that we've had God must provide a saviour a substitute that's why the

[35 : 19] Christian faith is all about the Lord Jesus Christ it's not simply he's our great example we don't need an example or we need something much more than we need an example or Christ being my example is to show me up more and more and more aware that I've failed that I fall far short of what God rightly requires of me we need something far more than an example we need somebody to get us out of the mess we need a saviour a rescuer and Christ is that rescuer because he was prepared to live our life a perfect life and then die our death bear our punishment in his own body when he died upon the cross so what is enough sense of sin and guilt it's enough to make you realise this is a big problem enough to make you realise that you need a saviour

God must provide a way of escape otherwise there's no hope for you but you must get to the point where you actually cry out to God for that this is what this man does he not only comes to the temple with a sense of guilt he doesn't just stand there and feel awful about himself he does those things but he cries out to God for mercy it's so obvious my friend but have you ever done that and you need to keep doing it until you know that you're accepted because the context of this story is important it's preceded by a parable the lesson of which Jesus says is that people should always pray and never give up so you've got to keep praying for a sense of forgiveness until you know that you are forgiven but there is something else which is really really important here what is enough sense of guilt well this source of shame in this tax collector's life is not a blip it's not a one off you know sometimes everybody has a day when they feel really wretched and guilty about something they've said or done every human being has that but not every human and perhaps many will pray for mercy at that point but you see

Jesus says that the hallmark of those who are accepted by God are that they don't go back to thinking well about themselves and looking down on everybody else because that's the whole point of the parable he says if you are a person who thinks well of yourself and looks down on everybody else then you're not right with God that's the point of the parable so so one has to have such a sense of sin and failure that it doesn't as it were disappear tomorrow but it teaches you it's only grace that can make me acceptable to God so instead of being so critical to other people I start to pity them you start to recognise look but for grace I'd still be there these poor people and anyway I can see my own sin much more clearly than I can see anybody else's I don't know what goes on in your heart my friend of course I don't but I know what goes on in mine and I don't like what I see in mine and I'm not going to assume it's just the same with you and therefore it's very different difficult for a Christian to be forever looking down it's impossible for a Christian to be forever looking down on other people because God has taught you that you are nothing that you're a failure that only grace can help and if anything does change and it does change it's all by God's astonishing grace so that my friends is a brief look at Luke 18 9 to 14 it's a tragic picture the Pharisee you see these words were spoken to Pharisees the reason why I've emphasised that side of the parable is because it was spoken to people who thought themselves good who tended all the time to be critical of others and yet imagined themselves acceptable to

God it's a tragic picture of terrible self delusion and the implication of the story is that it's as common as Mark there are multitudes of people who are being described here and it's absolutely tragic but your life doesn't have to be a tragedy your worship doesn't have to be unacceptable the Lord paints this picture to warn and to wake us up from our danger and from the horrors of self-righteousness for there's a glorious hope here and with this I close Jesus is saying astonishing as it sounds there

is acceptance with God it is possible to know that you're accepted with God none deserves to be acceptable but it is brought within the reach of all nobody is too evil we don't know what this man's life was this tax collector we do know he was deeply ashamed of it but there is no as it were no background too awful to know

[41 : 33] God's forgiveness and interestingly enough the implication is also that nobody has been who is can be so self deceived that they can't be delivered from it God may hate this kind of attitude but if a man humbles himself or a woman humbles herself the implication is they will be accepted and it's wonderfully encouraging because there isn't some great work needed in order to get us right with God the work has been done by Christ all that is needed is realism to face what you really are and a very natural response to come to God for mercy and grace because this is indeed a universal promise promise all those who exalt themselves will be humbled but all those who humble themselves will be exalted it's the way

God always works you can rely on it you can be sure now if you've humbled yourself then in the world to come you will be exalted I love this story it's gloriously liberated this man went home for all his background he went home literally having been justified before God it's not a sort of temporary situation it's a new situation a lasting situation he now is a justified man it's a permanent state even though he knew himself to be vile yet he was a justified man it's a wonderful thing to be a Christian to be one who trusts in the saviour that God has provided one who sees something of the evil of your heart and yet know that you're still accepted by

God because in his mercy he has provided a great saviour one of the great things about being a Christian is I don't have to pretend anymore to being a nice person I'm not saying I don't have to work hard in response to God's grace to become a nicer person I'm saying I don't have to pretend anymore years and years and years ago it suddenly twigged on me occasionally people have said to me well I'm afraid it's probably not occasionally it's more than occasionally people have said to me they prefaced some comment about my behaviour or the words I've spoken by the words call yourself a Christian and have you had that and it took me a very long time to learn the very obvious thing that the answer to that question is always to turn around and say you're completely right and by the way that is why I am a

Christian I am a Christian because I am like what I am because I need God's mercy desperately and the great thing about this parable is people who have a desperate sense of the need of God's mercy and come and express it to God are utterly acceptable to him and in a world of bad news that is an extraordinary piece of good news is it not Lord we bless you and Lord we bless you more and more as we see more and more of the unwelcome truth about ourselves we bless you that there is mercy with you that you have provided a great saviour and that there is pardon absolute and all sufficient in the

Lord Jesus Christ for all who will come because of all that he has done and the glory of his person the one who took our nature that he might bear our sin and Lord we pray that you'd help us to be deliver us from every semblance Lord of self righteousness which so clings to us that we find it so difficult to fight and we pray Lord that you'd help us to be humble and Lord to love what is right but also to have great sympathy for the failings of our fellow men and women we ask Lord that we might become those who model your graciousness that we might be people of integrity but supremely Lord those who know ourselves to be sinners and who glory in the cross we ask these things in Jesus name

[46 : 47] Amen