“The Pharisee and the Publican,” Luke 18:9-14 (Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2024)

**9**He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: **10**“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. **11**The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12**I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ **13**But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ **14**I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

PRAY

We pick back up in our study of the gospel of Luke this morning and come to a parable Jesus tells where he forces us think about an important question. It’s a question all of us ask, consciously or, more likely, subconsciously, every day. The question is this: ***am I justified?***

Now, if that question doesn’t hit home for you, it’s because few, if any of us, ***phrase*** the question that way. If you’re super religious, you might use that language but that would be a small minority of us. It’s not how I automatically conceive the question.

A few more people might phrase it, “Am I a good person?” But for most of us, it’s more of a continuous feeling we have, something along the lines of, “Am I doing what I should be doing?” or “Is my life going the direction it should?” And we try to answer by looking at the different areas of our lives, such as work, family, friendships, health, politics, even sports.

So, for example, say that since you were 12 years old you’ve dreamed of getting a job in this one certain field: medicine, academics, law, education. You’ve worked all through junior high, all through high school, all through college, to get into this field. You’ve dreamed about it. You’ve studied late into the night countless times. You’ve labored in unpaid internships. Then, one day, it happens: you get an email that says you’ve been offered the job.

Do you say, “That’s nice,” then go back to scrolling through TikTok? No, not at all. You feel a depth of satisfaction and pride you’ve never known before. You feel “justified.” This job offer isn’t just a way for you to make money; it’s statement ***about you, your worth, your value.*** It is a vindication of who you are as a human being.

Imagine you are a grandparent, and your adult child calls you and says, “Mom, guess what? Your granddaughter is a National Merit Scholar.” Do you say, “Oh, that’s nice”? Imagine that your sports team, the team you’ve followed all your life, after decades of struggle and losing seasons but you’ve been there through thick and thin in the stands, in bad weather, on the road, always trying to pull them through to victory, ***and this year they finally win the championship.***

Do you say, “Good for them”? No, you are so identified with your team that their success feels like your success ***and this success is a statement about you.***

Some might call it having a healthy sense of self-esteem, others might call it glory, but “justified” is the word Jesus uses in our passage in verse 14 (the ESV also uses the word “righteous” in verse 9, but in the Greek they are the same word). To some degree we all feel like this life is a trial, that we are being examined, ***and we need to be vindicated, justified.***

I want to show you two things about justification this morning. *First, the problem of false justification.* *Second, the source of true justification.*

First, the problem of false justification. As in so many of the parables of Jesus in the gospel of Luke, we are once again introduced to two characters. First, we meet a Pharisee. Pharisees were the religious leaders of Jesus’ society. Think pastors, ***but far more influential than any pastor in Oxford is today.***  Today, when journalists want to get expert opinions for some human-condition story (for example, on anxiety, child rearing, sexuality), they ***never*** ask pastors. They ask someone at the university. But in the first century, when the *Jerusalem Daily News* needed a good quote for a story, they called a Pharisee.

Now it is true that in the gospels whenever Jesus tells a story the bad guy is always a Pharisee. Yet that doesn’t mean that Pharisees were all wicked people. Quite the contrary, they were moral and obeyed the rules.

I guarantee you that if you were looking to buy a house in Oxford, and you found two houses that you really liked, you could afford them both, and the only difference was that one house had Pharisees as neighbors on either side, and the other house had a four Ole Miss fraternity guys as next-door neighbors, you’d choose the Pharisee house. The Pharisee would keep his yard cut, he wouldn’t leave beer cans all over the place, and he wouldn’t park his pickup truck on the street.

There are truly good things about the Pharisee in this parable. He tithes; that means he’s generous with his money. He gives not just to the church but to the poor. He’s says he’s not unjust; he doesn’t try to cheat people or take advantage of them. He says he’s not an adulterer; that means his faithful to his wife. He’s a good man, and these are good things.

***But something is off with this Pharisee.*** Look at how he worships at the temple.

*First, in verse 11 we read that he stands by himself.* When he worships, he’s not content to stand with everyone else, and he’s certainly not going to hang in the back. He ***must be*** up front, where he can be seen by everyone and, since he would be the closest person to the Most Holy Place in the temple, where the presence of God dwelled, he would also be the closest to God.

*Second, he prays, but notice how he prays.* Again, in verse 11 he says, “God, I thank you.” That’s an appropriate way to begin a prayer. But how does the rest of it go? ***The Pharisee never mentions God again. He only lists the things that he’s done.*** When you write a thank you note, aren’t you normally thanking someone else for what they’ve done? Yet the Pharisee only talks about himself.

As a minister, I’ve had the privilege of being invited to officiate at a lot of weddings over the years. It’s always an honor to be asked to do a wedding. But I don’t particularly enjoy going to rehearsal dinners, because after the meal the bridesmaids and groomsmen get up and give their toasts and, as a rule, they are pretty terrible.

I know someone who went to a rehearsal dinner years ago and one of the bridesmaids, under the guise of a toast, launched into this monologue. To give a taste of it, she said things like, “Remember that concert where I got to go up and sing on stage? Well, you were there. And you remember that spring break trip when I thought I was totally in love with Matt? You were there. And do you remember my junior year when I was having such a hard time?” She goes into all these details and then she says, “I told you about it.” After about fifteen minutes of this someone at the table leaned over and said, “Is she about to toast herself?”

***The Pharisee, under the guise of a prayer, is toasting himself!*** He’s not saying, “God, I thank you that you’re changing me. Thank you that I’m getting more patient and kind. I thank you that I can love people that I used to not be able to love. I thank you that I’m learning to keep my peace and my joy, even when things go wrong.” There’s none of that. He’s bragging on himself. In fact, it would be perfectly legitimate to translate verse 11, which the ESV has as “The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus,” as “The Pharisee, standing, prayed thus ***to himself.”***

So, what is it that’s off about this Pharisee? *He’s sure he has justified himself.*  He’s certain he’s a good person and his life is going in the right direction. He thinks he’s justified, ***but it’s a false justification because no one can justify themselves.*** That’s the message of the Bible. Paul writes in Romans 3:20, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight …”. ***The only one who can justify is God.***

No matter how much well he memorized the Torah, or how many times he fasted, or how faithfully he tithed, the Pharisee was never going to justify himself. And, friends, even if you graduate at the top of your class or get your dream job or make a killing in real estate, no matter how many elections your party wins, no matter how many triathlons you run or trophy bucks you kill, no matter if your children get into the best college or marry the homecoming queen or the captain of the football team, you’ll never be able to justify yourself.

There is nothing wrong with those things, but if they are what you look to so that you can know you matter and they are your self-worth, if when these things occur they aren’t just blessings to be received from the hand of God but they are your vindication, ***you don’t really have a relationship with God.*** You might go to church, you might even pray, but if those things are your justification, then when you pray, you’re only ***toasting yourself.***

*Second, because the Pharisee thinks he has justified himself, he has judgmental attitude toward others.* In the middle of this “prayer” (so-called) he looks back and sees this tax collector and, he just can’t help it, says, “Of course, God, I’m so much better than this guy.” The Pharisee, confident in his own goodness, looks down his nose at and despises the tax collector.

The problem with false justification is not only that you don’t know God, but you find it incredibly easy to treat other people with contempt (that’s what Jesus says in verse 9). Contempt is “the feeling that a person is beneath your consideration, worthless, deserving scorn.” When you justify yourself, you find your heart produces contempt for others effortlessly.

You might look at someone who has had a hard life and say something spiritual sounding like, “There but for the grace of God go I.” But in your heart, you think, “You loser. What’s wrong with you? Get some self-control. Get a job and pull yourself together.” Self-justifiers treat people they view beneath them with contempt, ***but they absolutely loathe people who are more successful than them because they are filled with jealousy and envy every time they see them.***

Those of the problems with false justification, but that’s not all we see in our text. Second, we see the source of true justification. We are introduced to the second character in the parable: a tax collector (the old King James version calls him a “publican”).

Tax collectors were the lowest of the low in that society. Everyone hated them because they were Jewish men employed by the occupying Roman government to collect taxes from other Jews. Imagine if one day in the future China invaded the U.S., they defeat our military, take over our country, then started employing your neighbors to go door to door and collect taxes to finance the occupying the Chinese army. Would you ever want to invite them over to your house for a meal? We joke about how bad a reputation lawyers and politicians have, and sometimes even preachers, but no profession today is as despised as tax collectors were then.

But this tax collector is a humble man. Where the Pharisee stands by himself, closest to the temple building, the tax collector, we read in verse 13, stands “far off.” He’s as far away from the temple building as you can get and still be on the grounds of the temple complex.

Nor will he look up. In our culture, we look down when we pray. We close our eyes. In that culture, you looked up to heaven, with your eyes open. But the tax collector won’t do that. He’s doesn’t feel fit to get close to the temple nor to even look in the direction of God. He bows his head and beats his breast, signs of grief and mourning.

Why is he so humble? There are two things you need to see about the tax collector to see the source of true justification. *First, he knows himself as “the” sinner.* In verse 13, we read that he says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Now that’s not what the tax collector actually says. He uses the definite article in the Greek. I’m not sure why the translators don’t use it, but literally the tax collector says, “God, be merciful to me, ***the*** sinner.” That’s an important distinction.

I don’t think the tax collector meant that he knew himself to be the only sinner who ever lived. Rather, when the tax collector calls himself “the sinner,” it means that his sins were more grievous to him, more shameful to him, more disgusting to him, than anyone else’s. He is saying, “I know other people are messed up. And I know that in principle some folks out there have done worse things than me. But I am so aware of my flaws and the evil I’ve done that I can’t sit here and dwell on anyone else’ssins.”

Does that describe you? It should. In Matthew 7:3-5 Jesus says, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? **4**Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? **5**You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.”

Your sins, even if objectively they’re smaller than someone else’s sins, ought to look bigger to you that anyone else’s because they’re ***your*** sins. They’re messing ***you*** up.Your sins have your attention. Therefore, you just don’t have the bandwidth to ruminate on the failings of others, how they let you down, and how they’ve hurt you.

To the degree you see that about yourself, you won’t hate other people. You won’t look down your noses at them or treat them with contempt. ***You’ll love them. You’ll extend them grace.*** You’ll long to give them the benefit of the doubt and forgive them. You’ll look for reasons to speak well of them. You’ll say, “All I know is I’ve blown it so many times, who am I to talk bad about other people, freeze them out, refuse to be kind to them?”

Years ago, Donald Miller wrote this. He wrote about a guy he went to church with whom he did not like. He thought this guy was sarcastic and lazy, this guy ate with his mouth open, and began and ended every sentence with the word *dude.* He thought he watched too much TV and wasn’t interested enough in the Lord.

Miller wrote, “I don’t enjoy not liking people, but sometimes these things feel as though you are not in control of them. I never chose not to like this guy. It felt more like the dislike of him chose me … I wanted him to change. I wanted him to read a book, memorize a poem … I didn’t know how to communicate to him that he needed to change, so I displayed it on my face. I rolled my eyes. I gave him dirty looks. I would mouth the word *loser* when he wasn’t looking. I thought somehow he would sense my disapproval and change his life in order to gain my favor. In short, I withheld love.” Is that the kind of thing you have done before? I know I have.

But Miller became convicted that what he was doing was sin and began to repent. He wrote, “God had never withheld love from me to teach me a lesson … After I repented, things were different … I was happy. Before, I had all this negative tension floating around in my gut, all this judgmentalism and pride and loathing of other people. I hated it, and now I was set free. I was free to love … After I decided to let go of judging him, I discovered he was very funny … and he was smart. Quite brilliant, really. I couldn’t believe that I had never seen it before. I felt as though I had lost an enemy and gained a brother. And then he began to change. It didn’t matter to me whether he did or not, but he did … He was a great human being getting even better … I loved the fact that it wasn’t my responsibility to change somebody, [but] that it was God’s, [and] that my part was just to communicate love and [acceptance].”

The first step to true justification is to see yourself as “the” sinner, and a wonderful side effect of that is that you’ll find it increasingly hard to treat people with contempt. Instead you’ll want to love and accept them ***right where they are.***

*Second, and even more important, the tax collector knows where to go for mercy.* Let’s look back at verse 13. The tax collector says, “God, be merciful to me…”.

Tim Keller in his sermon on this text points out that the word translated “merciful” is a rare word in the Bible; it’s a verb that shows up only two times and it literally means “to atone for sin” or “to propitiate.” As Greek is a very vivid language, much more so than English, the words often conjure up powerful images in the minds of the listener to communicate meaning.

The image this Greek word would have produced in the minds of Jesus’ listeners is part of the furnishing of the temple: the mercy seat. This was gold cover that sat on top of the ark of the covenant, which itself sat in the innermost room of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and it was where the God’s *shekinah* glory, his personal presence on earth, dwelled.

Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest of Israel could go into the Most Holy Place and pray in God’s presence, but only after sprinkling the blood of a goat on the mercy seat. The goat was sacrificed earlier in the day, and it died as a substitute for the people to atone for their sins.

Now, the only other place this Greek word is used in the New Testament is Hebrews 2:17, where, talking about Jesus, the author writes, “Therefore he [meaning Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make ***propitiation*** for the sins of the people.” You know what that verse is saying? ***It’s saying that Jesus is the new sacrifice, the true sacrifice, that atones for the sins of his people.*** All those goats slaughtered for a thousand years in Israel were pointing to him.

Friends, the way we receive mercy from God (even though we deserve nothing but judgment) is through Jesus Christ, ***and the good news of Christianity is that because God judged Jesus on the cross, he won’t judge you.*** Yes, you are a sinner. Yes, you should think of yourself as ***the*** sinner. Yes, you’ve done horrible things and have thought of doing even worse. ***But Jesus Christ was sacrificed so you don’t have to be.*** On the cross, a verdict was rendered: Jesus was guilty in your place, he was your substitute, so now you are innocent. More than that, you are justified!

Don’t you see? In Jesus Christ you have received the approval of the only one who matters, God himself, ***and if God approves of you, who cares what anyone else thinks?*** That means you don’t have to live and die by how you do at your job, or at school, or by how you raise your children, or by how much money you make or your appearance or anything else. It means you don’t have to feel better about yourself by treating others with contempt. If you will only cry out to God, “Be merciful to me, the sinner,” then, like the tax collector, you will go down to your house justified.

And if we will only take that gospel deep into our hearts, it will not only bring us peace and freedom from anxiety but also give us a profound ability to love others. Back in the seventies and eighties there was cinema, a one-screen movie/coffee house/café off the Square, right behind where Newk’s is now over on University Drive, called The Hoka. They showed arthouse, independent movies. Some weekends they had concerts. One time they had wrestling. But let’s just say it was not a place where Pharisees hung out. They kind of prided themselves on being a place for the irreligious people in Oxford, the non-churched crowd. The people leaving the churches on the Square did not go there to eat Sunday lunch.

But a real sense of community developed. The people who frequented it loved to hang out there. Several years ago, some folks at Ole Miss produced a documentary on the Hoka and they interviewed Sparky Reardon, longtime Dean of Students and regular at the Hoka. At the end of the documentary he said, “I never remember feeling bad when I was at the Hoka. And if I felt bad, I went to the Hoka, and I felt better.”

When I heard first watched that documentary years ago, I teared up when I got to that part. Now wouldn’t it be wonderful to hear someone say, “I never felt bad at Grace Bible”? “And if I felt bad, I went to Grace Bible and felt better. People have treated me with contempt all my life, but I never felt judged at Grace Bible. I just felt welcomed. And yes, they talked about sin, but it was always their sins they were worried about, not mine. But what really got to me was how they talked about Jesus. I loved how they talked about Jesus: like they knew him, certainly like they loved him but, more than that, ***like they knew he loved them!”*** Wouldn’t that be great?

One last thing: please don’t walk out of here saying, “God, I thank thee that I am not like those Pharisees, those people who don’t understand salvation by grace like I do, those people who are trying to justify themselves. My last church was like that, the people in my hometown were like that, but I’m smarter now and I’ve left all that behind. Thank you, God, that I’m not like them.” Listen: there will always be some amount of self-justifying junk in your life. Do you know where it is? Can you see it? Focus on ***your*** sins, and not someone else’s, then go to Jesus for mercy. There’s an ocean of grace waiting for you; dive in. PRAY