

# Luke 18:9-14

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[ 0 : 00 ] Turn back to Luke chapter 18. That will be a great help for me tonight. We're looking at this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector tonight.

! And broadly the theme of this evening is humility and pride. I wonder how humble are you? How humble are you? As a church, how humble are we? It's a good question, isn't it? But how would we tell? How can we tell how humble or proud we are?

Humility by nature is of course a really hard trait to identify because by nature humility is, well, humble. It's shy, isn't it? You shout too loudly about your humility and you destroy it because you turn it into pride.

But you know humility when you see it in other people. Ten years ago I had the chance to meet and interview one of my musical heroes. He's a composer who has conducted orchestras all around the world, written music that's been premiered at the proms and who's since been knighted by the Queen.

But when I met him, well, he gave me freely of his time, bought me a coffee and offered to drive me to my next appointment. He was humble, was very impressed.

[ 1 : 23 ] And it makes me wonder, well, what about me? Would I do the same thing in his shoes? With his success, would I be like that? See, we learn about our own humility or pride only by looking at the humility of others and being confronted with it.

And so in Luke chapter 18, Jesus asks us to examine our own claims of humility by confronting us with what humility looks like in someone else.

And he also shows us the danger of pride. Yes, danger. For the shock of this little parable is that humility makes the difference between saving faith and false faith.

Between the believer and the unbeliever. That gives us a point to think about, but also another one, because it's not just saving faith that humility is central in.

Here we see as well how important humility is in ongoing faith, which gives us two points, I think, this evening. First, see the dividing power of humility.

[ 2 : 35 ] And then second, see the ongoing need for humility. First then, see the dividing power of humility. Now the context here is all important.

Jesus is addressing the Pharisees in verse 9. And so it's not surprising that the Pharisees is one of the stars of the parable. Verse 10, the Pharisee and the tax collector go up to the temple to pray. And the Pharisee, of course the religious elite, is proud and he boasts to God as he prays. But the tax collector, the sinner in that society, humbly throws himself on the mercy of God.

And of course the shock of the parable is that it's the Pharisee, the religious guy who is rejected. Whereas the sinner is accepted, is justified. And what makes the difference?

It's humility. Humility. This actually is what this whole chapter in Luke is all about. So we have this little parable. But notice what follows it. We have the account of Jesus calling children to come to him.

[ 3 : 46 ] And then following that, the account of the rich ruler who refuses to give up his wealth to follow Christ. All three accounts linked by the theme of humility. The humble tax collector trusting the mercy of God.

The humble children who come to Jesus in faith. And the lack of humility in the rich man who won't humble himself enough to follow Christ. You see, Luke is giving us three pictures of humble faith. Faith that trusts in Jesus. Faith that comes to Jesus. And faith that follows Jesus. Do you hear the message? Jesus is saying that real faith is humble faith.

Real faith is humble faith. And that makes sense when we see the question that comes just before our little parable. Chapter 18 and verse 8. Just look before the Pharisee and the tax collector.

As Jesus says, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? Which of course raises the question, what does real faith in this Son of Man look like?

[ 4 : 49 ] And so through the three accounts that follow, Jesus says that what makes the difference is humility. It is the crucial element of saving faith. The difference between faith that brings you to Christ and so-called faith that actually separates you from him.

See, friends, firstly, we have the dividing power of humility. Let's dig a little bit deeper then into this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

They seem to be divided by their faith, so-called. We have two kinds of faith here, if you like. Let's see, the Pharisee's faith first. This is false faith, which is proud because it relies on good works.

So verses 11 and 12. The Pharisee stands up by himself and prays, God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. Now, actually, we're not to see this prayer straight away as a sort of scandalous thing. This prayer is actually a model of a Jewish prayer.

[ 6 : 00 ] It's a model prayer. God, I thank you was the standard way to open. And this prayer echoes Psalm 26, which we had read. I wonder if you noticed the echoes of that psalm.

Psalm 26, verse 4. The psalmist says, I do not sit with men of falsehood. Verse 5. I hate the assembly of evildoers. It's quite like this Pharisee. Here is an outwardly very godly Jew.

He's keeping the Torah, the law. And actually, he goes beyond it. He doesn't need to tithe on everything he gets. And the law didn't prescribe that he had to fast twice a week.

No, the Torah only prescribes fasting once a year. So we're to see this Pharisee as an outwardly very impressive Jew. But Jesus is making a very subtle point here, isn't he?

That morality with God goes deeper. Obedience to the law goes deeper than just outward and surface. Because we get an insight through his prayer into his heart, don't we?

[ 7 : 03 ] And we see he's not a very nice man. His heart is proud. We can hear his sense of superiority over others. His sense of self-importance. And even before God, his sense of entitlement.

God bless me because I'm so righteous. See, he tries to come close to God in his good works. But verse 14, he ends up far away.

See, false faith is proud because it relies on good works. And it's a shock. It would have been a shock for the Pharisees who were listening.

See, it's possible to have a very moral life. To have a life that looks very godly. But actually to have a heart that is far away from God. Or by contrast, see the tax collector's faith.

And this is real faith. This is humble faith that relies only on the mercy of God. So verse 13, notice the contrast. The tax collector stands far off.

[ 8 : 05 ] He won't even look up to heaven. And he beat his breast. Better in the Greek, he keeps on beating himself. It's a sign of mourning for sin. Of self-awareness.

Of sort of repentance and sinfulness. And he says, God have mercy on me. A sinner. Or it could be, God have mercy on me.

The sinner. Whereas the Pharisee looks at other people. And sees himself as standing a foot taller than them all. The tax collector sees everyone else. And sees himself as the lowest.

Of all sinners. It's a striking thing here, isn't there? That the Pharisee is praying, as it were, before God. But only the tax collector really prays to God.

For the Pharisee, God was like his audience. There to applaud him for his good works. But for the tax collector, God was his only hope. His saviour. And the verb for mercy here in the tax collector's prayer is interesting.

[ 9 : 07 ] It's not the usual New Testament Greek word for mercy. The kind of common garden variety of mercy that people ask for. No, it's the verb that is put in the mouth only once in the Old Testaments.

Of the high priest at the Day of Atonement. And it speaks of kind of ultimate mercy. See, the tax collector is staking his entire eternity on this prayer.

God have mercy on me. A sinner. Well, what was the result? He was justified. He was accepted by God.

Not the Pharisee. And what makes the difference? Do you see? It's humility. Humility. Real faith is humble faith. It relies only on the mercy of God.

We're to learn here that humility is the index of a truly regenerate heart. Heart. It's the sign of the real deal of a Christian. What does humility mean then in the context of faith?

[10:08] It means to realise that you have nothing good to offer God. Nothing good by which you can justify yourself to him. And so you cling to him and his mercy alone.

This evening, do you realise that you have nothing to boast about to God? I think there's a challenge and a comfort here. The challenge is sort of obvious, isn't it?

What kind of faith do you have? What are you relying on to make you right with God? A good question to think about. I think it's an old evangelism explosion question.

If you were to die tonight and God would have said to you, Why should I let you into my heaven? What's your instinct to say? I was baptised. No, not on its own.

I've gone to church all my life. No, it's not enough. I've tried to be really good and godly. No. On their own, they are not enough.

[11:11] And it's frightening that it is possible to look, speak, and even live like a person of faith, but be far from God in your pride. And I wonder if you can tell.

There's a hint here. See, like the Pharisee, it's just interesting that the Pharisee doesn't talk about the character of God. Whereas the tax collector does. The tax collector talks about the mercy of God.

But the Pharisee just talks about his own accomplishments and achievements for God. It's possible, isn't it, to be drawn to reformed Christianity because of its rightness.

And a sense of kind of doctrinal or moral purity. But there's maybe a challenge here that, well, those outward things on their own are not enough.

What kind of things are you relying on tonight? It's only the mercy of God in Christ that justifies us. That is the basis on which we obey God.

[12:13] But maybe some of you need to be comforted tonight by just remembering, actually, that you don't need to rely on your performance. You're conscious tonight, maybe, as you look back on your week, as you look in your heart, that your performance, your obedience has been flagging.

And you lack assurance tonight. You think, am I still all right? Well, remember that it was only ever the mercy of God that justified you. And it's true tonight that that is enough.

Come back in humility tonight to that mercy expressed at the cross. And I wonder, as a church, do we preach the mercy of God?

Is this the foundation of our obedience? See then first the dividing power of humility. But I think there is more here for us.

For in the tax collector, I think we have actually a kind of model believer. So this little moment in the tax collector's life, it's a snapshot of his real faith.

[13:20] We're to see that humility, because it's sort of index of his heart, marks his whole life. And so therefore, secondly, see in the tax collector the ongoing need for humility.

See, it's the truth, isn't it, that we always go on in the Christian life in the same way that we enter it. So humility is not just the crucial factor in saving faith, but it is also the crucial component of ongoing faith and godliness.

And we can learn much about humility here for our Christian lives. Notice that humility starts before God. Humility starts before God. The tax collector is humble in the context of his relationship first with God.

See, Christian, your attitude towards others is determined first by your attitude towards God. If you're proud before him, then you will be proud before others.

But if we start before God in humility, empty and mournful and dependent, well then that will flow out in our relationships with others. I'm most aware of this on the days when I neglect to pray in the mornings.

[14:32] When I neglect that kind of time when my heart gets the chance to kind of bathe in the love of God and be reminded of its true status before God.

When I forget to do that, my relationships with other people in the day are always harder. They're always more bumpy because my heart is more proud. It's more brittle, less soft.

But start the day being humble before God and that will bring a humility to your relationships. It's a good test to ask yourself tonight, how is your prayer life with God?

Do you start your humility before him? Is God your audience like the Pharisee? There to applaud you for your righteous life?

Or is God your only hope? It's just so good, isn't it, to be together in worship tonight because that's what worship does. Worship humbles us communally before God, corporately.

[15:32] That means that we go into the week more humble. Humility starts before God. Notice too that humility grows through an awareness of sin. So the tax collector was humble because he realised and he felt his sin.

And crucially, he feels it before God rather than before others. It's another truth of the Christian life, isn't it? That the longer you go on as a Christian, in a sense, the worse you feel because the more you are aware of your sin, the more you see that you're capable of.

I wonder tonight if you do see clearly your own sinfulness. And if you've lost that humility before God, well then you won't feel your sin so strongly.

See, it's all about perspective. I used to live up in the Peak District and loved it up there. I was often amazed by the beauty of the hills. They're so big, I used to think.

But one summer a few years ago, I went walking for the first time in Scotland where they've got really big mountains, about twice the size of anything in the Peak District. And I remember getting the train back from Scotland and going through Edale in the peaks and looking out the window and thinking, those aren't hills.

[16:47] Those aren't mountains. No, Scotland has the big hills. See, my vision, my perspective had changed. That's what we must do with God. We must keep, if you like, the big mountain of the holiness of God in view so that we won't think that our small efforts are anything to be proud of.

Live close to God and you will be aware of your sinfulness. It's another good question, isn't it? When you sin, how do you feel? Do you worry more about your own reputation or do you tremble at the judgment of God?

Humility grows through an awareness of sin. And lastly, we see that humility is reflected in how we treat others. So it's striking in the Pharisees' prayer that it was his contempt for those around him that really displayed his pride.

We're not very good at knowing the extent or not of our humility, but others are always better placed to judge whether we are humble. How pushy are we in our relationships?

How keen are we to get our own way? How good are we at giving others the spotlight? How good are we at serving? As a church, how good are we at serving others?

[18:09] It's a good test. How do we see other people? Do we look down on them because we think we're right? Or do we look up in humility? These kinds of questions will reveal the state of our hearts this evening.

Which leaves us with a final question, doesn't it? How can we grow in humility? How can we grow in our humility? Humility is a beautiful thing.

It's a beautiful thing. How do we grow in it? I mean, we think of ourselves too much, don't we? If you've ever done this, just think of your mind in neutral in the day and how, like a compass needle going to north, we just naturally think of ourselves.

You know, I am the center of my own thoughts without even trying. I justify myself constantly and I'm always thinking about myself. It's what we're like.

We are sinful. So how do we grow in humility? Humility. Well, I think there is a final example of humility here in Luke chapter 18. See, look just over the page at verses 31 to 33.

[19:20] The structure of this chapter is interesting. We have these three accounts that seem to be linked by humility. And then in verse 31, Jesus takes the 12 disciples aside and tells them that he's about to go to Jerusalem to die and rise.

See, there is another example, the ultimate example of humility as Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. See, I think there's a point here, isn't there, that we grow in humility first by looking at Jesus and his acts of humility as he goes to the cross for proud sinners like us.

See, the power for our own humility comes directly from Christ himself. See, the order in the parable is humility and then exaltation.

And that's because it mirrors Jesus' own obedience as he dies and then rises, as the cross is the route to the resurrection. And Christian, you follow him tonight.

The pattern of our lives is the same. It is glory through the cross or exaltation through humility. We follow a humble saviour whose humility looked like suffering, which is why actually God often brings suffering into our lives precisely to humble us.

[ 20 : 43 ] It is perhaps the chief means by which he humbles us. We grow in humility as we share, as Peter puts it, in the sufferings of Christ in multiple different ways.

And maybe tonight you're struggling because you're just not quite sure what God is up to in your life. Well, maybe God's design is to humble you. And so the way to respond tonight to him is to draw near the saviour, draw near Christ in your suffering, in your struggle.

And ask him to shine his resurrection life through your brokenness. And as a church, I wonder, are we prepared to follow Christ in obedience, in his death?

See, the way of humility may be the way of suffering and sacrifice. Sacrificing as a church perhaps our reputation, our gifts for him.

Because that is the way to glory. Humility, then, I started by saying, is a hard trait for us to identify, a hard trait to talk about.

[ 21 : 52 ] And it's right that it is. It's in the nature of humility that, of course, we cannot boast about it. Our humility as a church and as individuals is not another feather in our cap before God.

Rather, it is the natural response to grasping, as Schaeffer put it, the finished work of Christ for us. And so tonight we rest in him and we rest in that cross.

Let's pray together. Let's pray together. Let's pray together.