

Luke 18:9-14

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 April 2014

Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 00] And do turn with me to Luke 18. Luke 18, 9-14, from page 877 in the Church Bible. Luke 18. And again, it's a very, very familiar passage, isn't it? And people love the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. And I don't know whether you've ever heard a preacher try and retell the story in modern garb. You know, the parable of the good viker, or the parable of the good.

And I tried to do that this week. I just thought it was slightly twee and slightly embarrassing. And whenever you hear a preacher try and do that, I never think it really works. And the reason for that is because in verse 10, we have lost the shock, haven't we, of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We've lost the shock of it. If you know your Bible a little bit, if you've been in church and all, you would know that the Pharisees have always got it in for Jesus, haven't they? They've always got it in. They are the bad guys of the New Testament.

They wear black hats and they've got stubble. They shoot people in the back. You can't trust them. While the tax collectors, they are the sort of bad made good, aren't they? The bad lot made good. They are the tax collectors, the publicans, the New Testament heart warmers, aren't they? They would appear, wouldn't they, in Disney films, where everything works out in the end. There's Matthew, the bad guy, who ends up being one of Jesus' twelve first followers.

There's the vertically challenged Zacchaeus, who we'll see in the next life, who makes good after his life of dodgy dealing. But for the audience of Jesus, who first heard this story, he couldn't have chosen the most shocking contrast. You see, and you probably know that the Pharisees were not just the respected leaders of the day, they were the Bible people of the day.

They were the conservative, reformed evangelicals of the day, in lots of ways. They were the group that was most keen to stick to what God had said in his word. They were like the upstanding vicar or pastor, the Bible-centred man, who wanted to see his flock develop high moral standards.

[2 : 24] In the face of the world that was rejecting God. And the tax collectors, well they were the equivalent, it's so hard to put it, isn't it? They were the equivalent of what? The 7-7 bombers? The 9-11 bombers? They were traitors to their own people. They'd actually aligned themselves, not with their own country, but with a foreign superpower, Rome. And they'd made their money, they made their wealth by ripping off their own. They were universally hated. And you see, Jesus could not have chosen a less likely candidate for friendship with God. Because that is where the story ends. That is the line that causes the intake of breath from the people around Jesus.

Look at verse 14. I tell you, 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. The tax collector goes home justified, and to be justified is to be declared innocent. It's a term that is taken from the law courts. It is not just to be acquitted.

It is not just to say, well you never committed the crime. To be justified is to say that God is going to treat the tax collector as if he'd led a perfect life. As if he'd done nothing wrong. As if he fulfilled every obligation to the law. Now I expect Jesus' listeners like you. They might have been able to cope with that. The God of mercy. The forgiving God.

Well isn't that what God is supposed to do? God forgives the repentant sinner. Well that is exactly what you'd expect. But what they wouldn't have expected are the four words in the middle of that sentence. You see, that is the real shock. Rather than the other. That is the shock.

Rather than the other. The Pharisee for all his religious deeds, for all his good life, goes home guilty. Before God. And he goes home not justified, but condemned. So let's look at the attitude of these two men. And the first thing is this. Don't be self-confident. Don't be self-confident. And that was the problem of the group of people Jesus was addressing.

[4 : 53] Wasn't he? Look at verse 9. He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves. that they were righteous. He told this parable to some who were self-confident that they were

righteous. And they looked down on other people. And the people that he told this parable to were in no doubt that they were righteous. That they were in the right. And that is that they were good enough to have a right relationship with God. In fact, they were so pleased with their own goodness. That they felt free to make judgments about others. Others who weren't quite up to their standards. So you know, they'd say the kind of thing that I don't know what the world is coming to today. Look at the number of people who just don't save. Look at the number of people who've just got loads of credit cards and huge debt. Look at the people who are just so irresponsible. Look at the kind of people that go to the bookies early in the morning. And they're there. But this is actually a parable about church, isn't it? It's a place where these people would have felt that they were on very, very safe ground. Look at verse 10. Two men went up to the temple to the place of worship to pray. One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee was a respectable pillar of the middle classes. And this Pharisee is one of the best. He is not like those evildoers that he reads about in his Jewish newspaper.

You see, that is his first mistake, isn't it? He trusts in his relative goodness. Because when the Pharisee compares himself to the people around him, well, he's quite confident, isn't he? He's confident that he's better than them. He's certainly better than the tax collector that he catches the eye of over there. So we watch our news, we read it on the internet, and we see the murderer or the paedophile or the crazed maniac in wherever it is. And we thank God, don't we, that we're not like them. Basically, we do operate as if there were two types of people in the world, the good people and the bad people. And when push comes to shove, we are pretty sure that we're in the good person category. Okay, we get things wrong, we make mistakes. But we're certainly not in the evil person category. But that is the wrong comparison, isn't it? We may be relatively good. You may be relatively good compared to the other children in school. You may be relatively good compared to the people in your work. I'm sure that this Pharisee had done many, many virtuous things. In fact, you've got to give him credit, haven't you? Look at verse 11. Those are good things. He's not an extortioner.

He doesn't rip people off. He is not unjust, which means he is just. He's not an adulterer. You've got to believe him. Those are good things. This Pharisee had done many virtuous things. But the issue is this. We are not relatively good compared to God's standards, are we? Because God's standards are perfect. His standards level the playing field for humanity wherever you are from, however old you are. If you want to look at what God's standards are like, well you've got to look primarily at the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will not find, will you? You will not find a more beautiful character than the person of the Lord Jesus.

The Apostle Peter spent three years hanging out with Jesus, didn't he? He saw everything that Jesus did. He heard everything that Jesus said, and he could still say in 1 Peter 2 verse 22 of Jesus, he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. Could someone say that of you? You wouldn't have to hang around with me more than three hours to not be able to say that. He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. You've got to make the right comparisons this morning. If we are to have a realistic picture of ourselves, and when we compare ourselves to Jesus Christ and his character, we suddenly see how far short we've fallen, haven't we? Because Jesus was always patient. And Jesus was always kind. And

[9 : 35] Jesus never got it. I mean, do I need to go on? That when we compare ourselves to Jesus, we see our relative goodness is worth nothing at all, is it? Because we know that Jesus set the standard of humanity. But when he was asked, what is the greatest commandment of all? He said, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind, and all your strength. And he did that. Above all else, use everything you have, use it to love God. And then all you've got to do is to treat your neighbour as yourself. Love your neighbour as yourself. You see, relatively good is not good at all. But the Pharisee has got another string to his bow, he's got a religious ritual. It's not just that he's better than other people. No, he's got religious duty down to a T. And actually, he's going over and above.

What he has to do, look at verse 12, I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. The Old Testament requirement was for fasting once on the annual day of atonement. It's remarkable, isn't it? One day a year. That was the requirement for fasting on the annual day of atonement, once a year. But this guy fasts twice a week. And although giving a tenth of his earnings was a requirement, this man gives a tenth of all that he gets.

So he's given ten pairs of socks for Christmas. He gives one pair of socks to the Lord. He's given ten potatoes. He gives one potato to the Lord. He buys his mint. He chops it up on his dill and he gives ten percent to the Lord. Maybe he's finding his food. Lord, I'm doing much more than you ask. I'm not just here on Sunday morning. I'm there on Sunday night.

I'm not just there on Sunday night. I'm at a house group. I'm not there just at a house group. I'm at prayer meeting. And I am serving in so many ways that you don't know about.

[11:46] I read that Japanese job hunters, we can check with those from Japan later, Japanese job hunters have to go to even greater lengths to improve their employability these days.

So applicants for the post of trader at image.net, do you know that company image.net, were ordered to climb a mountain, as the initial interview, literally to meet their potential employees, employers. The 24 hopefuls were told that they had to climb Mount Fuji, which at 12,388 feet is the highest mountain in Japan. Only 11 of them made it to the top.

The rest of them were defeated by exhaustion and altitude sickness. But so many people think, don't they, that is what God requires of us. That getting right with him is about religious effort. That God sits on top of his mountain. And what he says is putting massive effort to get to me. Put massive effort into your church going. Put massive effort into your praying, into your giving your money. And if we do that, well then we'll make it through the interview.

We face when we die. And so many people say to me, I'm just not a good enough Christian. I'm just not a good Christian. And that shows us, doesn't it, they're trusting in their efforts.

I've got to try to make it up that mountain. Try a bit harder. I used to find that, I didn't used to like people, to tell people that I worked for a church, that I was a minister. With non-Christians, you know, there's some that say, isn't it, oh I work for a carpenter.

[13:30] All that sort of nonsense. But now actually I've changed my mind. So now as soon as I possibly can, I introduce the subject. People say, what are you? I say, well I'm a minister. Or I'm a preacher. Do you know what people say occasionally? They say, oh you make me feel guilty. I'd only said that I'm a minister. A person said, oh I can remember, you make me feel guilty. I haven't been to church for ages, she said. Perhaps I should go and make a confession.

Do you do that? At that point I said no. I said no. That's what people think God wants, don't they? They think God wants that. Please come to my club. Please come to my special rituals and then I will be pleased with you. And this is a danger that we have to daily avoid. The danger of feeling secure in our relationship with God because of my efforts. Because of what I've done. So I've read my Bible and I've said my prayers today so I'm rocking and rolling with Jesus. On the other side of it, I haven't read my Bible or said my prayers today so Jesus doesn't love me anymore. I always look at the church twice on a Sunday so many people don't. It's such a privilege to give to the Lord's work secretly. Do you see, it's the very nature of us. It's endemic in the human heart to place our confidence in the things that we do. And in the end, whether it's our relative goodness or it's our religious ritual, when it comes to my relationship with God, self-confidence is always misplaced. So do you see the repeated word in the Pharisees' prayer in verse 11 and 12? Do you see it? The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed this. God, I thank you, but I am not like other men.

Extortioners and just adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week.

I give tithes of all that I get. It's a bit of confusion by, not confusion, but the literal words in verse 11, standing by himself, prayed thus, prayed to himself, prayed about himself, standing by himself, can be interpreted in all those ways. God, I thank you that I, I, I, I, I, I. And that is where the Pharisee trusts. And when it comes to a relationship with God, I've been good enough and I've been to church enough. And that is why Jesus' verdict on this man, the man that you would have thought was the one in a relationship with God, if you saw him walking down the street, Jesus says, you are guilty. You are guilty, not justified.

And so let me speak to the children. It's lovely to have the children. We love having children in church. I think it's one thing to remember, we are no better children. We are no better because we are in church this morning. We are no better than our friends in school. And to think, well, they're so much better than the naughty kids in my class. And there will be very naughty kids in your class, won't they? But you are not. And do you know what?

[16:55] In schools, very often we are taught, we have to be confident in ourselves. And there's a part of that is right, but you need to talk to your mum and dad when you get home about why, according to the Bible, we must never be self-confident in our relationship with God.

Will you do that? Will you talk about that with your mums and dads? Why is self-confidence with God never wrong? Secondly, this parable tells us, do not be self-confident, do be sin-conscious. Look at verse 13. Here's the contrast. Verse 13 is the contrast.

But the tax collector, slamming far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Here, says Jesus, is the opposite attitude. Here is somebody who's got no confidence in himself before God in himself. And you can see that, can't you? You can see that in the verse, he stands at the back of the temple, he's too ashamed to go in, to go further in. He can't even raise his head. He cries out, he beats his breast in anguish, God have mercy on me, a sinner. The way he has lived actually causes him physical pain. Velma Barfield was convicted of poisoning four people, including her own mother. In 1996, she was executed by lethal injection in North Carolina. Shortly before she died, she wrote this.

I want to make it clear, I am not blaming drugs for my crimes. I am not blaming my troubled childhood or my marriage problems. I bear the responsibility for the wrongs I have done.

I know those things influence me, but they are my sins and my crimes. And that is the attitude of the tax collector. He knows there are lots of circumstances. He knows there are lots of things in his life which haven't been for him. He's had a difficult life, and yet he knows he's ignored God. And he knows he's broken God's law. And he comes before God humbly, and he cries out for rescue. And so he says, God have mercy upon me. Literally it means, turn aside your anger from me. The tax collector knows he deserves God's righteous anger, and he cries to him for mercy. And the Bible says that is the state of everyone who has ever lived.

[19:20] Paul picks up those words of the psalmist, that's in Romans 3. He quotes Psalm 14 and Psalm 53. And he says, there is no one who is righteous. No one who is righteous. So think about that.

Either God is lying this morning, or every single one of us in this room is a sinner today. There is no one who is righteous. I expect you've not committed murder. But you look back at your life, and you look back, and it will show that there are things that you regret. There are moments, aren't there, in your life and in mine, that we would rather forget. And we all know, or we should all know, that we stand guilty before a perfect God. If you rewound the last 24 hours of my life, I would not let you watch it while I was in your presence.

And I expect if you rewound through the last week, or the last month, or the last year, you would not want me to watch it. And if we are ashamed before each other, how much more should we all be ashamed before God? We can all cry, God have mercy on me a sinner.

And it's the conclusion to the story that packs the real punch. The people listening to Jesus would have expected the proud Pharisee to be better off in God's eyes. They might have thought God will have mercy on the tax collector, but Jesus doesn't tell them that both men lived happily ever after. There is only one man who goes home right with God.

Do you remember from verse 14? I tell you that this man, the tax collector, rather than the other, went home justified before God. You see, he is there with his head bowed. And as he prays, God acquits him of all that he's done. I love that. I love that. There is a school of thought that I could bore you on for the next half an hour about justification for your future. I think this is the passage that actually batters it. Look at it. I tell you that this man went down to his house justified. There and then, at that moment, justified before God. No further requirements. No further requirements after that initial cry for mercy. Isn't that wonderful? He's justified, not pardoned. He's not pardoned with his criminal record for future reference. That's how we deal with each other, isn't it? I say, I'm sorry. You say, it's okay. I forgive you. I do it again in six weeks. You say, well, you did it. You did it before.

[22:07] Now, justified, the slate wiped clean forever. Now, do you think Velma Barfield could be forgiven by God? That is a real test, isn't it? It's a real test of whether you've realised how guilty you are this morning. And how great God's grace is. Do you think Velma Barfield could be forgiven by God after poisoning four people, including her own mother? Well, shortly after her arrest, she became a committed Christian. Her sins, she firmly believed, were completely forgiven by God. She believed that Jesus has died at the cross to take them. And all that was left for her was to pay society's ultimate price. The warden of her prison said that on the night of her execution, she was the happiest, most radiant human being I have ever met. You see, Velma Barfield was convinced she was justified that God would treat her as innocent. Do you believe that a woman who murdered her own mother can go to heaven? Because in the end, verse 14, Jesus winds in the application,

doesn't he? Verse 14, he says, for everyone, everyone, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

You see, this isn't a parable for two types of people in first century Palestine. It is for all people for all time. And it is about the simplicity of the salvation that God offers.

And it is shattering. To come to be justified, to come to be declared right by God, there is no complicated checklist of do's and don'ts before God can accept you. We are not told quite deliberately what the tax collector does next. We are not told whether he joins a good local synagogue.

We are not told whether he joins a follow-up group. We are not told whether he has a firm grasp of the truth of the gospel. We're not told that. We are just told that he throws himself on God's mercy. For those of us who are here this morning, and we are not Christians, and if you are not a Christian here this morning, if you don't think that you are trusting in Jesus, you've got to understand this.

[24 : 36] You've got to understand that I and we are not trying to sell you some self-help course. We're not. We are not even encouraging you to become a member of our club. We are not trying to get you to be a better person.

We don't want you to become more religious. We are trying to tell you that there is a God who loves you so much, who is merciful, that if you were willing to admit that you've messed up your life, and that you deserve his punishment, he will treat you as though you are innocent.

And he will give you a relationship with him through his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, by his Holy Spirit. And that starts now, and that stretches through death into eternity in paradise.

And that is what Christianity is all about. And you see, they're not cheap words, are they? They are not cheap words from Jesus in Luke 18. Because we know, where is Jesus going? Where is Jesus marching to?

From Luke 9, he's been marching to Jerusalem. And towards a Roman cross. So look at the words he's going to say to his disciples later on in the chapter.

[25 : 44] Look at verse 31. Taking the twelve aside of Luke 18, 31, he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. Well, what is that? For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles, he will be mocked, and shamefully treated, and spat upon.

And after flogging him, they will kill him. And on the third day he will rise. And it will be fulfilled. Why? Because it's God's plan. It's always been God's plan.

It's always been God's plan from all eternity that his Son should die in our place. It is at the cross that Jesus makes it possible for you to know God's mercy.

We sang it earlier, Jesus disarms the wrath of God. It is at the cross he takes his perfect, innocent life and he dies in our place.

He takes upon himself all of our guilt and the punishment that it deserves. So Jesus can, just so that God can justify us. That God can declare us innocent.

[26 : 47] And that is what God is offering you here today. If you don't know the Lord Jesus, mercy, love, forgiveness at the cross of his dear Son. And for those of us who are Christians, who do follow Jesus, we must remember there is nothing.

There is nothing about you and there is nothing about me that deserves a relationship with God and a home in heaven. There is nothing about you or nothing about me that makes us better than the drug addict or the thief or the murderer.

One commentator says there are only actually two places to look in the Christian life. There are only two places to look in the Christian life. Your feet and the cross.

Your feet and the cross. And that is what you've got to do today. You look at your feet because you're ashamed. You look at your feet because you're ashamed.

But make sure that you look to the cross. And see that you're forgiven. It's so easy, isn't it, to look down on others. It happens to us so quickly.

[28 : 01] That when we start to follow Jesus, we find ourselves talking about the problems of the world as if they've got nothing to do with us. And there are problems out there and the problems about standards being lowered as though we've never broken them ourselves.

To think that there are people beyond the gospel and there's no point in helping them. And they would just be a waste of space in Christian service. So what's the point? And we must remember, mustn't we?

We must remember that we have only been saved because God is merciful. That we have been shown mercy when we did not deserve it. And so what is the answer for us as Christians? What should the Pharisee and the tax collector teach us? Well it should teach us that we should be people who will welcome anybody in the name of Jesus. Because God does. And we should be people who will tell everyone about the love of Jesus.

And we should be a church ready to admit that we need God's mercy. As much as anybody else. I want to close by two of the greatest statements that you will ever read.

[29 : 06] So pick up the white sheet in the middle which says more on justification. And I printed this out because I think there's lots. And it's been a great help to me in studying this doctrine over the years.

And we're going to read the Westminster Shorter Catechism. Which is the one on the front page. We'll read that. And then I want us to read the Heidelberg Catechism together.

But just read through those words. What is justification? Just read through those words. So it's Westminster Shorter Catechism.

Question 33. What is justification? Let's read the answer. Justification. Together. We'll read together. Alright. You haven't got it. Well some of you haven't got it.

Oh well. I'll read it for you. And then those of you, it should be at the back. Very sorry. Well let me listen. You've got to listen to this. It's great stuff. What is justification?

[30 : 08] Justification is the act of God's free grace. By which he pardons all our sins. And accepts us as righteous in his sight.

He does so only because he counts the righteousness of Christ as ours. Justification is received by faith alone. And let me read to you from the Heidelberg Catechism.

How are you righteous before God? Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments.

I've never kept any of them. And I'm still inclined to all evil. Yet God without any merit of my own. Out of mere grace.

Imputes to me the perfect satisfaction. Righteousness. And holiness of Christ. He grants these to me. As if I had never had nor committed any sin.

[31 : 11] And as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me. If only I accept this gift. With a believing heart. I tell you that 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. Let's pray. Let's pray.