

Luke 18:9-17

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[0 : 00] Do turn up Luke 18 that was read earlier, page 877.! Luke 18 verse 14, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

! Humility. Humility could be the king holding a door for a servant. We would think that was a very humble thing for them to do. Humility could be when someone unwittingly asks the CEO, you know, could you take this for me, take my coat?

And the CEO just quietly takes it and goes and hangs it up. We would think that that was very humble. They say nothing, they just go and do it. They're treated like a servant and that's okay. But another kind of humility is much more difficult. It is the humility that is required for us to be completely transparent, completely open, vulnerable.

It's the humility to be real. Now wherever you look these days, there's someone talking about the need for these characteristics.

[1 : 21] Transparency, openness, vulnerability, being real with people. It's especially the case among men. There's more of that chat now than ever.

Because men often don't feel able to be open about their emotions. And so we bury them. We're not vulnerable and we're not real. And so we bury our emotions.

But we can only do that until, we can only do that for so long, then they become unbearable. The biggest killer among men in the 20 to 45 age bracket is suicide for this reason.

We can't actually be vulnerable, open, transparent and real. But whether you're a man or a woman, we all find this kind of openness difficult.

It's alien to us. So with other people, even those closest to us, we pretend. We use humor rather than going deep.

[2 : 21] We talk a lot. We put up defenses so that they can't get too close. We say we want close relationships. We say we want vulnerability and reality in the way that we interact with others.

But we put up our defenses and we keep people at a distance. It's also true with God. We say that we know that he knows everything.

He knows us inside out. But we pretend. We pray the words that we think he wants to hear. We use language with him that we think sounds right and holy.

But we don't talk about how cross we are with his providence in our lives. How frustrated we feel about the circumstances that he has placed us in. We say that we know that he's in control of everything.

We say that he knows us inside out. And yet when we come to pray, we don't express any of the frustration that we feel because of where we are.

[3 : 24] It's a strange thing, isn't it, when you think about it? Because he knows our hearts inside out. And yet we say these things that aren't really true about how we feel.

Of course, we can read lots and lots of books about God rather than spend time with him. We overwork to keep him at a distance. We overconsume. We feel sorry for ourselves.

And all of these things, we do them in order to keep the beauty and the reality and the presence of God out of our awareness. Because if we can do that, we can keep God at arm's length and we can stay in control of things.

Well, at the start of this new year, we are thinking about what it looks like to belong to God's kingdom. What our posture should be as those who belong to Christ. Especially when we face opposition for the fact that we belong to him.

We name the name of Christ. That is difficult. We're opposed for that. How should we live? And last week, we saw that this will involve not getting distracted from living faithfully. And recognizing the great privilege that we have to live in close communion with God.

[4 : 32] And as we follow on from what we saw last week in this next section of Luke 18, we see the spirit in which this communion with God is to be pursued. And that is in a humility that is fully open and completely dependent.

Fully open and completely dependent. Two points this morning. The first is this. I want us to see, first of all, the humility of openness. The humility of openness.

Verse 9 to 14. And Jesus uses a parable. He did that before. And he does so in response to a problem. It's a problem that's made clear in verse 9. Some of the Pharisees, can you see, trusted in themselves that they were righteous and they treated others with contempt.

So there's no openness. There's no openness to other people. They are treated with contempt. And there's no openness to God. God is surplus to requirements because, well, these people have obtained their own righteousness.

They don't need God for anything, so they don't need to be open to him. So Jesus tells this parable to shake those who think this way out of their delusion and to awaken them to a better way, a more mature way, a more human way of relating to God, and I suppose by extension to others.

[5 : 50] Focus here, though, is in how they relate to God. Jesus describes two people. A Pharisee, an upstanding religious figure at the top of society, and a tax collector, a figure who is chosen in the parable specifically because tax collectors were held in such contempt by absolutely everybody.

Here is the picture of respectability and the picture of complete revulsion. One is a religious insider and the other a total outsider to the things of God.

And Jesus takes us to the temple, verse 10, you see. And doing that isn't a coincidence. It is the place, the temple is the place where God is most present in the context of the story.

And it is the place where mankind, the people who go to the temple, should be most honest and most open. If you think about it, what do you do in going to the temple?

You're going there to bring your sin into the light before God and have it forgiven, have it atoned for, dealt with. So it's the place where God is present and where people should be the most honest and the most open.

[7 : 01] And here we are, these two men are at the temple. But despite the setting, despite the presence of God, only one of them is really open. Only one of them is truly humble.

And it isn't the one we expect. If you're familiar with the story, you know how it goes. We expect the religious one to come out on the right side. We expect the tax collector not.

But look, verse 14, only one goes home justified. Only one, that is, is in the right with God. And it is the apparent outsider. Which means the one who appears to be the insider is the one who is actually lost.

And the goal of the parable is that we would examine ourselves. That we would hear this and we would examine ourselves in light of these men's prayers. And choose to reject the way of the Pharisee and to embrace the way of the tax collector.

So let's listen in and compare the two. The Pharisee, verse 11, 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.

[8 : 11] I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. 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. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. I want to highlight a contrast between these men in four areas.

The first is their view of self. Their view of self. The Pharisee talks a lot about himself. Did you notice that? There are five mentions of the first person, I, in the prayer.

It is a prayer of self-trust and self-confidence. Indeed, verse 11, when we're told that the Pharisee standing by himself prayed thus. The word translated by there is ambiguous.

It can be translated about or to or by. Now, I think that ambiguity is deliberate because it communicates the self-centered nature of the prayer. It is a prayer that is to himself, about himself, with himself.

[9 : 13] I, I thank you that I am not like, and so on. He's the subject of the verbs. He is self-righteous. He doesn't ask God for anything because he doesn't need to.

He is self-congratulatory. He is very impressed with the kind of person he is. And he is self-justifying. He outperforms everyone else. I'll say more on that in a moment. The tax collector, by contrast, has let himself go.

God, be merciful to me. God is the subject of the verb. And he is the one who is in need. He has no claim to righteousness, no desire for self-defense or promotion.

Rather, he is self-surrendered and completely honest about himself. That's their view of self. The second contrast is in their use of words.

Now, in the original, the Pharisee speaks here about 30 words. The tax collector, just six. Now, why is that relevant? Well, because we know that very often talking is how we stay away from being really present with God or other people.

[10:22] One author has said this, For many people, life is talk, talk, talk, narrate, explain, discuss, and analyze. And if words won't come then, rather than face the possibility that silence will bring me into attention of the present, they fill things up with filler words and noises.

You know, like, just, sort of, um, uh, end quote.

Words are often a way that we avoid openness, both with others and with God. Don't forget, Jesus himself told us that we don't need to use lots of words when we talk to God.

That's how unbelievers behave, Matthew 6, because they think that all their words will impress him. It may be, actually, that lengthy prayers are empty because in all our talking we're keeping God at a distance.

The tax collector uses six honest words that open his heart to God and God's heart to him. Their use of words.

[11:30] Thirdly, I want to contrast their appeal to performance. The way they appeal to performance. The Pharisee, he has all his bases covered, do you see? When it comes to morality, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

Then his piety. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. When this Pharisee looks in the mirror each morning, he can give himself a wink and a nod of approval and he can say, you, sir, are winning.

This man, this pillar of society, thinks all of his moral effort and his religious devotion are the means of his appeal to God. He has performed.

He has done what it takes. The tax collector, total opposite, do you see? He says, I'm done for. I am completely stuck.

I am helpless, without hope. Apart from your grace, God, I'm nothing. He makes no appeal to himself. He makes no excuses. He is honest. He's unfiltered.

[12:46] And he is fully open before God. Now just to say, part of the Pharisee's problem here is a superficial understanding of sin. He thinks that because he does the right things and stays away from the wrong things that he's good enough for God.

But the problem with that attitude is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of sin. Sin runs much deeper than mere external behavior. It's obviously seen externally.

Extortion, injustice, adultery, those are sinful things. But those things flow from a deeper source. They flow from an internal problem. Sin goes to the very core of our being. Sin goes to the heart. And that heart is self-centered rather than turned towards God. And that is why a message of be nice to people and say your prayers won't ever work.

I've been finding myself in conversations a lot recently with people who think that the world is divided into good people and bad people. And they think that if you can just be a good person and not a bad person, well then everything would be fine.

[13:54] If people could just get on board with the goodness project, well then the world would be a better place. I was with someone after New Year who said to me, they said, we don't do commandments in our family, but here are my rules for life.

And he took down a stone, mark you, a stone from the shelf on which he had written the five rules that his family were to live by.

And it was the usual stuff, treat others well, be kind, etc. No, I'm really pro treating other people well and being kind and all that kind of thing. But it's never going to be enough.

It's a fantasy because, well for a start, define good, define kind, define what it means to be generous without a fixed standard of goodness and generosity.

And the bottom line is that the reality of our hearts is that they're always pushing us away from those things. They're always pushing us in another direction.

[14:55] However hard we try to be kind, our hearts always drive us back to ourselves, like the Pharisee in the parable.

And that takes us then to the fourth area where I want to contrast these men. So their appeal to performance is contrasted. And then comparison, the way they think about comparison. Remember Jesus' audience here. Look up at verse 9. Those who treated others with contempt. Those who looked down on other people. Think they're better than them. And then the Pharisee thanks God that he is not like other men.

You see, when sin is only about external behavior, you look at the behavior of others and you measure yourself in respect to them. And when your behavior is more respectable than theirs, well then you're a good person.

And so you can feel superior, like the Pharisee here. But when it doesn't quite measure up, well then you're a bad person and you feel inferior. The truth is, when you keep sin at an external level, whether you're performing or you're not performing is neither here nor there.

[16:08] Because in both cases you feel contempt for other people. So either you're succeeding and they're beneath you so you can look down on them. Or you're not succeeding and they're better than you so you're jealous.

And you treat them with contempt for that reason. That's what the Pharisee can do. He's outperforming the tax collector. He looks over at him and he feels very superior.

Gives himself a wink in the mirror and everything's fine. Because he operates by comparison without any regard for the condition of his heart. Look at the tax collector. He stands at a distance. His head is bowed, verse 13. He doesn't actually see anyone else. And because he knows himself to be a sinner, he doesn't appeal to God on the basis that he is better than anyone else.

He simply knows his need of God's mercy. And by the way, his appeal actually is really important.

[17:09] The word for mercy here means make atonement. And remember where these men are. They're at the temple. Where the ark of the covenant rests. Where the mercy seat is.

Where the blood of the lamb is sprinkled to atone for sin. So the tax collector isn't saying, God, I'm so ashamed I'm a really terrible sinner. Please let me off because that's what you do.

He's saying, Oh God, make atonement for my sin. Which is the very thing. The same Jesus who speaks the parable is on his way to do on a cross in Jerusalem.

That is the journey that Jesus is on as he tells this parable. The Pharisee is self-centered. He talks too much.

He appeals to his performance. And he compares himself to others. He is the embodiment of unreality. And as a result, he is lost. The tax collector is humble, open, submitted to Christ.

[18:19] And so he is real. And it is that submission that I want to suggest is key in all of this. You see, it would be easy to go through that list and say, Don't be like the Pharisee.

Don't be like the Pharisee. Don't be like the Pharisee. But if we're honest, if we're honest with ourselves, the qualities that he displays here come much easier to us than humility.

Putting on a front is much easier than being open. But it's only easier until the pressure becomes too much. The parable is showing us that this openness is actually possible.

You see, I suspect some of us here are thinking, Well, you're telling us to be vulnerable and open and real and kind of connected, as it were, with our emotions. I'm not that kind of person.

But that's another way of saying, I'm afraid to be this open and this vulnerable. Because it means giving up control. It means dropping our defenses. And I've spent a lifetime cultivating these defenses.

[19:24] See, none of us are naturally this kind of person. That's the point. That's the whole point. And so it's important that we know that we can be humble and we can be open in a tax collector-like way.

You see, we don't need to fear openness. Because in surrender to Jesus, we are giving ourselves to one who loves us and who gave his life for us and who will never leave us or forsake us.

And in that, there is real freedom. If you think about it, openness with someone who is going to hurt you. You don't want that. Vulnerability with someone who is going to jump on that and exploit you.

You don't want that. Reality and openness with somebody who might be kind of responsible and respectful with that at the moment, but then leaves you.

And leaves you exposed. You don't want that. Jesus is none of those. He loves us. He gave his life for us. And he will never leave us or forsake us. In Matthew 11, Jesus says, Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your soul.

[20 : 37] That rest, that soul rest, is what all of us long for. But as long as we keep Jesus at a distance, as long as we keep putting up our defenses, holding on to our control, keeping him at arm's length, that rest will always elude us.

But if we allow him in, if we open up every corner of our hearts to the Lord Jesus in true humility, he gives us rest for our restless souls.

Indeed, look at verse 14. He will, in the end, exalt us. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. But the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Now, what follows then in the next verses helps us press this in a bit further. So the tax collector embodies the humility of openness. But in 15 to 17, Jesus takes us to the root of how it is that we can live this way.

And he describes here the humility of dependence. That's our second point, the humility of dependence, 15 to 17. Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them.

[21 : 46] And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him saying, let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.

We know that infants are completely dependent. The little ones that we have amongst us this morning, they need everything from their parents.

The ones in the story here are completely dependent. They couldn't get to Jesus unaided. They had to be brought to him, we're told. Infants are unable to help themselves.

They require others to do everything for them. And Luke places these verses here because this was the posture of the tax collector as he came to God.

One author says this, he has, the tax collector has the nakedness, dependency, unselfconsciousness and simplicity about him that mark the tiny infants who Jesus says are those who enter the kingdom.

[22 : 54] Look at the newborns over coffee when you see the little ones that we have among us. They don't care what you think about them. They are not worried about whether you like the way they are dressed or the way their hair is.

They don't put up defenses when they want something, they ask for it. They just cry. They don't care who is around, they don't care who hears them, they just cry. And when they need something, they go for it.

When they need food, they reach out, they grab it and they stuff it in their face. Or they get on their mother's breasts or whatever it might be. I'm ready to sleep. They don't care who is around.

And of course their parents meet their every need with love. You can only relinquish your ego.

You can only be comfortable in silence. You can only embrace weakness and resist comparisons when you know that you are fully accepted in the Lord Jesus.

[24 : 02] The Pharisee created his own identity. His identity was respectable and acceptable. And he created it for himself. He had to keep performing.

And he had to keep telling others, including God, about his performance and how well he was doing compared to others. You know, the truth is we all have our own versions of this and it is a punishing way to live our lives.

How much of what we say and do, how much of the way we present ourselves, particularly if we are online, how much effort we put into presenting ourselves. It's all about the identity that we have created for ourselves.

It's all about our desire to keep people thinking that we are impressive or like the Pharisee, respectable and acceptable. How much of the time that we spend or the time that we waste on social media is driven by image and performance and comparison.

And then we wonder why we are so anxious. But if like the tax collector, we don't create our own identity, but we come to Jesus in complete dependence like a newborn.

[25 : 16] We are welcomed and we receive the identity that is given by God. Over our heads, the words, verse 14, justified.

It's one word, justified. It's stamped in massive letters. Accepted by God. You know, although he was in very nature God, Jesus humbled himself.

He was open and vulnerable in his weakness before and his dependence upon his father. And he descended, we know, to the lowest point, Philippians 2, death on a cross. And he did it to atone for our sins.

And because of that, the apostle Paul says, he went to the lowest place. Therefore, because he went there, after his humbling, he is exalted. After his death, he is raised to life and he is vindicated. And as it was for him, so it is for all who are united to him by faith. What that means for you this morning, if you are trusting the Lord Jesus, is that you have the approval and the acceptance of heaven.

[26 : 20] In the Lord Jesus, the voice from heaven says of you, my beloved. My beloved.

In whom I am well pleased.

Despite all of your sin. In Christ, that's what God our Father says of you. In Christ, that's what God our Father says of you.

In Christ, that's what God our Father says of you. In Christ, that's what God our Father says of you. And when you get that, when that hits your heart. When you understand it.

My beloved, in whom I am well pleased. Despite all of your sin. Despite what is true about you. At your worst. In Christ.

[27 : 25] When you get that. When you get that. That frees you to be truly humble. That frees you to be fully real. It is only when you humble yourself to depend on the Lord Jesus.

The way a nursing infant depends on her mother. That you can get yourself out of the way. You can stop thinking about yourself.

You can use fewer words. You can not pat yourself on the back about your abilities or your gifts. In fact, you don't even worry what other people have or don't have around you.

The humility of dependence is what opens the door to the openness of the tax collector. It is the humility of Christ.

And so it is the humility of reality. That's what we need. That's the posture that we're to have.

[28 : 27] As citizens of the kingdom of God. And that's what we have in Christ. Let's pray that he would help us to live out of that more and more.

Let's do that now. Let's pray together.