

Luke 18:9-14
Humility: The Doorway to the Kingdom
Sunday August 21, 2022

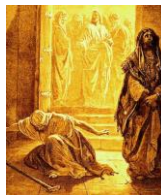
Last week I spoke about the core of the Kingdom of God being Mercy and forgiveness. This week I am speaking about “humility”, which I believe is the doorway to the core of the Kingdom of God and we see that in Jesus’ Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector.



We also see this explicitly in Jesus words to his disciples in Matt. 18:1-4 where “The disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**” We need the humility of a child to even enter the Kingdom of heaven much less be great in it.

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Now knowledge of characters and the culture in this parable are needed in order to understand it. The Pharisee was seen as a stereotypical righteous person. The tax collector was the stereotypical sinner.



A tax collector was held in contempt by most of the Jewish Society of Jesus’ day. A Tax Collector was not only the stereotype of a sinner he might even be seen as the archetype. He worked for the Romans who were an occupying military force and collected taxes for them often through violence, extortion, and deceit. He was a legal thief and liar, and since he dealt in coins stamped with the image of Roman gods, he was constantly in a state of religious defilement.

The tax collector did everything wrong, but that day that he went up to pray his heart was humble—he knew he could expect absolutely nothing from God, because he was so sinful, and only hoped and asked for mercy.

His heart and attitude were right. He was focused on God not himself and so he was justified, meaning he was accepted--saved by God.

**Pride condemns and separates.
Humility begs for mercy and unites.**

Humility opens the doorway for a relationship with God!

Now the Pharisees in Jesus' day meticulously followed the 613 laws of the Old Testament, and this Pharisee went beyond them to special acts of religious dedication.

This Pharisee bragged before God, **“I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.”**

These were things that the law required him to avoid, and he did. He was truthful in what he was saying. His piety also went beyond what the law required.... **“he fasted twice a week.”** The law only specified a few times a year for fasting. And he **“tithed of all his income.”** The law only required agricultural income to be tithed on.

Outwardly, to look at him and examine his life, you would find nothing wrong and everything right.

His problem was with his attitude and heart and because of that, he held the tax collector in contempt and scorn. His heart was full of pride.

So, then the point of this parable is made in verse one. Jesus told this parable, **“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.”**

On the surface the meaning is very clear, but the meaning deepens to the point of mystery in how we are bound together with each other and with God. It speaks to our relationship with each other, even when we think all we have is contempt for one another. But contempt for another person binds us to them and hinders us in life. Contempt for another is a relationship that though it binds us tight actually separates us from God and others. We stand alone then as the Pharisee did.

Now notice the Pharisee's language and actions before God in the temple that day. He walks right in, strides up to the Holy of Holies, looks up to God, lifts up his hands and says,

I thank you...

I am not like...

I fast...

I give.

As one guy wrote he had more "I's" than an Idaho potato.

X slide off

The Pharisee really wasn't in the house of God to thank God, but to congratulate himself. With great pride he stood before God and bragged. He was so full of himself and so turned inward into himself that he "stood alone" as the scripture says. His pride separated him from God and certainly separated him from other people.

X slide off

The Tax Collector on the other hand focused solely on a pure and Holy God. He was excruciatingly aware of his sin in the presence of his Holy God; so, all he did was pray for mercy for he could expect nothing else. God owed him and God owes us nothing.

I can't emphasize enough the difference in why the two were in the Temple that day. The Tax Collector was there to worship God and beg for mercy & forgiveness, the core of the Kingdom of God. The Pharisee was there to congratulate himself in the presence of God and pridefully judge others. He really had no need for God for he obviously believed he himself had achieved his own righteousness.

Today this is reflected in the common secular belief that “all people are basically good”. Those who hold to this secular belief do so with the self-righteous assumption that they are then “good”, and God owes them and in fact owes them eternal life in the end. God owes us nothing. I’ll get back to this.

The Pharisee had no humility, no contrition, no felt need for forgiveness for he figured he had done nothing wrong and everything right, and so he had no need of God’s forgiveness and grace. He was a “good man”.

We can’t be forgiven for what we don’t feel the need of forgiveness for. We become our own self righteous god believing God the Father owes us our salvation.



Now the Tax Collector’s body posture in prayer has deeply affected the way we as Christians pray today. In Jesus’ day the Jews would pray standing with face and arms uplifted. This parable is why if I say, “Let us pray,” almost everyone would bow their heads and close their eyes.



X slide off after a pause

When I was in the Holy Land almost ever site, we visited, if you wanted to touch the spot where Jesus was born, or Jesus died, or Jesus prayed in the Garden you had to take the posture of humility. You had to bow down and get on your knees to touch these spots because often they were underneath an altar.

Here is the spot where Jesus was crucified.



Here is the spot where Jesus was born.



In a real sense part of the problem of the Pharisee was spiritual immaturity. This Pharisee had not grown in his self-understanding and understanding of our common humanity and our relationship with God.

X slide off

Our common humanity and relationship with God is that of separation, and yet utter dependence. We live separated from each other and from God and we grow closer to God only through growing closer to each other. Remember the wheel and the spokes last week? As we grow closer to each other we grow closer to God?

And contempt and scorn for even the least of these, the evildoers, the thieves, the rogues, the adulterers etc. only separates us more from God.

The shorthand way of saying this is that we are all sinners in need of a Savior. And I know some chaff at being designated a “sinner” but that’s who we are! It’s our pride that fights the designation.

Isaiah 6:5 says, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Romans 3:23 puts it this way, “There are none righteous, no, not one.” Genesis 6:5 puts it “The heart of man is evil and tends towards evil continually.” Which is the basis for Wesleyan theology.

It is at the point at which we admit our common human sin nature that God can begin to work change in our lives. That is humility. That is the doorway into the Kingdom!!



My friends, what Jesus is warning us about here is pride. Jesus is calling for humility in front of God and mercy and forgiveness in our relationships with others. **Jesus is calling us to practice the Core of The Kingdom with each other: mercy and forgiveness.**

Now if you think that this parable doesn't apply to you that is the first clue that it absolutely does. We are all separated from God and our pride is the source of the separation. And we live in a culture that says repeatedly that God owes us eternal life and will give it to all of us no matter what we do, believe, and think. That is pride that is thought and lived out.

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Humility is hard to define and practice but its opposite pride is not. So, I'll take the easy route and note some prideful ways of thinking I've observed in and around churches.

“Do you see yourself”? Each of these following statements is based on pride, has contempt for God's people or Church and separates from God and others and yet binds us to them: Statements such as, “I'm more spiritual than that church, Sunday School Class, or group - so I won't attend.” “I get nothing out of it, so I'm gone.” “I won't join the church because it is full of hypocrites.”

If you ever want to talk to an angry person chained to the sins of the past talk to someone who has been disaffected from a church by the actions or omissions of others. Though the incident happened long ago they are still bound to it by unforgiving hearts and actions that say, “I'm better than you-you hurt me, so I'll separate myself.” And the sad thing is we're bound with chains of contempt and anger to the object of our judgment.

And we are Pharisees if we attend worship more for what we can get than give to God and others. The focus needs to be on God and others not us, and our own need. In our midst today, in this very room, are people broken of spirit and in need of the reassurance of another person.

It's up to you to minister to them to show them love rather than "self-righteous" condemnation. If you've ever said, "Well the 'church' ought to do that!" If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are 'the church' and so it is up to you!



We take turns when we go to church. Sometimes we need to be ministered to by others and sometimes we need to do the ministering, which is why it is so important that unless sick, or out of town we attend worship to worship God and encourage others. That is the commitment that makes relationship with God and others possible.



Our focus needs to be on God, not the choir, or the preacher, or the ushers, or any unfriendly people we might meet. That 'unfriendly person' may be in deep emotional, spiritual, or physical pain. I've seen people walk into church with grim unfriendly looking faces not because they are angry or upset, but because every step gave them great physical pain. The focus needs to be on worshipping God with a sensitivity to the common humanity of pain and sin we share.

X slide off

Are you lonely? Maybe it's time for you to be a friend!

Does the sermon not feed you? Maybe it's not your turn this week to be filled by the word, and maybe the food is for a future wilderness experience, a time of dryness and spiritual hunger in your life.

A family attended a new church one week, and on the way home the mom said, "The choir wasn't very good, and it sure got hot in there." The dad said, "Yeah, the sound system was poor and the preacher boring." The daughter said, "Yes, and the youth group was so cliquish." At which point little Johnny in the back seat piped up and said, "Well it wasn't such a bad show for the quarter we threw in the offering."

Who are you here for, God, for yourself, or for others?

I absolutely guarantee you I will eventually disappoint you in some way if you come to see and hear me and not God. In fact some are not in worship here today because I "disappointed them." I had warned them one day I would, but they weren't prepared.

A District Superintendent shared with me once that in any given year 65% of the congregation at any given church gets upset with their pastor at least once over something. And I absolutely guarantee you emptiness of experience if you come to worship only for what you can get and not give. We gather to give our worship to God!!! And hope beyond hope that God will somehow reach out and touch and heal our lives.

Every week there are people who enter this sanctuary and sanctuaries around the world who are surrounded by a puddle of tears. They and their lives are broken.



Do you hear the tear drops fall? Do you see the tears running down the cheeks, or do you get so focused on yourself and what you want that you are blind to the pain of the common sin separated humanity that we share.



Unforgiving hearts condemn and judge and scorn others. Hearts that have matured in Jesus greet others with open arms.

The doorway into the freedom of the Kingdom of God is humility. When we step through that door we step into the freedom of mercy and forgiveness, the core of the Kingdom. We need God's mercy and when we humbly open our hearts and minds to receive Mercy; we can give it.

As we grow spiritually, we develop empathy for other's also trapped in their sinful state. Only when we cast out every, "I did this or that and so I'm owed." Push aside every, "I'm here for what I can get."

Abandon every, "but I am a good person and God owes me", only then will we find the Grace of God and be able to pass that amazing Grace on to others.

James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

As we realize our own sinful nature it gives rise to an experience of the mercy of God whose mercy we can participate in as we give mercy and grace to others.

The call for humility is consistent throughout the Bible. I close with the words of the prophet Micah 5:8.

And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

What is God saying to you and what are you going to do?
In Jesus' name, amen!