

**The Parables of Jesus:**  
**The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14)**  
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on September 1, 2019

**Introduction**

- ❖ If you ever visit the city of Pisa, you're probably there to see the bell tower of their most famous cathedral. We know it as the **Leaning Tower of Pisa**. Its construction began in 1173AD. It was slow-going and interrupted by debt issues and wars. It was designed to have eight stories, but for the first five years, only two stories were built – so far so good. It looked to be a marvelous, marbled bell tower, standing tall and strong next to a great cathedral.
  - But in its fifth year of construction, while building the third story, everything began to lean. That's because its foundation stones had been laid on soft soil consisting of clay, fine sand, and shells. Now considering that the city got its name from the Greek word for "marshy land", you'd think they would've known better. But it must have escaped everyone's attention. Everyone assumed it was a wonderfully constructed tower. For five years, it looked just right. So they kept building. Until one day, the weight of it all became too much and its foundation began to give way.
    - The tower wasn't completed until 1372, almost 200 years later. Over that time, numerous architects and engineers tried to troubleshoot the lean, but there was no way to compensate and correct it. **Today, the Leaning Tower of Pisa stands as a stark illustration of what happens when a foundation problem initially goes unnoticed – when, on the surface, you look strong and well-built – but underneath (and unnoticed) you're set to fall.**
  
- ❖ That's the same idea illustrated in this morning's parable. Over the summer, we've been going through *The Parables of Jesus* in Luke's Gospel, and we've arrived at the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector. **Out of the two characters, this Pharisee is the one that everyone would've assumed is doing well spiritually.** He was a member of the most well-respected, highly-regarded religious order of his day, and personally, he was a man of high morals and discipline. On the surface, it all looked good. If you saw him walking home, after having just worshipped at the temple, you would've assumed that man was right with God. He assumed he was right with God.
  - But Jesus lifts the veil and exposes what's beneath the surface of this man's life. **He was building on a weak foundation of self-righteousness – on the soft soil of trusting in one's self.** He's in danger of toppling, but he doesn't see it, even by the end of the parable. He still thinks he stands tall and strong and so does everyone else. But soon, the weight of his sin will be too much and his foundation will give way.
  
- ❖ **Friends, Jesus's point in this parable is to warn us – before our lives are set on a trajectory of self-righteousness.** Before it's too late. Before it gives way and it's revealed that our lives were, all along, built on the wrong things and we're not actually right with God.
  - What becomes clear in this parable is this: You can be a very religious person. And I don't mean that pejoratively. **You can be a very well-respected, well-liked religious person. But it's much more important to be a justified person.** And don't assume that's the same thing. That was the Pharisees's mistake. He was content to be a religious man. But he wasn't a justified man.

- ❖ Friends, you want to be justified. That's what I hope to make clear. **By the time we're done, I hope you'll have a clearer sense of what it means to be justified and why you want to be *that* person.** That person who walks away from a time of worship with a clear sense that you are right with God.
  - If that's going to happen, then there are three things we need to recognize. We need to recognize (1) the central blessing of worship, (2) the way a Pharisee worships, and (3) the way a justified sinner worships.

### The Central Blessing of Worship

- ❖ The first thing to recognize is the central blessing of worship. I'm not talking about the central aim. **The central aim of worship would be the glory of God.** When we gather together as the people of God, to corporately worship our God – through singing, praying, preaching, and practicing the ordinances – our central aim is to exalt his glory and lift his name high. God is the goal of our worship – not us and how we feel.
  - But that's not to say that we, as worshippers, and our feelings don't matter. There is a blessing to be experienced in worship. When these two men went up the temple mount in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices and pray, they were there to worship. And they were seeking a blessing.
    - According to v14, one man received it. The other didn't. The tax collector "*went down to his house justified, rather than the other.*" **They were seeking to be justified. They wanted the blessing of being right with God.** That's what it means to be justified. And that's the central blessing of worship.
- ❖ When you walk out of a worship service like this, I hope you feel encouraged. I hope you feel inspired. I hope you come away with a greater love for God and neighbor. Those are all blessings we hope you experience when worshipping with us. **But if you don't experience justification – if you're not justified or assured of your justification – then you've missed the central blessing of worship.**
- ❖ **So what is justification? What does it mean?** What did it mean for the tax collector, after worshipping God, to go down to his house justified? **It meant he was forgiven.** When he arrived at the temple, he was guilty before God. He knew it. That's why he stood far off. That's why he called himself a *sinner*: He was a guilty sinner before God.
  - And Jesus already alluded in his previous parables to what happens to guilty sinners if they die or if Christ returns and they've never been forgiven – if they've never been justified. They'll be cut in pieces and put with the unfaithful (Lk 12:47). They'll be tormented in Hades (Lk 16:23). They'll be cast into hell/*Gehenna* (Lk 12:5). **That's the danger that awaits us if we remain in our guilt. If we remain unjustified.**
    - The tax collector knew this, so he came to the temple seeking justification, seeking forgiveness. And that's what he got. By the time he left, he was declared not guilty. **He was declared righteous. He was right with God. That's what it means to be justified.**

- ❖ **Now what's interesting is that you wouldn't have expected this language of justification to pop up here.** Because the context is the temple. Normally a sinner goes to the temple seeking a priest to declare him to be clean. Like in Luke 17:14. That's what Jesus tells the ten lepers to do after he heals them – to go show yourself to the priest.
  - So here you would've expected v14 to say "*this man when down to his house clean, rather than the other.*" **Cleanliness is a term more suited for the temple, while justification is for the courtroom.**
  
- ❖ But that's why we should pay even more attention when Jesus does the unexpected and speaks of justification. We should think about the difference. **When the priest declares you clean, he's only referring to your present state – with no view to your past.** You could've been filthy yesterday, but if you observe the Law and ceremonially wash yourself, you are now clean. **So you're clean – but you still have a record, a former reputation of having been filthy.** This, my friends, is where we need justification.
  - When God declares you justified, he's referring to both your present state *and* your past record. In justification, God not only does not count our sins against us – he counts Jesus's righteousness towards us (cf. 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). **We're declared righteous not just in terms of having washed up clean but having never been filthy in the first place.** We're brand new!
  
- ❖ Think about it this way. We just passed the two-year anniversary for Hurricane Harvey. If you drive around the affected neighborhoods, you'll see that many of the flooded homes were torn down and rebuilt. And since they're new constructions, their value is not affected. They can be listed as "never flooded". Because they're brand new!
  - But others, for various reasons, simply repaired and restored their homes. New flooring was installed. The walls were redone. Furniture was replaced. The house was given a new coat of paint inside and out. But that house – as clean as it looked and felt – still has a record. It still has a flood history. Which would still effect its value.
  
- ❖ **If salvation only consisted of cleansing us from sin, we would still carry a record.** We would have a sin history – of having once been polluted and stained by the filth of sin. We would carry around the reputation of being a filthy sinner who happened to clean up.
  - **And the devil will take every opportunity to remind you that you're nothing more, at the core, than a dirty sinner who cleans up good.** He'll tell you, "Sure you're clean but you're flawed. You've got a past, a history, that effects your value."
  
- ❖ So don't you see? **What we need in addition to cleansing is justification.** We need the sinless record of Christ imputed to us. We need his spotless reputation counted as ours in order to counter the devil. And that's what is freely offered in justification!
  - Let me ask you: Is that what you were seeking today when you came to worship? What are you here for? If I were to guess, you're here to feel encouraged, to feel strengthened, to feel comforted, to feel challenged. **How you feel is important. But what's far more important is how God feels about you.**

- Has *his* holy wrath against *your* guilty sins been satisfied? Has his justice been served? Are you right with God? Are you justified? That's the most important question. And that's the central blessing of worship.

### The Way a Pharisee Worships

- ❖ That's the first point. The second thing we need to recognize is the way a Pharisee worships. Because he didn't receive the central blessing. He wasn't justified. So what went wrong? **What did he do wrong in the way he worshipped – in the way he prayed?**
  - We don't have to look very hard for the answer. Luke tells us what the problem is at the start. Look at v9, "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.*" That's the problem with the way this Pharisee worships: **He trusted in his own righteousness.** He walked away from a time of worship without its central blessing because he looked to himself – for reasons why he should be right with God.
- ❖ And notice why he assumed he was already righteous and didn't need to be justified. **He was comparing himself to others.** When he worships and prays, his eyes weren't lifted to God in heaven. They were scanning around among fellow worshippers to see how he measures up.
  - It said in v9 this parable was told to those who considered themselves righteous and "*treated other with contempt.*" Because they were comparing! Listen to the Pharisee in v11, "*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.'*"
- ❖ Notice how he's described as "*standing by himself.*" He thinks he's in a class of his own. He stands apart. And the thing is – in comparison – it's true. He was probably a good guy. **If you've been a student of Scripture long enough, you're basically conditioned to view the Pharisees as the bad guys.** They're the antagonists – the foil to Jesus and the Apostles. So when we read this parable, we can predict that the Pharisee will be the man who doesn't go home justified.
  - But that wouldn't have been the case for Jesus's audience. **To them, the Pharisees were the good guys.** They were popular with the people because they resisted the elitism of the Sadducees. And unlike the Sadducees – who were anti-supernatural and rejected the inspiration of most of the OT – the Pharisees took the scriptures seriously. They were trying to bring the nation back to the Bible. **They had developed a reputation for being very serious about Scripture and holiness.**
- ❖ So we need to read this parable from the perspective of a 1st-century listener. They would've assumed that the Pharisee is the one who's righteous. And it's not like tax collectors have a great reputation today, but back then, they were more than a nuisance. **Tax collectors were considered wretched traitors.** They colluded with their occupiers, the Romans, and were known to overtax in order to line their own pockets.

- ❖ **So most of us are conditioned to think: Pharisee *bad*; tax collector *good*.** But it was quite the opposite for Jesus's audience. They would've assumed the Pharisee was the hero and the tax collector was the villain. It would be like telling a parable today about a biblical scholar (who's an elder in the church, a community activist, an overall good guy) being in the same worship service as a drug dealer (who's made a living at the expense of others and hasn't darkened a church door for years). There are natural assumptions to be made. One is a very upright, religious man, who is well-liked and well-respected. And the other is a scumbag.
- ❖ Look at the Pharisee's prayer again. There's no reason to think he's lying when he says he doesn't extort people and steal their money. He cares about justice. And he's a good husband, faithful to his wife. **Who would you rather have living next door to you?**
  - And look at his devotional life. He says in v12 that he fasts twice a week. The Law only mandated a fast for one day of the year (Day of Atonement; Lev 23:26). So he's fasting 100x more than the Law requires. And while the Law only says to tithe your crops, he gave a tenth of everything he had (cf. Deut 14:22; Lk 11:42).
    - If this parable was about who would you rather have to babysit your kids or housesit for you while you're on vacation, then this would end differently. Give me the religious guy. Give me the guy with the track record of *not* stealing and cheating – the guy who's disciplined and generous.
- ❖ But that's not what this parable is about. **It's *not* about who's moral or who's religious but who's justified.** And comparing yourself to others won't help you answer that question. In fact, it will likely confuse you into thinking that you're doing just fine on your own.
  - **If what you're trying to figure out is if you're right with God, then comparing yourself to other people makes no sense at all.** It would be like visiting your doctor, and she asks you what's wrong. And you spend the whole time listing out all the ways you're *not* sick like all the other patients in the waiting room. It's no surprise if you leave the doctor's office still sick without a cure.
- ❖ We know it makes no sense to compare, but we do it all the time. We're always comparing. Because it does make you feel better. **You feel more confident in your faith when you compare yourself to a struggling, weaker Christian.** It helps to think, "Thank God, I don't have to deal with that. Or thank God I don't have to go through that again."
- ❖ **But if you're going to take that approach and compare, then at least compare yourself to those who surpass you in righteousness.** Go read a Christian biography of a missionary who gave his or her life for the cause of Christ among the unreached of the world – and be humbled. It's too easy to compare yourself to struggling saints. Next to them, you're doing great. But by that very same logic, there's always a saint out there superior to you in righteousness. So if you go down that path, you'll always be in despair.
  - It's better not to compare yourself to others at all. **The only comparison should be your life – to the holy standard of God's perfect Law.** Compared to his righteousness, we all fall short.

- ❖ **Think about how in your word processor there's that button you push to "justify" the text – aligning it to a standard point.** The Law of God is that standard and to be justified means your life is aligned with it. Your life – and not just your actions and behaviors but your thought life and emotional life – are perfectly aligned with the righteousness of God's Law.
  - **If that's what it means to be justified, then who here can compare?** Who here is still trusting in themselves that they are righteous? Is anyone still counting on their good deeds?
  
- ❖ Now don't get me wrong. I'm not trying to trivialize or belittle our good deeds or good behavior. I'm not saying it doesn't matter. It's something to be thankful to God for – if you're a just man who can be trusted with other people's money and other people's wives because you're faithful to your own.
  - But are you putting your trust in *that* – in your righteous deeds, in your performance as a Christian? **That's the problem. It's when your relationship with God – when your confidence to approach him – is centered on you and what you do for him or for others.** The problem is when you become the subject and principle actor of your prayer life.
  
- ❖ Look at his prayer again. Notice how the subject of the prayer is the man himself. And all the verbs are in the active voice – meaning they express what the subject has done. **The entire focus is on what the man has done.**
  - Contrast that to the prayer of the tax collector. "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" Here the subject is God, and the verb is in the passive voice. That means the focus is entirely different – it's on God and what he does. This guy came to the temple – not to list his achievements or to compare himself to others – no, he came to seek mercy. He came to truly pray, to express his dependence on God.

### **The Way a Justified Sinner Worships**

- ❖ That leads to our third point. Let's consider the way a justified sinner worships. When we look at this tax collector, we see a man who has a clear grasp of reality. Unlike the Pharisee, he didn't have an inflated view of himself. **He didn't trust in himself that he was righteous. And he didn't treat others with contempt because he was more concerned with his own sins.** He held himself and his own sinfulness in contempt.
  - Notice in v13 how he's "*standing far off*" too ashamed to approach God. He can't bring himself to look up to heaven. Instead, he just beats his breast, which was a sign of sorrow and contrition. And then he prays, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner!*"
  
- ❖ What's worth noting is that that word for "be merciful" is not the typical Greek word for mercy. It's related to the word for propitiation. It literally say, "*God, be propitiated to me, a sinner!*" **It's a request for God to turn aside his anger, which the tax collector knows is rightly directed at his sin.**

- ❖ To propitiate is a religious term. It means to appease, to turn aside or to satisfy the anger of God. The tax collector recognizes that he's a sinner and that his sin (like all sin) displeases the all-good and all-holy God. **So in order to be right with God – to be justified – the wrath of God against our sin must be propitiated.** That's what he asks for. That's why some translations put it, "*God, turn your wrath from me, a sinner!*" (HSCB) He's asking, "God, let your anger against my sin be removed – be turned aside. Be merciful in this way."
  - **This tax collector knows that there's nothing – in terms of who is he or what he had done – that's going to serve as a good reason for God to turn aside his anger.** He can't justify that request based on his own righteousness. That's why he throws himself at the mercy of the Lord.
  
- ❖ Like we said, 1st-century listeners would've assumed, at the start, that the Pharisee is the hero and the tax collector the villain. But by the end of the parable, there's this reversal. But here is where we have to be careful. Because it would still be a mistake to reverse roles and now claim the tax collector as the hero.
  - He'd probably be the first to tell you that he's no hero. He's not the good guy. He hasn't done anything deserving of praise. **There's only one hero here. And he's the one telling this parable.**
  
- ❖ **Jesus came for this reason – to be the propitiation for sins.** He came to be the hero. To die for others. So that God can be propitiated (can be merciful) to sinners like the tax collector. To sinners like you and me. Listen to **1 John 4:10**, "*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*" Or listen to **Hebrews 2:17**, "*Therefore he 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.*"
  - **Christ made propitiation for our sins by bearing our sins upon the cross.** There died a hero's death – substituting himself in our place. And there he received the full measure of God's wrath directed towards our sins – the sins he bore. There on the cross, Christ was forsaken that we might be reconciled. That we might be justified by God (cf. Rom 3:23-25).
  
- ❖ This is the way a justified sinner worships: You plead God's mercy. You trust – not in your righteousness – but in the death of Christ as the propitiation for your sins. **Justified sinners worship with an abiding trust in the grace of God alone to save them by faith alone in Christ alone.**
  - Friends, is that how you worship? Please don't worship like the Pharisee and leave this service without its central blessing. **Thankfully, Jesus makes it clear, at the end, why someone would fail to receive this blessing of justification.** Listen to v14, "*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.*"

- ❖ It's pride that leaves you empty. It's because of pride that you find yourself on the road home without justification. **Self-righteous pride is the great danger here.** When Charles Spurgeon preached this parable, he imagined a conversation between two demons in hell who see this Pharisee arrive in hell. One demon asks the other, "What did he do? Why did he come to hell? Was he an extortioner?"
  - "No, he was quite generous. He tithed much more than others."
  - "Then was he unjust?"
  - "No, not at all."
  - "Then was he an adulterer?"
  - "No, he was actually very faithful to his wife."
  - "Well, then why is he here?"
  - "Because he wouldn't go to heaven by grace alone. He kept try to go by his own righteousness. For some reason, he wouldn't give up his pride and bow his head to Christ. That's why he's here with us in hell."
  
- ❖ Friends, I'll tell you I'm thankful to God that I'm not a worse sinner than I already am. And you should be thankful too that you're not a worse sinner than you already are. The world would consider us religious people. But that's not the same as justified people.
  - **Don't make the same mistake as the Pharisee and trust in your own righteousness.** Give up your pride. Don't let it keep you from heaven. Don't let your pride keep you from the central blessing of worship. Bow your head to Christ; plead his mercy; trust in his righteous life and propitiatory death.