

## **Gospel Focus: Avoiding Pharisaism**

**Luke 18:9-14**

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Now turn with me tonight to the gospel of Luke.

We're looking this summer, in a series which we have called, "The Gospel-Centered Life," and tonight I want to attempt to address the issue of avoiding Pharisaism. And suitably we're going to read now the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector as we find it in Luke 18. Before we read the passage, let's look to God in prayer.

*Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. This is Your Word. We are a needy people and we need Your Word to come alive in our minds, in our hearts, in our wills, in our affections. So grant, Holy Spirit, that illumination that brings Your Word to life. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Hear God's holy and inerrant Word. Verse 9 of Luke chapter 18:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. 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. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Thus far God's holy and inerrant Word.

### **I. Who were the Pharisees?**

Now in this parable Jesus tells us the meaning of the parable before He tells us

the parable. He tells us in verse 9 that this parable is addressed to some, presumably Pharisees, who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt. Now the Pharisees were of three sorts in the first century. There were three Jewish sects, collectively known as the Pharisees, and there were conservatives and liberals and something in between. The conservatives were the disciples of Shemei and the more liberal interpreters of the law were the followers of Hillel and then there was another group of Pharisees known as the followers of Gamaliel, the Gamaliel we read of in the gospels. It's hard to classify exactly where each individual Pharisee may lie. It wasn't a point but a spectrum, just as it would be difficult when you addressed Christians today. There are conservative Christians and liberal Christians and who-knows-what Christians.

Now this particular Pharisee is described to us. He describes himself to us. He's a conservative. And two particular things arise about him in his own self-description, let alone the description that Jesus gives at the beginning as the explanation of the parable. First of all he describes himself as one who is morally righteous. He is not an extortioner. He is not an adulterer. He's not unjust. We take him at his word. He was a morally upright individual. He wasn't the kind of man who was in trouble with the law. He wasn't the kind of man who had a record. He wasn't the kind of man we might label as a criminal. He's a morally upright individual, a law abiding citizen. He's a decent individual, upright. He may be self-righteous and you may not like him, but he's moral.

The second thing he says about himself is he's religiously devout. He says he fasts twice a week. Now you may have your opinions about somebody who fasts twice a week and we'll get to that in a moment, but he's a man of religious scruple. You might be critical of his scruples, but he is a man of religious scruple. The law in fact only required that you fast once a year on the Day of Atonement. That was a requirement. But this man fasts twice a week and he tithes. He tithes everything. All that he possesses, all that he gains in terms of good, he tithes. Again, you may have your opinion about somebody as scrupulous as that about the way he understands the law, but you have to admit he's religiously devout. You may think ill of him, you may call him a legalist — let's get the "L" word out. Anyone who pays too much attention to the law for probably the majority of folk here tonight would be thought of as a legalist. I have a partner who, if I do one mile over the speed limit, I'm told about it in a millisecond. She believes in maintaining the law.

Now this man here is morally upright, he's religiously devout, but he's also something more than that. He sees himself as morally and religiously superior. He's morally and religiously superior to this tax collector. He's not like this tax collector. There's a contrast here in the parable between this morally upright, religiously devout Pharisee, and this tax collector. Now tax collectors were, for good or ill, regarded as sinners. They were regarded as the scum of the earth as far as the Jews generally were concerned, but particularly the Pharisees.

Collecting taxes in the Roman Empire was a difficult business. The Romans wisely farmed it out to local enterprises to collect. And Jews would collect taxes for the Roman government. The way they would do that would be entirely up to themselves so long as the Roman government got their due tax. So tax collectors were notorious at adding to the taxation burden something for themselves. And because they were serving an occupying power, force, they were disliked more than tax collectors might be disliked generally among this audience this evening. There was an added burden here. The tax collectors were working for a foreign power. They were working for an invading power. They were working for an occupying force. And so collectively they were regarded as sinners. This Pharisee regards himself as morally superior to this tax collector.

The tax collector can't even look up to heaven. His eyes are cast firmly down upon the ground. He's riddled with a sense of guilt, guilt over his sins, over his failures, over his shortcomings, over the many transgressions that he is aware of in his own life. He beats upon his breast — a sign of contrition — and all he can do is pray the sinner's prayer. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." That's all he can say. He begs for mercy. It's not just that he doesn't seem himself as superior to someone else, no one else comes into the picture. It's just him and God and he begs for mercy. He seems unaware even of the presence of the Pharisee.

Now here's, as we say today, the kicker. Jesus says, "That man, the tax collector, the man who prays the sinner's prayer, the man who says, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner,' that man goes to his home justified, that is to say in a right relationship with God, rather than the other. The tax collector, the one who is conscious of his sin and can only beg for mercy, that man goes home justified in a right relationship with God and the Pharisee does not."

Now let's examine this Pharisee a little. It's very important. This man is not trusting in good works that he has accomplished all by himself without any assistance whatsoever from God. No, he's not, as we might say, a Pelagian<sup>1</sup> or for that matter even a semi-Pelagian. He gives thanks to God. The reason why he is morally upright, the reason why he is religiously devout, he sees as due to the sovereignty of God, even to the grace of God. He gives thanks to God for what he sees as his moral and religious position. The good works that he brings now to the surface in this prayer are not good works accomplished by his own unaided effort, but they're good works which God has enabled him to do and he's trusting in that. They are his good works. They are his good works. Notice how Jesus puts it in verse 9 — "He told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous." This man was giving thanks to God for his righteousness, but he was trusting in that righteousness which was his, wrought by God in him.

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<sup>1</sup> Pelagius (AD 354 — AD 420/440), denied the doctrine of original sin as developed by Augustine of Hippo, and was declared a heretic by the Council of Carthage. His interpretation of a doctrine of free will became known as Pelagianism. Man was thus able to freely choose good or evil.

Now, many of you are aware that in these last few years a great deal of research has been done about the Pharisees and some of us have been told by scholars and others that we got the Pharisees all wrong, that we read the Pharisees through the lens of the Reformation and Luther's understanding or misunderstanding of the medieval Roman church and we've read that back into the gospels and we've read the Pharisees wrong and villainized the Pharisees accordingly. Well be that as it may, what is it that Luther says about medieval Rome? It wasn't that medieval Rome believed that you bring before God works that you do all by yourself. No, medieval Rome believed in the grace of God, they believed that the works that we bring before God are works that are wrought in us by God and by His Spirit and by the grace of God, but they remain our good works. What's wrong about the Pharisee? Because the Pharisee is doing, it seems to me, exactly the same.

I want to ask tonight this very simple question — What's wrong with the Pharisee?

## **II. What's wrong with the Pharisees?**

Well you might be tempted to say what's wrong with the Pharisee is he's a legalist. He's a legalist. Well, yes he is a legalist. He's trusting in works that he himself has done, even though he's crediting that the origin of these works lay in the sovereignty of God. God worked these works in him but they're his works. And if you trust in your good works, even if you credit those good works to God, but they are your good works, and you lay the foundation of your assurance of your relationship with God on those good works, that's legalism.

And Jesus is saying in this parable, “that will end up in you *not* being justified.” You will go home, if that's where you are tonight, that the basis of my relationship with God is what I do — my moral stance, my religious devotion. And even though you may say, “God made me like this,” if that's the basis of your foundation, if that's the basis on which you think that you are right with God, Jesus is saying here, “You are mistaken. You are absolutely mistaken because that belief, that trust, that confidence in good works, good works that you perform — and they are good works; they're not bad works, they're good works — good works, even good works that you think God has wrought in you can lead you to hell.”

Isn't that what Ligon told us this morning in another passage in Luke? “Fear Him who can cast both body and soul in hell.”

On what basis, on what basis does God cast body and soul into hell?

On the basis that the confidence that I have about my relationship with God is based on something that belongs to me.

Now I want to ask you tonight, and I want to ask you who are Christians and believers and you make a profession of faith, what is the basis, what is the foundation of my right standing with God? On what basis will God say to me, if He takes me home tonight, on what basis will I hear Him say, "Welcome into My kingdom"? You see, even as Christians we can so subtly and so easily become Pharisaical. We do good works. We are religiously devout. We're in church on Sunday evening for goodness sake. I mean, who else goes to church on Sunday evening anymore?

And I wonder tonight, I wonder tonight, does it enter into your head as you sit here and sing these wonderful hymns and read the Scriptures and fellowship with each other that God must now be pleased with us, and that is the foundation upon which I rest all my hopes that I am in a right relationship with Him?

Jeremy was telling you last week we must — I assume Jeremy was telling you last week — we must never confuse how good works function as the fruit of justification and the root of justification. If you make good works the root of justification you are not in a right relationship with God. And all of our good works, all of our good works must stem as the outflow of gratitude for grace that has already been received in the Gospel.

My friends, what Jesus is teaching here is ever so subtle. It's subtle because it's the endemic sin; it's the endemic temptation of the children of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Satan planted a thought, he planted a seed, and that seed was — God is hard to please. He's set you in this garden and He's forbidden you to eat of all the trees of the garden. He's forbidden that. You may have a right relationship with God, but it's going to be on the other side of trying to please Him because He doesn't really, He doesn't really want to give you these good things. That's the seed that Satan sowed in the Garden of Eden. It's endemic. It's the default of the natural heart. Every false religion, every false religion, every deviation from the Gospel is a variation on self-justification, on trying to please God — a reluctant God.

Do you remember the parable that Jesus said about the two brothers? We emphasize the prodigal son, but the older brother, do you remember what the older brother said when the father killed the fatted calf and gave the ring and showed all this affection and tenderness toward the prodigal son, what did the oldest son say? "All these years I've been slaving for you. I've been slaving for you."

Does that ring a bell tonight in your hearts as you think about your relationship with God, that it's a kind of slavery, it's a kind of bondage, it's trying to ring out of God just a little affection by doing more, by performing more? And Jesus is saying, watch out for that.

Watch out for that Pharisaical spirit that says, “Here are my good works. Lord, I read the Scriptures every day this week. Lord, I had some good times in my quiet times this week. I came to church twice today.” That my friends, that can damn you. That's what Jesus is saying.

### **III. What is the cure for Pharisaism?**

What's the cure for Pharisaism of this kind? And the cure, of course, is the Gospel. The cure is Jesus. The cure is that little word, and it's so important, from the Reformation — *soli* — by grace.

Yes, the good works that the Pharisee performed were by the grace of God, but he was trusting in his own good works nevertheless. They were his own good works.

And the Gospel says even if you do everything, even if you fulfill the whole — supposing you could fulfill the whole law tonight. I mean, supposing you could be like the rich young ruler in the next section of this eighteenth chapter of Luke - you remember Jesus said to him, He took him to the Ten Commandments and this rich young ruler said, “All these I have done from my youth.” Imagine, imagine if you could fulfill the law. Turn back to chapter 17 and verse 10 — “So also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty.’” Even if you could do everything, even if you could fulfill the law, you are still, Jesus says, an unworthy servant. You've only done what was your duty.

How can I then be in a right relationship with God? Not, not through my righteousness. Even if I think that righteousness has been in some way worked in me by God.

It must be by an alien righteousness, the righteousness of another. He who has made sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him.

What's the basis of my confidence tonight? It's not my good works. It's not my Bible reading. It's not my church attendance. It's not the fact that I'm a member of First Presbyterian Church. It's not that I'm a covenant child. What's the basis of my assurance that I'm in a right relationship with God?

That the perfect righteousness of Jesus has been reckoned to my account and my sins have been reckoned to Jesus' account. It's by faith alone in Christ alone and by grace alone apart from the works of the law.

This is a very subtle thing. Paul had to warn the Galatians that they had started in the Spirit but were now trying to continue in the flesh. Every day, every single day

we must say to ourselves, “On Christ the solid Rock I stand; all other ground, including my moral uprightness and my religious devotion, all other ground is sinking sand.”

Young people, what's the basis on which you are in a right relationship with God tonight? And it has to be that I am building my life on the finished work of Jesus alone. “Nothing, nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”

Let's pray together.

*Father, we feel the subtle temptation of having begun in the Spirit to revert to the flesh, of having begun by faith and continuing by the works of the flesh, and we want to be able to see again tonight that it is of grace from beginning to end. Even if we could fulfill the whole law, we would still be unworthy servants. So we pray the sinner's prayer, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” We pray for anyone here tonight who perhaps has never fully realized what it fully means to be a Christian, what it means to trust in Jesus only, what it means to rid themselves of all self-confidence and cast themselves entirely upon Jesus. So grant it by Your Spirit for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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