

Are You Righteous
Luke 18:9-14

Some years ago, I was blessed to attend one of the most meaningful bible studies I could have ever been involved in. It was an in-depth study of the Book of Romans. And thankfully, the study reached into the heart of what God would have us to know about Him personally, about His holiness and about His righteousness. And then also, about His plans and His desires for us, for you and me.

And within that study, I was especially blessed as we studied about how, though we are born into this life with no righteousness of our own, we can, through God's provision of "Justification" still have real and true "righteousness", "His Righteousness," the "Righteousness of Christ".

In those studies, we learned that just as with the Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus' day, there are diverse understandings in our day as to how a person can attain to the righteousness that God intends for us.

We learned that our friends in the Catholic Church teach that each person has an "inherent righteousness" all their own, put there through the process of "justification," which occurs at the moment of infant baptism performed by a priest.

And that term "inherent righteousness" is a very important concept, meaning that if I were to be a member of a Catholic Church I would believe that I have a righteousness that is my own, a righteousness that resides within me. And I can either gain or lose some or all of that righteousness based upon my own personal behaviors.

In our bible study of these truths given in the Book of Romans, we determined that yes, righteousness does come to us through "justification", but that our "justification" is provided ever and only by the sacrifice that the Lord Jesus made for us. And contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church, the "Righteousness" that we obtain cannot be earned by us and it is not our own.

But rather the "Righteousness" we obtain is the "Righteousness of Christ", gained by His death on the cross and then imputed into our souls as a gift to us by

God's Holy Spirit, that by His sacrifice, we who receive Him as our Savior and Lord are "declared to be righteous" based solely upon His sacrifice.

In other words, our righteousness is never our own either to gain or lose. It was and will always be the "Righteousness of Christ". And praise be to God, with the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit who cannot leave us or forsake us, the "Righteousness of Christ" will remain within our soul throughout all eternity.

What then does all of this have to do with the scripture passage that we will study today? It is this . . . in many ways similar to the doctrines practiced by the Catholic Church, the Scribes and the Pharisees believed that their righteousness was an "inherent righteousness", in their case, passed along to them through their Hebrew bloodlines as children of Abraham. And they believed that they were able to gain or lose their righteousness based on their works and behaviors.

Let's pause and read this scripture passage and then we'll talk about it. Listen, these words beginning in verse 9 of Luke chapter 18,

⁹ Also He (the Lord Jesus) spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

¹³ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'" (Luke 18:9-14)

A question as we begin our study of these scriptures today, "Is it ever acceptable for us to compare ourselves to other people? Should we ever allow our thoughts to linger upon the shortcomings of others in such a way that we become thankful that we do not have their same shortcomings?"

Some people would say, "Certainly not! These verses before us today, and others like them, such as those in Matthew chapter 7, clearly tell us that we should never judge another person."

And that is true, very true. We should never judge another person, especially in the manner that is spoken about here in these words and in Matthew 7. There is a price to be paid for such frivolous judgmental attitudes and mindsets towards other people.

But to carry the question further “Is the act of simply recognizing another person’s shortcomings and making a comparison to ourselves the same as judging?”

And even further, should we never be thankful that we are not like someone else in their lifestyles, habits and behaviors?

While there truly is a “thin-line” of a boundary that we should not cross, the answer to these questions is given to us clearly here within these first few words of our scripture passage for today. Here we read,

⁹ Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others”. (Luke 18:9)

The answer to our questions is, “the rightness or the wrongness of the conclusions we reach about other people, and the comparisons that we make about them is found in the context from which we make our conclusions and our comparisons.”

Here, Jesus tells us that the Pharisees trusted in themselves, that they believed that they were righteous in themselves. And believing that they themselves were righteous, any comparison, such as this one, would almost always turn out badly for the other person.

Over the many generations of the Pharisees living within their Hebrew culture, and after their extensive training within their Pharisaical schools of learning, these church leaders had become thoroughly entrenched within certain religious beliefs and philosophies. Their religion had developed into such a well-defined system of principles and ways of life that if followed, it would naturally lead them to believe nothing else except that they were, in themselves righteous. They believed it for themselves and they taught it to their congregations.

Simply put, they believed that if a person diligently followed a strict line of reasoning and beliefs and practices and behaviors, then they would be truly righteous.

And yes, they were very wrong in those beliefs, and that was the exact context by which this Pharisee stood in judgment of this tax collector.

The basic error in their manner of thinking and belief is that the religion that God has given to us is simply some well-defined system of principles, ideas, philosophies and ways of life. And if followed, it will produce righteousness within a person's soul. Systems of beliefs and behaviors very much like the pagan Hindu and Buddhist and even the Muslim religions of our day.

But it never was that way and it never will be that way. True religion, the religion that God intended, was so close to them, they could have reached out and touched it at any time. And, as a matter of practice, they probably spoke about it often as they recited scripture and taught it in their synagogues. But somehow, the truth of God's words went unknown to them.

Those words found in Deuteronomy chapter 6 call out loudly and clearly . . .

⁴"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. ⁶"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. ⁷You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. ⁸You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. ⁹You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

You will recall that Jesus gave a similar instruction in Matthew chapter 22, where He said,

³⁷ . . . "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 22:37-40)

Note very carefully that these words do not contain any well-defined system of principles, ideas, philosophies and ways of life that if followed will produce righteousness within a person's soul, none whatsoever!

These words tell us simply and plainly that our religion must begin with and have as its foundation two things. First, we must love the Lord our God with all that we have within us, and then secondly, we need to love others in no less the manner and fervor that we love ourselves. Then, as Jesus said, every other requirement of God will flow out from those two things.

But note again the error-filled belief system that this Pharisee carried within his heart to confirm that he had followed all of the well-defined systems of principles, ideas, philosophies and life-styles. He said, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess."

Folks, may I say that this Pharisee was probably very, very sincere. And he probably really, really believed that the things he was doing were exactly right.

These things, these thoughts, these behaviors were all that he knew and all that he had been taught by his parents and by his teachers of the law.

Think about it for a moment. Was he very different from you and me now? Do we not do many of the same things? Do we not think many of the same thoughts? Do we not also measure ourselves by the standards set forth in our religious settings. Do we not firmly believe all that our parents taught us and all that we learned from our Baptist, our Presbyterian, and our Methodist teachers?

And we are so very sincere in our beliefs. And folks, truly, most of our beliefs are good ones and righteous ones.

But have we not also, at the same time, fallen into the same trap as these misguided Pharisees, trusting in and depending upon our good record of not being too bad a person most of our life, and of regular church attendance, and of our commitment to tithing, and all the other many religious things that we do?

And do we not quietly compare ourselves to others around us, even sincere fellow church goers, and think ourselves better than them?

We do! We might sincerely not want to do such things, but we do! It is part of the residue of the old sin nature that has not yet been removed from our souls.

Note the words given here in our passage describing this Pharisee as a person who trusted in himself that he was righteous.

There is a warning interlaced within these words, a warning about our "self", our "ego". Whether we want to recognize it or not, or call it as such, "self" is really a very clever and controlling kind of "force" within each of us. Self loves to be exalted. Self loves to glorify itself. Our "ego" demands that we think highly of ourselves and our ego wants others to do the same. And part of our ego's dominion over us requires us to put others at a lower level. Here, we read that "some trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others."

Again, and simply put, our self, our ego, really does think highly of ourselves and it thinks less of others. That is the way self maintains its own position and dominance.

Knowing this, may I go back and ask again, is it ever acceptable for us to observe and to recognize the sinful behaviors and attitudes within other people's lives? Is it a sin for us to do that?

And the answer is, "No, it is not!" It is part of the righteous nature of the Holy Spirit who lives within those of us who believe in Christ, to give us an understanding of the evil that swirls around us each day.

It is no sin to see and to recognize that other people are caught up in sinful behaviors and conduct. A liar is a liar, a thief is a thief, a murderer is a murderer, a con man is a con man, a temptress is a temptress.

And to see, to recognize, to discern such things in another person is not a sin to us. The sin lies in what we do with that information.

Let me say that again! Sin lies in what we do with those things that we observe in other people.

Here, this Pharisee began wrongly and he ended wrongly. He believed that His religious habits and behaviors made him righteous. He despised those that he perceived as being unrighteous before God, believing that he could legitimately say with confidence those words that the Psalmist said in Psalm 139, "I hate those who hate you, oh Lord".

But from Jesus' words, we know that the Pharisee was wrong in all of his assumptions. He, very recklessly, had placed himself in the seat of judgment, taking the authority of a judge, pronouncing innocence for himself and guilt for others.

And as a true judge, he also carried forward the penalty by despising the other man. He was, in essence, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. And he was very, very wrong in all that he was doing!

And that is what Jesus is warning us away from by giving us this parable. He is telling us here that it is very easy for us to cross over that thin line of discernment of sin into being the prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner of other people.

But what can prevent us from taking that kind of headlong rush into judgment of other people and their habits and their behaviors?

The first step is given to us here in these words. We are to begin by taking on the attitude and position that this tax collector took, that of "humility", "humility" . . . to humbly recognize our own utter wretchedness and sinfulness, and to confess it all before God.

Note the glaring contrast. This Pharisee saw himself as righteous. The tax collector saw himself as wretched.

Here, the tax collector could neither look at God nor anyone else. His eyes were only upon his own wretched sinfulness, and it caused him to cry out to God for forgiveness. Listen!

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner! (Luke 18:13)

Oh dear Christian, this is what each of us should and must do as we surrender ourselves over to the humility of Christ. As we surrender, our hearts will be so struck by our own sinfulness that we will have little time to busy ourselves with looking at and disapproving of other people's habits and behaviors and sins. Our own sinfulness will be enough to deal with.

But also, once we have seen our own wretched sinfulness, it will make us more understanding of another person's condition. And instead of condemning them, it will make us want to cry out for mercy for them.

The secret to our moving from the position of the Pharisee into the position of the tax collector is humility, the humility of knowing that "in us there is no good thing", and that there is nothing we can ever do to obtain our own righteousness.

The message and the warning that Jesus has for each of us in these words is that we must not be like the Pharisee and fall victim to the belief that our religion is a well-defined system of principles, ideas, philosophies and ways of life. And by keeping them, we can save our own wretched souls. It was never that way from the beginning and it can never be that way.

Before we close this study for today, may I pause and offer us a thought . . . As we consider this Pharisee and His behavior, He might well have been a very devout Jewish believer, keeping all the laws as he understood them to command. But as so often takes place with you and me, this man failed to look past the religious rituals into the heart of what God really wanted him to understand.

He probably dutifully brought his sacrifice to the temple on a regular basis, watching as his lamb was slaughtered to take away his sins, not letting the nature of the substitutionary provision have real meaning within his heart. His sin being wiped away by the blood of the sacrificed lamb.

And most likely, later on, this pharisee would not see that same substitutionary provision taking place when he would cry out from the crowd for Jesus to be crucified. He would probably still be relying upon his own righteousness to be his savior. But it would not be! It could never be his savior.

Oh dear Christian, we must understand and fully accept that our salvation will never come through a system of good Christian worship habits. Our salvation will come from only one source and one source alone, through the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus who shed His blood to take away our sins.

Praise be to God, this Christian religion of ours is founded solely upon that sacrifice that the Lord Jesus made for us on the cross and the personal and

intimate love that we will have with Him. And then, flowing out from that love is a love for the people around us.

With that as our foundation, we will have little time for judgmental thoughts and behaviors towards other people. And we will be as this wretched tax collector, standing continually before the mercy seat of God, crying out for forgiveness for ourselves and for the forgiveness of others.

Folks, I plead with each one of us today, to turn from our wretched habits of busying ourselves with judging and condemning others for their behaviors. Yes, they probably are exactly what we see in them. But let's leave that to God and instead cry out continually for God to forgive them and to bless them.

May I close with the simple cry of this tax collector . . . "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Pray with me.