

Luke 18 (9-14) – The Sinner's Prayer

Today we will answer the most important question of your life. And the question is this: How can you be right with God? In our passage today, Jesus describes this as being justified. It means being in right standing with God. In other words, those who are justified are going to Heaven, and those who are not justified are not going to Heaven. And Jesus makes it clear how you can be justified. So, I'm going to try and make this as clear as I can. And I'm going to slow this train down, so we can all get on board. Amen.

The Bible declares that you can only be right with God by having faith in God. But here in this passage of Scripture are two men who both had faith in God. And both knew they needed help from God to be right with God. But Jesus says that only one was right with God, while the other was not.

You might think that the difference between the two is obvious. However, the WHY of that difference isn't as immediately clear. But it is the difference between being right with God, and not being right with God. In other words, it's the difference between being saved or not, and going to heaven or not.

Here is what you will see in this text. Both men had faith in God. And both men had faith that only God could help them be right with God. But the help they thought they needed from God was different. The Pharisee thought he would be right with God if he did things for God. The tax collector thought he could only be right with God if God did things for him.

Hear it again. Both men had faith in God. Both went to the temple. Both were praying. And both looked to God as the source of their salvation. So, what's the difference? Why did Jesus say one man was justified, or right with God, but the other man wasn't justified, and wasn't right with God?

It all comes down to each man's prayer. Not just their words, but the heart behind their words. And in the tax collector's heartfelt words, you find what we call The Sinner's Prayer. So, let's examine these men and their prayers.

The Pharisee was a religious leader. And he thought that what made him right in God's eyes was that he lived better than others. And he was living a good life in a sense; he wasn't doing bad things, and he was doing good things. He was living a moral and religious life. And that's not a bad thing. And notice it; very clearly, he thanked God for making him like that.

So why then is he described as being self-righteous? You might see how he looked down at others and think that this is all there is to it. And you might think that as long as you don't look down on others, you'll be ok. But there are many people who don't look down on others, and they are definitely not ok. They think they are good enough in God's eyes. They do the right things. But here is what most people don't understand. Most people think that if they do good things God will accept them. But Jesus says they are wrong.

The Pharisee thanked God for helping him live better than others. And even though he acknowledged that it was God that enabled him to do good, he thought that this right kind of life made him right with God.

You might know that it is God's grace that saves you. But you might think that being justified by faith means God gives you the power to live a good life, and if you do, this is what saves you. Now God does give those who have faith in Jesus Christ the power to live better. God's people do live moral lives. But you cannot pay for your sins by living a moral and religious life.

Today, many people, including church going people, think of Christianity as living a moral and religious life. And other faith's also think of being right with God as living a life in line with whatever standard they set. All false religion views the purpose of faith as self-improvement. It is self-awareness, self-actualization, and self-satisfaction, dressed up in religious ritual.

Here is the problem. The standard of people like the Pharisee is too low. He compared himself to others, and to his own self. He was confident in his own righteousness. But the standard of righteousness is God, not you. Compared to God, to Jesus, you are not righteous. God's standard for salvation is his

Law, you know the Ten Commandments, which is a reflection of his own perfection. And no one has ever met that standard. Not Adam, not Noah, not Abraham, not Moses, not John the Baptist, not the Apostles, not Paul, only Jesus. He said he came to fulfill the Law. Because none of us ever could. Romans 3:23 says that everyone has sinned and no one is as good as God.

The Pharisee, although he thanks God, didn't think that he needed to be as good as God. He had the wrong focus. He didn't consider himself against the perfection of God. Because if he did, he would have cried out for mercy like the tax collector did. And this is what Jesus is telling you to do.

Do you see the problem? The Pharisee's focus was on his own goodness. And you need to realize that the Pharisee didn't believe he was sinless. He just believed that he had done enough moral and religious good that he had earned the right to be forgiven. He thought that since he did the right things that he was right with God. He even said he knew it was by God's grace. But grace doesn't mean that God gives you the power to achieve salvation.

The gospel of God's grace is missed by so many people who think that they have earned God's forgiveness by being moral and religious. But you can never be good enough for God. Jesus is the measure no one can meet. And you need to confess your sins and place your faith in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ if you want to be right with God.

So now let's talk about the tax collector. Unlike the Pharisee, he knows he is a sinner in God's eyes. He wasn't comparing himself with others, or even comparing himself with himself. He was comparing himself with God. The tax collector's focus was on God's perfection. And so, his head was down, his heart was heavy, and he was ashamed of his sin. This man knew he was broken. He knew he wasn't good enough. He knew he didn't deserve to be saved. As a tax collector, no one thought he was a good man. And when he looks at God, he knows that if there ever was a sinner, it is me. He was humble before God. But he had a humble faith in God, and asked for mercy. He asked God to forgive his sins. And he was forgiven.

That's the difference between being saved or not being saved. You have to know that you're a sinner before God or you won't be saved by God. You have to compare yourself with Jesus. Then you'll feel the conviction of sin that makes you humble. Only when you see the majesty of God will you call upon the mercy of God. Are you as good as Jesus?

The Pharisee didn't see God as the holy standard. So, he saw how holy he was compared to others. But can you really say that you are holy compared to Jesus? Because he is the standard you have to meet if you want to be right with God. Jesus is the measure. No matter how well you are doing with what you've been given in this life, you need God's mercy and grace.

Some people think they're humble before God, but they aren't as humble as they think they are. The Pharisee in you might say I know I'm not great...but I'm better than this other guy. If you were truly humble before God, you would keep your eyes on God, and not look at others and think you're better than them, or that you're doing enough. That is self-righteousness.

When you see God as he really is, and you see you as you really are, then you will cry out for mercy. You wouldn't see how well you are compared to others; you'd see how weak you are compared to God.

Growing in God's grace isn't about a constant fear of losing your salvation. It is a constant faith in the promises of God for your salvation. You can get off the treadmill of misery. There are certain segments of the professing Christian Church that seem to say you can never really know if you are saved. They think God justifies you at the end of a process, instead of what begins the process. But Jesus declared this man justified, saved, right with God, as soon as he said that prayer.

So, think about what the tax collector said. He didn't say, "God, be merciful to me, I'm not like this Pharisee." He didn't say, "God, be merciful to me, I'm doing the best I can." He didn't say, "God, be merciful to me, I'll try to do better." He didn't say, "God, be merciful to me, I'll change my life." He

didn't say, "God, be merciful to me, you know I believe in you." He said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

The Sinner's Prayer in Luke 18:13 are not magic words, as if you get saved just by repeating the magic words. No, that would be like thinking baptism and the Lord's Supper save you just by participating in them. They don't. You do those things to demonstrate salvation not to achieve salvation.

Do you want to grow in God's grace? Keep your eyes on God and see how you fail but how he loves you anyway. See how he wants you to desire to be like him, and he inspires and empowers you to become more and more like him. See him as holy as he is, and the more you fill your mind with that truth, the more you'll be like him (Romans 12:2). And one day, when Jesus comes back for his people, when you fully see Jesus as he is you'll be just like him in his character (1 John 3:2-3). Seeing God as he is, focusing your gaze upon him, this is the key to growing in God's grace (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Now let's dig a little deeper into the words and the heart of the tax collector's prayer. When the tax collector asked God to be merciful to him, he wasn't just asking God to forgive him. He wasn't just saying God pardon me. He was asking for something specific. He was asking God to make things right between him and God by the means of a sacrifice. God's sacrifice.

The ancient Greek word translated here as "be merciful" is the word for a sacrifice that makes you right with God. This word is also used in Hebrews 2:17, where it is translated propitiation. It says that Jesus was a *faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people*. What the tax collector said was, "God, be merciful to me by sacrificing for my sins, because I am a sinner."

The tax collector wasn't asking for God to allow him to make a sacrifice that made him right with God. He knew about all the Old Testament sacrifices. He knew that these were only shadows of the real thing. He knew any sacrifice he made would not be enough. He was asking God himself to make

a sacrifice that made him right with God. He knew that only God could provide it. He said, God, I want you to make me favorable in your sight. But I know I can't do it. Please pay for my sins. He isn't simply asking for mercy. He is asking God to make a sacrifice for his sins on his behalf. He knows that this is the only way he will be right with God.

And Jesus said that this man was made right with God, he was justified. He was humble before God in the right way. He saw his God, he saw his sin, and he pleaded for a merciful sacrifice to be made for his sins that he might be forgiven and made right with God. Although this was before the great sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, he was looking forward to the day when all those animal sacrifices and other ritualistic sacrifices would find their true fulfillment. As John the Baptist said about Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

What you need to be right with God is not to live as right as you can, what you need to be right with God is for God to be your righteousness, and to provide a sacrifice for you in your place. And he has done so in Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect, sinless life and died a sacrificial death in your place. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if he lived your sinful life, so that he could treat you as if you lived his perfect life. Your sin for his righteousness; that is the gospel of God's grace, and it is the ultimate good news. And it is the only thing that can justify you, that can make you right with God.

Justification is a declaration, not a process. Jesus makes it clear in this passage of scripture. You cannot equate your godly living with your righteous standing before God. Who are you looking at? No one has ever, will ever, or could possibly ever measure up to the standard of Jesus. Unless Jesus saves them. And it's not the righteousness that Jesus gives *to* us that saves us, it's the righteousness that Jesus is *for* us that saves us.

Now that you know what this Sinner's Prayer is, and what it really means, and what you really need, you can say, along with the tax collector – *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* Amen.