

Luke 18 (9-14) – What Measure Are You Using?

Today we are going to answer the most important question of your life. And the question is this: How can you be right with God? In Bible terms we say, “How can you be justified?” You might ask, “Who is going to heaven?”

The Bible declares that you can only be justified by faith. But what does that actually mean, in practical terms? Because 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 only one was actually right with God, while the other was not. One was going to heaven, and one 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 what the true gospel is, and what most people think the gospel is. It's the difference between going to heaven or not. So, there is nothing more important going on in the world right now than what I am talking about.

Here is what you will see in this text.

- Both men had faith in God
- 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 performed for God
 - The tax collector thought he could be right with God if God performed for him

Both men had faith in God. Look at the text. Both went to the temple. Both were praying. And both looked to God as the source of their salvation. Both knew they must be justified by faith. But what each thought that justification was, what salvation really is, was quite different.

The Pharisee thought that he was justified by faith. But it was his faith in how he lived. You see, he thought that what made him right in God's eyes

was that God made him better than others, and so 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 notice it; very clearly, he thanked God for making him like that. He knew it was God who gave him the power to perform.

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 righteous in God's eyes. They aren't actually humble before God, they are self-righteous, and they are not saved.

Listen up, because here is the thing that so many people do not understand. Again, this Pharisee thanked God for making him better than others. Most "good" people don't even do that, they just think that because they do good things that God will accept them. But they have the wrong measure.

The Pharisee thanked God for making him better than others. But he thought that because he lived better than others, that this is what made him right with God. He thought that this is how he was justified. So, you could say that he thought he was justified by faith. But even though he acknowledged that God enabled him to perform, it was faith in his own performance.

People might know that Christians are justified by faith. But they are not right in God's eyes if they think being justified by faith means God gives you the power to perform and you do so, and that this is what saves you. Now God does give those who have faith in Jesus Christ the power to live better. But you cannot atone for your sins by living a moral and religious life.

Today, many people, including church going people, think of Christianity as the performance of moral behaviors. They view the purpose of faith as personal happiness, self-esteem, and self-improvement. They view God as a distant, detached grandfather who will help them in an emergency, or like a

cheerleading parent who wants the best for you, but who just lets you do what you want, hoping you'll find the right way for you.

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 didn't see himself as a sinner. He stood where he knew people would see him. He was respected in the community. He would be given a place of prominence in the church today. He was proud of his righteousness. But the standard of righteousness is God, not you. That's the right measure. But this man, although he thanks God, did not see himself needing to be as good as God. He thought of others as sinners, but not himself. He had the wrong focus. He didn't see the holiness of God compared to the lack of holiness in himself. Because if he did, he would have cried out for mercy like the tax collector did.

Do you see the problem now? The Pharisee's focus was on his own holiness. The tax collector's focus was on God's holiness. And you need to realize something here. 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. But grace doesn't mean that God allows you to merit your salvation, or that he gives you the power to earn your salvation.

The gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ is missed by so many people who think that they have earned God's forgiveness by being moral and religious. I've met many such people along the way, and they just can't seem to hear you when you tell them that they need to repent of their sins.

So now let's talk about the tax collector. You don't see him talking about his performance. Unlike the Pharisee, he doesn't think of himself as being right in God's eyes. What you see is that 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. He stood away from everyone else; he wasn't looking to be seen, he wasn't looking around at everyone else. His head was down, his heart was heavy, and he was ashamed of his sin. This man knew he was broken. As a tax collector, no one thought he was a

good man. And when he says “a” sinner, he means THE sinner. 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; he wanted to be washed clean.

That’s the difference between heaven and hell, between being justified and not being justified. You have to know that you’re a sinner before God or you won’t be saved by God. Think about the Apostle Paul. As he progressed in his Christian life, you see him start out saying that he is the least of the apostles, then later he says that he is the least of the saints, and finally near the end of his life he says he says he the chief of sinners. Paul was not regressing in his Christian walk; he was progressing mightily in his Christian walk. And yet this was no false humility. Paul was growing in grace, but he always seemed to have a sense of his sin.

So, what was going on with Paul? Well, he wasn’t just continually confessing of all the details about his past. And Paul wasn’t just cultivating some self-deprecating persona. He wasn’t over analyzing his sin, or being overly critical of himself. He was looking at Christ, and as he saw Jesus more fully, he realized his sin more deeply. He saw himself as “the least of the least” when he compared himself to the “unreachable riches of Christ”. That was the secret of his humility.

You have to compare yourself with the right person. You have to feel the conviction of sin to keep you humble. Who are you comparing yourself to? Only when you’ve been gripped by the terrible majesty of God will you be equipped to call upon the wonderful mercy of God.

The Pharisee did not see God as holy as he is, so therefore 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 justified before 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. And humility before God invites God’s grace in your life. But self-

righteousness drives God's grace from your life. Self-righteousness is self-deception. You can think you're humble when you're not.

Some people think they are 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 shift your eyes toward others in comparison and self-righteousness. Jesus is the measure.

The Pharisee's eyes were not fully on God, only partially, so he didn't actually see God as he was. Because when you see God as he really is, and you see you as you really are, then you will cry about needing mercy instead of crow about your own performance. You wouldn't see how well you are compared to others; you'd see how weak you are compared to God, and how wonderful he is, not how wonderful you've done.

And by the way, this is also how you actually do get better. You keep your eyes on God and see how you fail but how he loves you anyway. You see how he wants you to desire to be like him, and he inspires and empowers you to become more and more like him. As you actually see him as holy as he is, and when your mind is saturated more and more, you'll be transformed to be more like him (Romans 12:2). And one day when you finally and 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 fully upon him, this is the key to justification, and also the key to sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18).

When the tax collector asked God to be merciful to him, he wasn't just asking God to forgive him. He isn't just saying God pardon me. No, no, he was asking for something specific. He was asking God to make things right between him and God. He wanted to be propitiated, which in Bible terms means to be reconciled to God by means of a sacrifice. That's what be merciful to me means here. And you also find this term in Hebrews 2:17, where it says that Jesus was a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, making propitiation for the sins of the people.

The tax collector wasn't asking for God to allow him to make a sacrifice that made him right with God. He was asking God himself to make a sacrifice that made him right with God. This man knew that he needed an atoning sacrifice for his sins if he was to be reconciled to God. And he knew that only God could provide it. He said, God, be propitiated for me, the sinner. I want you to make me favorable in your sight. I ask you to apply the atonement to me. He isn't simply asking for mercy. He is asking God to be appeased, for 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 atoning sacrifice to be made for his sins that he might be forgiven and made favorable to 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 an atoning death in your place. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if he lived your life, so that he could treat you as if you lived his 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. What measure are you using? 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. Amen.