

November 23, 2014
Sunday Morning Service
Thanksgiving
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from Luke 18 and 1 Timothy 1.

1. For what are you most thankful . . . really?
2. How does your pre-salvation life compare with the Pharisee's life, the tax collector's life, and the life of Saul of Tarsus?
3. How does your regenerated life compare to Christ?
4. How long has it been since you thanked God for saving you and putting you into His service?

A CONTRAST OF THANKSGIVING Luke 18:9-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-14

Thanksgiving Day is upon us once again. It seems like we just went through this ritual about a month ago. Maybe we are experiencing the full extent of what Paul told the Christians in Corinth, *This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short (1 Corinthians 7:29a)*. And it seems to be getting shorter with each passing year. I'm thinking about becoming like some of the folks I have observed up in the hills who leave the Christmas decorations on their houses year round.

Again, on Thursday, many Americans will gather around a table overflowing with some of the most wonderful food imaginable. And like on so many Thanksgivings past, there will be the required rehearsal of why each person at the table is thankful. The kids will

say that they are thankful that Thanksgiving is finally here because it means that Christmas is right around the corner. Mom and Dad might claim that they are thankful for a year of good health, and yet they are about to destroy their diet, literally engage in gluttony, and start down the path to obesity. And Grandpa and Grandma will probably say that they are thankful for all the family being together for the holiday. But they really mean we are thankful right now, but after a few days we will be thankful that they go home.

Have you ever stopped to think about how misguided, how uninformed, or how insincere our giving of thanks can be? The other day I read a report from the Walk Free Foundation that estimates that there are almost thirty-nine million slaves in the modern world. They define slavery as "people trapped under forced servitude or ownership of some kind." No, that is not the same thing as you having to go to work five days a week. Modern slavery impacts children who are forced into childhood labor. It encompasses young men and women who are conned into the sex industry and kept there against their wills. It even includes many adults worldwide who are owned by superiors until they can pay off enormous debts, which seldom happens.

As I read the report which revealed that among the most offending nations are Haiti, India, Pakistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic, I automatically thought, "Lord, I am so thankful that You determined that I would be born in America." Are you thankful to be an American? Is that not an honorable reason for thanksgiving? Or does it make us feel good about ourselves? Because I am an American, I have a lot of freedoms other people don't have. I have the freedom to go to church when I want to and where I want to.

I am so much better off than those poor slaves in those other countries. In fact, I am even much better off than a lot of people in America. I don't live under a bridge. I'm not addicted to crack/cocaine. I'm not a drunk. I haven't contacted multiple STD's because of living a profligate lifestyle. I don't even belong to a cult! I am a top of the line, Independent Baptist who knows what's right and who tries to do it. And I sure am thankful.

And right now I sound a lot like the Pharisee Jesus told about who prayed in the temple. No doubt the guy was quite thankful for

his circumstances in life. The problem was that he didn't really know how bad off he was. He needed to become like another Pharisee who came to grips with his sinfulness and then spent the rest of his life expressing thanksgiving for God's mercy to him.

The Thanksgiving of a Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14).

Jesus told a story to self-righteous people. *He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt (v.9).* Some people who gathered around Jesus the teacher needed to learn that they were not right. We are not sure who these folks were. But whoever these people were, they trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Of course, that sounds a lot like the Pharisees who notoriously trusted the keeping of their laws to give them eternal life. However, that is not just a Pharisee kind of problem. The reality is that every single person who attempts to enter the Kingdom of God (Luke 17:20-18:8) is guilty of trusting themselves to make themselves righteous.

The goal humanity attempts to achieve is righteousness. Ultimately, that has to mean the complete keeping of God's law which is stated in the Old Testament. That is not going to turn out well because the Bible teaches us that the person who breaks one small aspect of the law is guilty of breaking the entire law (James 2:10). Therefore, only people who measure up to God's perfect standard perfectly will be allowed into the Kingdom of God. Oh. That means that no one gets into heaven. The only human who ever lived who can enter the Kingdom of God on His own merits is the man Christ Jesus. God made Jesus in the flesh of humanity and He kept the law of God perfectly. Therefore, every person other than Christ will not, does not achieve "rightness" before God.

Be that as it may, here were people gathered around Jesus who, like many humans in history, trusted (had persuaded themselves) that their own works or their own ability to do their own works made them right. They refused to believe that it wouldn't work even though proof that it was not working (it never does) lies in the fact that they treated others with contempt. They were characterized by despising, excluding, counting as worthless, other people. Apparently, the

others, the despised ones, was everyone who didn't get on their wagon and try to keep their rules.

Was it unkind for Jesus to so boldly reveal that people like that were not on their way to heaven? The Lord is gracious to reveal our lack of righteousness. Jesus told this story to help the people see that they were terribly mistaken. Do we think they were happy with Jesus' efforts? Not hardly. They should have been. We should be. We who miss God's perfect mark of righteousness all the time ought to be very thankful that He is kind enough to show us from His word what we miss and by how much.

So here is the story. Jesus told about a devout Baptist who was thankful that he was right (vv.10-12). It was a story about two men. Jesus said, "*Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector*" (10). A Pharisee was considered by the public to be the most devout practitioner of the Jewish religion. Okay, the guy really wasn't a Baptist. But we can assume that he was much like a real serious Baptist church-goer who knows the common expectations for living like a Christian. This was a man who was a member of the most devout, zealous religions who went to great extremes to keep their laws that were supposed to comment on God's law. In their case, their commentary became the Bible. That their opinions superceded the authority of the Bible was okay with them, as long as everyone in public presumed that they were the standard-setters for "God-focused" religion. If the common Jew wanted to know what the "Torah," the "law," the Bible, as it were, required, they could just ask this Baptist – or this Pharisee guy.

Standing in vivid contrast to the devout, law-abiding Pharisee was a tax collector. The tax collector was considered by the public to be the offscouring of the earth. He was also a Jew. However, he worked diligently to land the job as the local tax collector. He collected taxes for the Roman government – which was hated by any Jew worth his salt. The government required him to collect and submit a certain amount of money for taxes. On many of the various taxes he could collect, the man had freedom to make as much for himself as the people would allow, without causing a riot. Therefore, the tax collector class of people gained a reputation for being traitors to the Jews, thieves who robbed their own relatives, and generally the

scum of the earth. If one of these guys attended “church” (synagogue) on Saturday, it would instantly set tongues to wagging.

According to Jesus’ story, both of these guys (the “good” guy and the “bad” guy) went to the temple to pray. That they went to the temple indicates that they were quite serious about their intent. The nation was replete with synagogues where people typically attended each week on the Sabbath to sing songs of praise, read from the Law and the Prophets, hear a sermon, and, of course, hear announcements. In other words, the normal proceedings at the synagogue were much like our typical Sunday morning services.

The temple was far more important. It was the center of religion. It was the precise place God ordained for worshiping Him. Therefore, to go to the temple was often considered a rare privilege. First you had to be in Jerusalem. A Jew might even have felt compelled to take a sacrifice for sin or thanksgiving, or at least to put an offering in one of the offering boxes. This is where a person went when he was serious about worshiping God. The Pharisee was there because he wanted people to think he was serious. The tax collector was there because he was serious.

Now listen to the men pray as Jesus portrayed it. The Pharisee was a very thankful man. He was so thankful that he was not like other people. Jesus described, *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”* (v.11). See the very religious man who went to church every week standing by himself. That was a necessary thing so that he would not take the risk of being infected by someone like that dirty worldling over there – the tax guy. It was also necessary for him to stand by himself so that everyone could see him. If he blended in with the crowd, no one would know how devout he was.

He prayed. This particular Greek word means that the fellow was making requests addressed to God. It does appear from the way Jesus described the man that he was publicly expressing thanks. That’s the sort of thing a religious person ought to do publicly in order to maintain his reputation. Maybe he was even genuinely thankful to God, as his prayer might indicate.

For what was the man thankful? He was so thankful to God that he was better than everyone else. Okay, he didn’t say that exactly, but from the story it is easy to gather that this is what the fellow meant. He said that he was thankful that he wasn’t an extortioner like the men in the community who virtually destroyed others by plundering them financially. He was so thankful that he wasn’t a loan shark nor did he run a utility company or own a health insurance company. Also, he was thankful that he was not unjust, meaning that he was quite sure he didn’t miss the standard of righteousness. He certainly was thankful that he wasn’t having sex outside of marriage. And most obviously, the man was so thankful that he was not like that tax collector praying on the other side of the courtyard. “How could that man even have the nerve to pray after what he had done?” the Pharisee must have thought.

Yes, the very religious man was so thankful that he was different. Indeed he was thankful to God that he himself had made himself different. Say what? Really! Notice that they guy was praying to God expressing thanks that **he had made himself distinct!** That conclusion is obvious by the words that follow. He was so thankful that he did good works. *“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get”* (v.12). Fasting is good, right? Most people are surprised to learn that the Law of Moses required only one fast a year, in preparation for the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29-31). That sounds good to me. I’m going to stick with the law on this one because I typically fast only once each year when I have to have blood work done before my annual visit with the doctor.

The Pharisees, being much more righteous than I, fasted twice a week. Tradition reveals that they usually fasted on Monday and Thursday. Surely that was a sign of righteousness. Not necessarily. But didn’t Jesus encourage fasting? Actually no. He told His followers that they didn’t need to think about fasting until after He had returned to the Father (Matthew 9:15). The problem in Jesus’ day was that the Pharisees fasted for the wrong reasons. Again, as in other religious acts, they did this to be seen by people, to remind the people that they were better, smarter, and more godly. Therefore, Jesus warned His disciples, *“And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward”*

(Matthew 6:16). Yes, but the Pharisee was so thankful that he did this.

He was also thankful that he tithed on everything. At least that is what he claimed. I have a gut feeling that his wonderful tithing was always figured on the net instead of gross. Jesus warned, *“Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward”* (Matthew 6:1-2).

This Pharisee’s prayer sounds a lot like us thanking God that we live in a nice town, in a nice house, drive a nice car, because we have a nice job, because we were smart enough to get a good education. What does God have to do with all that? That’s the kind of stuff men like Donald Sterling accomplish while only mentioning God’s name in cursing.

Speaking of unsavory characters, according to Jesus’ story there was another fellow in the temple precincts praying. Here was a guy who worked for the I.R.S. who desired to be right (vv.13-14). He was a sinner, knew he was a sinner, and prayed confessing his sin. *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!”* (v.13). This man, unlike the Pharisee, did not suffer from delusions of self-righteousness. He hated to admit it, but the Pharisee was right about him. He was a liar and thief – an extortioner. He admitted that he was unjust because he broke God’s law every day. He admitted that he had targeted people who disagreed with him politically, and he intentionally cheated them.

Therefore, since this poor fellow had no good works to offer to God, he beat on his breast in a display of emotional dejection and cried out for God’s mercy. God’s mercy is His kindness to withhold from us the judgment or punishment we deserve. This man understood fully that all he deserved was God’s wrath. He simply threw himself at God’s feet admitting that he was God’s offender and enemy and acknowledged that God could do whatever He chose to do to him.

That is what humility looks like. The self-righteous world looks at a display of genuine, humble contrition and concludes, “What a loser.” “Get some self-esteem man!” God looks at it and says, “Now there’s a man I can help.”

The Judge of righteousness concluded that this man *was made* right. *“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”* (v.14). The sinner left the temple a saint having been made right by God’s grace. The word translated *justified* is the same Greek word used in verse nine where we read that the people were convinced they had made themselves right. Here the Greek syntax means that someone else made the tax collector right. Since the man cried out for God’s mercy, it must have been God who made him right – forever. Because of God’s mercy, this man got into the Kingdom of God! God delights to exalt the same people who bow in humility to Him.

Do you think the man was thankful? Was he as thankful or more thankful than the Pharisee? It seems quite certain that the friends and family of such a person would notice a change in attitude and outlook on life. One would think that every thanksgiving day a man like this would say, “I am so thankful that God had mercy on a sinner like me.” Now let’s close by looking at an example of another person who God justified, even though he had been the pompous Pharisee who was thankful for all the wrong stuff.

The Thanksgiving of a Former Pharisee (1 Timothy 1:12-14).

The former Pharisee confessed that he had been a religious hypocrite (v.13a). That wasn’t quite the way his peers saw him. This sinner’s peers saw him as a very successful religious leader. They had to admit that he had been born into a most religious family. He himself confessed that he had been *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless* (Philippians 3:5-6). Not surprising then, when it came time for the man to go to college, he thrived in the best seminary. One time when he was on trial, he told governing officials, *I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought*

up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day (Acts 22:3). He was chosen to be part of “Who’s Who” and “Outstanding Young Men of Israel.” He was voted most likely to succeed. Even he had to admit, I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Galatians 1:14).

While it was quite true that the man was religious, he was also a wicked sinner. So in later years he wrote to his student Timothy, *Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent (v.13a).* When Saul was a rising star in the dark and failing religion of Judaism, God’s assessment of him was quite the opposite of what people thought. After God had mercy on Saul and turned him into evangelist/apostle Paul, the light dawned on him. What he had been in all his ignorance was now disgusting to him. The brilliant, hard working, law-keeping Pharisee had actually been a blasphemer. He slandered, insulted, and defamed the truth about God, about Jesus, and about the Church (the Bride of Christ). Sure he was ignorant, but ignorance is no excuse. It is not wise to blurt out your disfavor with a player at a high school football game because you might be sitting beside the parent of that boy who just fumbled the ball on the one yard line.

Paul must have been ashamed the rest of his life of how he trashed God the Son and His followers. Worse, he chased down the followers of Christ, tortured them, put them in prison, and assented to the execution of some. All in all, he was an insolent opponent of God. The wording means that the man was a violent, out of control, and overbearing person. He was just plain nasty like some politicians or judges you might know about.

That is where the sinful man came from. And Paul never forgot where he could have been. He was like John Bradford (circa 1510–1555) who is said to have uttered, “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford,” when seeing criminals being led to the scaffold.

That old Pharisee was genuinely thankful for God’s mercy and grace (vv.12, 13b-14). He rejoiced that God had mercy on the wicked sinner (v.13b). He confessed to Timothy, *But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief (v.13b).* Like all people

who are blinded by sin, Paul could not have possibly believed that he was wrong. That is why God in mercy must remove the blinders from our eyes. We all, in our natural condition, are blinded by the god of this world, Satan. In our case, *the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4).* Only through the mercy of God on us can we see the folly and consequences of sin.

So the former Pharisee was thankful that the Lord’s grace overflows for sinners (v.14). He wrote, *And the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (v.14).* God poured out His grace abundantly on Saul the sinner. God’s pouring out of blessing that the sinner did not deserve changed everything for him eternally. Suddenly Christ was not the enemy but the source of faith and genuine love.

The redeemed sinner was thankful that Jesus strengthened him to be His servant. He confessed, *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service (v.12).* The saint should be mindful and thankful for the strength (spiritual and physical) that Christ Jesus gives. The saint should be thankful that Jesus counts us faithful because of His own work in us to appoint us to His service. Thank Jesus Christ for making us servants for His own glory.

Very religious people who are impressed with their own ability to make themselves right talk about thanksgiving. It’s the right thing to do. But, sinners whose eyes God has opened to their sin, sinners who have fallen before God and confessed their sins, have something to be very thankful for during this season. Let’s remember on Thanksgiving Day, “But for the grace of God, there go I.”