

GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME THE SINNER

(SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2024)

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 15:1-6; LUKE 18:9-14

INTRODUCTION

The time of the New Testament is sometimes called 2nd Temple Judaism.

A little more than 40 years ago, some scholars argued that Reformers did not properly understand what many Jewish people believed in the time of the NT and that it was *improper* to say that they believed in works-righteousness.

Some of these ideas are known under the name the **New Perspective on Paul movement**.

This movement says that the Reformers were wrong to compare Roman Catholicism and its views on salvation and works to the Jews at the time of Jesus.

Further these scholars have come up with new ideas about what justification means with some taking it into a very radical, ecumenical idea that all who have some general idea of God are saved.¹

While we agree that history and grammar are vital for interpreting the Bible, we also believe that the Bible is **key for interpreting other portions of the Bible**.

Far more important than what some scholar says is what God's Word clearly says.

In the gospels and then some of the epistles, we are given an essential understanding of what many Jewish people sadly believed about righteousness and salvation.

¹ Cornelis Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*, see footnote 27 on page 23 for a quotation by James E. Dunn.

We will consider some of these important details as we look at our text from Luke 18.

God, be merciful to me the sinner!

1] Background and Context in Luke

2] Purpose and Parable, Luke 18:9-13

3] This man went down to his house justified, Luke 18:14

1] BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT IN LUKE

The purpose of the gospels is not to give an exhaustive background of all the beliefs and practices of God's people at that time.

But there is much that we do learn, especially about those who were in positions of leadership and influence.

Let's consider several passages.

Luke 3:7 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? **8** Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. **9** And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Man lowered through the roof so that Jesus could see and heal him:

Luke 5:20 When He saw their faith, He said to him, "Man, your sins are forgiven you."

Luke 5:21 And the **scribes** and the **Pharisees** began to reason, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Clearly Jesus clashed with the leading religious figures of his time. Who was right?

Obviously, Jesus!

So, we know that most of the leading figures in Israel were under God's wrath and judgment save that they turn to the Lord Jesus Christ.

But in God's grace there were those who did see Jesus properly.

Simeon in **Luke 2:30** - For my eyes have seen Your salvation.

Anna in **Luke 2:38** - She gave thanks to the Lord, and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Thankfully there were some who in God's grace came to see the truth in Jesus Christ.

Luke 5:32 I have not come to call *the* righteous, but sinners, to repentance.

The difficult demands of discipleship show that the message Jesus was bringing would bring great conflict for those who followed after Jesus.

Following after Jesus would mean suffering and persecution at the hands of others in Israel.

Luke 6:22 Blessed are you when men hate you,
And when they exclude you,
And revile *you*, and cast out your name as evil,

For the Son of Man's sake.

In Luke 7, Jesus accepted the worship of a sinful woman which caused great scandal among other Pharisees who were at the home of Simon.

Luke 7:47 Therefore I say to you, her sins, *which are many*, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, *the same* loves little."

I want to mention one other detail in terms of the context of this passage.

These two parables on prayer on one had seem quite different, but they are connected in their use of the root word of justice in Greek, the word *dike*.

This root is used **9 times in verses 3-14**.

Verse 3 - justice

Verse 5 - avenge

Verse 6 - unjust

Verse 7 - avenge

Verse 8 - avenge

Verse 9 - righteous

Verse 11 - unjust

Verse 14 - justified

2] PURPOSE AND PARABLE, LUKE 18:9-13

Just like the first parable in Luke 18, we observe that in this second parable we also find the **purpose** of the parable given first.²

This parable was spoken to some who **trusted in themselves that they were righteous** and **despised others**.

This introduction is very important, because it teaches us that not everyone thought this way, but it must have been common enough that Jesus had to speak about it.

The word **righteous** is used to describe others in the NT.

Matt. 1:19 Then Joseph her husband, being a **just man**, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.

Of Zacharias and Elizabeth we read:

Luke 1:6 And they were both **righteous** before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

How were Zacharias and Elizabeth righteous before God?

Was it simply their own efforts in terms of obedience and following God's Law?

Definitely not, otherwise there was no need for Jesus to come.

The answer must be because this couple had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and given faith to believe in the promise that God would send the Messiah who would bring true atonement for sin.

² Snodgrass says these are the only two parables with this structure.

MacArthur stated:

They believed in God. They believed in the true and living God. They believed the Word of God. They believed the revelation of the Old Testament. They believed God's holy law was right and true and just and good. They believed that they couldn't keep His law. They knew they were sinners who fell short of the law of God and they knew that the law of God called for penitence and repentance and they also knew that God was a God of mercy and grace and loving-kindness. They believed all that and so they saw the law of God, they saw its holy standard. They realized they fell short of it. They went to God with a penitent heart and they asked Him for grace and mercy.³

Rom. 10:3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

We should also realize that in Jesus using a Pharisee in his parable, he is not using someone that would have been **despised** by most Jews at the time but greatly respected.

The tax-collector on the other hand, was definitely viewed as someone compromised and working for the enemy.

Luke 7:34 The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, "Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

Luke 15:1 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.

In verse 11 we read that the Pharisee prayed thus with himself.

Versions differ on the best way of translating this expression.

³ John MacArthur, Sermon on Luke 1:5-7.

It might be best to read as prayed about himself with the idea that he was praying out loud for all to hear.⁴

I have mentioned repeatedly, that in the gospels you see how Jesus so powerfully cuts through external matters and shows the nature of the heart.

What we find in this prayer of the Pharisee is not simply an exaggeration.

This is the natural expression of those who trust in themselves that they are righteous.

I almost get the sense that Jesus in telling this parable cut off the prayer of the Pharisee with the end of verse 12.

We have heard enough.

Though the prayer begins with giving thanks, everything else in the prayer is about himself – what he is not and what he is.

He is not a swindler.

He is not unjust.

He is not an adulterer.

He is definitely not like the tax collector who was walking up to the temple with him.

How often did God's Law require people to fast?

Only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

This Pharisee boasted of how he fasted about 100 times a year.

And like we have seen in other places, he was very careful to tithe on everything that was gain.

⁴ NET Bible.

Some say Pharisees even tithed on what they purchased not being certain if the producer had given a tithe.⁵

I mentioned earlier the debate about what many people in the time of the NT believed.

What does the first part of the parable teach us?

Did the Jewish people believe in grace?

Certainly. This Pharisee gave thanks.

What is the problem?

His confidence is entirely on his own works.

John Calvin wrote very well here:

For this thanksgiving, which is presented exclusively in his own name, does not at all imply that he boasted of his own virtue, as if he had obtained righteousness from himself, or merited any thing by his own industry. On the contrary, he ascribes it to the grace of God that he is righteous. Now though his thanksgiving to God implies an acknowledgment, that all the good works which he possessed were purely the gift of God, **yet as he places reliance on works, and prefers himself to others, himself and his prayer are alike rejected.**

The problem and confusion among the vast majority of people is not that they deny God is gracious or that they don't need God's grace.

The problem as Jesus highlights is that they place their **confidence in what they do** and do not recognize that it is totally impossible we could satisfy God's Law and turn away His wrath through our own efforts.

⁵ Snodgrass.

We can also identify a second major problem with this Pharisee – his despising of others, and in particular this tax collector.⁶

Another very peculiar aspect of our sinfulness is that we can emphasize our own obedience in some areas and cover over our sin in other areas.

The Pharisee is very much like the older brother in the Parable of the Father and the Two Sons that we noted earlier in Luke 15.

The context is not entirely identical, but John warns repeatedly about those who claim to be believers but who hate their brother.

1John 2:9 He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. **10** He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. **11** But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

The tax collector demonstrated a very different attitude.

Observe what Jesus stressed in relating the prayer of the tax-collector.

The description of how he stood and acted his longer than the short words of his prayer.⁷

He stood afar off, recognizing his own unworthiness before a holy God.

In a similar way he did not raise his eyes.

And third, he repeatedly beat his breast, another expression of humility before God.⁸

⁶ Interesting that nothing is mentioned in the MacArthur Study Bible on this point. Klyne Snodgrass stresses this even more than the previous issue. Clearly Jesus mentions two things in verse 9.

⁷ Snodgrass, 466.

⁸ Snodgrass pointed out that the verb is imperfect, which I confirmed. It is not just a one-time action.

And then we have his prayer, which though short shows that God has brought him to a proper understanding.

Most versions read, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

However, some translations read, **the sinner!**

And the HCSB translates the word mercy as **turn Your wrath from me.**

Heb. 2:17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make **propitiation** for the sins of the people.

This prayer might be very short, but it is not simplistic.

3] THIS MAN WENT DOWN TO HIS HOUSE JUSTIFIED, LUKE 18:14

We are so used to hearing this parable that it does not shock us, but when first given it likely would have been shocking to many.

You mean the tax-collector not the Pharisee went down to his house justified?

Yes, and a reason is given by our Lord.

Those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

And he who humbles himself will be exalted.

It is significant that the words of Jesus in verse 14 are used again by both James and Peter.

James 4:6 But He gives more grace. Therefore He says:

*“God resists the proud,
But gives grace to the humble.”*

James 4:10 **Humble** yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

We need to also consider the importance of the word **justified** as used by our Lord in verse 14.

This verb **justified** is the same word used repeatedly in the book of Romans.

Rom. 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

Rom. 3:24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Rom. 3:28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Obviously, Jesus had not yet given Himself on the cross as the final and great sacrifice for sin.

However, this tax-collector by God’s grace was brought to an understanding of sin and the only way of salvation found in the turning away of God’s wrath which would be accomplished soon.

Some have suggested that the going to the temple to pray could have been at the time of sacrifice, which we see in Luke 1:10, the hour of incense and also sacrifice.⁹

⁹ “The hours of morning and evening sacrifices were also the major public hours of prayer in the temple (cf. Acts 3:1).”

We cannot be dogmatic about the time, but we do see in this very chapter, the third reference to Jesus speaking to His disciples about his coming death and resurrection.

CONCLUSION:

God, be merciful to me the sinner!

John Calvin wrote:

For it is not said that *the [tax-collector] publican* was justified, because he suddenly acquired some new quality, but that he obtained grace, because his guilt was blotted out, and his sins were washed away. Hence it follows, that *righteousness* consists in the forgiveness of sins.

We are not saved because we pray some little prayer and then earn God's favor.

We are saved when God by His grace and power brings us to the point of confession of sin and a trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation.

The question then is not, have you prayed some prayer and asked Jesus into your heart, but rather have you also been brought to this same place of confession and trust?

R. C. Sproul mentioned in his commentary that back in the 1960's when he participated in evangelistic outreaches through his church that the most common answer he received at that time for why people thought they were saved was the answer of works-righteousness.

Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 188.

“I tried to live a good life.” “I went to church every Sunday.” “I tithed my income.” “I did this good work and performed that good work.” Ninety percent of the people answered that they were trusting in their own righteousness.

The reason for this as I mentioned earlier is that this is the natural understanding for those who trust in themselves.

I have mentioned before the 2022 Ligonier State of Theology poll.

66% of those surveyed agreed with the statement that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature.

Only 28% disagreed.

Now thankfully most identified evangelicals in the survey did give the correct answer concerning salvation in terms of not our own works but through faith in Jesus Christ, but still there is significant confusion among “Christians in general.”¹⁰

And this survey is *shocking* in terms of what supposed Bible-believing Christians believe on other very critical issues!

60. How are you righteous before God?

Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself

¹⁰ <https://thestateoftheology.com/data-explorer/2022/14?AGE=30&MF=14®ION=30&DENSITY=62&EDUCATION=62&INCOME=254&MARITAL=126ÐNICITY=62&RELTRAD=62&EVB=2&ATTENDANCE=254>

accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.¹¹

Prayer

Hymn 403

BENEDICTION – EPHESIANS 3:20-21

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

¹¹ For some reason Venema lists this as Q/A 59 in his book, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*.