

Jesus and Justification

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Bible Verse: Luke 18:9-14
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This morning, what we're going to do is we're going to turn to a particular passage to set us with the right mindset, the right disposition for a time of sharing with Christ at his table because this truly is the table of the Lord that we are about to share in. It belongs to him. He appointed it. It's a remembrance of him. It's not the table of Truth Community Church, it's certainly not my table, God forbid, but this is a table of the Lord to which he invites his disciples, his followers to share in in a grateful remembrance of him and one of the ways, one of the marks of a right and proper heart disposition in taking the elements of communion is that they would be taken with a sense of humility, a sense of bowing low in worship before the Christ who saved us, remembering that we come not in our own merit but actually we are remembering and confessing as we take communion that we do not deserve to be here; we are confessing that we do not deserve Christ because we are remembering a sacrifice that turned away the wrath of God from our own sins and that there was a loving Savior sent from heaven, the eternal Son of God who voluntarily interposed and intervened on our behalf to rescue us from the wrath of God which we all so richly deserve, you and me. So we want to remember those things and you can turn to the book of Luke 18, that's going to be where we find our communion meditation here this morning. We come and we remember that this is a time where we consciously and deliberately push aside our pride, we set it aside, we even repent of our pride and our self-righteousness, our boastful spirits before God and before each other, and we see and we remember that we are nothing more, none of us are anything more than lumps of sinful clay redeemed by a precious Redeemer who set his eternal, sovereign, great, inexhaustible, sacrificial love on us and that's what we remember as we come to the communion table here this morning and our message will prepare us in that direction.

Luke 18, beginning in verse 9, and let me just say a word so that I don't have to cover this when we move into the elements in a little while. We practice what we call, what's known as in theology open communion here at Truth Community Church. You do not need to be a member of our church in order to share in this table with us. It's not the Truth Community Church table, it's the table of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so every true disciple of Christ, if you have repented of your sin and put your faith in Christ for your salvation, you are welcome to join us at this table and this table is for you as well as for our members and our regular attenders but it is a table for those who are repentant, for those who are not consciously clinging to sin in their lives. This is not a place to come

with a stubborn unrepentant heart but if you are a Christian with a soft heart and repentant as you are here with us this morning, we're delighted to welcome you and invite you to join us in this celebration of our Lord and yours.

Luke 18, beginning in verse 9, it says this, it says that,

9 ... He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This parable answers the question how can a man be right with God. What kind of man is it that is right with God, to state it in a different way, and what Jesus does in this story that he tells, is he contrasts self-righteousness with a humble repentance and that's just so vital to your understanding of what real Christianity is. It's a contrast between self-righteousness and a humble repentant faith in the saving mercy of God. So Jesus tells this parable, he describes two men that were reflective of real men at the time but he's described, it's a parable, he's describing not a real historical situation but illustrating it through a very plausible situation and it's two different men in contrast with one another in order to make this point about what kind of man it is that God accepts into his presence.

Look at verse 9 with me again. He says, speaking of Jesus that he told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt, and so this is a parable addressing and convicting and even condemning those who view themselves as righteous in their own merit, those who trust in their own works, their own religious observances in this particular context, as being that which obligates God to them and which would give them favor with God, "God, look at what I do. Here I am," and approaching him on that basis. These hearers were trusting in their own righteousness, their own merit, their own goodness, Jesus says, and what the parable teaches us is this, that someone like that is outside the kingdom of God. And it's a shocking parable in that way because as in that day, so also in ours, we tend to think about sinners as being those who are the most, of the most profligate kind and those who share in a common external morality are somehow better, the churchgoing people are the ones who are saved and the ones outside that are deep in sin are those who have no access to God, and Jesus takes that common mindset and turns it completely upside down as we will see, and to set that in motion, he contrasts a Pharisee with a tax collector in order to change the thinking of those who trusted in their own righteousness.

So look at it there with me in verse 10, he said, "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." Now we need just a little bit of background information here for this to make sense in our 21st century culture because we don't have Pharisees in the same way that they were present in the first century and we have tax collectors but not like this in the first century, and so let me just say a few words of background to set the stage because the difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector is central to the point that Jesus is making here.

The Pharisees were a religious party of the Jews and they prided themselves in their separation from sinners in their observance of meticulous religious observances, as you see reflected in the words that are put on his lips, and the Pharisees were greatly respected by the general population as being the holy and pious men of their day. When you said a Pharisee to somebody, they would have been viewed as those with respect and those with spiritual authority. One source says from the contemporary times, that when a Pharisee says something, they are automatically believed. So great was their authority and their position in society and in the religious realm in particular, that they were viewed as the ones who were the most holy men in their midst. Those hearing Jesus tell this parable would automatically have thought of the Pharisee as a righteous and holy man simply because he was a Pharisee and Jesus uses a tax collector to make a contrast with that Pharisee. Tax collectors, unlike the Pharisees, were men who were greatly detested by the Jews of their day. Tax collectors sold their services to Rome who was the ruling government over that area at the time, they sold their services to Rome in order to collect taxes from their fellow Jews so they could make money off of their fellow kinsmen, their fellow Jews. And tax collectors were known as men who cheated people, who overcharged on the taxes and kept the surplus for themselves, and so you can imagine if you were in an environment like that where one of your own kinsmen has betrayed you, sold himself to a foreign service and with the authority of that foreign service comes to you, takes more than he should, enriches himself at your expense and you are left with the crumbs of the leftovers. Well, that's the way that it was at the time and these tax collectors were men who were hated and you can see that reflected a chapter later in Luke 19 in the story about Zacchaeus.

Why don't we turn there for just a moment. You remember the story of Zacchaeus. It's always difficult for me not to say that he was a wee little man whenever I mention his name, a wee little man was he, but I'm going to resist the temptation to do that here this morning. In chapter 19, verse 2, it says, and this is an historical account not a parable but an actual encounter with a man that Jesus had with a man named Zacchaeus and he was a chief tax collector and he was rich it says there in verse 2. And you know the story of Zacchaeus and this isn't our text, it could be another time, we've taught on it in the past here, but just to remember, just to remind you that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, climbs up in the sycamore tree so that he could get a good view. Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, come down, I want to talk with you. I want to spend the evening with you. I have an appointed time with you," the language means. And Zacchaeus in verse 6 hurried and came down and received him gladly. Then my point in going here this morning is here in verse 7, "When they saw it," when the crowd saw it, "they all began to grumble, saying, 'He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'" Jesus is associating with someone that

they hated, who was a member of the despised class of tax collectors, and it wasn't just that he was any tax collector, he had a position of supervisory authority. He was a chief tax collector and what I want you to see for today's purpose is they immediately resented it and they said, "That Zacchaeus is a sinner. Jesus has no business being with him." That's critical to the story.

So what we have here as you turn back a page in your Bible to Luke 18 again, is that putting ourselves in the shoes of the audience, in the sandals of the audience as I like to say, those hearing the story, hearing Jesus' introduction to his parable would have heard about a Pharisee, "Oh, a righteous man, a holy man," and a tax collector and the boos and hisses would have come out as they heard the mention of that class of people. So they're thinking the Pharisee is a righteous man, the tax collector is a sinner, "Okay, Jesus, we're ready to get on with the story. I get it. I get it. You're going to tell us about a righteous man and an unrighteous man," and Jesus uses this setting to teach us something about the doctrine of justification.

Justification in theological terms is this: it is an act of God, before I go any further let me just point this out to you so that you see where I'm coming from and where I'm going. At the end of verse 14 he says, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other." Justified, considered righteous by God, and that's what we're going to focus on here this morning; that's where we're going and now we need to follow the path that Jesus takes to lead us to that point. Justification is an act of God in which he pardons every sin that a man has ever committed and accepts him as righteous. This act of justification is given to those who humbly repent and believe in Christ. Justification, just to give you the definition again, is an act of God in which he pardons every sin and accepts as righteous the one who believes in Christ. That is the most important thing that you could know that belongs to you is that you have been justified by God because ultimately whatever success we have, whatever prominence we have in life whether we have poverty or riches, whether we have sickness or health, none of it ultimately matters, beloved, compared to that great day when you stand before God and the outcome of life is either resulting in you being welcomed into heaven for the experience of eternal blessedness with your Savior, or you are sent away and Christ says to you, "Depart from Me, I never knew you." That's what matters, beloved, and when I say that's what matters, that's not my opinion, that's just an objective fact that what happens to you in eternity is far more important than what happens to you on earth. Better to be the beggar Lazarus eating crumbs off the table of a rich man during your earthly life and finding yourself in heaven at the end, rather than being that esteemed rich man who finds himself condemned and in Hades and just simply asking for a simple drop of water to cool the heat that's on his tongue. Beloved, you have to agree that that is more important. What happens in eternity is more important than what happens on earth and when you start to understand that, then it starts to drive you to say, "I need to understand these things. I need to know that I've been justified, declared righteous by God, and I need to know how to receive that gift because if I die without it, the consequences are unimaginable."

So Jesus is teaching on the most critical thing that he could teach about and what we find in this parable, beloved, is this, sweet sweet news to sinners, a judgment on the proud and

boastful, is that God justifies not on the basis of anything in us. If you have been justified, it's not because of anything in you that God would accept you as righteous. That could never be the case because Scripture is clear in multiple places and in a summary verse that we all know, that it says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We are all guilty, condemned before God in ourselves because we have all violated his law, and while we might have comparative degrees of moral external righteousness compared to someone else on a purely horizontal level, that means nothing vertically before God because Scripture says that if you've broken one commandment, you've broken them all. If you've broken the law, you're a lawbreaker and therefore condemned even if you have not sinned in the particular ways that others themselves have sinned in. As I like to say, the older I get and the longer I do this, the more I repeat myself. I'm getting an idea of what it's like when I'm older and my mind starts to go even more than it already has, I just repeat myself again and again and that's all right. But we just have to realize that even if you had not committed the sins that someone else has committed, maybe you're not the outwardly flaming sinner that others are, what you need to remember and understand is that they haven't done your sins either. So this isn't about comparing who's better man-to-man, this is about coming up against the perfect holiness of God, the perfect standard of his law, and realizing that we are all guilty when judged by that right and holy standard.

So what do we do with that? Well, we realize, then, that a holy God cannot accept a guilty sinner into his presence, that something has to be done with sin, and now we start to understand that God could not justify us on the basis of anything that is in us at all. Rather, here is the key pivot point, rather God justifies a sinner solely because he imputes, he counts to the benefit of a sinner the righteousness of Christ in Christ's obedient life and sacrificial death. To say this another way because this is just so really important for us to understand that it's worth taking our time on, God accepts you as a Christian not because of anything that you have done but God accepts you as a Christian because he accepts the perfect righteousness of Christ in your place. He accepts Christ's righteousness on your behalf. Christ represents you, as it were, before God and the perfect righteousness of Christ that is representing you is acceptable to God and God accepts us in Christ on that basis. Not because you're good and moral or have done anything to deserve that, that's all precluded, that's all preempted, none of us are like that that we have anything of our own that merits God's acceptance. What we have are filthy rags of uncleanness, filthy rags of no righteousness of our own that's what Scripture says about our righteousness, and so if we are going to be accepted before a righteous God, we must have a righteousness that is not our own, a righteousness that is outside of us as I've been saying repeatedly over the past several weeks. God accepts you in Christ not because you are good enough but because Christ was, and that must be clear in your mind that you are trusting in the righteousness and the person of Christ for your acceptance with God, not in anything that you have done. That has an effect. First of all, it's humbling, it's humbling to realize that as Scripture says we truly have nothing to boast about before God. Boasting is excluded. But it's also for those of us, you and me that are guilty sinners, it's also wonderfully liberating and a joy to recognize, "Oh, praise God that my sin is no longer a barrier to my fellowship with Him. My sin is no longer going to be a grounds of condemnation for me because the righteousness of Christ is the ground of

my acceptance with God, and now I am accepted, I am forgiven, and even though I still fall short, my imperfect practice of the Christian life was never the grounds of God accepting me in the first place, it was always the perfect righteousness of Christ on which He received me and accepted Me."

So God accepts, for those who put their faith in Christ, God accepts the righteousness of Christ on your behalf. He is our substitute. He is our representative. And you say, "Well, yeah, but what about my sin?" I used to wonder about that as a new Christian. I hadn't quite gotten it yet. God accepts the righteousness of Christ on your behalf, he imputes the righteousness of Christ to you, and in like manner, God imputes your sin to Christ who suffered on the cross in the place of sinners and bore the full punishment of God for sin for everyone who believes in him so that in the courtroom of God, your sins have been rightly punished by a representative, Christ on your behalf, your substitute, in your place, and that righteousness of Christ is imputed to your account so that the judge declares you – watch this – God, the judge, does not simply declare you not guilty, although that's true but it's more than just not guilty, God declares you as perfectly righteous because he accepts the righteousness of Christ on your behalf, and that is the basis of our salvation, and because your righteousness before God is premised on the righteousness of Christ, it does not fluctuate with your imperfect obedience during the course of your Christian life here on earth. You are given a perfect righteousness from the start so that – watch this – you are no more justified now 30 years into your Christian life than you were 30 seconds into your Christian life. The righteousness upon which God saves you is exactly the same 30 seconds into your salvation and 30 years into your salvation. Yes, we must grow in sanctification but the basis upon which God accepts us is solely and exclusively that righteousness of Christ.

So justification is a legal declaration by God that says this, that you as a sinner believing in Christ are free from all condemnation, Romans 8:1, right? "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." You are free from all condemnation and you are fully accepted in God's most holy sight. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "He made Him," meaning Christ, "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Your sin laid on Christ, punished at the cross. His perfect righteousness laid on you and God accepts you on that basis. As John MacArthur is fond of saying, God treated Christ as though he had lived your life so that he could treat you like you had lived the life of Christ. That's the principle of substitution and it is an imputation received as a free gift.

Now how does that play into our passage here in Luke 18. Let's go back there, Luke 18, with all of that introduction in place and we'll go through the rest of this rather quickly, I think. Famous last words from me. But first of all, in light of those truths, let's see first of all the danger of pride. The danger of pride. As Jesus is illustrating these principles of justification and how justification is received, he points to the Pharisee and what we see is that the Pharisee's prayer betrayed the condition of his proud heart.

Look at verse 11, he says, "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself," notice that he's got himself in mind there. I always am struck by that, "to himself." This is not

real prayer at all, this is self-boasting at its heart in the guise, under the pretense of prayer, and he says there in verse 11, "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." What's he doing here? He's looking at others with contempt. He recites their sins to God. Can you imagine when you understand the biblical nature of our sin and guilt before God, can you imagine going before God and thanking him that you're not guilty of the sins that others have committed? What kind of mindset is that? What kind of pride dripping, awful pride is that that you would go to God and thank him that you're not like other sinners? This is not humble prayer, this is pride dripping out with all of its ugliness and he manifests a self-righteous spirit that God actually condemns.

Look at it there in verse 12, he says, "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." See how he's relying on and pointing to his own righteousness as the grounds upon which he is speaking to God? Now in Scripture there was only one required fast every year at the day of atonement. You can read about that in Leviticus 16. The practice of the Pharisees, here's why this is important, the practice of the Pharisees was that they fasted on Mondays and Thursdays every week. Now think about it and just do the math with me on this, okay? Scripture requires one fast of the faithful Jews in that day, the Pharisee is saying, "And I fast twice a week. God," here's what he's really saying, "God, I am far more righteous than even You require. In fact, I'm 100 times more righteous based on my pattern of fasting compared to Your word. I'm 100 times more righteous than what You Yourself require, God." He's feeling pretty good about himself and yet he had totally missed the spirit of the fast, that the spirit of the fast was a confession of sin, that, "I'm in need of atonement. I'm in need of a substitute sacrifice so that I can approach You." He utterly bypassed the sacrificial substitutionary sacrifice that was made on the day of atonement and just focused on the external observance and said, "I'm so righteous, I don't even need that." God, having revealed his pattern, had a man in front of him in prayer who said, "God, I'll set Your standard aside and let me talk about mine."

There's a verse for that in the New Testament. You don't need to turn there, I'll just quote it, but this idea of man-made religion, man-made fasts and religious observances, they mean nothing. They carry no weight, no power of persuasion with God whatsoever. Colossians 2:23 is clear and emphatic and dogmatic on the point when it says, "These things are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in," watch this, "self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." They do nothing, these external observances that so many people are fascinated with, step into any Catholic Church and you'll find my words vindicated here, all of those external observances and kneel down and stand up and come and take a wafer from the priest and whatever else they want to do, it has no value in the court of God and therefore it's of no value whatsoever for your soul because, beloved, it is not the way that God has appointed that we would approach him. That is not it. God does not accept self-created righteousness.

Look at the book of Romans with me, please, Romans 3 beginning in verse 19. Romans 3:19, and actually let's just go back to verse 18 and at this rate I'll be back at chapter 1, verse 1, in about five minutes. But in verse 18, Paul in expressing the condemnation of

the entire human race says, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." People think they can approach God or ignore God without consequence. Really? You think there will be no consequence to ignoring the one who has manifested his glory in creation, who has revealed himself in his inerrant word, who has revealed himself in the Incarnate Word in Christ? You think there will be no consequences to that? Not humbling yourself before him? There is no fear of God before their eyes. In chapter 3, verse 19, it says, "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight," no flesh will be declared righteous in his sight, "for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." God does not accept your righteousness as the grounds of reconciliation with him, and this Pharisee, boastful and unaware, is manifesting the very attitude that God condemns.

Wow. How then can a sinner be right with God? We've seen the danger of pride, let's look at point 2, the demonstration of repentant faith. The demonstration of repentant faith. What attitude is it that does find grace with God if we come with no, bearing no righteousness of our own? What attitude does find favor with God? Look at verse 13, "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" The verb tense here when it says he was beating his breast gives the picture that he kept on beating his chest. The knowledge and the weight of his sin weighed on him inside and he beat his breast as a means of physically expressing and physically seeking relief from the spiritual torment that was in him. "God, help me! God, there is this pain that I want to beat out of me and I can't!" As he pleaded with God, his physical actions were an expression of the agitation of his soul and what he is saying in this deep and profound prayer is this, "God, let Your anger be turned away from me. I know I'm guilty, that's the problem. I know I have no claim, I can't even look up to heaven. I can't look in Your direction, God, because my knowledge of sin tells me that that cannot happen, that You can't receive me as I am." And his prayer expressed that his only hope was in the mercy of God.

Look at it again with me in verse 13, "the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" The only sinner that was in his mind was himself. The sinner that was not in the mind of the Pharisee was himself. The Pharisee had everybody else's sins in mind, the tax collector had no one else's sins in his mind but his own. "I'm the sinner. I'm the guilty one. I'm the one to blame. I blame no one else. God, I take responsibility for my sin." He understood that he was helpless. He understood that he was righteously condemned. He had a debt he could not pay. He boasted of nothing, he offered God nothing.

What was he doing as this guilty condemned sinner, what was he doing in this prayer? Beloved, he was asking God for mercy that he knew he did not deserve. He was looking for a righteousness that was not his own. That's what he was doing. By faith he asked for mercy from God. By faith he asked God to grant him favor and to give him an acceptance that he did not deserve. This is an expression of repentant faith. "God, I believe You to be

a merciful God. My sin overwhelms me. God, I'm asking You to do something for me that I don't deserve, accept me, save me, redeem me, cleanse me. I want to be accepted by You but I know I can't be in myself so, God, I'm asking for mercy to come down because I don't have a righteousness that can go up." And my friends, I ask you, is this not what King David did after his great sin with Bathsheba and his murder by command of her husband, Uriah?

Turn back to Psalm 51 with me. We are illustrating the prayers of repentant faith, the faith that lays hold of the righteousness of God. Psalm 51:1 says this in a prayer that you here today as a guilty sinner convicted by the Spirit of your separation from God, this is a model of the attitude that you can adopt toward Christ today in the New Testament era. Psalm 51:1, David a greatly guilty man prayed this, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me." He can't get it off his mind. He can't escape. The echo chamber of the judgment of his own conscience, "Guilty, guilty, guilty..." and he takes a breath and it repeats, "Guilty, guilty, guilty, guilty... God, help me out of this." And he says in verse 4, "Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge." Here he is using the word justified to say, "God, however You deal with me will be just. You will be righteous. I declare in advance that You're justified to deal with me however You want because I have forfeited all claim on Your favor." You see, beloved, what we see here from the tax collector's prayer, from David's prayer, is this common theme of an open acknowledgment and an acceptance of responsibility for our guilt.

Look at how often he says it, verse 1, "my transgressions, wash me, my iniquity, my sin, my transgressions. Mine is the guilt. Mine is the sin, O God." Well, then, if you're guilty and condemned, why are you even praying? What's the point? Isn't it hopeless? No. No, David appeals to God and says, "God, I'm appealing not to my righteousness but to Your lovingkindness. God, I'm appealing to Your grace. I'm asking You to be favorable toward me. I'm appealing to Your compassion. God, You're a compassionate God toward miserable sinners like me. Why don't You exercise Your nature toward me? I'm asking You for compassion from Your great character. God, I am asking You for mercy that I know I don't deserve."

Go back to Luke 18 now. Luke 18. So Jesus has set up his point brilliantly. You have this self-righteous Pharisee respected as the holy man in the community having prayed like he prayed. You have this tax collector condemned by the community praying like he prayed. What's the verdict? Jesus delivers the verdict and that brings us to our third point. If you're taking notes, you can just call it the declaration of righteousness. The declaration of righteousness. After the brief parable, Jesus delivers the verdict. Chapter 18, verse 14, he says, "I tell you, this man," this man being a reference to a near reference, the one that he had just been speaking about, this man that I was just talking about, this tax collector, in other words, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other." This is a thunderbolt of a conclusion. This is a massive earthquake, spiritually speaking,

to those who had heard. This man went away justified, in other words, God's standards were met in him. What God requires was met in him.

What is it that he did? He made a confession of sin coupled with a humble faith of asking for mercy from God that he didn't deserve and Jesus says that's what God requires. We could say it today, what God requires from you is not greater efforts at obedience for you to be accepted with him, your obedience is always going to be imperfect, it's always sullied. A fallen creature can't render perfect obedience, now can it? So what God requires is for you to come to Christ and say, "Christ, be merciful to me, the sinner. I abandon any claim, any pretense of my own righteousness. I openly confess my own guilt and condemnation before You and I ask on the basis of the cross that you would have mercy on my unworthy soul." And Scripture says that the one who approaches God like that finds justification. The one who does any other way, "Yeah, I'm good enough to go to heaven," is condemned because it's not on our own righteousness that we approach God at all. You have to abandon your claim to self-righteousness. All of it. You have to deny yourself. You have to deny any claim of your own righteousness which I'm happy to tell you I freely do, I have no righteousness of my own before God. I trust in Christ alone for mercy I don't deserve and for a righteousness that is not my own that God will accept, and every true Christian at heart, that is their confession. "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

So the Pharisee pronounced him self-righteous and walked away condemned by God. The tax collector confessed his genuine real sin and went home justified. It's not what humans would make up. Jesus teaches that a sinner receives immediate permanent justification from God by faith apart from any works that he has done. This tax collector had done nothing meritorious in his prayer and Jesus says he walked away freely justified by God because the appeal was not to his own righteousness but to the mercy of God now in our day revealed fully in Christ after the cross.

Go back to the book of Romans 3 for just a moment as we bring this to a conclusion and turn our eyes toward the communion table. Romans 3:28. Whenever I ask you to turn to a verse, just automatically subtract one and that will help. In Romans 3:28, beginning in verse 27, the Apostle Paul says, "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." Down to chapter 4, verse 5, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works. Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." With the tax collector, there was no process that he went through, no confirmation class, there was no priest between him and God, there were no rituals, there was no purgatory. He was immediately justified. God declared him righteous by faith and imputed a standing to him that he did not earn or deserve and, beloved, you and I are in that same blessed position when we come to Christ in this humble repentant way. All of your guilt, all of your lawless deeds, all of your sin covered, washed away by the precious blood of Christ and an acceptance with God that you didn't deserve but which is

real, which is permanent, which is immediate, which cannot be improved upon by what you do afterwards, and it cannot be taken away or diminished by what you do later because it is not premised on your righteousness at all, it's premised on the perfect righteousness of Christ, that perfect righteous life which he offered up on the cross to take away your sin so that God would not take your sins into account in his dealings with you.

So beloved, we've all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. You and me, people in the room, people outside the room, we're all in the same boat, we're all in that same leaky sinking boat, but for those of us that have turned to Christ and asked for mercy, God has answered with a salvation and a gift of righteousness that is far greater than we can imagine or understand because he imputes to us, he gives to us, he credits to us that perfect obedience that Christ rendered to his law during his earthly life in his Incarnation. So as we come to the table now, what we remember is this, we are on the receiving end of a great gift that we did not deserve. This table speaks to us of how much that inexhaustible love of Christ, what the measure of it is. It gives us a tangible reminder that he loved us to death, and the glory that was intrinsically his as deity, he willingly laid aside the prerogatives of that in order to become man and to become the sacrifice that would save you from sin, so that when you ask God for mercy, there was a basis upon which that could be accepted. If Christ had not done that, we would all be lost. He has done that and those who trust in him are saved and can partake of these elements with joy.

Let's bow together in prayer as the young men come forward who will distribute the elements for us.

O Lord our God, You offered Your life, O Christ, up as our substitute and Your Father punished You in our place for our sins. With humility and with gratitude, we remember Your great love and Your great sacrifice by which You gave yourself for us in this which we are about to partake. We thank You for that. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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