

Flee Damning Self-Righteousness
Luke 18:9-14
BBC, February 27, 2011

You must humble yourself to receive the salvation of God's perfect righteousness.

Whose righteousness are you trusting in for your salvation? (v. 9)

Do you compare yourself with others... before God? (v. 10-12)

Do you believe you are the most sinful sinner you know? (v. 13)

Humble yourself to receive the salvation of God's perfect righteousness. (v. 14)

I appreciate the opportunity to share this morning. I choose this text because this is something I need to hear, and I thought my soul would benefit from its study. I pray you will share the blessings of this instruction along with me.

In order to help illustrate the point of the Scriptures this morning, I would like to share with you two fictitious people who are here this morning in this worship service who are illustrative of lesson before us this morning. (Please know that any likeness of these fictional characters to any particular person is entirely coincidental, and not intended by the speaker.)

So two different people are with us today. Let me introduce you to the first. This young man has a father who is a wealthy politician in Springfield. He has been spoiled all his life, and is now a rebel of the most offensive kind. As he comes in this morning, you cannot help but notice his tattoos, his tall Mohawk set off by the shaved head, his clothing which can only be described as expensive offense. Designer jeans hung low, and his new brightly colored shoes demand attention. The overwhelming scent of smoke clings to him. If you were to visit this young man's facebook page, you would immediately notice the hundreds of friends as those of the baser sort – prostitutes, rebels, and known criminals of all kinds. In fact, this young man has been arrested many times, but never charged for a variety of legal technicalities that impeded justice. His facebook page lists his profession as “street pharmacist” and his nickname is “Robin- the sticky fingers-Hood.” His vulgar posts show his delightful glee in injustice and the oppression of the “bottom feeders” as he calls his own clientele and prey. His name is **D. Publican**... and as he enters the worship service this morning, he avoids all greeters and finds a quiet place to sit by himself out on a bench in the foyer, with his head in his hands.

The second fictitious person here this morning is a most respectable V.P of Caterpillar. He and his wife of 35 years have three children – one a doctor, one an accountant (also at Cat), and one daughter who is the president of the community's Christian Home Schooling Organization. This man is a leading elder at his church, and teaches a thriving Sunday school class. He sacrificially ministers at the county jail, and loves the church. (He's grown up in church all his life – in fact his dad was a pastor!) He is a self-professed prayer warrior, who loves to pray and gives regularly and generously to the church. In fact, he even worked hard to complete a Masters of Divinity degree on the side. He too enters to worship God with us this morning... and finds a

seat near the front where he won't be easily distracted from his personal worship experience. His name is **D. Pharisee**, and he is eager for the service to get underway so that he can learn more about how to live as a Christian should.

These are two men who are visiting with us today... two men who have much surprising and humbling truth to teach us this morning from **Luke 18:9-14**. Which one of these men would you think God accepts or approves? Honestly?

Please make sure your bible is open to Luke 18 now as we learn that **You must humble yourself to receive the salvation of God's perfect righteousness**. This morning we will learn from these two visitors that we must flee smug self-righteousness that leads only to eternal damnation and death. We must humble ourselves this morning... There is no other way to enter God's kingdom than through such humility and faith.

Here in Luke 18 we are in a section of Christ's teaching that is critical for us to rightly understand and apply within our own lives. If we get this passage wrong this morning, then we get the doctrine of salvation wrong, and all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time! For the text before us this morning is one that answers the most common question of man – how can I be accepted and approved by a holy God? How righteous must I be in order to be saved? How much righteousness does God require from me before He will welcome me into heaven when I die?

Please look with me at verse 9, as we together consider **Whose righteousness are you trusting in for your salvation? (v. 9)**.

Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

Let me ask you a question. Who is Jesus telling this parable to? (Notice it's not *about* some sort of people... Jesus is prepared to look someone in the eye this morning – he desires to speak the fullness of grace and truth *to* some...who are what?) That's right.... Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. Some who were confident that they were good enough in God's eyes.

Could that be any one of us this morning? Are we a fitting AUDIENCE for this lesson this morning?

I believe there are two kinds of people here this morning that need to listen up to what God is teaching here. Those who are sinners, and those who are saints. First – some of you this morning have found your way into the middle of this assembly of God's family – but your heart knows that in you there is a great gulf still fixed between you and your Creator God. The thought of death and appearing before the judgment seat of God makes you tremble. You know that if you died tonight, you would spend an eternity in hell, because you refused to humbly submit yourself under God's plan of salvation, and choose instead to live the futile life of trying to be your own savior – making right your own wrongs – ungodding God and seeking lasting approval from the faces of mortal men and the acclaims of worldly success rather than in the eternal halls of heaven above. Yours is the pride of self-achievement – the pride of working your way to God by being good.

Or perhaps some of you in this category this morning have justified yourself with excuses... your sin is too evil, your past is too complicated, your time is past... now you are too old to really be able to live your life for Christ... or perhaps you are still waiting until you conquer that one devastating habit before you come to Christ for salvation. O sinner... can I speak boldly to you this morning – O sinner... recognize this morning that these words of Jesus are for you. You are the audience to which this amazing parable is addressed. For like the Jewish audience of Luke 18... you have come to believe with the rest of the world that you can only get to God by being good. But Jesus has a surprisingly different message for you this morning.

But do I now hear a cry from a bold sinner in the back of the room? One who believes that after all, she is not really that bad of a sinner after all? Are you here this morning apart from union with Christ, and yet content in your own level of attained righteousness? Then this parable is also for you. For pride is that sin that everybody sees but the person who has it. And men's hearts are never in such a hopeless condition as when they are unaware of their own sins. Dare I remind you this morning of the pristine holiness of our majestic God? How none can approach his presence apart from the scrutiny of His holy law? O bold sinner... please lend me your ear for the truths of this parable have the power to heal and change you.

But I believe most of us here this morning are in the audience of this parable not as professing unbelievers... but as fellow disciples of Christ. Yes, this parable was not just directed at the Pharisees of the day – but also to Christ's own disciples – anyone who trusted in themselves that they were righteousness. Jesus here speaks against all religious snobbery that views oneself as more righteous than another. Brothers and sisters – this parable is directed at us – we're the proud ones. Do you every trust yourself, and your wisdom and your strength and your resources, rather than God? That's pride. Do you ever not pray, because you're going to do it yourself? That's pride. Do you ever boast of your accomplishments, your skills, your achievements. Pride. Do you ever lust for glory, attention, accolades? Pride. Thomas Watson said, "Mankind is nothing but proud dust." Do you ever look down on others for not being as smart as you, squared away as you... we have this ability ...to say what's wrong with that person. This is a smug self-righteousness that perhaps many of us here this morning are guilty of? Note the two characteristics of this audience in v. 9:

- They trusted that they themselves were righteous
- And they treated others with contempt.

Ah... the natural twins of pride – self-righteousness and contempt. Looking up to myself, and looking down upon others. Centering my world around me, and considering others as nothing. These sins of pride, self-conceit, and supposed superiority over others are sins that are especially common among converted people. J.C. Ryle said, "We are all naturally self-righteous. It is the family disease of all the children of Adam. From the highest to the lowest we think more highly of ourselves than we ought to do. We secretly flatter ourselves that we are not so bad as some, and that we have something to recommend us to the favor of God."

Perhaps this sin is more subtle for some of us than we realize? For when we trust in Christ for our salvation, but then we look to our own obedience for our assuring source of our salvation, are

we not guilty of this same self-righteous sin?

Let me explain this. The problem with Jesus' audience here was not that they were righteous – that they honored God's law and obeyed His commandments... these are in fact good and right things to be doing. The problem was simply this – they were trusting in their righteousness for their standing with God. As one pastor says, "When it came to justification—for that is the issue (vs. 14)—this man was trusting in the wrong thing. He was looking at the wrong basis for his righteousness before God. He was looking at the wrong ground –at the wrong person and the wrong righteousness. He was looking to his own righteousness—...That is what he was trusting in." You see... whose righteousness are you really trusting in for your salvation? Yours (as evidenced now by obedience, holiness, spiritual growth, etc.) or are you still wholly dependent upon the person and work of Jesus Christ for your standing before God? Whatever you are trusting to keep you saved... whatever you are trusting in to maintain your approval and acceptance of God...is what you are trusting to save you.

Are you looking to Christ and Christ alone for your salvation, or have you too begun to believe that your own righteousness is the object of your saving hope?

You see, there really are only two religions in the world – the religion of Divine Accomplishment and the religions of Human Achievement. Are you looking totally away from yourself? You must not look at or trust in what God has worked in you for your justification – you must look at and trust in Christ alone, and all that God is for you in Him!

For if you join the parade of self-righteous people who think that God's grace has enabled your own scrupulous law-keeping which is good enough to merit God's favor, you will necessarily treat others with contempt. You will treat others as if they are nobodies compared to you. Contempt here refers to the lowest and most biting form of derision – a condensing and superior attitude that makes it difficult to serve others. This is the obnoxious despising of others who fail to conform to your own personal standards, and fail to affirm your lofty position as your own personal savior. And so having elevated our own position so high, we easily begin to look down on others.

Having seen the comprehensive audience of this parable then, can we doubt whether or not Jesus has a word for us this morning? Does the question seem a bit more relevant to you this morning as you personally consider afresh, ***Whose righteousness are you trusting in for your salvation?*** O I pray that your mind would be fixed on Christ and Christ alone as we continue this study together.

We are now to see from verses 10-12, that one good test of whose righteousness we are trusting in... is the question of whether we compare ourselves with others, when we are before God in prayer. ***Do you compare yourself with others... before God?***

Note the text.

Luke 18:10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

Jesus here compares and contrasts two different men to help illustrate the deadly end of self-righteousness. Note that both of these men had much in common with each other:

Both came to the temple to pray. Literally – to worship. The word temple used here refers to the entire temple complex, with all its courts. This parable assumes that the two men were part of the mass of people flowing up the long steep steps on the south side of the temple mount at the regular hours of worship each day – 9am and 3pm – during the morning and evening sacrifice prescribed for burnt offering (atonement for sin). As the sacrifices would symbolically open the way to God through atonement, incense would be burned symbolizing prayer. At such times, many people would stand and offer their prayers, while a priestly benediction would be given upon all who were faithful enough to be there as well. So the scene of this parable is then the very presence of God Himself.

And they had much more in common with each other:

- Both understood OT to be the revelation of God
- Both were committed to Judaism
- Both believed in the God who revealed His law to Moses on Mt. Sinai
- Both believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, & Prophets
- Both believed in the God that had revealed Himself to Moses as gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
- Both believed in the atoning system of sacrifice and priesthood, as revealed in the OT
- Both believed and had faith in God – both believed in God’s forgiveness.

So there was indeed much in common between these two men, as there are with many of us here today listening to this sermon. But there were some deadly differences as we shall see from their prayers – for one of them self-righteously thought that he could please God on his own, the other one knew he couldn’t. And this in fact is what separates everyone – everyone listening to sermon and everyone in the whole world. For the eternal difference that divides all men into two camps – without regard to how righteousness they are – is the difference of repentance.

Here I wish to remind you of our two visitors with us this morning – D. Pharisee (the one we expect to be closest to God) and D. Publican (the one we would say seems to be the farthest away from God) I’ve described their out appearances to you... now as we proceed through our worship service...let’s take a look into their inner thoughts and prayers.

Verses 11-12 give us some great insight about Mr. D. Pharisee:

Luke 18:11 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.

Notice with me three betraying characteristics¹ of this man’s self-righteousness that are exposed in the words of his prayer, and ask yourself again... do you seek approval or justification before God based on how well you stack up to others?

If you do, you may appreciate this man’s focus on **separatism**. Here in the parable we find this

¹ Taken from Tim Keller’s sermon on Luke 18:9-14 entitled, “Inside-Out Living”.

respected religious leader standing – nothing wrong with this posture of prayer (acceptable posture mentioned in 2 Chronicles 6:12 (Solomon) and Mark 11:25) that was just as common as kneeling for the Jews of the day – but who was he standing alongside?? No one but God of course. In his self-righteousness, this man stands as near as he can to the holy place without touching any of the people who would contaminate him in his mind. Likely gone right into the inner court of the temple ... he wants to be wherever God is believed to be—giving the unclean around him a good look at a truly righteous man.

This teaches us a key component of self-righteousness this morning – for self-righteousness always causes us to use the standard of others to measure our own righteousness, and thereby sees sin as something out there... separate from us... but not within us. If we can only stay away from other sinful activities, events, people, practices... etc... then we can be righteous and acceptable before God. But this is a dangerous and damning error. In the bible the sin of worldliness is always speaking of an attitude, mindset, way of thinking that is opposed to God's mindset. If you think you can avoid sin only by just separating yourself from worldly activities or people...then you are dead wrong. For it is the proud sin of your own heart that will condemn you on judgment day.

For notice how effective this man's prayer really was in his smug self-righteousness:

Our ESV translation simply says that he "prayed thus"... but literally the Greek text reads, "he was praying this to himself."

Notice in these 2 verses, he refers to himself 5 times! And the verb used suggests that he went on praying (Self-righteous people love long prayers!) more than what is recorded for us here. But this is no prayer to God. He gives God no praise. He asks for nothing from God. Seeks no mercy, no grace, no forgiveness, no help. He's merely praying to himself – putting on a demonstration for people that he thinks God is also impressed with. He glances at God – but contemplates Himself. This is merely a recital of supposed merits. Like many contemporary worship songs today... this is a mere anthem to self. Dear church – please hear me... no matter how much better and separated this man thought he was in comparison to others around him...Hell is full of such intellectual conviction!

Having seen his self-righteous focus on separation, note also his **externalism**. Self-righteousness distorts many of the great doctrines of our faith – lowers the holiness of God, reduces the mercy and compassion of God... but also gravely diminishes the pervasive sinfulness of sin. As we see from this prayer, self-righteousness understands both sin and righteousness to be entirely external in behavior. There is little regard for the inward heart and character of a man, as long as his outside looks the part. And self-righteous externalism usually starts with what I don't do... "God I thank you that I am not like other men, etc." He refrains from these practices which is good—if indeed he does. But because we haven't committed full blown acts of sin, therefore we believe we are innocent of those sins. But this is a serious error. Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount that every sin that leads up to full-blown sin is just as sinful. Internal anger is just as sinful as external murder. Inside lust is just as much a sin as outside adultery.

No wonder self-righteousness wants to believe that sin is just that which is external in behavior... for that makes me feel justified against others who have worse behaviors than me, right?

When we fail to see our sin as the deeper self-righteousness and self-centeredness through which we are trying to live lives independent of God, we then only go to Jesus for forgiveness to “cover over the gaps” in our own project of self-salvation.

But like all sin – self-righteousness is irrational and rooted in lies. For while it is probable that on the surface this man was indeed not an extortioner (a swindler, robber, sneaky thief), or unjust (a generally unrighteous cheat, or dishonest person), or an adulterer (immoral sexual sins)... was he not at this very moment robbing God of the honor and glory due to Him? (guilty of extortion!) ... was he not at this very moment of pride cheating himself out of a blessing and twisting the truthfulness of his condition (guilty of injustice!) ... was he not departing from the true God, and thereby making himself guilty of the worst adultery of all?!!

This man trusted in his own righteousness... because his belief in righteousness by separatism, and righteousness by externalism. And then finally, along with externalism and separatism, did you notice D. Pharisee’s **cultural religiosity**? As he concludes his soliloquy on what he doesn’t do, his eyes fall on the wretched tax collector in the outer courts of the temple. His judgmental attitude is obvious – he instantly evaluates the man based on his vocation and cultural clues of dress, hairstyle, and other external signs. Here was one of the most despised of his day – and he looks down upon this Publican as if there is no similarity between them. He sees himself as superior – even if so by the grace of God.

How can a person become so self-righteous that he would so despise someone who was on his way to heaven? Because of his cultural religiosity – note what he claims for himself as his righteous deeds as his prayer continues.

Luke 18:12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'

Certainly there is nothing wrong with such practices. But it is important to note that the Scriptures do not teach such things! Although the Pharisees would condemn people and mandate that they fast and tithe like they thought best...the OT law only prescribed one fast a year – on the day of atonement (Lev 16), and the OT law only required a tithe from certain kinds of income (Deut 14:22-23)! This man goes beyond what is written ... as all self-righteous men do... in order to establish a ever-complicating and demanding scheme of cultural righteousness whereby to merit justification over and against the “less faithful.” Isn’t it interesting that we hear nothing of loving others or of spiritual heart-holiness in these religious deeds?

Self-righteousness elevates my cultural preferences to the standpoint of God’s law, and then judges others accordingly. God’s standards of righteousness are no longer sufficient in their simplicity. So legalistic “do-gooders” like D. Pharisee – who may in fact be very sincere and well-intentioned – yet go to their grave inventing more and more rituals, ceremonies, and systems by which they can appear righteous. And these man-made traditions only get more and more complicated and more symbolic in direct proportion to the absence of truth and reality.

This is the way of all self-righteousness. Focusing on separatism. Externalism. And cultural religiosity. These are the ways of all false religion – the religion of human achievement—the way of “outside-in” righteousness.

Again... because I don't wish to be misunderstood... Is there anything wrong with fasting, tithing, being honest, or faithful to your wife? No... not at all... in fact God's people do well to obey God in these commands. But can you do the right things in a way that doesn't please God? Yes. Because all worship is a matter of faith in the heart – not a matter of external behavior. Righteousness done for the purpose of self-salvation or self-worship is sinful. The mark of real righteousness is not external spiritual displays... but genuine attitudes and actions of worship that are expressions of a regenerated and justified heart.

This man obviously was qualifying himself before God by comparing himself with others at the lowest level of morality.

Do you do this? Do you compare yourself with others... in order to justify and assure yourself before God?

We need to remember that there are a lot of people in a lot of different places, backgrounds... we are all at different places, God is faithful and he will perfect us... but not according to my own expectation. We begin to complain b/c we see them as less than us, or poor pathetic sinners... we comparing ourselves with others rather than with Christ. But the standard is not us... it is Christ! Pride comes from comparing ourselves with others; humility from comparing ourselves with Christ.

If I thought less of you because you were a mere 6'... I could feel rather approved for my extra 2" that I have on you. But you put us both next to the Sears Tower... and what difference does my 2" have on you now?

We who desire to flee the damning end of self-righteousness must beware of measuring ourselves among and by our neighbors. “In all our self-examination let us not try ourselves by comparison with the standard of men. Let us look at nothing but the requirements of God. He that acts on this principle will never be a Pharisee.” (Ryle)

And so then, when we look away from ourselves, and look away from other people, and look only to Christ as our standard for righteousness, what will you see? Will you not see how far short you fall before a holy God?

O soul... if you really want to deflate deadly self-righteousness in your soul... can I beg you this morning... compare your righteous to Christ ... see the filth of your own righteous deeds... and then **ponder quietly in your heart whether or not you are the most sinful sinner you know?**

Look at verse 13 with me:

Luke 18:13 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!'

What a contrast. What confession, repentance, and prayer for God to do what he cannot do for himself. In contrast to the Pharisee, this tax collector knows that he is a sinner, and has humility – he doesn't believe that he even deserves to be in the presence of God... but he knows of nowhere else to go. His posture suggests that he was overwhelmed with guilt and shame – he views himself as completely unworthy of God's presence or blessing. There's no hint of the attitude that might say, "We'll I know I'm a sinner, but at least I'm here at the temple so I'm better than most tax collectors I know." He feels the full weight of his alienation from God. He feels that weight of sin and brokenness, that accompanying conviction and remorse. He senses the pain and fear and dread of deserved punishment and judgment. This is what was lacking in the Pharisee! Genuine, spirit-given repentance!

Note too that he keeps on (the verb is repetitive here) beating his chest. An old Jewish commentary says, "Why do the righteous beat on their heart as though to say all is there? The righteous beat their heart because the heart is the source of all evil longing." Here the tax collector looked away from himself to God. He trusted in nothing in himself. He trusted in God alone. His hands on his chest, his eyes down, he begins to turn his hands into fists and pound his chest rapidly and repeatedly. This is a gesture that is used to express THE most extreme sorrow, THE most extreme anguish.

Here is something that we must consider well if we are to flee from deadly self-righteousness. Genuine repentance is much more than external... it not only repents of our sin... but also of our own righteousness. Repentance must include more than just external behaviors and trespasses against God's law. It must also be deep enough to confess the sin underneath the sin – and the sin underneath the good deeds... for does not our sinful hearts attempt to make our own salvation – whether by breaking all the laws or doing everything right? Nothing wrong with moral righteousness of course... but when morality is an expression of self-worship... or self-salvation... it must be repented of. No wonder the prophet Isaiah said,

Isaiah 64:6 *We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment....*

I believe this is why the Publican prayed to God (and a real prayer at that!) be merciful to me... THE SINNER. The text literally uses the definite article here... This is a clear confession of his extreme and supreme sinfulness and there's no comparing himself with others. He is the worst sinner as far as his own personal experience and perspective allows. He finds no comfort at all in the fact that there are many other and ever greater sinners; he sees himself only before God; only as "the" sinner who is unable to answer to God for his sins.

Do you believe you are the most sinful sinner you know? I'm not wishing to get into a discussion of the degrees of sin – certainly the consequences of murder are often more grievous than the consequences of anger... but I'm speaking of what you know personally. While you can read of the criminals in the paper... do you know their sin at a deeper level than the sins of covetousness, pride, anger, etc. etc that have established residence in your own heart? While you see others' sins externally... is there any deeper awareness of sin than that which is internal and personal within you?

If you compare yourself honestly to the righteousness of Christ, then you will be intimately more

acquainted with your own sin at a level that you can't be with others. You know your own heart better than you can know the external behaviors of another. And this ongoing indwelling sin ... no matter how long you've been following after Christ and maturing in your spiritual walk... will give you great cause for a lifestyle of repentance. A lifestyle of humility. A life of confession and prayer.

And what then should we note about this man's prayer? That *genuine repentance finds its justification in the work of God, rather than the deeds of men.*

When you read his prayer in the English language... it cloaks the meaning of his real words. There is a greek word for mercy (that is used later in this chapter in vs. 38) that is NOT used in this prayer. Instead his prayer is literally, "God, be propitious to me... be appeased toward me, the sinner." He is saying "God please apply the atonement to me. This is not a general plea for mercy. This is not just believing that God loves him and has a wonderful plan for his life that can be all yours if you just ask Him to be merciful to you.

This word is only used elsewhere in Heb. 2:17, "...so that Christ might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."

So as the incense from the burnt offering fills the temple courts and symbolically opens the way for prayers... the publican is praying here that God may let the sacrifices which he ordained for sin in the old covenant blot out his sin so that God can again extend his grace and favor to this poor sinner. He is earnestly and fervently begging God to be propitiated. He is hungering and thirsting for the one great blessing, namely, that God's anger may be removed and his favor obtained. He is saying, I am in profound agony and anguish over my wretchedness. I need an atonement from my sins to be applied to me.

This is why this passage is the classic example of how OT saints were converted – That very day a sacrifice had been made on the altar, and so now he prays that it would apply to Him. He understood the theology of substitution, imputation, and atonement! Though Christ's ultimate sacrifice had yet to be accomplished at Calvary, this man was saved the same way we are – by faith in the substitutionary atonement of God's sacrifice!

This is quite contrary to the justifying attempts of the self-righteous – for their salvation is ultimately secured in their own merits of perceived and outward righteousness. But the humble mercy-seeker only seeks to be justified and approved by the work of God himself.

When you believe that your sin is the most sinful and deadly of all that is known to you... you will discover that there is no other approval or justification to seek other than that than comes from God alone on the basis of faith. We never begin to be good till we can feel and say that we are bad." "We are never in the way of salvation until we know that we are lost, ruined, guilty, and helpless. Happy indeed is he who is not ashamed to sit by the side of the publican. (Ryle)

And what justification and approval God's salvation brings to the repentant!! O listen to Jesus' concluding verdict to this parable and celebrate that today is the day of salvation church! No more does anyone have to try harder... be better than others, and keep exercising oneself on the

human achievement treadmill. Stop trying to be your own savior...recognize this morning that you can never be good enough – no matter how righteous you are, or have become. You must **humble yourself to receive the salvation of God's perfect righteousness (v. 14).**

Please read the shocking verdict of Christ in verse 14 with me.

Luke 18:14 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."

Christ tells us... these are authoritative words – no longer are we bound to the world's standards... Christ's ways are higher... and how did the wicked tax collector return to his home? Justified? Dare we celebrate such grace this morning together in Jesus?

The word here is a perfect passive participle. In other words... he went home "having been justified – and perfect -- done with permanent results... when this man completed his prayer of faith, he was permanently right with God, forever! Stunning truth!

Note – it was passive – he is justified by an act of God – not by a religious exercise of repentance, restitution, a season of fruitfulness... or any other good work....but immediately declared legally righteous – accepted and approved by God!

Justification is a wonderful theological word, and it is critical we rightly understand this glorious aspect of our salvation this morning. Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which He declares the sinner not only forgiven of all sin... but absolutely 100% righteous by union with Christ. Because we are "in him" by faith, what he is counts for us, his righteousness, his wisdom, his sanctification, and his redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). It is a forensic declaration by God on our eternal behalf. It is imputed alien righteousness... a foreign righteousness is put on our account. Justification then is different from our sanctification (growth in godliness) ... for we are not *made righteous* in justification—but declared righteous and approved before God. Our justification before God has nothing to do with the subjective conviction or knowledge or feelings of the sinner. The divine act takes place in heaven, outside of, apart from, and only in regard to the sinner who is on earth. The legal justification of Romans 5 becomes then the foundation for all God-honoring sanctification and spiritual godliness in Romans 6... but they must not be confused, lest our lifestyle of thankful worship somehow be construed as merited God's acceptance and righteousness.

The tax collector understood something that we must all understand very clearly. In order to enter God's kingdom, you have to be as good as God, you have to be as holy as God, and you have to be as righteous as God. And either you can achieve that or you can't.

The conclusion of this parable would draw gasps from the legalistic "do-gooders". Does it likewise shock you? Jesus says here that in one moment an extreme sinner can be pronounced instantly righteous without any works, without any merit, without any worthiness, without any law-keeping, without any moral achievement, spiritual accomplishment or ritual. No time lapse, no penance, no works, no ceremony, no sacrament, no meritorious activity whatsoever, nothing

to do, instant declaration of justification on the spot, permanent. Wow! How can that be? Because the only righteousness that God will accept is perfect righteousness and since you can't earn it, He gives it as a gift to the repentant who put his trust in Him. That's the gospel. All the sinner brings to his salvation is his sin, and all he needs to do is humble himself and repent of his pride, and receive God's justification by faith.

Only a fool would go to a doctor when he is gravely ill and try to convince the doctor that he in fact is very healthy and has a good life expectancy. No! When you are sick, you go to the doctor and you honestly report what is wrong... for you know there is hope in the true diagnosis of the problem. So then likewise... having realized now that your own righteousness will never be good enough for entrance into the kingdom – no matter how much or little you are religiously respected today... why would you continue to put your trust in your own righteousness? Flee such smug self-righteousness... strip yourself of this proud covering... and humble yourself under the redemptive hand of our mighty God of all grace.

Receive his righteousness as you only can – by faith... by submission... by surrendering your own life, and leaning dependent upon Christ and His work alone. Faith is the beggars hand extended out for mercy. Reach out soul today... stop clinging to your own goodness.

Are you terrified by Christ's warning here... "rather than the other." Yes, that's right. Remember our guest D. Pharisee? So respected. So esteemed. So loved and appreciated in the church. And his bitter end is hell. Damnation. This man is not accepted or justified before God. The road of self-righteousness only goes one-way. There is no salvation in self-righteous separatism, external posturing, and cultural religiosity. O search your soul this morning you who profess faith in Jesus Christ! Do you see that self-righteous pride only intensifies your spiritual lostness... for this man went back to home falsely assured in his spiritual game... but ever more the lost for it!

I must ask you this morning...

- Do you yet see yourself as a rebel before God, undeserving of his amazing grace in salvation?
- Are you broken over your sinfulness – growing ever more in a lifestyle of repentance and thankful worship?
- Are you looking to Christ & His righteousness alone for your salvation?
- Or... do you find yourself at this end of this message thanking God that you don't struggle with self-righteousness like others do...and secretly looking down on others who are so afflicted by such devilish lies?

O take great care on this point...and well impress your soul with this spiritual principle from our Savior:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Exalted here is a synonym for salvation... a synonym for righteousness. So everyone who tries to save himself will be humbled in the severest sense of the word – crushed in eternal loss and

judgment. The path of self-exaltation always leads to eternal judgment (c.f. Pharaoh, Goliath, Haman, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, etc.)

But in contrast, all who humble themselves and confess they can't do anything to save themselves, will be lifted high into eternal glory. (c.f. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Job, Isaiah, and Daniel.) Humility ought to be a leading grace in all who profess to serve Christ. All the Lord's people have not gifts or money. All are not called to preach, or write, or fill a prominent place in the church. But all are called to be humble. One grace at least should adorn the poorest and most unlearned believer. That grace is humility. (Ryle) Water always first fills the lowest places. The lower, the emptier a man lies before God, the speedier and the fuller will be the inflow of the divine glory. (Murray)

Having been so accepted by God, your soul is then free to humbly serve others. This humility not only works the acceptance of God in your justification, but rightly postures you to minister to others. Remember the biblical commands -- rebuking one another, forgiving one another, exhorting one another, bearing one another's burdens...etc. They are all enabled by and dependent upon such humility before God. Depending on Christ's righteousness, all the while living out humble repentance for your own sinfulness... is what makes marriages thrive on grace, enables us to really serve seeking sinners, and brings thankful joy to a very diverse and growing church. Humility and repentance are what we all need as we flee this deadly smug self-righteousness.

So come today, and relish in the abundant salvation that can be yours by faith in Jesus. Come today no matter if you're D. Publican... or D. Pharisee. The blood is red enough, deep enough, and wide enough to wash away all your sin. No matter who you are -- no matter where you've been -- no matter what you've done... You can be cleansed from the AIDS of self-righteousness in your soul. Come to him and cast your sins upon the rock of Ages... God alone is able to save your soul and grant you repentance for the joy of your justification and perfect and eternal acceptance before Him!

Closing prayer