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Good people go to hell.

Luke 18:9-14, *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ ¹³And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

I have referred to this text of Scripture many times in my ministry. It is such a profound text theologically, spiritually. It has such sweeping implications and yet it is at the same time so basic and so simple.

many of our Lord's stories, they are outrageous, shameful by all existing religious standards. This is one that fits into the category of an outrageous and shameful story. In this story Jesus describes the unrighteous man as the one who was right with God and the righteous man as the one who was not. This is the reverse of everything the Jews believed. Everything their religion at the time of our Lord taught them.

It is another reason to reject Jesus. To say that a self-confessed wicked man left the temple ground justified rather than a self-confessed righteous man is to completely overturn religious thinking.

Why this parable at this time in Luke's gospel?

Luke 17:20 –18:37 Jesus has been talking about the coming of the Lord Jesus and His kingdom.

The kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, Christ reigns and rules in the hearts of those who put their trust in Him.

He reigns then over a spiritual kingdom.

He will reign over an earthly kingdom over 1,000 years and

He will reign forever an eternal kingdom.

Those who are in the spiritual kingdom will be in the earthly kingdom and in the eternal kingdom.

How does one get into this kingdom?

How is one made right with God?

How is one reconciled to God?

This is not a new question.

This is a question that plagued and haunted the people of the earliest biblical era.

We looked at the question and answers in Romans Bible study.

Job 9:1-2, *Then Job answered and said: ²“Truly I know it is so, But how can a man be righteous before God?*

It is not easy to answer because we know for certain that no person, no one of us, can on our own achieve this righteousness.

There was no way that a sinner could be righteous on his own, for the Scripture says the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. (**Jeremiah 17:9**) All our righteousness is as filthy rags (**Isaiah 64:6**).

V 14 says, *"This man went down to his house justified."*

The most important issue that will ever face any human whoever walks on this planet and has a reasonable thought.

Who is right with God and how?

The Jews knew God to be righteous.

They knew God to be holy.

They knew the book of Leviticus said, "Be ye holy for I am holy," again and again.

They understood the question of Job: How can a man be right with God?

That question comes up number of times in the book of Job.

Job 25:4, *How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?*

Psalm 143:2, *Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, For in Your sight no one living is righteous.*

That is the issue of all issues that compels every human heart, the answer to which determines every person's everlasting destiny.

How was Abraham justified?

Genesis 15:6, *"Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness."*

Isaiah 53:11, *He shall see the labour of His soul, and be satisfied.*

*By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,
For He shall bear their iniquities.*

The only way that anybody could be righteous with God would be to be perfectly holy because that's what God demanded throughout the book of Leviticus.

The only way that could happen would be if God imputed His righteousness to them by faith and the only way God could do that is if there was a suitable sacrifice to bear the punishment, the just punishment His Law demanded in place of the sinner.

Either you can make yourself right before God or you can't.

There are no more options than that.

Either you can achieve righteousness that satisfies what God requires, or you can't. It's not complicated.

It is either a religion of human achievement or it is the truth, the religion of divine accomplishment. Every religion that's ever existed in the world apart from the true one revealed in Scripture is a system of human achievement.

You get to God by being good, morally good, religiously good, ceremonially, ritually, religiously, and morally. The complex of that makes you acceptable to God.

New Testament statement of the standard which God requires.

Matthew 5:48, *"Therefore you are to be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."*

Absolute perfection.

The Bible says if you break the law in one place, you have broken all of it.

Jesus went on further it isn't just the external law that must be obeyed. It also involves attitudes of the heart.

Adultery is not physical but in your mind.

That's absolute holiness.

If that's the standard, what hope is there for anyone?

Matthew 19. A rich young ruler comes to Jesus and Jesus says to him, you need to keep the law. He says, oh, I have done that. Kept the law from my youth up, all those things have I kept.

He went away without eternal life. He walked away from that conversation because he thought he was perfect. He didn't understand the standard at all.

Who can be saved?

Jesus responds by saying this, "With men it is impossible" impossible, "but with God" different story "all things are possible."

What we have in this story is a division of the only two religions that exist.

- The religion of self, of human achievement,

➤ The religion of divine accomplishment.

The Pharisee is self-righteous, contemptuous, standing as near as he can to the holy place without touching any of the people who would contaminate him in his mind.

He seeks no

- mercy,
- grace,
- forgiveness, and
- any sympathy.

Rather the Pharisee is thankful that he is not unrighteous. Self-exalted he goes away unjustified.

The other is the tax collector.

- sinful,
- outcast,
- object of contempt,
- guilty,
- standing far away as he feels so unclean
- unwanted,
- seeking mercy,
- desperately needing grace,
- distraught that he is not righteous.

He goes home justified. He is humble so he ends up being exalted.

**Two men,
Two postures,
Two prayers,
Two results.**

The crowd/listeners:

Everybody outside those in the true faith.

V 9, Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

The target audience here.

Anybody and everybody who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.

That is everybody who has any inkling at all about going to heaven based on works, religious ones and-or moral ones.

Who were the real leaders of this religion in Israel of trusting in yourself that you were righteous?

The Pharisees, Sadducees, and the scribes.

The religious elite.

Luke 16:14-15, *Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. ¹⁵And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.*

So, the Pharisees were the great architects of a system of self-righteousness that dominated life in Israel. They had the greatest influence on a populace because they had power in the local synagogues everywhere which were basically ruled by their theology and even local Pharisees.

So, the people believed that trusting in yourself to become righteous was the way that you gained a place in the kingdom of God and the way you would eventually get to heaven. The benchmark of their system. Self-confidence in one's ability to achieve righteousness by their own power and works.

What did they do with the heart being deceitful above all things and desperately wicked?

What did they do with that our works are nothing more than filthy rags?

What did they do with the fact, Psalm 143:2, that no one can live righteously before God?

Conveniently setting it aside in sinful pride, trusting in their own righteousness. These are the Pharisees for sure. These are the people who followed the Pharisees.

These are all the people in the religion of human achievement. Basically, that is how people think in the world.

How do you get reconciled to God?

How do you get into the kingdom of God?

But the people listening to Jesus this day were imbedded in the self-righteous religious system of the Pharisees.

Apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee, gives his own testimony.

Philippians 3:4-6, *though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so ⁵circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.*

The Pharisee's fasted all the time.

They prayed.

They abstained.

They tithed.

They memorized Scripture.

They invented laws just to keep them, anything and everything to create an appearance of holiness.

In spite of all that, the first great sermon of the New Testament Jesus at the beginning of that sermon makes this statement.

Matthew 5:20, *"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

Nobody could comprehend that.

They were the personification of human righteousness.

How could anybody surpass that?

Not only did they trust in themselves that they were righteous, but they viewed others with contempt. They viewed others with contempt. Contempt is the worst scorn that you can heap on somebody.

The Pharisees looked at anybody below them outside their group with contempt.

So, there's in this self-righteousness, in this pride, a contempt for anybody beneath you.

The Jews, the law keepers were called the **habarim** and the lawbreakers were called the **amharitz**, the low lives.

In the eyes of the Pharisee, he couldn't get near to anybody who was an **amharitz**.

That was an unthinkable thing for him to do.

Here we have these two men.

They are at extreme poles.

Contrast:

V 10, *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

Two men went up to the temple to pray.

That happened twice a day, every day, **9 A.M., 3 P.M.**, morning and evening sacrifice prescribed for the burnt offering which was laid out in the 1st chapter of Leviticus.

They were to go up and make an animal sacrifice, a blood sacrifice as a symbol of atonement. That was a very important thing. They were very fastidious people who made sure they showed up at 9 A.M. and at 3 P.M. every day, particularly Pharisees who were in the proximity and could do that.

Now the crowd would go up the steps at the prescribed time. The sacrifices would be offered on the altar. Following the sacrifices which would symbolically open the way to God because atonement had been made, incense would be burned symbolizing prayer.

Now because atonement has been made, prayers can be offered, and prayers would be offered.

There would come a priestly benediction upon the people who were faithful enough to be there as well.

When it says they went up to the temple to pray, “pray” would embody all the worship, all the activities that went on.

Matthew 21:13, *And He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a ‘den of thieves.’ ”*

Prayer synonymous with worship, a house where you go to offer yourself and your petitions and your praise to God. It was that time, and the crowd ascended the long, steep steps up to the temple mount.

The two men are in the crowd, and everybody would understand.

The Pharisee, as we know: self-righteous, self-promoting, and protectors of the religion of human achievement.

Tax collector mentioned here is the fifth time. We know they were the low lives of that society because they had purchased tax franchises from the Romans who were the idolaters, oppressors, thus desecrating themselves. They then extorted money from their own people using strong-armed thugs and any intimidation, manipulation, or criminal activity they could and were surrounded by the low life of society.

So, they are shown going up together with the crowd, but they separate when they get there.

V 11, *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.*

The Pharisee stood!

Nothing wrong with standing. In fact, standing was an acceptable and in fact normal posture for prayer.

There were many other postures, kneeling, lying prostrate was also a proper posture for prayer, hands down, hands up, eyes down, eyes up. But it was a common way to pray. Put your

hands up. Lift your eyes up, standing. We see that many times in Scripture.

We see it with 1 Kings 8 standing to pray.

Nehemiah 9 the leaders of Israel standing to pray.

Jesus even talks about in **Matthew 6:5** standing in a posture of prayer but not doing it to be seen of men.

Not wrong to stand but to stand to be seen by men is wrong.

Very likely he would take his place in a most visible location and nearest to the holy place that he could get to show his proximity to God. He wants to be wherever God is believed or deemed to be, to give the unwashed around him a good look at a truly righteous man. He takes his posture there.

prayed thus with himself

Two possible meanings.

One, he was inaudibly praying. When you say you were talking to yourself, you probably mean you are talking so nobody else can hear you. That is possible but not likely that he was just mumbling and moving his lips like Hannah in 1 Samuel 1.

Second audible prayer. Typically, Jewish people did pray audibly.

Understand that he was actually directing his prayer in a self-congratulatory fashion.

In **2 verses** of 11 & 12 he refers to himself **5 times**.

He is parading himself.

This is no prayer to God.

He gives God no praise.

He asks nothing from God, no mercy, no grace, no forgiveness, no help.

But he does refer to God. "*God*," because you are supposed to!

I thank You that I am not like other men

What is there to thank God for?

This is sheer hypocrisy. This is an unequivocal confession to God of his worthiness, and righteousness.

Thanking God for what you are on your own?

This is where self-righteousness leads you.

God, I thank You that I'm good enough.

- I am good enough to have a relationship with You.
- I am good enough to be here in Your holy temple.
- I am good enough to stand here so all the sinners can see what a godly man looks like.

The way all self-righteous people do, he compares himself to the worst.

extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

These are all categories of people who fit into the association of the tax collectors and the sinners and prostitutes that were part of the low life of society.

The Pharisee compares himself to the people he despises, the lowliest of the people he despises, all those kinds of sin associated with tax collectors and their companions.

He is praying to himself, putting on a demonstration for people that he thinks God is also impressed with.

Asks nothing from God; seeks nothing from God!
Needs nothing from God.

He just wants people to hear what a truly righteous man is like!

Pharisee stood aloof from others when they gather around the altar, they always stood aloof from others in society, they never had a dinner or a lunch at their house with anybody but another Pharisee, unless they invited somebody in which to trap Jesus.

According to the **Mishnah**, the Jewish law, at the time of the incense, after the sacrifice in the morning and evening service,

prayers were made. When the prayers began there was a delegation of Jews that was responsible at the time of the beginning of the prayer to find the unclean people in the crowd and clear them away to the eastern gate, get all the unclean people out.

Maybe a Pharisee like this would wonder why there was even a tax collector in his vision who should have been ushered off and out the eastern gate.

The Pharisee wants to let you know and let God know and let everybody else know what he is.
He is moral and religious.

How religious is he?

V 12, *I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.*'

The Old Testament only prescribed one fast, Day of Atonement, preparation for the Day of Atonement.

There are no other required fasts. There were times of sorrow, times of penitence, times of mourning when people fasted and that was something you could choose to do. But there was only one prescribed fast.

These self-styled, self-righteous, external legalists like to invent rituals and ceremonies as all false religions do. They get

more complicated and more symbolic in direct proportion to the absence of truth and reality.

They had developed a scheme of fasting on Monday and Thursday.

Why Monday and Thursday?

Because those were the market days and the crowds were bigger, so you could go into the big crowd and throw a bunch of ashes on your head and look sad, and fast, spiritual impression would be made.

Why Monday and Thursday?

Because it was a Monday, according to some rabbi, that Moses went up to Sinai and forty days later he came down on a Thursday.

Because Monday and Thursday are equal distant from the Sabbath while being as far from each other as possible.

Jesus condemned that in the 6th chapter in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 6:5, *“And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.*

People putting on external spiritual displays by ritualistic, ceremonial behaviour by the clothing they wear, the way they dress as if this is the mark of real holiness.

I give tithes of all that I possess.'

The Old Testament laid down prescription for tithing.

- ✓ 10 percent of what you get goes to fund the national theocratic government,
- ✓ 10 percent goes to fund the national festivals and feasts on high holy days, and
- ✓ 10 percent every third year for the poor.

So, it was about a 23 and a third percent tax, that's what funded the theocratic kingdom of Israel. Now that's all the Lord required.

Then there was a half-shekel temple tax.

But again, they wanted to invent laws to appear righteous.

Matthew 23:23, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.*

They went beyond the law.

A Pharisaic prayer dating from about the time of Jesus.

- "I thank You, Jehovah, my God,
- You have assigned my lot with those who sit in the house of learning and not with those who sit in the street corners.
- I rise early and they rise early.
- I rise early to study the words of the Torah and they rise early to attend to things of no importance.
- I weary myself and they weary themselves.
- I weary myself and gain thereby while they weary themselves without gaining anything.
- I run and they run.
- I run toward the life of the age to come. They run toward the pit of destruction."

Jesus is telling this parable to those kinds of people who think they can be good enough to please God, satisfy God, achieve righteousness, be acceptable into His kingdom.

Tax Collector:

V 13, And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

A very different approach!

We have seen the tax collectors many times.

chapters 3, 5, 7, 15, and 19.

We know that they were the most hated people in Israel, cut out of all religious activity and social relationships because of what they had done as traitors to their religion and their nation. They are the most defiled.

They are, in the eyes of the people, the farthest from God. It is not just the profession that bothers people but how they carry it out.

They were corrupt.

They were swindlers.

They were unjust, unrighteous.

They were surrounded by the scum and adulterers and prostitutes.

This is the worst sinner Jesus can portray in this brief story, as He has already used the Pharisee to present the most righteous man He could portray.

Location:

standing afar off,

Pharisee is as close to the holy place he can get, he is in the inner court, he is as close to the location symbolically where the presence of God resides as he can get.

Because in his own mind he belongs there, that is where he should be. He wanted people to see him and he thinks he's attained that.

This tax collector is far off.

Why?

Because he knows he doesn't deserve to be in the presence of God or even the presence of those who are righteous.

- He is rejected.
- He is a traitor.
- He is a sinner.
- He is an outcast to the society.
- He is an outcast to God.

He knew in his heart that he has no right to draw near to God. This is humility.

Posture:

would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven

Contrary to the Pharisee, who was happy to stand with arms up, open-faced looking to God.

This man will not even lift his eyes to heaven, meaning toward God.

He is overwhelmed with shame and guilt.

He knows he is unworthy.

He is a swindler.

He is unjust, dishonest, a cheat, corrupt, immoral, and irreligious.

He knows it, feels it, believes it, and confesses it.

He feels the full weight of his alienation from God. It's not just about being alienated from the society because of his profession, it's about being alienated from God because of his sin and disobedience and lawlessness.

Behaviour:

but beat his breast.

A study of Jewish social life will tell you that one of the ways that people prayed was to put their hands over their chest and put their eyes down.

This man does something that is unusual, a gesture familiar in Middle Eastern culture even today but still unusual. 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, and anguish.

There is only one other place in the New Testament where it happens.

Luke 23:48, *And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts and returned.*

There has never been a more horrific event than the cross. There men and women who were there to see that reacted in this dramatic way.

Why his chest?

Why does 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.

Matthew 15:19-20, Jesus did say that!

This man is crushed and humbled.

Confession:

'God, be merciful to me a sinner!

Those are the words of a true penitent.

1 Timothy 1:15, *This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*

There is no comparing him with others. He is the worst sinner. He knows about other sinners, but he knows his own heart better than he knows anybody else.

He is the worst sinner in the world, as far as his personal knowledge is concerned.

The Pharisee and the tax collector had a lot in common.

The Pharisee and the tax collector, they were agreed on a lot of things.

- They both understood the Old Testament to be the revelation of God.
- They were committed to Judaism.
- They believed in the God of the Old Testament, the Creator-God of the Old Testament, the God who drowned the world in the days of Noah.
- They believed in the God who revealed His law on Mount Sinai to Moses,
- They believed in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and then the God of Moses,
- They believed in the God of David.
- They believed in the God of the prophets.

- They believed in the God of the psalmists.
- They believed in the God of the Old Testament.
- They believed in the God that had revealed Himself to Moses as gracious, merciful, compassionate, tender-hearted.
- They believed in the God who was merciful, the God who was righteous and holy.
- They believed in the Scripture.
- They believed in the religious system that had been revealed in the Old Testament, the system of sacrifice, of priesthood.

Essentially, they believed the same thing, the same God, the same authoritative Scripture.

The Pharisee had faith in God. He believed in God. He believed in the true and living God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He believed in the God who was the Saviour God. He believed in the sacrificial system. He believed in atonement for sin. He believed in God's forgiveness.

Tax collectors did believe in God's forgiveness.

A Pharisee didn't believe that he never committed any sin ever in his entire life. He just believed that he had earned the right to be forgiven.

What is the difference then between these two?

Repentance.

Faith is a given.

You will find a lot of people who believe things that are biblical, believe in the Jesus of the New Testament, believe in the cross, believe in the resurrection. The element of faith so often in the Bible, so often in the gospels, the element of faith is sort of a given, that they believe in God and the God who is revealed in Scripture, etc., etc. The issue comes down to whether they will repent of sin in a true and genuine act of penitence.

The defining distinction here is that the first man thought he has nothing to Repent. He was like the rich young ruler.

There is no possibility of salvation apart from this kind of repentance because this is the defining element.

Be merciful to me!

God, please apply the atonement to me.

He understood the theology of atonement. He understood the wages of sin is death, the soul that sins it shall die.

He is saying, "I am a wretched sinner. I am unworthy to stand near you. I am unworthy to look up toward you. I am in profound agony and anguish over my wretchedness. I need an atonement for my sins to be applied to me."

That's what he's saying. This is about sin and atonement.

This verb is only used two times in the New Testament, one here and another in Hebrews 2:17.

Hebrews 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.*

To satisfy the wrath of God, to satisfy the justice and holiness and vengeance of God.

Please apply the atonement to me, make atonement for me. That very day a sacrifice had been made on that altar. He pleads that it would apply to him. He understood the theology of substitution, imputation, and atonement.

These two people weren't that far apart, theologically. There is just one fine difference divides everybody on the planet.

One of them thought he could please God on his own,
The other one knew he couldn't.
That is what separates everybody!

Conclusion:

V 14, I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Justified, permanently right with God!

Why did Jesus begin like that?

Because He knows He couldn't get this anywhere else in Judaism.

Jesus speaks with absolute authority, "I tell you."

Here is sound soteriology from incarnate God.

That is not what the rabbis or scribes tell you.

Jesus, God in human flesh, the holy one, the perfect sinless one says 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, religious achievement, spiritual accomplishment, or ritual.

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 penitent who put their trust in Him.

That's the gospel.

All the sinner ever does is receive the gift, coming in penitent trust, pleading for atonement to be made to satisfy the wrath of God against his sin.

It is not by human morality, goodness, or religion, but by repentance and conviction of sin and a plea for an atoning sacrifice.

There's no Christology here?

There's no cross here?

There's no resurrection here?

The sacrifice that atoned isn't here, but this is an Old Testament conversion.

You understand that this is pre-cross.

But the only sacrifice that pleases God is the sacrifice of Christ!

Therefore, it wasn't the sacrifice of the animal that would be applied to this man's account, it would be the sacrifice of Christ pictured in the sacrifice of the animal.

There is no righteousness apart from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. God is satisfied only with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ

because it was God who made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

"For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

"Exalted" here is a synonym for salvation, and righteousness.

In the Old Testament, only God is truly exalted and only God can exalt men. Men can't exalt themselves successfully to His level.

All efforts to doing that on your own are going to leave you humiliated. The path of self-exaltation ends up in eternal judgment. God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble.

On the other hand, all who humble themselves, confessing they cannot do anything to save themselves, will be lifted high into eternal glory.

- ✓ The condemned think they are good.
- ✓ The saved know they are wicked.

- The condemned believe the kingdom of God is for those worthy of it.
- The saved know the kingdom of God is for those who know they are unworthy of it.

- The condemned believe eternal life is earned.
- The saved know it's a gift.
- ❖ The condemned seek God's commendation.
- ❖ The saved seek His forgiveness.