

## Parable of Pharisee and tax collector – Luke 18:9-14 (Psalms 130,131) – 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018

Many years ago when I was studying hard for the Oxford University entrance exams, I heard the story of a recent philosophy paper set by the Oxford dons for the entrance exam. The question was a simple one: 'what is courage'? No doubt many great answers were written, and many heroic people named: Mahatma Gandhi, Florence Nightingale, and given that it was 1989, Nelson Mandela too. But the successful answer was remarkably short. After months of preparation and no doubt hundreds of hours of reading and cramming, the student who passed sat down and, looking at the question before him, what is courage, wrote the following: 'This is.'

I never discovered whether that story was true – probably an urban myth, but it seemed appropriate as we reflect today on a famous story. In many ways, we have all come here today to do a courageous thing. We have come to meet the Almighty God! Just imagine that: the Creator of the universe, the King of all kings, the One who can bend all things to His will, the One before whom all of us will give an account of our lives. And now we sit here in His presence....

The Almighty God is here, and you have come to meet Him: I hope you brushed your teeth this morning! How many of us, I wonder, made special preparations to meet the king today?

Some friends of ours told us recently about a family friend who was awarded a knighthood and the elaborate preparations required to go to the palace to meet the queen. It's a once in a lifetime experience: special clothes, special transport, probably an expensive hotel beforehand and an expensive lunch afterwards. All for a few words, a few *seconds*, with the great woman.

And throughout history, the thought of meeting with almighty God has inspired humanity to make special preparations – elaborate rituals, particular songs and dances, unique artwork, specially appointed go-betweens. Even today, no orthodox Muslim would dare to pray to God unless they were on their knees, on a special mat, head touching the ground. In the old Jewish religion at the time of Jesus' story, the only person to meet God directly was the High Priest on one day, once a year, and even then he had a rope tied around his waist in case the experience was so awesome he literally collapsed or died and had to be pulled out.

**How we approach God matters.** Even among religious beliefs which we would respectfully disagree with, people take the matter of meeting God very seriously indeed. It is an awesome thing to come into the presence of the living God.

Today's parable is all about how we approach God. As always with Jesus' stories, it makes us think again, it takes our normal ways of operating and turns them on its head. The God that we know in Jesus is no longer the terrifying, unapproachable being that early belief systems knew him to be – but even so, he is still God. He is *not* mortal, he remains the king of kings and lord of lords, the ruler of the universe. The question remains: what *is* the basis on which we can approach him?

In this simple parable, Jesus draws a contrast, doesn't he – do we approach God on the basis of **our goodness or God's grace**? That's what it comes down to: *what do we put our trust in* – that we're a good person or that God is gracious?

As is often the case, the pantomime villains in the story are the Pharisees. But let's not forget that these people commanded a huge respect in their culture. They were the ones who led the spiritual life of the people in the dark days of repeated conquest by other nations, they kept the fires burning, they called people to holiness. They were popularly known as 'bleeding Pharisees' because in their determination to avoid lustful thoughts they would not look up when walking around in case they saw something that tempted them – and kept banging their heads in the process. People did not see them as charlatans or frauds. They were the senior spiritual leaders on their people, with political influence too – think of them as modern-day bishops.

In contrast, tax collectors were not just bureaucrats – they were Jews who collected money on behalf of the hated Roman occupiers. They upheld and profited from a corrupt and oppressive system – they were effectively traitors, parasites preying on the weak and powerless. Think of them as modern-day loan sharks.

The parable of the bishop and the loan shark – now that sounds more interesting, doesn't it? READ v10-14a substituting words. It's scandalous, isn't it? How does a loan shark sit right in the eyes of God and a bishop doesn't?

In the end the defining factor comes down to our view of ourselves in relation to God: READ v14b. **When we stand in the presence of God, are we proud or humble?** Do we trumpet our achievements or cry out for God's grace and mercy?

The problem for us humans is that we have a very relative definition of goodness. You'll hear this kind of thing all the time: I'm a good person, I've never killed anyone or stolen or lied in court. Bad people are the dictators, the mass murderers. Or if not that, bad people are really just *other* people: my neighbour who annoys me, the colleague at work who lies to save his own skin.

But God's definition of goodness is not ours. When the rich young man approaches Jesus and says 'Good' teacher, Jesus reminds him: 'no-one is good but God alone'. God's definition of goodness sets the bar much, much higher – it means perfection. To describe ourselves as good we would need to answer yes to all the following questions: do you love God with every fibre of your being every moment of every day? Is every single act, word and even thought motivated by love and offered to God as worship? Do you see every person you meet as made in God's image and love them unconditionally all the time, demanding nothing in return? Is every single thing you do given over to God's glory and the good of others every second of every hour of every day of your whole life? Does your heart ache daily for more of God's presence, do you spend hours daily in prayer and praise, do you give thanks for every blessing *and* every hardship, do you crave suffering that you might be fully united with Christ?

I suspect none of us could say yes to even one of those questions, let alone all of them. We might see ourselves as good by the very low standards we set as humans – but we are not good in the way that God is good. How ridiculous it would be to approach God parading the filthy rags of our goodness as if that was somehow to our credit, to come before God like that and say – ta da, it's me! Aren't you lucky God to have someone like me working for you down here below?!

This week is exam results season. Hundreds of thousands of students have been waiting nervously – A-levels last week, GCSEs this week. And with every exam, a certain percentage gets you a certain grade, but a simple pass, what we used to call an E, is usually only around about 30%. So most students actually pass most of their exams, the stress is really about how *high* the passes are – is an A, or B or whatever.

But imagine for a moment that the basic pass rate for every exam is 100% - and not just that, to be awarded entry to the next college or qualification you had to get 100% for every paper for every subject. It wouldn't matter if you got 90% or 60% or 20% - it would fail, wouldn't it? And in fact, nobody gets 100% for every paper, it doesn't happen. And then imagine two students appearing before the examiners to argue their case, and one says – well, I'm just glad I'm not like this 20% student over here. I got 50% and that makes me so much better as a person... it's daft, isn't it?

The only way into God's presence is perfection, to be like him. And no human being can do it. There is no pride before God. All of us fall short. That's what sin means – at least one meaning of it – falling short. If you try to earn your way to heaven, you will fail, miserably. The only way in is perfection. PAUSE

But I have good news for you today. **The bar is still perfection, but it's not ours.** The Jesus who tells this story is the only human being to live a completely perfect life. God didn't want heaven to be empty, so he comes to us in human form. It is Jesus' perfection that saves us, that gives us a way to approach God – and the way it works is this.... BOOK ILLUSTRATION

This is grace. God's Riches At Christ's Expense. God himself makes a way. And this wretched tax collector, this loan shark, is justified because of God's grace not his goodness. That's the secret he knows that the Pharisee has forgotten. He humbles himself, and God graciously exalts him.

Before I close let me say 2 things that the parable is not saying: firstly, it does not mean that goodness doesn't matter, that good works and good lives aren't right. We hear nothing about what happens next to the tax collector, but in the very next chapter Jesus meets Zacchaeus whose life changes. He starts giving his money away, welcoming those he had oppressed. Grace offers us unconditional love but it changes us too. We are not meant to keep living the same way – if we do, we have missed the point. Similarly Jesus isn't saying that the Pharisee should stop being good. It is clearly better not to commit adultery, not to steal. It is great to fast and tithe. The point is that these things do not become a source of pride for us.

The Pharisee's big problem is that he's forgotten who he is, and who God is. He's forgotten God's mercy. And it's easy to do, it's a challenge for all of us who've followed Jesus for many years. When we first came to faith, we probably had that deep sense of God's mercy, of living by grace. Most new Christians are acutely conscious of all the bad things in their lives – and little by little God starts to work and to change us, which is exactly what God wants. But as the years go on, we start to rely more and more on our goodness – we have less to confess at church, we prosper and enjoy God's blessing and start to believe our own hype, that we deserve those blessings. Without realising it, we become Pharisees.

As I close I want to speak to 2 different groups of people, and the first is this: those of us – and it could be many of us – who feel the pull of the Pharisee, who need to hear again that we always and only ever approach God because of his glorious, undeserved grace. Here's a simple test – when you read a newspaper condemning some group like asylum seekers do you think to yourself – quite right, they don't deserve anything, or does your heart ache because a whole group of people, each made in the image of God, is being treated with contempt and denied mercy? Test your heart: self-righteousness creeps in so easily, and so much of our media feeds it. There are goodies and baddies and we're the goodies.

**This parable takes us back to first principles: grace.** God's glorious undeserved love and mercy. That never changes. We might have been a Christian 5 years, 20 years, 50 years, but the call to humility is clear – God have mercy on me a sinner. The very greatest Christians remain the most humble. John Stott used to say that growing in holiness is like approaching a light – the closer we get, the more we see the stains, which keeps us humble.

But for the second group I have good news – great news in fact. There will be some people here today who've never felt good enough for God. And you're right – you aren't. But Jesus is. That's the beauty of the gospel – it's not about you. Jesus does what you can't – he is your way in. St Paul says: 'In him and through faith in him we can approach God with freedom and confidence.' Whatever burdens you carry, or sins or shame or worthlessness, God declares in Jesus: you are forgiven, you are precious – give your burdens to Jesus and let him carry them.

That is the good news of our faith. That is our hope. The call goes out to each and every one of us, without fear or favour. God have mercy on me, a sinner. And his grace is sufficient. Amen.