

THE DANGERS OF DOING GOOD.

SERIES: THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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Luke 18:9-14

Seventh Message

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My name is Rolana Smith and I am the Women's Pastor at PBC. Among many other facts about me is that I am 5' 8". Anyone else that's 5'8"? This is actually new to me. For the whole of my adult life, I thought I was 5'7". My license still says 5'7". Long story short, I asked to be remeasured at my last physical. I'm actually 5'8."

On the one hand, height doesn't matter. It doesn't change who we are on the inside. We are all worth the same and loved the same by God, regardless of our height.

On the other hand, there are times when it matters. If you strive to be an Olympic athlete, height matters. Here's a picture of the ideal height for two prime athletes. [Picture of Simone Biles and Shaquille O'Neal] Simone Biles, wearing heels here, is 4'8", and Shaquille O'Neal is 7'1". They are the ideal height for their sports.

Sometimes, height matters.

We'll get back to height later.

Today, we are diving into another provoking parable. As we've said, parables are stories Jesus told to help us unlock something in our inner being that mere words cannot. Parables can penetrate the heart in ways that facts and simple truths have a hard time doing.

The problem with parables is that Jesus spoke them to a specific audience, and sometimes, the effect he is trying to evoke doesn't translate well into our current setting. Parables about gardening will not quite resonate with the souls of those with a brown thumb.

And many of us already know the punchline, so today, we need to do a bit more work to put ourselves in the shoes of the Jewish people 2000 years ago.

Let me read the parable first, and then we'll try to understand more.

Luke 18:10-14:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 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!' 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."

This may have already hit home or unlocked something for some of you.

This is actually a mic-drop moment for Jesus. What he said would have been quite shocking to the listeners.

The audience Jesus is speaking to were people who were probably upholding some of the Old Testament laws, interpretations, and traditions. Ingrained in the Jewish way of thinking was this sense that following the law was good, holy, and moral. God gave them these laws, which have been a part of their history for thousands of years. Even though following all of the laws was impossible, upholding or striving to uphold these laws comes with a sense of virtue.

So when you or I hear this parable, we have a negative reaction to the pharisee. Jesus speaks most harshly to and about the religious leaders of the day. They are no heroes.

But those listening to Jesus tell this parable would have seen the Pharisee as one with virtue. The accomplishments he lists are noble. The tax collector is seen as a traitor because the Jewish people are currently under Roman rule, and tax collectors work for the Romans, collecting their taxes from the Jewish people and adding a cut for themselves, often an unreasonable amount. So, the audience hears this parable as an honorable man and a traitor going to temple.

The story would have a bigger impact on us if it read like this: A sweet, beloved, 1st-grade school teacher and fraud, used car salesman walked into PBC. The teacher sang worship songs loudly, with their hands raised. She is grateful for her job, is proud of her sacrifices, gladly accepts a lower paycheck, even tithes, and volunteers in the Children's Ministry. She is thankful, unlike others, that she has found the right way of living and knows the truth. But the slick, used car salesman sits in the corner of the Fireside Room. He can't raise his face or voice to join in worship. He kneels, unaware of those around them, asking the Lord for mercy. Jesus says the salesperson, not the teacher, is justified.

This is supposed to evoke some outrage. Those listening are probably shocked by this parable.

Justified means to be counted as righteous, in right standing. So, how does it make sense that the person who has literally done more good is NOT counted as righteous when the fraud has been counted in right standing with God? That's not fair or just! The whole law is based on obedience and morality. If the seemingly obedient one doesn't make it, what does it mean for the others listening who are trying to follow the law? What does that mean for us?

Gary Gadini called us last week to "Go Deep;" that's what Jesus is doing. He is going beneath the surface, beneath the actions, and to the heart and attitude of the people.

This parable is one in a string of parables overturning how the Israelites related to God. Jesus is overturning the notion that your actions make you righteous or that doing good things makes you a good person.

The focus here is not the good or bad things either of these men did. The focus is on their *posture* towards God, themselves, and others. Interestingly, their physical posture mirrors their hearts.

Let's look back at the posture of the Pharisee in verses 11-12.

Luke 18:11-12:

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

The Pharisee stands and freely talks to God. He seems to have confidence in his posture towards God. He presents a list of what he has done and who he is not. But what or who does he have confidence in?

His confidence is in his own actions, especially compared to other people. His confidence is based on his works and sacrifices. He doesn't list failures, weaknesses, or any need for wisdom or help. He doesn't list the parts of the law he doesn't uphold. Though he is speaking to God, his eyes seem to be on himself and those around him.

If we look back at verse 9, the audience is described as people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt".

This sums up the pharisee's posture well—as he looks to God, looks at himself, and others, it's all about building himself up. This parable was told to those who think and act like him.

Let's look at the tax collector.

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!'

The tax collector stands far away, and cannot even lift his eyes to heaven. He views God as holy. He beats his chest. He sees himself as unworthy, as a sinner in need of mercy. He knows that this holy God could grant him mercy. He lists no accomplishments, and his view of others is irrelevant at the moment.

Jesus is highlighting this difference in attitude between the two men.

In verse 14, Jesus says that those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but the ones who are humble will be exalted.

We are starting to see the problem. Humility is key.

But here's the thing that's hard about humility. It's a posture that's hard to define. If you ask yourself if you are humble, what data do you use? If you answer yes, are you really humble? It's a weird enigma that sometimes people who know us well can tell us when we are not humble, but they don't have the full picture either to

declare us humble. So, usually, it's an unhelpful question to ask yourself unless you know the answer is no.

Like the tax collector, we're actually trying to zero in on our need for mercy.

When we see our need for mercy, humility follows.

Maybe you aren't feeling that gut punch—you're not offended like the original listeners. Maybe you see yourself more as the tax collector—aware of your need and the holiness of God. You don't resonate with the Pharisee nor see yourself as righteous, holy, or on top. What does this parable offer, then?

For some of you, this parable is simply an encouragement to be grateful for the Lord's mercy.

But for others of us, there is a subtle danger we should pay attention to. We might have Pharisees inside of us that we are unaware of. One common journey of Christians often includes a time with a deep sense of awareness for our need for Christ. There is intimacy and overflowing love for God and the people around us. And then, as we walk with God for a longer time, sometimes something shifts. Those louder sins that kept us humble may have become less of a problem. Praise the Lord. He has been transforming us, healing us, maturing us. We find sacrificing and doing good things come more naturally. Maturity then requires us to dig into the more subtle and unseen sins. We might become less aware of our need for Christ as some of our sins are less obvious to us. It means listening closer to God's voice. These are all good and normal things.

But sometimes, the more good we do, the harder it can be to spot our need for mercy.

And that is where the fight begins not to become a Pharisee.

I have a few prompts the Lord has used in my life to shine a light on areas that are harder to get at. I'm going to pose some of those prompts to you as well. This isn't so that we can overanalyze every thought or action, but rather as a pathway for our loving God to expose our need for mercy, increase our humility, and grow us. The tax collector didn't have his eyes fixed on himself, frantically listing every sin, so we don't need to hunt or be anxious either. Rather, as we go deeper, we trust that the Lord will meet us with mercy and love.

When I was first a Christian, my mess was quite obvious. I couldn't fool anyone into thinking I had my life together, even if I wanted to. I felt so, so, so thankful to just be in the presence of God, in the presence of other believers, grateful that God was merciful and generous.

I've been a Christian for over two decades now. My mess, though still obvious to me, is a bit quieter. God has done good things. But now, instead of resonating with the prodigal son, or the one lost sheep, or the worker who got paid for an hour of work, I find myself resonating more with the older brother, the 99 sheep that got left behind, the person who thinks they deserve more for working more.

My view of myself is still that of a sinner, but my need for mercy doesn't feel as deep or urgent as it used to be. A Pharisee is growing in my heart beneath the surface. She is easy to miss or ignore, but left in darkness, she will harm me and those around me.

You may find yourself in a similar boat. But Jesus gave us this parable to help us; we can trust in his goodness as we explore more underneath the surface.

The first question I'll ask is, "Do you think you're better than some?"

My first paid job was at Jamba Juice. When I was being trained, an intimidating customer ordered a smoothie. I made it wrong—it was quite bad. But I was scared of the man, so I served it anyway because he was so impatient. He yelled at me quite severely, and I remade the smoothie. My manager pulled me aside and encouraged me. She told me that anyone yelling at someone over a smoothie has other issues. It's not about me.

He was entitled, mean, wrong. But here's the other problem with that event. When I tell that story, a part of me likes putting him down, saying, "I'm thankful I'm not that guy who yells at young women."

Often, our judgements, contempt, or self-righteousness do a really good job of hiding itself. It often can lurk in the shadow of something good, behind something true, so it's harder to spot. My self-righteousness really snuck up on me in this one.

But maybe you have times when you have done this as well.

- Have you read about an evil act and assigned lower worth to them?

- Have you been hurt, sinned against, and devalued that person?
- Have you walked by someone in need and judged them for their actions?

Just as the Pharisee assigned worth to himself and those around him, we do as well. I'm not talking about normal ranking that is a part of our society. We just watched the Olympics where people were ranked based on skill and performance. But their worth was not defined by their rank.

Sometimes are tempted to think that the flip side of judgment or contempt would be to have no thoughts or only positive thoughts about everyone. If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all, right? That's not what we're called to either. Jesus reacted to and spoke against sin, and evil. He was angry and sad at times.

The Bible actually tells us to judge and discern. Jesus himself says in John 7:24 that we should "not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment."

We don't quite have the right words, but the judgment referred to there is more discernment, wisdom, and a sharp eye on truth. That is a critical part of being steeped in God's truth and following Him. But Jesus and the Bible speak harshly of the type of unseen judgment that lodges in our hearts and assigns worth and value to others. This is the type of judgment where we seem to forget our own failings but are keenly, overly aware of the failings or perceived failings of others.

This is at the heart of this parable—this gap, this lack of awareness of our own need for mercy, forgiveness, and God's love. We forget our own debt towards God and the wrongs we have committed against each other.

If I'm really, really honest with myself, I think I'm better than the Jamba Juice customer. I think I'm better than many people I see on the news.

I remember deeply wrestling with the Lord, trying to forgive my father for some hard things. It took five years after his death to forgive him because I thought I was better than him. The thought of us being worth the same was terrifying; it felt unjust. To forgive him, I needed to confess my own self-righteousness and see my own debt that God had paid.

This instinct to rank and value each other is hard to shake. In some ways, we use it to validate our pain in

this world. Letting go of ranking might feel like a threat, like defeat. Maybe for you, it flares most with people who seem fake, people we don't trust, or with family members, or topics like politics, theologies, or cultural ways of living. We often tend to assign worth and value to people who we do not understand, people who rub us the wrong way or who we feel might be dangerous.

Next question as you think of these tense relationships: Is it hard to give some people dignity?

Do you find it hard to treat someone well and love them despite the tension between you? In its extreme, this is Jesus calling us to love our enemies. When we aren't able to give someone dignity, it's a sign that we have assigned someone worth or value.

When we assign people's worth, we are taking the place of God. We have a posture that is one of comparison, not of mercy. We are focused on ourselves and others instead of focusing on God.

It's such a human instinct that is so strong and so destructive.

Take a moment to think about Christians in America right now.

This parable could have easily been red or blue.

When we speak about political issues, candidates, or political parties, are we collectively speaking with humility? I recently read a comment section of Christians debating over our current candidates. We are publicly speaking with contempt, we are assigning worth, we are self-righteous in our attitudes, and not speaking with dignity towards or about one another. And the whole world sees it.

And you know what I'm doing? I'm sitting there thinking I'm better than them because I'm not yelling at people on social media. My judgment of those judging is just another way my inner pharisee wants to grow.

Again, the answer isn't silence. The answer isn't promoting values we disagree on. We should be engaged, looking for the truth, learning what others think, and being sharp and wise. But when we have those discussions, are we doing so from a place of humility or contempt? Are we assigning worth and limiting dignity both in our actions and in our hearts?

When we withhold dignity in the face of disagreement, we again forget how much mercy we need and have been given. We have forgotten the dignity God has given us, even while we were his enemies.

The bad news is that we will always have mixed motives; we will always have thoughts and beliefs that will tear people down and push people away. We will lose sight of Jesus as we compare each other. But the good news is that Jesus gives us an answer in this parable.

Here is the clincher: the gospel.

The Lord cannot be won by our actions. His love cannot be bought with our obedience or maturity. We do not need to strive to be better. We do not become good people by doing good things.

Rather, in his kingdom, we need to be honest about our need for mercy so he can call us righteous by his power and goodness.

Now imagine if we engaged these issues with our fellow Christians and our culture as mere humans in need of mercy, firm in our convictions to follow God, and extremely aware of our humanity. If we were honest enough to admit to ourselves and others that we might have things wrong. In fact, we know that some things are wrong.

Imagine what our community would feel like if we tried to let go of comparing ourselves to others, if we stopped assigning internal value to external actions. I love that phrase that a good friend of mine said last week. We should stop assigning internal value to external actions. Instead of making assumptions, can we instead be graciously curious when we aren't aligned?

In God's kingdom, humility is worth more than the tithes and sacrifices, more than volunteering and good works, more than our votes, our opinions, more than our efforts.

Some might be uncomfortable. But Jesus speaks harshly to those unaware of their self-righteousness, and I know my inner Pharisee needs a reality check. Maybe yours does, too.

We've covered the Pharisee and the tax collector's view of others. Let's talk about the Pharisee's view of self, and his good works.

He had real sacrifices he made. Anyone who has ever fasted cannot look at this man's fasting twice a week and dismiss it. He tithes, which means he gives away money/things.

The danger of good works is that others can see them and praise you for them. You can point to them internally. You can hide behind them. You can use them to distract yourself.

This is hard because we *should* be doing good works.

Galatians 6:9 says "let us not grow weary of doing good". The book of James says that our faith is linked to our good works. Good works should, and will flow out of people who love God.

But we need to be careful that our good works do not become a stepping stone for building ourselves up or trampling the people around us. That they don't become a distraction from what God might actually want us to pay attention to. In other parts of scripture, we see that the Pharisees are known for upholding *some* of the laws but actually neglecting the laws that most reflect the heart of God. Their good works distracted them from the heart of God.

Let's return to the topic of height for a minute. The good works are being used as high heels and trendy sneakers to make themselves taller, rank themselves against others, and accidentally or intentionally step on others to get ahead.

We need to not confuse good works with following the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 13:3 says, "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Engaging God and listening for the heart of God is harder. For me, it's vulnerable because he might lead me into areas that are uncomfortable for me, where I need to lean on him more. It's easier to do things that are objectively good and easier for me than to listen to his still, small voice. But then I'm acting out of self-reliance, not out of faith. I can default to choosing work tasks over family dynamics or chores over a conflict I must pray about. Maybe you are also so busy doing good things that you haven't made room to be with the one who *is* good.

Are good works a distraction from listening to God?

Are you prioritizing good works that make you feel better about yourself or listening to the Spirit?

Quick side tangent. I don't think there's anything wrong with feeling satisfaction in the work we do. There's nothing wrong with the easy win of completing a task or gaining pleasure from a job well done. I think these are a *huge* gift from God.

The problem becomes when those good things are used against the Lord, against ourselves, and against those around us. God will bring awareness; our job is to be honest with him and listen.

If you want a quick gut check on some of the good things you're doing in life, one prompt that Jesus himself gives is if we are willing to do good things in secret. This is such a helpful suggestion. Go out of your way to do things in secret so as not to get rewards or a good reputation for what you do. Notice your reaction—are you waiting for people to notice and thank you? Do you want to drop it into conversation casually? After all of these years, when I aim for this, I can still find myself wanting rewards from others instead of accepting the harder-to-grasp rewards from God. Our sin runs deep.

This was all quite heavy. The application of this parable isn't to feel bad or walk around constantly beating their chests. He tells us in other parts of scripture to come to him boldly, like a child; in fact, the parable right before this one is the one where he says we should pray with such determination that God himself will give in.

The wonderful news is that once we are well acquainted with our sins and mistakes, there is hope. When we can admit that we cannot properly do this life on our own, when we know in our bones our effort isn't enough, we can surrender ourselves completely to God. And how does he respond? Jesus says he exalts us. He meets us in that place to give us worth. He gives us mercy, not by our strength but by his love for us. Out of that humility flows gratitude, joy, and love for God, for ourselves, and for others.

Some might be sitting here feeling shame or are internally judging themselves. Sometimes, that's the enemy, and sometimes, we judge ourselves as less worthy to feel safe. To you, I want to remind you that there is no condemnation in Christ. Even though you are putting yourself down, it is still in comparison with others, still

assigning worth. God wants you to have confidence, joy, and gratitude in the fact that he calls you his daughter or son. You are safe with him. It is good to rejoice in who he created you to be.

Let's get back to height.

The great theologian Joanie Burnside, one of our deacons, would tell the middle schoolers that sometimes, humans stand next to a mountain, comparing each other's height to see who is closer to the top. One person is putting on platform sneakers, the other a top hat, or another heels. In comparison to the mountain, our differences are negligible. When we look at that scene, it's laughable and embarrassing to watch ourselves trying to get just a bit higher. We cannot make it to the top by our own accessories or efforts. Even with the extreme differences between Simone and Shaq, they still practically have the same distance to the top of the mountain.

No, Jesus already paved the way. He knew we could not follow his path on our own.

So, friends, we need to lay down our efforts and our accessories. We need to take off our trendy sneakers and heels that we use to build ourselves up. We need to lay down our comparisons, our contempt, our judgements, and our inner Pharisees at the feet of Jesus.

Instead, we need to find a posture of humility, a posture that admits that we need help and a guide.

From that posture, with our hearts inclined towards God, we can gratefully receive his mercy. And we can see each other as equal—equally in need of help and equally counted worthy. Our differences are real. Our pains are real. We will hurt each other. But when our value comes from God, we can better see each other through His eyes.

I want to leave you with one quick phrase. Have mercy on me.

When we find ourselves comparing, judging, or assigning worth, let us pray like the tax collector. His full prayer was, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." But a simple prayer we can return to often is simply, "Have mercy on me."

I want to give us a moment to posture ourselves toward God's mercy. Start with your heart. Be honest with the Lord. Listen for his nudge, his voice, his love. And as we lead into this next song, feel free to posture

your body toward the Lord. Sit, kneel, stand, stand far off, raise your hands or bow your head—whatever helps you posture yourself towards God.

If you have never surrendered it all to God, if you haven't asked him for his mercy, this is a great time to do that. You can have this moment with the Lord and then come up to me during service, or the prayer team when we are finished so that we can pray for you and support you.

Let me pray. Lord, I simply ask for your mercy. Would you be gracious enough to show us areas where our good works or perspective has led to self-righteousness and has led to putting others down? Would you give us the courage to be vulnerable? Would you give us your reminder and encouragement that there is no condemnation in Christ when we confess our sins to you. Lavish us with the worth, the love, the dignity that only you can give. And help us spill that out to those around us. Amen.