

How to Go Home Justified

Introduction

The Text

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, 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.” (Luke 18:9–14)

Something’s Not Right

- A. We’re not right. We all feel it. Not all of us, perhaps, are willing to admit it. But, deep down, we all feel it. We’re not right. Something’s off.
- B. I was reminded of this just last week when I was reading a book to my kids that Debbie Griego, the leader of our Mercy Hill Women’s team, actually let me borrow. It’s a book called **Blotch** (I’m actually going to give a copy away after the sermon if you’re interested). I had lit a fire in the fireplace—our first of the season. We had turned the lights down a bit. And we were all sitting around reading this story.
 1. It’s a story about a boy who notices that everyone, himself included, has these spots, these blotches, all over them. And with every bad thought, word, or deed, another spot appears. And he’s determined to see if there is some way to get rid of them. He wants to travel about to the different towns and villages around and see if anyone has the answer. His parents think it’s something of a fool’s errand but they let him go. And as he comes to different villages, he finds that each one has approached the problem of the spots differently.
 - a. The people in one village try to hide the spots, externally, with makeup. They look better on the outside, but nothing is different on the inside, and soon their secret is exposed.
 - b. The people in another village simply ignored the stains and collectively determined to pretend they didn’t exist. They didn’t want to talk about them. They didn’t want to go there. That would make for unpleasant conversation.
 - c. And the people in yet another village deal with the spots by blaming others for them. They’re divided up on either side of the street running through the town—at odds with each other, accusing each other.
 - d. And then the little boy, just when he’d lost all hope of ever finding a solution to the stains, meets the King . . . and, to his amazement, the King is spotless.

- i. And the King welcomes him, listens to him, cares for him, and, ultimately, heals him. And as the little boy stands back in wonder that his stains have been removed, he looks up at the King and realizes that they are all now on Him. The King took them upon Himself!

(1) It's a powerful story. Read it to your kids. There's a family discussion guide and everything.

- C. But here's why I bring this out right up front like this: As I was reading this story to my kids and hearing this little boy's struggle with the stains and pondering the idea of being accepted and loved even in spite of them . . . I just started weeping. I was kind of glad the lights were down low at this point so my kids couldn't see just how choked up I was starting to get. I mean, this is a kid's story about spots and yet here I am, a grown man, weeping. Why?
 1. Because I feel stained. Because I feel unclean. Because I feel not right, wrong, broken, covered in spots. This story was giving language and metaphor, in very simply terms, to things I feel deep in my bones. Something's off with me. And I feel the temptation to either hide it, or pretend it's not there, or blame others for it . . . so that I can feel better about myself . . . justified.
 - a. You see, I know that something is wrong with me—that there's sin up in me. And you know that about yourself too. And we all have different ways we're trying to make it right.

Two Ways

- A. Jesus, in our text, in this parable, is highlighting for us two possible approaches we could take, two ways, we might try to do this.
 1. The first is what we'll call (1) The Way of the Religious; the second we'll call (2) The Way of the Christian. For each we'll look at the approach to justification—how are they attempting to get in the right—and then we'll trace the effects that follow out from that approach.

(1) The Way of the Religious (vv. 9-12)

- A. We begin here, because this is where Jesus begins in His telling of the parable: “¹⁰Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get’” (vv. 10-12).

The Approach

- A. Let me make a few observations concerning the approach we see here—the way this man is attempting to justify himself.

Observation #1: He Is Externally Clean

A. This fact, surely cannot be missed. Indeed, the Pharisee himself will not let us miss it. It is the substance of his entire prayer. We see it there—what he has not done and what he has done. It is all about works, external behavior, following rules, and such.

1. It is, to borrow the image from the book I just mentioned, hiding the stains of the heart under the makeup of good deeds.

Observation #2: He Is Standing by Himself

A. We read this plainly there in [v. 11](#): “[The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus . . .](#)” No doubt, we are to assume here that this man has positioned himself up front in the temple towards the altar.

B. There are a few things we should say about this separation:

1. First, it implies clearly, I think, that this man feels himself to be better than the rest, set apart in some significant way from them, deserving of the best seat in the house, as it were.
2. Secondly, it showcases the distance that this sort of approach to justification always ends up creating between the “holy man” and the rest. If your righteous standing before God is based on what you do or don’t do, then you won’t dare be seen with anyone lesser than lest they corrupt or taint you in some way. It’s too risky. It could tarnish your image.
3. And third, I think this standing by himself detail, reminds us that when we attempt to justify ourselves in this way, we always feel the need to be seen.
 - a. Standing alone is a way of setting himself apart from the crowd, not just because he thinks he is better, not just because he doesn’t want to be tainted by the common laymen, but because he wants to be seen, admired, even adored.

C. You know you’re in the thick of this sort of thing when you, even as a Christian, try to pull those “humble brags” we’re, sadly, all probably familiar with. You know what I’m talking about. You’re in conversation and you just kind of slip in the fact that you just finished a three day fast, or that you were out evangelizing all weekend, or that you’re looking for a new book to read now that you just finished the two-volume collection of the works of Jonathan Edwards.

1. I’m not saying we necessarily hide these things. I’m just saying sometimes we go out of our way to share them. And when that’s going on, you know you have some of this Pharisee stuff in play in your heart. “I want you to see me. I want you to tell me how good I am. I want you know I’m right, I’m holy, I’m justified. I want you to adore me as I adore me” And this leads into Observation #3 . . .

Observation #3: He Is Praying “to Himself”

A. The interesting thing about the Greek grammar underneath our text at this point is it’s a bit ambiguous (the ESV even has a footnote on this).

1. The preposition could be taken to mean, as we've just discussed, that the Pharisee stood to or by himself and prayed.
 2. But it can also be taken to mean that he in fact prayed to himself. Now, of course, the idea would be he prayed quietly to himself or something, but I think we may be intended to see some sarcasm here as it is quite evident in the words of this man's prayer that he is not really praying to God at all.
 - a. If you look closely, you'll see that He mentions God, but He's not really talking to God. As one commentator puts it: "He glances at God, but contemplates himself" (Plummer). We might say that this man references, but quickly passes by, God while on his way to self-adoration.
- B. The five "I"s in this passage make such an observation plain to us: " ^{11b} 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" (vv. 11b-12).
1. This is not worship of God, this is worship of self. He is inviting God to come and adore him!

Observation #4: He Is Trusting in Himself

- A. This just kind of wraps up what we've been looking at to this point and brings us back to what is said plainly with reference to this man at the beginning: "[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous . . ." (v. 9a). That's where this man is. "I don't need your help God. I've got it. You give me the Law. I'll take it from there."

The Effect

- A. And this leads us towards a discussion of the effect of this approach. What comes of this man in the fallout of his religious way? It's not what we would think or expect. And it certainly would be a shock to the original audience. Pharisees were revered for their holiness.
1. I want to consider the effect of this approach along two lines. First with reference to his relationship with God. And second with reference to his relationship with other people.

Effect #1: Relationship with God

- A. With regard to this man's relationship with God, we would think that this man is in the right, but Jesus comes out down in v. 14 and says that this man is all wrong.
1. He doesn't go home justified, but by extension, we infer, he goes home condemned. He isn't exalted by God as he might have imagined but instead is, rather, humbled.
- B. He missed the point of the Law. He treated the Law as if it were a mountain up which he could climb to get right with God. But the Law was meant, rather, to be a muzzle, by which our mouths would be shut before him and all boasting silenced.

1. I get this really from what Paul writes in [Rom 3:19-20](#): “¹⁹ [W]hatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”
- C. I love the illustration Matt Chandler gives on this. He says that the Law is God’s MRI machine, as it were. It was meant by Him to expose all that is off in us.
1. But here’s the point: The MRI machine doesn’t fix you. It can’t fix you. All it can do is tell you what’s wrong with you and send you out with that knowledge towards the only One who can fix you.
 - a. As Paul says elsewhere: “[T]he law was our [teacher] until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith [in Him]” ([Gal 3:24](#)). The Law was meant to lead you not to self-righteousness but to Christ for righteousness.
 - i. But, again, this man missed it. And he goes home condemned, humbled.

Effect #2: Relationship with Others

- A. But there’s more here. This approach to justification doesn’t just affect his relationship with God, it affects his relationship with others. That’s what is brought out plainly back up in [v. 9](#) again: “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt . . .”
1. These are not two disconnected observations here. No. We are meant to understand by this that the latter flows from the former. There is cause and effect here. Because he trusted in himself that he is righteous, he treats others with contempt. That is where self-righteousness necessarily leads.
- B. And I think it leads here for at least two reasons it seems:
1. First, you think you did it. You look down on others who aren’t able to match your standard because you were the one who made this happen. Why can’t they? What’s wrong with them?
 2. But then secondly, and this is a hidden a bit deeper down in our hearts, we’re honestly insecure. This whole thing presents as self-confidence, but underneath it’s really shot through with fear and insecurity.
 - a. We have to compare ourselves with others and cut them down because we are always worried we don’t measure up. We keep shouting about our accomplishments because we’re worried you’re not going to notice. We keep tearing down because it’s actually one of the ways we reassure ourselves.
- C. So there’s this tragic irony in all of this. The one who thinks he’s justified in himself is the one who’s truly condemned before God. The one who thinks he’s righteous in himself is the one who is truly

becoming more and more monstrous in his personal dealings with others. There's got to be another way!

(2) The Way of the Christian (vv. 13-14)

- A. All of this stands in contrast now to the way of the Christian. This approach is here illustrated in the tax collector of Jesus' parable, whom we meet in v. 13 in particular: "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 Approach

- A. Now, as we did with the Pharisee, so I will do here with this man. I will draw out four corresponding observations, but as we do I trust we shall see the sharp difference between the two.

Observation #1: He Is Externally a Mess

- A. Where the other man was clean and proper and something to behold, this man is drawing attention, perhaps, but not the sort of attention you would want. He looks a bit crazy, a bit off. Externally, he looks to be more of a mess than anything else.
 - 1. We read that he is "beat[ing] his breast" (v. 13). It's a mark of grief, of mourning, of contrition.
 - a. It's the sort of thing that if you saw it would send you whispering to your friends: "I wonder what's up with that guy? What do you think he did that's got him that worked up? Perhaps he isn't all there." If you had your kids with you, you'd be gathering them close and asking them to cover their eyes or look away.
- B. This is, of course, comfort for those of us who come into church feeling unkept, unpresentable, unclean, a mess. As we'll see, such folks are often much closer to the kingdom of heaven than anyone else. Because they know they're broken, they know they're desperate, they know they need help.

Observation #2: He Is Standing at a Distance

- A. This is quite interesting, isn't it?! As with the Pharisee this man sets himself apart from the crowd, but we come to find that he has done so for a very different reason.
 - 1. Where the Pharisee understands himself to be a great Saint and takes his place up at the very front of the line, this tax collector, understanding himself to be a great sinner, has taken his place at the very back. He is "standing far off . . ."
- B. There's a detail that's missed in the English translation that I think is worth bringing out here. Where the ESV translates this man as saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"—a literal translation would read: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

1. That has a different ring to it, doesn't it? ["The sinner."](#) It is perhaps something similar to the apostle Paul's self-declaration as the "chief of sinners" ([1 Tim 1:15](#)). "As far as I'm concerned I'm the worst. It is not for me to figure out where I stack up in the pecking order. I do not know your heart. I only know mine. And that is enough to put me on the bottom of the list."
- C. This man refuses to take consolation in the fact that he is just one sinner among many. Here is the logic that, if we're honest, we often seek comfort in: "Well, everyone is doing it. I'm only human."
1. All well and good, but what everyone is doing, what is now only human, is the stuff of devils. Who cares if it is normal behavior if it is monstrous. That should be no consolation or comfort at all. In fact, truly, it should only cause us more grief. Why are we all this way?!
 - a. In any case, this tax collector refuses to go there. ["God, be merciful to me, the sinner."](#)

Observation #3: He Is Praying towards Heaven

- A. Now I say it like this to make a point. It is interesting, right? Technically, this man, we are told, while he was praying, ["would not even lift up his eyes to heaven . . ."](#) But I am telling you, his are the only prayers that actually make it there!
1. The Pharisee is certain that when he opens his mouth to pray all of heaven tunes in to attend to his words. He looks up to the sky assured that God is beaming down on Him with admiration. But God hears not a word. His prayers never make it past the ceiling. And understandably so—they are all orbiting around himself.
 2. This man, gets down in the dirt with the worms, and simply lets out a pathetic cry for help, and God is on it! It's much like what God says in [Isa 66:2](#): ["\[T\]his is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word."](#)

Observation #4: He Is Trusting in God and His Mercy Alone!

- A. The first man couldn't get over himself. But this second man has given up on himself long ago and is looking instead outside of himself and his merits to God and His mercy.
- B. The amazing thing is that though this man has this strong sense that He doesn't belong in God's presence—hence he's standing at a distance, not even willing to look up to heaven, and things—at the same time he has this strange lingering confidence that God will still welcome him.
1. That's why he's there. That's why he's praying. That's why he's calling out for mercy. He knows that God, as holy as He is, is also merciful.
- C. Now, there is something, again, hidden in the Greek behind the English here that is profoundly important. The fact is, there is a perfectly good and much more customary Greek word for mercy that could have been chosen here, but it isn't. Instead the word used here is much more specialized [Gk. *hilaskomai*].

1. It belongs to a word group associated in particular with the Day of Atonement. It's related to the word used to identify what's been known as the "mercy seat." The mercy seat was the lid to the ark of the covenant that was kept there in the Most Holy Place of the temple. At God's command, the High Priest would only dare approach that place and God's presence there once a year, on the Day of Atonement. And he would make atonement for the sins of the people by sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on that seat and God would meet with him there. And, through this, a sinful people could continue to dwell alongside a holy God.
- D. So when this man says, "God, be merciful . . .", he is not merely asking for God to sweep his sin under the rug. He is asking for God to make atonement, to make propitiation, to provide the blood-payment of a substitutionary sacrifice for the forgiveness of His sins.
1. He knows that's the only way a sinner, "the sinner" like him, can come near to a holy God. "There's got to be blood on that mercy seat or it's over for me!"
- E. All of this, of course, foreshadows and prepares us for the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Which is why, by the way, the only other time the verb form of this word is used in the NT is in [Heb 2:17](#), "where it refers to Jesus fulfilling the duty of the high priest by atoning for the sins of the people at the Holy of Holies in the temple" (PNTC): "Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation [hilaskomai] for the sins of the people."
1. How does a sinful man approach a holy God? How do we get right? It isn't by my works or merits, but by His. [2 Cor 5:21](#): "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
 - a. This is what theologians have referred to as double-imputation—He gets my sin, I get His perfect righteousness. And this is the core of what we call the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Effect

- A. And this leads us now to the effect, to that which results from this tax collector's approach to getting right. And, again, it's surprising. Tax Collectors were despised in this day—collaborators with Rome, notoriously dishonest. And yet we see Jesus is flipping everything on its head here.
1. Let's consider those same two lines again. Let's look at how this approach affects both his relationship with God and his relationship with others.

Effect #1: Relationship with God

- A. With regard to his relationship with God, surprisingly, it is this man we are told who "went down to his house justified, rather than the other" (v. 14a).
- B. Here we come to face that great doctrine of the Reformation: namely, justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

1. Paul writes of this very thing in Rom 3:22b-25 when he says: “^{22b} [T]here is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

C. How do you get right, before God, deep in your soul?

1. You’re not going to be able to do it on your own. You’re just going to play the game—always having to compete, always having to one-up, always having to posture and position. You’re never going to be done. You’re never going to be able to arrive. You’re never going to be able to fully deal with the unrest in your soul that says something isn’t right.
2. The only way to get right is to throw yourself down on the floor with this tax collector and say, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner”—and God in Christ will come. And your sin will be imputed to Him and His righteousness imputed to you. And you will know, deep in your guts that things are right, not because you finally climbed the mountain up to Him, but because He’s come down from it for you.
 - a. That’s the meaning of Christmas. I can’t climb my way up to Him, so He’s come down to me. I can’t make things right myself, so He’s come to make things right on my behalf.

D. You know, when Martin Luther first discovered this doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ by grace and not by works of the Law, he says, “I was born again of the Holy Ghost. . . . [T]he doors of paradise swung open, and I walked through.”

1. John Bunyan, writer of the beloved Pilgrim’s Progress, when the light of this doctrine first dawned on him writes: “Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons; my temptations also fled away . . . [and] I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God” (Grace Abounding, p. 112).
 - a. And that’s just it. When you get this, everything changes! You’re put in the right with God, freely, on the basis of the righteousness of another. You are secure. You are loved. You are free.

Effect #2: Relationship with Others

- A. And do you want to know what else? You become more loving. The only way to break that trusting-in-self-contempt-for-others connection we saw back up in v. 9 is to come to know the free and abounding love of God for you in this way—to stop trusting in yourself that you are righteous and to place your trust in Christ!
1. No longer am I looking down on you, because I know I didn’t do this, I couldn’t have done this. As we say often: “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” There is no hierarchy here—no one better than another. We all have sinned and fallen short and our only hope of justification is the gift of grace in Christ.

2. And no longer do I need to compete with you or make sure people see my accomplishments and your failures. My only hope is that people see Christ. My assurance isn't in me, and how I stack up next to others. It's in Him.

Conclusion

- A. I'll leave you with a quote from John Trapp, a Puritan from the 17th century. I think this sums up all we've been saying here quite nicely. He writes this: "God casts away many in anger for their supposed goodness, but none for their confessed badness."
 1. Listen, your goodness cannot commend you to God and your badness cannot condemn you before Him. All that matters this morning is where you stand in relation to Christ.
- B. You know stuff's wrong. What way are you taking to try to get it right?