

## LUKE 18:9-14 6-30-13

### A TALE OF TWO MEN

(Luke 18) We have had a terrific week at summer camp and our theme has been that of investigation. We investigated the Bible to understand the mysteries in the teaching of Jesus. I actually got to play the role of super-detective Sherlock Holmes. So, today, I shall continue in that vein and lead us through the mystery of the two men in the temple. This is surely one of the great and instructive stories told by our Lord Jesus. Luke 18:**9-14** *He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:* <sup>10</sup> *“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* We will approach our study of this passage by looking first at the facts of the story and then secondly at its lessons.

First then, we have to understand the story itself. Verse 9 says that Jesus told the parable to certain folks who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and viewed others with contempt. This is the group to whom this story holds the greatest relevance. Now, I know that none of us are in this group, none of us are guilty of these things, but there might be some people like this in the TV audience so we will go ahead and look at what Jesus says. He says there were two men who had this one thing in common - they went to pray in the temple. But apart from that they were very different. The first man was a pharisee. Now most of you realize that a pharisee was an extremely religious person and a person who was hyper-conscientious about following all the little rules of his group. You can see from his description of himself that he didn't get off into the really ugly sins and what was more he fasted twice weekly and tithed on everything. That means he skipped meals and donated money as part of his religious observance. Pharisees were looked up to in the Jewish community as being the paragons of virtue. They represented the Jewish ideal. But the tax-gatherer, oh my, the tax gatherer was the lowest of the low. The tax-gatherer would have been a Jew who was hired by the oppressive Roman government to collect taxes for Rome from his own people. His motive for taking such a despised position would have been to get the big money since the Romans allowed him to tax for profit so that most tax collectors became quite rich at the expense of their neighbors. They were

regarded as disloyal turncoats and as greedy scoundrels. So our two characters represent for us the highest and the lowest of Jewish society.

Let's look now at their prayers. 11-12 *The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.* Isn't that a sweet little prayer? Of course I don't know that it deserves to be called a prayer. He begins it by saying, "Oh, God" but after that you get the idea that he is really speaking to another audience. Now I know preachers who do this kind of thing. They say, "Let us pray" and then what they proceed to do is something else. For example, many preachers will say "let us pray" and then while everyone is quiet and concentrating they will deliver the final point of their sermon. Other preachers will use the prayer time in a service as announcement time. You get a prayer like this: "Oh Lord, please bless the ladies group that meets at the church this Tuesday at 9:30. Thank you that a nursery is provided and help the ladies remember to bring the \$8.50 for their study guides. In Jesus' name." There is more than one way to abuse your prayer time and this pharisee is pulling the ole pray-to-show-off trick. We are not told that the pharisee had an audience of some kind here but Jesus made this remark about pharisees in the sermon on the Mount Matthew 6:5 *When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.* He says their motives in prayer were to be seen by men. They desired to be thought well of by others and I think also by themselves. So what comes out is a prayer that has the guise of thanksgiving but is really more of a self-congratulations speech isn't it? He isn't talking to God but to himself and to anyone else who might hear. How different is the prayer of the tax-collector. It is simple and short. It is clearly directed to God and most of all it is a humble petition. 13 *But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'* So we have two very different men praying two very different prayers resulting in two very different responses from God. We are told that, because of his humble appeal for mercy the tax-collector went home justified, that is, he went away at peace with His God. But the pharisee was not justified. Indeed the conclusion of verse 14 indicates that God set himself against the proud pharisee. To the utter surprise of the Jews who heard this, the example to follow in this story is that of the tax-collector, not the pharisee. For the tax-collector was blessed and the pharisee condemned. That then is the story. Those are the facts of our case. Let's look now at the lessons we can derive from it.

Lesson # 1 is that the value of seeing and feeling that I am a sinner in need of mercy. ® Now that sounds like the kind of thing you have heard in church before doesn't it? But I am convinced that many of you have yet to get to this point and until you arrive here you haven't gone anywhere spiritually. So, I am genuinely concerned. I am concerned because so many people, even in the church, act as if God is their debtor. They have this confidence that "I have been good and whatever I have I deserved and what's more I can think of lots of other things I have coming my way." The idea of needing mercy is totally foreign to them. They view God as being like Santa Claus and figure that if he would just check his books he would see that they are due for plenty of goodies. Is that how it is with you? Oh, you won't say that God owes you but deep down that is how you feel. You need to realize how fundamentally out of accord such an attitude is with the teaching of Jesus. Jesus holds before us as a model one who cries out not for his fair share but for mercy. Mercy is the desire of one who has no claims, who is guilty and liable. He can demand nothing from God but, thank the Lord, he can plead for mercy and grace. The catch is that the only ones who do that are those who know their need. At the end of the chapter where we have read is a story of a healing that pictures for us in physical ways the spiritual lesson of our text. Luke 18: **35-38** *As Jesus was approaching Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the road begging.* <sup>36</sup> *Now hearing a crowd going by, he began to inquire what this was.* <sup>37</sup> *They told him that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by.* <sup>38</sup> *And he called out, saying, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* There you see the appeal again - for mercy. <sup>39</sup> *Those who led the way were sternly telling him to be quiet; but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"* And as you may know, Jesus stopped and healed the man because he cried out for mercy. He was blind and he knew it and he longed for the healing mercy of Jesus. What you should notice in the case of the tax-collector is that he asked for mercy not justice. He said, "Be merciful to me the sinner." Not "be fair to me I'm a good fella." Oh, if we could only see that point more clearly that I, even I am guilty and vile and wretched before my God. Chuck Colson brings this out powerfully by telling of a story he saw on 60 Minutes with Mike Wallace.

*"Introducing a recent story about Nazi Adolf Eichmann, a principal architect of the Holocaust, Wallace posed a central question at the program's outset, "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann acted? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying: was he normal?... The most startling answer to Wallace's shocking question came in an interview with Yehiel Dinur, a concentration camp survivor who testified against Eichmann at the Nuremburg trials. A film clip from Eichmann's 1961 trial showed Dinur walking into the courtroom, stopping short, seeing Eichmann for the first*

*time since the Nazi had sent him to Auschwitz 18 years earlier. Dinur began to sob uncontrollably, then fainted, collapsing in a heap on the floor ... Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories? No, it was none of these. Rather, as Dinur explained to Wallace, all at once he realized Eichmann was not the god-like army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. "I was afraid about myself," said Dinur, "I saw that I am capable to do this. I am exactly like he."*

I know I can read something like that and most of you will nod your head in agreement. In the evangelical church we are programmed to regard ourselves as sinners, that is what our Bible and our theologies tell us we are. But I don't think that is enough; there is something more that is needed. I not only need to see that I am a sinner in need of mercy but I need to feel it. When I say that I am a sinner in the sight of God justly deserving His displeasure and without hope save in His sovereign mercy I should feel it in here. I should groan when I speak of my sin. Such a confession should make me ache a little bit. Or should it? There are those voices telling me that such conviction of sin is a negative thing. Robert Schuler, for instance, says, "We must proclaim the good news!...We must tell people everywhere that God wants us all to feel good about ourselves!" How does that square with the teaching of Jesus? I read in the word that Blessed are those who mourn and that the man who says, "Be merciful to me the sinner" goes home justified. The man to whom Jesus points us as an example here is one who sees his sin and feels it. He turns his eyes to the floor and he beats his breast as he cries out to his God for grace. This deep feeling of my own sin is a trademark of true Spirit-given conviction. Listen to what some of the great saints of the past have said: Isaiah 6:5 *"Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."* Peter said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man O Lord." David Brainerd wrote, "I am made to possess the dreadful sin of my nature. I am all sin. I cannot think or act but all is sin... I saw myself to be very mean and vile and wondered at those who show me respect...What a vile wretch I am!" Some of you can relate to those feelings. Many of you, I'm sure cannot. Your attitude is that, "Yes, I've sinned. I'm a sinner but after all everybody's a sinner." You see it but you don't feel it and I think I know why. For many of you the secret to experiencing a saving conviction of sin is found in lesson #2 from our passage.

Lesson two is that I need to stop comparing myself to others. ® II Corinthians 10:**12** *When men measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.* But that is precisely what we see the pharisee doing in our story. And the problem is that when we compare ourselves to others we get a distorted idea of who we are. That is true for several reasons.

One reason is that we tend to grossly overrate ourselves. In their book, "In Search of Excellence" Tom Peters and Bob Waterman give the results of a study that I find quite fascinating. *A random sample of male adults were asked to rank themselves on the ability to get along with others; all subjects, 100%, put themselves in the top half of the population. 60% rated themselves in the top 10% and a full 25% thought they were in the top 1%. In a parallel finding 70% rated themselves in the top quartile in leadership; only 2% felt they were below average as leaders. Finally, in an area in which self-deception should be hard for most males, at least, 60% said they were in the top quartile in athletic ability, only 6% said they were below average.* Invariably, when I compare myself to others I will get overrated. The second reason it is bad news to compare yourself is that you get to pick your own standards of comparison. With the pharisee, with whom did he compare himself? He said, "I thank you that I am not like other people. What other people did he have in mind? Swindlers, unjust, adulterers. Most of us would stack up pretty good against a crowd like that wouldn't we? You see that the pharisee didn't compare himself to godly men like Simeon or Samuel or John the Baptist. You have to pick carefully your comparisons. Comparing yourself to others can help you feel good about yourself only because you get to pick the others. If I want to feel good about myself as a pastor all I have to do is look at some struggling church that is having troubles and losing members and, "hey, I must be doing all right. We are lots better off than they are." But then there are those churches where the attendance is far better, the worship is far better, the giving is far better and we don't look so good. It is for this reason that I like my wife to read articles about men who beat their wives. If I can get her comparing me to those guys I'm gonna look pretty good. But then some of you fellas, you dirty bums, you ruin the curve for the rest of us husbands with all your sweetness and affection. It's like my wife said to me one time, "Honey, the man next door is so attentive to his wife. He brings her flowers, and candy and kisses her every evening. Now why don't you do that?" "But Dear" I said, "I hardly know the woman." Careful who you pick for comparison. Maybe you ran across the bit in the paper recently about how much money Americans give away. It was an interesting report. It showed for one that in our country the rich people give away a lesser percentage of their income than does the lower class. But it showed as well that we give away pitifully little. I want you to know, by the standards of the average American I am very generous and I bet you are too. If that is our standard we might look very good. But what happens if we turn our eyes away from average Americana and look at the average missionary, or maybe we look at the widow who gave away all she had, or maybe we look at the Son of God hanging on the cross and then ask ourselves how generous we are.

The pharisee compared himself to others and felt he rated pretty good. The tax-collector compared himself to no man.® He could have. He could have come to God pointing out that he wasn't a hypocrite like the pharisee. Or he could come claiming that he was better than most tax-collectors. But when he stood to pray it was as if he was conscious of no one and nothing else. He knew he was standing in the presence of God who is holy, holy, holy. His mind was filled with thoughts of God and when he looked at himself in the light of who God is there could be no question he was **the** sinner. He was not simply one among many sinners who felt that his sin was excusable since everyone was doing it. He looked in on God and saw himself standing as one lonely naked man before the judge of all the earth. I believe the failure to do that, and the habit of comparing self to others, keeps us from appreciating our sinfulness. You see, you might stack up pretty well with other sinners. I suppose that among skunks there are some skunks that smell better than others and some that smell worse than others. Even in a skunk community certain guys are probably known to be rather rank while other skunks are thought to smell just fine - to other skunks. Those who compare themselves with themselves are not wise. To us all the skunks smell awful and so it is for our holy God. To God some humans may smell worse than others but as Martin Luther put it, "until we die we are all stinking sinners." This says something about how we should view one another doesn't it? Who is there that I can view with contempt? What sinner can I look at and say, "I'm not like him!" Oh we sin differently for sure but we all sin. Some of us commit respectable sins, others low-down sin, some commit white collar sins, others blue collar sins, some commit Christian sins, others commit secular sins but we all sin and even though I make efforts to be a good boy I must realize that before God I am just one of the skunks. Our self-righteous attitudes often come out I think when we get into the non-churchy crowd. We go into prison or a bar or a construction site and feel like we are morally superior. Be careful ® fellow skunk, let's remember who we are before God and avoid comparing ourselves to others.

Our third lesson is that I need to place my faith in God not in self ®. The pharisee is described as one who trusted in himself. He was **self**-confident. But isn't that a good thing? Aren't we supposed to be self-confident? Aren't we supposed to feel good about ourselves? I can quote Mr. Schuller again who said, *God's ultimate objective is to turn you and me into self-confident persons.* Doesn't that sound nice of God? Well, if that is what God wants He should certainly have been happy with this pharisee. When the pharisee prays as he does we should expect Jesus to say, *Good for you Mr. Pharisee what a fine self-image you have.* Here was a man brimming with self-confidence. But apparently that isn't what God wants. Indeed, as we read the gospels we find that self-confidence is

the last thing Jesus wants for us. Jesus says, *blessed are the poor in spirit*. He calls us to deny self and humble self. And listen to this statement from Paul. In Philippians 3 when he describes the marks of a true Christian he says they “worship in the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” That is, the thing a Christian doesn’t do is trust in himself. So is a Christian to always be down on himself, berating his abilities, feeling sad and dejected? No. Listen now. When it comes to your human abilities it is fine to have a form of self-confidence. The musician that develops his skill and is ready to perform ought to be confident. But we are talking about spiritual matters, about a man’s relationship to God and in that there can be no self-confidence at all. But what there can be is a Jesus-confidence. It is confidence in another who is on your side. You can understand that can’t you? Years ago I had a fella on our church staff named Graham who was a college tennis player and I used to brag to all my pastor buddies in town that our pastoral staff could beat their staff in a game of tennis doubles. Now that was an expression of confidence. Was it self-confidence? No. It was Graham-confidence. I knew that Graham by himself could beat any two guys. I wouldn’t have to do a thing. It’s sort of like when they asked Hot Rod Hundley, a former pro basketball player what the greatest thrill of his career was and Hundley said it was the night that he and Hall of Famer Elgin Baylor combined to score 85 points. Baylor had 83. That is what our relationship with Jesus is like. We know that when you put us together with Jesus we can do great things. We are confident in Christ not in self. When you stand before God to give an account it is folly to be self-confident. It is folly to say, “Lord, haven’t I been good?” He who is wise would point to the Lord Jesus, confident that through Him, His righteousness, His sacrifice in our place we have access to our God.

In our story we have a man who is downcast and despairing. He cries out for mercy and receives it. The story ends there but you can be sure that the reception of mercy and justification would make a difference in the man’s countenance. Before he is not confident, later he is but it is not self-confidence, it is God-confidence and even better in our day to say it is a Jesus-confidence. The difference is absolutely critical ☺. It is the difference between being justified or made right with God on the basis of your deeds or on the basis of faith. The teaching of the Jesus book. The doctrine of Romans 3 and Galatians 2 is that we are justified before God by faith in Jesus period apart from any human works. How was this tax-collector justified? Did he go down to his house justified because he convinced God he was a good fella? No way. Did he go home justified because he was a good fella? No way. What did he do? He cried out to God for mercy and that is all. Look at this! Do you see it?! It is a beautiful thing. Romans 10:**13** *Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.* That is

exactly what we see happening her. Is this justification by faith or deeds? By faith. His crying out to God is the expression of faith. Again Romans 10:13-14 *Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.*”<sup>14</sup> *How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?* The assumption is that a man hears about the grace of God in Christ, believes it, and then, as a natural expression of his faith, he calls out for God to save him and God does it. Magnificent! This is how a man is made right with God. Not by going to church or by obeying the law or by working for charity. Eternal life is a gift of God to sinners who sincerely ask for it. Did you hear me? I’ve run into far too many people lately who have been in church all their lives and never heard or understood that eternal life is a gift. You have heard it now. That is why we call it gospel - good news.

So how does our story end? The pharisee keeps on doing his pharisaical thing assuming that all is well with his soul when in fact he is a stranger to God. You don’t want to be like him. He did not see that he was a sinner in need of mercy because he compared himself to others and he placed his faith in self. The tax-collector? He went home justified—and then what? Well, then nothing. Did he continue to be a tax-collector? Did he continue to stuff his pockets at the expense of others? It doesn’t say does it? That irritates some of you. You want to see a clear declaration that his repentance was lasting and that his moral life was altered. You want this parable to teach a lesson about the relationship of faith and works. But it doesn’t. There is a story in chapter 19 about a real tax-collector named Zaccheus and that story teaches us about faith and forgiveness and the life of obedience which follows but today the word of God is this: When you truly see and feel your sin, when you humbly cry out to God for mercy then and there and forever you are forgiven, you are justified and the angels in heaven rejoice. I want to say that again. Please catch this. When you truly see and feel your sin, when you humbly cry out to God for mercy then and there and forever you are forgiven, you are justified and the angels in heaven rejoice. What an exciting gospel this is! But you are all about to leave this place and go down to your house. You may stop for lunch first, but tell me, with judgment day honesty, tell yourself, are you going home justified? Pardoned of your sin? At peace with a righteous God? All that stands between you and the confidence that you are is repentance from sin and faith in Jesus. Turning from your sin or even your old trust in self, and placing your life, your hope, your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. *Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.* Humble yourself to do just that. And don’t put it off till later. You can go home in your pride or you can go home justified. It is time for you to decide.