

Guilty until Proven Innocent – Luke 18: 9-14. Mathew Hessian 4th November

In New Zealand, the Bill of Rights Act 1990 says this:

Everyone who is charged with an offence has, in relation to the determination of the charge, the following minimum rights:

- the right to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial court;
- the right to be tried without undue delay;
- the right to be **presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law.**

We know that our God is a God of justice – but the justice in God’s Kingdom is enacted very differently to the way the Bill of Rights Act in New Zealand allows for.

Psalm 51:5 “For I was born a Sinner – Yes, from the moment my Mother conceived me.”

Isaiah 59:2 “It’s your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.”

Ecclesiastes 7:20 “Not a single person on earth is always good and never sins.”

Romans 3:23 “For everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s glorious standard”

Psalm 143:2 “Don’t put your servant on trial for no one is innocent before you.”

In God’s eyes, the truth is that we are guilty and in need of being proven innocent.

Before we carry on today, let us pray...

PRAYER

Everything we have learnt in our study of Luke over the most recent months has revealed a counter cultural, upside-down view of Kingdom things. Jesus has been contradicting the religious views of the day left, right and centre. But we also know that his views contradict the pervading thoughts today on justice, success, achievement, compassion, sin, morality, community, church – in fact in every area of life, Jesus teaches a very different perspective than was believed then and is believed now.

He took everything that those great religious minds of the time thought to be real and turned it on its head – he taught God’s perspective.

One of the things I am coming to appreciate more and more as I learn God’s Word is just how perfect it is. Every ‘i’ is dotted and ‘t’ crossed. There is so much depth and richness

in the Word that I am continually surprised when I dig in to it, just how it all hangs together. Praise God!

In preparing for this message it was no different – the parable Jesus tells about the Pharisee is a perfect, concise summary of a vast number of Scriptures before Jesus' time on earth and New Testament verses that came to be written down after Jesus' time on earth... I guess when you are outside of time these things become possible.

So today, I am going to take my cue from Jesus and turn this message upside down. The passage is Luke 18:9-14 but rather than open with that I am going to conclude. We will get there but we will look at other verses of Scripture first. So, have your Bibles ready, hang on and let's see if we can navigate our way through this to arrive at Luke 18 in good shape....

By now, having studied Luke here and from our own study, we know Jesus reigns over the spiritual kingdom; he will reign over an earthly kingdom and then will reign over the eternal kingdom.

The question we need to ask is how do we get there with Him? How do we become justified, righteous, guiltless? You choose the synonym, but we should all be asking, "How do I make sure I am there?"

The verses in my introduction set the scene of our separation from God. Right from our Birth.

And God then made it clear what was needed to be justified. When He was handing down the Law, God said we are to be holy as the Lord is holy.

Leviticus:

11:44, 45 "You must be Holy as I am Holy"

19:2 "You must be Holy because I the Lord your God, am Holy"

20:7 "you must be Holy because I the Lord am Holy"

He makes it very clear that the standard is high, so high.

And in response, the religious set about doing. Striving and straining to uphold the laws, offering sacrifices, attending the temple, tithing, regular prayer, remaining ceremonially clean, separating themselves from the riff-raff and the unclean, keeping themselves pure etc, etc. And the greatest at this of course were the Pharisees - they set the standard for adhering to the Law.

Make no mistake - they very much wanted to be in the Kingdom. They thought that through their obedience to the Law they would make it there.

The prevailing thought in our society is that if you are a 'good person' then that is enough. It's what all other religions are based on... But how good is good enough and how do we know? We may be asking ourselves the same question every day. "Is what I am doing good enough?" "I can't do anymore..."

Or just as bad, we may be thinking “I will never be as good as that person or this person.”

This is not a new question:

Job 9:

v1 “Yes, I know all this is true in principle. But how can a person be declared innocent in God’s sight?”

v29 “Whatever happens, I will be found guilty. So what’s the use of trying.”

V30 “Even if I were to wash myself with soap and clean my hands with lye, You would plunge me into a muddy ditch and my own filthy clothes would hate me.”

V33 “If only there were a mediator between us, someone who could bring us together.....” (I just love a bit foreshadowing... we will come back to that soon.)

Paul knew first hand just how futile the quest for ‘goodness’ was:

Philippians 3: 5 – 8:

“I was circumcised when I was eight days old (the perfect time doctors say). I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin – a real Hebrew if there was ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demanded the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness I obeyed the law without fault. I once thought these were valuable but now I consider them worthless...”

Paul had seen how far the Jewish religion had moved from faith to a reliance on doing works.

So, if trying to be perfect through our own efforts is worthless, what are we to do?

There are plenty of clues in Scripture that support an alternative approach to achieving righteousness:

When God told Abraham of the impossible – that his descendants would number the stars in the sky...

Genesis 15:6: “...and Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.”

Abraham’s faith led to obedience and to righteousness. Israel may not have had access to Paul’s words at that time but this is what he said about that faith in Romans:

Romans 4:1-3: “Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God? If his good deeds had made him acceptable to God, he would have had something to boast about. But that was not God’s way. For the Scriptures tell us, “Abraham believed the Lord, and the Lord counted him as righteous because of his faith.””

And Isaiah 53 foretells the story of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice:

V11: "When He sees all that is accomplished by His anguish, He will be satisfied. And because of His experience, My righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous – for He will bear all their sins."

Israel had plenty of clues to know that simple adherence to the Law was not going to be good enough to be holy. And it was holiness that the Lord required of them as He said in Leviticus.

The Jews should also have known, they had enough pieces of the puzzle, that their own sacrificial system, where an innocent substitute died in your place every time a law was violated, was only symbolic pointing to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. Who would, as is written in Isaiah and the Psalms, be the sacrifice that God offered up for us.

That whoever believed in him would be justified and be called righteous, a Child of God and have a certainty of Kingdom life.

But Israel did not see that - and so a system of sacrifice and rule and law and doing the right thing developed and, as I said earlier, the Pharisees reigned supreme in that regard. Not only did they strive to uphold the Law written by God, they even added their own.

Appearance was important and perhaps worst of all they held in contempt those who they looked at and decided were not worthy. The requirement for obedience to the Law was completely distorted by the Jews in that time.

Their aim was to exalt themselves towards God so that he would look favourably on them. To do whatever they could to be considered justified, righteous and holy in God's sight.

Easier said than done:

James 2:10. "For the person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as a person who has broken all of God's laws."

And then, as only He can, Jesus sets the bar even higher when He said, "You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father was perfect". He also said " your righteousness needs to exceed even the Scribes and the Pharisees." Holiness is one thing, but perfection too??

So, in our whizz-bang tour of Scripture, we have uncovered 2 pictures:

- One of the Israelites working hard to keep and obey all laws to justify themselves earn their way into the Kingdom; An effort that we know, and they should have known, was pointless and never going to be enough.

- and second, a picture that God has painted quietly but clearly throughout - that faith will be counted against you as righteousness. Faith will take guilt away and will be replaced with innocence. And it is that innocence that brings us back to Him and removes the separation caused by our Sin.

We know with the benefit of hindsight and with knowledge of the cross - that we have just remembered in Communion - that the Mediator of Job 9 and the Righteous Servant of Isaiah 53 is Jesus and that our faith - is to be faith in him.

And so now we can turn to the passage:

Luke 18:9-14 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹He 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.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.’¹³But 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!’¹⁴I 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.”

When Jesus told parables, He told them to Jewish people who did not understand, or to Jewish people who had some major error in their theology.

Here, He directed the parable to all who had great confidence in their own righteousness and those who scorned everyone else. Jesus chose the Tax Collector and Pharisee to tell the story because they are polar opposites. They highlight the point He wants to make perfectly.

We know about the Pharisee. We are very critical of his self-righteousness and pride. The way in which he presents his prayer to God. His prayer, or if you know Shakespeare, well it was really a soliloquy. It was not really said to anyone in particular – he worships himself, certainly not God. He does not ask for anything because he is lacking nothing. He trusted in himself that he was righteous.

And there is more – he held others in contempt. That much was clear from the words in his prayer. “...Thank you that I am not a sinner like everyone else...”

The word scorned, or contempt, is interesting – it is used twice in the Gospels – it is scorn, ridicule and mockery. It was used when the soldiers were mocking Jesus and sending him back to Pilate for judgement...

[This is an example of that great richness I talked of at the start. In this very short parable there are two expressions (and this is one) that are used in only one other place of the Bible that helps to create such complete picture.]

The Pharisee was there appearing to be righteous, but in fact he was merely making sure he was seen as being better than everyone else around him. He stood to pray – nothing wrong with that, he had his hands raised to God – nothing wrong with that is there? But he had likely positioned himself in full view so no one could miss his utterances. So, they would know he was good....

It is like the story of the guy walking through the African jungle with a friend. When they saw a hungry lion stalking its way towards them, his friend said to him, "Run!!" The guy asked, "How fast do you think you have to be to outrun that lion?" and his friend replied, "Only faster than you!!"

Comparing himself to others, the Pharisee believed he measured up just fine. But that is not the measure God is looking for.

Let's turn to the Tax collector: "Have mercy on me, the sinner." He could not even stand with the crowds at the temple. He was off to the side. He was on his own and he was in significant despair. He beat his chest and he had turned his eyes away from the Lord.

The tax collector was off on his own in a busy bustling temple scene during one of the two sacrifice ceremonies that took place each day. We know 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. And it isn't just the profession that bothers people. Its how they carry it off. They were corrupt. They were swindlers. They were unjust, unrighteous and they were surrounded by the scum and the riff raff and the adulterers and prostitutes of society. And so, it is the worst sinner Jesus can portray in this story, especially to set against the most 'righteous' man he could describe – the Pharisee.

The Tax Collector offers no excuses, no positives about his character, no mitigating circumstances. He blames no one else; diverts attention nowhere else. He comes to God and says, "Have mercy on me, the sinner." He didn't just say he was a sinner. He was THE sinner. The worst, the sinner supreme. That was how he viewed himself.

Jesus depicts the man beating his chest. This was a common Jewish expression and appears a lot in non-biblical writings. Jesus uses it here as an acknowledgement of the source of the

man's problems - he is an evildoer at the heart of it all. We all are. The Tax Collector acknowledged it.

He was born that way, we are born that way... he was guilty (in need of being proven innocent).

Although common in extra biblical writings, the 'beating of one's breast' is used only one other time in the Bible. That was when the women were walking away from the cross after Jesus' death. It is a strong powerful image – reserved for the most extreme despair.

This completes this example, because there are many more, of the richness of the Word. One Parable, two phrases each used only one other time in the Bible. The first phrase, contempt or scorn, used here in connection with the Pharisee and then only once more during the mocking of Jesus by the soldiers before he went back for judgement in front of Pilate. And the other, the beating of the breast, used here to describe the Tax Collector, to express the depth of his sorrow at his sin. And used again only once more to describe the depth of pain the women experienced following Jesus' death.

I will let you decide if that is reading too much into it...

In his prayer, the Tax Collector could well have been reading from Psalm 51, "For I know my transgressions and my sin is before me... Don't keep looking at my sins... Remove the stain of my sins." Unlike the Pharisee, he had nothing else to offer in his prayer. He had accepted his condition as a sinner, as we must, and he knew that there was nothing he could do to change that.

So, there we have it. One common aim - to be considered good enough to enter the Kingdom of God:

2 very different men, 2 very different attitudes, 2 very different postures, 2 very different prayers and 2 very different outcomes!

Jesus said, "I tell you, this man (the Tax Collector) went away justified." Therefore, we can conclude that the Pharisee did not. This was scandalous! It was a complete tearing down of the whole belief system that the Jews held onto. How could this be?

Jesus finishes by saying, "Those that that exalt themselves will be humbled and those that humble themselves will be exalted." Exalt is used as a synonym for salvation, righteousness. John McArthur, an American Bible teacher, puts it well:

"Everyone who exalts himself — that is, tries to save himself or make himself righteous, shall be humbled in the severest sense of the word, crushed in eternal loss and punishment. 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.”

Since we are 500 years from the reformation, it seems only right to quote Martin Luther. Coming from the Catholic Church where it was all about justification by works, he was frustrated at the struggle of attaining righteousness. And then after what he describes a thunderbolt from God he says:

“When I learned that the righteousness of God is His mercy and that He makes us righteous through it, a remedy was offered to me in my affliction.”

You see:

- The damned *think* that they are good; the saved *know* they are wicked;
- The damned believe that 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 damned believe eternal life is earned; the saved know eternal life is a gift.
- The damned seek God’s commendation; and the saved seek God’s forgiveness.

If you put yourself in today’s parable, where are you standing?

Are you trusting in your own goodness to get you into the Kingdom? Are you standing there measuring yourself against those around you – so that the lion gets them and not you?

Or,

Are you the Tax Collector who has said, “Forgive me, have mercy on me; a sinner. No, *the* sinner.” If you are then praise God for you.

Look around you this morning. There are 150 – 170 people?

When it comes to the most important question of life, the reason we are all here this morning I would suggest, we all have something in common. We are all the same. We might be dressed differently, we might have different qualifications, we might look different, have different beliefs – maybe about whether communion should be at the end of a service or in the middle. Some might come every week and some every second week – I could go on and on about our differences.

When it comes to our eternity, we are all in exactly the same place. We need God to have proved us innocent. Each of us. Without that, our eternity will be somewhere other than God’s Kingdom.

None of us has anything to offer that will get us there.

It is only in acknowledging our sin before God that we can comprehend the wonderful thing that God has done for us, in sending Jesus to be that Mediator. It is in comprehending what Jesus did that we are motivated by the Holy Spirit to love and to serve and live in fellowship and community with his people. It is out of that motivation of the Spirit that we want to share the love and forgiveness that we have experienced ourselves.

Being made right is not a corporate thing- it is for us as individuals to deal with. In Ezekiel, the Prophet said, "The person who sins is the one who will die." – no one else can do it for you.

You may be sitting there this morning thinking, "Mmm I am really not sure where I am. Maybe I do spend my time measuring myself against other people and trying to ensure I am better than them." Maybe you think you do not always live your life with faith in the grace that Jesus' death on the cross provided for us. A faith that you used to have or a faith that has been replaced or just topped up by the good things you do.

Maybe there are some here who come along regularly, and you have not really considered before what steps you need to take for God to declare you innocent in His eyes. If that is you this morning, I really encourage you to search your heart and to recognise that being a good person and doing good things is not going to see you justified. You need to accept that the only way into the Kingdom is through faith in Jesus Christ.

As the musicians come up, let us pray as I read Psalm 51:

Psalm 51 English Standard Version (ESV)

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

51 Have mercy on me,^{1a} O God,

according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,

so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

⁶ Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right [Ⓜ] spirit within me.

¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

¹⁹ then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.