

September 16, 2018

Parables

A Salvation Parable

*The Publican and the Pharisee*

Luke 18:9-14

**Opening words:** There came a time in Jesus's earthly ministry when he was no longer welcomed in the synagogues. The Master was forced to teach in the open air and to change his teaching method. For the first time, he used fictional stories to teach divine truth. We call those stories "parables". Webster defines a *parable* as, a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. A parable is not an allegory or a fable. They are different. A parable stands on its own. The Gospel of Luke contains twenty-four parables. The Gospel of Matthew contains twenty-three parables. The Gospel of Mark contains eight parables. The Gospel of John contains no parables, only allegories.

In his book, *The Parables of Jesus*, James Montgomery Boice tells us Jesus's parables can be categorized. He says all the parables of Jesus can be broken down into five different categories. These are his categories:

- The Wisdom Parables
- The Salvation Parables
- The Christian Life Parables
- The Judgement Parables
- The Kingdom Parables

In this five-part sermon series, *Parables*, I am preaching on one parable from each one of those categories. I began last week by looking at a wisdom parable, the Parable of the Rich Fool, which dealt with the issue of holding correct priorities. Next week, we will look at a Christian life parable, The Good Samaritan.

Today, I am preaching on The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, a salvation parable. This parable is dominated by two men. They are not identified by name. They are only identified by their vocation. The first man was a Pharisee. We are critical of the Pharisees because they confronted Jesus. The Master's own generation was not critical of Pharisees. They were viewed as the religious elite, who were the bridge between mankind and God Himself. The second man was a Publican. That was the term used in ancient Roman times. We would call him a tax collector. In our time, we dislike tax collectors; they hated tax collectors. They were viewed as traitors, who sold out to the Romans. They profited at the expense of their own people, the Jews. This parable plays on our stereotypes or prejudices. The villain in this story ends up being the righteous one. This is not the only salvation parable. The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Lost Son, The Workers in the Vineyard, The Banquet, and The Narrow Door are all salvation parables. Our Gospel lesson for today is Luke 18:9-14. Let me call this message *The Publican and the Pharisee*.

**Luke 18:9-14** To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup>“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup>“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

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Today, we look at a salvation parable. The other night, I was up late researching famous conversion stories. I came across Kathie Lee Gifford’s (born 1953) story. I don’t know how I feel about her as an entertainer, but I found her story to be fascinating. She was raised in a family where God was honored generally, but He was not known personally. Her father was Jewish, and her mother was a Christian. When she was twelve years old, her mother and her sister were led to Christ by a televised Billy Graham evangelistic crusade. Several months later, they encouraged her to go see a movie produced by the Billy Graham organization, *The Restless Ones*. Kathy Lee decided to go. In many ways, it was her story - a young girl trying to decide what path to take, the ways of this world, or the ways of God. She related to the young girl in the movie and she began to evaluate her own life. When the movie ended, an altar call was given and young Kathie Lee went forward to accept Christ as her Lord and Savior. Her life would never be the same again. Ask Kathy Lee Gifford and she will tell you, we are saved by grace and by grace alone!

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) was an English Baptist preacher. He has been called the Prince of Preachers. He once said, *"Saving faith is an immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, resting upon Him alone, for justification, sanctification and eternal life by virtue of God's grace."* That is an old quote. Charles Spurgeon died in 1892. That quote may be old, but it still rings true today. Someday, we will stand before God justified because of the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Never forget it. We are saved by grace and by grace alone! And all of God’s people said, **"Amen!"** With that in mind, let us look at this morning’s Gospel reading.

We find ourselves today in the eighteenth chapter of Luke. Bruce Larson (1925-2008) was the Senior Pastor of the University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington. He once said, the first thirty verses of this chapter are vital because these verses contain the qualities we must possess to live the abundant life in Jesus Christ. In our reading for today, we discover one of those qualities, humility. At the very heart of this parable is humility. Like all parables, it is easy to imagine.

Two men went to the temple to pray. There is nothing surprising about that line. The people of Jesus's day valued prayer. They prayed regularly. Daily, morning and evening prayer was scheduled at the temple in connection with the sacrifices. However, the temple was always open for private prayer. Prayer was not isolated to the Sabbath. Prayer was a big part of their daily lives. In Jesus's story, one of the men was a Pharisee. He is the picture of complete pride. He stood upright and reported to God all his good deeds. He fasted twice a week and gave generously to the poor. The other man was a Publican, or a tax collector. He is the picture of complete brokenness. He stands at a distance beating his breast. He is not proud of the life he is living. He admits he is a sinner, and he asks God for mercy. The two gentlemen in Jesus's story are from opposite ends of the universe. There is nothing surprising in the story until the last verse. Verse fourteen says, *"I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Can I ask you a question? Do you relate more to the tax collector or the Pharisee? If you know what your answer should be, say, **"Amen!"**

Do you see the Pharisee's problem? There is no sign in the story that he is lying. He did fast twice a week. He did tithe and give his money to the poor. As a typical first century Pharisee, he tithed all that he acquired, not merely what he earned. His problem was, he forgot the truth. He forgot that despite all his good deeds, he was still a sinner, who was dependent on God's grace. It is easy to compare ourselves to other people, other sinners. It is a humbling thing to compare yourself to God, who is perfect. I would like to say this was an isolated case, but I don't want to lie to you. Can I ask you a question?

Do you know of anyone who believes they can earn their salvation? You must know someone. According to the Pew Research Group, 80% of American Christians believe Jesus is not their only hope of salvation. Only 35% of Evangelical American Christians believe they are saved by grace and by grace alone. That means 65% of American Christians believe good works play into the salvation formula. In other words, they believe their entrance into heaven is merit-based. That is why we hear so much about good works when a loved one dies. They volunteered to help children read. They mowed their aging neighbor's lawn. They gave generously to the church of their time, talent, and money. They would do anything for anyone. They cared for stray cats, and loved dogs. Do you know why people say such things? They are trying to convince us, or themselves, that their loved one is in heaven because they were a good person. This is the problem: A merit-based entrance into heaven is not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches us we are saved by grace and by grace alone. May we never forget, we are sinners, who Jesus loves. Ephesians 2:8-9 says it clearly: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourself, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.* Grace is God's unmerited favor, demonstrated

most fully in the sacrifice of Christ. In short, the only way to heaven is through Jesus - the way, the truth and the life.

Hudson Taylor (1831-1905) was a missionary who spent fifty-one years in China. At some point in his life, he was scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian church in Melbourne, Australia. The moderator of the service introduced the missionary in eloquent and glowing terms. He told the large congregation all that Taylor had accomplished in China, and then presented him as "our illustrious guest." Taylor stood quietly for a moment, and then opened his message by saying, "Dear friends, I am the little servant of an illustrious Master." Hudson Taylor never forgot the truth. He was a sinner, who was dependent on God's grace. Never forget it. You are a sinner who is dependent on God's grace. We are saved by grace and by grace alone! If you are thankful for what Jesus did for you, say, "**Amen!**"

Several years ago, I heard a story from the lips of George Lee. You know George. He has been in the ministry for over fifty years and has been a blessing to countless people. When George talks, people listen. When George told this story, I listened. According to George, he had a woman in his church who was present at every church event. If the door was unlocked, she was there. She loved her church and supported it in every possible way. Through the years, she served on every committee, twice. She never missed the plate when it came her way. If someone needed to sit in the church nursery, she volunteered. She always volunteered in the kitchen for the dinners. She always got the same kitchen job. She peeled the potatoes. She got the job of peeling the potatoes so many times, she no longer asked. She would just go in and start peeling. In time, peeling potatoes became her identity. She was the "potato peeling lady". George said, she had a soft spot in his heart because she had a servant's heart.

One day, the potato peeling lady called George. She said, "George, can you pray for me? I have been losing weight and I don't feel well. I have a doctor's appointment this afternoon and I am afraid." George prayed with her over the phone and prayed again during her appointment. The doctor sent her for some tests and George prayed some more. When the test results came back, it wasn't good. She had a malignancy and it was advanced. Over the next year, George prayed for the potato peeling lady and watched her decline. Knowing George, I am sure he visited her in the hospital countless times. The last time George saw her, the battle was just about over. There would be no more trips to the hospital, no more treatments. She decided, she wanted to die at home, so George went to her home to pray with her. On that last visit, a family member led George to her bedroom. She was weak, only skin and bones. George sat next to the potato peeling lady on a chair and he took her hands to pray one last time. Before George could begin to pray, the lady looked at George and asked, "George, have I peeled enough potatoes to get into heaven?" George was brokenhearted. The woman had lived her life in the church. The woman had supported her church in every possible way. But she didn't hear a single word. There just aren't enough potatoes. We are sinners, dependent on God's grace. We are saved by grace and by grace alone!

Billy Graham (1918-2018) died on February 21, 2018. If anyone deserved to go to heaven, it was Billy Graham. He preached the gospel to more people than anyone in history. Only God knows how many souls he won for Jesus Christ. Yet, Billy himself never forgot the truth. He was a sinner, who was dependent on God's grace. Those closest to him told us, Billy Graham helped plan his own funeral. He had a simple request: less about Billy, more about Jesus. Billy Graham knew he was saved by grace and by grace alone! Do you? Do you remember the words of Charles Spurgeon? He once said, *"Saving faith is an immediate relation to Christ, accepting, receiving, resting upon Him alone, for justification, sanctification, and eternal life by virtue of God's grace."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**