

## Luke 18.9-14

### *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*

<sup>9</sup>He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated 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, 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. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup>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!’ <sup>14</sup>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.”

### Message

More Kingdom Wisdom  
For Disciples

### Intro:



Luke 18.1-8

Last week we heard Jesus tell a story about a seemingly powerless widow who persisted in seeking justice from a reluctant if not corrupt judge. She kept presenting her case and eventually got the justice she sought. I heard this as Jesus orientating his disciples to persistence in seeking justice as a priority. This is a hallmark of the Kingdom he was spearheading.

I linked this to the The Lord’s Prayer where ‘Thy kingdom come’ seeks the heavenly Father’s right-making power to do saving work on earth. Jesus’ instruction for disciples is that concern and prayer for justice is to be the persistent desire of those seeking God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

After the story of the Widow and the Judge, Jesus continues to teach on kingdom wisdom for disciples with another story about seeking righteousness from God. This story gets more personal and goes to the heart of the gospel of reconciliation he is bringing that will be made effective for all by his death and resurrection. We just heard this next installment of discipleship wisdom in the story of the Pharisee and the Tax collector.



Luke 18.9-14

I am going to consider this story as being about two different gospels as believed by the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. There is of course only one gospel by which we are reconciled to God and come to enjoy God as Father and King. This is through repentance and faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ crucified and risen and it’s all about grace.

However, as Jesus’ story sets out: when two men went to the temple to pray they prayed in very different ways.

**Q1:** Why?

**A1:** Because they believed different gospels.

**Q2:** So if two men can go to the Temple and pray in very different ways, might two people who come to church pray differently because they hold different gospels?

**A2:** I suspect that on Sunday morning people might pray in very different ways because even as believers people can hold different Gospels?

Jesus' conclusion to his story was that only one of the praying men he described went home justified I suggest this justified one held the true gospel. The Tax Collector, a recognized sinner believed a gospel with the power to make sinners righteous through faith. The Pharisee -an outwardly respectable person- did not live out of and into the same right-making gospel. His confidence was in another 'gospel'.

Romans 1:16-17

<sup>16</sup>I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed.

The public sinner found what St Paul -himself a converted Pharisee- would later celebrate in beginning to write to the Romans:

<sup>16</sup>I am not ashamed of the gospel (*ie: the true gospel through faith in God's grace*), for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed. (*ie the right-making power of God*)

## Development

Theology

*Lex orandi, lex credendi.*

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Law of prayer is the law of faith.

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We pray as we believe.

There is a piece of theology traditionally expressed in Latin which describes what happened in Jesus' Story: *Lex orandi, lex credendi*. This says that the law of prayer is the law of faith. So in terms of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, they prayed in differently because they believed different gospels.

This is nothing new: one of the oldest stories in the Bible is about two brothers who offered worship through sacrifice. Cain and Abel brought their prayers in the form of sacrificial offerings. You know what happened. They worshipped differently because they believed differently. Abel's worship was accepted and Cain's was not.

So let's get closer and consider some gospels that people may believe in when coming to church to pray. We'll start some way out and work inwards.

Other Gospels

### Examples:

- JW 'gospel'
- Self-Righteous / Prosperity 'gospel'
- Feeling good 'gospel'.

In the 1970s some of my extended family became Jehovah's Witnesses. Consequently in my younger years I got to hear a great deal about what they believed and why they thought we and all other Christians were wrong. So I got to recognize the outline of their gospel message. Their 'good news' was something like this:

### *JW 'gospel'*

All other Christian churches are essentially wrong. Their faith and practice got corrupted by the Emperor Constantine and his mother. But good news has come! We (ie JWs) have finally translated the Bible correctly and worked it all out. If you join us you will be among the true church when the end comes. They even offered dates for when the end would come and this was last predicted to happen in 1975. Their 'gospel' offers a place at their exclusive bus stop for true believers going to heaven. That is the JW 'gospel'. If you believe this you would join them in going door-to-door spreading this false gospel.

To illustrate how different this 'gospel' is, it has no place for Jesus hanging on a cross and no personal Holy Spirit. At the end of the day it's a set of rules for life administered by a group that claims to be the only true church and with the only true gospel. I don't expect anyone here to hold this false 'gospel'!

### *Self-Righteous / Prosperity 'gospel'*

Let's consider another false gospel, a bit closer to home. I'll label it the 'Prosperity-seeking Pharisee gospel'. In the first person it runs like this: I am well born. My background sets me up to be a good person and I know the ways of God and what church is all about. If I honour God with righteous living and live without sin he will pour out his grace on me - and my family.

God gives good things to good people so it pays to be good. It's right to pray regularly thanking God for his goodness as well as to avoid contact with people who live sinfully or less holy to my standard. Church is a great place because I know I am righteous.

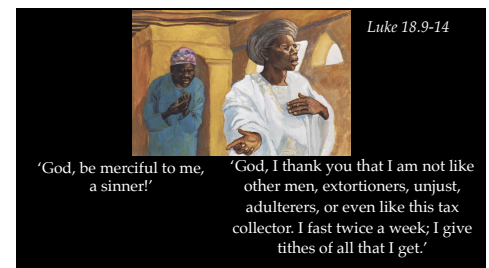
What I describe here is a blend of self-righteousness and so-called 'prosperity gospel'. If you hold this you do not need a saviour because you are not lost and have worked out how to prosper in God's Kingdom economy. Elements of this are very common today around the world today. This is like what the Pharisee in Jesus' story prayed from.

### *Feeling Good.*

The third common 'false gospel' I see lived out focuses on feeling happy and doing what it takes to enjoy that. This is very contemporary. All that matters here is love as a feeling and Christianity is all about bringing that home to people. Church is then all about helping people feel loved and coping with negative things in life. In this 'inadequate gospel' of feeling good righteousness and justice are secondary at best to feeling good and living positively. Feel good love is made to be a big carpet under which every disturbing issue can be swept. Personal integrity is often a casualty.

None of these false 'gospels' represent the gospel that led the Tax Collector to pray as he did:

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'



- If you think you are standing at the right bus-stop in the one true church you would not pray that.
  - Triumphalism cannot be humble.
- If you think you know what God wants from you and are living it already -with only minor maintenance issues that are easily atoned for - you don't pray that as the Pharisee illustrates with his prayer.
  - Did you notice that he likes the sound of his own voice and that his prayer is not a request but simply a statement of self-satisfaction?
    - standing by himself, *he* prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'
- If you believe God wants you to feel good about yourself and only defends your self-esteem you don't pray 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' is the prayer of someone who has the courage and the faith to come before God Almighty as they really are. This is worship in spirit and truth as Father God seeks. <sup>1</sup>

The gospel that Jesus brought was that when people come to God, entrusting themselves as they are and not as they may pretend to be, God's grace flows as a saving, transforming power, like a river in barren land.

The good news is that God's Kingdom is open to all who turn -or return- to the arms of the Father in whatever broken and sinful state we are. God welcomes all sinners and calls us home.

The promise of this gospel is that those who come to God like this are then open to receiving the right-making power of God in the grace he shows.

Again, this is what Paul bore witness to in his experience:

<sup>1</sup> John 4 <sup>23</sup> But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup> God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

<sup>16</sup>I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.<sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness (=right-making power) of God is revealed.

- Claiming to be at the right bus-stop in the one true church does not reveal God's right-making power. There is no joy in that false gospel. It breeds legalism and hypocrisy.
- Claiming -even with apparent gratitude like the Pharisee in the story- that your life is in order and so much better than others does not bring a revelation of God's right-making power. What is God meant to do for you if you have it all under control anyway?
  - But there is a very human twist here. The Pharisee in the story played a very common human game. He bolstered his own self-righteousness by cataloging the apparent failures of others.
 

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

When you hear people cataloging or marking the failings of others –real or otherwise- you may well be hearing someone trying to establish their own righteousness. Understand then: They don't yet know or trust the gospel of Jesus. Transference and projection can be clear indicators.
- Claiming affirmation in whatever feels loving does not bring a revelation of God's right-making power.

Only honest faith casts itself -warts-and-all- on the goodness of God so that:

- God can lift the shame.
- God can forgive the guilt of deepest sin.
- God can release the bonds that hold us in dark places.
- God can soothe the pain we carry.

### Application

In my earlier years in ministry I regularly had the privilege of ministering this gospel in people's lives. I have often seen the power of God revealed at work in people's lives as they came to him as they were: broken, sinful, hurting and lost. I have accompanied many prodigal sons and daughters in coming home when people believed in the goodness of Father God as Jesus described. It's conversion that changes people.

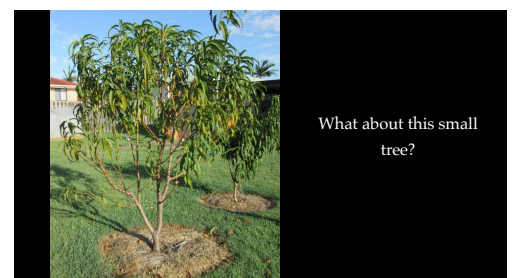
I am disturbed that I don't see this much lately and I wonder why?

- Is the gospel not preached adequately?
- Do we not take sin that seriously?
- Perhaps another gospel is obscuring our need for a saviour?

It is precisely when we uncover our own sin, our shame and our guilt and bring it to God that the right-making God reveals his saving power in us. It takes faith to do that and so often the preference is to avoid doing that if we can. It may involve some pain akin to having a diseased tooth pulled or undergoing surgery. We trust dentists and doctors but many hesitate to trust God preferring the pain they know to what they don't

### Illustration

In 1990 an uncle of mine was developing part of his property which was a mixed orchard. He said I could cut up the trees for firewood. Behind all the large fruit trees was a small peach tree. He told me that for some reason this peach tree had never done well but might do well in my garden. I thought it worth transplanting so I came back towards winter to dig the tree out.



I remember it was surrounded by lush grass but as I dug down around it I uncovered ugly burnt rubbish and it became clear why this tree had never flourished. In the days before rubbish collections people had burned their rubbish in barrels and then buried it. That ground under the tree was polluted. I remember seeing bits of burnt metal and old batteries. A fruit tree had been planted over such a rubbish heap. The tree looked nice surrounded by lush grass but it had never thrived. It was alive but not very fruitful.

I replanted it at my home. The next season it produced box loads of healthy delicious dark purple peaches. Some years later this all came back to me in a vivid dream and I recognized the lesson.

We all produce rubbish. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.<sup>2</sup> All of us live with sin and its consequences: guilt and shame, relationships and legacies that are not good, not right. There are lies lived and lies remembered. They are the rubbish of sin with polluting power.

These can be buried in denial, in willful amnesia, in self-excusing relativism - whatever it takes to cover it. If we then still claim righteousness before God and people there is no power in it.

But we are like trees and so long we remain planted on top of rubbish, we may survive but we will not produce the desired fruit.

Alternatively we can entrust ourselves and our buried rubbish to God. The message of Jesus is that we will not receive condemnation but grace and the saving power of God.

Two men went to pray... They believed different gospels to pray in different ways. Only one went down to his house justified in grace, right with God and right with himself.

### **Conclusion:**

Jesus hung on the cross to earn the right to take our rubbish and the burden of sin in all its forms. He says "Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden for I will give you rest..."<sup>3</sup> On the cross he earned the right to redeem us from all our sinful rubbish.

- Don't claim superiority.
- Don't delude yourself as self-righteous.
- Don't settle for a feel-good solution with buried sin.

Whatever we bear, however carefully buried, take it to Jesus, trust his mercy, receive his grace and you will know the power of God's salvation.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3.23

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11.28