

# “THE GOSPEL: How to Be Right with God”

A sermon by

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**TEXTS: Luke 18:9-14 and Romans 10:1-13**

## **Luke 18:19-24**

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

## **Romans 10:1-13**

*Brothers and sisters, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

*Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that ‘the person who does these things will live by them.’ But the righteousness that comes from faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, “Who will ascend into heaven?”’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or “Who will descend into the abyss?”’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?*

*‘The word is near you,*

*on your lips and in your heart’*

*(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. The scripture says, ‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.’*



Sometimes, we just get it wrong. Thomas Edison’s teacher declared that his brains, at age seven, were “addled.” The notes of Marilyn Monroe’s first audition at Columbia Studios declares, “Can’t act. . .voice like a tight squeak. . .utterly unsure of herself. Unable even to take refuge in her own insignificance.” Of Fred Astaire’s audition, someone wrote, “Can’t act. Slightly bald. Also dances.”

Sometimes, we just get it wrong.

In today’s epistle lesson, the Apostle Paul indicates that his Jewish brothers and sisters got it wrong in their approach to God. Paul freely admitted that he had gotten it wrong until he got a wake-up call from the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

One would think that the Jewish people, especially the Jewish leaders, knowing and understanding the prophecies concerning the Messiah, would have been the first to welcome Jesus.

They weren't.

They were experts in the Law of Moses. They should have known that the Law was only a guide.

They didn't.

Paul calls the Law in Galatians 3:24, a παιδαγωγός (paedagogos). . . an instructor, a teacher, a disciplinarian, an escort, that would lead God's people to a knowledge of our inability to meet God's standard of righteousness and our need for grace and mercy. The Law was temporary.

They got it wrong.

John records of the Messiah in John 1:11-12, *"He [the Word of God] came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God."*

How did they miss it? How do people miss out on a relationship with God today?

### **AT LEAST I'M NOT LIKE THAT GUY! (pride & self-righteousness)**

Do you remember when you were in school and exam time came? I was normally a good student. Give me a standard of excellence and I would achieve. A grade of A or a B was expected. Every now and again, a pop quiz, surprise test, or an unannounced examination would catch me unprepared. Usually, it caught everyone unprepared. Everyone did poorly on the test. That was when the students who frequently did well hoped the teacher would curve the test. The curve graded you against how everyone else did and not against an absolute standard. It was a relative standard, not an absolute standard.

The Pharisees mistakenly believed God grades on the curve. Many people believe it today, as well.

Jesus told two parables about this kind of person. The first parable is the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The elder brother compares himself to his younger brother. He is upset because Dad welcomes Junior back home and throws a party. He stayed home, worked hard, did everything right, but was upset because Dad never threw a party for him.

The second parable is this morning's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee fails to focus on God. He focuses on his own righteousness. He then compares himself to the tax collector. Some things never change. People disliked tax collectors then and they dislike them now. The Pharisee, filled with pride in his own righteousness, thanks God that he is not like the tax collector. He recites all the good things he does keeping the Law of Moses. He goes beyond what is required. He is extra-righteous.

He uses his own goodness as the standard to judge another person. He fails to see where he might really fall short of God's standard of righteousness. The Pharisee believed God graded on the curve. In his estimation, there was no one better than he, especially when compared to others.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knew how far short he fell of God's standard of righteousness. He knew there was no curve. He could only ask for grace and mercy.

God has not given us the right or privilege to judge others. Even so, I freely admit to having done that very thing. We all have done it. It is part of our fallen nature. That doesn't make it right.

A grocery store checkout clerk once wrote to advice-columnist Ann Landers to complain that she had seen people buy "luxury" food items--like birthday cakes and bags of shrimp--with their food stamps. The writer went on to say that she thought all those people on welfare who treated themselves to such non-necessities were "lazy and wasteful."

A few weeks later Landers' column was devoted entirely to people who had responded to the grocery clerk. One woman wrote: "I didn't buy a cake, but I did buy a big bag of shrimp with food stamps. So what? My husband had been working at a plant for 15 years when it was shut down. The shrimp casserole I made was for our anniversary dinner and it lasted three days."

Another woman wrote: "I'm the woman who bought the \$17 cake and paid for it with food stamps. I thought the checkout woman in the store would burn a hole through me with her eyes. What she didn't know is the cake was for my little girl's birthday. It will be her last. She has bone cancer and will probably be gone in six to eight months."

We have done just what the Pharisee did. We have compared someone else's behavior to what we know of our own righteousness. We even fall into the trap if we're thinking right now, "Well, at least I'm not like the Pharisee."

Another obstacle stood in the way of the Jews in accepting Jesus. Even today, it affects some Christians. What is it?

### **AT LEAST I'M NOT LIKE THOSE UNBELIEVERS (zealous for God)**

When the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, they had to rebuild the Temple. In the period between their exile and their return, they became a people of the Book. Idolatry had been purged and they knew they worshiped the One True God.

The Pharisees improved on the Law, adding their own oral traditions and customs. They went beyond the Ten Commandments and codified 613 commandments that guided them in every aspect of life.

Instead of leading them to humility before God, this scrupulous devotion to their traditions and customs, what Jesus condemned as the "traditions of men" (Mark 7:8), became a source of pride for them. It allowed the Pharisees to look down their noses at every person who wasn't doing what they did or striving as hard as they were.

Notice how the Pharisee in the parable begins his prayer. *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector."*

Paul knew this kind of zealotry.

In Philippians 3:1-4, Paul takes on those who demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised before they could become Christians. Paul calls them dogs and evil workers because they were putting confidence in a fleshly symbol of righteousness instead of the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ alone. They were putting their trust in works designed to earn God's favor instead of in the faith that seeks God's mercy. Paul talks about what his confidence could have been if that were something to recommend a person to God. If anyone could have a claim, Paul knew he was that man.

He writes in Philippians 3:4-6, *"If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of the Hebrews, as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."* Paul could have been the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. He could easily have been the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son. If anyone could claim to be "good enough," Saul would have been a top candidate.

However, he still fell short. He knew it. Perhaps it was at the stoning of Stephen when he was still known as Saul. There he had held the cloaks of those who self-righteously clutched their stones to kill a man they considered a heretic. The lightbulb began to go on for Saul. He could gather his robes about him and honestly claim his innocence of Stephen's death; but he approved! He was just as much a murderer as those who threw the stones.

Hear what Paul writes in verses 7 and 8 after citing his qualifications concerning his own righteousness: *"Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. . ."*

The Pharisee thought himself "good enough" for God to accept him. The tax collector knew he could never be "good enough." He needed mercy.

If you ask the average person what Christianity is about, the answer you will get is love your neighbor, try to live like Jesus, and observe the Golden Rule. That's great advice until someone cuts you off in traffic or takes your parking place at Walmart. Then, all bets are off! It's great advice, but it's not good news.

Good news comes from beyond you. Good news comes from outside of you. Good news comes because it is God at work to save us in Jesus Christ. We cannot and do not save ourselves.

In the end, there are two ways to approach God. One is all about you and what you have done.

It will never be enough.

The other is all about what God has done for you in Christ. It is truly enough.

One is bad news. The other is good news.

One method works. One doesn't.

In Romans 3:20, the Apostle Paul writes, *"Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight."* Simply put, you cannot perform your way into heaven. It will never get you to God. Only what Christ has done for you will ever be enough. All you need do is trust in Him. It is His righteousness for you that is pleasing in God's sight. God, in Christ, has done what you, by yourself, could never do.

The purpose of the Law is not to save anyone. The purpose of the Law is to condemn everyone. Until you are aware of your need, you will never realize that there is a solution.

The Presbyterian preacher, Robert Murray McCheyne, was passing out tracts one day and handed one to a well-dressed lady. She gave him a haughty look and said, "Sir, you must not know who I am!"

In his kind way, McCheyne replied, "Madam, there is coming a day of judgment, and on that day it will not make any difference who you are!"<sup>i</sup>

That truly is good news.

God's salvation is not just for the good people, the righteous people, the morally better people. Thank God! The good news is for everyone. *"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes will not perish, but have everlasting life."* (John 3:16) That is good news for everyone, because everyone needs that good news. There are none righteous, no, not one, Scripture says. Boil it all down and the Pharisee and the Publican are both "whosoever's." We all are!

God doesn't grade on curve, and that's good news!

## **AT LEAST GOD HAS PROVIDED A WAY FOR US ALL (grace)**

The Pharisees believed that God's love and salvation were only for the Jewish people. Gentiles need not apply. Truth be told, they weren't sure that God loved anyone as much as God loved the Pharisees. They really tried hard to please God. Everyone else? Not so much.

Pharisees got caught up in their own righteousness. They truly tried to live by the Law. However, that is where the problem lay. That is where they went wrong.

If you live by laws, rules, and a laundry list of "oughts, shoulds and musts", you are bound to fail. You can only be righteous if keep ALL of the Law. Jesus said, *"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of God."* (Matthew 5:20) Fail in any one area and you have failed the test of righteousness. It matters not that you are more righteous than most. In the eyes of God, you are still unrighteous.

That is what the Apostle Paul means when he writes in Romans 10:5-9, *"Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.'"* I'm going to pause here. That means that if you are going to commit to finding your righteousness in living right, acting morally, and doing good things, you are thereby committed to keeping ALL of the Law. Fail in one aspect, and you have failed totally. The whole structure of righteousness rises and falls with you and your behavior.

Paul continues by explaining that salvation is not something we have to go seeking. It is not just for the super-spiritual, the highly motivated, and the saintly.

Salvation is for those who call on the name of the Lord. Salvation is for anyone who believes and confesses. ". . . if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. The Scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.'" (Romans 10:9-11)

Jesus is the only mediator, God's only means to restore a fallen humanity to Himself. The only means to restore you and me to Himself. This is not Plan B. There is no other plan.

It is not by being good enough. Only Jesus can do that. That is why my faith must be in Him and what He has done for me.

I'm going to close this morning with a story I heard as a young adult. The story illustrates the common belief of many about salvation and what God says.

A very good man dies at the end of a full and productive life. He appears before the Pearly Gates and is met by St. Peter. St. Peter is a bit bored on this day and decides to have a little bit of fun. He addresses the man and says, "Good afternoon, sir. Welcome to heaven. Why should I let you in?"

The man responds, "Well, I've tried to live a moral and ethical life." St. Peter says, "Ten points." Rather shocked, the man continues. "Well, I was a successful businessman and donated sixty percent of my income and estate to charity." St. Peter says, "Fifty points." Again, the man is taken aback, but continues. "Oh, and went to church every week, taught Sunday School, sang in the choir, and served as a deacon and then as an elder." St. Peter smiled. The man looked hopeful. "Forty points.

Pause.

The man looks at St. Peter. "Excuse me, sir, but exactly how many points do I need to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?"

"Four million, two hundred eighty-three thousand, six hundred and twenty-four."

The man became ashen-faced. He fell to his knees and cried out, "Jesus help me! Lord have mercy on me! The only way I will ever get into heaven is by the grace of God."

St. Peter beamed. "Exactly right! Welcome to heaven!"

*"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, so that no one may boast." (Ephesians 2:8-9)*

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). The Bible exposition commentary (Vol. 1, p. 547). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.