

TELL ME THE STORIES OF JESUS
“A Story About Attitude”
Luke 18:9-14

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Sermon preached from the pulpit of First Baptist Church Merritt Island, Florida, on Sunday, July 26, 1998, by Dr. David H. McKinley, Pastor.

As I was listening this morning, I was reminded of how church is just a great place to come to be blessed, to be encouraged, and to be strengthened. That is why you need to be in church. You need to be with God's people. You need to be where people are full of God, and where the spirit of God can encourage and rekindle your heart.

Yet, church can also be a place to come and get into trouble. I know that is hard to imagine. Most people come to church so that they can get out of trouble, or they hope that somehow they can get forgiveness for some trouble that they are in.

I heard about some parents who had two boys. These boys were just giving them fits! They were mischievous. Everywhere they went, they were disruptive. Finally, the parents decided that they needed to put a greater emphasis on their family and spiritual things. They needed to take the boys to church.

They took the boys to church and every week it was just “Quit that!” “Shhhh!” “Quiet!” You know how it is if you have a child sitting next to you sometimes in church. These boys were causing major disturbances. They were getting down on their knees, crawling under the seats, and pulling on the legs of other people. They were completely out of control!

Finally, the father looked at the mother and said, “I am so mad I do not know what I am going to do! I think we need to go have a conference with the pastor and let him talk to these boys.” They set up an appointment and went to see the pastor. The pastor decided that instead of getting the whole gang in the room, he would take them one by one. He started with the younger of their two sons who was a 10 year old. The little boy went into the office and the pastor sat him in a chair. The pastor was nice to him. However, after a few minutes, the pastor started to ask some questions to this little boy.

He looked at the little boy and said, “Son, I want to ask you a question. Where is God?” The little boy did not say anything. He just sat there. The pastor looked at him again and said, “Son, I am asking you a question. Where is God?” The little boy did not say anything. The pastor raised his voice and said, “Son, I want to ask you, where is God?”

With that, the little boy got up, ran out of the office, took off lickity-split through the outer office area, and ran all the way home. The family followed him. The other son, the brother, went up to the bedroom to try to find his little brother. Sure enough, there he was, hunkered down in the closet. He said, “What in the world is wrong with you?” He said, “Listen, we are in big trouble this time. Now God is missing and they think we are the ones who did it!” Those two boys found out that sometimes you can get into trouble even at church.

I am thankful God is not missing here today. There were two men in the Bible who also found out that going to church can get you into trouble. Actually, only one of them got into trouble. The other one was blessed at church.

The story is found in Luke 18:9. We have been involved all summer long in a series of messages that we have been calling “Tell Me the Stories of Jesus.” The story of Jesus is the greatest story ever told. So many things can be said of the story of Jesus. Yet, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, was the greatest story teller who ever lived. Jesus, many times, would package the truth. He would portray the truth of God through simple life experiences, through stories known as parables. A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, a truth that parallels life and is pictured in life. Wanting to describe and address the

issues of what takes place many times at church in the experience called worship, Jesus told about two men who went to church. Luke 18:9-14,

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner!” I tell you this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’.”

What an interesting story! What a unique parallel! The Bible tells us two men leave their houses with the same aim in mind. They were both headed to the temple to worship. You cannot begin to imagine today in our culture the implications of that phrase “go up to the temple”. So much of the ceremony, so much of the ritual of the ancient world and of the worship of the people of Israel revolved around that center place called the temple. One of the most significant experiences in life was to set out from your house and go to the temple. Yet, the Bible says that both of these men, though they were very different men from different backgrounds and locations, left their homes to go and worship.

They not only left their houses with the same aim, they both participated in the same activity. When they got to the temple, both men prayed. Prayer is one of the most significant expressions of worship. There are many components of worship. We spend time singing, which is a component of worship. We spend time giving, which is a component of worship, especially in that day. You had stuff that you had to take with you to make offerings and sacrifices and gifts to the Lord. For people in that day, it was more like carrying a U-Haul with you just to go to church.

Yet, one of the absolute, essential elements of all true worship is that of prayer. Both men participated in this activity called prayer. However, there was something very different. While both of them had the same aim, and while both of them engaged in the same activity, they had two very different attitudes. The attitude of one man, the Pharisee, was that he deserved to be there. He thought that he was doing God a favor, that God ought to be smiling to have someone like him sitting on the pew.

The other man felt ashamed to be there. He knew that he did not deserve to be there. He knew that he was out of his element around the holy things of God. There was a difference in the attitude of these two men. That is what I want us to look at because I believe that what Jesus is giving us is a story about our attitude; an attitude, in particular, that relates to the issue of worship. I want us to take just a few moments and look at these two men. Then, we will bring together some things that will be an attitude check for us.

First, I want us to take some time and evaluate the attitude of the Pharisee. The Bible says in Luke 18:11,

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God I thank You that I am not like other men---extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’.”

I know that as we read that, with our background and knowledge of what the Pharisees were like in that day, we immediately want to say, “Good grief! What kind of person was this?” However, while you and I have the inside story on the Pharisees as being a self-righteous, self-perpetuating group of people in the days of Jesus, the reality was that in that day the Pharisees were respected. They were not looked down upon. They were looked up to in their day. They were the religious uppercrust of the Jewish society.

In that day and time, when Jesus started talking about a Pharisee, everyone thought of this one in high esteem, not in some low fashion. They thought of him as being someone who was an example, the embodiment of someone who had it together spiritually. Jesus said this man went to the temple and he began by saying, “I thank God.” That is a very wonderful thing, to give thanks to God! Psalm 100:4,

“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise.”

This man, the Bible says, was being thankful before the Lord. It says that he was giving thanks as he saw it in his perspective. The Bible says that he also talked about the fact that he was a man who fasted and tithed. We have to be careful that we do not look at this man so much through the lens of how we know him to be, and miss the picture that was being portrayed. When you look at this man coming to the temple to pray and doing all the right things, the first attitude dynamic that you see is an attitude of sincerity. He was a sincere man! He meant well by what he was doing and what he was trying to do. When he talked about fasting and tithing, he was a good supporter of the things of the temple.

There are a lot of sincere people who will attend churches all across America today. They are there because they sincerely desire to do what is right. There is nothing wrong with that; it is a good thing. Yet, if you have never learned this lesson, you need to learn it today: It is possible in life to be sincere and to be sincerely wrong. While this man was sincere, his sincerity was not sufficient to worship God. There are people today who will go to church and they are sincerely trusting in their christening. They are sincerely trusting in their confirmation. They are sincerely trusting in the ritual that they will go through at church, the liturgy that they will follow, that this is giving them the right standing, the sense of deserving to be in the presence of God.

There are even people who will attend Baptist churches who have been baptized. They were sincerely baptized because that was the Baptist way to do it. A lot of people see us as the “dunkin donuts” variety of Christians in the evangelical world. There are a lot of people who got “dunked” because they thought that was the right thing to do. Do not get me wrong. I believe in baptism. I emphasize baptism. I believe that the first thing a person ought to do after they receive Jesus Christ is to follow Him in believers baptism. However, I want you to know that baptism will not take you to heaven. It will not earn you credits with God, because you are not saved by baptism.

The issue in this man’s life was that he was there and he was sincere. Yet, he was wrong. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Salt Lake City, Utah, as a part of the Southern Baptist Convention. The dynamics of the community in Salt Lake City were most interesting during the time of the convention. I found it fascinating to realize how open and eager people of the Mormon community there were willing to talk with those of us who were there as a part of the convention. In fact, I had something happen while I was in Salt Lake City that I have never had happen in any other time in my life.

I went out to dinner one evening with two other pastors and dear friends, Dr. Jack Graham from Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, and Dr. O. S. Hawkins, president of the Southern Baptist Annuity Board. Our food had just arrived when a very distinguished looking gentleman and his wife walked up to our table. He asked if it would be possible for he and his wife to join us. (I have never been in a restaurant and had somebody ask if they could come join my table for dinner.) We asked them if they would mind if we went ahead and ate since we had no idea what was going on. It would have been difficult to have made that adjustment at that point.

Then we said, “Why don’t you let us finish our meal and then you can come over and join us for dessert?” They agreed to do that. When we finished eating, we asked them to join us. They came over and sat down at our table. For the next 1 ½ hours, this man simply talked to us about the Mormon church. That was his mission. It was not his desire to be confrontational. It was his desire to be engaging. In fact, it was more than simply to be engaging. It was his desire to relate to us and to help us see the similarities and the sense in which we were together about what we believed.

However, there was one distinct difference. While we believed in Jesus Christ as the only begotten Son of God and the only Savior of the world, he added to the work of Christ the works of later prophets. He also added the works of individuals to live a good life and to be able to one day go to heaven.

While this man was as warm, as personable, as gracious, and as sincere as he could have been, I left there with a broken heart that night. I knew that he was sincerely wrong! He did not know Jesus Christ. He knew about Jesus. He knew about the Bible. Yet, he did not know Jesus in a real and personal way. The

only worship that God accepts is the worship that comes through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are made acceptable in Him, and not of ourselves, no matter how sincere we may be. The basis of worship is not simply sincerity. Sincerity is a part of it, but that is not the basis of acceptance. You can be sincere and be wrong.

There was another attitude in this man's life. It was not only that of sincerity, it was also that of superiority. That is something that gets in our face as we read this passage. He was a sincere man. He was at the right place, and he was doing the right thing. Yet, he did have a little bit of an edge and an air about him. If you will look at what the Bible tells us, it says that he began to pray. He said, "God, I thank you...". He was giving thanks. Yet, "I thank You that I am not like other men."

He had this sense as he looked around in the temple that day that he stood above others who were there. There were others around him who he immediately recognized. I do not know who all of those were. He did identify extortioners, the unjust, and adulterers. One of the people that he identified was the tax collector, the other man who had come to the temple at the same time.

As this man was praying, the Bible tells us that he stood. There is a significance to that. The common way to pray in the temple is not as we pray today. They did not often kneel down, fold their hands, bow their heads, and close their eyes when they prayed. The common way for a Jew to pray, especially a Pharisee, was to stand and to lift his hands up to the Lord. They would rock in a very aggressive fashion.

It is an amazing thing today when you go to Israel to stand at the Wailing Wall. There are just hundreds of men who are rocking and praying and chanting aloud. The picture that we have here will give you some idea of the activity that goes on around the Wailing Wall, the picture of men who are there. Yet, if you go just into the inside of the gate, you would just find men who are rocking and praying. This man stood out and stood above the others who were there.

The Bible says that he felt like he had the ability to stand there and to pray. In his prayer he said, [paraphrased] "I am not like other men." That was his greatest problem! He was comparing himself with the wrong standard. God does not compare you to other men. How many times have I heard someone say to me, "Well, I am as good as the next guy." You may be, but that is not the right standard. God does not base His acceptance of you on how you stand next to other men. God has one absolute standard by which He measures all of humanity. Jesus said it in Matthew 5:48,

"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Is there anybody who can say, "I am perfect." I do not think any of us would stand to elevate ourselves in that. We are not perfect. We may be better than the person in front of us or behind us, but if you are going to talk about perfection, that is a completely different standard. I am not perfect. That was this man's problem. His standard of comparison was other men. God's standard of comparison for worship is not other men – it is Jesus Christ, the one and only perfect person who ever lived.

The bottom line is that no matter how you may compare with others, not one of us measures to the standard of Jesus. Based on who we are and what we are, we cannot stand before God no matter how superior we may be to other people. Worship is not based on merit, superiority, or ability to live above others. To show you how much this man failed to understand, I Corinthians 10:13,

"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man..."

We all have the same propensity to sin. We do not all have the same sin areas in our lives. Some of us have a weakness at the point of lying and others of us have a weakness at the point of telling the truth. Some of us are stealing. Some of us have a weakness at the point of lust. Some of us have other weaknesses in our lives, all kinds of habits and hang-ups. The issue is that while the points of sin may be different, the propensity to sin, the tendency towards sin, is the same in everyone of us. From Adam and Eve, we have inherited a gene called sin. We are all sinners, [paraphrased] "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

Standing next to another man, you may be here and he may be there. However, it does not matter how high you stand in some pyramid here. If God's standard is as high as the roof, we all fall short. None of us can jump high enough. This man's problem was that he had a spirit of superiority.

There was one other thing about his attitude. It is another attitude that hinders worship. Worship is hindered when I substitute sincerity for a relationship with God based on Jesus. Worship is hindered when I look at my superiority and compare myself to others rather than to God's perfect standard. Worship is hindered in my life when I have an attitude of sufficiency. He says, "I fast, I give, I, I, I..." The strength of this man's faith was himself. He felt that he could somehow, of his own merit, of his own accord, of his own effort, live a life of sufficiency before God. He assumed that his religion would be good enough, that his playing the system and going through the routine would be sufficient.

There is one person that God cannot bless in church. It is the person who believes that they are sufficient, or that maybe God can just be some little appendage that they can add to a basically secure and sufficient life. God cannot bless that kind of a person. There is no room for God in that person's life. Instead, their life is filled up with their own sufficiency. That is where this man was. He was full of sufficiency.

In Luke 18:9, the Bible says that Jesus spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves. This man was trusting in himself. This is not simply a problem of Pharisees. This is a problem that believers in churches today struggle with. I want to remind you that Jesus, speaking to the churches, spoke specifically to one church about this particular matter. Revelation 3:14,

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, 'These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: I know your works that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish that you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked' -- ..."

The problem with the church at Laodicea was that they could have church without Jesus. That was essentially this Pharisee's problem. He could simply have church within himself. His problem in worship was his own sufficiency. An attitude of sufficiency rather than an attitude of dependency will absolutely destroy your ability to worship. The attitudes of the Pharisee were sufficiency, superiority, and the attitude of sincerity. Those things can all get in the way of true worship.

Let's look at the other man's attitude, the attitude of the tax collector. Luke 18:13, Jesus says,

"And the tax collector, standing afar off..."

We have the picture of the Pharisee standing in the midst of the crowd, his eyes looking up. He is talking to the Lord and looking around at all of the people who are there. However, here we have the picture of the tax collector. He is essentially over in the corner. He is standing afar. The Bible says that he would not even look up to heaven. He would not take the normal posture of prayer. Instead, he looked down at his feet. He was uncomfortable. The Bible says that he clutched his chest and said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."

There was an incredible spirit of brokenness in this man's life! There was an incredible cry for mercy from this man's heart! As I reflected on this man's call to God for mercy, my mind and my own heart took me to Psalm 51. This wonderful Psalm outlines for us the attitude that God desires in the life of His people as we approach Him. The attitudes of humility, dependency, faith, and of calling upon the Lord is so clear.

Psalm 51 is the account of the prayer of David after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. You can only begin to imagine how this man, who was known as the man after God's own heart, had come to a place of such total broken-heartedness and realized how great his fall was. He was no longer comparing

himself with other men and saying, “I am the king and everybody should serve me.” He had come to the place where the posture of his heart was “You are God, and I have failed you.” Psalm 51:1,

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight – that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge.”

Psalm 51:10,

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”

Psalm 51:16,

“For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise.”

Here we have the Pharisee saying, “I give. I fast. I play by the rules.” The tax collector is saying, “God, I cannot do anything to somehow make right what I have done wrong. All I can bring to You is a broken and a contrite spirit.”

In the mind of the Jew who heard the story that day, the Pharisee was looked upon with honor. The other side of that coin was that, for the Jew, the tax collector was looked down upon as the scum of the earth. Tax collectors in the first century were Jewish people who lived among their own people. Yet, they would take taxes from the people for the Roman government. The way in which they would earn their living is that they would essentially extort or overcharge the people that they would tax in the name of the Roman government. They would profit in the process.

Basically, they were what we would call in our day “blood-sucking pigs”. That is the context in which the people saw the tax collector of that day. When Jesus was talking about this Pharisee, everybody sees this man and pictures in their mind him going through the process. Here is this man over in the corner and everybody is thinking, “Oh, man! What is he doing in church?” Yet, there was something so different about him. His attitude was one of calling to God for mercy.

Jesus said in Matthew 5:3,

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There is one attitude that totally destroys worship. That attitude is pride. What was lacking in the tax collector was pride. What was ever present in the Pharisee was pride. Yet, what is respectable before men is despicable with God. God cannot stand our pride. God cannot stand religion on display and self-righteousness on a platter. It does nothing for God but make Him sick.

The Bible says that pride is the first, the worst, and the most despicable of all the deadly sins. In the list that God gives in Proverbs, [paraphrased] “These seven things does the Lord hate...” The first one is a proud look. There is one thing that will destroy worship on Sunday. It is pride -- pride in my own sincerity -- pride in my own superiority -- pride in my own sufficiency. Nothing so depreciates a man in the presence of God. The Bible says that a man is exalted when he is humble, but he is depreciated when he is proud.

This tax collector came to God with the spirit of an old song that says, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.” The Pharisee, on the other hand, said, “Something in my hand I bring and to myself I cling.” God was not impressed. Jesus put it this way in Luke 18:14,

“...this man went down to his house justified...”

There is not a more powerful word in all of the Bible to describe what happens when a man is made right with God than the word justification. The book of Romans unfolds, describes, and develops the picture of justification whereby my sin is credited to the account of Jesus, and Jesus' righteousness is credited to me. I have a right standing before God. That is what justification means. Jesus said the tax collector left justified, but the other man did not. He was not right with God when he got there, and he was not right with God when he left. What a tragedy to go through the motions and to miss the reality of worship!

This parable brings us to some very crucial points of checkup in our own lives -- certainly the checkup at the point of our own pride, and the attitude that compels us to come to church Sunday by Sunday. I want to use these crucial life points from this text to apply and to summarize the implications to my life and to your life today.

1. God does not measure people the way that we do. We always like to look at people based on their position, their performance, their image. However, God is so clear that the way that He measures us is according to the heart. God does not measure people the way that we do.
2. My best is not good enough for God. If anybody proved that, it was Paul. In Philippians 3, Paul talked about his life and all of the components of his life as a Pharisee, as a leader. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. He was schooled according to all of the religion of his day. Nobody had a pedigree that was greater than the apostle Paul when he was known as Saul of Tarsus. Yet, Paul described himself this way in I Timothy 1:15,

“Jesus came into the world to save sinners among whom I am the chief.”

He had learned that his best was not good enough for God.

3. We need to understand very clearly today that justification is the only key to heaven's doorway. The only way that I am ever going to be accepted in the presence of God when I die, or in the presence of God when I worship, is based not upon myself, but upon justification. That was the solution for the tax collector. He was justified. Again, let me describe justification. Justification is the process whereby my spiritual bank account receives a massive deposit through grace, making it impossible for me to ever erode the principal or deplete the balance. It is a deposit so great that you can never deplete it, being made right with God through Jesus Christ.

The only way that you can be accepted in worship and the only way that you can ever go to heaven is by being justified. Let me show that to you in Romans 3:27, 28,

“Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”

The only way that I can be justified is not through my own effort to live a life that is good enough for God, but to accept what God has done for me in Jesus Christ. He is the one and only person who has appeased the righteousness of God. Romans 4:5,

“But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.”

When you do not come to God based on your merit, but, instead, on the merit of Jesus Christ, in that moment putting your faith in Christ becomes the basis of receiving the righteousness of God. Then, again, Romans 5:1,

“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Worship is not you giving God your best. It is giving your all and taking God's best in Jesus Christ. Justification is the only key to heaven's doorway. That brings me to my final observation.

4. Salvation does not make sense. I am not saying it is not sensible. In our minds, it just seems that if a man will do his best and try hard enough and keep his nose clean, that ought to be good enough for God. However, God says that all of our righteousness is as filthy rags in His sight. There is not a way for you or a way for me to somehow cover our sins so that it will be acceptable before God. Instead, God says, expose your sin. Admit your sin. Come to me and look at what I have done for you. I took your sin and let it become the nails that drove the hands of Jesus to a cross. If you see what Christ has done and what your sin has done, and then, know that not only did Jesus take your sin to the cross, but that He was buried and that He rose on the third day, then through His life you can receive life.

While that does not make sense, it is the greatest truth in all of the world. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life." [paraphrased] It is so simple that a child can say, "I want Jesus in my heart." Yet, it is so profound that you can spend years studying theology and every other thing that has to do with the marvel, the work of God, and salvation, and it will never make sense in your mind. Yet, it is the reality that salvation is simply taking God at His word.

How will you leave church? Will you leave feeling good about yourself because you went to church? Will you leave justified, made right with God through His Son, Jesus Christ? How can you be justified?

1. Admit that you are a sinner. Do not admit that you are good. Admit that you are bad. God sees through the veneer of goodness. Admit to Him your badness. Admit to Him your sinfulness.
2. Appeal to God on the merit of Jesus, not on your merit. You and I do not have any merit to bring to God, but Jesus does. Appeal to Him on the basis of that merit.
3. Ask for Him. Receive God's forgiveness and salvation today.