

Looking away from self and toward Jesus

Luke 18:9-14



Pastor Jim Rademaker

Two people arrived at church that day. Though both were religious - coming to pray as they did - they were like night and day. The first person was a well-respected member of the community and of his religious organization. He took God seriously and tried his best to live out his faith day in and day out. The second person was just the opposite. No one looked up to him. No one respected him, either in the community or in his religious circle. He was considered by many to be nothing but a common crook, thinking only of himself and cheating people out of their hard-earned money.

Yet as different as these two were, they had one thing in common. Neither of them had what it took to enter the kingdom of God. One *thought* he did. The other *knew* he didn't. Despite their best efforts, both entered God's house condemned. Condemned to an eternity in hell.

What does it take, to make it into heaven? What's the entrance exam? Pretty simple. Love. Love God and love your neighbor. That's it. That's all it takes. Simple to understand. Another thing to do. A few verses later, Jesus said it was like getting a camel through what the eye of a needle. (Lk 18)

Loving God and loving our neighbor. The first guy tried. But he imagined his camel to be much, much smaller than it really was. And he imagined the eye of his needle to be much, much larger than it really was. It wasn't easy, but with a enough effort, it could be done. Loving God and loving our neighbor. The second guy gave up. He knew he hadn't come close and didn't stand a chance.

How about you? How was your week? Did you love everyone you came into contact with this week? Think of them before yourself? Think of how you could give, instead of get from them? Put their interests before your own? Was God the most important thing in your life this week, night and day? Did you love Him and serve Him over all else? Did you honor your parents in everything you did and said to them? Did you turn the other cheek? Love your enemy and serve him or her - sincerely, from the bottom of your heart? Sounds a lot like what? Trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle. According to Jesus, nobody's getting into heaven. We're all going to hell. Whether we think we're good enough to get in or not.

Two people entered God's house to pray. The first prayer went something like this, *"God, thank you for your goodness to me. I know I may not be perfect all the time, but at least I'm not like a lot of other people I know - you know, like I hear about on the news. People who use drugs, people who drive drunk and kill innocent pedestrians, or abuse their spouse, or run around with someone they're not married to, or like those rich financial executives who cheated so many people out of their life savings. Or like the person who's voting for the other candidate in the upcoming election. Lord, thank you that you saved me from such a life and that I'm committed to You. You know that I give more than most and do my best to live for you."*

Next, the second person began to pray, "God, I don't know what to say. You know me. You know what I've done. You know my checkered past. You know the choices I've made and how I've been treating people lately - especially those closest to me. You're not too happy with me. You know my heart - deep down, what I'm REALLY like on the inside - that which I work so hard to keep hidden from other people, that which I'm not even aware of myself. Lord, PLEASE don't give me what I deserve. I beg of You, be merciful!"

Two people went to God's house to pray. One, a devoted follower of God. The other, considered a cancer on society. Seemingly from opposite ends of the spectrum, both entered God's house unfit and unworthy to enter into God's presence. As we come to God's house today, you and I come with these two people. We *are* these two people. Whether you are looked up to and well-respected by others or looked down upon as someone who never quite measures up. Whether you think things between you and God are pretty good or a complete mess, we all stand before a Holy and Righteous God as equals. Equally unfit for the kingdom of God. Equally condemned to hell.

Two people came into God's house. One came in confident of his relationship with God. Confident he had God's favor, at least compared to others. And yet despite all his confidence, he *left* God's house that day the same way he had come in. Condemned! All of his confidence did him no good. Why? He was confident in himself. Confident he had what it took to please God. Why - look at his life. How could God not approve, especially compared to certain others? Yet the best he had to offer God turned out to be filthy rags compared to the goodness of God. What he thought was "A" work turned out to be a failing grade. James 2:10 *"For whoever keeps the whole law, but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."* Matthew 7:22-23 *"On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'"*

["Look at all I've done. Look at all my As!"] *And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

Be careful of being confident in yourself and your spiritual walk. If you do, you're a fool. Mt 7:26-27 *And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.*" There is ONE foundation to build your life, your eternal life, on and it's certainly not you and your ability to please God.

The other worshipper that day in the temple, the worshipper standing far off at a distance, came into God's house confident as well. Confident that he wasn't going to make it. Confident that God wasn't at all pleased with him. Confident that he didn't have what it took. Confident that all hope was gone for him - expect for one thing. That somehow, in some way, God might possibly extend mercy. Not, give him what he's got coming!

"I tell you [Jesus said] that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God." Right with God. Pleasing to God. Acceptable. The drop out ends up with a perfect report card! A+. Why? How is this possibly? How can this be? *"For everyone who exalts himself, will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Humbling self. It's humbling to admit the truth about ourselves. We are powerless. *I am not a sinner because I sin. I sin, because I am a sinner.* And I can't change that. I was born that way. Born as a child of Adam. The Bible humbles us in its estimate of people. We are the children of wrath (Eph 2:3), totally unable by nature to grasp the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor 2:14). We were shaped in iniquity and born in sin (Ps 51:5). The imaginations of our hearts are evil (Gen 8:21). Even though we may desire to do good, we're unable to accomplish our lofty ideals because our nature is wrong (Rom 7:18-19). We are in bondage to the law of sin and death (Rom 7:21).

As one person put it, "If I am the problem, what is the solution? If you educate me, you will get a smart sinner. If you discipline me, you will get a disciplined sinner. If you refine me, I become a refined sinner. If you give me more religion, I will be a religious sinner. Whatever you do with me, you can not change what I am, and what I am is the problem." (Don Matzat, *Christ Esteem*)

Ever notice how irritating other people can be? They're not always so easy to get along with. They get under your skin. They're so messed up. *They're* what's wrong with the planet. How often might we come to God's house "thanking God that we're not like other people"? How often do we look down on the Pharisees of our world and thank God that we're not like them, thinking we're better than them - showing that we are them?

Two people are sitting in church today. One knows what the problem is in the world, and even in the church - other people. The other person knows what the problem in the church is. *"God, have mercy on ME, THE sinner."* As you and I sit in God's house today, we sit together with these two people. Whether you've confident in your standing before God - at least compared to some other people you know, or confident that there's no hope for someone like you, be assured that we're all in the same boat. We all fall short of the glory of God.

Yet, He was pierced, for our transgressions. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned—every one—to his own way. And the Lord has laid on Him, the iniquity of us all. And with his wounds, we are healed. (Is 53) *"For everyone who exalts himself, will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* Through Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, you and I, the unrighteous, are declared righteous, holy, pleasing to God - perfectly fit for His Kingdom! We are exalted beyond measure.

Those who exalt themselves aren't givable. They've already got everything they need - themselves. Those who have nothing are empty. And God is able to fill them. The humble are givable, because they have nothing, and need everything.

Do you know where you're going to spend eternity? Are you sure? How do you know? While humanistic psychology teaches us to know ourselves so that we might feel good about ourselves, God's Word teaches us to know ourselves so that we might turn away from ourselves and discover our life and identity in Christ Jesus. (Matzat) As C. S. Lewis writes at the very end of his book "Mere Christianity", *Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in.*

Spiritual maturity is not our growing independence. Rather, it's our growing dependence on Christ. It's not arriving at some point where we need Jesus less because we're getting better and better. *"Blessed, are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Blessed, are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied [filled]."* (Mt 5) Filled - as we look away from ourselves and unto Jesus.