

Hey how are we? If you have your Bibles, turn to Luke 18. The more I got into this text, the more I tried to break down every word, the more I tried to do commentary work, tried to do background work, I'm just utterly convinced at what this is calling people to do and who the type of people are that He's calling. Let's just look at the text. Luke 18, starting in verse 9. "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." If you've got any background in church, then Pharisee is bad and tax collector is good. The Pharisee's prayer is an excellent, theocentric prayer. So let me show you his prayer. "The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you...'" Two things. He is not standing up in the middle of everyone. Where is he standing? The text says, "off by himself." He is not grandstanding, he is not praying loud enough for everyone to hear him and he is off by himself. He does not say, "I thank You God that I'm so great..." There's no grandstanding. This is a theocentric, God-centered prayer. And look at what he thanks God for. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." Now once again, there's nothing wrong with this prayer. Here's all he is saying, "If it was not for You, who knows what I would be?" Now who wouldn't say that? Which one of you wouldn't say, "If God hadn't intervened in my life, at this moment, at this place, who knows what I would have become? Who knows what I would be in right now? Who knows what I would be capable of if God hadn't intervened and saved?" That's all he said.

And then he gets into some moral things in verse 12, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." Once again, who is he thanking for his ability to do that? He's thanking God. This is ferociously theocentric. Not only does this guy have his understanding correct, even his morality shows his spirituality, because this guy is unpacking varsity spirituality for us. Tithing and fasting, people don't like to come to those series. So if I go, "Hey, I'm going to do a twelve week series on fasting," we're going to have more open seats than we do today. Because people will do anything, but just don't touch their comfort eating and don't touch their money. You can do almost anything else, just leave those two alone. And this guy's going, "I thank You God that You've loved me enough to engage me so deeply that my money is open-handed and even my food is open-handed. I don't use food as a god." That's what he's saying. He's gone beyond the Law. This is a great guy. I like him. I'd want to hang out with him...not on the days he's fasting but on other days. I like him. This is a good prayer, a good man.

Now look at what happens. The tax collector's prayer is very different. Verse 13, "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!'" So get this picture in your head. He's not saying, "I thank You, God" for anything is he? He didn't thank God for anything. He didn't say, "At least I've done this well." He doesn't even offer that. Most of us that have darkness in our past, we at least have one area of our lives where we go, "At least I have that." He doesn't even offer that up. He offers nothing. While he's hitting himself, he says, "Please be merciful to me. It's my only hope."

Now the next line is absolutely terrifying. It wouldn't be terrifying if there were a period instead of a comma. But there's a comma instead of a period, so it's mortifying. Let me show you. Verse 14, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified,..." Which means the tax collector, with his prayer, is given right standing before God. God is not going to condemn that man now. He has right standing, he is accepted, he is welcomed in the presence of God. Now, if there were a period after that, we could all go, "Oh, how great is that. The tax collector got saved." But there's not a period; there's a comma. And He finishes this very terrifying idea. "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather

than the other.” Which means that the tax collector with his prayer of “Be merciful to me” has right standing before God while the Pharisee, who gives God all credit for his behavior, his life and his money, is said here by Jesus to not be justified, to not be accepted and to not be forgiven. That’s a little terrifying, is it not? The reason the Pharisee’s prayer is problematic is because the Pharisee is counting on these works of righteousness as his means of salvation. That’s the problem with his prayer. And the tax collector is counting on the mercy of God for his salvation alone.

Now, that’s what we covered in week 1. In week 2 we went right into this. Verse 15, “Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”” So what we tried to unpack is how does an infant receive things? I am intimately acquainted with this right now. Nora, when she’s hungry, her only hope to get food is to cry and hope. When she’s in her own filth, her only hope is to cry. When she’s uncomfortable, her only hope is to cry. When she’s cold, her only hope is to cry. When she’s hot, her only hope is to cry. When she wants to be cuddled, her only hope is to cry. Nora can do nothing except cry and hope. Jesus just said that the Pharisee is not justified, but the tax collector whose cry is for mercy is justified, and that the only ones who will be justified are the ones who come to the kingdom like infants, whose only way to receive is to cry out. Do you see that this is the same thing?

Now it’s all going to come to a head in a very well known moment in Jesus’ life. Verse 18, “And a ruler asked him,…” We know more about this ruler than what’s just said here. This story is in the other gospels also. Matthew 19 tells this same story also. And what we find out about the ruler in this case is, not only is he a ruler, but he’s rich and he’s young and sorry ladies, he’s married. So a rich, young ruler comes up to Jesus. And we know he is not a ruler in the synagogue. So we know he’s not a religious ruler, because he’s not young enough. If he’s marked by young, he’s not a ruler in the synagogue. So he’s a rich, young ruler. The best way to think of it is he’s some sort of cultural icon. He is very wealthy, he is very powerful and he is very much a trend setter in that culture. He is well known and well respected. This is who is coming to ask this question.

Look at what he asks, ““Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.”” So we know two things. We know that there was some turning point in this man’s youth, no idea what age that was, where he was probably living what we would call a secular life and he’s rich, his family is rich, he’s well known. So he’s living the secular scene, and then something it is not jiving with him, so he leaves the secular scene and becomes religious, extremely religious. He’s religious to the point where Jesus goes, “Obey the Law,” and this cat goes, “I do.”

Now let me just try to unpack this a little bit, because Christianity is not a religion. If there was a banner or phrase that described what religion is, it’s this. The mantra of religion is, “I obey therefore I am accepted.” That’s the mantra of a religion. “I do these things, and because I do these things, God will accept me, God will forgive me, God will be nice to me and God will bless me.” That is religion. Christianity and our Scriptures teach violently against this idea constantly.

So what we know about the rich, young ruler is there was something in the secular vein that was not satisfying to his soul, so he gets very religious. But he’s still asking the question, because even his religion has done nothing to satisfy the longing in his heart. And so he’s coming to Jesus and going, “I’m confused. What do I do? Because I’m wealthy, I’m powerful, I’m known, I’m successful, I have done everything the church tells me I’m supposed to do, my behavior has been modified, I am a good man, I am a good husband, I am a good father, I give my money away, I’m a generous man and something still is not right.” That’s what’s happened here.

And then look at Jesus' response. "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Here's why this drove me crazy. The rich young ruler said, "I tried secularism, and it didn't work. I tried religion, and it didn't work." Religion is outside in. Religion is "I do things to get accepted by God." And the Bible teaches so contrary to that, so he comes to Jesus and goes, "What do I do?" And Jesus does what? He gives him something to do. So I'm going, "Okay, something is wrong here." The first rule of reading the Bible is Scripture interprets Scripture. I've got a lot of Scripture that says what Jesus said is wrong, but Jesus is the Son of God and can't be wrong. So I'm wrong and I've got to figure out where I'm wrong. Here's what's happening in this moment. Jesus says, "One thing you still lack. Let me reveal to you what it is." It has nothing to do with money. He will use this man's love for money to expose what really is at the core of his heart, which is what he's lacking. So Jesus says, "Take everything you have, sell it and give it to the poor." Because He knows the man's response, He knows the man's heart, He knows the man will not do this.

Let's look at his response. "But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich." Now, here's what just happened. The question that came out of his mouth was, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus pokes around the Law a little bit. The guy goes, "Oh, I obey all the laws." Jesus says, "There's one thing you lack, let Me reveal what it is. Go sell all you have." And the guy walks away sad and refuses to do it. Here's what's happening here. The question that the rich young ruler is actually asking is not, "What must I do to be saved?" The question he's asking is, "What behavioral modifications do I have to make to put You into my debt? What behavioral modifications do I need to arrange in my life to make You do for me what I want you to do?" And it is my passionate belief that a bulk of evangelicalism in the United States is built on this idea that my behavior makes God owe me and that what saves me is God in my works.

What I was asked to come teach on in North Carolina is this idea of the dechurched. Dechurched means people who started out in church, went to church for a while and then just bailed on it. There's a lot of reason that happens. Some people put their faith in some charismatic leader instead of in God and the Scriptures. That charismatic leader ends up sleeping with his secretary or stealing money or punching you in the face at a softball game or whatever and then you're done. "If he's going to do that, God can't be real." So your faith was never actually in Jesus and you never really believed the truths of the Bible; you just liked his style of communication and decided to follow a man. Men make really crummy Gods unless they're God in the flesh, and there's only been one of those. So you put your faith in that and that guy betrayed you, so God can't be real and you bail. That happens all the time.

Let me show you the primary way people become dechurched. Our Christian culture, the time in which we live is consumed with pragmatism. Which means, here's what you're going to get at church 99% of the time all over the place. You're going to get pragmatism. You're going to get "Four ways for better biblical sex...Nine ways to your best life now... Fifteen ways to be a better man..." And do you know what you're not being taught? The nature and character of God. So here's what ends up happening because the world is broken and God has not restored it to its fullness yet. Somebody's going to get sick, somebody's going to die in a car wreck, somebody's not going to get into the school they wanted to get into, somebody is not going to get the job that they want, somebody's wife is going to leave them, somebody's husband is going to leave them, some three year old is going to get cancer, some of you are going to get sick. And at that moment, when that happens, because you do not know the nature, character and beauty of the transcendent God of the universe, you simply know, "Here are the behavioral modifications that I'm supposed to do," you find yourself standing in half melted marshmallow, unable to move, feeling betrayed and you bolt. That's what happens over and over and over again while the church continues to try to figure out how to get you back by getting creative and putting smoke and lasers and helicopters and explosions in the middle of the deal and having a rig fly me out over the crowd while I rain down on you candies with Jesus' name on them. And through it all, what you're not getting is the picture of the transcendent, all knowing, all powerful God of the universe. So most of our faith is built on "I'll behave so God gives me

what I want. And when he stops giving me what I want, I'm going to be furious and feel betrayed by Him. Because I did this, this and this and He didn't give me what I wanted." And that is in my experience a bulk of what Evangelicals believe. And of course you're going to get a lot of people dropping out of church because they don't know God and the don't know the Bible. They haven't even really been taught the Bible or taught who God is. They just know that this is how sex should be handled and this is how money should be handled and this is what we need to do to be good businessmen. And that's actually the thing the Jesus is actively, aggressively attacking.

"But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich." For all the heat that Christians get about our God that damns everybody to hell, the message of the New Testament is not that God damns, it's that God saves. You see, Jesus tries to expose this man's heart so that he might repent and believe. The man refuses to repent and chooses his wealth. All that happened here is God exposed that this man's goal, his heart, his love was not God in Jesus Christ, but he was trying to control God to get God to do what he wanted. Jesus exposes that in the hopes that he'll repent, he refuses to repent and leaves sad and Jesus' heart is grieved. Jesus doesn't go, "Oh, it's like that huh? Well I just happen to know because I'm God in the flesh that you're going to die in eight years. Peter, write his name down. I'll see you then on the judgment seat. We'll see who's sad then." That's not what happens, is it? Jesus grieves over this man who had a shot at life and refused it.

Okay, so this is going to jack up the crowd who just saw this happen. It's really going to light them up. Here's why. Because if this guy isn't saved, then what does it even look like to be a believer? Because here's this guy, he's wealthy, powerful, he looks blessed by God in all of his dealings, he is morally upright, he teaches Saturday school at the synagogue and if he's not in, then who gets to be in? And they're going to ask that question. Let's look at this. "Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, "How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."" There's so many reasons that this is true. Rich people have a lot of ability to distract themselves. When they feel lonely, when they feel afraid, they could easily go on a vacation or buy a new trinket. And trinkets have an amazing amount of power, don't they? A new car, a new phone, a new television, they just make things better for a bit. So the rich have that ability. The poor really don't have that ability.

Another reason that this happens is because God's economy is upside down to the world's economy. What I mean by that is in the world's economy, pretty, powerful, wealthy people make the rules and set the pace. In God's kingdom, there is an elevated role for the poor, the ugly, the hurt and the wounded. Doesn't Paul say in Corinthians that God chose the foolish things of this earth? Later on, talking to a church, he goes, "Look, not many of you are wise, not many of you are successful. Let's face it, some of you are really unattractive. And yet God does these things." So in God's economy, the unattractive is actually exalted while the rich and pretty is actually asked to be humbled and lowered. That's God's economy. That's another reason it's hard for the rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Which means God wants to show His might and glory by letting this thing flow not through the wealthy and powerful, but if you'll remember Acts when the disciples were arrested, the Roman powers were blown away that such unlearned men could turn the world upside down like they had.

Let's keep going. "Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"" So if he's not in, who gets saved? Let's look at Jesus' response. "But he said, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."" Now let's turn to Romans 8. Starting in verse 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Everyone in this room has broken the moral Law of God. Here would be my point. No one in this room can remember the first time you lied. Because you've been lying since you've been breathing. You've broken the moral Law of God, everyone in this room has. You weren't thirteen when you first went, "Should I come completely clean about this?" You were eight months old. Anyone with small children knows this. "Who did this?" "I don't know." "Really you don't know? So you expect me to believe

either I, in some dissociative way, threw flour all over the playroom or that your mom did?" "I don't know." "Really? You're really going to stay with 'I don't know?' You're going to have to get better at this."

Verse 2, "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free..." I want to point out that you are passive here, not active. You did not set yourself free; you were, by the Holy Spirit, set free. You didn't do it. "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." The only way the Law works is if you perfectly obey it. Because of your flesh, you cannot perfectly obey it. So God fulfills the righteous requirements of the Law "by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh..." It's not in sinful flesh, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. "...and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." So we've all broken God's moral law. The righteous requirement of us being law breakers is death and destruction, so God in the flesh, Jesus Christ comes, is arrested and on the cross absorbs God's wrath towards those who would repent and believe completely. So from the cross forward, for those who have been called by God according to His purposes, there is no condemnation. Which means, for those of us who believe, nothing in my past, nothing in my present, nothing in my future will be able to be brought as a charge against me. Why? Because God did what the Law can't. He paid my debt in full. I didn't do it; He did. I'm saved by nothing that I did or do, but by what He did.

Which brings me to my backward application of this text. I started going to church late in high school. I go in and somebody opens the big Bible, they read the text and then they correctly preach the text like this. And I'll have to use it in the context it was in at the time. They would go, "Listen, if you guys are going to the parties on Friday nights and you're getting wasted, that's sin and you need to repent. If you guys are sleeping around with your boyfriends or girlfriends, that's sin and you need to repent. If you guys are cheating at school, then that's a sin and you need to repent." And so it would be this, "These things need to be repented of. Your wickedness needs to be repented of." And that is the call to repentance that I've heard since my conversion all the way through my adult Christian life.

Now here's what just happened in Luke 18. Instead of that direction, God says this. "You good husbands, you good fathers, you small group leading, church going, morally righteous men and women, you repent." That sounds weird, doesn't it? Building your confidence in your salvation off of your goodness is just as God belittling, cross mocking wickedness as anything on the pagan dark side of the fence. It's just as cross belittling. "Who cares about the mercy of God? I do this, I do this, I do this... God? Yes, but I am a better man than my father was. I am a better husband than my father showed me how to be. I am a good man to my wife...I am a good man to my children...I am a good wife to my husband...I am a good mother to my children...I am a hard worker...I'm involved in the church...I'm plugged in..." Jesus is saying, "Repent! That does not save you. That does not justify you. And it's just as belittling and God mocking as anything else out there."

So here's the question. How do you repent of being good? Am I saying let's get a 12-pack of Shiner and get in a fight somewhere? There's a part of me that's interested, but no. We don't repent of righteousness by becoming unrighteous. That's not how we repent of it. In fact, Paul addresses it when he says, "Should we sin all the more so that grace might abound?" Because that's what they were arguing. In the book of Romans, they were arguing that if the gospel of Jesus Christ was all we needed to be justified before God, then we need to sin all the more because that would make you in need of that mercy all the more. And Paul said, "Should we sin all the more so that grace might abound? That's foolishness." In fact, his response translates into "May that never be," which can translate more strongly into, "You're damned if you do," which means there's no Holy Spirit in you if you think that way and walk that way. So what does it look like to repent of goodness?

I actually think it's kind of simple. Romans 8 says that those who are in the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit and that those who are in the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh. So how do we know if our mind-set is a mind-set of the Spirit. Well, you've got to get into what the Spirit does besides make the Baptists and Presbyterians nervous. So let me show you what the Holy Spirit does. In John 16, the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus. In John 16:14-15, the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 12, the Holy Spirit leads us to understand Jesus as our Lord. In Romans 8, the Holy Spirit empowers us to live like Jesus. In John 14:12-16, the Holy Spirit gifts us to do ministry like Jesus. In John 14:26, the Holy Spirit reminds us of Jesus. In Acts 1:18, the Holy Spirit empowers us to tell the good news of Jesus to the world around us. It seems that the Holy Spirit is just a bit obsessed with Jesus. The Holy Spirit glories, the Holy Spirit exalts, the Holy Spirit reveals Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. So if your mind is set on the Spirit, then your mind is set upon what the Spirit is set upon, which is Jesus Christ.

So I think one of the ways you can tell very quickly here is whether there is in you desire for, affection for and an exaltation of the person and work of Jesus Christ in the cross and in the resurrection, or if you get all of your hope in what you've been able to manage in morality and in church. Because if your hope, confidence and satisfactions is in being a good husband, being a good wife, being a good father, being a good mother, being a good churchman, then you've severely misplaced your hope in something that cannot and will not save you. So repentance of those things look like coming back to the cross and confessing. We sang earlier, "Prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love." How do most of us leave the God we love? What happened at the church at Ephesus is he said, "Hey, you've replaced a passion for God with a cold pragmatism." That's how we repent. We repent that we've become satisfied with pragmatics, that we've become satisfied with serving Him rather than knowing Him. And we ask God once again for mercy.

This is the story of the Bible over and over again. Even Paul preached the gospel to the circumcised and to the uncircumcised. If you've never been into church before, that goes well beyond foreskin. We'll have to explain that later. Basically he preached a gospel for the religious and a gospel for the pagan. How often does God rebuke the people of Israel in the Old Testament for being religious externally but not having a heart for Him? He even says, "I hate your gatherings. I hate when you sing to Me. Please shut up." That's what the book of Isaiah says. "I despise your festivals. I despise your feasts. I despise when you come to me with this external." Okay, so do you need to repent of goodness? Do you need to ask forgiveness for your righteousness? You need to once again throw yourself on the mercy of God and put your confidence in His cross and not in the fact that you're better this year than last.

In Matthew 7, a very terrifying exchange occurs between a group of people to whom Jesus says, "Depart from me for I do not know you." And their response is, "What do You mean, You don't know me? Did I not prophesy in Your name? Did I not cast out demons in Your name? Did I not do all sorts of services and acts in Your name? Why are You telling me to depart?" "Because I never knew you. And what saves you is not your list of accomplishments, but it's Me." God help us.

I want to give you a few minutes here to think on your heart, to think on whether or not this has anything to do with you, to take stock in your life and see where your confidence is. Is your confidence in the mercy of God through the cross of Jesus Christ or is your confidence in the fact that you're a good churchman, a good churchwoman, a good person all around? You trusting in those things is God belittling. What you do in that belief system is say, "I have no need of You; I have no need of Your mercy; I have no need of Your salvation." The Bible says that if we could earn the favor of God with our behavioral modifications, then the cross of Christ was for nothing. So is your confidence in your goodness? You've got to wrestle with that. I don't know that it will come quickly. I think maybe you need to talk with your spouse, talk with your friends to work through this.

Let's pray, "Father, help us. Where we're off a click to the left into license, where we're off a click to the right into legalism, will You just expose it? Many of us come this morning laying down not what is wicked but what is righteous.

So we lay down good things at Your feet and confess before You that they are filthy rags and we need Your mercy and salvation. Help us. Give us clarity in these things. It's for Your beautiful name I pray. Amen.”

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