

## **The Tax Collector and the Pharisee**

### **Luke 18:9-14**

I am thankful for the powerpoint team, the media team, the worship team, the welcome team, the set-up, breakdown, driver team, the finance team, the staff team, the elders, the trustees, the Grace Kids volunteers and the Community Group leaders. But actually, the translation team feels lonely. It's only Elaine and myself. You might think that is okay, but actually we can't keep on like this. We'd like to have a rotation where people do it once a month or ideally, once every two months. It involves receiving the Sunday message beforehand, translating it into English, and then doing simultaneous translation during the worship on Sunday. It's good Japanese study, and also English study. I think a native speaker of English is easier to listen to, but anyone who wants to try, please talk to Elaine or myself. Thank you.

Today I have both good news and bad news. Let's start from the good news. Spring has come. The days are warmer. We don't have to wear our coats. Going outside is enjoyable. The flowers are blooming. It is a beautiful season.

The bad news is that pollen has also come. It makes us sneeze. It makes our eyes water. It can even bring a fever. We don't like it.

In a similar way, the gospel also brings both good news and bad news. The word "gospel" itself means "good news." The good news is that in Jesus, we are saved from sin and death. Like Jesus, even though we die, we will be raised to life.

Within the gospel though, there is bad news. In order to receive salvation, we must recognize our sin. We must humble ourselves and confess that we are sinners. This is difficult because our hearts are resistant. Sin puts up a wall in our hearts that blocks the gospel. Even though we believe in Jesus, we can still be controlled by sin. That sin will block the gospel's power in our lives. When that happens, the gospel doesn't become good news.

Through the mercy of God, we are saved from sin, the walls in our hearts are broken down and we can love Jesus and love people. The gospel is what Jesus did for us.

If we are not careful though, we can focus on what we do for Jesus, and become prideful. We make the gospel about ourselves. And then, instead of loving God and people, we focus on ourselves. We get separated from God. Relationships break up. We lose our joy. Why is that? It is because the gospel becomes what we are doing. Our good, our righteousness becomes our gospel. My joy is that I'm better than others. Or when I can't do what others do, I become discouraged and quit.

The Pharisee in this parable talked about what he did for God. He said in verse 12, "I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." This sounds really good, doesn't it. I mean, truthfully, it sounds like what we do. Some of us may fast. We pray. We give offerings.

And before that, the Pharisee says in his prayer in verse 11, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."

Wow, what a terrible self-centered prayer. He uses "I" five times in his prayer. It was more about comparing himself with others and feeling like he was better than they, than it was praying to God. He looked around at others, decided that he was better than they, and thanked God for that. This isn't the gospel. Even though he was doing good things, his heart was far from God. These good things blocked the gospel. His good life became his gospel.

So, Jesus told a parable. Verse 9 says, "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.'"

The Pharisee was a respected Jewish religious leader. He appeared entirely righteous. On the other hand, the tax collector was despised by the Jewish people for collecting taxes for the Roman government. Sometimes they would demand more money than the required tax, and deceptively take some for themselves. Therefore they were seen as extortioners and unjust. When Pharisees saw tax collectors, they would turn their heads and spit.

During the time that Jesus lived, tax collectors were despised. In society, they were considered the lowest of the lowest.

However, look at 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, the tax collector stood way far off from the temple. He couldn't look up toward heaven, as the Pharisee was used to doing. He understood his sin.

Why did he understand his sin when so many people don't. Jesus didn't say that here, but in the next chapter there is a man named Zacchaeus, who was the chief tax collector in the region. Zacchaeus met Jesus and after having him in his home said, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." What a change in his life! Zacchaeus met Jesus. He welcomed Jesus into his home, the hardness in his heart was broken down and he understood his own sin. Not only that, he was willing to give back more than what he had taken.

Going back to the tax collector in the parable, He prays to God, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He understood his true need: the mercy of God. Not power. Not money. Not approval from others. God's mercy. This is the gospel.

Listen to Psalm 130:3,4. "If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared."

My brothers and sisters, this is the gospel. It isn't anything we have done. Rather it is the mercy of God to us through Jesus on the cross.

That's why Jesus concludes this parable by saying in verse 14, "I tel 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."

This likely made the Pharisees very angry. "I've lived a good life. I've served the Lord for many years. I've given a lot of money, and my whole life." Jesus' parable wounded the hearts of the Pharisees because there was pride there. It was a necessary wound. That pride was obvious evidence that the Pharisee was also a sinner.

Tim Keller wrote the book called "Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I". The reason he wrote it is because a lot of Christians say that we should forgive, but when we are in the middle of a conflict, the same people cannot forgive. He says in the book, "When we get angry, it is usually because the things we love most are threatened." The things we love include our public image, our ego or some plan we have that we think will bring us satisfaction. These things become our gospel.

We protect that which means the most to us. We guard it from being taken away. We build up walls against those who try and take it away. We can even build up walls against God.

We want to elevate ourselves, and we become self-centered, and so God has to humble us. I thought about Abraham's life. It was difficult for him to wait for a son. But even more difficult than that was when God asked him to offer up his own son. His son Isaac came from God, but then giving him back to God became so difficult. The Bible doesn't say it, but Abraham and Sarah must have surely thought, "Even our son?" Yes, because their son was God's. God was saying, "Give him to me."

My brothers and sisters, we must ask ourselves, "What is most important to me? Is my relationship with someone? Is it my work in the church? Is it my being right about something? Is it your child? Is it your plan? If that is true, then that becomes your gospel. Your gospel is no longer Jesus, it is something you have or do. Your relationship with Jesus is sacrificed. Your love for God is weakened. Without knowing it, you are building a wall in your heart that blocks the gospel.

I thank God for my relationship with Fukuda San. It is not to be taken for granted. It was given by God. It was my great joy to be a part of the staff. We share the gospel. The gospel was what we started with in the staff meeting. And then, we could talk about anything. We could trust each other.

But I have to confess that without my realizing it, Fukuda San became my gospel. And so, I have really suffered with him over this last year. But I came to understand that he is human. What should I do?

I have to pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." As I pray this, I receive mercy.

My brothers and sisters, what are you holding onto more than God? Is it a person? Is it pride? Is it control. Is it your plan? Is it your own righteousness? Is it your wounded heart? This clearly shows our sin. Pray "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Then the gospel will be good news. Then the coldness of your heart will be melted, and Springtime will come.

Let's pray.

"God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I give you my pride, my control, my son, this church."  
Individually release anything you are hanging onto more than God and give it to Him.

Benediction

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:23,24)

Let us receive the mercy of Jesus. It's Spring! Let's share the gospel and rejoice together!