

Text: Luke 18:9-14

Title: "Approaching God"

INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to Luke 18:9-14. If you don't have a Bible with you today, you can use the one in the pew rack. Luke 18 is found on p.1038. Boys and girls, Luke is the third Gospel ... Matthew, Mark, Luke. Read text.

ILLUSTRATION – We were at the TCU football game a couple of weeks ago and occasionally the cameras would pan the crowd and catch some unsuspecting spectator doing something really silly ... and suddenly they would look up and find that the camera had been fixed on them, and they were now on the giant image mag screens for everyone in the stadium to see. The spectator has now become the center of attention.

I've often wondered what it would be like if we had a hidden camera scanning the worshippers on Sunday morning. And what if this camera could not only capture the outward appearance of a worshipper, but it could also capture what's going on in their minds. How scary would that be?

Well Jesus tells a parable, a story, about two men who went to church ... to the Temple in Jerusalem. Little did they know that their actions and attitudes were captured on the image mag of heaven for us to see.

I want you to notice something from the beginning. Jesus told scores of parables; they were his favorite tool for animating the truth that He taught. Most of the time Jesus told parables *about* something or *about* someone. This parable is different. He tells it *to* someone.

Luke 18:9 - To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else...

So Jesus is getting up in their business here. This is personal. This tells us that Jesus knows what's going on in our minds and hearts when we approach Him in prayer, or in worship. Don't think you can escape the complete knowledge of the Lord.

EXAMPLE: Remember the occasion when the guys brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus for healing. They couldn't get through the crowd so they cut a hole in the roof and lowered him down before Jesus. Jesus saw the faith of these friends and said to the man, "Your sins are forgiven." Well some Jewish religious leaders were in the room, and when they heard this, and thinking they were out of the hearing of Jesus, they said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! No one can forgive sins but God. This is blasphemy."

Mark 2:8 - Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?"

God sees our outward actions, hears out outward words, but also knows perfectly what is going on in our minds and in the attitudes of our hearts. And those thoughts and attitudes are the key to whether or not we come away from the encounter with God having received what we sought.

So Jesus is giving instruction to His followers about the proper way to approach God. The Lord Jesus sets the standard. We don't get to decide what way is proper to approach God. Jesus determines that. He is in the position of authority.

1. THE PROPER OUTLOOK IN WORSHIP

Luke 18:10 - "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

We're introduced to two men here: a Pharisee and a tax-gatherer.

First, notice the outlook of the Pharisee. The Pharisees were one of three main groups within the Jewish community of the New Testament. The other two were the Sadducees and the Essenes. Think of them as political parties within the Jewish religion. The Pharisees were the most popular in the day of Jesus. The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. The name Pharisee meant "separated" and they favored strict obedience to the Law of Moses; but underneath that many of them were lax in their morality. Jesus called them hypocrites ... like cups that are clean on the outside and dirty on the inside ... like whitewashed tombs that were pretty on the outside, but filled with death on the inside.

So one of the characters in Jesus' story is a Pharisee. Notice how he prays:

Luke 18:11 - The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."

The truth of the matter is that according to the standard of outward religiosity and morality he was being truthful when he said, "I am not like other men."

They were scrupulous in their adherence to the Law. Rigorous in keeping Jewish ritual. Meticulous in honoring every religious tradition. Zealous in furthering their faith.

Luke 18:12 - I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

EXAMPLE: For the Jews there was only one fast they were obligated to keep, the Day of Atonement. But a Pharisee may well fast as much as twice or three times a week. And a Jewish person was required by the Law of Moses to pay a tithe of all his or her produce. But the Pharisee went further and paid a tithe on things where there was no obligation to tithe.

So when this Pharisee said, "I thank you that I am not like other men..." he was telling the truth.

Second, notice the outlook of the tax collector (v.13). Now the tax collectors were Jews, but they were at the other end of the social spectrum from the Pharisees. You see, the Romans taxed the

inhabitants of Palestine during the days of Jesus. And often the Romans would contract with a Jewish middleman to collect their taxes for them. The arrangement was simple. The middleman would pay a stipulated fee to the Romans for the right to collect the tax. Then he would collect the tax from the citizens and tack on more to make a profit for himself. Needless to say these guys were despised.

Remember the little man Zachaeus? He was a tax collector. When Jesus changed his life he promised to pay back everything he had stolen from others.

Notice how this tax collector prays in Jesus' story:

Luke 18:13 - "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Now let's be careful. The story is not about making the Pharisee into a villain and a crook into a hero. That's not what this is about. The point here is not the moral stature of either of these men. The point is their spiritual outlook or attitude in their approach to God. There are people who are religious and lost. There are people who are rebellious and lost. The point is that they are both lost.

So here's the difference in outlooks: The Pharisee was haughty in his outlook. "Lord, I thank you that I'm not like that scum-bag over there." The tax-collector was humble in his outlook. And that is the proper outlook that opens the way into the presence of God. Next we see...

2. THE TRUE OBJECT OF WORSHIP

Jesus pulls back the curtain to let us see the prayers and the worship of these two men. Who is the object, the focus, of their prayer and worship?

First, let's look at the Pharisee's approach to God in v.11:

NOTICE HOW HE STANDS. Verse 11 says, "He stood up..." That's the position of prominence and pride.

NOTICE WHAT HE SAYS. He mentions the name of God, but it isn't long before God is completely out of the picture. In v.11 it says that he "prayed about himself."

Note: Next time you pray think about this. How much of yourself is in your praying, and how much of God is in it.

NOTICE WHAT HE SEES. He turns his eyes off God and upon Himself. In his prayer the word "I" turns up repeatedly. There you have the object of his praying and worship ... himself. "I" is the middle letter in "pride" and the middle letter in "sin."

And to build himself up even further he begins to look around to find someone who is inferior. As his eyes scan the temple worshippers he focuses on the tax-collector. And he looks down on him.

Reading this parable how do you think God feels when you look down on other worshippers? How can a person in the presence of God ever have his eyes on anyone else? The object of our worship and prayer has to be the Lord.

Second, let's look at the tax-collector's approach to God (v.13).

NOTICE HOW HE STANDS. He "stood at a distance." Maybe he felt unworthy. He knew he needed to pray. He knew he needed God. But he felt unworthy to approach God.

NOTICE WHAT HE SEES. "He would not even look up to heaven." There again, humility is written all over this.

NOTICE WHAT HE DOES: "He beat his breast..." This was an ancient sign of contrition and grief. He was beating himself up over the mess that was his life.

NOTICE WHAT HE SAYS: "God, have mercy on me a sinner." By the way, in the original text it is not "have mercy on me, a sinner." It is more literally "have mercy on me the sinner." It's as if the guy is saying, "God, I need mercy big time. I'm the only sinner."

The word "sinner" means someone who misses something ... like missing the mark ... like failing at something. From a biblical perspective it means to fail at living up to the standards of God's holiness.

Romans 3:23 - for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

If, in your praying and worship, your eyes are on yourself, then you might have reason to be proud. You can always find someone who is worse than you. But if your eyes are on God, you cannot escape the reality that He is holy and we are not.

So there's a proper outlook for approaching God, and there's a one true object in approaching God. Next, there is ...

3. THE ULTIMATE OUTCOME IN WORSHIP

Luke 18:14 - "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

You see, this all goes back to v.9. Jesus spoke this parable ...

Luke 18:9 - To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else...

Now any time we read a passage like this we need to let the shadow of the Cross of Christ fall over the text. We are reading this verse looking back through the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ. And as we do, this is how we are to understand it:

If I have confidence in my own righteousness it reveals that I really don't understand righteousness. The Bible says that there is none righteous, not even one. In spite of that people still try to depend upon and establish their own righteousness. Why? It is because it retains some of our self-worth. If it is my righteousness that impresses God and gets me into heaven, then I still have some control and some independence. I can do this myself.

Paul described the Jews' problem in this regard, but it wasn't just the Jews who struggle with this:

Romans 10:3 - Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.

So if I'm clinging to my own righteousness to make me right with God then I miss the whole point of the Cross where...

2 Corinthians 5:21 - God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

The only righteousness recognized in heaven is the righteousness of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

That's why Jesus would say of the tax collector:

Luke 18:14a - "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

The tax-collector went home forgiven. The Pharisee went home condemned.

Now Jesus is rebuking those who were confident in their own righteousness *and* who "looked down on everyone else." The two go hand-in-hand. To look down on someone else means I am...

- Judgmental - When we think we're better and more important than others, then surely our evaluation of a person must be perfect ... so we criticize and judge freely.
- Selfish - It basically says "I'm the most important around here, and my needs are the only ones that matter."
- Independent - To look down on someone else means I'm better than you and I don't need you.

And when I act in a judgmental, selfish and independent way it shows that I do not understand the Gospel or God's righteousness. The Gospel teaches us that every one of us is a sinner in need of mercy ... every one! The Cross of Christ levels the playing field. I cannot look down on anyone else.

Thank God that when we approach Him this way we receive mercy. The great hymn "Mercy there was great, and grace was free. Pardon there was multiplied to me. There my burdened soul found liberty, at Calvary."

And when I know how merciful God has been to me, I realize how merciful I need to be to others.

This is the only way I can experience the justification and forgiveness that I need to get right with God and to stay right with God.

Luke 18:14 - "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

CONCLUSION

James 4:6 - "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

James 4:10 - Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

ILLUSTRATION - The grace of God is like water. It always seeks the lowest place. If it rains, the water will flow to the lowest place in your yard. Water always collects in the lowest place. And that's the way it is with God's grace and mercy. It always collects in the lowest place. And if you will live your life humbly before God and before other people, God's grace, mercy and power will flow into your life in a way you could never imagine.