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Luke 18:9-14

Ninth Message

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BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

The day came for the newly ordained minister to give his first sermon. He made a grand entrance into the church. He was adorned in an elegant robe with velvet lining; a handsome cross hung from his neck. He walked slowly down the center aisle, with his head high, haughty and stiff with pride. As he rose to the pulpit, his arms expanded like wings reaching to the heavens. It seemed that he intended to pluck the words of his sermon right from the lips of God. He proceeded to deliver a fire-and-brimstone sermon, citing chapter and verse as though he had committed the entire Bible to memory and had personal knowledge, not only of all that had happened in the universe, but also all that was to happen. He railed for over an hour providing all the answers and all the solutions to all the problems of every member of the congregation.

However, throughout his spirited sermon, there was no indication that the overflow congregation had heard a word he said. They all sat stone faced. In sharp contrast to this grand entrance, he descended from the pulpit, perspiration dripping from his face, his beautiful robe now formless, his gold cross and chain dangling in his limp hand. As he slowly made his exit down the center aisle, disheveled, exhausted, bowed and yes, humbled, an elderly lady tapped him softly on his leg with her cane and whispered quietly to him: "Son, if you had come in the way you are leaving, you would have been much better off."

We all work hard at exalting ourselves, whether in the church, in business or in the community. That's the way the world works. We surround ourselves with degrees and titles and things that make us look important. We do not work nearly as hard at becoming humble. One reason for that is that it is hard to find books that teach on humility. No one seems to place much value on humility. Praise and honor are given to people who win and advance in life, not to the humble.

But pride is extremely dangerous to the Christian. C.S. Lewis said of pride: "Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness and all that are mere fleabites by comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind."

Although humility is hard to put into practice in our Christian lives, however, it is a critical element of our walk of faith, as we will see in our study today. In the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke, we are learning how the Lord was working out a godly character with his disciples. In our text, the parable of the two men who went up to the temple to pray, pride and humility are contrasted. Luke 18:9:

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this

tax-gatherer. 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 NASB)

First, some observations on the text. This parable is part of a collection of Jesus' teachings on prayer. The introduction, which was probably written by the evangelist, indicates that the story is directed at those who insist on trusting in their own righteousness. The general subject is righteousness; the particular, self-righteousness. There are two characters in the story: the Pharisee, a precise observer of the law, is deeply religious and highly respected; the tax collector, a member of a hated, isolated and often corrupt group, is considered to be a traitor to the nation.

The context of the story is temple worship; and what is in view is public prayer, not private devotions, for both men go up to the temple at the same time. In the tax collector's reference to the notion of atonement, he probably is referring to the sacrificial offering which was made in the temple twice a day, every morning and evening. Apparently, private prayers were offered as a part of the corporate worship during the atonement ritual.

The Pharisee stands alone as he prays. He considers himself righteous and religiously superior. He "despises others." Tax collectors were considered unclean. If the Pharisee even brushed up against the tax collector, or any unclean worshipper, then he, too, would be unclean. So he stands apart.

The focus of temple prayer was two-fold: the offering of thanks and praise to God for all of his gifts, and the making of petitions for the needs of the worshiper. But notice that this Pharisee ignores both of these elements in his prayer. He does not thank God, but rather boasts of his own self-achieved righteousness; and he makes no requests. He opens his prayer by saying that he is "not like other people." Then he lists an unsavory group, and includes the tax gatherer. His list proceeds from bad to worse. "Swindlers" and "unjust" obviously refer to the tax collector. "Adulterer" is thrown in for good measure. This is the same description which the self-righteous older son applied to his brother in Luke 15:30. This term reveals nothing about the tax collector, but it says a lot about the mind-set of the speaker. The tax collector is not part of another category. The Pharisee selects a number of characteristics to apply to the tax collector who becomes, in effect, the illustration of his list.

The Pharisee then proceeds to boasts before God of his own righteousness: "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." Moses stipulated a once-yearly fast on the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:29; Num 39:7), but the Pharisees fasted once a week. This man goes beyond even this: he fasts twice a week. Tithes were levied on grain, wine and oil (Lev 27:30; Num 18:27; Deut 12:17; 14:13), but this man

tithes everything. He prides himself on his more than perfect observance of his religion. He boasts of having not only kept the law, but exceeding its demands (cf. Amos 4:4).

The tax collector is set in stark contrast to the self-righteous Pharisee. He, too, stands away from the crowd, but for a very different reason. He does not stand aloof, but “afar off.” He feels he is not worthy to stand with God’s people before the altar. He is “unwilling to lift his eyes to heaven.” The accepted posture for prayer was to cross the hands over the chest, with eyes downcast. But the tax gatherer beats on his breast. This is still done in the Middle East today to express extreme anguish or anger.

The remarkable feature of this particular gesture is that it is invariably practiced by women, not men. One man who had lived in the Middle East for 20 years reported that there is only one occasion when Middle Eastern men beat on their chests, and that is in remembrance of an Islamic figure. Women customarily beat on their breasts at funerals, but not men.

In biblical literature, this gesture is used but twice—here in this story, and in the account of the crucifixion in Luke 23:48. There we are told that “all the multitude” went home beating on their chests. It takes something of the magnitude of Golgotha to evoke this gesture of beating the breast by men in the Middle East. The tax gatherer beats on his chest because the heart was considered the source of all evil thoughts (Matt 15:19). Thus we see the depth of his remorse. It was if he were seeking to get at his heart and drive the evil from his body.

The tax collector prays for mercy, and he does so in a particular sense. The Greek word for “mercy,” which appears in Rom 3:25; Heb 9:5, and 1 John 2:2; 4:10, clearly refers to the atonement sacrifice. The tax collector yearns for the benefits of the atonement. He stands afar off, unwilling to be seen because he senses his unworthiness to stand with other participants. Yet he wants to stand with “the righteous.” He beats his chest and cries out, in effect, in repentance and hope: “O God! Let it be for me! Make an atonement for me, a sinner!” He is aware that he can do nothing for himself and so he prays that God will intervene on his behalf. He longs that the great atoning sacrifice might apply to him.

The story concludes with both men coming down, but the tax collector is the one who is justified in God’s sight. The sacrifice does not have an automatic effect on the believer irrespective of his spiritual state. It is the broken-hearted, those who trust in God’s atonement, who are made right with God.

The principle given is a well known wisdom statement about exaltation and humility which occurs six times in the parables of Luke (8:8; 12:21, 48; 16:8b; 18:8b; 19:26) and in various forms in a number of places in the NT (Matt 18:4; 23:12; Luke 14:11; 1 Pet 5:6). The word “exaltation” is used in its OT sense, to mean “deliver, redeem.” One commentator writes: “As God’s name alone is exalted...so He alone can elevate and exalt men...Exaltation means drawing close to God; the righteous man who is meek and humble may hope for this and claim it...all exaltation on man’s part is repudiated...Exaltation (redemption) is the act of God alone.”

Now we come to the spiritual principles of this parable of Jesus. First, we need to recognize that pride and self-righteousness distort our view of relationships. This has a three-fold effect. First, our view of God is distorted. We begin to trust in our own ability to be right-

teous. We applaud our own efforts, boasting that we go way beyond what is required. We think that our relationship with God depends on ourselves. We fail to thank him for his gifts to us. We feel we are capable of finding favor and grace from him because we act better than everyone else. We cannot see that external performance, no matter how good it is, only causes our hearts to grow more prideful and cold.

Second, our view of others is distorted. We compare ourselves to them and we feel superior, so we exalt ourselves. We treat others with contempt. In our eyes they are but rogues, swindlers and adulterers. We stand aloof from them. We are too good to rub shoulders with such low-life.

C. S. Lewis has a helpful word for us here:

Pride is essentially competitive—is competitive by its very nature—while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others...It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest.

And third, our view of ourselves is distorted: We become consumed with self. Notice the prayer of the Pharisee: “I am thankful that I am not like other people; I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” This man had no appreciation of his true sinfulness. He was not praying to God, but worshipping at the shrine of self. Pride causes us to see ourselves as the center of the universe. We act in the way that Babylon is described in Isaiah 14:

**“But you say in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.’” (Isa 14:13-14)**

Pride distorts our understanding of God and our relationship with him; and then it undermines all other relationships.

David Roper, who was a pastor at PBC for many years, lists some prideful signs:

Pride shows itself in subtle ways: insisting on recognition (our titles); wanting to be noticed, to be prominent and eminent; smarting when we’re not consulted or advised on a matter; dominating social situations, telling our tales rather than listening to others; resisting authority; getting angry and defensive when crossed or challenged; harboring a grudge; nursing a grievance; wallowing in self-pity; choosing our own kind rather than loving the lowly; wanting to be in the center rather than serving on the edge.

Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, moved in a circle of prominent men and women, among whom was Senator Charles Sumner. On one occasion, Mrs. Howe invited the senator to her home to meet actor Edwin Booth. Declining the invitation, Sumner wrote to Mrs. Howe, “The truth is, I have got beyond taking an interest in individuals.” Later that night, Mrs. Howe commented on this arrogant remark in her diary, “God Almighty has not gone so far.”

C. S. Lewis concurs in these words:

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as

that—and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison—you do not know God at all. As long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

Self-righteousness and pride distort our vision of sinners, our appraisal of ourselves, and our perspective of God.

Here is the second principle: In contrast to prideful distortions, humility allows us to see our relationships clearly. This also has a three-fold effect. First, we have a clear view of ourselves. Just like the Pharisee, the tax-gatherer stands some distance away from the sacrifice, but for a completely different reason. He does not draw near because he feels unworthy. He knows he is a sinner, but the Pharisee sees himself as deserving of everything that he has. But if we are truly humble, we will see ourselves as undeserving of anything. We must honestly confess that we are sinners, remembering that God does not forgive excuses, only sins.

Second, humility helps us get a clearer view of others. It helps us put ourselves in our rightful place—below, not above, others. Notice that the tax collector does not even lift up his eyes. He takes no notice of others. This is not his concern or focus. He is not looking at other people, trying to exalt himself in relation to them. But the Pharisee scans the crowd even while he prays. A humble person does not compare himself with others. He does not use others as steps to ascend to self-exaltation.

And third, humility helps us get a clearer view of God. We need his salvation if we are to be saved. The sorrow and remorse of the tax collector is demonstrated by his beating on his chest; and his prayer reveals his clear understanding of God: “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” He looks at the atonement sacrifice and longs to benefit from it. If we are truly humble we will see ourselves as sinners who are totally dependent on a merciful God. Even keeping of the law, attending Sunday services or any kind of religious exercises will not secure righteousness for us. We can offer nothing to earn God’s praise. If we are to be saved then God must do it all. We must look at the cross and humbly ask that God’s atoning sacrifice benefit us.

Here is another helpful word from C. S. Lewis for those who are tempted to think that religion makes them better than their peers:

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

In the list that follows, David Roper lists some characteristics of humility:

taking the lowest place and littlest place; being content to be unknown and unnoticed; refusing to dominate meetings and social situations; being mostly silent; listening more and saying less and not insisting that we be seen and heard; choosing to sit and associate with the lonely and the lowly.

In the tax-collector we have a picture of true humility. Everything about him speaks of brokenness and repentance before God and his fellow-man.

Now our third spiritual principle: There are consequences to pride and self-righteousness; and, ironically, they are the opposite of what we seek to gain. In the story two men go up to the temple, and

the Pharisee is in the lead. When they come out from the temple, however, it is the tax-gatherer who is in the lead; he is the one who is justified rather than the Pharisee. If you exalt yourself you will be humbled. Not only will you have enemies among men, but you will have an enemy in God. He will not let you get away with it. James says, “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6). If you seek to raise yourself high, then be assured that God will bring you low. If you seek to build a tower of Babel, he will destroy it. The proof of his power to bring down things was clearly seen in the Los Angeles earthquake last week. Humiliation is the costly consequence of pride. When we choose to be great, we forfeit God’s grace and we experience instead his wrath and opposition.

A good illustration of this is the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan story which is getting a lot of news coverage these days. Tonya Harding invested everything in her goal to win the ice skating gold medal. Whether she was involved in the attack on Nancy Kerrigan we do not know, but we do know that her bodyguard and perhaps her husband were involved. They wanted to eliminate the competition and exalt Tonya to a position of praise and wealth. But their efforts have had quite the opposite effect. They have brought Tonya more humiliation than praise, and they may have cost her the opportunity to win the gold medal and the riches that flow from that. Even if she wins it, sponsors might not endorse her. And what of her rival, Nancy Kerrigan? She has done nothing, yet she has been exalted.

Finally, the exhortation is to humble ourselves before God does, and wait for him to exalt us. Humility has its consequences, too. Peter puts it in these words, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6).

How can we “humble ourselves”?

First, we need to realize just how proud we are. This is the first big step on the road to true humility. Being quiet, shy and reserved does not mean you are humble. If you think you are not conceited, you are very conceited indeed.

Second, we need to stand before God with our eyes downcast. We must learn that our salvation comes from his hand, not from anything we do or anything we have to offer. The key to finding the heart of God is humility and contrition.

Third, we need to stop comparing ourselves with others and competing with them. Let us instead take the lowest place and seek to exalt others. This is the measure of a man or woman.

Fourth, we need to draw near to Jesus and learn from him. He was “meek and humble of heart.” He was not concerned about protecting his place or his dignity. Here is how Samuel Gandy put it:

By meekness and defeat,
He won the mead and crown.
Trod all his foes beneath his feet,
By being trodden down.

Finally, we must wait for God. He will exalt us in due time. Our struggle is with waiting and worrying about who will take care of us. But Peter says that we can “cast our anxiety upon Him, because He cares for us.”

I don’t have any personal illustrations about humility to share with you, so I will tell you a story about a Nebraska acquaintance of mine named Lenny. My parents lived in Omaha until the time of their death. Some time after I moved to California, Lenny moved to

a house just up the street from them. Lenny is what you might call a product of the Midwest. We don't see too many Lennys in our community here in Cupertino. He reminds me of Roseanne's husband Dan. Lenny is very overweight; his stomach rolls over his belt. What makes it stand out so much is the fact that he goes about without a shirt. Lenny is very outgoing. On summer evenings he walks around the neighborhood, a can of beer in hand, talking with the neighbors until dark. I went to high school with Lenny. He knows a lot about me, but I don't even remember him. It's embarrassing. Whenever I went home for a visit, Lenny would come down to chat. I would never know what to say to him. My mother would suggest, "You should go up and talk to Lenny." I'd pretend I didn't hear her. I'd do anything I could to avoid talking to Lenny. Every time I left Omaha, I'd pray to myself, "Oh, God, thank you for not making me like Lenny."

As my parents grew older, Lenny would come to the house and do odd jobs for them. These visits became more frequent after my father died in 1988. When I talked to my mother on the phone, she would tell me that Lenny had been over to fix something, the water-heater, a drain pipe, whatever needed fixing. Other times he'd trim the trees or mow the lawn. If she needed to move anything heavy, she'd call Lenny. When she went into the hospital with brain cancer two years ago, Lenny watched over the house because there was no one staying there. Each time I visited during her illness, Lenny would come down to talk. When I left, he'd say if there anything he could do, to just ask. If I needed a place to stay, I could stay with him. Lenny will never be chairman of the board. He will never live in a mansion with three new cars in the driveway. He will never be written up in *Who's Who*. But he's written in my book. After my mother died and I drove away from 6714 Ogden for the last time, my prayer had changed to: "Oh, God, would you make me, a sinner, more like Lenny?"

I want to close this morning by reading Edward Sill's poem, *The Fool's Prayer*. It captures beautifully the theme of our text:

The royal feast was done; the King
Sought some new sport to banish care,
And to his jester cried: "Sir Fool,
Kneel now, and make for us a prayer!"

The jester doffed his cap and bells,
And stood the mocking court before;
They could not see the bitter smile
Behind the painted grin he wore.

He bowed his head, and bent his knee
Upon the monarch's silken stool;
His pleading voice arose: "O Lord,
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

"No pity, Lord, could change the heart
From red with wrong to white as wool;
The rod must heal the sin: but, Lord,
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

"'Tis not by guilt the onward sweep
Of truth and right, O Lord, we stay;
'Tis by our follies that so long
We hold the earth from heaven away.

"These clumsy feet, still in the mire,
Go crushing blossoms without end;
These hard, well-meaning hands we thrust
Among the heart-strings of a friend.

"The ill-timed truth we might have kept—
Who knows how sharp it pierced and stung?
The word we had not sense to say—
Who knows how grandly it had rung?"

"Our faults no tenderness should ask.
The chastening stripes must cleanse them all;
But for our blunders—oh, in shame
Before the eyes of heaven we fall.

"Earth bears no balsam for mistakes:
Men crown the knave, and scourge the tool
That did his will, but Thou, O Lord,
Be merciful to me, a fool!"

The room was hushed; in silence rose
The King, and sought his gardens cool.
And walked apart, and murmured low,
"Be merciful to me, a fool!"

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

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