

How do you determine who is righteous and who isn't? That's the question that we're presented with today. And I think that if we think in very human terms, we're very likely to think of it as comparing somebody with something else. This person over here does all of these things that we consider to be good and right, and therefore they must be righteous in the sight of God. And on the other hand this person over here doesn't do any of those things, and for that reason, they must be unrighteous in the sight of God. And so that comparison between what someone is and what someone does is the way that we try to figure out who is actually righteous. But very often, Christians, we leave out that middle thing altogether, don't we? We compare people with people, so that we say this person over here is righteous, because they don't do any of the things that those people over there do. And these people over here are unrighteous, because they're not doing the things that these people are doing. And so by comparing people with people, we think that we can figure out who is righteous and who isn't. But does God think that way? Is that how God determines who is righteous? That's the question that Jesus presents to us today.

Because in the parable in Luke chapter 18, Jesus gives us two very stereotypical pictures of a man who is righteous and a man who is unrighteous. The Pharisee, on the one hand, --even though we tend to think of the Pharisees very negatively because of the New Testament--the Pharisee is a man that everyone in his day would have considered to be a very righteous man. He goes to church every time there's worship. He reads his Bible. He prays every day. He talks about God with everyone. This is the kind of man you would want to associate with, the kind of man that you would consider to be a very good person, a very righteous person. And the tax collector, on the other side, is not a man you would want to associate with. The tax collector is a thief. He is a liar, a traitor, someone who is willing to sell his own country just to make a quick buck. You think of it today, it'd be like the way that we sometimes look at politicians, someone who can't be trusted. Someone who's slick. Someone who is only in it for themselves. If anybody would be considered an unrighteous man, it is this tax collector. So Jesus asks you this question: which one of these two men is righteous in the sight of God?

The Pharisee goes up into the temple, and he begins to pray. He says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of everything that I get." But you'll notice what he's doing, Christians. He's comparing himself with other people. He says, "I'm not like those people out there. I'm not like this guy right here. I'm better. I'm not like those extortioners, those people who try to just steal from you. I haven't done any of that. And so therefore for that reason, I must be righteous. I'm not like those unjust people over here, those people who don't even try to keep the law of God. And for that reason, I must be righteous. I'm not like those adulterers over there. I've been faithful to my wife. I've done everything right. And for that reason, I am righteous. I'm especially not like this tax collector, this thief who shouldn't even be here. I am better than all of these people." And then he even holds up his own works. He says, "And on top of that, Lord, I've also fasted twice in the week. I've also given a tithe of everything that I get. This surely is proof that I am a righteous man!"

But before we start to say, "Thank God I'm not like that Pharisee," stop and think for a minute about how often we are tempted to do the same. "I am not like those people over there, those people who kill babies, those people who do all of these nasty things, those adulterers, those thieves, those sinners out there. I'm not like them. Yeah, I'm not perfect. I'm trying my hardest. If

God wants me to be all the way up here, I'm probably somewhere around here. I've got to work at it a little bit more, but at least I'm not down here like all of those other people out there." And so by comparing ourselves with other people, we're tempted to think that we're better.

Or we could even compare ourselves with ourselves. "I remember what I used to be, the things that I did in my past. I don't do those things anymore, and therefore I must be doing better. I go to church more regularly. I pray more regularly than I used to. I read my Bible more regularly. Surely that must count for something before God, right?"

But the problem, Christians, with this kind of comparing, especially when we compare ourselves with other people, is that it leads to pride. Just look at the Pharisee in our text for today. The Pharisee who can look out on all of those sinners out there and thank God he wasn't like any of them and fell into a worse sin, because he was trusting in himself. When we think that righteousness is a matter of comparison, comparing ourselves with others, or even comparing with what we used to be, we are bound to fall into the same sin.

But what does the tax collector do? He's standing outside of the temple. He doesn't even go all the way in. And without even lifting up his eyes to heaven, calls out to God, beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And you'll notice that he does that because he too is comparing himself, but not with other people. He's comparing himself to God. And when we compare ourselves with God, Christians, do you think that we are going to be able to say, "God, look how righteous I am"?

Because think about who God is. God is perfect. God is completely and utterly righteous. Everything that God does is good. Evil has no place with him. And before this all holy, all-powerful, Almighty God, who has given us everything that we have, do we think we're going to be able to hold up the things that we have done and say, "See, God? Surely you must be impressed, right?" Well, think about how people who came face-to-face with God in the Bible reacted. You think about men like Manoah, for example, the father of Samson, who after he realized that he was talking with God became terribly, terribly afraid. He says, "I'm going to die, because I have seen the Lord of hosts!" You think of men like Isaiah, who in Isaiah chapter 6 sees that grand and glorious vision of God. God's throne sitting inside the temple! And all Isaiah could see were his feet. What does Isaiah say in that moment? Does he say, "God, I thank you I'm not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector?" No. He says, "Woe is me! For I am undone! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the Lord, the God of hosts!" He's afraid for his life, because he knows the truth about his heart. You think of Ezekiel, Ezekiel who saw that great vision of the wheel within a wheel. God's glory going throughout all the earth! And how he had to sit for a week after he saw it, trembling in fear, knowing that it was only by the mercy of God that he had survived. You think especially of Moses, Moses who wanted to see the glory of God, and yet God said to him, "No. I will cover you with my hand when I pass by, for no one can see the face of God and live." And that's the truth, Christians. When we are presented before the all holy God, all we can do is think of the depth of our sins. And so is it any wonder, then, that the tax collector cries out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

God will humble those who lift themselves up over others, who lift themselves up before him. But God will also lift up those who, confessing their sins, cling to him in true faith. Because that is what he did for this tax collector, Christians. The tax collector who confessed his sins found a free and full forgiveness in God because of his son Jesus Christ. Because righteousness is not a matter of comparing ourselves to other people. Righteousness is what God has done for us. And because of what God has done for us in his Son Jesus Christ, we are now in fact righteous in the sight of God.

The righteousness of Christ has become our own, and that righteousness which is ours through him changes us. It transforms us. It makes us better than what we were. But not so that God will then love us, as if he had to transform us in order to make us into something he could love. No, he transforms us because he loves us. He has forgiven us because he loves us in his Son Jesus Christ. And so when we come to him this day, Christians, confessing our sins and laying all of our iniquities at the cross, God is faithful. God will forgive, because our righteousness comes from him.

So righteousness is not comparing ourselves to other people. That only leads to pride. Righteousness is not comparing ourselves with what we once were, because what we are is only because of the grace of God. But righteousness comes from Jesus, and because of what he has done for us. And God declares that everyone who trusts in him by faith will be forgiven. And they will find life in Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.