

3. Two worshippers

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- [0 : 0 0] I did hear a mobile go off. If anyone has a mobile, maybe you'd like to turn it off. In fact, turn off everything electronic except your pacemakers. You can keep those on.
- That would be a great help. Let's pray. Father, thank you for the Bible. Please help me to explain it clearly and please speak to each one of us in the very depths of our being. Amen.
- A close family friend died about a month ago and the one question I will not be allowed to ask at his memorial service, which is next month, I'm not taking it, I'm just going, is this question.
- Was this man right with God, with his creator? He was always charming to me, this man. He was a great friend of my father. They worked together really right through their careers. But as far as I can see, there was no time given to the things of God right through his life.
- Let alone that question being right with God. It wasn't even on the radar. And in that sense, he was very unlike the two men that come before us in the Bible today.
- [1 : 1 4] Why? Because as they walked before us in Luke 18, these two worshippers, they actually did believe there was a judgment to come. You see, actually, what they wanted, can we look down verse 14, is to be justified, to be put right with God.
- Johnny Wilkinson has just written a book, My Way, My World, by Johnny Wilkinson. And in this, interestingly, he says this, I live my life as if a 24-hour surveillance camera is trained on me.
- At the end of my days, I'll have to hand it over and sign off the video. And these guys believed the same thing. They believed that there was a judgment to come. Amos chapter 8, verse 7 says, The Lord has sworn I will never forget anything they have done.
- So, you see, we may think we're through with the past, but the past isn't through with us. And on that basis, as these guys felt, well, there is some sort of judgment coming, they felt guilt. And let me tell you something about guilt.
- You can see it as a result of social conditioning. You can try and erase it. You can try and get yourself reprogrammed in therapy. You can blame it on your parents or your circumstances.
- [2 : 2 1] But guilt is real, unless you're very different from me. And we feel guilty because we are guilty. I was very struck by a moment in this film, The Talented Mr. Ripley, in which Matt Damon, Tom Ripley, suddenly confesses to his lover, don't you just take the past and put it in a room in the basement and lock the door and never go there.
- That's what I do. And then you meet someone special and all you want to do is toss them the key and say, open up, step inside. I keep wanting to do that. Fling the door open. Just let the lighting clean everything.
- But you can't because it's dark and there are demons. And if anybody saw how ugly it is. And then at the end of the film there is this chilling lament. I'm lost. I'm going to be stuck in the basement alone and in the dark.

And in my experience of being with people as a pastor as they die, you cannot lock this guilt in the basement. You can't toss away the key. For the conscience has a habit of rising up.

This is what the author Kingsley Amis said a week before he died in an interview with the Daily Telegraph. He said this. One of Christianity's great advantages is that it offers an explanation for sin.

[3 : 37] I haven't got one. Christianity has got one enormous thing right, original sin. For one of the great benefits of organised religion is that you can be forgiven your sins, which must be a wonderful thing.

And then he said this. And this was a week before he died. The interviewer said that he paused for a long while and bowed his head and said, I mean, I carry my sins around with me.

There is nobody there to forgive them. And these two men felt that as they went up to the temple. They felt that there was a judgement day coming. So they both do two things.

Can we see verse 10 as we look down? They both go up to the temple. And verse 14, they both go home. And their intention is to be right with God to get their consciences cleansed. And that's why they go to the temple.

Because the temple was seen as the heart of Jerusalem, of the place where God dwelt among his people. And if you wanted to be in contact with God, in relationship with God, this is where you went.

[4 : 34] And Jesus has carefully chosen these two men to illustrate the extreme ends of the first century religious spectrum. And it's as though you see, as I said the other day, again, he's holding up a mirror in this parable.

And he says, now where are you? In comparison to these two guys. How are you doing with your walk on path? And with what you do with your guilt? Well, let's have a look at these two as we see them.

And first of all, the Pharisee, the word, the title, he's in verse 10, literally means the ones set apart, the separated ones. They had a great desire to keep the law of God.

They wanted to be perfect by their law keeping. So that's the first one. A very, very religious man. And the second is a tax collector. He's at the other end of the spectrum.

He is an agent of the Roman occupying power. So what happened was, in terms of tax collecting, it was a bit like privatisation. The Romans sold franchises for tax collecting.

[5 : 35] And you put in your bid, you were allotted an area. You then had to give the governor his quota. And then you could take whatever you raised on top. And of course, these tax collectors fleeced their own people. But more than that, more serious than that, they had done the unthinkable and accept that there was another ruler in Israel apart from God.

That was the issue. And just to put it in more emotional terms, this is a bit like a French mayor in World War II getting rich on Nazi bribes by informing on the resistance.

That's what's going on. That's the level of antagonism there was to these people. So they both go to pray because they know they want to be right with God. And the extraordinary thing is, is that only one of them prays, and only one of them comes home right with God.

And the interest in the story is, is how could the Pharisee, the moral religious man, have got it so wrong? Because Jesus totally disorients us in this story.

I mean, surely he's led a decent life. Surely he's never harmed a fly. I mean, God's bound to forgive him, isn't he? How could this moral religious man have got it so wrong, and go home, on the way to hell, and not on the way to heaven?

[6 : 54] Because that's what we're talking about here. We're talking about a man who goes home, unforgiven, and on the way to hell. Well, let's have a look. And the first half of verse 9, really unlocks the parable, because it says, to some who were confident of their own righteousness.

And they look down on everybody else. And Jesus holds up the mirror, and he says, do you have the attitude and thinking of the Pharisee? And the question here is, why will religion always take me to hell?

That's the question. Why will religion always take me to hell? Why won't it put me right with God? And there are two major reasons that come out in verse 9, but the picture gets clearer.

And firstly, this Pharisee, if this anything like you, has a false confidence. That's the first thing we have to see. Verse 11, can we see as we look down? The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself.

God, I thank you that I'm not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. Now the text literally says, the Pharisee took up his position, he posed himself, as in a public performance, palms out like this, standing before God, that's what happens, in his normal position, to receive God's blessing, and that's how he stands.

[8 : 08] It's very visible, very public, he's being religious. And of course he'll be right with God. Surely he'll be right. But look at the text, can you see verse 11 as we look down?

Look at the text. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, and actually, literally in the text, it's towards himself. That's what it says in the footnotes, in the NIV. So the focus here, is not God at all.

He's actually praying, with himself. That's what he's doing. He's just praying to himself. And we see that, I think, because of the word I. Can you see as we look down?

God, I thank you that I'm not like other men. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all I get. He's totally self-centered. Self-centered people are such a pain, aren't they? It was Samuel Butler, who wrote about Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle, and he said, how good of God, to cause Carlisle and Mrs. Carlisle, to marry each other.

And so made two people miserable, instead of four. And that's what's going on here. And you see, what he's doing is, is he is, can we see verse 14, he is exalting himself.

[9 : 11] That's what he's doing. He's only interested in himself, and the key is, that all his confidence, is in his own performance. He's actually saying, you know, look at what I have done.

So this is little Jack Horner religion. He put in his thumb, and pulled out a plum, and said, what a good boy am I. And in verse 12, he even reminds God, of his exceptional piety, far beyond what God, could actually require.

You see, now in verse 12, he's into bonus points. He's into bonus points. Can we see, the law demands, that you fast, once a year, on the day of atonement. And actually, he says, God, I've done it 103 times, more than that.

Now I know that, as some of you look at me, you could recommend fasting for me. I can see that. And I have to say, that last year, on New Year's Day, I gave up puddings, except on my day off.

And then on my first day off, I had six. I just, anyway, let's, let's get back to this. And you see, the law required, back if we can have a look, the law required, that producers, farmers, should tie the tenth, and give the harvest, to the priests in the temple, who are consumers.

[10 : 25] But here he is, he says, I'm a consumer, but I give a tenth of my herbs and crops. I'm a consumer, but Lord, look what I do. And you see, verse 14, he exalts himself, he says, God, look how impressive I am.

And of course, as he comes to the temple, there is no humility at all. Not a jot. It's all about self-justification. Here's the issue. It is about what I do, which was exactly the Anglicanism that I was brought up with.

What I do. He wants to have God in his own terms. And God, by the way, did you realise that actually my terms are very generous? And you are very fortunate, God, to have me around.

I'm doing a great deal for you. So it's a false confidence, and that in turn leads to a false comparison. For when I have confidence in what I do to make myself acceptable to God, then I will always drag a comparison into place with other people.

Which is why religious people are such a pain as well. Because they're always trying to allay their guilt by pointing the finger at other people. You see, that's how they get rid of their guilt.

[11 : 36] A comparison between who I am and other people so I can boost my own confidence. And then you see, here's the issue. When I look at the stuff that's in the basement, I can feel better about it.

Because I can go, well, you know, look at those people. And I can just pop my basement back on the lock and key. And religious people, you see, this is the problem, will always be those. The mark of them is self-justifying religion which despises others.

Despises other people. They don't measure up. Look at the rest of them. Look at them. This robber, adulterer, evildoer. Look at them. And you see, here's the issue again.

Religion wants to have God on our terms. I'll drive a bargain, I'll make an offer, I'll buy him off, he's actually very fortunate to have me. Very fortunate. But here's the key.

It's not about us meeting God on our terms. Jesus says, it is all about us meeting God's terms. And his terms are surprisingly shocking.

[12 : 39] So we move now to our third point. We've had a false confidence. Secondly, a false comparison. But thirdly, and now we come right to the heart of the Christian faith, a fantastic contrast.

An amazing contrast. And can you see it in verse 13 as we look down? Verse 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.

You see, this tax collector is entirely dependent on God. It's all who God says he is and what God does. So his assessment of himself is not, I'm not like other men, not a Pharisee.

At least I'm not like them. His assessment of himself is, God, have mercy on me. And the word here is not a sinner, but literally the sinner. In other words, God, if you want to see a specimen of human rebellion against you, then it's me.

It's me. And when I look at what's in the basement, and when I see some of the things that I have done, which perhaps no one knows about, not even my spouse, I am thoroughly ashamed of the way in which I have lived ignoring you and made up my own rules and the way in which I have thought and indeed the things that I have not done that I should have done.

[14 : 09] And the room in my basement is full and if you want to know who the sinner is, it's me. And so he says, have mercy on me. That's God's verdict on him and he accepts it.

And the Pharisee, of course, is nowhere near this. But this explains why in verse 13 do you see the body language? He stood at a distance. He doesn't march up to the front. He's at a distance and he doesn't pose himself with his hands uplifted.

No, can you see as we look down there, he beat his breast and he cried out and he said, God have mercy on me. He comes relating to his creator God and he knows that God knows about the dark rooms and that he can fake it with everyone else but not with God.

That's the issue and he's deeply ashamed. And if I may at this point and there's no better time in the year do it, if I may say there will be people here and there are some things that are very, very dark that no one knows about and they're there in the basement and you're thoroughly ashamed and nobody else knows about them.

And if that is the case you're exactly alongside this man here. Do you know, the issue with Christianity of course is not are you good enough to be Christian but are you bad enough?

[15 : 32] That's the amazing thing. It's whether you really do come to terms with what's in the basement. And can you see what the first step here of being right with God is? It's very striking. The first step to being right with God is knowing that I'm not.

The first step to getting into right relationship with God is saying actually by nature I am a sinner and I richly deserve God's anger. It's extraordinary for me, you know, when I was a school boy I kept this diary and I really kept it because I thought I was such a great bloke I owed it to the world to record my life.

So I kept this diary and I was staggered at my own selfishness and that of my contemporaries and I remember as I kept this diary during 1981 this shadow just came over me because I kept it for egotistical reasons and yet I found there was this desperate selfishness.

So I would, for example, call out for world peace yet nevertheless I had the weapons of sarcasm and malice in my own self-defense. I'd call out for an end to poverty and ask my parents for a larger allowance.

I just saw the wickedness in me and my contemporaries. But what amazed me later on was that actually as I began to get in a desperate step about this I was making real spiritual progress.

[16 : 48] I was beginning to go do you know what there's something desperately wrong that was the first step. The Bishop of London recently said we make no spiritual progress until we look within and take responsibility for what we see.

And therefore you see there's a great danger today in lots of preaching where the preacher keeps telling people that they are victims. And can I tell you that you are not a victim. You are fundamentally a rebel.

You're a rebel with weapons in your hands against your creator God. That's what the Bible says. And this man you see says I'm a sinner and sometimes for those of us from respectable backgrounds this can take a long time to get in place.

David Jackman is a preacher down in London and when he's preached in Southampton he told the story of a woman called Jean and she rang up one day and she'd been going to his church for 20 years and she said David I'd like you to know that I became a Christian yesterday.

And he said well Jean that's lovely to hear but surely you were a Christian already. She'd been going to the midweek prayer meeting too. And she said no. She said I wasn't a Christian until yesterday.

[17 : 57] Up until then when you said I'm a sinner you're a sinner I looked at you and I thought that's rubbish you're a perfectly respectable man and I'm a perfectly respectable woman. But she said it was only last night in church that I accepted God's view on me which is that I'm a rebel and a sinner and only last night that I really came to be forgiven.

You see this tax collector will have no false confidence in his own performance. Can you see where he puts his confidence his trust his dependence can we have a look God have mercy on me a sinner and the word mercy literally means to turn away God's anger.

Now how can that happen well you see this is the issue I wonder if you can imagine it as the tax collector looked up to the altar he would have seen blood from the altar from slaughtered animals that had been killed on the altar running down the steps and as he said God have mercy on me he would have seen the blood.

Now what happened was this once a year a Jewish household would go to the temple and the priest would put his hand on a young unblemished lamb and he would say all the sins of the household are on this lamb then he'd take the lamb and kill it and when a little girl said to her mother mother why must the lamb die she would be told you like the rest of your household deserves to die for your sins but God has permitted this substitute this lamb to die in your place.

Now it was a horrible sight but it taught a very important lesson we deserve to die for our sin we deserve to die but in his mercy God has provided a substitute and the substitute that he provides well he speaks to us here in Luke chapter 18 and verse 31 Jesus took the twelve aside and told them we're going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written by the prophets about the son of man will be fulfilled he'll be turned over to the Gentiles they'll mock him insult him spit on him flog him and kill him and Jesus says and he may have said this on Monday Thursday he says I am the lamb and I'm going to go to Jerusalem to die and I will do the dying because you have done the sinning and the great question of course is the great question of course is where is your confidence when it comes to being right with God that's the great question where is it focused in fact just to nail this let me ask you a question and we'll see where your confidence is focused you see here's the question if you were to die tonight and God said why shall I let you into heaven what would your reply be so if you were to die tonight so tonight you're locked into the judgment and God says why shall I let you into heaven what would be your reply now let's just run it past these two men you see the first man the Pharisee in verse 11 and 12 where is his confidence the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself

[21 : 14] God I thank you that I'm not like other men robbers evildoers adulterers even like this tax collector I fast twice a week I give a tenth of all I get where is his confidence it's in his own performance in what I have done I'm not greedy dishonest immoral like this man but what about the other man the tax collector where is his confidence can we look down but the tax collector stood at a distance he would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said where is his confidence God have mercy on me a sinner his confidence is in the blood and the great question for us therefore as we head towards Good Friday tomorrow is where is our confidence is it in our own performance or is it in the performance of Jesus and again can I say whenever I speak like this I am haunted by watching my grandmother die from the 1st to the 7th of April 1988 that's what put me into the ministry because I watched her die absolutely confident that her own goodness would take her to heaven her own performance

I am a good person I am loved in the community I am loved in my family God will be delighted to have me and therefore there is no need for forgiveness there is no need for the cross and don't you speak like that to me where is our confidence is it in what happens tomorrow between 12 and 3 o'clock or is it in what we've done and I am saying there are millions going to hell because their confidence is in their own performance and I am pleading with you if that is the case for you to change and put it all in the blood of Christ as he dies let's pray for that