

Reaching for Righteousness

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[0 : 00] If you've got a Bible, you can turn to the Gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 18. Luke 18 in the New Testament.

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Luke 18 in the New Testament. Luke 19 in the New Testament.

[1 : 45] us so that we might know you our creator and our king our lord we might understand something of the glory and the majesty you possess we might be changed by what we see we thank you for your son who allows this relationship to be possible for us to commune with our holy God we thank you for his work his saving work and we thank you for the spirit that takes this work and does something inside of us draws us near opens up scripture so that we might gain spiritual insight won't you do that this morning lord won't you ask us to see all these wonderful things not that we may be puffed up in knowledge but that we may grow in godliness we ask this for Christ's sake and his glory amen so this is the final week of our four part series simply Jesus looking at who Jesus is there are a bunch of different places we could have gone in the bible a bunch of different ways we could have done this what we did do was we said well let's walk with Jesus a little bit in the second half of the gospel of Luke he heads out on a journey he heads to Jerusalem to ultimately face his death and we've kind of gone along with him on that journey as he's stopped and he's talked to people and he's told stories and he's done things and by listening to those stories those parables by watching what he does by listening to what he says we've been able to gain a clearer picture of who Jesus is which is our aim and our goal and in a time where we we know some stuff about Jesus but we're not always that clear on who exactly he is what he stands for what he's done and what the significance of that is for us we've been trying to get more clarity and so hopefully that's been growing for you over the last couple of weeks as we've been going through this series and now we come to the final one now last week what we did was we spoke about hell we looked at a parable where Jesus looks at the issue of hell we didn't do a full-on doctrine this is everything the bible teaches about hell but we did consider the question which seemed to be at the heart of the parable that Jesus was telling us about how one either ends up or avoids ending up in hell and so I thought well since we did that last week it's only fair we kind of go the other way this week and we look at the other eternal option which is heaven again not doing a full doctrine of heaven in the bible and there's an area I think that we we need to sometimes stop and pause and look at because I think there's a lot of confusion

I think a lot of people have sort of cartoonish images in their head that heaven is flying off to a cloud sitting on a cloud playing a harp maybe going to some sort of pearly gates where you sign a register at the beginning and you go in and St. Peter makes some sort of quip about your lack of morality or whatever as you get to that gate when in actual fact the bible has a much more concrete vision of what the end is a renewed heaven and earth a new creation where we live and have active lives we work we engage in all sorts of things and so I think we do need to think about this new heaven and this new earth and what exactly it is but that's not what we're going to do this morning this morning we're going to just in a similar way track what we did last week we're going to ask questions about well if there is this final eternity how do you end up there or not end up there last week we saw in scripture Jesus' words what keeps us out of heaven and what keeps us in hell and gets us out of hell and so we're asking a similar thing this week by looking at Jesus' word what gets us into heaven what keeps us in heaven what keeps us out of heaven and to do that we actually have to consider a word we have to think about the word righteousness we have to understand the word righteousness because the bible repeatedly describes

God as the only truly righteous being in this universe he himself is righteous because he himself is the source of all righteousness heaven then is often described in the bible as the place of righteousness the dwelling place of righteousness because it's the place where God dwells it's where he is and if he is righteous and he's there then heaven is the place of righteousness so the apostle Peter 2 Peter chapter 3 says we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells so heaven first thing heaven is for the righteous the apostle Paul gives us then the other side of the coin in 1 Corinthians 6 he says do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God so the very very very super short answer to the question of how does one get into heaven is this you get into heaven if you are righteous we could end the sermon there and go for coffee and tea but I think we need to understand righteousness with more detail and you know what besides besides obviously this massive thing of heaven and hell being in the balance which is huge and is of enormous importance and significance there's also a sense in which you in the day to day have a vested interest in this whole concept of righteousness so not just something for like where's my end destiny but for your day to day interactions with life and with God you and I

I want to put it to you are daily regularly reaching for righteousness now I say that and that probably doesn't automatically compute with a lot of people because partly because the word righteousness is something of an archaic and overly religious word or phrase you think of some guy maybe in a temple somewhere in a remote place observing strict rules fasting maybe engaging in some sort of self-flagellation whipping yourself on the back and you say oh that guy that guy is reaching for righteousness I don't know what he's doing but that guy is reaching for righteousness but I want to put it to you that we're all actually doing it we're all doing it temple or no temple fasting or no fasting whether you're beating yourself on the back or you're not you're all reaching for righteousness see the word righteous is a pretty rich word in the bible it contains within it a number of different ideas so the idea of blamelessness for example a sense of justification so to be righteous is to be without blame to be righteous is to have your existence justified to put it another way another really strong idea at the heart of righteousness is acceptance and affirmation to be righteous is to know that you are accepted and affirmed one of the great blessings of a good marriage and I'm sure this is not necessarily exclusive to marriage but this is my particular experience one of the great blessings of a marriage is to be to be completely known by somebody as far as we can humanly speaking know someone and then still be loved and accepted so Robin my wife she gets to see a side of me that you God willing will never ever ever ever ever ever see she knows things about me that you God willing will never never never never ever ever know she's seen my great moments she has seen my dark moments she's seen a more authentic real version of me than any other person will ever see and yet she loves and accepts me still thankfully to be known completely and loved completely at the same time is actually a thrilling and an incredible experience now we all want that I think I think we all want that we all want that acceptance we all want to feel it deep down in our hearts that we have it to know that we are justified to know that our peers or the people who are important to us look upon us with affirmation and so we're reaching for that all the time we think and we behave in ways that we think are going to procure this righteousness for us some of us do that in the temple of religion formal religion some of us do it in the temple of corporate finance and career ladder climbing some of us do it in the temple of modern parenting some of us do it in the temple of romantic relationships we all have our temples we all have our rituals we are all I think reaching for righteousness that somebody someone of import out there would affirm us would accept us and would love us would say you are all right Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to the cross he's on the way actually to tackle the issue of righteousness head on and along the way he tells the story about righteousness and he particularly tells it to people who think they've worked out this righteousness thing that they've got it sorted it's this parable we just read of a tax collector and a Pharisee in Luke 18 and I think we see two things that are kind of our two points

[10 : 45] I know it was a longish introduction but the points will go quick so two points two things that this story teaches us the wrong way to get righteousness in the right way the wrong way to get righteousness in the right way and this is crucial because remember our initial premise without righteousness you will not see God without righteousness you will not see God you will not enter the kingdom you will not find your eternal destination in heaven so here's the wrong way to get righteousness have a look down at verse 9 it says that some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else to these people Jesus told this parable two men went up to the temple to pray one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector the Pharisee stood by

himself and prayed God I thank you that I'm not like other people robbers and evildoers and adulterers or even like this tax collector I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get I don't know how often you pray but when you do pray and you start a prayer off with

God I thank you that dot dot dot what generally comes next generally I think a list of good things God has done in your life God I thank you for dot dot dot that's not what the Pharisee says he says God I thank you that I emphasize on the I I thank you that I am not like other people robbers evildoers even this tax collector and why is he not like them well he tells you why he's not like them because I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all that I get so the Pharisee seems to be crystal clear in his own mind at least of where his righteousness comes from it comes from outside of him it comes externally it comes from comparing himself to other people outside of himself I am better than them and it also comes from things that he does on the outside external activity so I fast I give now just when you are tempted to look at the sky and roll your eyes a little bit and think he's just pompous and arrogant know that he probably was by the moral customs of the day the religious dogma of the day better than those around him and he had pretty good reason then to trust in this external righteousness Pharisees generally did give more these religious leaders they did give more they did pray more they fasted more they conformed themselves their lives the patterns of their lives to the religious dogma more than the average person on this street so he's not really necessarily embellishing his record here he's just being straightforward and honest this is what I do this is who I am and this is what I do now in contrast to that look what the tax collector says verse 13 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 so he calls himself a sinner so it's an important term in the gospel a sinner again he's not just being modest here the people who are standing around him listening in on his prayer would have actually nodded and agreed with him yep you are a sinner you got that part right you are a sinner we're not sure what you're doing here at the temple but you you got that part right you are a sinner tax collectors in that society were regarded at this kind of special class of sinner they were essentially extorting the people they had moved their allegiance over from the Jewish nation to their

Roman captors and so they had this really really nasty reputation amongst the people and so when he says have mercy on me a sinner nobody's disagreeing with that last part yep you are a sinner you're a turncoat you're a sinner he has no external righteousness to speak of to boast of to pray about nothing and yet here is Jesus' assessment look at verse 14 I tell you that this man the tax collector rather than the other the Pharisee went home justified before God for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted the tax collector is justified not the Pharisee now in the New Testament the word justified comes from the same root as the word righteous so to be justified is to be declared righteous to be declared right with God the tax collector is declared righteous not the

Pharisee and we'll come back in a second to why the tax collector is declared righteous righteousness but first see this first see that all of the Pharisee's external righteousness doesn't get him in it doesn't count it doesn't justify him now you say well why why if he is such a good guy is he not declared righteous and I think the reason is this is because his external understanding of righteousness and sin is just actually way too shallow and inadequate way way way too shallow and inadequate for him everything is about how he behaves on the outside specific acts I don't steal I don't cheat on my wife I don't extol people I do pray I do give I do fast it's all external acts notice what it's not it's not character he doesn't stop there and say to the Lord and pray Lord I thank you that I'm becoming a more peaceful person I thank you Lord that I'm growing in patience

[16 : 30] I thank you that I'm becoming more compassionate there's no kind of fruit of the spirit that you see in the book of Galatians there's no character in his definition of righteousness and so his definition of sin really is only skin deep it doesn't go to the root of a corrupted heart now I think we we know this you don't almost in some ways need me to stand up and teach the Bible on this because we know instinctively that focusing on external behavior is insufficient to deal with the human condition I mean just a very very simple test in your own head around this to answer this question if every single country in this world had flawless legal and justice systems that perfectly enforced the rule of law do you believe that this world would then be free from human bad behavior and the obvious answer is no no it wouldn't it would not even with flawless legal systems flawless justice being carried out we believe human beings will still do bad things figure out ways of doing bad things even within that system and that's because instinctively every single one of us believes

that the reason human beings do bad things goes much much deeper than external behavior and external rule keeping

C.S. Lewis the great Christian writer put it this way he said what is the good of telling ships how to steer so as to avoid collision if in fact they are such crazy old tubs that they cannot be steered at all that's you and me talking about what is the good of drawing up on paper rules for social behavior if we know that in fact our greed cowardice ill temper and self conceit are going to prevent us from keeping them I do not mean for a moment that we ought not to think and think hard about improvements in our social and economic system what I do mean is that all thinking will be mere moonshine unless we realize that nothing but the courage and unselfishness of individuals is ever going to make any system work properly it is easy enough to remove the particular kinds of graft or bullying that go on under the present system but as long as men are twisters or bullies they will find some new way of carrying on the old game under the new system you cannot make men good by law and without good men you cannot have good society that is why we must go on to think of the morality inside the individual so he says look we have to go deeper he's not poo-pooing the validity of law and the necessity of law to restrain evil and enact justice but he's saying you've got to go deeper if you really want to understand human beings you've got to go deeper than the externals and find real righteousness if you build your sense of justification on externals on the things you do and don't do then I want to suggest this morning you might be in a bit of trouble if you're looking at your external achievements for that sense of acceptance that righteousness and the justification what you're doing is you are essentially trusting in incredibly shallow wells and you're hoping that they're deep wells and that there's lots of water in there and that they're going to sustain you through drought but in reality they're going to dry up fairly quickly the minute the rain stops and we know they dry out because of this we know they're dry out because we know that you can rise to the top of your career and yet still feel incredibly aimless and lost inside we know that you can earn a ton of money but still feel completely bankrupt and empty inside we know this because we've seen so many people maybe we experienced this ourselves but so many people in these sorts of situations before empty lost and despairing on the outside they appear to have everything they got it on the inside in truth they have nothing if you are looking to your external roles maybe even roles for that sense of acceptance your role as a mother or as a father or as a husband or as a wife or as a leader or as a friend if you're looking at those external roles and your performance in those roles to justify your life then there as well you could be in really really big trouble because you can be a really great husband and completely lack a sense of approval inside you can be a stellar parent and be devoid of truth and hope inside none of these externals performance roles achievement can really fill that reaching for righteousness that you have inside of you they don't even do it for the Pharisee look at how he's trying to puff himself up and cover over what is obviously a very big gaping hole inside of him who do you think he's trying to convince in his prayer God is he trying to convince God that he's a good man or is he actually trying to convince himself I mean who says the sort of things that he says in this prayer someone who feels like they're deeply lacking in something that's who says that solicitor you met that kid at school maybe you were that kid at school who always spoke about their own achievements all the time every day all the time you know when you looked at that boy or that girl they were covering a deep sense of inadequacy a deep sense of unrighteousness that's what the Pharisee is doing here trying to build external righteousness won't get you into heaven it'll keep you out in fact it even has the potential to really wreck your life a long time before you even get to consider heaven and hell as your ultimate destiny it's not enough it's the wrong way to get righteousness so what's the right way then well look again at the tax collector who Jesus tells us is justified verse 13 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 and Jesus then says I tell you that this man rather than the other went home justified before God for all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted so the tax collector stands there and he spiritually strips before God he bears his naked soul to God I've got nothing to hide and we can see actually from what Jesus then later says in that little epilogue section there verse 14 that he considers the tax collector to have humbled himself so he's essentially standing before God and he's saying the problem Lord Lord the problem is not outside of me it's inside of me I cannot do this I cannot generate this righteousness inside of me I've looked inside I've seen who I am inside and I know that there's nothing there and so help me you've got to do something he says you've got to have mercy on me

now the word for mercy that's there the original word is an interesting word it's an unusual word it's not the word that's usually translated mercy in other parts of the New Testament it's a more technical form of the word mercy that includes within it the idea of atonement it's a variation on a Greek word hilasterion now you don't have to pass the test to remember that word but just keep it in the back of your mind because it's important so the tax collector when he asks for mercy he's not he's not just asking God to make his abject failure in life go away like I've stunk at life up to this point Lord please just like clear the decks up till now and then I'll go out and try better he's not just asking for that he's asking for God to take his sins away by somehow making atonement so he's saying I can't do this I cannot atone for my own unrighteousness I can't save myself I can't make myself except for God even if you clear everything if you clear my record from before what I've done now I'm not good I'm going to be back here next week praying the same prayer and the week after that I need more than just a clean slate I need atonement here I need this hilasterion it's the same word you find in the Old [24 : 50] Testament in the Greek version of the Old Testament to describe the gold cover of the Ark of the Covenant place where once a year on the Day of Atonement Yom Kippur in the Jewish religious system the high priest would come and would sprinkle blood on that gold cover on the hilasterion the mercy seat in order to atone for the sins of the people and that same word then appears also in our New Testament it appears in the book of Hebrews here's what we're told in Hebrews Jesus is the merciful and faithful high priest in service to God that he might make atonement it's that word for the sins of the people so the tax collector knows that he can't make himself righteous he can't justify himself he can't deal with the problem of what's inside of him or what's not inside of him he he's tried to deal with that emptiness but making lots of money that's what tax collectors did he probably was fairly wealthy but the whole still there he needed atonement he needed hilasterion he needed

Jesus the true high priest who makes atonement for sin like Hebrews says and so that's what you need you need Jesus you need his atoning sacrifice if you are ever ever ever to find true righteousness to find true acceptance to find true affirmation and you get all of that you get all of that at the cross if you look at the cross of Jesus Christ you get all of those very things you get affirmation think about it Jesus loved you so much that he was willing to die for you that is huge affirmation personal affirmation from the creator God of the universe who takes on flesh and then says I care about you that much that I'm prepared to die for you I don't even get that sort of affirmation from my wife in the very very best marriage that's incredible affirmation you get acceptance Jesus through his substitutionary death makes you acceptable to a holy and a righteous

God says now you can come into the throne room now you can stand in the very presence of God now you can commune with him accepted accepted in the same way that he accepts me his son justification Jesus swaps his life for yours and pronounces over you that your life matters it has eternal worth and value if you ever wake up in the morning and saying what justification do I have for taking up breath on this planet well here Jesus gives it to you he the fact that he will swap his life for you says your life matters you get righteousness Jesus takes your sin record upon himself and he gives you his perfect righteous record and clothed then as the language of the New Testament clothed in that righteousness when God looks upon you he sees not a sinner he sees a son he sees a daughter a beloved son a beloved daughter the the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus well that's the only thing that's going to make you righteous the only thing and so here's what I don't want you to do don't bring your own righteousness to the party doesn't help doesn't get you to heaven it doesn't make you acceptable to God nothing that you bring and say here Lord this is my justification for inclusion is enough to get you in to make you acceptable no amount of external righteousness all of that external righteousness is actually worthless that's what it is it's worthless and if you trust in it it will damn you eternally

John Gerstner was a famous Presbyterian theology professor in kind of the back end of the last century and he tells a story of a little old lady who was in the congregation one day and he was preaching a sermon on how we have no external righteousness to make us acceptable to God and this little old lady came up to Dr. Gerstner and said Dr. Gerstner you make me feel this big she says and he smiled at her and he looked at her and he said that's too much that is too much don't you know that even that much self-righteousness will send you to hell forever if you don't want to go if you want to go into heaven you need to abandon any notion of self-righteousness external

righteousness throw it away you need the righteousness of Christ which he freely offers you through his atoning death on the cross his wounds are your justification his cries of dereliction are your words of affirmation his pain of isolation is your inclusion you don't bring anything to God that is the wrong thing to try and do we can talk a lot about how we live in response to this righteousness and there's all sorts of things to say there about living holy lives and pursuing godly living but at the very beginning you bring nothing absolutely nothing and to bring anything is an affront to the righteousness that Christ has earned for you instead what you do is you stand on Golgotha and you look up at the forlorn figure of Christ on the cross and you beat your breast and you say father have mercy on me a sinner let Christ and his substitutionary death give you his righteousness that's how you get into heaven we sing about this often in the song Rock of Ages we're going to sing it in a second these words not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy laws commands could my zeal no respite no could my tears forever flow all for sin could not a turn thou must save and thou alone nothing in my hand I bring simply to the cross I cling naked come to thee for dress helpless look to thee for grace foul eye to the fountain fly wash me savior or I die let's pray our father God our king we want to we want to thank you for this incredible righteousness given to us in Jesus that we can come knowing knowing the emptiness on the inside knowing the brokenness knowing the sin knowing the things we've done knowing the things we've been unable to do and yet in your great love we can stand before you beat our breasts and say have mercy on me oh God a sinner and you meet us in that moment with the mercy poured out in Jesus Christ [32 : 14] Lord help us to cling to that this morning teach us what it means to do that not to build our lives and our identities and our sense of well being on the external righteousness we're trying to find all day every day let's find our righteousness in Christ alone and I pray for any person who's sitting here this morning maybe who's never done that who's saying I've been living this entire life trying to justify my own existence I pray that you will help them to see this morning that they can't do that and they need to abandon that self-justification and they need to turn to Jesus repent and trust in him have mercy upon every sinner who prays that prayer this morning Lord we pray we ask this for Christ's sake and his glory Amen if you let me can't be there anything