

Rejoice and Be Glad

In Joel's prophecy, the people of Israel had endured terrible devastation. Locusts had stripped the land bare – fields were empty, barns were broken, their joy had vanished. But God's word to His people wasn't despair. It was hope. "Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for He has given you the autumn rains because He is faithful," (Joel 2:23). Then Joel declares, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance," (verse 32).

It's a message of grace – a promise that God will restore, renew, and pour out His Spirit on all flesh. Joel reminds us that salvation isn't something we earn. It's a free gift. We call upon the name of the Lord – Jesus Christ – and He saves us. That truth is a good segue into the Gospel lesson for today, in which Jesus tells a parable. The theme is the same – grace for the humble, mercy for the repentant, and salvation for all who depend on God rather than on themselves.

And it also fits for this Reformation Sunday – a day when we remember how God used humble men and women to reform the Church, calling it back to the truth that "the righteous will live by their faithfulness," (Hab. 2:4). The Protestant Reformation, at its heart, was a rediscovery of humble faith – a faith that depends entirely upon the mercy of God, and not on human merit. So today, we're going to look at Luke 18:9-14, to listen to Jesus' story about two men who went up to the temple to pray. One exalted himself, the other humbled himself – and we'll consider what it means to have a faith that makes us right with God. **Read Luke 18:9-14.**

Two Men Go Up to Pray

Pay close attention to how our Gospel lesson opens today, because it's very much the reason why Jesus tells the parable in the first place. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable," (Luke 18:9). That's important to take in. There are a lot of people today turned off by the Church, because they think they can't come into it without being judged. There are a lot of people – with great skills out there – who won't commit to the Church because they think the people on the inside will look down their noses at them.

We don't do that here at New Hope, or at least I hope we don't. If we do – we need to repent, because that's pride. It's a sin to think higher of ourselves than others. Look at how He starts the story, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector," (verse 10). Both of the men are coming to the same place, for the same purpose. They're both coming to pray. But their hearts are very, very different.

The Pharisee was a respected religious leader, devoted to the Law, committed to purity, and admired for his discipline and generosity. He's a holy man in most people's eyes. But the tax collector, on the other hand, was despised. He was viewed as a

traitor to his people. He collects taxes for Rome – to fund their continued occupation of Judea – and it's no secret, the tax collectors usually collected more from people than what was due. On the outside, it seems pretty obvious which guy was righteous. But Jesus, as He so often does, turns the world upside down.

Self-Satisfaction in Place of Faith

“The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get,’” (verses 11-12). Notice the tone. The Pharisee begins with the word “God,” but his prayer isn’t really directed toward God. It’s directed toward himself. *The Amplified Bible* makes this really clear in how it phrases the beginning of verse 11, “The Pharisee took his stand ostentatiously and began to pray thus before *and* with himself...”. He’s not really praying to God. He’s not confessing his sin. He’s reciting his resumé.

Now people may not be comfortable hearing that. So, let’s say we give the man the benefit of the doubt. Let’s say he’s really praying to God. In which case, he isn’t thanking Him for God’s mercy. He’s thanking God for his own superiority over other people. “I thank You that I am not like other people,” he states.

In the Pharisee’s mind, righteousness is measurable. It can be tallied, calculated, and compared. He has a “Holier-than-Thou” mindset going on. He’s confident that his goodness earns him a place before God. He’s entitled to it – he’s lived a good, upright life in comparison to other people. At least, according to him. But Jesus reveals that this very confidence in oneself is a barrier to true faith. When we rely on our own righteousness, we close our hearts to God’s grace. Church, if we ever think we can do it without Jesus and don’t really need Him in the first place, we’re lost. We have no hope in a situation like that.

Humility that Leads to Mercy

“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,’” (verse 13). What a difference! This guy stands at a distance. He’s aware of his unworthiness. He won’t even raise his eyes up toward the Holy of Holies – the high place of the temple hidden by a large tapestry or veil – which the high priest entered to offer sacrifices and offerings one day each year. His words are few, but powerful.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It’s the sinner’s prayer. The Greek word for “have mercy,” *hilaskomai* literally means, “atone for my sin,” or “make reconciliation for me because I can’t do it.” He’s not asking God to be lenient with him. He’s begging for cleansing from sin. He knows he needs forgiveness for his sins in the depths of his being. He knows he can’t make himself right with God – he needs God to make him right.

That’s humble faith, friends. Humble faith doesn’t bring a list of achievements to God, with an expectation that God is going to reward us. It brings need. It doesn’t say, “Hey God! Look what I’ve done for You.” It says, “Lord, have mercy!” And has a

mindset that to be able to see Jesus face-to-face one day is reward enough for all we've been through, and every good thing we've done to try to bring Him glory. And Jesus' verdict with parable is stunning, and completely unexpected by the audience that day when He told it.

The Verdict of Jesus

"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," (verse 14). In one sentence, Jesus reverses every human expectation. The Pharisee – religious, moral, impressive, a pillar of the community – he goes home unjustified. The tax collector – broken, ashamed, and repentant – goes home right with God.

To be "justified," means to be declared righteous. John Wesley spoke about this at length, as "justifying grace." When we realize we've sinned and can't save ourselves, and cry out to Jesus, He saves us. He justifies us. It's a legal term.

The Judge of all Creation has spoken, and the verdict is clear – mercy triumphs over merit. Jesus shows us that at the cross. His blood saves us – it's the only thing that can! This parable really is the Gospel under a microscope. It's a tiny view that reminds us that salvation isn't about our status, performance, or pride. It's all about grace – God's grace poured out for us and for everyone through the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross.

Reformation and Rediscovery of Grace

More than 1500 years after Jesus told this story, another man was struggling with the same question that haunted the Pharisee and humbled the tax collector. "How can I be right with God?" That man was Martin Luther, a young monk in Germany, desperate to please God. He fasted, prayed, and confessed his sins for hours, but peace eluded him. He later said, "I did not love God; I hated Him, for He demanded righteousness that I could not produce."

And then Luther read a verse from Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, "The righteous will live by faith," (Rom. 1:17). Suddenly he understood – righteousness isn't something we achieve. It's something we receive. It's a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. That discovery sparked the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther wasn't alone. John Calvin in Geneva, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, John Knox in Scotland, and about 200 years after Luther, John Wesley in England, along with many others joined in calling the Church back to the Gospel of grace. They preached what Jesus had taught all along. "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted," (Luke 18:14).

The Reformers remind us that we stand before God not by our good works, our church attendance, or our moral record. It's all because of Christ's work finished once for all time on Good Friday's cross. They remind us of sola gratia – by grace alone; sola fide – through faith alone; solus Christus – in Christ alone; sola Scriptura –

according to Scripture alone; and soli Deo gloria – to the glory of God alone. This is the essence of humble faith!

Humble Faith Today

If we're being honest, the spirit of the Pharisee is still alive today. We live in a culture that measures worth by performance – grades, income, followers, success. Even in the Church, we can be tempted to compare ourselves to others. "I serve more. I give more. I know more." But Jesus calls us to take a different posture – in Bible times, prayer was a posture – they prayed standing up, with arms and eyes raised to heaven, or the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem.

Jesus calls us to a different posture. To come before God like the tax collector, with open hands and honest hearts, knowing that all we have and are comes from His mercy alone. Humble faith doesn't deny goodness or good things other people do. It simply recognizes that goodness flows out from grace – not pride.

It's the faith of a parent praying for a wayward child. It's the faith of a worker struggling to stay honest in a dishonest world. New Hope, it's the faith of a congregation trusting God to rebuild and renew in a changing time. God IS doing a new thing here, with us, and in us! It's the faith of every follower of Jesus, who cries out to Him, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" When we pray that prayer sincerely, Heaven rejoices. Like the tax collector, we go home justified – not because of who we are, but because of who God is, and what He has done.

The Heart that God Honors

For just a moment, think back to Joel's prophecy that we heard earlier today. "I will pour out My Spirit on ALL people," (Joel 2:28). That promise was fulfilled at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on the Church. It continues to be fulfilled wherever humble faith opens the door to God's presence. The Spirit fills the humble heart, not the proud one. The Spirit renews those who admit their need. The Spirit gives boldness not to boastful people, but to the broken. And on Reformation Sunday, we celebrate that the same Spirit, who inspired prophets and apostles also inspired Reformers to stand for truth, to translate Scripture, to sing new hymns, and to preach the Gospel to every nation.

That Spirit is still at work today – calling us back to humility, to repentance, to a humble faith. So how do we apply the parable in our lives? First, we need to examine our hearts. Are we standing in the temple of self-satisfaction, or in the shadow of the cross? Second, it calls us to look upward – to trust completely in God's mercy. Every prayer we pray should begin with grace and end with gratitude. And third, it calls us to look outward. To treat others with the same mercy that we've received. When we really understand grace, we can't look down on others. We see every person as one for whom Christ died.

The Pharisee's prayer separates. The tax collector's prayer unites. Humble faith creates community because it reminds us that we all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross. At the end of the day, there's only one prayer which truly opens an

immediate floodgate of grace on us from the heart of God: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” That prayer changed the destiny of a tax collector. It changed the world through the Protestant Reformation. And it continues to change lives today.

Have you prayed that prayer before? If not, what’s stopping you? “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, and everyone who humbles themselves will be exalted, Jesus says. In praying for His mercy, we too, can leave this sanctuary today justified by faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, and rejoicing in the God of mercy!

Prayer: Merciful God, We come today to You as those who have nothing to boast of except the cross of Christ. Forgive us when pride blinds us and self-righteousness hardens our hearts. Teach us again the way of humility – to trust in Your mercy, to live by Your grace, and to love as You have loved us. Pour out Your Spirit on us as You promised through Joel. Renew Your Church, as You did in the days of the Reformers. Let our faith be humble, our hearts contrite, and our lives filled with gratitude. Through Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.