

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon series: STORY TIME

Surprise! Look Who God Saves!!

(Luke 18:9-14)

Study #5

Introduction: Cinderella winners...

Cinderella stories are sweet. The pitiful cinder girl goes to the ball in a magic pumpkin, meets the prince and finds love, despite her wicked stepmother's attempts to keep her at home.

The sports world gives us lots of Cinderella plots. We almost expect the New York Yankees to win the World Series. But when, back in 1969, for the first time ever, the Mets won, well, that was a Cinderella story for the ages.

The New York Mets have long been Major League baseball's laughingstock. You can usually find them at or near the bottom of the standings in the National League East.

And jokes about the Mets abound.

Q: What do the New York Mets and possums have in common?

A: Both play dead at home and get killed on the road!

Q: Did you hear that New York's Mets baseball team doesn't have a website?

A: They can't string three "Ws" together.

Q: What do you call a Mets player with a World Series ring?

A: A thief.

The Mets have been, throughout their storied history, with rare exceptions, exceptionally bad.

But then, in 1969, they won the World Series. A Cinderella story! Nobody thought it would ever happen. Everybody thought that the Orioles would win - but the Mets - the METS! - won.

In the story we'll hear today from Jesus, the completely unexpected happens. The loser wins and the way the loser wins gives hope to us all.

Speaking of parables

Over the last several Sundays you and I have listened to Jesus express, by way of parables, God's amazing love for people who are far from Him. He is the Good Samaritan who has stopped to save us who are lying in the ditch of sin. He is the Host who is throwing a great banquet and doesn't want any empty seats at His table.

We have also seen, by the way He tells these stories, that He wants us who have come to know God, to have the same concern for those who haven't come to know Him that He does. He wants us to spread the Gospel in our world like leaven. He wants us to answer the door when opportunity knocks and share the Good News with friends. Jesus wants us to bring Him our friends!

Next Sunday we'll wrap up our series in the parables with a look at one more that comes complete with a "hearing test." (Think, "***He who has ears, let him hear***")

But today we'll give our attention to a short parable that is, like some of the others we've seen, recorded only in Luke. It's one that I've never paid as much attention to as I now wish I had.

The setting

At the point at which we enter Luke's Gospel this morning, Jesus is only days away from entering Jerusalem to give His life for you and me on a Roman cross.

He is about to have a conversation with a rich, young ruler. Then, He'll give sight to blind Bartimaeus. And right after that, He'll have a life-changing conversation with the tax-collector, Zaccheus.

But before all of that happens, Jesus tells a couple of more parables.

First, He first tells one of my all-time favorites. It's about an unrighteous judge and a feisty widow who is in trouble and demands justice from the judge. Even though the judge doesn't care at all about her plight, he eventually gives in and helps her because she bothered him.¹

The point of that parable is that if an uncaring judge is eventually persuaded to help a defenseless widow HOW MUCH MORE will God come to the aid of those who pray?

Jesus gave that parable to His followers.² Luke follows that parable up with another one that He gave to a very different audience.

We aren't told what is the physical setting for this one or exactly when it took place. But, like the previous parable, the actions in this one revolve around prayer.

The Back Story (v. 9)

[9] And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

Fatal Error #1 - Trusting in Self to Save

The people Jesus had in His sights in today's parable were guilty of two grave errors.

First, they ***“trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”***

¹ Literally, Jesus says that he was afraid she was about to ***“hit him under the eye.”***

² The last reference to an audience is 17:22, where He was speaking to His disciples.

They believed that by their own efforts they could establish a relationship with God. They could do enough good works and try hard enough to earn eternal salvation.

Anybody who thinks that has made a serious miscalculation.

Yes, God has given us commands to obey. And it's a good thing to obey them. But since no one perfectly obeys all the time, we can't come to God by way of works. That's why He provided for forgiveness through sacrifices and offerings.

A Jew in Jesus' day would offer the prescribed sacrifices, believing that God would forgive. She is how she found mercy and was saved. No Jew was ever saved by his or her obedience to God's commands.

Today, we are eternally saved by putting our trust in Jesus, who offered Himself as a sacrifice on the cross. That is where we find mercy.

From the very beginning, God has granted eternal life and forgiveness of sins to the one who trusts Him for mercy, not to the one who trusts in good works.

But these folks Jesus to whom Jesus is going to give a parable were trusting in themselves. They think that they're going to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps.

That's Fatal Error #1. Fatal Error #2 follows logically from Fatal Error #1.

Fatal Error #2 - Looking Down on Others

When we believe that we've gotten ourselves saved all by ourselves and our hard work, it's easy to view other people with contempt. Jesus' audience looked down their noses at other people who didn't work as hard as they did at doing good.³

And to THESE people, Jesus gave THIS parable.

³ Plummer, in his commentary, says that ***“others”*** equals “all others.” They looked down on everybody.

Notice. Jesus didn't give this parable ABOUT these people who got it wrong. He told it TO these people who were guilty of Fatal Error #'s 1 and 2.

This is amazingly bold. This is outrageously "in your face." And here's the story.

The Parable: A Scene at the Temple (vv. 10-13)

Two Men Show Up to Worship (v. 10)

[10] "Two men went up into the temple to pray..."

The story is given as if it really happened. It is set in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, on top of a hill called Mount Moriah. Two men have gone "up", walking up hill to the temple (Moriah is called "The Hill of the House") to pray mid-morning.⁴

They have gone to the most sacred site in Israel - the temple - to do the most sacred thing possible - pray.

Jesus identifies these two men by clearly understood labels. They would have been considered polar opposites by everybody listening to Jesus on that day.

One of them was a Pharisee.

A Pharisee

[10] "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee..."

Loving the window vs. loving the view

We read about the group known as "Pharisees" a lot in the Gospels. They are among Jesus' most bitter enemies and were, eventually, at the end, behind the effort to get Him arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. No surprise that we identify the Pharisees today as the bad guys.

But calling them "bad guys" would have surprised the average Jew of the first century because in those days a Pharisee was among the most highly respected men in any community.⁵

The Pharisee was devout and obedient to God. He knew Scripture backward and forward. So why do we think of them as "bad guys"?

To get a handle on where the Pharisees went rogue, I'll use an illustration from Eugene Peterson that might help.

"Imagine yourself moving into a house with a huge picture window overlooking a lake with a grand view of mountains. These are beautiful, rugged, snow-capped mountains. You have a ringside seat to grandeur and beauty. You can see the cloud formations, the wild storms that blow in, along with the rocks and the trees and the wildflowers and the water.

"At first you're just captivated by this view. You sit and you look and admire this breathtaking panorama. Several times a day you interrupt your work and stand before this window to take in the majesty.

"And then one day you notice some bird droppings on the glass, and you get a bucket of water and a towel and you clean it. A couple of days later, a rainstorm leaves the window streaked and the bucket comes out again. One day some visitors with a tribe of small dirty-fingered children come, and the moment they leave you notice there are smudge marks all over the window. They're hardly out the door before you have the bucket out again.

"You're so proud of that window, and it's such a large window. But it's amazing how easily that window gets dirty. Keeping that window clean now becomes an obsessive/compulsive neurosis. You accumulate ladders and buckets and squeegees.

"You construct scaffolding outside and inside to get to all the difficult corners and heights. You end up having the cleanest window in North America, but it's now been years since you've looked through it to see those beautiful mountains. You've become a Pharisee."

⁵ Pharisee: means *to separate*; i.e. from sinners and sinfulness, generally.

⁴ The morning time of prayer was about 9am.

The Pharisees came to love the window rather than the view that the window offered. They loved the letter of the Law more than the God who gave it.

Loving the letter rather than the spirit of the Law

They started out with zeal and passion and love for God. Over time that passion drifted from the God who gave a wonderful Law, to following rules for rules' sake.

By the time we come to Jesus, the Pharisees dealt exclusively in the realm of behavior. They didn't deal with heart issues. They just didn't go there.

They were doctrinally pure and morally upright - and as dead toward God as dead could be.

But we would have expected a Pharisee here in the temple. He was extremely religious. It's not surprising that he's gone to the temple to pray.

The other guy in Jesus' parable does surprise us with his presence. We don't expect to find a tax collector in the temple. And we sure don't expect to find him praying.

A tax collector

[10] "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."

The tax collector held the position of "Most Disrespected" and "Most Despised" in first century Israel. Tax collectors had well-earned reputations for dishonesty. They worked for the Romans, collecting taxes from their fellow Jews. They had permission from Rome to collect as much as they could and to pocket whatever they collected above and beyond for themselves.

Tax collectors were notorious sinners who thumbed their noses at God, His Law, and His people.

It would have been a rare sighting to find a tax collector in the temple at prayer time.

For one thing, they wouldn't have been welcomed there by the other worshippers. For another, they wouldn't have been inclined to go there in the first place.

But in Jesus' parable there is a tax collector and there is a Pharisee, both praying in the temple at the same time. Jesus lets us listen in on their prayers. First, we hear the Pharisee.

Two Men at Prayer (vv. 11-13)

The Pharisee's "prayer" (vv. 11-12)

[11] "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.' [12] 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

When a prayer is not a prayer

We are to picture him standing as he prays, which was the normal posture for prayer. But this Pharisee isn't just standing. He's "taking his stand." He's making his case before God, with eyes directed to heaven.

Curiously, Jesus says that he was "**praying to himself.**"

That doesn't mean that he was literally engaging in self-talk. He was addressing God and Jesus probably means that he was speaking internally, praying silently.⁶

But "**praying to himself**" is an interesting turn of phrase. And we wonder if the subtle, hidden thought is that while he *thought* he was talking to God, his prayers weren't making it past the temple ceiling.

That's because while he was praying, he wasn't really praying. There are times when a prayer is not a prayer.

In these words, the Pharisee addresses God once and manages to refer to himself five times. His prayer begins like a psalm of thanksgiving, but immediately turns into something ugly and self-centered.

⁶ Hannah prayed out loud, but quietly. (1 Samuel 1)

Matt Redman once wrote a Christian song called, “Heart of Worship”. Included in that song are the words, “*It’s all about You, Jesus.*” This Pharisee’s song says, “*It’s all about ME!*”

He doesn’t focus on God’s grace, mercy, and love. He doesn’t pause to consider God’s majesty or His mighty works or His amazing grace. He’s too impressed by his own amazing works.⁷

Me vs. “THEM”

He first lists vices from which he abstains. He sees himself as superior, in a class by himself. He’s a cut above.

His only word of thanksgiving is that He’s not like others. God should be glad to have a faithful servant such as he.⁸

Others might be extortionists. Others might be unclean and unrighteous sinners. Others might sin sexually. Not him.⁹

And at this point, you can see him looking sideways at the tax collector who is also in the temple. He is certainly happy that he’s NOTHING like THAT guy!

And honestly, there is no reason for us to believe that he was lying. He probably was an extremely moral man - and that’s not all.

It turns out that this man had a double major in pharisaism. On the one hand, he excelled at avoiding certain, easily identifiable sins. On the other, he had expertise at certain highly observable religious practices.¹⁰

He takes a verbal “selfie” and we get a good picture of this Pharisee.

⁷ Highlighting what an odd and egotistical statement this is, Bock renders verse 11, “*I thank God that I am such a great guy!*”

⁸ So, Plummer.

⁹ See 1 Corinthians 5:10-11; 6:9-10 for similar lists.

¹⁰ See Matthew 23 for Jesus’ denunciations of the Pharisees for their hypocritical practice of fasting and tithing.

A pharisaic “selfie” (v. 12)

[12] ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

FASTING

Now, fasting is good. There is not a thing in the world wrong with fasting. Avoiding food for a season to turn to God, to focus on eternity, or to express repentance over sin is a good thing.

But the Pharisees of Jesus’ day had made fasting such a regular practice that it had lost its “bite.”

In the Old Testament, there is only one required day of fasting in the whole year. That is the fast of the annual Day of Atonement. This man has gone above and beyond Moses. He fasts twice every week.¹¹

Again, he was free to fast as much as he wanted to. But he’s boasting about doing something that God never commanded.

And he’s not only boasting about it as if it gave him brownie points with God. He’s “praying” about his fasting practices to say that he is morally superior to others who only do as much as God commands.¹²

TITHING

In addition to fasting “above and beyond”, this Pharisee tithed “above and beyond.”¹³ He was really proud of his giving.

He didn’t just give a tenth part of his crops to the support of the priesthood, as required by Moses’ Law. He tithed EVERYTHING!

¹¹ Zechariah 8 gives evidence that other fasts were added to the Jewish calendar because of events that occurred in the nation’s history. But they are not what are referred to here, and they were not required by the Mosaic Law.

¹² In the first century, voluntary fasting usually occurred on Mondays and Thursdays. Tradition held that Moses went up on Mt. Sinai on a Monday and came down on a Thursday - hence fast! (?) Or... (Bock) it divided the week nicely.

¹³ Old Testament teaching on tithing is presented in Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:21-24; and Deuteronomy 14:22-27.

And on the basis of all the good things he does do and all the bad things he doesn't do, he considers himself right before God.

Now...

Of course it is a good thing to not be a swindler or to be unjust or to be an adulterer. And it's a good thing to be generous and to fast and to pray.

It is not, though, a good thing to look down on other people and to hold them in contempt. It is not a good thing to trust in yourself and your good works to find justification before God.

Ugly pride oozes from this Pharisees' prayer. He believes that God should be impressed with his record of service - especially when compared to such people as the contemptible low-life tax collector who is praying nearby.

The tax collector's prayer (v. 13)

[13] “But the tax collector, standing some distance away,¹⁴ was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

Overview of the tax collector

Like the Pharisee, the tax collector was standing. Unlike the Pharisee, he's not “taking his stand” before God. He's standing, but barely.

If he's standing externally, he's kneeling internally. Picture him standing while lying flat on the floor, face to the ground. He can't bring himself to raise his eyes to heaven. There is no pride about him.

He's located himself some distance away from the place where the Pharisee was praying. He is beating his chest, a sign of deep remorse over sin.

So, it turns out that the Pharisee was right in his evaluation of this man. He really was a sinner.

Side-by-side comparison

The tax collector and the Pharisee were on different ends of the spectrum when it came to behavior. The Pharisee was upright; the tax collector was not.

And they were polar opposites in other ways, too.

The Pharisee was focused on himself and gave a perfunctory nod to God. The tax collector's chief concern is with God.

The Pharisee was self-confident and was a “together” guy. The tax collector is a mess. He's so distraught he can't bring himself to look up. He's pounding on himself with regret for the bad things he's done.

The Pharisee put himself in a class by himself - and so did the tax collector. But he saw himself, not as superior to everybody else. He saw himself in a class of one not measuring up to God's righteous standards. He is **“the sinner.”**

The Pharisee believed that his life guaranteed him heaven. The tax collector knew that his life guaranteed rejection from God - and so he pleaded with God, not for justice, but for mercy.

The tax collector knows his need

If you've been treated wrong by someone, when you go to court you're looking for justice. If you are the one who has misbehaved, if you've broken the law and know you are in the wrong, you go to court seeking mercy.¹⁵

This man is pleading for mercy from a holy God. He needs mercy to “cover” his extortions, his thefts, his lusts and adulteries, his drunkenness, his selfishness.¹⁶

¹⁴ The temple was arranged in concentric “courts” - it is likely that the Pharisee has gone into one of the inner courts. The tax collector has probably located himself on the outer edges of the outermost Court of the Gentiles.

¹⁵ See Psalm 34 and 51.

¹⁶ The word that best describes the concept of mercy is “propitiation.” (Greek: hilaskomai; *ιλασκομαι*;) The word is found in 1 John 4 and Romans 3, and it is

Jesus' parable ends with the prayer of the tax collector. And with the parable finished, He speaks directly to His audience, beginning with a solemn, "*I tell you...*"

The Punch Line (v. 14)

The Amazingly Saved! (v. 14a)

[14a] "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other..."

The Pharisee is lost

The Pharisee left the temple that day with a slightly wrinkled sportscoat - and that's all. He was grateful to have been seen worshipping, but he left unchanged and untouched. He left unsaved and didn't receive God's mercy.

The problem wasn't that he wasn't far enough along on the road to salvation. The problem was that he was on the wrong road. He was trying to work his way to God - and that's a Dead End road.

But the tax collector left the temple reborn, his salvation highlighting God's love for the lost, the last, and the least.

The tax collector (THE TAX COLLECTOR!?) is justified!

More spectacular than the Mets win in the 1969 World Series, the tax collector wins. He is now justified. He has a right standing before God and is now God's forever son. It all happened in an instant, just like that.

the concept behind the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament and the death of Jesus in the New. The subject of God's wrath is not a terribly popular one - now or in the past. But the Bible is clear that God is offended by our sin. His wrath is kindled against us because of our sin. The only way to turn that wrath away is by means of a sacrifice - an unblemished lamb or the spotless Son of God. That is propitiation/mercy and it is for this that the tax collector in our parable pleads.

And it wasn't because of anything he did. In fact, you'll notice that he hadn't done anything at all when Jesus declared him justified.¹⁷

He hasn't carried out one good deed. He hasn't paid back any money. All he's done has been to come to God, admit his need, and plead for mercy.

And because that was the way he came, God said "Yes" and justified him. That's God's policy. He always says "Yes" when someone comes to Him, admits their need, and in faith pleads for mercy.

Jesus wraps up with one of the many Gospel paradoxes we find in the New Testament.

The Beauty of Grace (v. 14b)

[14b] "...for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Similarly,

- if you want to find your life, lose it for Jesus.
- if you want to be great, become servant of all.
- if you want to be first, run to the end of the line.

The tax collector learned that the way to come to God is not to try to impress God with how well you're doing. It is to admit to God that you're not doing very well at all - and to plead for mercy.

If you are here this morning and have never admitted to God that, no, you're really not doing all that well, thank you, well, today can be the day that you do just that.

You may or may not be guilty of extortion, theft, or adultery.

¹⁷ The Pharisees would have disagreed that the tax collector was justified by God. But Jesus' point is precisely that it is the attitude of the heart that is ultimately what matters and that justification depends on the mercy of God rather than on works.

But if not these, then in an honest moment, like I would, you might admit to pride, selfishness, envy, or arrogance. Maybe gossip and angry outbursts and failure to tell the truth (we call that lying). It may be that you even hold certain types of people in contempt.

The thing is, of course, that we have all failed. None of us measure up. We all stand in the same place as the tax collector.

And the way to come to God is to believe that everything we need for eternal life comes from Him. We supply nothing but need. We need mercy.

He provides the supply. He sent Jesus to live a perfect life and to die a perfect death that whoever believes in Him won't perish, but will have eternal life.

When we come to Him, believing that He is the kind of God who grants mercy when we ask Him, He showers us with that mercy. He saves our eternal soul, adopts us into His forever family, and forgives every sin we have ever or will ever commit.¹⁸

So, to you who have never tasted grace, whatever your sin, come to God today in the spirit of the tax collector. Come to Jesus and receive grace, mercy, and the free gift of eternal life, given to those who simply believe.

Conclusion:

As we conclude, I'm speaking to you who have already received mercy from God.

This morning, you're neither Pharisee nor tax collector. You know that good works don't commend you to God. You've come by faith in Jesus and have received God's grace and mercy.

But you know people.

You have friends who are running as fast as they can, trying as hard as they can to work their way to God. They don't know that that road is a Dead End.

And you also know people who have given up trying to make their way to God only because they think there is no way. They know that they have failed and they don't know what you know - that God always says, "Yes!" when someone come to Him admitting their need, asking for mercy, believing in Jesus.

And you're just enough of a lover of Cinderella stories to not only remember your own unlikely faith story, but to imagine what it would be like to see these friends come to faith in your Jesus.

God's heart is that the outsider will come in, that the prodigal will come home, and that the lost will be found. You once were lost and now you're found. Having received God's grace, will you tell your friend about the amazing grace of God available to her, to him?

So, first, take your friends to Jesus in prayer. Lift them up in prayer to God and ask Him to open their eyes to their need. Ask Him to open their hearts to His provision. Ask Him to show them the compelling beauty of the cross of Christ.

And then bring your friends to Jesus. Tell them about grace. Assure them that they'll never get to God by trying hard. Then assure them that eternal life is theirs if they will come by way of the desperate tax collector.

You've probably got someone in mind right now you could both pray for and tell.

Bring your friend to Jesus.

¹⁸ The point of the story is that even tax collectors are acceptable to God if they come to Him humbly. (Marshall) And if tax collectors, who is not welcomed to come to God?