

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: We are SO Grateful!

When Your “Next Step” is an “About Face” Study #1

(Luke 18:9-14)

Introduction: Next steps...

On December 25th, 2015, the highlighted NBA Christmas Day game featured the Los Angeles Clippers vs. the Los Angeles Lakers.

There was one memorable play, early in the game, when the Clippers point guard, Chris Paul, dribbled down court and took a shot from behind the 3-point line. He missed, and the ball bounced off the rim in the direction of Lakers power forward, Larry Nance.

Rather than catch the ball, as in a typical rebound, Nance tipped it up into the air, back toward the basket. It went right INTO the basket and Larry Nance joined a select group of NBA players who have scored for the other team. He scored two points for the Clippers.

It was actually a pretty athletic move. Nance jumped nice and high, displaying good coordination. He made good contact with the ball. It was a nice shot, a shot any Clipper would have been proud of. Swish.

The Lakers coach - Byron Scott - couldn't fault Nance's style on the play. He couldn't urge him to improve accuracy. The only way to improve Nance's performance on that play would be - not by shooting better - but by not shooting at the wrong goal.

I tell this story because I'm thinking of our church's Mission Statement. *“We help you take next steps with Jesus, so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus.”*

Taking a next step in the same direction is a great idea *if* you're already traveling in the right direction. In that case, a next step will get you closer to your goal.

So, I continue to be jazzed by our Mission Statement. The idea of a lifetime's worth of “spiritual next steps” deeply resonates with me.

But, when you're shooting at the wrong goal, your need is NOT to shoot better, it is to stop shooting at the wrong rim.

About a century ago, Will Rogers was credited with being the first to give us The Law of Holes, which is, *“When you're in one, stop digging.”* If your ladder is leaning against the wrong wall, climb down. If you find yourself walking toward a cliff, turn around.

Sometimes, the best next step you can take is an about face.

Thanksgiving, and preview...

Over the next three Sundays, we're going to give thanks to God for some of the many facets of His goodness and grace. And on this, the Sunday before Thanksgiving, we're going to look at one of Jesus' parables together.

This one is perfect for any of us who have ever shot at the wrong goal, run in wrong directions, or dug ourselves into a deep hole. That's because this parable highlights God's amazing eagerness to welcome us when we realize we've been wrong - and turn to Him.

The setting for this parable...

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. And then, He'll give sight to blind Bartimaeus. And right after that, He'll have a life-changing conversation with the tax-collector, Zaccheus.

Before all of that happens, Jesus tells a couple of parables.

First, He 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.

This judge doesn't care at all about the widow's plight, but he does eventually help her because she "**bothered**" him.

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

Jesus gave that parable to His disciples.¹ Luke follows that parable with another one that the Lord gave to a broader audience.

We aren't told what was the physical setting for this one or exactly when it took place. Like the previous parable, the action revolves around coming to God in prayer. But, whereas the point of the judge and the widow was all about God's posture toward us when we pray, this one is all about our posture toward Him when we pray.

The people Jesus had in His sights in today's parable were guilty of two grave errors. The first error concerned the way they viewed themselves.

The Audience (v. 9)

I am VERY Impressed with Me

[9] And He also told this parable to some people who TRUSTED IN THEMSELVES THAT THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS...²

¹ The last reference to an audience is 17:22, where He was speaking to His disciples.

Here are people who think that they have their lives all together. They have a very high view of themselves and think that they are a cut above the rest. They are 1%-ers when it comes to morality.

These people are impressed at what they see when they look in the mirror. They believe God is pretty fortunate to have such high-performing followers.

That smacks of pride and is Error #1. Error #2 follows.

I am Not Impressed with You

[9] And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and VIEWED OTHERS WITH CONTEMPT:

It's easy to fall into Error #2 when we're guilty of Error #1. People who believe that they are doing really well often view others with contempt, and Jesus' audience was guilty of looking down their noses at people who didn't work as hard as they did at being good.³

To these people, Jesus gave THIS parable. It is an outrageously "in your face" parable.

The Parable (vv. 10-13)

Two Men Show Up to Worship (v. 10)

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

² Commentator and biblical scholar Darrell Bock writes, "*Not in the final sense were they 'righteous'; simply that they thought they could go to God because they were morally upright.*" Bock holds that the point of this parable is not to teach who will and who will not receive eternal life (I agree with Bock in this), but what kind of an attitude pleases God when we come to Him in prayer.

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

Now this is a parable, so it didn't really happen. But Jesus told the story as if it really happened. It is set in a real place, in the temple in Jerusalem, which had been built on top of a hill called Moriah.⁴

Two men have walked uphill to the temple to pray. They are probably at the temple for the mid-morning time of prayer.⁵

Jesus identifies these two men, giving them labels that everybody in His day would know. And these two guys were, morally speaking, polar opposites

A Pharisee

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

Pharisaic devotion to God's Law

We frequently read about Pharisees in the Gospels. They were a very influential group of men in first century Israel.⁶

The Pharisee was devout and obedient to God. He knew Scripture backwards and forward. Pharisees went to extremes to carry out some of the commands of the Mosaic Law.

For instance, hand-washing for some ceremonies was required; Pharisees washed their hands incessantly, throughout the day. Sabbath observance required resting on the Sabbath day; Pharisees made a full-time job out of resting on the Sabbath.

Some of the first century rabbis thought the Pharisees were ridiculous in their picky observance of rules, but they were highly-respected by the public as spiritual leaders.

It is well known that Jesus and the Pharisees had issues.

⁴ According to Jewish tradition, the temple was built on the same site where Abraham took his son, Isaac, for sacrifice. (Genesis 22)

⁵ The morning time of prayer was about 9am.

⁶ Pharisee: means *to separate*; i.e. from sinners and sinfulness, generally.

Pharisaic conflict with God's Son

Jesus frequently called the Pharisees out for the sin of externalism, for not dealing with matters of the heart. He called them to mercy, compassion, and love.

Near the end of His life, Jesus referred to the Pharisees as "**blind guides**" and "**fools**" and "**hypocrites**" and "**white-washed tombs**" and "**a brood of vipers**". (Matthew 23)

They could have listened to what Jesus had to say, reflected, and repented. Instead, though, they got behind the effort to arrest Jesus. They pushed for His trials, His conviction, and His crucifixion.

The Pharisees were doctrinally pure and morally upright. AND they were as cold as ice toward people who weren't as holy as they were. They overlooked mercy and grace, brokenness and humility.

But we would have expected a Pharisee to go to the temple. The temple was a religious place and the Pharisee was a religious guy. It "fits" to see him praying in the temple.

We're surprised, though, to see the other man in Jesus' parable show up at the temple. We don't expect to find a tax collector in the temple. And we sure don't expect to find him praying. But there he is.

A tax collector

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

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 money as they could from the Jews and were then allowed to pocket whatever they collected above and beyond what Rome required. We can easily understand why the Jews hated tax collectors.

They were notorious sinners who thumbed their noses at God, His Law, and His people. So, a tax-collector in the temple - especially at prayer time - was a rare sighting.

In Jesus' parable, though, there is a tax collector and there is a Pharisee, both praying in the temple at the same time. First, we get to hear the prayer of 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.'

When a prayer is not a prayer

We are to picture him standing as he prays, which was the normal posture for prayer. But there is "standing" and then there is "standing." This guy is posturing. Posing.

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

Now, the Pharisee was addressing God. And if you had asked him he would have told you that he was praying to God, speaking internally, praying silently.⁷

But "**praying to himself**" is an interesting way for Jesus to say it. The not-too-veiled 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 His "prayer", the Pharisee says "God" once and refers to himself five times. At the start, his prayer looks like a thanksgiving psalm. It quickly turns into something ugly.

⁷ Hannah prayed out loud, but quietly, to herself. (1 Samuel 1) So here.

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 because he's too impressed by his own amazingness.⁸

ME vs. "them"

He lists vices from which he abstains. His only word of thanksgiving is that He's not like others. He sees himself as superior, in a class by himself.⁹ He's a "cut above." God should be glad to have him on the team.¹⁰

Others might be extortionists. Others might be unrighteous sinners. Others might sin sexually. Not him.

While praying, he opens his eyes and sees the tax collector and thinks, "*Thank God I'm NOTHING like THAT guy!*"

He was, truly, an extremely moral man with a double major in pharisaism. He excelled at avoiding certain sins AND he excelled at performing certain religious acts.¹¹ Like fasting.

A pharisaic "selfie" (v. 12)

[12] 'I fast twice a week.'

Now, fasting is good. 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' way of fasting caused it to lose its "bite."

⁸ Highlighting what an odd and egotistical statement this is, Bock renders verse 11, "*I thank God that I am such a great guy!*"

⁹ I'm remembering what coach Bum Phillips said about his star running back with the Houston Oilers, Earl Campbell. "*Earl may not be in a class by himself, but it doesn't take long to call roll.*"

¹⁰ So, Plummer.

¹¹ See Matthew 23 for Jesus' denunciations of the Pharisees for their hypocritical practice of fasting and tithing.

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 Pharisee has outdone Moses. He fasts twice every week.¹²

Yes, of course, he was free to fast as much as he wanted to. But he's boasting about doing something that God never commanded as if it commended him to God. And he's boasting about it to say that he is morally superior to others who only do as much as God commands.

In addition, the Pharisee was an over-the-top giver.

[12] 'I pay tithes of all that I get.'

He was proud to tithe "above and beyond."¹³ 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 - what he ate, what he bought, and what he sold!¹⁴

And on the basis of all the good things he does 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. It's a good thing to be just and to not sin sexually. 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 hold yourself in such high regard that you end up thinking that it's your righteousness that gets you in good with God.

Ugly pride oozes from this Pharisees' prayer.

¹² 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.

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

¹⁴ Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah. p. 312.

He believes that God should be impressed with his record of service - especially when compared to such people as the low-life who is praying nearby.

Jesus now lets us eavesdrop in on the tax-collector's prayer.

The tax collector's prayer (v. 13)

[13] "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, 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 posing. He's standing, but barely.

Picture him standing, while kneeling. He can't bring himself to lift his eyes to heaven. He's not proud of who he's become or of what he's done and he is beating his chest, a sign of deep remorse over sin.

It turns out that the Pharisee was correct in his comment about this man. The tax-collector really was a scoundrel.

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 morally upright; the tax collector was not.

But these two men were different in other ways, too.

The Pharisee focused on himself and gave lip service to God. The tax collector's chief concern is with God.

The Pharisee was self-confident, a "together" guy. The tax collector is a mess. He's filled with regret for the stuff he's done, the stunts he's pulled.

The Pharisee put himself in a class by himself and so did the tax collector. But the tax collector 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 God's blessings. The tax collector knew that his life guaranteed God's judgment.

So, he did what guilty people do. He pleaded with God, not for justice, but for mercy.

The tax collector knows his need

If you've been treated wrongly by someone, you go to court looking for justice.

But, if you are the one who has misbehaved, if you've broken the law and you know you are in the wrong, you don't want justice. You go to court seeking mercy.¹⁵

This man is pleading for mercy from God. He needs mercy to "cover" his extortions, his adulteries, his drunkenness, his selfishness.

Jesus' parable ends with the prayer of the tax collector. And with the parable finished, He speaks directly to His audience, those who thought so highly of themselves and so lowly of others.

The Punch Line (v. 14)

The Pharisee's Wasted Time and Effort

[14a] "I tell you, this man went to his house justified RATHER THAN THE OTHER..."

The Pharisee's time in the temple did him no good. He left the temple that day with a slightly wrinkled robe, and that's all.

He was grateful to have been seen worshiping, but he left unchanged and untouched. He improved his reputation, but hadn't connected with God.

And the problem was not that he wasn't far enough along on the road to right living. The problem was that he was continually dunking on the wrong rim, digging a deeper hole, climbing higher up on a ladder that was leaned against the wrong wall.

Convinced that his tithing and fasting and morality would impress God, he kept on, oblivious to the fact that God was looking for something else altogether. God was after humility, honest reflection, genuine, God-centered worship. God wanted brokenness and gratitude for grace received.

The Tax Collector's Blessing from God

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

Against all expectations, it was the tax collector who brought a smile to God's face. The notorious sinner is "justified." The least, the last, the lost is "exalted."

And it wasn't because of anything he did. He hasn't done one good deed. He hasn't paid back any money to anybody. He simply went to God, admitted his sin, pleaded mercy from God - and God said, ***"Yes."***

Jesus' punchline is one of the many profound paradoxes we find in the New Testament.

The Way to Come to God (v. 14b)

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

The tax collector learned that the way to come to God is to put away any thought of impressing Him with how well you are doing.

¹⁵ See Psalm 34 and 51. They are psalms of contrition and repentance.

The way to come to God is by way of humility. Reflect on God's holiness and purity and power. THEN, sure, go ahead and think about how well you're doing. Reflect on God first and see if that doesn't kill contempt of others.

Humble yourself and receive the cleansing and mercy that only God can give.

Conclusion:

So, four days. Four more days until Thanksgiving. And, whether your Thanksgiving involves a traditional feast with family and friends around a big bird, or something else, I hope that you will take time on Thursday to give thanks to God for His many blessings.

Our time of looking at Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector has added an item to our Thanksgiving list.

In addition to all the other things for which we are grateful to God, we are SO grateful that He eagerly welcomes us when we take a next step with Jesus, even if - maybe *especially* if - that next step is an about face.

I've taken dozens of about faces to return to a place of submission and obedience.

For instance, early in my walk with Jesus, I had to turn from very unedifying speech patterns and involvement with pornography.

But, all of my about faces didn't take place in the distant past. On Wednesday morning of this past week, I was brought up short as I was taking an early morning prayer walk in my neighborhood.

I listened to what I had just prayed and realized how terribly insincere, how Pharisaic, I sounded as I laid out a list of requests and complaints without giving a thought to heartfelt worship.

By God's grace (it is always the kindness of God that leads us to repentance - Romans 2:4), I made an about face.

I worshipped on the street, in the dark. And the testimony of Scripture is that God received my worship and I'm SO grateful.

One of the most beautiful themes of the Bible is the grace of God to welcome people who veer off course and who rebel.

For instance...

- When the people in the city of Nineveh repented, God relented and did not destroy them. (Jonah 3)
- After King David committed adultery and murder, he confessed his sin and God forgave him. (2 Samuel 12)
- After fifty years of a massively wicked reign, King Manasseh turned to God while in captivity, and God restored him. (2 Chronicles 33)
- In another of Jesus' parables, a prodigal son wasted his inheritance on loose living in a far-away land. But when he came to his senses, he returned to find his father's embrace, picturing God's welcome of all those who return. (Luke 15)

So, a word to you, the child of God, who this morning finds yourself wandering around in some pigpen or other.

Don't miss this. The tax-collector of Jesus' parable really did misbehave. Cheat, thief, immoral, disloyal. Guilty as charged. But he came to God in humble prayer, brought a smile to God's face, and walked away right with God.

If you have been guilty of speech that wounds (like gossip or lying or filthy speech), alcohol or drug abuse, disrespecting parents, out of control anger, being unkind to your friends or to your spouse, the way is open to you for a great next step in Jesus. But your next step may well need to be an about face.

Go to God in prayer. Get honest. Admit how you have failed. No excuses. God will cleanse you. He promises He will.

[1 John 1:9] If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

He promises that He will welcome you when you turn back to Him, when you stop digging.

And, after you make that about-face next-step and are pointed in a good direction, would you please reach out to someone here and ask them to help you take more next steps with Jesus? After all, we are here to help each other in this walk.

Now, I'd like to speak to you who have not yet come to Jesus for eternal life.

If you are aware of ways in which you are violating God's commands and God's wisdom, I hope that you stop. I really do.

Turning from this or that sin will be good for you and will lead to a better life. But it's not the most important "turn" you could make.

The first thing to do is to turn TO Jesus.

That's the turning that has to happen to be right with God. Other turnings will follow, a lifetime of turnings will follow. But, first, turn to Jesus. Trust in Him.

When you do that, He will save your eternal soul, adopt you into His forever family, and will forgive every sin you ever have or ever will commit.

And the way to come to Jesus is to tell Him that you are trusting Him to save you. Thank Him for giving up His life on the cross so that you could freely come to God.

Today, come to God. Trust Jesus, receive the free gift of eternal life and enjoy a Thanksgiving season unlike any you've ever known.

Finally, a word to you who may not see yourself in the shoes of the tax-collector.

You are doing well, resisting sin, walking in righteousness.

And you see the things going on all around you, in your culture, in your school, at work, and it breaks your heart. In fact, it makes you kinda mad.

You've noticed that there is a lot of sin going on today. It's in the news. All the time. 24/7. People in the corridors of power are sinning. People in the entertainment and sports and business world, too. It's serious stuff.

And, you're fed up with it all. You're put out with those who are misbehaving. I get it.

I think Jesus would say, *"Careful. Watch out. My little story is for you."*

Based on surveys I've looked at and books I've read and conversations I've had, it is clear that many of us who follow Jesus are famous for holding those who violate the Bible's standards for behavior in contempt. Just like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

Yes. By all means protect the innocent and support victims. Where crimes are committed, we support legal consequences.

But what if we who follow Jesus became known as the people who weep over sin and for sinners? What if we were more known for our compassion than for our anger? What if we become the ones who love and support innocent victims and who, like Jesus get the notorious reputation of being the friends of sinners?

Why not do an about face, stop railing against sin, and try loving the sinners for whom Christ died?

We who are SO grateful to God for His love and grace would do well to be known as the people who shower people who need His love and grace with love and grace.