The Good Man, the Bad Man and the Verdict

Luke 18:9-14

Over the summer we've been looking at the hard sayings of Jesus - those sayings that just seem to cut across the way we tend to see life, that we just take for granted, and we think, 'Jesus, surely you didn't mean that?' Or at least, surely you didn't mean it that bluntly, that directly. Except he did.

And today we're going to look at this parable Jesus tells of two men praying, two men standing before God. In fact, as we're going to see, they way they stand is a crucial part of the parable. And one of them's a Pharisee and the other's a tax collector. And today's hard saying is there in v14, where Jesus says, "I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other." That it's the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who goes home having been declared not guilty, having been declared righteous in the sight of God.

And you probably hear that and think, what's so hard about that? Because none of us like a pharisee do we? I mean, if I were chatting to you and describe someone else by saying, 'he's such a pharisee' it wouldn't be a complement, would it? And you might rightly go away saying, 'and Martin's a pharisee for saying that' and that wouldn't be complement either. And that's because we live on this side of the gospels. But back when Jesus first told this, this would have been shocking. People would have heard this and said, 'Jesus, seriously? You're seriously saying the tax collector goes home right with God but the Pharisee doesn't? That's hard. At least, it's hard to swallow.'

And when you see what Jesus is saying, you'll see why it was hard then and why it still is, but also why it's glorious. So, we're going to look at three things: the good man, the bad man and the verdict that counts.

The Good Man

Imagine the case of a senior executive, or academic, or politician who gets caught out for having lied on their CV, their resumé. They've claimed to have a degree they don't have, or worked at an institution they haven't, or served in a higher position than they did. It's not hard to imagine, is it, because the cases are numerous. But why do they do it?

Or think of a person who longs to be in a romantic relationship with someone else. Or the team member who wishes they could hear one word of encouragement from the coach, or a word of affirmation from the boss. What are each of them looking for?

Whether it's the embellished resumé or the desire to hear words of love or encouragement or affirmation from another, we all know what it is to want others to approve of us. The padded CV is about trying to make oneself look more impressive, so others will think more favourably of you. The need to hear words of love or encouragement comes from that longing to be valued by the one whose opinion matters to you.

And so, rightly or wrongly, we can find ourselves living for the verdict of others. And that's what this parable is about. Except it's about the verdict of the only One who really matters. It's about how God can look at your life - not just a resumé but it's totality - and say, I accept you, I love you, I approve of you.

And Luke introduces it by telling us in v9 that Jesus 'told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.'

So Jesus aims this parable at the self–righteous. At the kind of person who feels good about himself by comparing himself positively to others. And if that was a problem for the Pharisees it remains a problem for anyone who's religious, doesn't it? I mean, have you ever felt good about yourself because you're not like those flakey liberals, or legalistic fundamentalists? Have you ever felt that little surge of pride that your kids, or your marriage are going great, unlike those people over there? Have you ever looked at the behaviour of others and felt that inner congratulation that that's not you?

But self-righteousness isn't just a problem for the religious, is it? It's also a problem for the person who's thoroughly secular. You see, notice what Luke says. He says that Jesus 'told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, *and treated others with contempt*.' And right now, contempt is rife in our societies. The contempt of left for right and right for left. The contempt of progressives for conservatives and conservatives for progressives. I was struck this week by reading about Courtney Lawes, an English rugby player, who tweeted about the wisdom of being financially secure and getting married before having kids, and how that might go someway to dealing with some of the issues in the kind of areas he grew up in. And there was the usual twitter firestorm, including calls for him to be dumped by his sponsors and dropped by the team. Now, what is that? It's contempt for those you disagree with.

And every day, our ideologically fragmented media and politics, our online echo chambers and the rapidity of social media, will give you a thousand reasons to view and treat others, those different from you, with contempt.

But before you dismiss him, look at this Pharisee. Jesus' whole point is that he's not a bad man, is he? Ladies, if you met him when he was younger you'd think he was a pretty good catch. Jesus introduces us to him praying. So he's serious about his religion. In v11-12, the man spells out his credentials: he fasts twice a week, so he's obviously not going to get overweight. He doesn't commit adultery – he's going to be a good father and husband; he's not an extortioner – so he works hard; he's upright in his business practices. And if you're right-leaning in your politics, the good news is he doesn't like the tax man standing behind him, so he's obviously in favour of small government and low taxes. And if you're left leaning, he tithes, he's got a social conscience, he gives away a tenth of everything he earns. He has a heart for the poor, for the church and for charity.

By any standards, he is a good, morally upright person. But there lies his problem. Because the gospel is not a call to moral improvement. What God calls us to is not a list of behaviours to avoid, or political positions to embrace. It's not about how good your marriage or family is. It's not about the great kids you raise or the social agendas you advocate for.

But if you think it is, if you think that's how God is going to form a favourable verdict of you then it leads you up at least three wrong paths that Jesus shows us here.

Firstly, there's the path of **Judgmentalism**. You see, if you think that being accepted by God, if you think your ultimate approval depends on external stuff like behavior or religious observance, then it becomes very easy to develop a critical attitude towards those you think fail the test. When you think you've made it, it is so easy to look down on those who haven't.

So the Pharisee opens his prayer in v11 with 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men.' With his eyes and in his heart, he's looking around. He's comparing himself to others and considers himself better than others. But have you noticed how when we do that, we always seem to put the bar just a little bit lower than ourselves. We get in – we pass, because our sins aren't really sins, they're just minor character flaws, or they're the fault of your grandfather on your mother's side who had a terrible temper. So, we get in, but adulterers or extortioners, fat-cat bankers, are beyond the pale.

And so setting the bar just a little lower than himself, the Pharisee's prayer is strikingly devoid of confession of sin, isn't it. There is no acknowledgment of guilt. There's no sense of need, or of humility; but there is plenty of judgment of others.

But the second wrong path it can lead you down is **Separatism**. Look at v11 where Jesus says that 'the Pharisee, *standing by himself*, prayed thus...' And as is often the case, he unconsciously acts out what's going on in his heart.

He stands apart, by himself, because he thinks he stands apart. Concentrating on external behaviours, he considers himself in a different league to others and so he separates from others. And it's not hard to find that kind of separatism within churches. But once again, the secular world is no better. The shaming and the shunning of cancel culture, driven by a belief in someone's approval being based on external behaviours or political positions held, is just another form of the Pharisee's standing apart.

But thirdly, think your approval by God is based on your moral effort and you're going to become increasingly **self-absorbed, self-centred.** Did you notice how he opens his prayer? Verse 11 – 'God, I thank you...' And you might think this is going to be the prayer of a man grateful for God's undeserved blessing. And yet, after that first mention of God, God doesn't get another. Who does get a mention is himself, four times in two verses the Pharisee says 'I, I, I and I'. And despite the fact he looks around critically at others, his prayer is focused on himself. He's thanking God that he, himself, is so wonderful. Like a cargo plane that has just got too much stuff on board to get any lift, so in the words of Michael Wilcock, 'The Pharisee's prayer is so laden with self-congratulation that it can hardly get off the ground"!

But why would thinking that it's what you *do* that makes you acceptable to God make you self-absorbed? Because it's about what motivates you to *do*. You give and fast and pray and serve others, maybe to a greater degree than anyone else, but you'll be doing it for yourself, so you can look good to God or others. It'll be your image that's driving your doing.

So, Jesus is saying that it's possible to live this outwardly exemplary life; to have others respect you, to be a person of integrity and generosity and be far from God.

But there is another way.

The Bad Man

Now, in the culture of Jesus' day, the Pharisee and the Tax collector were at polar ends of the spectrum. If Jesus could not have picked a more pious person than a Pharisee, he could not have picked a more hated person than a tax collector. Jesus chooses a good, upright, moral guy and places him opposite the first century equivalent of a Nazi collaborator, someone who worked with the Roman occupying forces and profited at other people's misfortune. A hated outsider.

But what's interesting is that the way they approach God is as opposite as their position in life. While the Pharisee stood apart, by himself, Jesus tells us in v13 that the Tax Collector stood 'far off.' And while the Pharisee looked around at others, comparing himself, the Tax Collector, v13, 'would not even lift his eyes to heaven.' Why? Because he knows he isn't worthy to approach God. He stands far off because he knows he's far off. He won't lift his eyes to God because he knows how he compares to God.

And look what he prays: v13 again, 'God be merciful to me, *a sinner*.' Except Luke uses the definite article before sinner: so what he really says is 'God be merciful to me, *the* sinner.' So, unlike the Pharisee, he's not playing the comparing game. He's not saying, I know I'm a sinner, one

among many, and I know I might be worse than that Pharisee, but I'm better than that adulterer. He doesn't have anyone else's sins in his field of vision. Like the apostle Paul years later, calling himself the chief of sinners, in his eyes, he's THE sinner, coming to God for mercy.

But if the example of the Pharisee tells us that living a moral life is not enough to secure that mercy, if cleaning up his act is not going to do it, what can? How can any of us hope to be able to approach God and hear his words of approval and not spend our lives standing far-off?

Well, look again at what he prays: v13: 'God, be merciful to me.' He knows his only hope is God. And the verb for 'be merciful' to me is not the usual one for mercy. It's the verb ἱλάσκομαι (hilaskomai). It's from the same root word that was used for the cover, the mercy seat, on top of the Ark of the Covenant, in the Most Holy Place, in the Temple, where the High Priest went, once a year on the Day of Atonement, to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal, to atone for the sins of the people.

So he's asking, 'God, make propitiation for me. Make atonement for my sins. God, I need you to do for me what I can't do for myself, do what turns your righteous anger away from me.' So he's not coming like the Pharisee, with his moral record. But neither is he asking God to brush his sins under the carpet. He knows he deserves God's wrath, and he knows that his only chance is if God will step in and atone for him: 'God be merciful to me, by atoning sacrifice turn your anger away from me the sinner'.

The Pharisee thinks he can approach God on his own – and so he stands apart, probably closer to the altar than anyone else dared go, because he thinks his life is good enough. The Tax Collector hangs back because he knows that if he stands any chance of approaching God, God's got to do it for him.

The Verdict that Counts

And in v14, our hard saying, Jesus says 'I tell you, this man [the Tax Collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other'. And that would have been unthinkable in his day. No one would have said the Tax Collector was more acceptable to God, or had a better standing with God than a Pharisee - that just makes no sense. And think what Jesus is saying. He's saying, it's not your religious efforts, it's not how much you pray or how sincere you are. It's not about ticking the right theological boxes; but it's also not about your philanthropy or social engagement, it's not your wokeness, your ability to identify the tax collectors, the oppressors and enablers of the day, that makes you right, that makes you acceptable to God. Justification, that verdict of being welcomed and approved of by God, of being declared not guilty, is not based on any of those. Jesus is saying, you can never earn it, and you can never be good enough to deserve it.

But if that's the case, how do you get it?

By knowing what the Tax collector knew, and doing what the Tax Collector did. By humbling yourself and knowing that God's got to do it for you.

And in Hebrews 2:17 the writer says that Jesus, 'had to be made like his brothers in every respect [he became a human like you and me, with all that entailed], so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, *to make propitiation for the sins of the people*.' And that word propitiation is the same verb the tax collector uses in v14, 'God, make propitiation for me'. And the apostle John writes, 'In this is love, not that we have loved God *but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins'* (1 John 4:10).

And at the cross Jesus became THE sinner to save you and me, *the* sinners. At the cross he became that substitutionary sacrifice of atonement, the propitiation, that turns God's wrath away from us and takes it on himself. And at the cross God declared the sentence of death on our sin and Jesus took it for us. And he was cast off that we might draw near. He was shut out, that we can enter in. His head was bowed in death like the Tax Collector's was bowed in shame, that ours might be lifted up.

And what the Tax Collector prays God would do for him, Jesus does by dying for us. And you can know mercy and acceptance, you can know God's love for you and His unchanging verdict upon you, not because you get your act together like this Pharisee, not because you exalt yourself, or think you've got it more together, or are more socially aware than others, but because of Jesus; because of all that he has done for you; because of all he's doing for you; because he's exalted and sits at God's right hand praying for you.

And that's the only thing that can give you a motivation for living and giving, and praying and serving that isn't about you. You see, our problem is that within each of us there is a little Pharisee. Here, the Pharisee prays, 'thank God I'm not like this Tax Collector', and our response is, 'thank God I'm not like this Pharisee!' We're all Pharisees. And it's that pride in ourselves, and it's our doing to look good to ourselves, or God, or others that cuts us off from God's grace. But when you know that when you didn't deserve it, Christ died for you; and now, even though you don't deserve it, he loves you and prays for you, you can pray and you can serve, and you can give of yourself, not to earn God's favour but because you know you are already overflowing in God's favour.

So, go out into the week, and be loving and faithful and work with integrity, and stand up for truth and justice, and pray and fast and give sacrificially, because you know that in Christ God is already 100% for you. So you can do it for his glory, not your own.