The good man, the bad man and the verdict
Luke 18:9-14

As I've been pondering this parable, I've had two other stories rattling around in my brain. One of them is true, the other fiction, but so common it could be true.

The true story is that of Scott Thompson, the former chief executive of Yahoo who was forced to stand down this week having been accused of padding out his CV with a fake degree in computer science. Now, whether that is the case or not, I have no idea, but if it were, he certainly would not be the first person to have tried to impress people by adding imaginary stuff to his CV.

The second story I picked up from a novel, whose publishing blurb caught my eye – this novel tells the story of a young lady who longs to hear the man of her dreams tell her he loves her. She just wants to hear those words from his lips: I love you. But he's a distant unattainable dream, and knowing that she fills her life with work and relationships, and consequently pain, all trying to fill that void. Now, you may or may not be glad to know I didn't buy the book, so I'm sorry for all you romantics, but I haven't got a clue whether it ends happily ever after.

But what struck me about both those stories – the padded CV and the longing to be told you are loved, is this deep need we have for people to approve of us. That it matters to us what other people think of us. The padded CV is all about trying to make oneself look more impressive, in the hope that people will think more favourably of you, and give you the job. That desire to hear the words 'I love you' comes from that longing to be of value to the one whose opinion is most valuable to you, who matters most to you.

Now, of course, we might say sometimes – I don't care what people think. But that is often said in the moment when we very much do care what people think. We want people to think favourably of us, to welcome us, to accept us, to like us, and with those special few around us, to love us. And one of the problems is that deep down we can fear that if they really knew what I was like, if they met the real me, rather than accept me they might reject me. If they saw my CV as it really is, they wouldn't appoint me. If I let my guard down and they knew the thoughts I have, or the motivations that are driving me, they wouldn't really like me let alone love me.

And so, in a very real sense, and rightly or wrongly, we can find ourselves living for the verdict of others. And this parable that Jesus tells is about the verdict of Another on our lives, and it's the one verdict that really matters.

You see, as He journeys to Jerusalem, Jesus has been talking about the final coming of the kingdom, and the judgment at the end of time. And the question that arises from that is how can we stand in that judgment? How can we know a favourable verdict, the verdict we want to hear from God, upon our lives, not just at the end, but now, while we live? How can we know God's acceptance of us, how can we hear him say of us, 'I love you' when He knows precisely what we are like on the inside, and how can we know He will accept us at the end.

Well, in this parable Jesus presents us with two men who pursue very different ways of doing just that. Now I thought about calling this 'the proud man and the humble sinner'. But I suspect that if you had known these two men that is almost

certainly not how you would have viewed them. So instead I've called it the Good Man, the Bad Man and the verdict. And I've just got three simple points this morning: the good man who goes wrong; the bad man who goes right and the verdict that really counts.

The good man goes wrong

Now Luke introduces this parable in v9 by telling us 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. Those terrible people who feel good about themselves by comparing themselves positively to others. But you don't have to look too long at your own heart before it dawns on you that he might just be talking about you and me. Let's face it, have you ever felt that little surge of thankfulness or pride, that your kids are ok, or your marriage is great, or your career is going forward, in comparison to those people over there? Or you're glad you're not like those who drink or smoke or vote democrat or republican? Or in the religious sphere, you feel good because you're not like those legalistic fundamentalists, or those flakey guys who are just so emotional. If you've ever thought that way, or think that way, then this parable is for you; and me. And I suspect, everyone of us.

You see this Pharisee wasn't a bad man. He's a good man. If you met him when he was younger you'd think he was just the kind of young guy you'd want one of your daughters to marry. Jesus introduces us to him in the temple, praying. So he's serious about his religion. In v11-12, he spells out his credentials for us: he fasts twice a week, so as well as being committed to his faith, he's obviously not going to be overweight, and he's clearly got the self-control thing licked. He doesn't commit adultery – so this guy's a good husband, he loves his wife and his family; and he cares for them, he works hard – he's not an extortioner – he's upright in his business practices. Like many of us, he doesn't like the tax man, so no doubt he's in favour of small government and low taxes – if you're right leaning in your politics that is, and if you're left leaning, this man clearly has a social conscience – he tithes, he gives away a tenth of everything he earns: he cares for the poor, he's generous, he gives to church and to charity. I mean this guy could be the church treasurer couldn't he? He's the kind of thoroughly decent, upright, dependable man who would be chairman of the school governors or on the board of the local hospital. There's no way he's a bad man. And no one would have denied that he was more morally upright than the vast majority of people around him.

But there lies his problem. You see, in seeking the approval of God, in seeking this favourable verdict from God upon his life, he has concentrated on the externals. It's all about external behavior: obeying the rules and doing the right thing. It's not about his heart, or inner character. In the words of Luke's little introduction, he trusts in himself that he is righteous. He trusts that his behavior is good enough. That if he prays and fasts, and gives and lives morally upright, God will be in his debt, God will be impressed by his record of service, and will bless him and accept him; and that is a path that so many take.

But taking that path comes at a price:

Firstly, **Judgmentalism**. When we think acceptance before God is based on external stuff like behavior or religious observance, then it becomes very easy to develop a critical, judgmental attitude towards those we consider not to pass the test – whatever that test is. And in Luke's words in v9 we treat others 'with contempt'. When you think you have made it, it is oh 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.' He considers himself better than them. Now, what's interesting when we do that, is that we always 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 the fault of your grandfather on your mother's side who had a terrible temper. So, we get in, whereas adulterers and extortioners and the unjust… man, they are beyond the pale – they certainly don't get in. We are strangely partially sighted: we see everyone else's sins as clear as day – but are blind to our own, and in particular we don't see our pride.

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 simply no acknowledgment of guilt. There is no sense of need, of humility, or of personal sin; just judgment of others.

The second danger of taking this path is that of **Separatism**. And I was really helped in understanding this by listening to Tim Keller. You see Jesus tells us in v11 that 'the Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus…' Or some of your translations may have something like, 'he stood and prayed about himself'. And the Greek could mean either. And I think it's deliberately vague. You see, what is going on in the Pharisee's heart, he acts out in how he prays.

He stands apart, by himself, because he thinks he stands apart. Concentrating on the externals, he considers himself in a different league to others and he lives that out by separating himself from them. And isn't that just so easy to do? And now doubt you see how that can happen in churches all the time: the isolationism, the separatism that inevitably follows from the judgementalism of thinking your acceptance before God depends on the external stuff. Stuff like attitudes to alcohol, or worship styles, or blank, blank, blank and the list is endless.

But the third danger of taking this path of thinking your acceptance before God is based on your own moral effort and the stuff you do is **Self-centredness.** Now, did you notice how he opens his prayer? Verse 11 – 'God, I thank you…' And it first glance you might think this is a humble prayer of thanksgiving. But it's not. After that first mention of God, God doesn't get another mention. Whereas five times in two verses the Pharisee says 'I'. He is entirely self-focused. So rather than this being thanksgiving to God for His grace and His gifts, in reality it is me, me, me, me, me. He is thanking God that he, the Pharisee, is so wonderful. Like a cargo plane that has just got too much stuff on board to get any lift to take off, so

in the words of one commentator (Wilcock), 'The Pharisees prayer is so laden with self-congratulation that it can hardly get off the ground"!

Now, why is that? Why would thinking that you are can make yourself acceptable in God's sight by what you do, make you self-centred? Because it's all about what is motivating you to do those things. If you give and fast and pray and live upright so that you can get from God, by putting him in your debt, then it will inevitably make you self-centred. It's always going to be about you. And when you serve others, actually you're doing it for yourself.

So, the remarkable thing about this Pharisee, this good man, Jesus tells us, is that it is possible to be religious, and serious about it; to be morally upright, to refuse to engage in dishonest business practices, to pride yourself on your integrity, to pray, and fast and tithe and still not be saved, to still be alienated from God, to still be trusting in your own righteousness, and that not to be enough.

You see, what this man doesn't see is that it is the heart that counts. It's the inner-life that motivates the outer-life that matters. And ultimately, his confidence, his trust was in himself, not in God. So Jesus goes on to show us a better way.

The bad man goes right

Now, these two men, the Pharisee and the Tax collector were at exact opposite ends of the spectrum in that social religious culture. Jesus couldn't have picked a more pious person than a Pharisee nor a more hated individual than a tax collector. And Jesus doesn't do that by accident. It's not as if one is really a hypocrite and the other just a humble guy who finds himself in the wrong job. Jesus has deliberately chosen this good upright, moral guy and put him opposite the first century equivalent of a Nazi collaborator, a hated and rank outsider.

And yet the way these two men approach God is as opposite one another as their position in life. While the Pharisee stood apart, by himself, Jesus tells us the Tax Collector stood 'far off.' He probably stands at the outer edges of the temple court, because he knows he isn't worthy to approach God.

And his prayer in v13 is, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.' But what's interesting is that though the various translations translate that as 'a sinner', to make it more readable I guess, he actually uses the definite article before sinner: so what he really says is 'God be merciful to me, THE sinner.' Unlike the Pharisee, he's not comparing himself to anyone else. He's not saying, I'm a sinner, just one among many, and I might be worse than that Pharisee, but I'm better than that adulterer over there; at least my sin is just money and not sex. No. He says, be merciful to me 'the sinner.' He doesn't have anyone else's sins in his field of vision. In his eyes, he's THE sinner, he's not comparing himself favourably to anyone. It's true, isn't it, that the cure for self-righteousness is knowing yourself as you really are? And so this Tax Collector makes no other claim for himself other than that: God, I'm the sinner, coming to ask for mercy.

But therein lies the Tax Collector's problem. You see if the Pharisee's problem was his goodness, his moral uprightness so that he ends up seeking the approval

of God by his own merits and worthiness, the Tax Collector's problem is that he – like all of us - is a sinner, stained and slimed by sin. And if God is holy and just, and cannot look upon sin, as the Bible tells us is the case, how can this man, or any of us, do anything other than stand at a distance, afar off? How can we hope to approach God, and draw near to him?

And yet knowing what he is like on the inside, knowing his sins are just the outworking of his heart, this Tax Collector still comes, because unlike the Pharisee, he's not trusting in himself. He knows what he is like, he knows he can never be good enough, he sees himself as he really is and he has come to throw himself upon God and His grace. He knows his only chance is God.

And just look what he prays, v13: 'God, be merciful to me.' Now the verb for 'be merciful' to me is not the usual word for mercy. It's the verb ἱλάσκομαι (hilaskomai). What this word ἱλάσκομαι means is – make propitiation for me; God, for my sake do that which turns your wrath, your righteous anger, away from me; God, make atonement for my sins. It's from the same root word that was used for the cover, the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant containing the ten commandments, that was placed 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 upon the mercy seat, to atone for the sins of the people.

You see, this Tax Collector is not asking for his sins to be brushed under the carpet, he's not asking God to turn a blind eye to his sins. He knows he deserves God's wrath, and he knows that his only chance is if God will atone for his sins: 'God be merciful to me, propitiate your wrath, by atoning sacrifice turn your anger away from me the sinner'. It's interesting isn't that the Pharisee thinks he can approach God on his own – he stands apart, probably closer to the altar than anyone else, because he doesn't think he needs any atoning sacrifice. His life is good enough. The Tax Collector hangs back – he knows that if he is to approach, God must do it for him.

The Verdict that Counts

And in v14, Jesus totally turns it on its head, when He says 'I tell you, this man [the Tax Collector] went down to his house justified, rather than the other'. You see no one listening then would ever have thought that possible. It runs totally counter to their and our preconceptions. It's the Tax Collector who goes home justified, who goes home have been declared not guilty, who goes home having been declared righteous in the sight of God. The man who everyone thinks God should be pleased and honoured to have on His side – the Pharisee - fails the test, while the Tax Collector who knew he could never make the grade but threw himself on God's mercy, went home accepted by God.

Now why is that? How can that be? Because justification – that verdict of not guilty, that verdict of being accepted and welcomed in God's sight, is God's free gift to us. And we can never earn it, we can never be good enough to deserve it. But out of His wonderful grace He gives it to us as a gift, because Jesus became THE sinner to save you and me the sinners. At the cross Jesus became that substitutionary sacrifice, that sacrifice of atonement, whose death in our place,

for our sins, turns away – propitiates - the wrath of God. This Tax Collector's and your and my sins can be atoned for, we can know and experience God's mercy towards us because someone else paid the price.

In Hebrews 2:17 the writer of Hebrews says of Jesus, 'Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation [same verb as v14, ἱλάσκομαι] for the sins of the people.' In 1 John 2:2 John writes 'He [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins' [same root word, hilasmos]. And then in 4:10, 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.'

So 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 and be sure and certain of God's love for you and His verdict upon you, the only verdict that matters, not because you get your act together like this Pharisee, but because of Jesus and what He has done for you, because of God's grace to sinners like this tax collector, like you and me.

Now, of course it's not that fasting and prayer and being generous and caring for the poor and being faithful husbands and people of integrity in the work place are unimportant. That would be a travesty of the gospel. But we don't do those things or live like that in an attempt to earn favour with God, we walk the walk because God has been so favourable and generous and gracious to us in Christ. We don't do those things to try and secure the verdict, we do them because Jesus has secured the verdict for us.

And in closing out the parable, Jesus says in v14, 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.' Ultimately, the Pharisee put his confidence in himself, but the tragedy of that is that he went home empty handed. The Tax Collector put his confidence in God and he went home justified. Because it's about being confident in God's mercy and Jesus' righteousness, and not our own. And our problem is that within each of us there is a little Pharisee. We hear him pray, '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 is that pride in ourselves that is the very thing that cuts us off from the grace of God – because we think we don't need it. But when we come humbly, like this Tax Collector, admitting what we're really like and throwing ourselves upon the mercy of God, then we will find the grace we all so desperately need.

Now in closing, you might think, 'doesn't seeing yourself this way just lead to misery, o I'm just a miserable sinner'? Isn't that the way to a miserable, sin-focused life? Well, it might be if it wasn't combined with the grace and mercy of God – that He loves you and accepts you and receives you, even though He knows you inside out. That despite all your failures and faults and sins and secrets, there is nothing you can do to make Him love you more… or less; that you are secure in His love regardless of your performance – and all because of Jesus; and that's not the path to misery, it's the path to joy – unbounded joy in the grace of God.