

Who is Right with God?

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Date: 12 March 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I wonder what would you say is the biggest question in the Bible? The biggest question in the Bible. There's lots of questions in the Bible.

We might have lots of questions for the Bible, but what is the big question that the Bible itself asks and answers for us? Maybe you can think of a few. How can I live a good life?

How do I get to heaven? What happens after I die? Maybe why is there so much suffering? Or where did we come from? What is life all about? All good questions, all questions that the Bible answers, but what is the big question that the Bible puts to us and that it answers for us?

As elders, last year we read a book together called What is the Mission of the Church? And it's a book that encouraged us to think about the author's claim, about the one question that stands at the very heart of the Bible's story. What do you think that is? They say it's this, how can hopelessly rebellious, sinful people live in the presence of a perfectly just and righteous God?

How can hopelessly rebellious, sinful people live in the presence of a perfectly just and righteous God? They go on to say it would be easy to answer the question, how can righteous people live in the presence of a righteous God? Or even how can sinful people live in the presence of an indifferent God?

[1 : 4 1] But the question of how sinful people can live in the presence of a righteous God is not easy at all. And now I don't know about you, I'm convinced that that is the big question that the Bible asks and answers for us. I'm happy to talk more after the service if you're not sure yourself. But especially in this part of the Bible that we're coming to you this morning, that question is right on the surface of the text. How can sinful people be right with a righteous God? Now this whole book, the Gospel of Luke, is here to show us who Jesus is and what he came to do. And if we were to go back since chapter 9 in this book, Jesus has been on a journey on the road going to Jerusalem where he knows that he must suffer, die, and be raised to life again. And on the way, Jesus is teaching his followers what it means to live in the kingdom of God. That is, how do we live rightly with a holy and a perfect God as our king?

And in chapter 18, we're coming to the end of that journey. They're nearly in Jerusalem. And at this point, Luke tells us about a series of different people who come to Jesus, read about some children, and a ruler, and a beggar, and a tax man. And Jesus uses those different meetings to teach us who can come into God's kingdom and how they can come in to God's kingdom. How can we live with a holy God? That is the question at the heart of this section. And to help us see that, Luke tops and tails this section with two parables or stories. So the verses we just read together, two men come to God. One of them goes home right with God. And in chapter 19, verse 11, if you just have a look, it's a story about a whole city of people who have to decide how they will respond to their king. And by the end of those parables or stories, it's very clear who it is who was in and who was out of God's kingdom and why that is. And Luke puts those stories there so that as we read about those meetings, meetings with real people that Jesus had, we will see the question is, is this person in or out of God's kingdom and why? Is this person right with God or not? Why or why not?

And just to tip us off, okay, to the ultimate answer to that ultimate question right at the beginning, this is the spoiler. What does Luke put right in the middle of this section? You can actually see it on one spread of the church Bible. If you've got that open, you just have a look even at the headings and work your way in. You've got these two parables on the outside. If you just work your way in, then you've got one meeting and then another meeting. And then right in the middle, what is that section headed? Jesus predicts his death a third time. Right in the middle, isn't it?

Jesus speaks about what? His death and resurrection. And so friends, we as a church, we're on the flight path to Easter. And so is Jesus here. And so here is the question that Jesus wants us to be asking in the light of his death and resurrection. Am I right with God or not? How can I be right with God?

How can I not be right with God? We're going to take four Sunday mornings to ask and to answer that question, those questions with Jesus in the lead up to Easter, beginning today with the story that Jesus tells. Just have a look again, 18 verse 9. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. Now back then, you couldn't have got two more different people in their status and their reputation. The Pharisees were a group who were known for their really strict standards of living. So much so that for every law that God gave, they would invent a whole series of laws to ring fence that law so that you couldn't even get close to breaking God's law.

[6 : 18] So for example, God had said in his law that for one full day, the Sabbath day, his people were not to do any normal, ordinary work. They were to rest and worship him. And so say somebody came and asked, can I go for a walk on the Sabbath? Well, God's law didn't say anything about that. So they said, well, you know, what's a distance that you can kind of safely walk without being really at risk of breaking the Sabbath? Maybe half a mile, they said. Okay, now God's word doesn't say anything about that. But this was their idea of being right with God. If they could keep God's rules and then some, well, surely they must be right with God. No question, right? And this is exactly how this Pharisee comes to God, isn't it? In verse 11, you can hear that self-confidence, the self-righteousness in his prayer, can't you? The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all that I get. What's he doing? He has come to God to brag and boast about who he is and what he does. He's effectively handing God his religious CV, thinking that that is his ticket into the kingdom of God. And he's not shy, is he, of letting everyone know that that's what he thinks of himself and of them. He stands off in his own special place, Luke. You can imagine him kind of puffing out his chest, throwing his head up in the air and saying loudly enough for everyone to hear, thank you, God, that I'm not like all these people. Can you imagine? That is how the Pharisee sees himself. And we need to understand that that is how everyone else would have seen this guy as well.

Okay, now we can't stand this kind of holier-than-thou snobbery, can we? But back then, these people would have been looked up to as the people, the people, spiritual, holy, right, and good. Whereas the other guy in the parable, the tax collector, he would have been seen as the opposite, the lowest of the low.

Why is that? Not only is he collecting taxes, he's collecting taxes for a foreign government. So Jerusalem was being ruled over by the Romans, the Jews of the day, they despised this. And so they took out their anger on the obvious people, the people who came to take their money away and give it to the Romans. Now, these probably would have been their friends and neighbors, people who were paid a lot of money to do a really unpopular job. And so this is the tax collector. They were seen as traitors who had betrayed God and betrayed his kingdom to God's enemies. So how could a traitor like this have any place in God's presence? How could a traitor be right with God?

So can you see the gaping chasm between these two guys in the temple that day? If we had a scale that we could kind of plot these guys on, how close are they to God? Just by looking at them, well, the Pharisee would be right at the top and the tax collector would be right at the bottom. Whatever rules, the Pharisee had kept, the tax collector had broken. Whatever good deeds the Pharisee had done, the tax collector had failed to do.

And whatever identity and status the Pharisee could boast in, the tax collector did not have. And here's the thing, they both knew it, didn't they? They both knew it. The Pharisee prays, God, thank you that I'm not like this tax collector. The tax collector prays simply, verse 13, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Unlike the Pharisee, he's not on his own special pedestal, is he? He's off in a corner on his own at a distance. He doesn't puff out his chest. He does what? He beats his chest.

[10 : 50] His head isn't lifted up high, it is hanging down low. The idea is that he can't even bring himself to look God in the eye. He's so overwhelmed by his sin, the shame, the disgrace that he carries before God. He can't brag about what he's done. He can only confess his need of God's mercy.

He can't boast in who he is. He can only confess that he's a traitor, a rebel, a sinner. And not just a sinner, but the sinner. Something our translations don't quite pick up. Actually says, the sinner.

So if he's saying, forget other sinners, God, forget other sinners, I'm the sinner of sinners. I'm the chief of sinners. Now up to this point, okay, there's no surprise in the story.

There's no twist. This is what everyone thought of these guys, what they should say, and how they should be seen. But here's where Jesus turns our whole idea of getting right with God, being in God's presence, living with God. He turns that all on its head. Just have a look at verse 14.

What does Jesus say about these guys? I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. Just checking, Lord, which man? The tax collector went home justified right with God, and not the Pharisee. What? Can you begin to just get your head around the shock of Jesus' words?

[12 : 35] This bombshell that he lands, it just doesn't follow. It has to be a mistake. The Pharisee looks so right, doesn't he? The tax collector looks so wrong. And yet it was the tax collector that became right with God that day, because he came rightly to God, says Jesus, humbly, not proudly.

And here's the bombshell. Who's he telling this story to? Do you notice? Who does he tell this story to, verse 9? To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.

Jesus told this parable. He's telling the parable to people who are like the Pharisee. Can you imagine the shock, the insult, the offense of Jesus saying this?

Because as good as your life and religion looks, your hearts and your prayers don't get you anywhere with God. In fact, your hearts and prayers really need to be more like this traitor's heart and prayers, if you are ever to be right with God.

It's a simple story, isn't it? Maybe it's familiar to you. It's five verses in our Bible. It's not complicated, is it? And yet, and yet, it is pretty life-changing if we really take it to heart, isn't it?

[13 : 56] Because it's answering that question at the heart of the whole Bible. How can unrighteous people be right with a completely righteous God? Jesus says, it is not by trying harder to keep God's rules.

Or trying hard to keep God's rules plus some of your own made-up rules or human rules like the Pharisee. Instead, we get right with God by laying all of our rule-breaking, all of our unrighteousness before God, owning up to who we are in our sin, and simply asking him for his grace, mercy, and forgiveness, like the tax collector.

And that is no less shocking or insulting to our pride today than it was on the day when Jesus said it. Because that means, doesn't it, friends, that me and you can't do anything to get right with God.

We can't work hard enough. We can't do enough good things. We can't keep enough rules. We can't invent enough standards. We can't come to church enough times to be right with God or for God to say we are righteous.

God will only say that we are righteous when we have given up coming to him to boast, to brag, to present our track record and our CV, who we are, what we've done.

[15 : 26] He will only say that we are righteous when we throw ourselves on his mercy and give up on ourselves. If I am to be right with you, God, you have to be the one who does it, not me.

Now see how that would change us. How would that change our lives? How would that change our families, our church, if we took that from the mouth of Jesus as he said it and didn't try to kind of find a way around it or make our own way?

In our tradition, maybe I'm speaking to some of you particularly and not to everyone. I know we're not all, okay, from a certain free church tradition, but maybe some of us have grown up in a tradition where we've kind of tied ourselves in knots over this.

And maybe some of us are still tied up in knots about it. There are people who have sat in church their whole lives, have heard the gospel of Jesus week by week by week and still think that they cannot be a real Christian because they are not good enough for God.

As if being good enough was the way to come to God. Which of these two guys in the story thought that you had to be good enough to come to God? The one who wasn't saved at the end.

[16 : 52] If you think that you need to be good enough to come to God, when will you ever come? No one is good enough to come to God. We look at this Pharisee, don't we? We cringe.

So why would we think that we would need to become like him? To become right with God? You're the guy who didn't pretend to be good enough, who simply confessed his wrong.

He is the one who God saves. And so being right with God cannot be a case of being good enough, can it? You cannot possibly be good enough for God.

I am not good enough for God. I won't ask you to raise your hand if you think you're good enough for God. I trust that none of us would because we are not. So what wonderful good news then that God delights to accept us when we admit that we fall short of his standard and simply throw ourselves on his grace.

Tom Wright says in his commentary, these are among the most comforting words in the whole gospel. If that is how Jesus says we come rightly to God, God have mercy on me, a sinner, why would we not come like that?

[18 : 03] Well, here's the offense. We don't come to God like that not because we're too humble but because we are too proud. In reality, saying I'm not good enough for God, it's not humble.

It's saying I want to do it on my own my way. I want to do it without God and without God's grace. One day I'll get there. God just has to wait for a while for me to be good enough for him.

Is that humble? Or is it self-reliant, self-confident, self-righteous? Friends, we are never too humble. We are only too proud.

And that is a challenge to us still if we're already Christians, if we have come to God and confessed our sin and been forgiven, declared righteous in Jesus by his grace. In what way could the attitude of this Pharisee still live in us?

Not saying that we are Pharisees, but in what way might it be reflected in our own lives? Well, it's telling, isn't it? Jesus says the issue in the people he's speaking to is both vertical and horizontal.

[19 : 13] He says, verse 9, it was vertical towards God. They were confident in their own righteousness. They're telling God, I am good enough. Where might we see that same self-righteousness in us?

Perhaps there's sin in us that we're not willing to be challenged by God's word. We're not willing to confess to him as being sin. Or when we do, base our relationship with God on how much we are doing for him, how well we're doing, rather than simply on what Christ has done for us.

You brothers and sisters, those are both ways of trusting in our own righteousness, aren't they? They look like opposites to us, cherishing sin and cheerlessly serving. But they can both come from a heart that says to God, I'm good enough on my own.

And it's horizontal too, isn't it? They looked down on everyone else. So not only were they saying to God, I'm good enough, they were telling others, I'm better than ye. Again, where might we see that self-righteousness in us?

When we're quicker maybe to judge and to criticize others than we are to thank and encourage them. When we might assume the worst and not the best of others. Perhaps we'd rather sort out somebody else's sin before we've dealt really with the sin in our own hearts.

[20 : 39] Can we be like that? No, I can be like that. Do we tolerate that spirit of judgment and pride in our own hearts, our lives, our families, our church?

If that's how we relate to others, what does that say about how we relate to God? You think about this, it's impossible really, it's impossible for us to be proud before others and humble before God.

We can't look down on others and look up to God at the same time. It can't be done. Now again, that's not to say that we, if we are in Christ, are the Pharisees in the story.

If we were Pharisees, we wouldn't be Christians. But we can share something of that heart, can't we? And Jesus is saying we need to humble ourselves before God and ask his forgiveness for all of that.

Because that pride and self-righteousness is not the way to come to God or live with his people. If you just have a look at the end of verse 14, here's the take-home lesson for all of us today.

[21 : 47] Here it is from the mouth of Jesus. For all of those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

That is the lesson for us, isn't it? Don't we all need to learn it? If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian and you're maybe just finding out what our faith is about, you need to know that Christianity is not about being holier than thou and it's not about being a cut above and it is not about being better than anyone.

Christians can have that attitude, but it is wrong for us to have that attitude. And so while you maybe have seen that or experienced that in church, please know that in a Christian church, that that is something that will always be being challenged and repented of and not cherished.

because Jesus says that is not real Christianity. And in the same spirit, I'd want to put that challenge to you. How do you think? How do you think that you might need to come to God and be right with him?

How would you come? Lots of people today ask that question would say something like this. If I just don't do anything really bad and I live a generally okay life, law-abiding, good, kind, friendly, then God must not have anything against me.

[23 : 12] Surely, surely he would accept me. Perhaps you think something like that. Well, would God call you righteous? Because is that not anything different than what the Pharisee is doing, lifting up his achievements, who he is, what he has done before God and expecting God to call him righteous?

Is that how you would come to God? Jesus says that is not the way. Being right with God doesn't require a CV. It is not a life well lived.

It is simply telling him that you need his grace and forgiveness and trusting him to show you mercy. And all hangs on that word justified. It's the one word, isn't it, in this passage that might trip us up.

Justified, what does that mean? Well, to be justified means to be declared righteous. You put yourself in a courtroom. A judge, in giving a verdict on a case, would declare somebody guilty or righteous.

Today, it's guilty or innocent. Back then, it was guilty or righteous. And so, Jesus is saying, God can only say one of these guys is righteous at the end.

[24 : 27] But how can God call this man righteous when he is not? How can God justify sinners? Well, this brings us back to the beginning, doesn't it?

What is the answer buried in the heart of this section? What does it all hang on? Remember, what did we see? He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him.

They will flog him and kill him. And on the third day, he will rise again. Jesus says that will happen to him. The one who is telling this story, the Lord Jesus, he knew he had to die and rise again.

And he knew he had to do that so that sinners could be made right with God. Because on the cross, when Jesus died, God would count against him all the sin and the wrong that we have done against him and punish that sin in Jesus' suffering.

And in exchange, God would count to us who trust in him all the righteousness and perfection of Jesus himself. So that God can rightly say of those who have faith in Jesus that we are righteous when we come to him because he has clothed us in Jesus' perfect righteousness.

[25 : 50] We thought in Christianity that Christianity explored last month about how we would feel if a film of our lives was displayed before God. All of it. Okay? Not just what we've done but what we thought, what we felt.

How would we feel for God to see all of it? Our lives exposed. We thought, well, none of us would be able to look God in the eye.

Would we not be disgraced for God to see our secret secrets and the thoughts of our hearts? Well, that is how it is, friends. But then we thought about how God in Jesus' death had shown that film and projected our lives, our sins, our wrongs onto Jesus so that as God looked at Jesus on the cross, he did not see the life of his son but our sins as if it were Jesus who had done it.

And he has projected onto us who come to him in Jesus the perfect life and work of Jesus himself so that as God looks at you today, what does he see?

If you come to him in Jesus, not your sin and wrongdoing but the perfect spotless righteousness of his own son.

[27 : 09] That is how God today can call you righteous, right with him only through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ which means that whoever you are, whatever you've done, whatever you have not done, God holds out that right relationship with himself to you today if you would simply ask him for his mercy and forgiveness.

And friends, it is that simple. If you have not done that, would you not do that? And if you have done, does your heart not overflow with joy, praise and thanksgiving to the God who has saved you by his grace alone and not by anything that you have done or brought to him?

Let's praise him together as we pray together now. Gracious Father, how we thank you that you call us to yourself as we are, that you do not ask us to clean up our sin before coming, but you call us in our sin to make us clean.

Father, how we thank you for the death of Jesus, his blood that washes away our stained hearts, Lord, that cleanses us. How we thank you for his resurrection by which he presents us to you, spotless and blameless.

And Father, how we pray that we would rejoice in that. Lord, we pray that that would be the antidote to our pride and our self-reliance. Lord, help us, we pray, to humble ourselves before you that we might be exalted.

[28 : 58] For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.