

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben on Luke 18:9-14 at Victory of the Lamb on July 27, 2014.

Series: Good Questions – Honest Answers
Today's Focus: What Do You Mean: "I'm Not Good Enough?"

"The Joy of Going Home Justified"

Any of you listen to Pandora or Spotify at home? In case you don't know what those are, they're internet music streaming services. We love these things at our house because we love listening to music. However, we don't have the premium versions of Pandora or Spotify. We have the basic, free versions which means you have to deal with a commercial interruption every so often. And you know how the commercials are always louder than the music? It's like they're designed to startle you and grab your attention.

So this week as I was working on this sermon, I was listening to music on Spotify. The playlist was called "Focus." I thought, "That's perfect, I could use a little help focusing today." And then the first commercial came on. A familiar deep baritone voice intoned, "When you're a good person, good things usually happen to you. But what about when you're a good driver? All-State thinks you ought to be rewarded for that too."

And my first reaction was, "Well I'm a good driver. I deserve to be rewarded too. I wonder if my insurance company has a program like that." And sure enough, most of them do. But have you ever actually enrolled in one of those good driver programs? Basically you have to agree to let them install a GPS monitoring device on your vehicle so that they can monitor and track all your driving habits all the time—everywhere you go, every time you go there, how fast or slow you go, how quickly you accelerate or brake, and other things like that.

Well ok, maybe that's worth it to you to save some \$ on car insurance. That's totally fine. But here's the thing. Even if you have no problem letting some company track your every movement and monitor your every habit, do you really think it's always going to show that you are a good enough driver to earn a reward? Or might the truth finally come out that you're kind of reckless? That once in a while you run a red light, or you go a couple miles per hour over the speed limit. You ever do that? Or you forget to use your turn signals every so often, or you have a nasty habit of cutting people off when you're talking on your cell phone.

Are you always a good driver, everywhere you go, all the time? Now you're probably wondering, "Where's he going with this?" Well let's switch from the good driver program to the good person program. Have you heard of that one? It's pretty popular. It's the commonly held belief of almost every religion out there. It says, "God rewards good people."

Ok so let's say God rewards those who are good people. Well are you a good person? Why or why not? And how do you know if you're good enough? Then consider that your car insurance company might give you the option of enrolling in their good driver program, but that enrollment into God's good person program isn't optional. Imagine instead that you're automatically enrolled from birth into this

good person program and that God, who is omniscient, doesn't have to install a monitoring device on you because he knows already instantly and completely everything about you and so he evaluates you not just on the basis of your outward record but also on the record of your internal thoughts and attitudes—especially towards him and other people.

Are you still pretty confident that you're good enough? I mean kids, are you always *good* kids? Or do sometimes disobey your parents and try and get them to give you what you want by ignoring what they say or pushing the boundaries or throwing a fit? You do, don't you? And parents are you always *good* parents? Or does your patience sometimes run thin and do you ever lose your cool when disciplining your kids? Do any of you really think you've earned your way to the front of the line so that at the end of your life you're confident enough to stand before God and say, "Here's why you should let me into your heaven, God, because I've been a pretty good person"?

Well today we're going to hear Jesus actually tell us a story about man who had just that thought. "God loves me because I'm, basically, a pretty good person." It's a parable about two different people—one who at first glance looks good and one who at first glance looks bad. We'll start with the "good" guy.

⁹ *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:*¹⁰ *"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*

¹¹ *The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

So here Jesus tells us about The Pharisee. Now I know we today have the tendency to sneer, "Ohh...a Pharisee." But did you know that in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were considered to be the good guys? They were the very best of men. They were the pillars of the church. The guiding lights of Jewish society. Think of the best church people you know and that is how people looked at the Pharisees. Everybody saw how they lived. They were moral, upright people. Everybody respected them. These were the good guys!

Of course the Pharisee thought so too. Did you notice his prayer? It's kind of a funny sounding prayer, isn't it? *'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'* It's a boast, isn't it? He boasted about how much better he thought he was than other people. And what kind of people? Those people out there—bad people like the people you hear about in the news when you hear about gas stations being robbed by dudes wearing ski masks, when see the mug shots of people who get arrested for drunk driving, or those who get put in jail for gun violence. God, I thank you that I'm not like those people, those bad people...or even like this tax collector. That was what this "good" guy, the Pharisee, thought.

Now on the complete opposite end of the social scale, we find the tax collector. Compared to the squeaky clean Pharisee, guys like him weren't just considered bad. They were considered despicable. They were hated by just about everybody and usually with good reason. They were thieves. The Roman government had set up their tax system to give the tax collector complete authority for taxing his area. You had to pay what he decided. Anything he collected over and above what the government demanded

was his pay. It would be the same as if our local Milwaukee County tax collector had to give the state of WI \$75 for every car license, but then he charged you \$150 and kept \$75 for himself. Needless to say, he'd make a ton of money and not a lot of friends.

So on the surface of things, between the two men, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, who's the good guy? Everyone would have said, "Of course it's the Pharisee!" And from the outside only, it's no contest. If you compare deeds, there is no comparison between the unscrupulous thief and the church-going Bible teacher. Of course the Pharisee would be the one good enough in the eyes of God. He would be the one about whom God would say, "I'm going to reward that guy." But here's what Jesus is saying, "That guy's got it all wrong."

You see friends, the question we're trying to answer today is this: "What do you mean, I'm not good enough?" Maybe you get a sense that of all the questions so far this one might be the most sensitive to me. The reason I say that is because almost every funeral I've done ends up with me being sharply criticized by someone. In fact never have I been confronted in quite the way I have when I've preached for a funeral or memorial service. Because invariably here's what happens. Someone hears me say of the deceased that they were a sinner, that the wages of sin is death, that the reason everyone dies eventually is because everyone is a sinner.

And it's amazing how it usually doesn't matter what I say after that. I could have 5 paragraphs where I talk about how wonderful Jesus is because he conquered sin and death for us and how wonderful it is that those who believe in Jesus are forever with the Lord in heaven and if you believe in Jesus then you too will be delivered from death. I can say all that and then some...and yet someone, whether in a card that I get later on, or in a conversation that I overhear at the dinner, or sometimes even to my face will say, "How dare you say that so and so was a sinner! I knew so and so and he or she was a good person."

And it's not like I'd say in the sermon that were so bad that they never did anything good and I am always careful to not suggest they weren't a good father or a good mother and or a good kid who had a lots of friends. But there's just something deep in human hearts that's hard wired almost to think, "God rewards good people. What do you mean that I'm not good enough to get into heaven?" I get that. Jesus does too. It's just that it's wrong. That's why he goes on to say,

¹³ *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

¹⁴ *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

Can you hear the Pharisees in the crowd muttering criticism under their breath? Can you see the crowd clenching their fists in anger at Jesus? Of course you can because there's a little Pharisee in each of us, isn't there—including myself? From the moment we're little kids we're taught to try and be good whether it's being good at school, being good at sports, or being good at obeying the rules. And that's not bad except that when it comes to how you get to heaven, because then it's all wrong.

And here's why. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ... there is no one who does good, not even one" (Romans 3:10,12). Kaboom! That's God's verdict over all people on this planet who've ever lived. So the problem with thinking that God rewards those are good enough is that no one can be good enough. In fact everyone without exception is by nature bad enough. And that is why Jesus once said, "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). And I know how that sounds. It makes you want to say, "But Jesus, wait! That's not fair! No one can be better than that, except maybe you. You mean to say that I can't be good enough. How can anyone then get to heaven?"

¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

You see the difference between the Pharisee and tax collector? God does and it's a matter of the heart and faith. The Pharisee is self-righteous and proud. "I'm a good person." But the tax collector is sorry for his sins and repentant. He knows he doesn't even deserve to come into the presence of God. He couldn't even lift his head toward heaven. He was painfully aware of his sins. No excuses. No, "Yeah, buts." No, "But I'm basically a good person!" No, "But at least I'm better than those people." Just an honest, humble, heartfelt plea. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

And about this man, Jesus says, he *went home justified before God*. Do you know what that means—to go home *justified*? Picture God as a judge. The sinful person stands before God in the courtroom and he knows that he's guilty. But instead of the judge condemning him, he raps his gavel and says, "I find you not guilty. You are free to go." And you wonder, Well how can this be? Because the judge found Jesus our Savior guilty in our place. This is why God the righteous judge justifies also you and me who trust in Jesus as our Savior. Jesus took the punishment we all deserved when he died on the cross and suffered the torment of hell. When Jesus died he endured the full wages of sin which is death. When he rose from the dead on Easter, this is how Jesus proved that he had truly defeated sin and death, and not just in part, but in full for us all. The tax collector in Jesus' parable believed this. He put all his hope and trust in the mercy of a God who forgives only by grace. Trying to earn grace is like trying to pay off the national debt with Monopoly money. And that's why Jesus could say of this tax collector that he *went home justified before God*. He went home forgiven and therefore he could truly go home from church happy.

What gives you confidence that you will go to heaven when you die? I pray that it's this simple truth expressed in one of my favorite hymn stanzas that I learned as a kid. "Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to Thy cross I cling." So today instead of protesting, "What do you mean, I'm not good enough?" I pray that God would humble all of us to freely admit: "Lord, I'm not good enough. Not even close. Thank you for covering me with your goodness and calling me your own. Help me to experience today the joy of going home *justified*." Amen!

My Next Steps

Connect: You know the person who has that obnoxious personality, the one you try to avoid when you see them coming down the hall? Or the person that thinks that half the things they say are hilarious, but they're not? And what's really hard to understand is that they have no clue as to how much you dread running in to them.

Aha: We have no clue as to what we really look like to God. We're always rationalizing and changing our view of events to make us look better. Yet the perfect God expects no less than perfection all the time—and only his Son was able to deliver.

Treasure: ⁴ *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared,* ⁵ *he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,* ⁶ *whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior,* ⁷ *so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life* (Titus 3:4-7).

Challenge: For one week work on curbing your defensiveness and your desire to justify yourself. Instead, simply admit your failures and mistakes to others and to God. Find joy in the fact that God has justified you—fully and freely for Jesus' sake!