

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Luke 18:9-14 at Victory of the Lamb on October 30, 2016.

Series: Who Is This Man?

Today's Focus: Why It's a Small World After All (Reformation)

"Jesus Busts the Good Person Myth"

We've been talking about the profound impact that Jesus has made on our world. And we're going to listen today to Jesus himself tell a story where he busts the 'good person myth' which is at the heart of almost all religious thinking in human history. You know what I'm talking about? The good person myth is quite popular still today. It sounds like this. "I want to live the good life—whatever I feel makes me happy. But at the same time when I die I want people to say at my funeral that I was a good person and that's why I could go to heaven." Boil it down and the good person myth sounds like this: God loves people whose lives look good. But then we hear this story recorded in Luke 18:9-14:

⁹To 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. ¹¹The 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. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

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 imagine a candidate running for president with the slogan, Make America Humble again? Probably not a successful one. Yet Jesus here turns worldly thinking upside down and says that in the end there are those whom God will humble. And there are those whom God himself will exalt. Which group do you want to be in?

You see the good person myth says if you want God to exalt you then you need to be one of the good people. And to become good enough you need to enroll in and excel at the good person program. What am I talking about? Well a perfect example of it can be found in the first person in Jesus' story.

¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed. Now this sounds pretty nice, doesn't it? The guy went to church. And what did he do? He prayed. Gotta be a good person to do that, right? It sounds like he's

following the good person program. Act religious. Go to church. Say your prayers. Give generously. And the thing is that Jesus makes it known up front that this guy is a Pharisee. And I know we might hear the term Pharisee and have a knee jerk reaction to say, “Boo...hiss, a Pharisee!”

But in Jesus’ day the Pharisees were considered by almost everybody as the good guys. They were squeaky clean. They were not compromisers who gave in to the Romans and their pagan culture. They were religious looking, law loving folks who were zealous for God. Most of them were trying to preserve the Jewish way of life and whose lives looked like the part of being good—at least on the outside. And so at this point in the story everyone in the audience is admiring the goodness of the Pharisee who goes on to say, **I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.** Not too shabby—at least when compared to other people. You can measure this kind of religious activity after all. I mean would your devotion to God stand up by comparison? How good was your behavior this week? How generous is your giving going to be today?

But here’s the thing about the good person myth. The good person myth says it’s all about trying to look good on the outside. But what if God is actually more concerned about the condition of a person’s heart? Remember the context, we’re told up front that Jesus was telling this story... **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.** Now why in the world would these folks be confident of their own righteousness? Because they’d fallen for the good person myth. They thought by living outwardly moral lives that looked good, God loved them more. And the result, Jesus says, is that *they looked down on everyone else.* They thought, “God loves ‘us’ because we’re the good people and that gives us the right to look down on ‘them’ because they’re the bad people.” The problem is believing the good person myth doesn’t produce people who are good in the sight of God. It produces religious looking hypocrites.

I mean what a prayer this Pharisee prays, huh? **‘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.’** Now before we move on I think it’s important for all of us to try this on for size. Because the good person program is easy to fall into. You know what I mean? First of all, it’s self-centered. I. I. I. I. How much is your life centered around you and your feelings? How much of your energy is spent toward trying to get others to accept you or you trying to get attention and “likes” on Facebook and Instagram or you having other people think you’re such a good person?” To that extent that’s true for you...chances are you’ve fallen for the good person myth.

But what about this kind of prayer? *God, I thank you that I’m not like...* Now, I’ve never prayed a prayer like that out loud...but how many of you haven’t you ever thought something like “God, I thank you that I’m not like... *those people.*” You know what I mean? “Like those people who would vote for a scoundrel like that who is so corrupt and doesn’t have any morals and is going to ruin our country.” (Notice I didn’t even name a candidate yet you you’re all probably thinking of one or the other and their supporters that you lump together in one big group, as if all those people are bad,

right?) Or, “God I thank you that I’m not like those people who hang out at those motels on 27th St.” I see that one a lot on the Franklin community Facebook groups. Lord, have mercy on us.

You see the good person myth not only says that God loves people who try to look good, but one of its symptoms is that I will try and find my assurance that I’m good by comparing myself to other people whom I think are bad. And it’s helpful if I can find those people whose lives look really bad so that by contrast then I can start to feel really good. Why are so many people bullies in school or arrogant jerks at work who pick on other people? Because they’re trying to exalt themselves by humbling others. It’s a twisted version of the good person myth. It’s salvation by comparison. But the thing is you can always find somebody you think is worse than you, some group of people you think is worse than yours, some people you will try super hard therefore to avoid and despise from a safe distance as you pray: **God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.**

Because if ever there was a bad guy in Jesus’ day...it was the thieving, collaborating tax collector, a Jewish IRS agent in league with the Roman government. Recall how Pastor Bill last week described Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who was little in stature but big in sin. That was kind of guy Jesus is talking about in his story here.

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.’

And everybody listening to Jesus tell this story is going, “Yep, he sure is. A big time sinner. Preach it, Jesus. He’s not a good person at all. Nasty guy. Not like us.” Except what Jesus was about to do is bust this good person myth. He was about to blow it up big time! And in the process he was about to dismantle the entire scope of the good person program by declaring that a sinner is accepted in God’s sight not by their efforts to look good but simply by faith in the goodness and mercy of God who saves sinners.

¹⁴ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.

Can you imagine how all those who believed the good person myth were feeling? They must have been shocked. “Are. You. Kidding. Me!?” To which Jesus says, **For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**

Now the world doesn’t work this way, does it? Rarely. Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are not running their campaigns on the basis of who is more humble, are they? Rather they are appealing to the American virtues of who is smarter, tougher, stronger, who has more stamina, and whose track record of performance and experience is better. Admitting weakness is not looked upon as a virtue when it comes to politics, is it? Repentance is not political virtue while defiance seems to be. But what if this is completely backwards when it comes to our relationship with God and how we should

treat others? What if humbling ourselves before God wasn't actually a sign of weakness but the first step in experiencing closeness with God and a prerequisite for entering heaven?

In telling this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus is busting the good person myth. ¹⁴ **“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.**

Jesus said the tax collector—of all people—*“went home justified”* because he had just one plea. *“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”* He makes no excuses. He doesn't pass the buck to somebody else. He doesn't blame the system. He doesn't compare his goodness to other people's badness. He simply confesses that he has no righteousness of his own to bank on, that he has nothing good to bring to God except only his great need. Yet what did Jesus say? The tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home *justified before God!*

What is justification? What does it mean to be justified? Justification is when God declares someone *“Not Guilty!”* for Jesus' sake and that alone. Basically, it's God's announcement of complete forgiveness for every single one of your sins and mine because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. And it's based completely on grace. Grace is God's underserved love for sinners like us who could never deserve it. It's love that seeks you out when you have nothing to give in return.

You see the good news that Jesus Christ came to bring is something unique and wonderful! Every man-made religion in the world has at its foundation some version of the good person myth—that God loves those who try to look good. Some people think it's that God loves bad people who try and become good. But that's a myth. The tax collector didn't go home justified that very day because he promised to try hard to behave better and over time become good enough. Rather he simply trusted in the mercy of our gracious God when he finally realized he could never be good enough on his own.

How about you? Friends, God doesn't love bad people who try and become good. The good news is much sweeter than that. The good news of the Gospel is that God declares sinners like you and me completely righteous, for Jesus' sake. In other words, holy and perfect in his sight, lacking nothing! How? On the basis of grace through faith in Jesus Christ the Righteous One. Jesus Christ made satisfaction for all our sins in the sight of God when he exchanged his sinless life on the cross for our sins. He paid in full with his holy, precious blood the sum total of all our wretchedness and sin which he has forever taken away so that we could be declared righteous in the sight of God by faith in him.

So here's why it's a small world after all...because we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The good person program doesn't work because none of us can ever be good enough. But it's ok to admit that now because God has a better way. It's called salvation by grace alone, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. It's not the good person way. It's the Gospel way. Jesus has busted for all time the good person myth and given us instead the Good News. **For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** Amen.