

The Good, The Bad, And The Justified

Luke 18:9-14

Actor Gregory Peck was standing in line with a friend, waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. They'd been waiting for some time, the diners seemed to be taking their time eating and new tables weren't opening up very fast. They weren't even that close to the front of the line. Peck's friend became impatient, and he said to Gregory Peck, "Why don't you tell the maître d' who you are?" Peck responded, "No. If you have to tell them who you are, then you aren't."

That's something the Pharisee in our lesson apparently hadn't learned. His prayer, if it can be called that, is largely an advertisement for himself. He's selling himself to God. Little wonder that Luke calls him out by writing, "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." He would have done better had he had Gregory Peck there to whisper in his ear that if he had to remind God who he was, then he wasn't.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't have to tell God who he was. He knew who he was and he knew that God knew who he was. His prayer is less self-promotion and more confession, even a plea for mercy. He's not selling himself, but opening himself. And Jesus says, "It is this man who went home justified."

To be justified means to be declared "not guilty." It means to be declared right. The tax collector is declared to be right with God while the Pharisee, so certain of his own righteousness, is declared to be wrong with God. He is not justified before the bar of God's justice which is the court of ultimate consequence.

However, that doesn't mean that the Pharisee was a bad person or the tax collector really a good person. There's no hint of that in this parable. The Pharisee was probably every bit as good and moral and generous as he claimed to be.

When he gives his speech about how he fasts and tithes and gives alms and prays, he's not guilty of false advertising. He's not pretending to be something he isn't. In fact, the Pharisees enjoyed great respect among the people of Israel because of the high standards of their morality, their ethics, and their piety.

And there isn't any suggestion that the tax collector was really a good guy at heart. He was very likely every bit as bad as his reputation made him out to be. If he hadn't been crooked, he wouldn't have been a tax collector in the first place. You see, the Romans couldn't get honest people to be their lackeys. The only people who would be tax collectors were people interested in getting rich with little concern for how they did it.

The contrast in the parable is not between the real, but hidden, goodness of the tax collector and the real, but hidden, hypocrisy of the Pharisee.

This parable goes to the root of the problem of human sinfulness and alienation from God. The gospel that Jesus proclaims in this parable is radical in at least three aspects: first, the parable tells us that God knows us as we really are; second, that God accepts us as we are; and third, that though God accepts us as we are, He never leaves us where we are.

The first of those three aspects of the gospel is familiar to us, though we may not live in awareness of it all the time. **God knows who we are.** We don't have to do a snow-job on God and sell ourselves to him. Like the line in the Christmas song about Santa Claus, "he knows if you've been bad or good." God knows us.

But God's knowledge of us goes much deeper than that. He knows not only our actions, but our motives, our intentions, our deepest most intimate secrets. He even knows the depths of our unconscious minds.

It can be a frightening thing to operate on the "God rewards the good and punishes the bad" philosophy. Because if that's the way things work, then I'm in trouble. I've got things inside me that I wouldn't want anyone else to know.

That's why the news that God knows exactly who I am, better than I know myself, is such a liberating piece of good news. I don't have to pretend. I am who God knows me to be. I don't have to be afraid of him finding out something I'm ashamed of. I don't have to close off part of my life to Him. God knows me with a knowledge that is deep and wonderful and intimate and infinite.

Close on the heels of this truth comes the next part. God not only knows who we are, but **he accepts us as we are**. This is radical because it goes against the grain of the way most of us think.

If something good happens to somebody, we say, "Well, you must be living right," meaning that their goodness has been rewarded. When something bad happens to somebody, we wonder what they've done to cause God to punish them.

It's normal to think that God blesses those who are good and punishes those who are bad. That's the way we would do it if we were God, and we project our idea of justice and reward and punishment onto God. The only problem is that God doesn't conform to our expectations of Him.

Theologian Karl Barth would say, "God is God." He's not an idol created in our image. God acts as God acts. And Jesus says in this parable that God is a God who justifies the ungodly. He declares sinners to be in right relation to himself. He declares them not guilty.

Now, by human standards of justice, this is positively scandalous. God justifies the ungodly? Not because they are ungodly! God hates their ungodliness. God justifies the ungodly because they trust in him for their justification, and that's the right or righteous thing to do.

That's the meaning of having faith in God, believing that God will act like God and have mercy on us. The problem most of us have is that we don't act like God, and therefore, we are scandalized when God acts like God.

There's not a sin too black, nor a deed too awful, nor a thought too horrible for God to forgive. What cuts us off from His forgiveness and the freedom such forgiveness brings is our thinking that we have to justify ourselves. Trusting in our own righteousness does not bring God's verdict of not guilty. Trusting in God's righteousness does.

Now, those of you who are still awake and have been following along may be wondering, if God doesn't require us to change before he accepts us, then what's the use of being good at all? Why not sin boldly and have a good time? Here's where the third truth comes into play.

God knows who we are; God accepts us as we are; but **God never leaves us where we are**. When God justifies us on the basis of our faith in Him, He also transforms us and makes us better than we are.

The theological term for God's forgiveness of us is justification. The word for God's cleansing and purifying within us is sanctification. God starts with us just where He finds us, be it a palace or a pig sty, but He never leaves us there.

God's purpose is not just to rescue us from hell but to get us ready for heaven. He's in the business of making us holy. Maturity in Christ, spiritual adulthood, perfection in love -- these are all ways to describe God's work in our lives after He justifies us or declares us righteous.

This sanctifying work of God's spirit within us does not turn us into stained-glass saints, people who walk around piously with their hands folded in prayer all day. God's work within us is the most practical, down-to-earth (or is it "up-to-heaven") work imaginable.

When we open our lives to God's gracious presence, when we no longer trust in our own morality or good behavior or willpower, we find the most amazing things begin to happen. When we experience more of God's love for us, we find ourselves more loving toward others.

People with bad tempers find that God's spirit within them allows them to control their temper. People with enslaving habits find a resource beyond themselves and a source of strength to overcome those diseases of the soul. People with love of money and material things find that values begin to change. People with deep insecurities and low self-esteem begin to see themselves - and love themselves - as God sees them and loves them.

This doesn't all happen at once, of course. Discipleship, sanctification, spiritual maturity, it's all a life-long process. It's a journey. We don't become saints overnight, but we do become. That's the nature of the Christian life -- becoming conformed to the image of Christ.

God will not be content until Christ's image is perfectly formed in us, and that is why He'll never leave us as He finds us. Like a dentist who will insist on pulling an abscessed tooth rather than merely giving us pain-killers, God insists on removing the abscesses from our souls.

We don't have to remove them to make ourselves acceptable to him. But he'll insist on giving us the full treatment, causing us a lesser pain in order to spare us an infinitely greater one -- the pain of a life without him.

What aspect of the gospel speaks most to your needs? Is it the fact that God knows you, and knows you intimately and fully? If so, then accept the freedom that God offers you. Open yourself to him, confess who you are to him, and you will find him gracious.

Is it the second aspect which speaks to you -- that God accepts you as you are and declares you righteous on the basis of your trust in him? That too is liberating. Not only do you not have to hide your real self, but you do not have to make yourself good. Accept his love. Accept his forgiveness which he offers you in Christ. Accept his claim upon you. Accept your adoption into the family of God.

Or maybe you've experienced that much of the gospel -- the knowledge that you are loved and accepted and justified -- but you've not experienced the transforming work of the Spirit in your life because you have yet to understand or allow him to work on your heart.

If so, then open yourself to the Spirit as fully as you are able, giving Her the freedom to cleanse away all that is incompatible with the love of Christ. Accept the Spirit's discipline, and commit yourself to "going in for the full treatment."

All of which is a work of faith and a matter of trust for it is God who makes us like Christ. We won't have better morals or better ethics or more willpower based on our

decision. We'll have them only when we allow God to mold our nature into conformity with the nature of Christ.

Because when Christ is formed in us, then we'll be better people knowing that from beginning to end, we are saved by God's grace.