

The Heart of the Matter

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Luke 18:9-14

Sermon Series:
Gospel in Life

*What do you
say to a
preacher if
you don't
want to talk
about God?*

I attended my high school reunion last month. Interesting! A disc jockey was on hand to play music reminiscent of our era. Could someone tell me why, at social gatherings, we crank up the music so loud that we render social discourse impossible?

Name tags are a must at high school reunions. Although I attended a small high school, some of my classmates stood before me as perfect strangers. One woman asked, "Do you know who I am?" How do I respectfully admit to her I don't have a clue? It turned out that I sat next to her in home room.

We swapped stories that night, many of which I had long since buried or forgotten. Some stories made me laugh; others made me cringe.

Thankfully, old high school petty jealousies and cliques had long receded from view, although it's curious that most of my classmates still congealed in predictable social clusters. Some of the people I thought were cool in high school didn't hold my interest any longer. Some of my classmates I tended to overlook turned out to be the most intriguing.

So, why did I go? I spent the first 18 years of my life, my most formative years, with such people. Okay, there's another reason. I wanted to see how everybody turned out.

I wasn't very religious in high school. The super religious people I knew didn't seem to be having much fun and, since I was bound and determined to have a good time, I avoided them like the plague. Church bored me in those early years. I couldn't figure out what on earth the minister was trying to say. It seemed totally irrelevant to my relentless pursuit of fun.

Some classmates were more than a little surprised at my vocational choice. They didn't know what to say. What do you say to a preacher if you don't want to talk about God? Some didn't say much of anything. We exchanged pleasantries and drifted away. They seemed awkward and ill-at-ease.

Over the years, I've come to recognize this phenomenon all too well. If I'm in a social setting, let's say I am standing by a punch bowl with a group of people and we're making small talk about the weather and the Redskins; you know, important stuff. Eventually, the

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conversation will turn, as it always does in northern Virginia, to the question, “So, what do you do?” I smile and let it out slowly: “I’m a Christian minister,” which is typically followed by a lull in the conversation. I can almost see people making mental inventory of everything they have just said. Did I say any off-color remarks or four-letter words?

My profession, like every profession, is caricatured by people. People think it’s my job to act as a God enforcer and moral policeman. They are dead wrong, of course. My job is to share God’s good news with people. We are, it is true, deeply flawed, but we are also deeply loved by God.

We’re in week two of our eight-week Sunday *Gospel in Life* series. We’re using a workbook by Pastor Tim Keller to connect God’s good story to our everyday lives. Today’s topic is “heart.” Heart in the Bible is the soul or core of a person. While people look on outward appearances, God looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7).

The parable read a few moments ago features two people: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Jesus’ introduction to his parable in verse 9 ought to tip you off to its purpose: “Jesus told this parable to people who were confident of their own righteousness and

looked down on everybody else.” There are people, then as now, who are consumed with self-importance.

This Pharisee represents the most respected religious society of Jesus’ day. Pharisees are considered paragons of virtue. This Pharisee stands up in the temple and prays, in verses 11-12, “I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week [They were only obligated to fast on the Day of Atonement] and I give a tenth of all I get.” I count five references to the pronoun “I” in this two-verse prayer. This Pharisee’s prayer is totally consumed with self. His point of comparison is all the other people he feels he can eclipse—robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even this scum-bag tax collector standing nearby.

First century tax collectors were at the bottom of the Jewish social pyramid. They were considered traitors to the cause, working for the Roman government which insisted on levying heavy taxes on Israel. Tax collectors were notorious for extorting more than their fair share from unsuspecting citizens.

This reviled tax collector stands outside the temple, beats his chest and prays, in verse 13, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” Literally, the Hebrew reads, “God, make atonement

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- Dallas Willard

for my sin.” This tax collector recognizes it is going to take an act of God to remove his sins.

This tax collector casts himself on God’s mercy. The Pharisee isn’t looking for mercy; he’s expecting to be rewarded. Keller uses this parable to set up a distinction between religion and the gospel. The religion of the Pharisees could be characterized: I obey, therefore, I am accepted by God. The tax collector’s approach is just the reverse: I am accepted by God; therefore, I obey. In religion, my obedience wins God’s acceptance. But in Jesus’ way of seeing the world, God’s acceptance becomes my impetus for obedience. The Pharisee must somehow prove he is worthy of God’s love, while the tax collector knows he can never be worthy enough to merit God’s favor. One bases his acceptance with God on merit, the other centers it on grace.

Grace is an indispensable word in the Christian life. If you are new to this church, you will hear this word grace a lot around here. Paul writes in his New Testament letters that we are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:5). Grace in the Greek, *charis*, is best translated by our English word, “favor.” God’s favor or love is unmerited and undeserved. We can do nothing to earn God’s favor. Grace cannot be earned. Grace is God’s gift to us.

But the danger here is thinking—Well, if there is nothing I can do to earn God’s grace, I might as well do nothing. Grace is not intended to make us passive. Dallas Willard writes, “Grace is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.” Earning is an attitude while effort is an action. Without effort, we will never make any progress in the Christian life. Grace requires effort, plenty of effort. That’s why we encourage you to center your life in Christian practices such as prayer and worship, service and acts of mercy.

Grace is not opposed to effort, but it is opposed to earning. Earning is the attitude that I can somehow earn favor with God. We cannot earn favor with God. God’s favor is unmerited and undeserved.

Let’s return to the parable. The Pharisee thinks he can earn favor with God, while the tax collector knows himself to be in need of God’s favor. One centers his life on merit; the other bases his life on grace.

Ignaz Semmelweis was a Hungarian doctor working at a Vienna, Austria hospital in the mid-1800s. He was alarmed as to why there was such a high mortality rate among the women in the maternity wing of his hospital (one out of every ten). He began his research by making sure it wasn’t due to overcrowding or the food or atmospheric conditions. In the

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midst of his research, he left the hospital for four months of study abroad. While he was gone, the mortality rate dropped dramatically. He finally discovered the source of the problem. It was none other than Ignaz Semmelweis. In his work at the hospital, he and his colleagues not only oversaw the maternity ward but also did research on cadavers. He had no idea that he and his fellow doctors were transferring germs from dead bodies to actual patients. When he made it hospital policy that doctors wash their hands in chlorine lime, the mortality rate dropped 90 per-cent. His theory about washing hands wasn't enthusiastically received by the medical community. Doctors scoffed at his suggestion that they should wash their hands. His counsel was largely ignored and ridiculed. He suffered a nervous breakdown as a consequence and died in an insane asylum. It took another researcher, Louis Pasteur, to confirm his germ theory. Semmelweis was a man who devoted his life to studying a problem only to discover that he was the problem.

In our Scripture lesson, Jesus tells a story about two men who see their problems quite differently. The Pharisee sees the problem as outside himself. The tax collector

sees the problem as inside himself. One uses prayer to parade his virtues. The other uses prayer to seek God's grace and mercy. One focuses on merit, the other centers on grace.

The London Times newspaper, in 1908, asked a number of noted writers to contribute on the topic, what is wrong with the world? G. K. Chesterton, a well-regarded British author known as "the prince of paradox" as well as a noted Christian, contributed the shortest submission. In answer to the question, what's wrong with the world, Chesterton answered, "Dear Sirs, I am." Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton.

There is something wrong inside us. We call it sin. Sin is any word, thought or deed that separates us from God. But God, in the person of Jesus Christ, has taken the initiative to heal the breach. We are saved by grace. Salvation is grace, my friends.

You will drive yourself batty trying to earn favor with God. I tell you, it can't be done. God, be merciful to me, a sinner.