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THE WRONG AND RIGHT WAY
TO APPROACH GOD

Luke 18:9-14

By

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Luke Lesson 82

The Wrong and Right Way to Approach God
Luke 18:9-14

Some years ago, a researcher surveyed 7,000 Protestant youths from many denominations, asking whether they agreed with the following statements:

"The way to be accepted by God is to try sincerely to live a good life." More than 60 percent agreed.

"God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can." Almost 70 percent agreed.

"The main emphasis of the gospel is on God's rules for right living." More than half agreed. (Morton Strommen, *Five Cries of Youth* [Harper and Row], 1974, p. 76.)

My own experience in talking with people about how to be right with God bears out these findings. When I have asked, "If you were to die and stand before God and He asked, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?" the most frequent answer I hear is, "I am a basically good person." Or, "I've always tried to do the best that I can." Or, "I've never intentionally hurt anyone." Most people, including those who would call themselves "Christian," think that the right way to approach God is to present their good works at the gate of heaven.

All of the world's religions (except biblical Christianity) teach that we approach God through our good works. This was the main issue that split the Reformers from the Roman Catholic Church. Rome taught (and still teaches) that a person is saved by grace through faith in Christ, but not by grace through faith *alone*. Rather, in addition to believing in Christ, a person must add his own good works both to preserve and increase his right standing before God.

The Roman Catholic Church spells out these official doctrines in the Canons and Decrees of Trent, which The Second Vatican Council in the 1960's declared to be "irreformable." Here are some statements from the Canons and Decrees of Trent:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified, in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, ... let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 9, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker], 2:112.)

If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 12, in Schaff, 2:113.)

If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof: let him be anathema. (Session 6, Canon 24, in Schaff, 2:115.)

In our day, influential men, such as Charles Colson and Max Lucado, along with the Promise Keepers movement, are saying that we should set aside the differences between Protestants and Catholics, since we all believe in Jesus. But as long as Rome affirms these Canons and Decrees of Trent, to say that we are all of the same faith is to deny the gospel (as Paul argues in Galatians). Since the salvation of a person's soul depends on believing the gospel as revealed in God's Word, it is of vital importance that we all understand what Scripture teaches. It is important to you personally, so that you are clear about the basis of your own salvation. And it is important so that you can explain it to others who mistakenly think that we are saved by our good works. If you witness to a Roman Catholic, this is the issue you must endeavor to make clear, so that he can be saved.

Note that Luke 18:9 tells us why Jesus told this parable: He spoke it "to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt." He may have been targeting the Pharisees, but undoubtedly there were many others who trusted in their own righteousness as the basis of their standing before God. The Jews tended to think that being Abraham's descendants and following the Law of Moses separated them from the Gentile "dogs." They were a notch above others and would be accepted into heaven because of their Jewish heritage and their

moral lives. But Jesus upended that view with this parable. He shows that ...

The wrong way to approach God is by your own good works;
the right way to approach God is as an unworthy sinner,
pleading for mercy.

The scene is set in verse 10: Two men go to the temple to pray. One is a regular "church-goer," in fact, a religious leader who has devoted himself to the things of God. The other is a selfish, dishonest, greedy man who has no qualms about ripping off his fellow countrymen for his own advantage. Which of these two would you expect to get through to God in prayer? Guess again!

1. The wrong way to approach God is by your own good works.

The Pharisee represents all who try to come to God on the basis of their own good deeds. Keep in mind that in our day, the word Pharisee has a negative connotation, but in the Jewish culture of Jesus' day, the Pharisees were those who had devoted themselves to God. They were diligent to keep the Law of Moses. They were the religious leaders of the day. But Jesus uses this Pharisee as an example of those who try to come to God through their good works. He shows four problems with this approach to God.

- A. People who try to come to God by their good works are trusting in themselves.

Luke states this plainly in verse 9. To trust in ourselves is to distrust in God; the two are mutually exclusive. A person may protest, "I am trusting in *both* God and myself," but the truth is, he is trusting in himself, not in God. John Calvin draws the line this way: "Every man that is puffed up with self-confidence carries on open war with God, to whom we cannot be reconciled in any other way than by denial of ourselves; that is, by laying aside all confidence in our own virtue and righteousness, and relying on his mercy alone" (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], "A Harmony of the Evangelists," 2:202).

Let me illustrate it this way. Suppose that we both had bad cases of arthritis and I had been healed. You asked me, "What healed you?" and I said, "I drank a bottle of Pepto Bismol every day for a month." But just as you're running out the door to buy

your supply of Pepto Bismol, I shout after you, "And I also took ten Excedrin tablets every day that month." Suddenly, you're not so sure about the Pepto Bismol. Did it cause the cure or did the Excedrin cause it, or some combination of the two? Adding anything to the Pepto Bismol detracts from its testimony, that it alone cured me. The makers of Excedrin could boast that their product had a part in the cure as well.

Scripture declares that we are saved by grace through faith apart from works (Eph. 2:8-9), because if we add just a small amount of human works to what God has done, we will boast in our works and detract from the finished work of Christ. To try to come to God by our good works is to trust in ourselves, even if those works are mingled with faith.

Note the Pharisee's prayer. Jesus says that he "was praying thus to himself," meaning that he was praying so as to be heard only by himself. But, in fact, he *was* praying to himself, not to God! His prayer mentions God once, but "I" five times! Godet (*A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* [I. K. Funk & Co.], p. 409) says, "It was less a prayer in which he gave thanks to God, than a congratulation which he addressed to himself."

But, if his prayer was truthful, he was a moral man. He was honest in business, not a swindler. He treated people fairly, not unjustly. He was faithful to his marriage vows, not an adulterer. He was a decent man, not a greedy, selfish, unscrupulous person, like this tax collector. If you had to choose between a society made up of men like the Pharisee or the publican, you would pick the Pharisee any day.

Not only was the Pharisee a moral man, he was also pious even beyond the requirement of the Law. He fasted twice a week, whereas the Jewish Law only required once a year, on the Day of Atonement. He tithed from everything he got, including his herbs and table spices (Matt. 23:23), which went beyond the requirement of the Law. He had gone beyond the call of duty. But even though he was an exemplary man in many ways, he was heading down the wrong road. It wouldn't get him into heaven, because he was trusting in his own goodness, which cannot save anyone.

- B. People who try to come to God by their good works are looking down on others.

Luke also states this plainly in verse 9. Invariably, the person who trusts in his own righteousness looks down on others who have not achieved his level of holiness. He may phrase his pride in religious language, as this man does: "I thank You that I am not like other people." He is giving a tip of the hat to God, but he is still boasting in himself as being fundamentally different than these sinners that he mentions. And pride is a damnable sin, being the original sin of Satan and of the human race, who thought that they knew better than God. It is safe to say that every sin we commit is rooted in self-exaltation, or pride.

I was raised in a Christian home and outwardly I have lived a moral life. I have never been close to being drunk. I have never used drugs. I have been faithful to my wife. I seek to be honest, even in little matters. I have gone to church almost every Sunday since I was born. But, God had to show me that my heart is just as corrupt as that of the worst criminal on earth. If I had been born to a drug addict mother in the ghetto, instead of to Christian parents who loved me and brought me up to know God, I would be exactly where most of the ghetto kids are: doing drugs, stealing, and killing each other. If you think that you are somehow better than others, you are probably trusting in your own good works, not in the grace of God.

- C. People who try to come to God by their good works are comparing themselves to others, not to God.

The reason this Pharisee thought that he was so good was that he was comparing himself with swindlers, immoral people, and greedy rip-off artists. We all can find those who outwardly are more wicked than we are, and congratulate ourselves on our own holiness. But, if we looked the other way, we also could find many people who are far better than we are, people who have given their very lives for others. But those who try to come to God by their good works rarely, if ever, compare themselves to those who are better than they are. And they never compare themselves to God in the splendor of His perfect holiness!

I read of a guy who said that his greatest fear is that he would be standing in line at the Pearly Gates behind Mother Teresa, and hear Saint Peter say to her, "Well, you didn't quite make it." But the fact is, if Mother Teresa is in heaven, it isn't because of her good deeds. Line up the very best humans who have ever lived and they all have sinned and fall hopelessly short of the glory of God. He cannot and will not tolerate any sin in heaven. So it is useless to compare ourselves with one another. God's perfect righteousness is the only standard.

- D. People who try to come to God by their good works are looking at things outwardly, not at their hearts before God.

The Pharisee was thinking of all of his good deeds, the fasting and the giving, plus probably a whole lot more things he had done. But he wasn't looking at his heart, which was filled with pride. God looks on the heart. Outwardly, we can smile and be friendly toward someone, while our heart hates him and is plotting revenge. Outwardly, we can give a million dollars, if we had that much, and people would say, "What a generous man!" But God is looking on our motives before Him. Did we give it to please God or to receive the applause of men? Outwardly, I can be faithful to my wife all my life, but in my thought life, I may be committing adultery with other women every day. God looks on my heart.

No one who honestly examines his heart before God can hope to come before God on the basis of his good works. We may clean up our outward behavior, but we cannot clean up our hearts. Only God can do that through the power of the new birth. That leads to the second lesson here, exemplified in the tax gatherer:

- 2. The right way to approach God is as an unworthy sinner pleading for mercy.

If you exalt yourself by presenting your good works to God, you will be humbled on judgment day; but if you humble yourself now before God and plead for His mercy, you will be exalted into His presence on that day.

- A. Approach God as an unworthy sinner.

The publican wouldn't even come as far into the temple as the proud Pharisee did. He stood at some distance, and was even un-

willing to lift up his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast, showing his true sorrow for what he had done. But he didn't plead with God on the basis of his contrition. He didn't plead that he had now reformed his life by turning a new corner. He didn't promise that things would be different in the future. He simply came to God as he was, an unworthy sinner, with no basis or merit in himself for laying hold of God. He asked God for mercy.

That is the only way any of us can come to God, because that is what we all are—unworthy sinners who deserve His judgment. Come honestly and say, "God, I am a sinner who deserves nothing but Your judgment." The more you grow as a Christian, the more God will show you the utter sinfulness of your own heart. Charles Simeon observes, "Never are you higher in God's esteem than when you are lowest in your own" (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 13:34).

B. Approach God by pleading for His mercy.

"God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" Note that the man approached God Himself, not a priest. That is how we all must come. God is the one you have sinned against; go directly to Him with your confession.

Note also that the man approached God personally. "Be merciful *to me*." He doesn't lump himself with others: "We all have done wrong." He didn't assume that he would get into heaven on the group plan, because he was a Jew or because his parents had been faithful synagogue members. He was dealing with God on a personal basis. That's the only way into heaven. You must come to God personally, just you and Him.

Also, note that the publican approached God asking for mercy, not for rewards based on his merits. He did not say, "Be merciful to me because I was humble enough to come and confess my sins." He didn't say, "Be merciful to me and I'll work hard to pay You back." He just said, "Be merciful to me, the sinner."

The Greek word translated "be merciful" has in it the idea of propitiation, which refers to God's wrath being appeased because the proper penalty has been paid. Although this man, living under the Jewish sacrificial system, probably didn't understand that Jesus would offer Himself as the perfect and final Lamb of God for the

sins of the world, he did know that without the shedding of blood, there was no forgiveness for sins. And yet it was not the blood of bulls or goats or sheep that atoned for sin. They merely pointed ahead to what God's Savior would do in offering Himself in the place of sinners. They illustrated the principle of substitution, that God would accept the death of an acceptable substitute in place of the sinner's own death.

God cannot just shrug off our sins or He would not be just and righteous. The penalty for sin must be paid. Either we pay it or we trust in God to pay it for us through the acceptable sacrifice of His Son. To cry out to God for mercy is to trust in the only provision God has made for the penalty of our sins, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Rom. 3:21-26). The good news is,

3. When sinners approach God for mercy, He graciously, instantly justifies them.

Jesus emphatically states, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other" (18:14). To justify means that God bangs the gavel at His judgment bench and declares, "Not guilty!" Not only does He remove the guilt of our sins, He also credits to our account the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, the substitute who suffered the penalty of God's wrath. This man walked into the temple as a guilty, despicable tax collector, who ripped off people because of his own greed. He walked out of the temple righteous before God. How could this be? The answer is, he received a righteousness not his own, imputed to him.

Was that perfect righteousness imputed to him because of his works or his promise to be different? No, it was imputed to him by God's grace through faith. Did it take years of personal reformation and penance in this life and more years in Purgatory to secure this righteous standing for this man? No, he went down to his house justified. God graciously, instantly granted it. The word "justified" in Greek is a perfect passive participle. The passive voice means that he was acted upon by God; he had nothing to do with his own justification. The perfect tense shows that the act was accomplished with continuing results, so that he is now in a permanent state of justification. The great news is that when a sinner comes to God as a sinner asking for mercy, God graciously, instantly justifies him.

Conclusion

Years ago, a man was about to make a purchase in a drug store when a detective laid his hand on the man's shoulder and said, "You're under arrest. Come with me." Stunned, the man said, "What did I do?" The detective calmly replied, "You know what you did. You escaped from the Albany penitentiary several years ago. You went west, got married, and then came back here to live. We've been watching you since you returned." Quietly, the man admitted, "That's true, but I was sure you'd never find me. Before you take me in, could we stop by my house so I can talk to my family?" The officer agreed.

When they got to his home, the man looked at his wife and asked, "Haven't I been a kind husband and a good father? Haven't I worked hard to make a living?" His wife answered, "Of course you have, but why are you asking me these questions?" He then proceeded to explain what had happened and that he was now under arrest. He apparently had hoped that his record as an exemplary husband and father would impress the officer. But the fact was, he was an escaped criminal and he had to return to prison.

You may be a good person, a faithful churchgoer, and a decent citizen of this community. But God knows the many sins of your heart. All the good deeds in the world cannot pay for the many times you have broken His holy law. If you come into God's court on judgment day and present your good works, you will be condemned. But if you come as an unworthy sinner who has pleaded for mercy on the basis of Jesus Christ who shed His blood to pay the penalty you deserve, God will declare, "Not guilty!" Make sure first that you understand and apply this personally; then, share with others the wrong and the right way to come to God. Nothing less than yours and their eternal destiny is at stake!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is justification by faith alone not just a doctrinal fine point for theologians, but a crucial matter for everyone?
2. Why does adding our good works to faith as necessary for salvation deny the gospel (see Rom. 4:2; 11:6; Eph. 2:8-10)?
3. Is God fair to justify a terrible sinner the instant he believes and to condemn a good person who tries to do the best he can (see Matt. 20:1-16)?
4. Roman Catholics will bring up John 5:28-29 & James 2:23 to argue that we are justified by faith plus works. How would you answer this claim?

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