

A Sermon on Luke 18:9-14 NIV The Character of True Faith: It Seeks God's Mercy

People of God in Christ,

Last Sunday morning we took up a study of God's Word to learn about the character of true faith. And as we continue that study this morning, let's remember that we don't study God's Word simply to gain knowledge and to be learned people, but to be changed by God's Word from the inside out. And in this particular study, we are seeking to know the character of true faith, not just for the sake of knowledge, but for the sake of having such faith within us.

Thus I repeat the challenge I gave you last Sunday- Are you a believer in Jesus Christ? And before you quickly answer, let me make it clear what I'm asking- Do you possess the kind of faith that God's Word defines as true faith? Last time we made note that this is a different question than the question- Are you a moral person? Or- Are you a respected person within the church and community? Or even- Do know something about Christ and do you hold Him in honor? Nicodemus could have answered yes to all three of these questions. He was a moral person. He was respected among the people. And he came to Jesus with a significant degree of humility and even submission. But Jesus-- recognizing his lack of true faith, recognizing that Nicodemus was yet ashamed of Him--Jesus challenged him with the teaching- "You must be born again."

So from this we learn that true faith is the result of being born again, or born from above by the Spirit. And rather than thinking, like Nicodemus, that being born again is something that we must do for ourselves, we must rather despair of ourselves and go to God in humility and prayer, seeking to be given a true and saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Well, all this by way of review from last time, but this morning let's look even further at the teachings of Jesus concerning the character of true faith. And once again, let's compare our faith to the definition of true faith taught by

God in His Word. If we claim to be biblical Christians, if we would be those who uphold the Word of God on various other hot button issues in the church today, then let's be biblical on every issue, even if doing so brings us under conviction and requires our own repentance. And indeed, may the Word of God change us from the inside out.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is indeed another teaching from Jesus about the character of true faith. Let's think about it this way, very logically, that if the sinner's justification is by faith, as Romans 4 teaches, and if Jesus said that the tax collector went down to his house justified, then clearly we have an illustration here of true faith. Clearly the tax collector's prayer is the prayer of true faith.

So the main thing to take from this parable is that true faith cries out for the mercy of God. To put it another way, true faith makes an approach of great humility before God and seeks from God His mercy in Christ. Luke 18:13 says- "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 again, the immediate point of application is whether each of us has this faith. Not just any faith, not just a faith defined by some human tradition or a faith belonging to a certain culture. I must ask myself and you must ask yourself- Do I have this faith, set forth in God's Word, a faith in which I have cried out to God for His mercy in Christ?

I. HE STANDS FAR OFF - ACKNOWLEDGES THE HOLINESS OF GOD

And notice all that underlies and leads up to the tax collector's cry for God's mercy. First of all, the tax collector *acknowledges the holiness of God*. It says- "But the tax collector stood at a distance..."--and by this we see that he acknowledges the holiness of God. Jesus sets the scene for this parable at the

temple, as He says in verse 10- “Two men went up to the temple to pray...” So here is the tax collector, in the place of God’s holy presence among His people, but it says that he “stood at a distance.”

And actually the temple itself was designed by God to convey and impress upon His people His consuming holiness. From the outside in, there was the court of the Gentiles, then the courts of the people Israel, then the holy place, and finally the Most Holy Place, or the “Holy of Holies.” And the writer of Hebrews teaches us that into the Holy Place only “the priests entered regularly... to carry on their ministry.” And of the Holy of Holies it says that “only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.” (Hebrews 9:6-7) So the temple and the priesthood of Israel were set up by God for a powerful reminder to the people that their God was a holy God. They could not presume to enter into the immediate presence of God. Only the priests could enter the holy place. And only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies and then only once a year. And whenever he went to enter into the immediate presence of God, he had to take the blood of atonement to turn aside the wrath of God from striking him down and the people as well, even as they remained in the outer courts.

So here is the tax collector. As he comes into the temple, he won’t even draw near as far as he is allowed, but he even stands at a distance. He knows that the temple is the dwelling place of God. He knows that God is holy, indeed, a God of consuming holiness.

If we have yet to cried out for the mercy of God in Christ, it may be because we have yet to know and acknowledge that God is holy. And modern evangelical spirituality will not serve us well here, because too often in our day when we hear that God is holy, it would seem to mean that God is cozy. God is

holy, so let's all come snuggle up tight with him. That's not the God of Scripture, and that's not the meaning of holiness set forth in God's Word. God's holiness--in both Old Testament and New--God's holiness is what terrifies the people of God. At Mount Sinai, when God came down and manifested His presence upon the mountaintop and gave His Law through Moses, it says- "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance..."-- Doesn't that sound familiar? Like the tax collector did much later in the temple, "they stayed at a distance... and [they] said to Moses, 'Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.'"

In order to come to God in true faith, we need to understand that the incarnation of Christ was not a matter of a change within the essential Being of God. The coming of Christ into this world was not the occasion of God shedding His character as a holy God and deciding to lighten up and to be more accessible from now on. In fact, Christ came teaching the people, teaching us, that God is and remains a holy God. And while the cross of Christ certainly conveys and proclaims the great love of God, yet that same cross upholds and establishes forever the holiness of God, because on the cross the blood of the Lamb was shed to turn aside the wrath of a holy and just God.

If faith is real, it must begin by acknowledging that God is and remains a holy God. Otherwise, faith will not be about seeking the mercy of God in Christ. In fact, without the acknowledgment of God's holiness, it will be faith in a different god altogether. And so Jesus says of the tax collector, as he went into the temple, that he stood at a distance. He knew that God was a holy God.

II. HE WILL NOT LOOK TO HEAVEN - COMPARES HIMSELF TO GOD

But as we notice all that underlies and leads up to the tax collector's cry for God's mercy, second, the tax collector *compares himself to God in all His holiness*. Verse 13 again, says- "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven..." It's a posture of deep humility. His head is bowed low, his eyes are cast down. But I would argue that the thing that puts him into this posture of being unable even to lift his eyes to heaven is that he has come to compare himself to God.

By way of contrast, what do we hear from the Pharisee in his prayer, except that he spends much time comparing himself to other sinners. He prays- "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector." And in any given day, we too might shake off the conviction of sin simply by comparing ourselves to others. Like Nicodemus, we may tend to be very moral people. But that's not the comparison that the tax collector makes. The tax collector has been brought to see himself in the light God's holiness, and he is crushed. And he will not even lift up his eyes to heaven, because to do so would only deepen his conviction and the despair of himself that he feels within his heart.

And if we have yet to cried out for the mercy of God in Christ, it may be because we have yet to compare ourselves to God. Even if we acknowledge that God is holy, we need also to acknowledge that God is entirely just to demand that we be holy as He is holy. Instead, we might say- "Yes, God is holy, and good for Him; that's what He should be. Me, I'm not perfect like that. I freely confess that God is holy and I am not." But do we understand the consequence of not being holy as He is holy? He created us in His own image. He created us to be holy. And the fact that we are not holy, the fact that we are not without sin before Him is a matter of our bitter rebellion against God.

Romans 8:7 says- “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s Law, nor can it do so.” So it may sound so very casual, it may even ring with a bit of humility, to say- “Yes, God is holy; it’s what He should be. But I’m just not perfect like He is.”--when actually those are words of rebellion and hostility toward God.

So if faith is real, it must begin by acknowledging that God is and remains a holy God. But if faith is real, it must continue by comparing oneself to God in His holiness and acknowledging the just demands of His Law.

III. HE BEATS HIS BREAST - FEELS THE WEIGHT OF GOD’S JUDGMENT

But a third thing to notice leading up to the tax collector’s cry for God’s mercy is that *he feels the weight of God’s judgment against him*. Verse 13 continues- “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 we might ask the question- What is the meaning of such an act, this beating of his breast? Well, it certainly conveys a sense of self-displeasure. In the very least, surely we can say that the tax collector is not happy with himself. And how at odds with the modern day theology of self-esteem. Granted we want our children to have a healthy sense of confidence in their school work. And all of us need to have the confidence to make full use of the gifts and abilities that God has given us. But having compared ourselves to God, having known Him to be a holy God and ourselves as sinners before Him, it’s not self-esteem that we need but a very real sense of self-displeasure.

And yet this gesture surely means even more, because the tax collector clearly isn’t just disappointed that he has failed to meet the standard of God’s holiness. Even more, he feels the consequence beneath God’s judgment. He knows that He is a dead man before God. He knows and feels the sentence of

death as the punishment for his sin. And he beats his breast in the agony of his sinful soul before God.

Well, we live in a day when the church too often refuses even to talk about sin, even less the wrath of God for sin. But God's Word very clearly charges us with sin, and just as clearly warns us of God's holy judgment. In fact, scripture teaches that Christ Himself will carry out this judgment in the last day. And on that day, the people of earth will seek to hide themselves and will call upon the mountains and rocks to fall on them to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb, a response very similar to the beating of one's breast.

So if we have yet to cried out for the mercy of God in Christ, it may be because we have yet to feel the weight of God's judgment for our sin. Perhaps we simply choose not to consider it. Perhaps we've created, by our own imagination, a god of a different color. But if faith is real, it must acknowledge that God is holy. Surely a true faith doesn't deny the God of Scripture, and the God revealed in Scripture is a holy God, a God who requires holiness of us. So true faith must acknowledge that He calls us to be holy, and it must acknowledge that He judges those who are not.

CONCLUSION

But there may be another reason why we have yet to cry out for the mercy of God. Could it be that we have yet to be convinced that God is merciful? Maybe you came here this morning not knowing of God's tender mercy for sinners. So you don't have the hope of receiving mercy that would prompt from within you a cry for God to be merciful to you. If that's the case for anyone here this nothing, then let be it known as a proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ that God is a merciful God. And He has promised His mercy for those who seek His mercy in the cross of Christ Jesus. There are many re-

quests that we might make of God to which He might say, “No.” But here is a request that He will always grant- “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” As we cry out to God for His mercy in Christ, the promise of His Word is that He will be merciful. He will not turn us away. He will forgive our sins, and He will count us righteous in Christ Jesus.

And that’s what Jesus said of the tax collector who went up to the temple to pray. In verse 14, Jesus said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God...” To be justified before God is to be made right with God, to be counted righteous before God. It means your sins are forgiven, but even more, it means that God looks at you and sees you clothed in righteousness of Christ Himself. And the only way for that to happen is by true faith, a faith in which we cry out for the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus finishes this parable with both a warning and a promise. He says- “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled...” That’s the warning. Those who exalt themselves, those who persist in their pride, those who do not come to God for His mercy in Christ, will be humbled. But here’s the promise, that “he who humbles himself will be exalted.” This morning, you and I, like the tax collector, you and I can go home justified before God, as we pray in true faith- “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”