

The Real Sinner's Prayer

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[0:00] We want to turn to the book of Luke. We'll be in the book of Luke, chapter 18, 9 through 14. And as you find your place there, I think it's up on the screen, but it's Luke 18, 9 through 14.

As you find your place there, as Brother Greg mentioned, I've had the opportunity to be here before, but I know some of you may not have had the opportunity to meet. I work at the Virginia Beach Theological Seminary. Brother Mark's down there right now taking classes.

I got my Master of Divinity there, but I also work in the Registrar's Office and we have admissions there. So that's been a blessing. I have a wife, Leah, and we have four little children ranging from 10 down to 2.

And they are a blessing and, of course, keep us busy as well. One thing you can pray for us is you've been praying for us for years, for those of you who have been here, as I've worked on my MDiv degree.

But the Lord may be opening doors for us to pursue pastoral ministry up in New England, so where it's nice and cold there as well. So I'll be candidating a church in Connecticut next month.

[1:05] So if you can keep that in prayer, I would appreciate that. But we're not here to talk about me. We're here to talk about what the Lord has for us in his word. So I trust you have found the book of Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 through 14.

Probably have a heading that says the Pharisee and the tax collector or the Pharisee and the publican if you are more of a King James person. The Bible says here, Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. The one who humbles himself will be exalted.

[2:32] May God bless the hearing and teaching of his word this morning. Will you pray with me? O heavenly, gracious Father, we lift up this meeting to you.

May you be glorified. May you allow me to accurately convey what your text teaches. And may you give everyone here ears to hear. We think of this church, Lord, and pray for it.

And thank you for its faithfulness and its love for your holy word and for you. We think of its pastor, its lead pastor, Pastor Jeff, this morning.

We pray for his health and his back issue. O Lord, in your will, would you be merciful, Lord, and relieve the pain and let him return here in a work that only you can perform.

We are grateful, Lord, for this audience before you. I pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, usually when I have these opportunities to come and speak to a church like this, as happened this morning, I spoke to your brothers over in the AV booth, and they usually ask me, what should be the name for this sermon?

[3 : 43] And I'm not a very creative person, and my understanding is a lot of preachers are like that as well. And so my title of the sermon is, well, Luke 18, 9 through 14. How about that? That works. But this morning I actually did have a title for a sermon that I think corresponds with a theme, and that is the real sinner's prayer.

The real sinner's prayer. Now, as I mentioned that, what probably comes to mind is the way perhaps many of you were introduced to the gospel when somebody shared the gospel view.

Perhaps they told you about this type of prayer. And I just looked up a random website that had an example of this. And this is what it says the sinner's prayer is.

Maybe it would read like this. It would go something like this. Dear God, I know I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus Christ is your Son, that He died for my sins, and that you raised Him from the dead.

I turn from my sins and invite Jesus to come into my heart and be my Lord and Savior. Help me to follow you from this day forward. Amen. Well, I'm not mocking this prayer.

[4 : 53] In fact, it contains truth, orthodox truth from the Scripture. For example, in Romans 10, 9, and 10, you may be pretty familiar with this passage, but it says, If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

For with the heart one believes, and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses, and is saved. I think if you compare that passage with what you see in the sinner's prayer, you see a lot of it line up. It corresponds pretty well there.

So there's nothing inappropriate in and of itself with that sinner's prayer. In fact, I, and maybe some of you have the same testimony, I prayed something very similar to that when I was saved. I believe I was legitimately saved at that time when I prayed that prayer.

Now, it probably actually happened that you're saved before you ever pray those words, but it is a proper reflection of what God has done in your heart. However, there is a problem with that. Sometimes it can be presented or understood in a way in which it is the prayer itself that saves you.

It's like some magical incantation, you say, and all of a sudden, once you mention those words, the gates of heaven spring open, and you are part of God's family.

[6 : 00] Now, there's a contemporary example of this that I think underscores the danger here. Some of you might be familiar with the late cartoonist Scott Adams, who wrote the Dilbert comic strip.

It was pretty famous, well-known in the 1990s, kind of mocking corporate culture, and somebody who served in that, there's a lot to mock there. So that was a popular cartoon that resonated with a lot of people.

He later on said some political things that were controversial, but nonetheless, he was most well-known for that cartoon. However, sadly, recently, he developed prostate cancer, and I believe he passed it on within the last month or so.

But he made this statement after his death. He wrote it, obviously, before his death, but it was read after his death. And he said this in regards to his religious views. He said this, Well, I think our, hope and prayer would be that Mr. Adams may have written that well before he died, and that he had a more genuine understanding of what the Scripture said before he passed into eternity.

But if that was all that he understood about the faith and about Christ, I think we can see from that is an insufficient understanding. It was just this idea that if I say these words, then I will be in glory.

[7:43] I will be in heaven. There's no genuine change of heart, no genuine change of mind, no real repentance, nothing about the work of God, all about just a statement of the work of man there.

And I think what we see in our present text is just how and why there's such a grave misunderstanding to understand a sinner's prayer in that way. And that a true sinner's prayer goes well beyond this.

So let's look at the text this morning. Contextually here, what is happening in the gospel accounts, sometimes as you weigh the different gospel accounts, it's hard to keep track of the chronology, but this is what's happening here chronologically.

Jesus is heading down to Jerusalem for what will become the Passion Week, or what we understand is the Passion Week leading to the crucifixion, of course. Now, Jesus has been in Jerusalem recently, but the text indicates to us that he's gone back up to the region of Galilee, where he spent a good deal of his ministry, and also Samaria.

In fact, this is what it says in Luke 17, 11. On the way to Jerusalem, he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. And he is there, and he's heading down to Jerusalem.

[8:56] Now, we are told in Mark 10, 1, it's not mentioned in the book of Luke, but it's the same sort of passage or area of Scripture, the same events are taking place, that Jesus takes this route. He left there, that is, Galilee and Samaria, and he went down to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.

So let me give you, I know, fortunately, there's no map up there. I probably should have thought ahead about that. But if you can think in your mind, up north, there you have the Sea of Galilee. Down south, you have the Dead Sea.

Connecting them is the Jordan River. The region up top, towards that Sea of Galilee up here, it's known as Galilee. Makes sense, right? Then down near the Dead Sea, you have Judea, where Jerusalem is, where Bethlehem is.

And then in between, there's this region called Samaria. Well, Jews typically didn't want to walk through Samaria if they're going from Galilee to Judea, or going to Judea to Galilee.

And the reason for that is it was filled with Samaritans. And they didn't like Samaritans, because Samaritans were a mixture between Jews and Gentiles. And so devout Jews would see, these people are unclean, they're insufficiently Jewish.

[9:57] We don't want anything to do with them. Now, the Lord doesn't have that compunction, but they do. And so the normal route they took was they'd go through this region called Perea. They'd go across the Jordan, or what's called the Transjordan, across the Jordan, and they'd go up to Galilee and down to Judea, because they hated the Samaritans that much.

Well, as we know, the Lord, of course, interacts with the Samaritans at various points, but He does take this route, because what we're told in the book of Mark, is He goes across the Jordan.

He goes beyond the Jordan, and He comes to this place called Perea. The region of Perea is never mentioned in the Bible, but when it talks about going beyond the Jordan, that's the region He's in. And when He is in that region, or that portion of the country, a number of events take place.

He goes to a village at one point, and that's where He famously gives His teaching on divorce, that you see in Mark and Matthew, and because of some of the difference between the text, there's a lot of controversy there, but He gives that famous sermon there.

It's also where He tells the apostles to let the, or the disciples, to let the children come onto Him. And then as He's about to leave that village, it seems what's happening chronologically, it's sometimes hard to piece together exactly what's happening, but it seems like that's when the rich young ruler comes and runs up to Him.

[11:04] So all that takes place in Perea. Now that's going to take place a little bit later chronologically than where we are. But Jesus has come into that region, and I think the first event that happens when He comes into that region, it's found in chapter 17 of the book of Luke, in Luke 17, 20, some Pharisees come and challenge Jesus about the coming kingdom.

And the reason I mention that, not only is it the first event in this region, but part of the reason I mention that too, is this is probably not the audience who Jesus is talking to in our present passage. So our present passage has some things to say about Pharisees.

I don't think it's these people. What I think has taken place is that Jesus moves on to somewhere else. We don't know exactly where it is, but somewhere in that region. And He is talking to a group of people, but it's a new group of people.

It may include Pharisees. It may not. The description's left intentionally ambiguous here. But nonetheless, He's talking to a group of people somewhere. And look at verse 9. If you look at verse 9, you'll see a description of those people.

Some in that audience, it seems like it's some, not necessarily everybody in that audience, but some in that audience are said to have trusted in themselves that they were righteous. And they also treat those who they see as insufficiently righteous, they treat them with contempt.

[12:22] Now when Jesus is speaking to this crowd, I think He's speaking two parables to them that you found in chapter 18. The first one is the parable. It might be labeled as the corrupt judge and the widow, or the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge, something like that.

And when Jesus shares this parable, what He's talking about here is that there is a man who is a judge, and this widow keeps bugging him for justice. And eventually, the judge just relents and gives her what she wants.

And the point of that parable is that if a corrupt judge is going to give an annoying widow what she wants, how much more is our Heavenly Father going to give His children what they so desire?

And the point being there is that God's people naturally have a dependency upon their Father. God's people will depend upon their Father. But here in this present parable that we have here, we have people who have no dependence upon God.

People who don't seek God in any way. Because why? We're told they trust entirely of themselves, and they are also contemptuous of anyone who does not meet their standards of righteousness.

[13:36] Now, as mentioned, Luke doesn't give us a lot of specificity about this audience. We just know, in general, they are self-righteous. But he doesn't tell us, are there Pharisees, are there scribes in this audience?

There may be. Maybe it's even likely. But we don't know. And I think Luke leaves it ambiguous for a purpose. He intentionally leaves this ambiguous. Because what he wants us to do is to see, does this apply to the reader?

Or does this apply to us? It's not just for Pharisees and scribes. It's for anyone who might come to this text and read it and see themselves. Are they people who are self-sufficient and see themselves as righteous in themselves?

Essentially, to ask yourself as you work through this text, is it me? Is it me this text is talking about? Having an active involvement as you read through this text to see what's meaning and application is in your life?

Well, what does it mean, though, to trust in oneself? It's obviously condemned here, but what does it mean to trust in oneself? It is this idea of your spiritual posture being this way.

[14:49] Having an attitude that is consistently fixed on the idea of your own self-reliance for any spiritual need and even for eternal life.

It's all based, this individual, that's the focus of those parables, we'll see. It's all based upon what he has earned, what he has done, what he has achieved, at least in his own mind.

And the idea here, as the people who are understanding this or hearing this parable, is a person whose entire disposition is away from God and he's put his trust in himself and his own works and he's very comfortable in that situation.

Another way of putting this, perhaps, is that Jesus was addressing those who put their faith in themselves who don't really need God in any way, in any sense. This is what Habakkuk 2.4 says about such a person.

Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by faith. The only authority somebody like this has is himself and is somebody who has usurped God's role in his life.

[16:01] But the Lord goes further, or Luke goes further, at least in his description here, because not only have they put their entire trust and faith in themselves, it's caused them to have a haughty or judgmental attitude towards others.

They treat others with contempt. So the root to self-reliance leads to the branch of ungodly arrogance. The word here, if you have the ESV, that is used is contempt.

And that's partially correct. It captures some of the sense that there's this idea of this disdain for other people who aren't so righteous. But it actually goes, the word goes beyond this. It's actually referring to treating somebody or something as if it is nothing.

It is absolutely worthless. And so because these people are so enamored with themselves, everybody else is beneath them. Everybody else who doesn't correspond to their idea of righteousness is nothing.

They have such a high regard for themselves and such a little regard for others that they need correction. And the correction comes in the form of a parable. Actually, in the Greek, it's a definite article.

[17:12] It's the parable. It's a specific parable tailored to these people and their present condition. Now, as I'm sure many of you know, the purpose of a parable is not just a story, but it's a story that has a spiritual or illustrates a spiritual principle reflecting like a mirror back to a person so they can see who they really are.

And perhaps, as the Lord may provide as their sin is exposed, to repent of that sin. So here the diagnosis has been made of the people in this audience. They are proud, they are self-righteous, and they disregard others.

But the cure, the cure for the situation has come in the form of this parable. And this is how this parable begins if you look down in verse 10.

Two men are said to go up to the temple to pray. Two men are united in purpose initially. They are going up, supposedly, at least to worship God.

As we see the account develop, their paths will diverge dramatically. Two men go up, but only one, effectively, will come down.

[18 : 24] Note that when Luke talks about them going up, he's actually initially giving us just basic geographic information. Now, this would be a pretty basic thing that anyone had heard it then, but perhaps for us, it's helpful to have the understanding that where was the temple in Jerusalem?

Well, it was up on the Temple Mount. So it means anywhere you were in Jerusalem, you had to ascend to go up to the temple. Anywhere you were meant that you physically had to go up to the temple.

And this also has a spiritual relation, because when you're going up to the temple, you're going up, ascending, to meet with God. This is what Psalm 122, that's considered a psalm of ascent, says in the first verse.

I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord. So you have to ascend to go up to have this audience, to have this meeting with God. And that's what they're doing.

There are desires to come up, at least stated desires to come up, and to meet with God. And they want to do so by communing with God. And how do we commune with God? It is through prayer.

[19 : 23] They are going to go up to pray, as we are told in here. And it is in prayer where God's verdict is often rendered. And here that will be the case. God will weigh the hearts of these men as they pray before Him in this temple, in this situation.

Well, I think a little bit more background might be helpful as we try to understand this passage. Because at least in my mind's eye, as I just read this text without studying it through, I kind of think of the idea that you have two men coming almost like coming into a church, right?

And one sits down one pew, one sits down the other pew, and they just pray to God, and this is their prayers. But that's not the case. Now, the text itself really indicates this is more of a public prayer, so you probably were more perceptive than I was as you read the text.

But this is not, this is decidedly not just some private prayer with two men. This is a very public setting. In the Old Testament, there was a ritual given to the Jews.

You can find this in Numbers 28 if you want to look it up later on. And it's known in the Hebrew as Olat Hamid. But essentially, what took place was twice a day in the temple, the Jews were to come up, and they were to, or in the house of worship, they were to come up, and there would be a sacrifice of a lamb, and then there would be a grain offering and a drink offering.

[20 : 38] And what we know contextually here is the audience probably would have understood this as these two men coming during one of those two services during the day. So they're coming at a very public time of prayer in the main courtyard of the temple.

The word for temple here is not the word for the inner sanctuary. It's the word for the temple broadly. So they are in a broad, public area, and they are praying there. And so some of the actions of these men make a little bit more sense understanding that because the Pharisee has an audience for them to listen to how great he thinks he is.

That's why he's praying this way. Everyone around him can hear him boasting in this way. And it also shows why there's such shame on the publican or the tax collector's part because he's in the situation in a very public way.

Moreover, as we mentioned, part of this ceremony is the sacrifice of the lamb that points to the coming Messiah. And so perhaps this is what prompts the tax collector to repent in this way and be so moved by his sin as he understands the spiritual nuance of what's taking place while the proud Pharisee ignores the substance of the ceremony in which he's involved.

Well, as we've mentioned, there are two men, one the Pharisee and the other the tax collector or the publican in the older English in the King James Version. If you look at verse 10, you see this construction, the one being the Pharisee and the other being the publican.

[22 : 05] That, I think, is an intentional structure brought into the English from the Greek. And what it's saying, the tone here is that the Pharisee is the one. That is, he is the focus of the story.

And the audience here most likely would have seen him as the default character, even the hero of the story. He's mentioned, he's the focus, whereas the other is the outsider. He's the deviant. He's the tax collector.

And that corresponds pretty well with what we know about the tax collectors, that they were not well regarded in society. So, the focus is on the Pharisee and the outsider.

The other is the publican or the tax collector. Now, when we come to this text, if we've been Christians for any amount of time, we come with a certain bias. And that is, we understand who the Pharisees are.

And usually, they're the villains throughout the gospel accounts. So, we come with that understanding as we read the text and also as we have an understanding of what the gospels say in general about this party, about this group of people.

[23 : 04] But that wouldn't be the case for the audience that was listening to Jesus at this time. The Pharisees were well regarded. Even today, in modern day Judaism, rabbinical Judaism today is the successor of the Pharisaical system.

So, they would look back in Christianity if we say you're a Pharisee, that's an insult. In Judaism, that would be a compliment. And back then, the same would be the case as well. These were the defenders of the traditional view of Judaism.

They strove to be pious religious men and they literally were the separated ones. So, they didn't want to be contaminated by anything outside the law or anything at least outside their tradition that they saw as the law.

And they were commonly regarded as the most faithful adherents of the Jewish religion, of the Jewish system. So, these would be considered admirable people. In contrast, the tax collectors were pretty much the lowest of the low.

They were socially despised. They were seen as supremely morally compromised individuals. Part of this is because they were seen as traitors. They were traitors to the Roman Empire, to the Roman system.

[24 : 07] And they allied themselves with the hated Roman government and participated in the subjugation of the Jewish people, of the nation of Israel. But also, on top of that, the way they made their money, the way they became wealthy, was that they were corrupt in most cases.

That they would take more than was owed and they would extract that from their very own people. They would call Zacchaeus in the next chapter, in chapter 19. When he comes to salvation, he repents and he gives back not just the money, but he gives back with interest because he defrauded others.

And while he comes to salvation, what that indicates is that what he did is really probably similar to what the other tax collectors did. They took more than was owed to them. And so, naturally, these people are not thought of as particularly well-liked in the Jewish society.

To call somebody a tax collector, is effectively to call them a sinner. But, Jesus here wants the audience to question that understanding.

Essentially, the question that's posed here is, who is truly nearer to God? Who is truly nearer to God? Psalm 24, 3 and 4 puts it this way, Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?

[25:18] And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully?

The expectation would be that the Pharisee meets this standard, but is an expectation the Lord will eventually shatter. Two men go up to the temple to worship, but it is not the expected one who will eventually be considered to be righteous.

So the setup the Lord has here is based upon their societal stations. The Pharisee is up here, the publican is all the way down here. But eventually, the observation is going to be not about their station in society, but the station of their hearts.

The tension that we see here anticipates what Jesus will later teach and state in Matthew 20, 16. So the last will be first, and the first will be last.

Well, having established the setting of the story and the characters in the story, the Lord begins to describe their posture and behavior here. He starts with the Pharisee.

[26:28] He actually calls him the Pharisee. I don't know if it comes across in your English translation, but in the Greek it's that way. He's not just a Pharisee, he's a specific Pharisee. And I think the point that the definite articles used there is because he's specifically addressing those people who consider themselves righteous.

Essentially, he's saying to them, this is you in the story. This is your representation here. And the specificity underscores that understanding. When it comes to the Pharisee's posture, he's said to be standing when he prays.

Now, standing by itself isn't a problem. The Jewish people tended to stand while they prayed. That wasn't the issue. But I don't think the English necessarily captures the sense entirely.

Probably a clunkier but more accurate way to translate this is the idea that the Pharisee, having taken a stand. The Pharisee having taken a stand. So that doesn't sound like smooth English.

But essentially what it's doing here is stating that he is deliberately putting himself in a position. Not just standing, but to be the focal point or the center of attention. He's essentially making himself a spectacle here because he naturally sees himself as belonging near God.

[27:38] He is one who belongs near God. So he wants his physical posture to correspond with his spiritual posture. Posture, pardon me. And we see that his mindset really is inherent to the Pharisees.

Jesus describes them this way in Matthew 23, 5-7. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad. So that's the prayer boxes they have in their head and their arms.

And the fringes long. The fringes on their prayer robes are long intentionally. So it draws attention to themselves. And they love the place of honor at feasts. And they love the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.

So the Pharisee wasn't just standing. He was standing in a way to draw attention to himself. And it also goes on to say, at least in the ESV, he was standing by himself. Now I think there's a little textual issue here.

We don't have to go into detail about that. But I think the King James captures what's taking place here a little better. It says, he stood and prayed thus with himself. He stood and prayed thus with himself.

[28:45] Because the idea isn't that he's just standing alone by himself. In fact, it's the opposite. He's making a spectacle of himself. The idea is he's standing with himself and praying to himself or praying about himself. It's all self-focused here.

He's the audience. He's the subject of his prayer. And his prayer is entirely oriented towards him. He's praying in a self-referential manner. The Greek even says that he prayed these things.

So it's just kind of this broad idea. It's not really the sincere prayer. It's just a very impersonal prayer. He's just praying a bunch of words essentially, not bringing a sincere petition before the Lord.

And moreover, the voice of what he's doing here, the grammatical voice indicates that it is self-focused. It's entirely oriented towards him. It's his habitual ritual that he prays about himself rather than about God.

You know, there's a lot of love expressed in this prayer, but it's all self-love. It's not a love for God. And so, as we mentioned, it wasn't wrong for him to pray standing up in this way.

[29 : 48] But what was wrong was the motivation for his prayer. What was wrong was the way he positioned himself so others would see him and look at him this way. What was wrong was that the temple of this man's heart was himself.

Well, if his posture and his motivations don't condemn him, though, certainly the substance of his prayer does. It reflects his self-serving heart. Now, his prayer begins well enough, does it not?

It says, O God, I thank you. O God, I thank you. So he starts off appealing or addressing the Almighty and he even offers him thanksgiving, which is good and right for us to do.

But he's not really expressing any gratitude to the Lord in this prayer. He really is just using it as an opportunity to distinguish himself from other people.

Essentially, he's just identifying who he is or making clear who his identity is as he sees it. I am not like these other horrible people. I'm not like these people.

[30 : 51] He never asks God for anything during the course of his prayer. In fact, the only time he mentions God is at the very beginning of the prayer. He is a separated one and in his own mind he has arrived.

He's perfect. He has no need for anything. Revelation 3.17 For you say I am rich. I have prospered and I need nothing. Not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

So the Pharisee is glad that he is supposedly not like the rest of humanity and he does not pray back anything that God has done for him. He's just happy he's not like these other people.

And who are these other people that the Pharisee is glad he's not like? Well, they're, as it's listed in the ESV, extortioners. Unjust and adulterers.

Notice that this is an intentional, rapid list of sins. There's no conjunctions. There's no connecting words. He's just throwing all this out. This is the rest of humanity. This is the unwashed. This is everyone who I'm not like here.

[31 : 52] The first category he mentions are extortioners. It can be translated also as swindlers or thieves. Essentially, the emphasis here is people who engage in predatory greed. They abusively and deceptively take money or property from other people.

So as he sees it, he's not like people like that. He's not unjust or unrighteous. That would include any sort of legal injustice, moral crookedness, covenant breaking, anything like that.

He doesn't do that in his eyes. That's not him. And then finally, adulterers. This of course naturally refers to sexual unfaithfulness, but it also can refer to spiritual infidelity as well.

It can refer to that as well as immorality. So the rest of humanity is all economically, morally, and spiritually corrupt.

Now in truth, he is right. All of humanity is like that. The problem is he excludes himself from that condemnation. Everyone else is like that, but not me, at least not the Pharisees. And the Pharisee is very proud in this.

[32:51] However, ironically, the Pharisees as a party, as a group, were actually guilty of all these things. after all, they took advantage of the weak and the poor.

Luke 20, 47, they devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. They were not really righteous men.

Galatians 3, 10, for all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. For it is written, curse be everyone who does not abide by all the things written in the book of the law and do them.

So they hold this up as this great standard. They even add to the law, and yet they do not meet that standard. They are not righteous. And while immorality is not a characteristic of the Pharisees, they certainly were spiritually unfaithful.

Matthew 15, 8, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. So as typical of man, it's a lot easier to find fault in other people than to find it in ourselves.

[33:51] And the Pharisee demonstrates that quite clearly. Matthew 7, 3, why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eyes? Or your brother's eye? But do not notice the log that is in your eye?

Well, as bad as all these people are, all these extortioners, all these unjust people, all these adulterers, as bad as they are, there's one person who's worse than all of them. And he points them out there, right in the crowd.

Even this tax collector, bad as those people are, this guy is the worst of the worst. There's intensification here, especially this tax collector. Now, not only would this be a particularly rude thing to do, to point out one person that you're not like and how bad he is in a public prayer, he's also using him as this object lesson about how righteous he is and how unrighteous this other person is.

I'm at the top of the scale of righteousness and holiness. This man is the worst of the worst. He's the exemplar of a sinner. And if all this isn't bad enough in puffing himself up, not only does he tell us who he's not like, but he wants to make it clear who he is.

He doesn't just condemn others, he boasts of himself or he exalts himself here. If you look at verse 12, there's a number of things most likely he's very proud of, but there's two things in particular. One, he fasts twice a week, if you look at verse 12, and two, he tithes of all he acquires.

[35:16] Looking at the first one, there was no command in the Old Testament, the fast, except on one time, one day, the day of atonement, Yom Kippur in the Hebrew.

Leviticus 16, 29 says, And it shall be a statute to you forever, then the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.

So when it says afflict yourself, part of that is fasting. So that's when you would fast. But the Pharisees had added to the law, and they said twice during a Sabbath week, you need a fast. And the Pharisee is boasting that he goes beyond the law, he keeps the tradition, he is faithful in doing so, and so he should be exalted because of that.

And then the second also has to do with the Pharisees going beyond the law. The law requires a 10% tithe, or a tithe, which is 10% of one's increase, of one's growth.

Deuteronomy 14, 22, You shall tithe all your yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year. So the command in the Old Testament was that you would give of your produce, you would give of your increase, 10%.

[36 : 23] But this man is actually saying he gives of all he acquires, or all he gains in possessions, which means not only does he have this income tax essentially assessed on him, he voluntarily adds a sales tax.

So he gives himself a 10% tax on all he acquires as well. And so he boasts in this as well, that he boasts not only in production, but also in this consumption tithe as well.

And many more things could be said about the Pharisee's disposition here, but I think the key observations are about this man is just the self-centered nature of his remarks. Look at all the people I'm not like, and look at all the wonderful things that I do.

It's all about him earning God's favor through meritorious works and behavior. None of it is about what God has done. None of it is about dependency on the Almighty.

He's supposedly given so much to God, both in sacrifice and offering, but he withholds the one thing God actually wants of him, a repentant and contrite heart.

[37 : 28] Hosea 6.6 For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Well, if you look down in verse 13, you'll see it starts with a strong contrast, the word but.

There's a big contrast between this Pharisee and this other man who was the tax collector. Two men went up to the temple to pray, but their postures before the Lord cannot be more different.

As discussed, the tax collector is at the lowest part of society. He's a traitor and he is dishonest. And it's also likely that unlike the Pharisee, he probably didn't make a regular habit of going to the temple to pray.

This was probably unique to him. He didn't make it to the Ola Tamid service very often. But nonetheless, here he is with the Pharisee in the same location. And unlike the Pharisee, unlike this other man, he cannot claim to be free of injustice and deceit in his life.

He doesn't come anywhere close to meeting the law, let alone trying to exceed it like the Pharisee does. And so being ashamed, he stands like the Pharisee, but he stands far off.

[38 : 40] He stands far away on the distance. He's probably standing close to the court of the Gentiles, if we understood it that way. He's standing far away. He doesn't make a spectacle of himself in this way. He doesn't want to draw attention to himself, at least in his pride.

But his humiliation goes beyond this. He doesn't just stand far away. It says here, if you look in the text, he will not look up towards heaven. Now this was the usual practice of Jews.

They would look upward to heaven as they prayed to God. Jesus even did it himself in John 11, 41. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, Father, I thank you that you have heard me.

But the tax collector would not do that. In fact, it's not that he just would not do it. It literally means he did not have the will to do it. He decidedly would not lift his eyes up to heaven. He had an intense objection to it.

And the reason for that is he had no pride before the Lord, no cause of boasting. He recognized who he was, a vile sinner, sinner, who had no claim to God's acceptance or mercy.

[39 : 44] And not only that, not only will he not look his eyes up to heaven, but he does do something, sort of unconventional. He hits himself. It says he beats his chest.

And the word for beating there is the idea of hitting something with extreme force. It's not just tapping the chest. He was hitting himself hard on his chest. And what this indicates is his extreme anguish he had at his sin standing before the Lord.

This was actually how some people behaved without witness the crucifixion in Luke 23, 48. And all the crowds that assembled for the spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, what did they do?

They returned home beating their breasts. This is a sign of extreme distress and anguish. This is a genuine response of somebody who is truly grieved by his sin.

Now, not every repentant sinner is going to behave the same way. Some of this is cultural. But what it did show that he was overwhelmed with conviction here. He didn't care if he was making a public outburst or drawing attention to himself in this way.

[40 : 46] The Pharisee made a spectacle of himself intentionally because he wanted to boast. But here, the spectacle he makes is a byproduct of genuine grief and emotion over his sin. And it's not only that he's repeatedly hitting his chest, but he's repeatedly saying something here.

His prayer is something, not just he says once, but he goes over and over again. So in your mind, you can think of it this way. This man's standing far off. He won't lift his eyes up to heaven. He's beating his chest, and he's saying this, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

As he beats his chest repeatedly, be merciful to me, a sinner, O Lord. I think this is the true sinner's prayer. A genuine, contrite response to God in the face of one's sin.

Well, what does this man say? What does it mean when he says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner? Well, he begins the same way the Pharisee begins his prayer. He makes an appeal to God. He speaks to God here. But there's two parts that follow.

One is the appeal itself, where he asks for mercy. And the second is his identification of being a sinner. So let's start with the second portion, his identification, because that's the foundation for his plea before the Lord, the foundation for his appeal.

[41 : 59] In the Greek, you might not be surprised to learn that it's, once again, the definite article. It's not just a sinner. I am the sinner. It underscores his culpability here. It underscores that he is confessing himself to be nothing more than a sinner before the Lord.

Remember, the Pharisee spent his time comparing himself to others. But the publican only compares himself to God and his holiness, of which he falls woefully short.

And so, in this appeal, he understands that he is a sinner without any standing before God. But what is the appeal that he makes on that basis? I am a sinner, God. What is he saying to God?

Well, he's saying, I don't have any merit before you, and I am instead pleading for undeserved mercy. But the translations sometimes struggle here in this area as well. Because it's too simple to simply say that he is asking God for mercy here.

It goes beyond that. The word that is used for mercy or to ask for mercy here is a word that's elsewhere translated as propitiation. Propitiation. And that might be a big word to some of you, but essentially what this means is his plea is, O God, be in atonement for me.

[43 : 12] Be in atonement for me. Or stated otherwise, cover my sins and turn your wrath away from me. So it's not just asking for kindness to God and merciful in that way. He's asking God, you yourself, cover my sins.

Atonement for me. The other time this is used in the New Testament is Hebrews 2.17. We're talking about Jesus that says, therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation, the same word, or to make atonement for the sins of the people.

And that's why the context of what we're looking at is so important. Because remember, in this Ola Tamid service, the lamb is presented as a sacrifice on behalf of the people. And what this publican saw in there was both his sin, but also the atonement for his sin in the coming Messiah.

As John states in John 1.29, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Pharisee just saw this as ritual.

The publican saw it for what it was. The coming Christ who would take away his sin. And so the Lord concludes this verse, concludes in the last verse here, that this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

[44 : 36] The lowly, treacherous tax collector was forgiven that day while the pious and devout Pharisee remained in his sins. Two men went up to the temple to pray, but only one came down saved from sin.

an eternal death. Not the one who would have been expected, but the one who repented. And why is this the case? Well, as Jesus states in this verse, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Or as James puts it in referencing the Old Testament in James 4.6, but he gives more grace, therefore it says, God opposes the proud, that gives grace to the humble.

I don't know if the name Jim Newcomer means anything to you. He's somewhat well-known in biblical counseling circles. He was a professor actually not for counseling, but for an evangelism class. And in that class, he told us a story about a friend of his he grew up with in church.

And his friend eventually made a very poor decision to leave his wife and his family. and he decided to open a bar and then started dating a number of other women.

[45 : 55] And Dr. Newcomer arranged to meet up with this man. They had lunch or coffee or something like that. They sat down and the man agreed. But he had one stipulation in the beginning. He said, Jim, being his friend, he said, Jim, I don't want to talk about my situation.

I've made my decision. I'm happy with it. I don't want any rebuke over it. Dr. Newcomer, not wanting to create a scene or a situation, agreed in general. He just said, can I ask you just one question? Are you afraid of what's going to happen to you when you die?

And you might expect this man, having drifted away, would just say, well, I don't care about that. I don't believe your religion. That's just good for you. But I want to live my life the way I want to live it. But that's not how he responded. His face showed fear and concern.

And he said to him, Jim, you know I'm going to heaven. You were there when I prayed the prayer. That man was very much like the Pharisee.

Not that he could boast in any external works, obviously, but that he was trusting in a religious ritual. He was trusting in words and a rote prayer to save him.

[47 : 01] Just as the Pharisee was trusting in his works. There was no trust in the atoning mercy of Christ because he had no brokenness over his sin. He didn't understand who he was.

How could he ever have trusted in Christ to save him when there was nothing to be saved from? And so I think the question for us this morning is, have you experienced this brokenness in your own life?

Have you experienced this brokenness about your sin in your own life? If not, I think the text is clear. Then like the Pharisee, you go down to your house today unforgiven of your sins to go eventually into eternal darkness.

But, but, if like the publican, you earnestly turn from your sins and understand what you have done and who you are, and you turn to the mercy of Christ as the Spirit leads, then you, like that vile publican, will also go down to your house, justified.

But what if this morning you are trusting that you are a redeemed believer? You truly have come to Christ. You have been saved. Well, our tendency is kind of look at this passage.

[48:09] We worked through all this text and there's really not much for us here. Well, that's good. It's a good evangelistic verse, right? Or a good verse for others. But I think our tendency is to come and almost be like the Pharisee in this sense.

We would pray back, God, I thank you that I am not like this Pharisee. But to have such an attitude is to undermine the work of Christ.

A tendency can be, yes, I understand that technically, theologically, I am a sinner. But who I really am is a dutiful church member, a deacon, a good homeschool parent, an elder, an exposer of the Word of God, an amateur theologian, or whatever it might be.

Without realizing that the publican's prayer is not just a prayer of justification. It's a prayer of sanctification and even perseverance. For apart from Christ and His atoning work, you and I are nothing but vile sinners as well.

Our daily prayer, therefore, should be before God, God, continue to be merciful to me, a sinner. You may be familiar with William Carey, the missionary to the nation of India in the late 1700s, early 1800s.

[49:25] We don't have a lot of time to go into much detail about him, but as mentioned, he was a missionary to India. And it was many years before he saw really any fruit from that ministry. He labored in that harsh climate and condition.

And because of his initiative, he's oftentimes considered the father of modern missions. So what do you think is on his gravestone, which I believe is in India? Here lies William Carey, the great missionary to India.

Here lies William Carey, the father of the modern missions movement. Here lies William Carey, the sacrificial servant of the Lord. No. He says this.

William Carey, a wretched, poor, and helpless worm. On thy kind arms I fall. There are only sinners in this room this morning, some who are redeemed and need to persevere, and some who are lost and are called to repentance and faith.

May you submit now to the Spirit's call in your life. Let's pray. Oh, heavenly, gracious Father, Lord, I thank you for this text. I pray for anyone here who does not recognize that they are a sinner before you with no plea other than, Oh God, be merciful to me, but I am a sinner.

[50:43] May you draw them to yourself, Lord, and help them see their sin that they repent and turn and be saved. And for those, Lord, who are yours, who are your children, let us not be haughty and arrogant, Lord, in our salvation, but lean on you day to day, seeing in ourselves as nothing, Lord, except for our identity in Christ.

Oh Lord, we pray to you to be merciful unto us who are sinners. Lord, you worked us in our hearts and our lives this morning. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.