A Prayer God Will Answer
Luke 18:9-14
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Over the years I've collected common cultural sayings that don't exactly square up with Scripture.

- "He (or she) is now in a much better place." This is often stated at funerals, whether the deceased was born again or not. To which I want to ask, “How do you know that?” We know where Heather Wear is, don’t we?

- "Cleanliness is next to godliness." Sorry, moms, but this verse is not in the Bible.

- "God wants you to be healthy and wealthy." This certainly sounds good to us Americans and is propagated from many pulpits and popularized by TV preachers but it is not found in the Bible.

- "God won’t give you more than you can handle." I hear this saying a lot but I can’t find chapter and verse for this one either. God does promise that He will provide a way out when we’re tempted in 1 Corinthians 10:13, but He never says that He’ll shield us from struggles. In fact, sometimes we can’t bear things on our own, so that we’ll run to God.

The Apostle Paul often was overwhelmed according to 2 Corinthians 1:8-9: “For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.”

- "Money is the root of all evil." Actually, the Bible says in 1 Timothy 6:10 that the “…Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil…”

- "To thine own self be true." This saying originates in Shakespeare’s Hamlet but is not found in Scripture.

- "God wants you to be happy.” I hear this one all the time. It’s often used as justification to get out of something that is right or to start doing something that is wrong. Friends, God’s heart is for us to be “holy” as stated in 1 Peter 1:15: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.”

- “God helps those who help themselves.” The earliest record of this quote is from Aesop’s Fables. This one is commonly quoted but it's not only extra-biblical, it’s also unbiblical.

In fact, Jeremiah 17:5 says, “Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD” and Proverbs 28:26 states: “He who trusts in himself is a fool...”
Actually, God helps those who are helpless. That leads right into our passage for today as we continue in our summer series called, “Practical Parables.” Please turn to Luke 18:9-14 where we’ll discover this parable’s purpose, we’ll look at two different people, study their prayers, contemplate a paradox and conclude with some principles that we can apply today.

This parable is unique to Luke and follows the account of the persistent widow who prays both day and night. Jesus has just asked his listeners a probing question related to whether or not He will find faith on the earth when He returns. Now, using contrasts again, Jesus gets to the heart of how to be justified.

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 10 Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ 13 And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Purpose of the Parable

We’re left with no doubt as to the purpose of this parable. Look at Luke 18:9: “Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.” The phrase “to some” is a broad term that literally means, “whoever the ones” or “the certain one” who trust in themselves.

Jesus is directing this story to those who think their sins smell better than other people’s and who look down on those who sin differently than they do. When we write out our sin list, we usually include the sins of others and omit our own.

The phrase, “despised” is the opposite of honor and means “to despise with contempt” and “to treat with scorn and as nothing.” They were obnoxiously self-righteous and looked at everyone else as nobodies.

It’s right at this point that we all see ourselves in the story. Most of us compare ourselves to others and say something like, “I know I’m not perfect, but I’m sure better than that other guy at work or at least I’m nicer than my neighbor.
Pride causes us to think too highly of ourselves as we become harsh with those we think fall below our standards. When we compare ourselves with others it’s easy to start condemning them.

There’s something like that going on in New York politics right now. A week ago one mayoral candidate criticized another candidate for his moral failings and in the process chastised the former New York governor for pointing fingers because he committed adultery...all the while she herself admits proudly to living in open immorality.

In a commentary posted on CNN.com, Peter Bregman writes these words: “It’s just too easy to become a hypocrite, to have one standard for people we like and another for people we don’t, to judge one person and to excuse another when basically they both did the same thing.”

Just to make sure that this parable applies to each of us, let’s consider a few questions.

- Do you ever look at people who don’t go to church and think you’re better than they are?
- Do you think you’re superior to those in a different political party?
- Do you ever look down on someone because they’re young? Because they’re old?
- Do you ever scoff at someone who uses drugs or breaks the law?
- Do you make jokes about homosexuals?
- Do you think your race is better than others?

C.S. Lewis once said, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and of course, as long as you are looking down, you can’t see...above you.”

The People in the Parable

Verse 10 tells us that two different people “went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” The temple was Israel’s most holy site and people would often go there to praise and to pray twice a day. Jesus introduces us to two people who could not have been more different from each other. In Jewish society the Pharisee was the cream that rises to the top while the tax collector was like scum found on the surface of a putrid pond.

1. The Pharisee. In order to correctly understand this parable, we must consider how Pharisees were regarded in that culture.

While we look down on them because of their hypocrisy and legalism, they were the guys with the white hats, the ultimate “good guys.”
There were only a few thousand of them at a time and they were known for their careful observance of the Torah, which are the first five books of the Old Testament. They also followed the Mishnah, which explained how to obey the Torah. There might be several chapters in the Mishnah devoted to just one verse in the Torah. On top of that, they followed the Talmud, which was a commentary on the Mishnah!

2. The tax collector. In contrast to the Pharisees, tax collectors were considered the low lives of society. Working for the pagan Romans, they owned tax franchises, and would charge exorbitant rates and keep most of the money for themselves. They were not allowed to give testimony in court because their word was considered worthless. In this story, he would have been considered the villain, or the wearer of the black hat.

The Pharisee is the most religious, respected and revered man while the tax collector is the most despised, disrespected and despicable individual around. A religious man was to do three things if he accidentally touched a tax collector.

- Spit instantly, to express his disgust for touching him.
- Then he would go home and burn his clothes.
- Finally he would take a scalding bath to purify himself.

The Prayers in the Parable

These two men were at the opposite ends of the spiritual spectrum. Their prayers were the exact opposite as well.

1. A Prayer about Me. God’s name is used just once while there are six references to “himself” or “I” in the Pharisee’s prayer. Check out verses 11-12: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’”

The phrase “stood” means that he “took his stand” or to “set in place.” One commentator suggests that he stood in the center of the court so the sunshine would make him even more visible. His posture was self-promoting and his prayer was selfish.

Notice that he’s praying “with himself.” Some versions say that he is praying “to” himself. He’s really praying something like this: “God, I thank you that I’m so marvelous!” He’s essentially giving a soliloquy to his own soul; like an exaggerated eulogy about himself.

He gives God no honor and makes no request of Him because he believes he’s already better than everybody else. In Isaiah 65:5, God weighs in on those who say, “Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!”
Here’s what God thinks of people like that: “These are smoke in My nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.”

This Pharisee is all about himself and so he lists the vices that he avoids – he is not an extortioner or an evildoer, has not been unfaithful to his wife, and is certainly not a traitor or a cheat like the tax collector. Referring to him as “this” tax collector shows how much disdain he has for him.

According to the Mishnah, there was a delegation of Jews who were responsible to rid the Temple of anyone who was unclean and clear them out through the eastern gate. Perhaps this Pharisee was wondering why this terrible tax collector had not been ushered out by the bouncers.

After recounting how self-righteous he is by avoiding these vices, the Pharisee then spells out a couple religious virtues that he’s really proud of. Clearly, God’s program could hardly advance without this man’s contribution. He wants everyone to be aware of his religious resume.

- He fasts twice a week. He’s going way beyond the one day of fasting that the Law prescribes on the Day of Atonement. It was common for Pharisees to fast on Mondays and Thursdays because they believed Moses went up to Mount Sinai on a Monday and came down 40 days later on a Thursday. But there’s another more nefarious reason - Mondays and Thursdays were big market days and they could make a big show to the big crowds.

- He gives a tenth of all he possesses. Sounds like a good Baptist, right? Actually, I hope you are using the tithe as a good starting point for your giving. He not only gives a tithe on what he earns, he also gives 10% of all that he owns. Matthew 23:23 says that many even tithed their “parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.”

He’s self-righteous because he’s proud of what he doesn’t do and he’s religious because he’s proud of what he does do. This reminds me of the old Mac Davis song: “Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble when you’re perfect in every way. I can’t wait to look in the mirror ‘cuz I get better looking each day.”

2. A Prayer for Mercy. The tax collector didn’t list his merits but instead longed for mercy in verse 13: “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” Let’s ponder his prayer.

- His position. While the Pharisee was probably standing as close to the holy place as possible so everyone could see him, the tax collector is afar off, standing timidly on the outer edge. He “slumped in the shadows.” He was afraid to approach the Almighty because he understood that he was unworthy.
His posture. He not only stood far away, he was unwilling to lift up his eyes because he was filled with guilt and shame. It’s a double negative – he would not so much “as raise his eyes to heaven.” This attitude is captured in Ezra 9:6: “O my God, I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You, my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.”

His passion. To beat one’s breast was the outward sign of an inward pain in one’s soul. It also shows that he’s locating his depravity as coming from his own heart. The tense that’s used means, “to strike repeatedly.” Using his fists he hammers his unholy heart rapidly and repeatedly.

His plea. His prayer contains only seven words. After addressing the Majesty, he begs for mercy. In the Greek, he calls himself “the” sinner because he’s not comparing himself with anyone else. In his eyes, he’s the worst sinner there is. He gives no excuses, no explanations and no rationale for his unrighteousness. The phrase “be merciful” literally means to “be propitiated towards me.”

This big word simply means to be satisfied. The only way God would be satisfied with this sinner would be if God chose to be merciful.

This is the verb form of the noun that referred to the “Mercy Seat,” which was the lid on the Ark of the Covenant. It’s as if the sinner is saying, “God, be mercy-seated to me.”

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, a goat was slaughtered and his blood was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat. When God looked down he saw the blood of the sacrificial substitute that covered the sins of His people. 1 John 2:2 says this about Jesus: “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

This tax collector is saying, “God be propitious to me; please apply the atonement to me. Be merciful to me not on the basis of what I have done but on the basis of the blood shed by the substitute.” One man gushed with pride, the other oozed poverty. One felt religiously rich, the other knew he was spiritually bankrupt. One man was impressed with his own accomplishments; the other was depressed by his failures. One boasted, the other begged.

The Paradox in the Parable

As Jesus loves to do, He uses this story to surprise His audience with this shocking summary in verse 14: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather
than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” God helps those who are helpless.

This was an outrageous reversal to the ears of the religious guys. It would have made them gasp. The word “justified” means to be acquitted from any charges and to be accepted by God as righteous.

Job 9:1 asks the question: “But how can a man be righteous before God?” Let me boil it down. There are only two options. Either you can make yourself right before God or you can’t. Either you help yourself or you admit that you are helpless. Either you satisfy God’s righteous standards or you cling to a substitute who has done it for you.

Let’s go back to the two men who represent two paths that are followed today.

- Merit. You can trust in your goodness but that will lead you to a bad place.
- Mercy. You can trust in God’s goodness and end up in a good place.

Are you on the merit path or the mercy path?

Charles Spurgeon used tells the story of a duke who boarded a galley ship and went below to talk with the criminals manning the oars. He asked several of them what their offenses were. Almost every man claimed he was innocent, blaming someone else or accusing the judge of taking a bribe. One broken man, however, replied, “Sir, I deserve to be here. I stole some money. No one is at fault but me. I’m guilty.” Upon hearing this, the duke shouted, “You scoundrel, you! What are you doing here with all these honest men? Get out of their company at once!”

The duke ordered that this prisoner be released. He was set free, while the rest were left to labor at the oars. The key to this prisoner’s freedom was his admission of guilt. That’s also true in salvation. Until a person is willing to admit, “I am a sinner in need of salvation,” he cannot experience freedom from guilt and condemnation. (Source: “Our Daily Bread,” www.rbc.org).

Entrance into God’s kingdom depends not on our merits, but on God’s mercy. God’s justice is satisfied by the Savior’s death on our behalf, His blood blots out our sins, propitiation is accomplished, providing our justification.

God helps those who are helpless. Let’s look at some things we can learn from this lesson.

Principles from the Parable
1. Humble yourself now or God will do it for you. Proverbs 3:34 says, “Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.” I want you to know that I am more like the self-righteous Pharisee than I am the broken and tender tax collector.

The week before I came to Edgewood to candidate in late February I was working on my sermons and lost all of them when my computer crashed. God humbled me big time and I came here feeling broken, humbled and very dependent on Him.

This past weekend for the installation services was also very humbling. Right before we came to the picnic our dog tore up our landscaping in the backyard and I gave him a piece of my mind I couldn’t afford to lose. When I got in the van I realized I had forgotten to put gas in it. On top of all that, I somehow got into some poison ivy and my legs were on fire. When we got to the picnic, I received a call from our daughter Becca who was about to head out on the highway and discovered that her tire was flat. In the midst of all this, Pastor Ray’s flight into Moline was delayed and I realized I was going to have to prepare a sermon for Saturday night. During the service I received this text from Beth: “They’re at the gate but haven’t seen them yet...clear your throat...you may be preaching.”

God humbled me big time...again. And He will again...because I need it...and so do you.

Someone has said that the only person God sends away empty is the person full of himself. I fall into the thinking that I can do things on my own when I can’t do anything apart from Christ. I trust my heart more than I should and discover pride and ugliness when I look inside. Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”

What about you? Will you admit your individual arrogance before the Almighty? James 4:10: “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.” Luke 1:53 says, “He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.”

The English preacher and martyr John Bradford, when watching criminals being led out for execution, said: “There but for the grace of God, goes John Bradford.”

2. Consider beginning your prayers with confession. I appreciate the reminder found in Psalm 66:18: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.”

While the ACTS acronym is a useful outline for prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication; perhaps this one is better because it starts with confession: CHAT – Confess, Honor, Ask and Thank.
We have a lot to confess as a country, don’t we? 94-year-old Billy Graham released a letter last summer titled, “My Heart Aches for America.” Here’s part of what he wrote: “Self-centered indulgence, pride and a lack of shame over sin are now emblems of the American lifestyle.” He’s calling us to repent and return to God before it’s too late.

3. Don’t go home without being justified. There are two attitudes that keep people from coming to Christ: “I don’t need Him because I’m basically a good person” or “He won’t have me because of how badly I’ve been living.” I urge you to go home justified today. You can have immediate salvation...right now. Admit your sin and accept the Savior as your substitute. You don’t have to do anything.

Thomas Barnardo, who established orphanages once came upon a young boy on the streets. The boy pleaded with him, “I need help and I need it badly.” Barnardo replied, “I don’t know you at all. What can you offer?” The little boy looked down at what he was wearing and said, ”I thought these rags would be enough.” Barnardo picked him up and said, “They are son, they are!”

You don’t have to clean up your act and start doing a bunch of religious rituals. You don’t have to perform penance or seek out a sacrament. Come to Him in filthy rags and He will receive you as you are.

Edgewood missionaries to Kenya, Jim and Cybil Eberhard, in a recent prayer letter, recount the story of Kizito, who has HIV. He came to a church service, cried out for mercy and was saved. By the way, Jim will be sharing about their strategic ministry tonight at 6:00 p.m. I hope you can come and hear more about what God is doing in Kenya.

The mercy of God comes to those who least deserve it. Have you been sleeping around? You can be saved today. Have you used drugs or abused alcohol this week? You can be forgiven right now. Have you lied? You can have eternal life this instant. Are you far away from God? Reach out and receive Jesus and you can be instantly declared righteous.

Many years ago a man conned his way into the orchestra of the Emperor of China, though he could not play an instrument or read music. Whenever the group practiced or performed, he would just hold his flute against his lips, pretending to play, but not making a sound. For years he received a good salary and enjoyed a comfortable living.

Then one day the Emperor requested a solo from each musician. The flautist got very nervous and pretended to be sick, but the royal physician wasn’t fooled. On the day of his solo performance, the imposter ingested poison and killed himself. That’s where we get the old expression, “He refused to face the music.”
Friend, it’s time to face the music by stopping the charades and taking off the masquerade. God helps the helpless. Ask Him for mercy.

Play “A Stained Glass Masquerade.”

Is there anyone who fails? Is there anyone who falls? Are you wondering if you’re the only in church today feeling so small? It’s time to stop the masquerading and start asking for mercy. Jesus said in Luke 5:32, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”

I have some great news for you today. You can go home justified by crying out for mercy. Or you can leave here self-satisfied, thinking you somehow merit God’s favor because of how good you think you are. What will it be?

Isaiah 57:15: “For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.’”

You can have the Lord dwell with you today. You can go home justified.

If you’re ready to do that right now, then pray this prayer with me: “God, have mercy on me, the sinner. I have failed and fallen so many times. My sins have broken your laws and your heart. I repent from trusting in my merit and cry out for mercy. I plead with you now to forgive me and by faith I receive the Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior. Please apply what He did on the cross to my account so that I can be free and forgiven. Thank you that His blood sacrifice fully satisfied your righteous demands. Help me to live for you for the rest of my life. In Jesus name I pray. Amen.”