

A Sermon for DaySpring
By Kingsley East Gibbs
Have Mercy on Me, a Sinner
Luke 18:9-14
October 23, 2022

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Breathe in: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,*
Breathe out: *have mercy on me, a sinner.*

I first learned this breath prayer in high school. The woman who taught it to my small group at church explained that it's called a breath prayer because you can pray it in this pattern of breathing in the first half and exhaling the second.

I loved this prayer because I could always remember it. If our youth leader had us all doing silent prayer, and I couldn't think of anything else to say to God, I could pray this. If I wanted to pray before bed but was too tired to think about what to say, I could pray this. Also, when I felt too far gone, on days like I didn't deserve to pray and have God listen, I could breathe these words and be reminded that God is full of mercy, and I am not the only sinner in the world. There are other people praying this same breath prayer.

Not only could I remember these words, but they always felt true. On low days when I was beating myself up for something; on high days when I won the Bible class award or gave a great lesson. To be a Christian, this prayer reminds me, is always to be a sinner in the hands of a merciful God.

This summer, I introduced the youth group to our guiding question for this year. For those who don't know, I'm the youth minister here at DaySpring. We were at camp, and I asked the youth, "What's the difference between a good person and a Christian?"

I want you to go ahead and think about the answer to that question. It's not rhetorical, not in the youth group. What is the difference between a good person and a Christian? At camp, I got some very creative, very thoughtful answers. Christians are usually rich and have time for God. Christians are actually usually poor and know that they need God. More Christians are from this part of the world than that. Most Christians are older. We talked about demographics, circumstances, and generational shifts. And then one youth came in late; so, naturally, I put him on the spot with this question. And he said: "One believes in Jesus."

The difference between a good person and a Christian is that one believes in Jesus. One is justified by Jesus' works, not her own. One cries out, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

And I think this parable today in Luke gets at this question. Who's the good person? The Pharisee. Who's the Christian? The tax collector. But is it really that simple? In our Christianized culture, we read this parable and immediately know whose side Jesus is on. The Pharisees are self-righteous, egotistical, bad guys. The tax collectors are poor, little sweethearts looking to be saved. But that's not quite how Jesus' listeners understood these two characters.

On the contrary, the Pharisees were the good guys. They knew the Old Testament Law, and they followed it! Our Pharisee goes to the temple, prays, fasts, and tithes. He does everything God commands him to do in Deuteronomy. And the Law wasn't just a set of rules to get into heaven. The whole point of the Law was to rightly love God and love others. The heart of the law is human flourishing, justice, and love. So, what's so wrong with this Pharisee?

But the tax collector—he's bad news. Standing at the edge of the Jewish temple, with a lifestyle sponsored by the very people who are oppressing the Jews. And it typically didn't stop with the government's taxes. Most tax collectors added a little extra to everyone's taxes so that they could take home a little more money. Maybe a lot more money. What did the tax collector do that would lead him to pray like this—beating his breast and mourning in public? And how can a simple confession save him from his sin?

Let's turn to Luke 18. From the beginning of this passage in verse 9, Jesus explains what's going on in this story. These are the best kinds of parables. Jesus tells this parable to "some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." So, we know Jesus' point from the beginning: don't trust in yourself and your own righteousness. And don't hate other people.

Easy. I don't trust that I can save myself. And I don't think I'm better than the tax collector. Boom, done. Thank God, I'm not like that holier-than-thou Pharisee. Hmmm. That sounded a little pharisaic....

Or did it? I actually think there are at least three ways to hear the Pharisee's prayer. He says, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."

There's the more traditional, egotistical reading: "Thank God I'm so much better than these other people. Look at all of the great works I do."

Then there's a more empathetic reading of the Pharisee. What if he's genuinely thankful in this prayer? Looking around his community, the Pharisee is so grateful to God that he didn't grow up in a home where his only imagination for economic survival was through stealing or conning people.

We might say today, genuinely: "Thank God I have enough money to buy groceries and clothes, and I don't have to consider stealing or some kind of illegal work. Thank God I didn't go out with my friends the night they got a DUI. Thank God I didn't reciprocate when my co-worker started being more than friendly. Thank God I don't have to sell my body to feed it."

Then there's a third way, which is actually how I read the Pharisee's prayer this time around, which may tell you more about me than the Pharisee. But imagine with me, you find yourself praying like this Pharisee. Comparing yourself to others and listing off some of society's greatest outcasts. What would lead you to pray like that? To need to justify yourself before God, to remind God, and maybe to remind yourself, that you're not *that* bad. I think like this when I've sinned. When sin is so heavy on me that I've sort of given up trying to change, and I've moved on to self-justifying. When I can't break a habit, let me tell you, I can justify it. And I can definitely find someone who's done worse than me.

What if both characters in this parable come to the Temple weighed down by their sin? What if the Pharisee, who knew the Old Testament Scriptures far better than most of us, knew that even with his highly esteemed status and morale and all the good works that he has done, he wasn't above every

Israelite and leader of the faith who came before him, and in case you forgot, was super messed up. (We had a lot of flawed people in the Old Testament.) Surely, the Pharisee knew he wasn't perfect. So, both the Pharisee and the tax collector know they've fallen short, and at first, they both have the right response—go to the Temple and pray to God.

Then the Pharisee stands alone. Verse 11 says he was “standing by himself,” which feels like a physical embodiment of his isolation from others, and he tells God about himself. “I, I, I, I.” In a 2-sentence prayer, the Pharisee mentions God once and himself 4 times. He is not like our Psalmist this morning, in Psalm 65, praying, “Praise is due to *you*, O God, in Zion; and to *you* shall vows be performed, O *you* who answer prayer! To *you*, all flesh shall come.” In the first two verses of Psalm 65, the Psalmist addresses God as “you” 4 times. And he goes on to say “you” 17 times, not to mention addressing God by name throughout his prayer.

Now looking back at Luke, verse 13, “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” The tax collector stands far off—away from the inner circle, farthest from the Holy Place. He only refers to himself as a sinner. And though his eyes are cast away from God as he beats his breast, he offers this prayer in a posture of repentance to God.

Two men stand alone in the Temple. Both weighed down by sin, both praying to God, but one turns in on himself. I, I, I, I. And the other turns to God: “Lord God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” One puts his trust in himself and his own righteousness. One hopes in God and God's mercy. One places himself above the others around him—exalted. One takes the lowest place in the temple—humbled. And Jesus says, verse 14, “for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

This semester, the youth and I are going through a daily devotional book. Each day has a few quotes, a short devotion, and reflection questions. This week, the theme was “What is my picture of myself?” One of the quotes that stuck out to me, especially in light of this parable, is the one in our worship guide this morning by Brennan Manning: “My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it.”

One of the most problematic parts of this parable is that the person who dedicates his whole life to following God's ways leaves the Temple rejected. And the person who built his career and livelihood on deceit and robbery leaves accepted. In short, God's not fair. The tax collector does nothing to earn or deserve justification. The prodigal son comes home, and the elder brother doesn't get his own party. The workers who show up hours late to start the day go home with the same wages as those who started working at dawn. Why?

Deuteronomy says, “It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land” (Deut. 9:5).

“Do not say to yourself ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God...” (Deut. 8:17-18).

And then, in Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

And Romans: “For while we were still sinners, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ, and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it. That is who I am. And that’s the first question Jesus poses to his listeners in this text: when you stand before God, who are you? Do your good deeds puff up your pride? Does your sin break your heart? Are you standing front and center? Are you crouched down in the back corner?

Or do you trust someone else standing in your place?

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

When we trust God, when we trust that it’s actually Jesus Christ standing in our place that makes us righteous, not us and our good works, then we can stop turning in on ourselves and against others. Remember, there were two things wrong with Jesus’ listeners of this parable: they trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and they regarded others with contempt. What is my picture of myself? And what is my picture of others?

“For if I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Love of neighbor isn’t just a nice idea or something to work towards once we become Christians. Loving our neighbors is a requirement of being a Christian. Loving others is the difference between a great rhetorician and a Christian speaker. A brilliant prophet and a Christian prophet. A selfless giver and a Christian giver. That’s the difference between a person who goes to church and someone who is the church.

And to be the church in the world, we must hold both of these questions in our hands: What is my picture of myself, and what is my picture of others? Who am I, and who is my neighbor? And as we hold those two questions together, and perhaps, we stretch out our hands, we remember that standing in both our places is Jesus Christ.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us—sinners.”

Amen.