

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"The Failure of Works Righteousness in the Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector."*<sup>i</sup>

On Sunday mornings we are working our way through Luke's Gospel verse-by-verse and we find ourselves at Luke 18:9.

I want to begin with what I believe is the most important question we can ask, which Job asked...

**Job 9:2 (NKJV) How can a man be righteous before God?**

The question comes up again later in the book...

**Job 25:4 (NKJV) How then can man be righteous before God?**

I believe this is the most important question we can ask because it determines where we spend eternity. There can't be a more important question than this one.

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This is the question that every religion asks. This sounds good at first, because it means religions are asking the most important question. But the problem is, every religion outside of Christianity gets the answer wrong. Every religion believes we are righteous, or right before God by being good, or by works.

But the Gospel is that we are righteous, or right before God by grace through faith.

And this brings us to lesson one...

**Lesson One: Our works can't make us righteous before God.**

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector, which we will be looking at this morning and next week, demonstrates this better than any other narrative in Scripture.

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Job continued wrestling with being righteous before God. A few verses later he said...

**Job 9:15 (NKJV) Though I were righteous, I could not answer Him; I would beg mercy of my Judge.**

Job said he couldn't even be righteous enough to ANSWER God. Instead, he would have to beg for mercy.

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A few verses later...

**Job 9:20 (NKJV) Though I were righteous, my own mouth would condemn me; though I were blameless, it would prove me perverse.**

Job said even if he was righteous, his mouth, or his words would still **condemn [him]** and show him to be **perverse**.

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It is interesting that Job, of all people, recognized he couldn't be righteous before God, because if there is anyone who looked righteous before God, it is him.

Listen to God himself describe Job to Satan...

**Job 1:8 The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that THERE IS NONE LIKE HIM ON THE EARTH, A BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT MAN, WHO FEARS GOD AND TURNS AWAY FROM EVIL?"**

Can you imagine a better description of someone...from God himself?

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Satan told God that Job only feared God because of how much God blessed him, so God let Satan remove almost every blessing Job had, and then again...

**Job 2:3 The Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job, that THERE IS NONE LIKE HIM ON THE EARTH, A BLAMELESS AND UPRIGHT MAN, WHO FEARS GOD AND TURNS AWAY FROM EVIL? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason.”**

Job was so righteous, even Satan himself couldn't turn him from God!

Yet...

He still couldn't be considered righteous before God.

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Listen to what Jesus said to the people in his day who thought they could be righteous enough...

**Matthew 5:20 I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.**

The religious leaders were the picture of righteousness attained by human effort:

- Everyone knew it was impossible to be more righteous than them.
- When Jesus said this people would've said, “There is no way we can, not just match, but **EXCEED the righteousness** of these men.”

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At this point it should be obvious we can't be righteous in our own effort, but:

- Is there a sacrifice we could bring that would allow us to be righteous before God?
- Is there an offering we could bring that would allow us to be in God's presence?

The prophet Micah asked this, and listen to what he said...

**Micah 6:6 “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?**

In other words, will this allow me to come before God?

**Micah 6:7a Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,**

This is an unimaginable number of animal sacrifices.

**Micah 6:7b with ten thousands of rivers of oil?**

This is a TON of oil.

Now he goes to the most extreme sacrifice...human sacrifice...

**Micah 6:7c Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”**

This is evil, but it is the approach many cultures have taken throughout history in their attempts to be righteous before God.

Micah asked this not because he thought it would please God. He asked this rhetorically to demonstrate that even THIS would not allow us to be righteous before God.

Wonderfully God doesn't expect this of us. I think it looks to him being willing, instead, to sacrifice his **firstborn Son for [our] transgression and sin.**

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I hope you see that there is no way for us to be righteous before God through human effort, which is why we read in the Old Testament...

**Psalm 143:2 No one living is righteous before [God].**

We know Job's friends were off, but they weren't completely off. Eliphaz was right when he argued that we can't be righteous...

**Job 15:14 What is man, that he can be pure? Or he who is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?**

And in the New Testament...

**Romans 3:10 There is no one righteous; no not one.**

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But by the time we reach this morning's verses, which is far into Jesus's earthly ministry, he is still dealing with people who trust their self-righteousness. So, he preaches this incredible parable to show how righteousness is and is not attained.

Let me say that one more time to make this perfectly clear...

The Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector is primarily about how righteousness is and is not attained.

With that in mind, let's look at **verse 9**...

**Luke 18:9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:**

Although Jesus didn't mention the Pharisees in this verse, that's who he has in mind, because this parable is about a Pharisee.

But the parable applies to anyone who does what the verse says: **[trust] in themselves that they [are] righteous.**

Doing so causes people to believe in the world's most common lie. Any guesses?

*"I'm a good person."*

Listen to these verses...

**Proverbs 16:2 All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes**

We are self-righteous. We think our ways, or actions, are pure!

**Proverbs 30:12 There are those who are clean in their own eyes but are not washed of their filth.**

How bad is this: we are so self-righteous we think we are clean in our eyes, but we are not washed of our filth.

Think of the Laodiceans...

**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.**

This is not a physical description, but a spiritual one. The Laodiceans were so self-righteous they thought they were great when they were terrible.

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It is like the apostate northern kingdom of Israel. God sent the prophet Hosea to rebuke them at one of the spiritually lowest points in their history, and listen to what they were saying about themselves...

**Hosea 12:8 [Israel] said, “Ah, but I am rich; I have found wealth for myself; in all my labors THEY CANNOT FIND IN ME INIQUITY OR SIN.”**

They were so self-righteous, God was about to wipe them out with the Assyrians, but they thought there was no iniquity in them.

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Now listen to this...

God judges us, not just for our sin, but even for the self-righteous that leads us to say we are without sin...

**Jeremiah 2:35 You say, ‘I am innocent; surely [God’s] anger has turned from me.’ Behold, I will bring you to judgment FOR SAYING, ‘I HAVE NOT SINNED.’**

God said he would judge them for being so self-righteous that they would say they were innocent and without sin.

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Why would God be so upset when we deny our sinfulness?

Because he said we are sinners, so we are calling him a liar...

**1 John 1:8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...10 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

Declaring we are righteous is also declaring God is a liar.

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So here’s the question...

If we’re so deceived about our righteousness, what is the solution?

We need something to show us we are sinners!

Any guesses?

God has graciously provided the Law. Despite what most of the world thinks, the purpose of the Ten Commandments, or the purpose of God’s Law, is not to show us how to be righteous. The purpose is to show us we’re not righteous...

**Romans 3:20 By works of the law no human being will be justified (or declared righteous) in [God’s] sight, since THROUGH THE LAW COMES KNOWLEDGE OF SIN.**

The Law gives us knowledge of our sin as we see how incapable we are at keeping it.

**Romans 5:20 The law came in to INCREASE THE TRESPASS.**

This doesn't mean God gave the Law so we would sin more. This means God gave the Law so our sins would be increased TO US.

**Romans 7:7 If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."**

The Law revealed Paul's covetousness to him.

Back to **Luke 18:9**. Notice what Jesus says those who trust in themselves are doing: **treating others with contempt**.

And this brings us to lesson two...

### **Lesson Two: Self-righteousness leads us to look down on others.**

Self-righteousness and looking down on others go together. We can't help but treat others with contempt if we are self-righteous:

- *"You're terrible."*
- *"I'm better than you."*

The Pharisees are the premier example of self-righteousness and looking down on others. That's why this parable is about them.

Just using Luke's Gospel let me show you the times they did just this. Turn to **Luke 5**...

**Luke 5:27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth. And he said to him, "Follow me."**

Tax collectors were considered the scum of the earth. If there's anyone you didn't invite, it's them. But that's exactly what Jesus did. This tax collector is Matthew, the same man whom the gospel of Matthew is named after.

**Luke 5:28 And leaving everything, he rose and followed him. 29 And Levi made him a great feast in his house, and there was a large company of tax collectors and others reclining at table with them.**

Now it's even worse, because Matthew invited all his tax collector friends.

The Pharisees were thrilled Jesus had the opportunity to preach the gospel to so many needy sinners, right?

Wrong.

Look at **verse 30**...

**Luke 5:30 And the Pharisees and their scribes grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?"**

They were not asking sincerely. The word **grumbled** reveals their hearts.

**Luke 5:31 And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.**

Just like only sick people know they need a physician, only sinners know they need the Savior.

**Luke 5:32 I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."**

Jesus doesn't literally mean there are **righteous** people. He means he hasn't come for the self-righteous, because they don't think they need him, whereas people who know they're sinners, do.<sup>ii</sup>

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Turn to **Luke 7:39**...

**Luke 7:39** Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner."

You can hear the scorn in their voices toward this woman...whom Jesus ended up praising...while condemning them.

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Turn to **Luke 15**...

**Luke 15:1** Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." **3** So he told them this parable:

Their attitude toward sinners led Jesus to preach the three parables in this chapter: the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son.

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God hates this self-righteous attitude that looks down on others...

**Isaiah 65:5** [God says, people] who say, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am too holy for you." These are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day.

This was the religious leaders!

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But Jesus had something in store for them that was a complete shock. Look with me at **Luke 18:10**...

**Luke 18:10** "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The **temple** was on a hill, which is why they **went up** to it.

These two men have a few things in common:

- They both go to the temple
- They both approach God
- They both pray

But otherwise, they couldn't be further opposites:

- The Pharisee is the most righteous, respected man Jesus could portray.
- The tax collector is the most sinful, hated man Jesus could portray.

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Next week we will look at the tax collector. For now, look at the Pharisee...

**Luke 18:11** 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.

Paul Washer said...

*"Idolatry is when you become the source of your own joy. Poverty of spirit is a wonderful thing."*

This man was the source of his own joy, and he didn't have poverty of spirit.

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Jesus said the parable is for those who **[trust] in themselves that they [are] righteous.**

There are primarily two ways we become self-righteous, and the Pharisee does both, and I have done both. You can examine your own heart to see if you have done either of these.

Here's the first thing the Pharisee did to feel self-righteousness...

### Lesson Three: Self-righteousness comes from thinking about (Part One) what we don't do.

The Pharisee compared himself to others to feel good about himself, and we compare ourselves to others to feel good about ourselves.

And when we compare ourselves to others, we think of the worst people we can imagine and pride ourselves on being better than them. We say things like:

- *"I'm not like those thieves."*
- *"I'm not like those drug dealers."*
- *"I'm not like those murderers."*
- *"I'm not like those adulterers."*

We know from the sermon on the Mount that we don't have to commit these sins physically. We can commit them spiritually in our hearts.

Often, even if we have sinned, we can make excuses for ourselves:

- *"I lied, but it was for a good reason."*
- *"I was mean to those people, but if I didn't stand up for myself they would've kept walking all over me."*
- *"I looked at things I shouldn't, but if God didn't want me to look at them, He wouldn't have given me these desires."*
- *"I left work early before I was supposed to, but there were those other days that I worked hard that make up for it.."*

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And let me ask you an interesting question...

Is the Pharisee lying?

He didn't look like the sinners he mentioned. Instead, he looked like a righteous person.

But this filled him with self-righteousness, and we will see next week, this made him worse than a tax collector!

We might not look like sinners we can think of, but when we focus on them, if it fills us with self-righteousness, we can become worse than them.

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And the Pharisee is not done yet. Look back at **verse 12...**

### **Luke 18:12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'**

Five times in two verses the Pharisee used the word "I." It's obvious who he is thinking about when he prays, and it is not God.

He thinks he's special, and he lets God know that. And this is the other main way we feel self-righteous...

### Lesson Three: Self-righteousness comes from thinking about (Part Two) what we do.

We think about the bad things we haven't done, and we think about the good things we have done:

- *"I'm religious."*
- *"I pray."*
- *"I serve."*
- *"I go to church."*
- *"I give."*
- *"I receive communion."*

We almost can't help but be annoyed by the Pharisee's pride, but I can tell you that before I became a Christian, when I was still a Catholic, if you asked me why I would go to heaven, it would have sounded something like this:

- *"I have been baptized."*
- *"I had my first communion."*
- *"I served as an altar boy."*
- *"I had my confirmation."*
- *"I go to confession."*
- *"I go to church regularly."*
- *"I observe most of the holy days."*

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Sadly, many of the religious things I trusted in, I did wrongly, and even sinfully:

- I was "baptized," but I use that word loosely, because it was sprinkling as a baby, which isn't baptism.
- I confessed my sins, but to a priest.
- I prayed, but to Mary and "saints," and I use that word loosely too, because saints are simply believers.

I could go on. I mention this because it's the same with the Pharisee!

He trusted his religious activity. but much of it was done wrongly!

First, his prayer was pretty much the worst prayer in history. He actually thanked God for how great he thinks he is. And just in case you don't know which other men he thinks he's better than, he listed them.

Even asking to be a billionaire would look more spiritual than this.

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Something interesting is because he noticed the tax collector who happened to be in the back of the room behind him, it means he's paying attention to the people around him.

He prayed standing, which was an acceptable posture for praying. The tax collector is standing too. But more than likely he is standing up front for others to see him, like Jesus said Pharisees would do...

**Matthew 6:5 When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to STAND AND PRAY IN THE SYNAGOGUES AND AT THE STREET CORNERS, THAT THEY MAY BE SEEN BY OTHERS.**

Because this is a parable you could wonder if someone could really be this self-righteous. Adam Clarke told the story of a Rabbi named Simeon the son of Jochai, who said: *"If there were only thirty righteous persons in the world, I and my son would make two of them; but if there were but twenty, I and my son would be of the number; and if there were but ten, I and my son would be of the number; and if there were but five, I and my son would be of the five; and if there were but two, I and my son would be those two; and if there were but one, myself should be that one."*

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Second, he boasted about tithing, but listen to Jesus condemn the way they tithed...

**Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin.**



God never cared about people tithing on their spices. Can you picture him counting out every little piece, feeling better about himself the whole time?

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Third, he boasted about fasting, but...

The Law required Jews to fast once per year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)...

**Leviticus 16:29 “It shall be a statute to you forever that in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall fast and shall do no work.**

The Pharisees went way beyond what the Law required in this area too: instead of fasting once per year, they fasted 104 times per year.<sup>iii</sup>

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The sad, sad irony is this: the Pharisee in this parable thinks he’s going to heaven because of his self-righteousness, but he couldn’t be further from heaven as we will see next week.

Our last lesson...

#### Lesson Four: Only one Person is righteous enough.

I want to share a story with you from this past week that I kept thinking about that I hope illustrates the situation with righteousness...

NCFCA, or speech and debate, tournaments require lots of judges. If your children compete, you are expected to judge. We have a handful of people in our church who have judged, either because they have children participating, or because they volunteered at a local tournament.

This might come as a surprise, but I hate judging. I hate it so badly that I pursue staff positions, because they allow me to volunteer without judging.

The reason I hate judging is I have to judge seven or eight competitors, and I can’t submit my ballot until I have them ranked in order from first to last. I’m not kidding: sometimes it seems like there are five competitors who should take first place, and nobody who should take last place. I know these young people pour their hearts into their presentations, so I hate thinking that I’m going to put them in the wrong order and it is going to be the difference between them advancing.

There are local tournaments, which allow people to qualify for regional championships, and the competitors who do well enough get to go to the national championship. This past week I was at the national championships in Minnesota. I couldn’t get a staff position, so I was stuck judging. I thought judging was difficult before. This past week – and I’m not kidding – it seemed like every competitor should be placed first.

I even started adding a comment in the notes section about how wonderful they were and how badly I felt about not putting them higher and that it wasn’t a reflection of them. It was simply a reflection of the quality of the tournament.

I was watching competitors walk out of the room with their friends and family who would tell them how great they did, which they did, and how they should be first in the room, and it looked that way...but obviously only one person can be placed first.

I’m going to tell you about one round in particular. A very talented, articulate young man – who looks and talks like he could be the next president – was the first competitor in the room. I said to myself, “He is going to be ‘first in room.’” I was so confident I put him first in the room before the second competitor entered.

Any guesses what place he finished?

Last!

I thought that every single competitor who came in after him was better than him.

And I was wrong about plenty of other competitors I thought would be first.

The competitors just kept getting better.

There is always someone better.

We look at things through earthly eyes and compare people with other people. We think people look great because we compare them with other people.

If anyone looked like he would be “first in room,” it was Paul. But listen to what he said...

**Philippians 3:4a I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also.**

He means he has reason to be confident he would be “first in room,”

**Philippians 3:4b If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:**

If anyone else thinks they can be “first in room,” Paul has even more reason to be confident than them. He’s like...

*“You can’t even be in the same room with me!”*

Now he lists his credentials so you can see why...

**Philippians 3:5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.**

He doesn’t mean he kept the law perfectly. But he does mean he kept it well enough nobody knew he had broken it. He couldn’t be blamed for anything.

**Philippians 3:7a But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss**

He’s like, *“I don’t care how many times I am ‘first in room.’ It’s all trash to me.”*

And this is why...

**Philippians 3:8b because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, NOT HAVING A RIGHTEOUSNESS OF MY OWN that comes from the law, but that [righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.**

Even Paul, who knew he was as righteous as people could get, knew he wasn’t righteous enough. He knew he needed Christ’s righteousness which is available by faith.

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And I’ll close with this...

- Christ’s righteousness is not available for people who, like Jesus said in **verse 9, [trust] in themselves that they [are] righteous.**
- Instead, it is available for people who recognize their UNRIGHTEOUSNESS, repent, and look to Christ in faith to be saved...as we will see next week with the tax collector.

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If you have any questions about anything I’ve shared this morning, I will be up for after service and out consider it a privilege to build a speak with you.

Let’s pray.

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<sup>ii</sup> Think of this language...

**Isaiah 55:1 “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;**

This isn’t talking about physical thirst; it’s talking about spiritual thirst

**Isaiah 55:1 and he who has no money,**

This isn’t talking about financial poverty, but spiritual poverty

**Isaiah 55:1 come, buy and eat!**

This isn’t talking about physical food).

**Isaiah 55:1 Come, buy wine and milk**

Now listen to this...

**Isaiah 55:1 without money and without price.**

It says to buy something that’s free. That doesn’t make sense. It’s talking about the free gift of salvation. It’s talking about the free forgiveness of sins and the free gift of righteousness, but it can only be freely given to people who want it...people who know they need it!

<sup>iii</sup> Jesus fasted on at least one occasion, when He was in the wilderness, but this was done privately agreeing with His own teaching on fasting (Matthew 6:16-18). All other fasts, besides the Day of Atonement, were supposed to be voluntary, for specific reasons like penitence or earnest prayer. This guy’s boasting about fasting shows he thought of fasting as an exercise for his own righteousness.