

Look Down Before Looking Around

Luke 18:9-14 (HCSB)

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and looked down on everyone else: ¹⁰ “Two men went up to the temple complex to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee took his stand and was praying like this: ‘God, I thank You that I’m not like other people —greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.’ ¹³ “But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even raise his eyes to heaven but kept striking his chest and saying, ‘God, turn Your wrath from me —a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this one went down to his house justified rather than the other; because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Tonight is a very special night. We start the church season of Lent. For the next six weeks, the paraments will be purple, reminding us of our sinfulness and our complete dependency on Christ our King. We will have special midweek services to give us additional time to focus on what God has done for us. Tonight especially, with the mark of ashes, we remember that we are nothing but dust and ash. But as the ashes form the sign of the cross, we recall the one who has removed the sting of death. In the Lord’s Supper tonight, we receive the forgiveness of sins and assurance of that salvation. As a Christian, on Ash Wednesday, there’s no place to be other than here at church.

So, did you look around at any point tonight and notice who’s not here? I would be lying to you if I said that I didn’t. With those who are not here this evening, we try to come up with good reasons for them. Maybe they had car trouble. Maybe they had to work late. Maybe they are sick. Maybe they accidentally forgot. Maybe they had a prior obligation that they couldn’t break. As we look around and ponder why certain people are not here, a little voice inside your head says, “Hey, at least you made it a priority.”

That little voice doesn’t speak only while you are here in church. You heard it earlier today. As you saw some people with ashes on their foreheads, you thought to yourself, “Hey, good job, you. I will be showing how important God is to me tonight when I come to service. I’ll be celebrating Ash Wednesday too.” Then there were those with no ashes. Guess they aren’t Christian. Guess they don’t care what today is all about. I bet they don’t even know. They probably think that people like us with the smudges on our foreheads or hands have some dirt that we need removed and no one was polite enough to tell us. Looking around has us tempted to look down on everyone else.

This temptation is nothing new. In fact, it’s a timeless temptation for people. It’s something Jesus specifically spoke about. He addresses his story, his parable, to people who were looking around and looking down on everyone else. They trusted in themselves, confident in their own righteousness. To these people, Jesus starts his story: “Two men went up to the temple complex to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” (verse 10)

A Pharisee is someone who separated themselves from the rest of the religious Jews with strict observance to the Jewish law. They weren’t content following God’s law as is. No, they had to be untouchable. They made extra laws, kind of like a hedge around the Law of God, that if they followed these extra rules, then in no way would they ever come close to violating the actual Law of God. If you wanted to be a religious Jew, the best of the best, you aspired to be a Pharisee.

It’s no wonder, then, that a Pharisee takes his stand in the temple courts, the area where people are coming to pray. He wants everyone to see what he is about to do. He even speaks his prayer out loud: “God, I thank you that I’m not like other people — greedy, unrighteous, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of everything I get.” (verses 11-12) Look at how good you have made me, God. I am not greedy. I am not a crooked, twisted person lacking in righteousness. I have not committed adultery. And I’m not like this lowly puddle of a man — this tax collector. He cheats people out of their money, gets rich off of deceiving us. He betrays his own countrymen to serve the Roman Empire. He was probably disowned by his whole family. Even if I had to beg for a living, I wouldn’t accept his greed-tainted money. I am so far removed from being like this tax collector. I fast not once a year as God’s Law demands, but I fast twice a week. I deny myself those pleasures well beyond what you all do. I give a tenth of everything I get. I know that I am only required to give a tenth of my earnings, but I make sure to give a tenth even of what my garden produces. God has made me just that great of a guy.

The Pharisee looked around and saw nothing but despicable people, people who were below him, people who didn’t have the same religious zeal that he had. They all should be ashamed of who they are, but not me. The Pharisee looked around and figured “I am more righteous than any of these other people. I thank God that I am so much more righteous than any of them.”

Did you notice how in the Pharisee's prayer he wasn't even asking God for anything. Instead, it was a moment to tell God how good he had done at being a Pharisee. Compared to everyone else, I am God's gift to this world, a model example of what it means to follow God. God looked around and saw all the people impressed by the Pharisee's words, his "prayer." But you know what, God was not impressed by what the Pharisee had not done.

It doesn't impress God when you make a list for him of all the things you haven't done as if by the virtue of not doing these certain sins you are better than others. You may never have succumbed to greed to the point where you have outright robbed someone. You may not have swindled someone, dealt with them dishonestly, been unrighteous. You may never have been unfaithful in your marriage to the degree that you actively engaged in sex with someone other than your spouse. God is not impressed by this. He's not giving you a high five for this list of sins you haven't committed. He expects that you never do any of these things.

But instead of talking about sinful things you haven't done, look down for a moment at yourself. Have you kept God's expectation, his command that you fulfill all of his laws? Have you hit the bull's-eye of perfection day in and day out? Because if you have not, God says, "Whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all." (James 2:10) God is not impressed that you didn't commit the most flagrant of sins.

Looking around, God sees that you have not kept his entire law as he commanded. You are guilty of failing at one point and so much more. You have broken it all. There is no righteousness in you by the list of things you have not done.

When I stop and look down, it becomes clear. I have no righteousness. I am no better than anyone else, no better than those who are here tonight and no better than those who aren't. I'm no better than those who have ashes on their foreheads than those who don't. When I look down, I realize that I have no righteousness in me. So, "God, turn your wrath from me – a sinner!" (verse 13)

The tax collector got it. Instead of looking around at everyone else and measuring his sense of righteousness to their actions, he looked down at himself. He realized his sins. He realized his greed, his crooked, wicked ways, his lustful heart. As he looked down, he realized that he had failed to keep any of God's laws. He had nothing to boast about before God. He is a poor, miserable sinner, not worthy to direct his eyes toward heaven. "No, I deserve to be beaten," he thought. "I deserve to be punished. What a wretched sinner I am." He beat his chest as if beat the sin out of his life.

Looking down, the tax collector had nothing to offer God. The only hope for him was for God to decide to turn his wrath from him. If God could find some other way to put an end to his unrighteousness, to make up for all the sins he had done, to make peace with all the wrongs he had done against God's laws, then, and only then, could the tax collector be spared from his wrath.

God answered the tax collector's prayer. He had looked down and emptied himself of any idea that he might in any way be right with God because of what he had or had not done. God, then, lifted him up with the answer that he poured out his wrath on another – one Jesus Christ. Looking around, there was no one else like Jesus. He had avoided all sin. He tirelessly kept God's commands. He was righteous. By his sacrificial life and death, he gave that righteousness to all people. The tax collector was justified, declared not guilty of his sins, freed from the sentence of receiving God's wrath, because Jesus was his righteousness – Jesus and none other.

God has humbled us to see our sin, the ways that we have missed his mark of perfection. But he has also answered our prayer. He has turned his wrath away from us. You and I, we go home tonight justified, declared not guilty, before God. We no longer look around to other people so that I can feel righteous because I'm not as bad as those people. We look now to one place, and one place only to see how God has turned his wrath from us. We look to the cross. There death was paid for by Jesus Christ to make us right with God. Looking to the cross, we see our righteousness. Jesus has lifted us up, exalted me and you to be right with God. He has had mercy on us, entirely of his own free will by pouring his wrath out on Jesus instead of us. We go home not just humbled before God, but also justified before him. Amen.

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