

## Undeclared by Comparison

Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' <sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

There has to be a measurable way to determine how we are doing. During the winter Olympics, especially during figure skating, it made a whole lot of sense for us as the viewers to have the skater with the top score listed while the current skater had their compiling score listed underneath, going up as they completed parts of their routine. Comparing the two scores in their segments, although the skater didn't get to see it in real time, we were able to measure whether this skater would overtake the first-place holder and win the gold.

We don't just do this in sports. We gauge ourselves on how we are performing by comparing ourselves to others. That's why Jesus tells this parable. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" (verses 9-12)

The Pharisees were a faction, a sect, of the Jewish faith. Their name literally means "the separate ones." They distinguished themselves from your average, ordinary religious Jews by going above and beyond the commands of God. This Pharisee even tells us how in his prayer. He fasts twice a week, a huge jump beyond God's law which required fasting only one time a year for the Day of Atonement feast. He gave a tenth of all he got, including 10% of his spice garden, when God's law only required 10% of his earnings. By comparison, this Pharisee is convinced that he is so much better than the obvious sinners – the robbers, the evildoers, the adulterers, and, of course, the tax collectors.

That's the other man in Jesus' parable: a tax collector. This job was bid out by the Roman empire to citizens of nations that they ruled over. The thing about the tax collectors is that they had to collect what was required by the Roman government but didn't have to tell the people what Rome required. They abused this power to charge people whatever they wanted so that they could pocket the extra. Thus, they earned their reputation as dishonest, traitorous thieves and swindlers. Religiously, they were considered unclean. Even Jewish beggars would not take alms from them. By comparison, tax collectors were the worst.

The Pharisee had such an easy time seeing how much better and God-pleasing he was as he compared himself to the tax collector. He didn't cheat people. He wasn't unclean. He followed all the laws and went way above and beyond the minimum God required. You might have noticed in the Pharisee's "prayer," that he wasn't asking God for anything, but rather announcing that by comparison he was already awarding himself the religious gold medal without any other judges' scores.

Think about what that would look like if we operated like that here. The confession of sins in our worship would turn into, "God, I thank you that I'm not like all those nominal, slacker Christians. I'm in church for Bible study and worship every Sunday. I attend church twice a week during Lent, and often another time online. I give way more than 25% of my gross income for my offerings. I read my Bible for 30 minutes every single day without fail, along with devotions with my family at mealtimes in addition to reading my *Meditations* book. I pray in the morning, at every meal, and twice in the evening. God, look at how much better I am than so many other people in this world. Surely, I've won the religious gold medal by comparison.

Although we don't say these things out loud, don't we find ourselves figuring out how we are doing as Christians by comparing ourselves to others? When I see my spouse mess up, don't I elevate myself just a bit knowing that I didn't do what they did? When I see my brother or sister get in trouble, don't I take a little self-satisfaction that I behaved better than them, that I'm the good child? When I hear what other "religious" or "Christian" people say and do in hate or when they commit a gross, public sin, don't I elevate myself thinking, "At least I'm not like them"? How tempting it is to look at people who are suffering and fall into a similar mindset as that of Job's friends who thought, "I must be doing something right or be loved a little more by God since I don't have their problems not do I suffer as they do."

On the other hand, while we compare ourselves to the people around us but notice that they are actually doing more than me, that they are more loving, more giving, that they are kinder, gentler, more compassionate, then I start to look for ways to drag them down so that I can get ahead in comparison. I come up with invented reasons of why what they are doing is bad, ascribing self-interested motivations to their deeds so that they aren't so good anymore. I have to drag them down so that I can still win by comparison and justifying me still being in first place.

Is this kind of measurement, this comparison, really going to win us the righteous race of life? I mean, if we are going to "win" by comparing ourselves to others, who are we choosing to compare ourselves to? Don't we need to stack ourselves up against all people, not just some of the people you see? Do you do a religious survey to see how many good works the people here are doing day in and day out so that we can have those real time religious scores kind of like the skaters during the Olympics? Then, of course, don't we need to compare ourselves to the great people of faith like Noah and Abraham and David? Is "winning" in this comparison graded on percentages like school, that you have to be better than at least 59% of all people to be right with God and get the religious gold medal? Will he lower his standard so that you have to be better than just 50% of all people? If this was our measurement in winning this righteous race of life, how would you ever know that you are really winning, that you deserve a religious gold medal?

God tells us the measurement that we have to use if we are going to win the righteous race of life by comparison. "Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy." (Leviticus 19:2) Or, as Jesus says in the New Testament, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48) That's the standard, the top score for the religious gold medal. And this is not just a one time, I had a really good day effort. God didn't strive to be holy, to be perfect. No, he was and is perfect. So we have to have absolute pristine perfection at every moment day in and day out, every action, every reaction, every emotion, every thought for every second of every day with no falls, no partially completed sets. With God, there are no medals for second place. It's perfection or condemnation, 100% perfect or not at all.

That's pretty defeating, isn't it? None of us have that perfect gold medal standard compared to God. It doesn't matter if I am better than 99.999% of people, let alone 50% or 60% of them. We lose this righteous race of life by comparison; no medal awarded.

The tax collector knew that. He knew of every time that he had lied and cheated people out of money. He knew the greed that resided in his heart. He knew how he had abused his power and privilege. He was defeated by comparison to God. This is why he stood at a distance for his prayer. "He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" (verse 13)

Defeated by comparison, the tax collector actually asked God for something. He wasn't thanking God that by comparison he may have looked better than some other people and seemingly deserved a religious gold medal. No, he begged God to treat him with mercy, to not score him as he rightly should be. God heard his prayer and answered it. Jesus tells us, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (verse 14)

Humbled by his comparison to God, knowing that he had lost the righteous race of life, God had mercy on the tax collector. He did this because God himself had achieved the gold medal standard of perfection for this loser tax collector. God had paid the price of all his sins and removed them from him. God had filled the tax collector instead with his total perfection, clothed him with Christ. Jesus' perfect score was now next to the tax collector's name. He was now right with God. God had exalted the tax collector, justifying him, declaring him not guilty of his sins, declaring him to be perfect in comparison to God.

We were humbled today with the ashes that were put on us. The wages of sin is death. For dust you are and to dust you will return. Each of us will die for our sins. None of us are perfect when we compare ourselves to God. I guess we are all losers in that righteous race of life by comparison. But this is exactly why God came into our world. He humbled himself to take our place. He accomplished what we never could. We cried out to him defeat when compared to his perfection. God has had mercy on us. Jesus' perfect score now goes next to our name, just like the tax collector. God justified us, removed our sins, declared us not guilty. We are perfect in comparison to God because we are clothed with Christ. He welcomes us up to the gold medal podium and puts his medal on us. We win!

Tonight, we go home as gold medal standards of perfection, not in comparison to other people, but in comparison to Christ. He has lifted us up by removing our sins on the cross and filling us with his total perfect life lived for us. We are undefeated by comparison. Amen.