

How Deep does the Gospel Go?

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[0 : 00] Let's pray again. Heavenly Father, what a privilege it is to open your word and hear from you. And I pray today that we won't lose that sense of privilege and wonder, but instead that your spirit will come and truly soften our hearts so that we will keep placing our full confidence in your Son alone and not in ourselves, and that we will not fear to keep drawing near to you in your throne of grace.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now when today's service is over and we're having tea and coffee, that's probably one thing that my devious heart is hoping for. As I'm munching away on my kueh, I'm hoping that someone, one of you, will come over to me and say, Wow, Pastor, what a fantastic sermon. It was so good. Now why might I want that? Because I want to know that my sermon has been well received. It's been approved. It has passed the test.

And because the sermon has passed the test, it feels like I have passed the test. I myself have been accepted. I have your stamp of approval.

[1 : 17] What I do, indeed, who I am, has been justified. You see, all of us, whether we know it or not, are on a quest for justification.

At school, we hope to secure those A's and subsequently entrance into that particular university to prove that we are worthy.

At work, we try to enhance our skills so that we can develop professionally, so that we can stand out and have the satisfaction of boosting our link-in profile.

Amongst our friends, we don't want to seem ignorant of whatever it is that people in our circles are supposed to know and to make sure that we have the right opinions.

We want to be justified before others. And whether we know it or not, we are seeking ultimately to be justified before God.

[2 : 24] There was a play written in the middle of the 20th century called *After the Fall* by a guy called Arthur Miller. And in that play, the main character, Quentin, who is a retired lawyer, is reflecting, or you could even say, interrogating his own life.

And as he looks back, he can't help but think that life is like a series of proofs. Look, he says, when you are young, you have to prove how brave you are or smart.

Then, what a good lover you are. Then, what a good father you are. And then, finally, as you grow older, how wise or powerful or what the hell ever you are.

In other words, we all live life as if our actions and decisions are being weighed. As Quentin goes on to say, we all live life as if we instinctively know that by the end of it, someone up there will give a verdict.

And what we seek is assurance that this verdict will be favourable. At the end of the day, when we stand before God, and the question is asked, does my life pass the test?

[3 : 49] Have I passed the test? We want to know with certainty that the answer is yes. That's what we are after, whether we realise it or not.

But here is another question. How do we pass the test? How do we know if we have measured up? Well, our passage today will show us we often default to a particular strategy, what I'll call today the way of the Pharisee.

And as we will see later, even when we don't mean to, we often end up here. But Jesus will also show us another way, which I'll call the way of the tax collector.

It is a way that is not instinctive to us, but Jesus will show us this is the path to take to pass the test. And we can't go both ways.

They are fundamentally incompatible. We have to choose. And so this morning, Jesus will teach us what both ways look like, and then he'll ask at the end, which way will we go?

[5 : 00] Choose wisely. So let's learn about these two ways to keep your Bibles open, to look 18 if you've closed them. And firstly, there is the way of the Pharisee.

Two men, we are told, went up to the temple to pray. Now, they're not going there for their own private quiet times. Anyone listening in will understand that they were joining in one of the corporate worship services where public prayer was offered.

One in the morning and one in the afternoon. And in verses 11 to 12, we begin to zoom in on the Pharisee. And straight away, we are thinking, oh, here's the baddie.

Boo! After all heaven, we already learn from countless sermons not to take Pharisees positively. But to really feel the force of this parable, we need to first see the Pharisees the way the people of that time did.

Back then, they wouldn't automatically think, oh, here's the bad guy. Pharisees, you see, were associated with akribeia, which means precision.

[6 : 15] They were very precise when it comes to interpreting and observing God's law. And we are to see that as a positive thing.

After all, why were they precise? Precisely because they were serious. Serious about God, serious about God's people living God's way, and therefore, serious about themselves living the right way. No wonder the Jewish historian Josephus says the Pharisees were popular. People generally liked them. Picture a respected Sarawakian public figure today.

someone known as a churchgoer, God-fearing, reliable, he has no scandal, he is willing to speak up for the community when it looks like we Sarawakians are being taken advantage of.

He is generous in lending a hand even financially when there is a need. That's the kind of image to have in mind when you hear Pharisee.

[7 : 26] And that is certainly how we should imagine this particular Pharisee. Notice some of the things he does. He is praying, fasting, and tithing.

All these, of course, are things that the Bible says are good and admirable. They are things we should want to do. And this man is doing them.

I mean, consider this. Remember what world this Pharisee is living in. He is in Roman-occupied territory.

His masters worship other gods. And frankly, you will probably do better in life if you worship the gods they do too. But this guy is not caving in.

He is not afraid to show his allegiance towards Yahweh. He continues praying to the one true God in public.

[8 : 28] He is your devoted church goer, not ashamed to live out his faith before a watching world. And he is certainly not just going through the motions. In the Old Testament, fasting was only required once a year on the Day of Atonement.

But this guy, he fasts twice a week as good devoted Jews would do. So for this guy, it isn't just about the church attendance.

No, outside of church, he is taking the spiritual disciplines seriously. He knows fasting will help him focus on God's will, which is what he desires.

So that's what he will do. And then he's putting his money where his mouth is. verse 12 says he gives a tenth of all he gets.

Deuteronomy 14, verse 22 to 23 says that he needs only to give a tenth of the firstborn of the flock, along with grain, wine, and oil. But this guy, he doesn't just give that.

[9 : 36] Whatever he has, maybe stuff from his garden, or perhaps the profit that he made from his side hustle, whatever the equivalent of online selling was in those days, he made sure to give at least a tenth away, exceeding what the law requires.

Imagine if this guy is in our church. By his generosity, he's making sure that the pastor gets paid.

He's making sure that our social concerns ministry has enough food parcels for the poor.

He's making sure parents who are otherwise struggling can afford the Tadika Rajawali fees. This is a good guy. And this guy is not just religiously devout, but morally upright.

He's not a robber, verse 11. So if you are doing business, you are happy when you discover that you are dealing with him because you know he will try to cut corners and cheat you of your money.

You're pleased to hear he's not. An adulterer. In this day and age, we need people who are willing to stand up for traditional family values, especially when there is so much marriage breakdown all around us.

[10:57] And he's not an evildoer. He's not guilty of the many sins others commit, drunkenness or fits of rage or filthy language.

If only more people will like him. So all in all, this guy looks great. He is great.

One potential mistake we could make here is to think that maybe this guy is hypocritical. That is, he doesn't actually practice what he preaches.

And it is true that elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus does accuse some Pharisees of being hypocrites. But it is important to notice that Jesus never lays that charge against this particular Pharisee.

This guy, by all accounts, genuinely wants to be a serious follower of God. There is no reason to doubt he really has done what he tells God he has done.

[12:07] He has walked the talk. And Jesus doesn't have any quarrel with that. So what's the issue then? What's wrong with the way of the Pharisee?

Why might it not pass the test? Well, Jesus tells us himself. Just like last week, did you notice that we are given clues as to why he says what he says?

Look at verse 9. To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

The problem isn't that the Pharisee is hypocritical. The problem is that the Pharisee is proud. He has not only prayed, fasted, and tithed, but he has taken a deep and intense pride in those things.

For he is sure his own righteousness will justify him before God. In other words, he is self-righteous.

[13:22] That's where his heart is. That's the problem. Now, when we hear that, perhaps many of us will breathe a sigh of relief because, hey, maybe that's not our problem, right?

I mean, if I came down and asked you, are you trusting in yourself and your righteousness, many of you will probably say, no, of course not.

I'm a Christian. I've heard enough of the gospel to know I should believe in Christ's righteousness.

I'm not proud. So this isn't me. But the truth is, even if we are Christians, the way of the Pharisee is more ingrained in us than we care to admit.

You see, if we get sinfully angry or greedy, we tend to know it. It's obvious. But if we are proud, we tend not to know it.

It's not obvious. We often need someone else to point it out to us. And I suspect that is what Jesus is doing. In verse 9, did you notice Jesus isn't just speaking about the self-righteous?

[14:53] No. He is speaking directly to the self-righteous. He's giving us this picture of this Pharisee so that if we have any self-righteousness lurking unseen within us, that picture will become a mirror exposing our pride.

So before we jump to the conclusion that we're not like this Pharisee, let's look at him again and see if we bear any resemblance.

How do we know if we are like him? Well, Jesus says self-righteous people have certain characteristics. Number one, they like to boast.

They like to boast. Look at the way this Pharisee prays in verse 11. Did you notice how often he keeps saying I, I, I, I?

Yes, he starts by addressing God, but after that his entire prayer is self-referential. He is simply listing what he's done or not done. It's like he is taking home a report card where he's given himself an A plus and he's proudly announcing this fact to his father.

[16:22] Whenever I disciple new Christians, I sometimes define prayer as simply asking God. But by that definition, this Pharisee isn't even praying.

He doesn't ask God anything because he thinks he doesn't need anything from God. Indeed, one commentator points out that while his prayer starts out like a psalm of thanksgiving, he never actually goes on to thank God for what God has done, as the psalms do.

Instead, all he simply wants is to draw attention to himself. He is boasting. Now, of course, most of us will say, I suspect, no way do I boast like this guy.

And that is true, I'm sure. But could we do it in more subtle ways? Now, here's how I could do it. In casual conversation with you, maybe I say this, hey, Samuel, guess what?

I got asked to speak at another conference again. Oh, that's the fourth time this year. They keep asking even though public speaking is still so scary for me. It sounds innocent, but what I'm really doing is trying to indirectly draw attention to the opportunities I'm getting.

[17 : 54] Or perhaps I try to hint at my own level of importance by emphasising certain activity. Sorry, Jeremy, gotta go. I've been running between meetings all day.

You know, everyone wants to talk to me. Or like the Pharisee, I could try to make it sound like it's all about God, but really it's all about me.

So I post this on Facebook. Humbled that God allowed me to lead such an incredible ministry event this weekend. It is all for his glory.

Now, there is nothing wrong with conference speaking, meetings or ministry events in themselves, is it? These can be good things, but our hearts are so deceptive that so often, I want to turn all these good things into ways in which I can justify myself to prove to you that I am worthy.

And yet what I end up with is superficiality. You see, if I am self-righteous, what often happens is that I become more concerned with your perception of me than what my heart is really like.

[19 : 22] I become more concerned with the outward behaviour which might impact how you see me and not concerned at all with my secret sins which you cannot see.

And so ironically, while the way of the Pharisee might appear to justify me, the reality is, before God, I most certainly am not.

Now, what about you? do you see yourself possessing this feature of the Pharisee?

So that is one telltale sign by boasting, however subtle it might be. But here is sign number two of self-righteous people. They like to compare.

That's the attitude of this Pharisee. thank you, he says, that I am not like this robber or adulterer or tax collector. Thank you, he might say today, that I'm not like my lazy co-worker who's always watching YouTube during working hours while I slave away as a good Christian employee.

[20 : 43] Or thank you, God, that I'm not like that parent over there who just cannot control their kids and their kids are forever disrupting people here and there. You see, pride must always put others down.

And that is because, as the Christian writer C.S. Lewis once pointed out, pride at its heart is competitive. You are never just proud of being rich or clever or good looking, he says.

What you are really proud of is that you are richer or cleverer or better looking than others.

If everyone was equally rich or clever or good looking, they would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud.

The Christian psychologist Robert Roberts makes pretty much the same point. he says, we are committed to building our egos on the foundation of inferiority, the inferiority of others.

[22 : 03] To think well of ourselves, we need to feel that we are better than them. That's how pride works. It is based on comparison. And if that is correct, no wonder we go looking for the faults and flaws of others.

To justify ourselves, we need to. Now, how might we do that? There are so many ways. If we are from an older generation, we might think to ourselves, look at how that person dresses, not modest at all.

And did you notice that tattoo on his arm or her dyed hair? She is clearly not spiritually mature like me. In fact, she is even a Christian. If we are Gen Z, it might sound different.

Look at how that person is so ignorant about climate change. Doesn't she realise how important it is to care for God's creation? Thank God, I am more enlightened.

Or look at how that person doesn't even care about what's happening in Gaza. He clearly lacks God's compassion and doesn't realise how important justice issues are to God's heart.

[23 : 18] You see, what we think is worth comparing might change, but the attitude remains the same. And in fact, the irony is that it might actually be easiest to fall into this trap when we are making the most spiritual progress.

So for instance, perhaps we've recently experienced a wonderful few months where we've learned to read the Bible well, and it is opening up all these wonderful new truths to us.

We can begin to see how all the Old Testament is all connected together and how it all points to Christ in this seamless, multi-layered way. and it gets us all excited. But then my brother or sister in Christ doesn't seem to get it.

And when we share with them these insights from the Bible, they are indifferent to it. And it gets us frustrated enough that we begin to compare. Why is he so dumb, unlike me?

Or perhaps by God's grace, we have begun to learn to serve sacrificially. as we take on more responsibility in church and we are seeing God do some good things in the ministry.

[24 : 38] But precisely because the ministry is growing, we need more people. But our brother or sister in Christ again haven't seemed to learn yet that service is part of following Christ.

And once again, we get frustrated and we begin to compare. Why is she so lazy? Unlike me. Or perhaps we might be listening to a sermon on Luke 18 9-14 and it's helping us to understand all about self-righteousness.

We've learned how important it is not to be self-righteous. And now our minds begin to wander to certain people. And we begin to think, thank you God that I am not self-righteous like those self-righteous people over there who are always boasting, and comparing.

Do you see how sneaky our self-righteousness can be? It can keep shifting. And we love it because it puts us in a position where we can feel we are better. But as we all know, it often leads to us instead feeling more insecure.

And it can often lead to our next characteristic. So more briefly, here is sign number three of self-righteous people. They like to separate. Look at verse 11.

[26 : 04] The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed. Now, if you have the older NIV in front of you, it might say something slightly different. It would say, the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself.

And that is because in the original Greek, the grammar is ambiguous. The himself could go with either the standing or the praying. But either way, the point is, he wants to separate himself.

If he is standing by himself, then he wants to make sure that he is not contaminated by the other worshippers. If he is praying about himself, he is highlighting to God how superior he is to those around him.

And sometimes that attitude can infect us too, right? When we are self-righteous, we are saying, I am better than you. And if I am better than you, then I don't want to be brought down to the same level as you, since that would take away my ability to say, I am superior.

So better if I don't get too close to you, in case that happens. But Jesus is clear in verse 14.

[27 : 21] If we simply rely on our moral or spiritual performance, it will not justify us before God. Why not?

Because even if I do what is right, I will end up being proud of my goodness. forgiveness. I am in effect saying to God, I can save myself.

And that is simply sin in a different form. And of course, do I even do well every single moment of every day? Am I really good all the time?

we know the answer. The way of the Pharisee only ends in misery. So what is the alternative?

Well, we come now to the way of the tax collector. That's the other guy in this story. And one thing you should know is that basically everyone hates him. He is ritually unclean because he works for and with the Romans, the enemies.

[28 : 32] And he is morally dubious as well, since tax collectors often got plenty of do-it copy from their job. So he's on the other end of the spectrum from the Pharisee.

It is highly unlikely that anyone is actually pleased to see him in the temple. But Jesus says take a close look at him. Notice first his posture.

He stands at a distance. He knows his position. He is ritually unclean, so he can't be in the inner courts of the temple. He has no claim to be near God.

In fact, the whole time he is there, he doesn't even dare look up to heaven. He is utterly ashamed before God. And he beats his breasts, probably as a way of saying, this is what I completely deserve.

I deserve to be beaten and bruised. And then he says, God have mercy on me, a sinner.

[29 : 36] And it is worth slowing down to get what he's actually saying. Firstly, although our English translations say, a sinner, he actually says, in the original language, God have mercy on me, the sinner.

God has mercy on me. You see, like this Pharisee, he is also singling himself out from the rest of his fellow human beings. But unlike the Pharisee, he does so for a different reason.

The Pharisee singles himself out as someone who is better than others. But the tax collector singles himself out as someone who knows he could never say that.

He is unrighteous. He is bad. He would have agreed 100% with the Pharisee's assessment of him. And he is not looking to compare himself with others.

He could have. He could have said, oh yes, I'm not perfect, but at least I'm better than the other tax collectors. At least I made an effort to go to the temple.

[30 : 43] But he doesn't. Because he's not looking to justify himself. He acknowledges what he is truly like. He's the sinner. And he knows there is no way his life will pass the test.

Unless he gets help from outside, he is a goner. He needs mercy, big time. And that's what he cries for. Once again, it is actually helpful to know more literally what he says.

When he says, God, have mercy on me, in the original language, he's actually saying, God atone for my sin. I know there is no point in listing down any of my righteous acts, even if I have done them.

They weren't atoned for my sin. My goodness is no use. Only you alone, God, can atone for my sin. You see, the tax collector understood this very well.

Only God could justify him. And perhaps that is why he is at the temple. You see, at the very worship service he was at, there would have been a sacrificial offering made.

[31 : 58] In other words, he knew, even under the old covenant, that God had provided a means of atonement. And he knew that was his only hope.

The old testament law, good as it was, couldn't give him that hope. It was only the provision of an atoning sacrifice that meant he could stand before God.

And as the Mandalorian from Star Wars would say, this is the way. You see, we are sinners. So when you come to God, confess your sin and don't just pay lip service to it.

Oh, I'm a Christian, so I guess I should say I'm a sinner. No. Mean it. In other words, come before God without feeling the need to make ourselves better than we really are.

Come before God without feeling the need to downplay the sins we have committed for that day.

Come before God without feeling the need to find scapegoats for what we have done wrong.

[33 : 13] As Martin Luther once preached, be not a false, but a real sinner, not only in word, but in reality. And from the heart, acknowledge yourself, worthy before God of his wrath and eternal punishment, and bring before him in truth these words, me, a poor sinner.

And why can we do that? Because God does grant mercy to us. God does atone for our sin. Today we're in Luke 18, but in just a few more chapters, what is going to happen?

Jesus is going to the cross, and on that cross, he will become the sinner. He will cry out, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Because he will be bearing all our sin, and he will be making atonement for our sin. You see, why is it that we can be honest before God, and confess that we are sinners and transgressors?

Because that is where Jesus meets us. As Isaiah 53 puts it, he numbers himself with the transgressors.

[34 : 33] and that means if we confess we are a transgressor, Jesus will come and be with us.

When we cry out, Lord, I have nothing going for me, I am a sinner, I can't even justify myself, I can only cast myself on your atoning sacrifice, well, that is when Jesus says, verse 14, we will walk away justified.

For God's justification, as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it, is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us and received by faith alone.

But if we don't name ourselves as a transgressor, we won't get to meet Jesus. Because only transgressors need atonement. Only transgressors need grace.

And that is the good news of Christianity. You see, grace can never come to those who are proud.

And that is what Jesus wants us to understand. Because grace means getting what we don't deserve.

[35 : 55] So if we think we deserve God's favour, God cannot be gracious to us. If we come with our righteousness, God rejects it. Because it's not enough.

But if we come with our brokenness, God accepts it. Because it means he can clothe us with Christ's righteousness.

We're not too proud to accept it. And that is enough. And when we understand we are clothed with a righteousness not our own, well, we won't be boasting in ourselves, will we? We won't be constantly comparing ourselves to others, will we? Because it's not our righteousness. No, the only thing we will want to do is to show people Christ.

Because when we were down and out, he exalted us. That's what verse 14 says. If you are not a Christian today, this is what happens when you trust in Christ.

[36 : 59] And if you are a Christian today, this is the gospel you and I need to be reminded of day after day so that we won't go the way of the Pharisee.

And when we walk the way of the tax collector, we show how attractive Jesus really is. There is a wonderful story of D.L. Moody, one of the greatest evangelists, of the 19th century.

There was a time when he was giving two evangelistic talks. And after the first talk, a man came and made some highly insulting comment to him, one that is personal in nature.

Moody got angry and he gave him a shot. Now, the man wasn't hurt, but given how many people saw it, it looked like the credibility of the gospel was now lost.

In fact, one of Moody's friends said, that's it, no one is going to believe the gospel tonight. But at the beginning of the second service, Moody stood up, called the meeting to order, and with a trembling voice, said this, friends, before beginning tonight, I want to say that I lost my temper with a man, and I have done wrong.

[38 : 19] I want to confess my sin before you all, and if that man is present here, whom I push in anger, I want to ask his forgiveness, and God's forgiveness.

And what happened next was amazing. Instead of the evangelistic meeting being a lost cause, God moved unusually that night, as many people were moved by the gospel.

Why might that be? Because I suspect Moody walked the way of the tax collector. He not only preached the gospel, he lived out the gospel.

He humbled himself. He did not feel the need to make excuses to make himself look better. He admitted his need for mercy. even though he was a famous guy.

The gospel had penetrated his heart deeply, and people saw that. So today, my friends, let me leave you with this question.

[39 : 23] How deep has the gospel gone in your life? How much are you relying on Jesus alone and not on your performance? Well, day by day, let the gospel continue to do its deepening work in our lives.

Let's pray for that now. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, you have spoken and there is so much pack in just these few verses, and I'm not even sure if I have done it justice, but Father, I just pray that the gospel will be heard loud and clear again.

Father, help us not to be justified or rely on our own performance to be justified, but help us to rely on Christ for our justification and find joy knowing that we are clothed in his righteousness and that is more than assurance enough for us to keep living for you day after day.

We pray all this in the name of Christ. Amen.