**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE TWO SIDES OF ASSURANCE**

**Luke 18:9-17**

**INTRODUCTION**

Today we look at what Jesus says about one of the most important topics in the Bible: the assurance of salvation.

When we think about the assurance of salvation, our thoughts turn first to the Christian who’s struggling with believing that they’re actually saved. This person may struggle at times with believing that Jesus Christ actually died on the cross in the place of sinners, and that all the sins of those who trust in him are forgiven, but those aren’t really their main struggles. For the most part, they say “Yes” and “Amen” to those things and have no trouble believing that those things are true.

Instead, what they struggle with believing is that those things are true *for them*. They struggle with believing that they actually believe. They have faith in Christ, but they don’t have faith in their faith. People like that need assurance of salvation. They need to believe that their desire for faith in Christ is faith itself. It may be weak faith, it may be imperfect faith, but it is faith nonetheless. This is one of the wonderful things about the assurance of salvation. It gives peace to those who doubt their salvation.

But there’s another side to the assurance of salvation, because assurance of salvation isn’t only meant to comfort those who are saved. It’s also meant to warn those who aren’t. It’s meant to shake up those who experience assurance of salvation but shouldn’t because they’re not actually saved. Assurance of salvation cuts both ways. It comforts the saved who doubt, and it warns the unsaved who don’t doubt but should.

We know that there are a lot of people who fall into the first category, but we must not forget that there are also a lot of people who fall into the second. We live in a time in which many professing Christians find assurance that they are saved because, at one point in their lives, they “accepted Jesus into their hearts” or they said the sinner’s prayer. If you use these sorts of tests as the foundation for your assurance, then you’re building on a foundation of sand. These aren’t biblical tests. They may incorporate biblical concepts, but they’re not biblical tests for determining whether your sins are actually forgiven and you’ve been reconciled to God. True assurance of salvation goes much further than a decision that you made once in your lifetime.

In our text today, Jesus is going to tell us some important things about what it means to be saved. He’s going to give us both sides of the assurance of salvation coin, so that those who are saved might receive comfort, and those who aren’t might receive warning. And as we have so often seen in Luke’s Gospel, what Jesus says will completely turn many of our assumptions upside down.

The title of this message is **The Two Sides of Assurance.** My aim today is to show you that **Crying for God’s Mercy is a Distinguishing Mark of Truly Saved Sinners.**

Our text today is a parable containing two characters, and each of these characters will form the two points of today’s sermon:

1. **THE UNRIGHTEOUS RIGHTEOUS MAN**
2. **THE RIGHTEOUS UNRIGHTEOUS MAN**

(1) **THE UNRIGHTEOUS RIGHTEOUS MAN**

Our text today begins in verse 9 with Luke telling us who this parable is meant for. As we have seen, Luke’s typical practice is to simply record Jesus’ words and actions so that his readers can do their own interpretation, but here in verse 9 he adds a little comment of his own to make sure we don’t miss the point of the parable. He says this parable is directed to those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.”

In other words, the parable is meant for those who experience assurance of salvation, not because God has saved them, but because they think that they’ve saved themselves. They believe that, when God looks at their good works and their godly character, he’ll say, “He’s good enough” or “She’s good enough”. They believe that they’ve met the standard of righteousness that God requires, and as a result, they expect that they will escape God’s judgment and spend an eternity with him in his kingdom. That’s who this parable is directed to.

But here’s the question: how do you know if you’re this kind of person or not? After all, most, if not all of us, would deny that we’re the kinds of people who would trust in our own righteousness. We read verse 9 and think, “That’s not me. Of course I’m not good enough to save myself from God’s judgment. This parable may be for other people, like the Pharisees, but it’s certainly not meant for me.”

But do you know what? The Pharisees thought the exact same thing. None of the Pharisees would say outright that they’re good enough to earn a place in God’s Kingdom, or that they’re righteous enough to save themselves. They wouldn’t say that. After all, they grew up in a religious institution centered on making atonement for the sins of God’s people.

The Pharisees believed in the need for God’s grace. They believed in the need for forgiveness. But that doesn’t mean they received it.

You see, it’s one thing to say that you trust in God and not yourself, but it’s another thing to actually believe it. Many of the Pharisees said it but didn’t really believe it. If they actually believed that the only way they could be called righteous is if God gave them righteousness as a free gift of his grace, then it would have completely changed their lives, especially how they related to other people.

That’s why Luke adds in verse 9 that this parable is for those who “treated others with contempt”. Who you trust affects how you live. If you trust in God, you will live in a way that respects and honours others. But if you trust in yourself, you will live in a way that treats others with contempt.

What does it mean to treat others with contempt? It means that you look down on people. It means that, when you compare yourself with others, you lift yourself above them in worth and significance. Jesus calls this “exalting” yourself in verse 14.

Another, more common word for this is pride. We often talk about pride as if it simply means that you think highly of yourself. We think we’re proud when we know that we’re really good at something. But that’s not pride. Pride isn’t just thinking you’re good at something. Pride is thinking that you’re better at that thing than others. Pride is comparative by nature, which means that proud people don’t just exalt themselves. They exalt themselves *above others*.

In his classic book *Mere Christianity,*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking, there would be nothing to be proud about. It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone.

For the Pharisees, what they were proud of was their rule-keeping. They were proud because they thought they were better at rule-keeping than others, and as a result, they treated others with contempt.

Perhaps that describes you today. Like the Pharisees, perhaps rule-keeping gives you your sense of value and makes you feel that you’re worth more than others. The rules you keep could be God’s rules, man-made rules, or the rules that you’ve made up yourself. Whatever set of rules it may be, if keeping the rules makes you feel superior to others, then you’re trusting in yourself. You’re believing that you’re righteous because of what you’ve done. And the fruit of that self-trust is that, when others fail to keep the rules, either because they break God’s rules or they break yours, you look down on them with contempt. In your view, they’re worth less than you are because they haven’t kept the rules as well as you have. If that describes you, then Luke tells us that this parable is for you.

Or maybe you don’t care much about rule-keeping. You care about other things. Other things give you your sense of value and worth, and when people don’t do well in those things you treat them with contempt just like the Pharisees did. The disciples struggled with this in verses 15-19. Luke tells us in verse 15 that people “were bringing even infants to (Jesus) that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.” Why? Because they didn’t think that little infants were worth Jesus’ time. They treated these little babies with contempt because they hadn’t accomplished anything in life. That was what mattered to the disciples, and that’s why they looked on these little babies who wanted some time with Jesus with contempt. But Jesus tells the disciples they’re wrong. Worth isn’t measured by worldly accomplishments. Indeed, if that’s how you think, you’ll never enter the Kingdom of God, because “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”

There are so many other reasons why we look down on others. Take wealth, for example. There are a lot of people who find their sense of worth in what they own, so much so that they look down on those who don’t have as much as they do. That’s looking down on others with contempt like the Pharisees did to those who broke the rules. Others find their sense of worth in their beauty. They think that attractive people are worth more than those who aren’t. There are countless other categories. It could be your career. Your education. Your family. Your health. Your life’s accomplishments. Even the soundness of your doctrine.

If you look down on other people for any reason because you think you’re better in some area than they are, you’re treating them with contempt. If that’s you, then this parable is for you.

So what is this parable about? Our parable today contains two men who pray two prayers who are headed for two different eternal destinations. The first man is a Pharisee. He prays a lengthy prayer captured in verses 11-12 that is meant to illustrate the kind of person described in verse 9 who trusts in himself and treats others with contempt. Jesus warns that, though the Pharisee may be righteous in his own mind, he’s not righteous in God’s. He wasn’t “justified”, as Jesus says in verse 14. He was an unrighteous righteous man, and for now, our focus will be on him.

Jesus tells us that he went up to the temple to pray. He begins with, “God, I thank you”, which is an excellent way to begin a prayer. But what is he thankful for? He’s thankful that he is “not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”

There’s nothing wrong with thanking God for keeping you from sin. I’m thankful that God has kept me from extorting people. I’m thankful that God has kept me faithful to my wife. But what’s problematic about the Pharisee’s prayer is that he thanks God that he’s not “like other men”. He’s not only thanking God that he’s not these things. He’s condemning those who are.

In other words, this man is so self-righteous that even when he’s trying to thank God, he can’t help but judge other people. He can’t help but look on others with contempt. Indeed, even as he’s praying, he looks back at the second man in the parable, the tax collector, and says, “Lord, thank you that I’m not even like *him*.” He doesn’t even know the man, but he condemns him anyways. Of course, tax collectors had a reputation of being sinners. Many of them were truly extortioners. But the Pharisee was so confident in his own righteousness and his own sense of justice that he wasn’t willing to give the poor tax collector a chance.

This Pharisee was a proud, judgmental man, but the ironic thing about him is that, when it came to obedience, there was much to commend. You could say that he was a paradigm of obedience, a man who is even worthy of imitation. He says in verse 12 that, “I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” The Jewish Law only required fasting on one day per year – the Day of Atonement – but this man fasted *twice a week*. The Law required fasting once per year, but he fasted 104 times per year. In addition, the Pharisee says that he gave tithes of all that he got. The Law only required that he tithe what he earned, but he tithed even what he purchased.

This man was as religious as a man could get. He went above and beyond the requirements of the Law. He gave up the comforts of food to show his devotion to God, and he donated generous portions of his wealth. If you only looked at his obedience to the Law, it would appear that he was a very righteous man. And yet, Jesus tells us that he was not. He was an unrighteous, righteous man.

Despite all his outward righteousness, he was unrighteous in God’s eyes. Why? Because of his pride. His pride is the one thing that Jesus focuses on to show us that he was still unrighteous. The way that he thought about himself, and the way that he thought about others in relation to himself showed that, despite all his outward righteousness, he was still as unrighteous as ever.

This is meant to be a warning to those who think that they’re saved but aren’t. It’s for those who enjoy the assurance of salvation but continue to be defined by pride. If this kind of pride characterizes the way that you think and the way that you relate to other people, if you’re constantly looking down on other people with contempt and exalting yourself above them, then Jesus is saying to you today that your assurance is misplaced. Like the Pharisee, you may keep all the rules. You may tithe to the church, you may pray, you may even fast. But if you trust in yourself, believing in your own righteousness in a way that puffs you up in pride, then just like the Pharisee, you will go home from this place without God’s justification.

(2) **THE RIGHTEOUS UNRIGHTEOUS MAN**

So what can be done if you struggle with pride like the Pharisees did? If that kind of assurance is false, how do you get true assurance? The answer lies in the other character of the parable, leading to our second point: the Righteous Unrighteous Man.

Jesus describes this man in verse 13 as a tax collector. As we have seen already in Luke’s Gospel, tax collectors were as close to the scum of the earth as you could find in those days. They were Jews who worked for the Romans to collect taxes from their people on behalf of the Roman Empire, and because of that, they were seen as traitors. Many of them were also greedy extortioners, charging people more tax than they actually owed so that they could be personally enriched.

We don’t know if this was true of the tax collector in verse 13, but we do know that he was a man who was deeply aware of his sin. Jesus says in verse 13 that he was “standing far off” from the Temple, and that “he would not even lift up his eyes to heaven”. This man was ashamed of his sin, so ashamed that he didn’t think he was worthy to approach God. Instead, he hung his head and approached God’s presence in the Temple with fear and trembling.

Jesus then tells us that he “beat his breast”, which was an expression of remorse, before he prayed this simple prayer: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

That’s it. No list of righteous deeds. No thoughts about the sins of others. Just “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

We don’t know what he did. He could have done anything. Perhaps it was one of the things the Pharisee boasted that he wasn’t. He could have been an extortioner. An unjust man. An adulterer. It could have been something worse, like murder. Or it could have been something that wasn’t as bad, like getting angry at someone. Whatever it was, Jesus doesn’t find it necessary to tell us. We only need to know that he was a sinner, and that he knew it.

So he cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” The Greek phrase “be merciful to me” can also be translated “propitiate your wrath against me”. “Propitiate” isn’t a word that’s commonly used today, but it’s an extremely important word in the Bible. It means to satisfy God’s justice. It means to turn God’s condemnation into favour.

This tells us something very significant about the tax collector. It tells us that he’s not only aware of his sin. He’s also aware of what his sin deserves. There’s a massive difference between knowing that you’ve done something wrong and knowing that what you did deserves God’s judgment. Many people believe the first. In fact, if you ask pretty much anyone you meet if they’re perfect, they’ll say “Of course not. No one’s perfect, including me. I’ve done my fair share of bad things in my life. Things that I regret.” But ask those same people whether they think they deserve God’s judgment, they’ll say, “No, I don’t think so. I may have done bad things, but I’m not *that* bad.”

The reality, however, is that all sin deserves God’s punishment. God doesn’t just reserve his justice for those who are “really bad”. His justice is for all who have sinned. Period. This tax collector knew this. He knew his sin attracted God’s judgment. So he calls out for God to appease his divine wrath against him.

That’s all Jesus tells us about the tax collector. He’s too timid to enter the Temple, he’s too ashamed to lift his eyes to heaven, he beats his breast in remorse, and he cries out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” And here’s the absolutely remarkable thing. In verse 14, Jesus says, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.”

This sinful tax collector was *justified*, which means that God declared him to be righteous. Not the righteous Pharisee. The unrighteous tax collector. This remorseful sinner went home righteous in God’s sight, while the rule-keeping Pharisee did not.

How could this be? How can the unrighteous rule-breakers be declared righteous, and not the rule-keeper who appeared to be righteous?

The answer is simple, and yet eternally profound: righteousness is a gift. It’s not something that is earned. It’s not something that you work for. If you try to work for it like the Pharisee did, you’ll never have it. But if you cry out for it in sorrow over your sin, God will give it to you as an undeserved gift.

This is the beautiful mystery of the gospel. God gives his righteousness to anyone who calls out for mercy, because God is *merciful*. He delights to show mercy to those who ask for it. And in order to ask for it, you can’t be proud. You can’t trust in your own righteousness. You have to be humble. You have to come to him like a little child who has nothing to boast about. You have to come to him like this poor tax collector, knowing that you’re a sinner who doesn’t deserve to approach God but deserves God’s wrath instead. You need to be brought to a place of such brokenness, and grief, and repentance that you cry out that he might propitiate his wrath against you, because otherwise, you have no hope. You will be lost to his justice forever, because you will never be able to earn your righteousness before him.

And when you do, when you cry out for God’s mercy in humility, God grants you righteousness as a gift, a gift of infinite value that no one could ever earn, or has earned, except one man: Jesus. Only Jesus could earn God’s righteousness, because only he lived a perfect life. And although Jesus doesn’t reveal this in his parable, because it wasn’t yet time to reveal how God would justify sinners, the righteousness that is given is the very righteousness of Christ himself.

Jesus lived a perfect life so that he could die a sacrificial death on the cross for those who trust him. He took the wrath that we deserved and suffered in our place, so that we could receive his perfect righteousness. Our sin for his righteousness. And now, because of what Jesus has done, everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be justified – declared righteous – not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done. God cleanses us from our sin, and he clothes us with the robes of Christ’s righteousness, so that sinners like us can truly be called righteous.

This is what today’s parable is all about. If you exalt yourself, you will be humbled by the divine justice of God. But if you humble yourself, God will lift you up to himself in mercy and give you a place among all those who have also become righteous in Christ.

So today, if you struggle with believing that you’re right with God, if you don’t experience the sweetness of the assurance of your salvation, then our parable invites you to take comfort in the mercy that God gave to the tax collector. The tax collector didn’t bring anything to the table. Not his own righteousness, not his good works. All he brought to God was his sin and a cry for mercy. And in his mercy, God sent him home righteous.

If you relate to the tax collector, then Jesus’ words in verse 14 are for you. You are going home from this place “justified”. God has declared you righteous even though you may not feel righteous or be righteous because the righteousness you now have isn’t yours. It’s Christ’s. God declares you righteous because of what Christ has done, not you. The more you understand this, the more you trust in Christ’s righteousness rather than your own, the more you will taste the sweetness of the assurance that you are truly saved.

**CONCLUSION**

Let me conclude with two words of application.

The first is a word of warning. If you have a tendency to look down on others with contempt, then you’re in danger of God’s judgment. The reason for your contempt doesn’t matter. It could be because people break the rules you think they should keep, which is the struggle for the legalist, or it could be because people keep the rules you think they should break, which is the struggle for the liberal. It could be because other people aren’t as smart as you. It could be because other people aren’t as wealthy or as beautiful as you. It could be because other people don’t go to the same church as you. Whatever it is, if you treat others with contempt, if you look down on them as if you are superior, you’re in danger of God’s judgment.

Why? It’s not because of your contempt. It’s because of what your contempt reveals. It reveals that you’re trusting in yourself instead of Jesus. The only reason why we look down on others is because we think that we’ve earned something, or we’ve worked hard to become something that others haven’t. That’s trusting in yourself and not Jesus, which is why treating others with contempt is so dangerous. But if you truly believe that everything you have, and everything that you are is a gift of God’s mercy and grace, then there’s nothing for you to boast about except the righteousness that God has given you in Christ.

So watch yourself carefully for the tendency to treat others with contempt. Don’t let it sneak into your life. As soon as you notice it, you need to acknowledge it as a return to trusting in yourself instead of Christ, and you need to turn back to him in repentance and faith.

The second word of application is one of comfort for those who struggle with assurance. Some of you struggle with assurance because you think your life lacks the fruit of a truly saved life. You think to yourself, “If I were truly saved, my life would look like this or that”, but because it doesn’t, you doubt. You doubt that you’re truly saved.

If that’s you, then you need to hear this: the most important thing you can do isn’t working harder to produce the fruit you so desperately want to see. The most important thing is to look to Christ. If you want to see the fruit of a truly saved life and you respond to that by merely working harder to produce that fruit, you’re just acting as another version of the Pharisee. You’re trusting in yourself. Not Jesus. That’s not how true godliness is produced. True godliness comes first and foremost from looking to Christ and what he did for us on the cross. Cry out to Jesus. Trust in him. Worship him. And when you do, you will find that the fruit of godliness will truly start growing in your life.

Whether you’re a repentant Pharisee who treats others with contempt but doesn’t want to, or you’re a sorrowful tax collector who constantly laments over your sin, God calls you today to look to Christ for your salvation, so that you might go home justified.