Lord, Have Mercy

No. 23  Luke 18:9-17  February 27, 2005  Nathan Carter

Series: Gospel of Luke

Introduction

We’re preaching through Luke – the third book in the NT and the third of four theological biographies of a man named Jesus who lived roughly 2,000 years ago, the founder of Christianity. For nearly a year now we’ve been in a section of this book called the Jerusalem Journey segment, starting at chapter 9, verse 51. Believe it or not, we’re actually getting close to the end of this segment when Jesus arrives at Jerusalem for the final week of his life. The major topic of this segment has been what it means to follow Jesus. What does the Christian life look like?

Last week we looked together at Luke 18:1-8. It was on a certain level a call to prayer, a call for Jesus’ disciples to always pray and not give up. So the Christian life looks like… a life of prayer. But I mentioned that other passages throughout this Jerusalem Journey section highlighted other calls, causing us to note that the Christian life looks like a life of compassion, simplicity, worship, witness, and several others.

However, I cautioned us against this very real temptation to treat all these calls as a check-list – prerequisites for admission to Jesus’ club. Jesus is not saying that following him involves doing certain things and not doing others. Instead, from the way last week’s account is presented to us by Luke we see very clearly that following Jesus involves simply this item called faith. And then out of this faith certain behaviors and attitudes will naturally flow, but faith is the sole criterion for experiencing the salvation that Jesus brings.

I defined faith like this: a correct apprehension of the unmatched glory, beauty, majesty, awesomeness, goodness, loveliness, power, splendor and infinite value of God and consequently delighting in, reveling in, treasuring, prizing, relishing, adoring, savoring who he is. That’s the glue that holds the whole Christian life together. Now today Luke wants to take us one step deeper. He wants us to get a little more precise in our understanding of faith. What is the foundational attribute of God that acts as the gateway to appreciating all the others? What is it about God that attracts us to him in the first place? What aspect of God’s glory, beauty, majesty, etc… is the prime object of a believer’s amazement, the key recognition that signals faith? It is God’s mercy. Faith is, first and foremost, knowing God to be above all merciful.

If you don’t apprehend first and foremost the limitless mercy of God, you haven’t seen God and you don’t have faith and you are not a follower of Christ no matter how many good things you do, no matter how correct your theology is otherwise. The
greatest display of God’s glory was the cross. The gospel message is the central message of God. You don’t know God, you don’t follow Christ apart from a mental assent and a gut affection to the message of the gospel – that God has provided a way for sinners to be justified through the atoning death of his Son on the cross and thus mercy is available to any and all, including you and me! Personally knowing God to be merciful is the crux of faith, biblically understood.

So, let me try to put that all together for you. Faith involves perceiving God to be merciful as displayed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and experiencing that mercy applied to yourself, which leads to an estimation of God as being infinitely valuable and to a treasuring of him above all things, which leads necessarily to a transformed life with different desires, values, and behaviors. So you can’t claim to be a Christian without certain fruit present in your life – some of you need to hear that. Faith prays, faith worships, faith gives money away, faith surrenders its life.

But faith is before anything else a whole-hearted belief that God has freely pardoned you solely on account of Christ and not on account of anything you have done to merit a pardon – I know many of you need to hear this. The opposite understanding would be to pray, worship, give money, fast twice a week, be religious in order to obtain God’s pardon. That’s the farthest thing from biblical faith. Essentially what I’m saying is just this: **The only way to live the Christian life is to humbly throw yourself at God’s mercy.** If that doesn’t make sense to you or if what I’m saying hasn’t clicked yet, hopefully listening to Jesus’ two illustrations of this point will bring it to life.

*Let’s ask God that it would…*

**The Pharisee & The Tax Collector**

There are really only two types of people in the world. One type represents the vast majority of the human race throughout history and today. This group is comprised of some who may call themselves Christians and all of those who don’t. Its philosophy is, “I’m generally good and deserve certain rights.” These types are confident of their own righteousness and they obtain such confidence primarily by comparing themselves to other people. They relate to God through good works/good deeds/doing good things (yes everyone relates to God at some level – don’t let anybody tell you they don’t believe in God because it’s a lie, they know he’s there; and yes everybody has at least a basic sense of good and evil – a moral conscience, seared as it may be). This is one type of person in this world. This is the default worldview that we humans naturally slip into – works righteousness.

The other type is a very narrow way that few have tread, yet it subscribes to the most appealing and self-authenticating philosophy of all – “I’m genuinely bad and entirely at the mercy of God.” These types recognize their own corruption and impotence through an honest comparison of themselves to what they know of God and thus are compelled to plead for mercy. They disregard any foolish notion of earning God’s approval or finding worth in their accomplishments and simply rely on God’s grace. This is the liberating way of living that is so easy and at the same time so hard – justification by faith.

There are only two types. The first one, the popular one only leads to frustration, meaninglessness, and death. The second one, on the other hand, leads to joy, purpose,
and eternal life. Two fundamentally different outlooks on life. Every single person operates by one of them or the other. And we have them pictured for us with stunning precision in the parable that Jesus told.

Again like last week, we see right away the intention behind Jesus’ parable and which of the two characters Jesus desires his disciples to imitate in the introductory verse, v. 9 – “To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.” So Jesus is telling this to a group of the first type of people – those who operated under a works righteousness system. Are you confident of your own righteousness? Do you look down on other people? Jesus is talking to you.

Coming on the heels of last week’s call for his disciples to pray he’s going to show us two alternative examples of prayer. One is a prayer that flows from faith; the other is a prayer that exemplifies unbelief. “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector” (v. 10). By the way, do you know why the Bible usually refers to going to Jerusalem or the temple in Jerusalem as “going up” even if someone’s approaching it from the north? It’s referring to an up in elevation not latitude. It’s like someone from Chicago going up to Denver, the mile-high city. This made sense to me when I visited Jerusalem several years ago and wondered if the charter bus carrying my group was going to be able to make it up the relentless incline – it was straining and laboring for several miles. Just imagine what it was like before automobiles!

Anyway, so we have two men going up to Jerusalem to pray at the temple – the center of religious life, the place to meet God in those days. One you might expect to see there – a Pharisee. A Pharisee was a member of a religious sect known for taking the OT Law seriously, caring deeply about theology, studying the Bible, and keeping God’s commands rigidly. It may be fair to draw a modern day comparison to what sociologists and political scientists call an ‘evangelical’ in today’s landscape. Jesus has a lot to say about Pharisees throughout Luke, not much of it good. But Jesus uses a Pharisee here in this story because more than any other he epitomizes what it means to be religious. He would have been associated in people’s minds as one accepted before God.

The other person praying at the temple is a shocker – a tax collector. Being a ‘tax collector’ was almost synonymous with being a wicked person/sinner. Notorious for graft and corruption, tax collectors were hated. We may not like IRS agents today, but they don’t have the same associations as a first-century tax collector would have. He would have been immediately associated in people’s minds as the last person God would have anything to do with – a traitor, someone who collected inflated taxes for the Romans and skimmed off the surface his own fees. “In today’s culture,” Kent Hughes asserts, “the closest social equivalent would be drug pushers and pimps, those who prey on society, who make money off others’ bodies and make a living of stealing from others.”

A Pharisee and a tax collector.

“The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get’” (vv. 11-12). Now it’s possible to read this prayer in a positive light. It sounds somewhat like some of the Psalms (i.e. Ps. 26) and it could be construed as praise for God’s preventative grace. It’s appropriate to be thankful...
for God’s grace of prevention in your life. You know the phrase, “There, but for the
grace of God, go I?”

I read once of a pastor whose daughter came to him disappointed because she had
to give her testimony at a missions trip she was going on and she felt that her testimony
was boring, un-exciting. In other words, she didn’t have a wild conversion story. She
hadn’t fallen into deep, destructive sin before God convicted her of her need for his
mercy and lavished it on her through faith in Christ. The pastor/father then instructed her
of the blessing of a boring testimony, stating that “God’s preventive grace is to be more
highly prized than his reclaiming grace.” I don’t know if I would say more than – every
kind of mercy is equally magnificent – but it’s definitely not to be dismissed, but rather
recognized as a mercy indeed.

So done properly there’s nothing wrong in praising God for his grace in your life
that has prevented you from going down certain harmful paths – “Thank you God for
gracefully keeping me from going down the path some of my high school friends went
down. Praise you!” It’s entirely God’s grace and he deserves to be praised for it!

But something different is going on with this Pharisee. We notice that he uses the
first person singular pronoun 5 times in 2 verses. It starts off okay, “God, I thank
you…,” but the tone displays a radically self-absorbed, self-righteous demeanor. It
should properly be read like this, “I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers,
evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. [Instead] I fast twice a week and
give a tenth of all I get. [God, I’m the best thing you’ve got.]” Darrell Bock comments,
“After reading his prayer, we wonder whether God should apply to be his assistant!”

Notice also how he assesses himself. He compares himself to other people in
order to feel good about himself. He puffs himself up by comparing himself to others.
How often do you do that? I do it all the time. Refusing to admit my own bankruptcy
and find my worth and value and acceptance wholly in Christ I look to other people to get
some sense of worth. Generally, if I’m not finding my security and confidence in Christ
and his mercy and what he’s done for me what happens is I start looking at someone else
and wish I could be like him – “I’m not as good of a preacher as Kent Hughes; I’m not as
holy as him. I’m not as smart as this classmate in grad school.” I start feeling guilty and
sorry for myself so then I find someone to compare myself to that I feel I’m better than,
“Man, I’m a way better preacher than this guy. I know way more than he does.” And it
makes me feel good about myself again. “I’m really a pretty good preacher. I’m quite
holy. I’m smarter than most people.”

My guess is you’ve done this too. Comparing yourself to others generally results
in feeling bad because you see someone else and think, “I’m not like her. I wish I could
be like him.” This makes you feel guilty and you pity yourself. And then to make
yourself feel better you try to find someone you can compare yourself to and feel good –
“Well, at least I’m not like her. I don’t do the things that he does. Aha, he struggles with
that! I’ve never struggled with that.” Instead, the way to cope is to preach the gospel to
yourself – I have no standing with God except for the mercy shown to me at the cross.

But that’s getting a little ahead in the story; that’s what the tax collector does.
Simply notice that the Pharisee proudly feels good about himself by comparing himself to
others. The true standard is and always has to be God. Listen to what John Calvin says,
First, we bid a man begin by examining himself, and this not in a superficial and perfunctory manner, but to cite his conscience before the tribunal of God, and when sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, to reflect on the strictness of the sentence pronounced upon all sinners. Thus confounded and amazed at his misery, he is prostrated and humbled before God; and, casting away all self-confidence, groans as if given up to final perdition.

The Pharisee, focused on himself, is deluded of his own sin and dependence on grace by comparing himself to others. Finally, he touts his own accomplishments. Here’s the ultimate signal that something’s wrong. He brags, “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (v. 12). He comes to God with a list of accomplishments. He arrogantly holds up to God his curriculum vitae. He fails to see his sin and need for mercy and actually thinks that he has earned God’s favor by his works.

He fasts twice weekly – a characteristic of Pharisees. The OT only mandated one annual fast, but in an effort to be super-spiritual they added more, and they let everyone know that they did it too (cf. Mt. 6:16). He makes it clear that he tithes everything (cf. 11:42). It’s like someone announcing to God and all the family listening at the Thanksgiving meal that he never misses church and prayer meeting and he tithes from his pre-tax income, always rounding up. This Pharisee is a meticulous list follower! He lives a clean life and does everything right and he thinks by doing so he is able to come to God on his own merit.

Is this what your prayer life looks like? If you’re here today and wouldn’t necessarily call yourself a Christian, is this generally how you relate to God when you think about him? “I don’t steal” or “I don’t molest children” or “I bought a neon wristband – it’s for cancer research” or “People think of me as nice” or “I’m not like some people I know who are just plain evil and mean” or “I’m a good friend… God, I’m an overall good person.” Or, how about this: maybe you’re a good churchgoer, not like your worldly co-workers or your high school buddies who got sucked into the party scene. You have your quiet time every morning, give to the church, listen to KLOVE in the car, and when you see someone else who appears really spiritual and start to wonder if you measure up you work all the harder. Do you ever relate to God like the Pharisee in this parable?

Let’s look at the other example in the story – the tax collector. “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’” (v. 13). He slipped into the outer regions of the temple area away from the masses of religious worshippers. His prayer was simple, to the point. He didn’t put on airs of righteousness. He recognized himself for what he was and admitted it – a sinner. He didn’t bring to God any of his good deeds as if to say, “Here, look at me and what I’ve done. Accept me.” All he could say was, “Have mercy on me.”

He also didn’t say, “I will change and find a new job and give back all I’ve stolen and start doing good things and come back in a few weeks and then you’ll be pleased with me.” He knew that was useless. Brought low by a recognition of his sin, he went to God, believing that he was a merciful God, and threw himself at God’s mercy. The tax
collector humbled himself, confessed his unworthiness, and simply cried out to God to forgive him.

After telling us about these two alternative types of prayer, Jesus draws the conclusion: “I tell you that this man [the tax collector], rather than the other [the squeaky clean Pharisee], went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (v. 14). The word is justified, something that Paul uses frequently but that we don’t normally think of being in the Gospels. But the foundation for the magisterial Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone was laid by none other than Jesus Christ.

Jesus states clearly that this tax collector was justified (declared righteous in God’s law court) because of his faith, while the self-righteous Pharisee went home unjustified. This shows us that nobody is beyond the reaches of God’s mercy, even slimy tax collectors. And nobody is above the need for God’s mercy, even rule-following Pharisees. The way you get justified before God is not by being good, but by admitting you’re not good and trusting in God’s mercy. That’s the way God designed the universe: those who suppose themselves worthy are rejected and the one who knows himself to be rejected is counted worthy.

Paul put it this way in Rom. 3:28 – “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” And this way in Eph. 2:8-9 – “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” Again, Calvin puts it this way:

We maintain, that of what description soever any man’s works may be, he is regarded as righteous before God, simply on the footing of gratuitous mercy; because God, without any respect to works, freely adopts him in Christ, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to him, as if it were his own.

There are two types of people – those who operate on a works righteousness system and those who operate according to justification by faith. Only the latter are really following Christ.

Two men went to pray; or rather say,  
One went to brag, the other to pray;  
One stands up close, and treads on high,  
Where th’ other dare not send his eye.  
One nearer to the altar trod,  
The other to the altar’s God.

Child-Like Faith

Right after the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector Luke tells us of a certain event in Jesus’ ministry in which Jesus made a similar point to the one we just looked at. It’s an account of the time when “people were… bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them” (v. 15a). Now having an accurate picture of how completely dependent one is on God’s mercy should change the way one thinks about others. If you truly see yourself as a sinner saved by grace, nobody will be beneath you because you
recognize that in comparison to God’s righteousness, every single human being is on an equal footing. Are there certain people that you subconsciously presume to be beneath you?

Well, Christ’s disciples at this time must have still struggled with this concept. You see children were considered to be a lesser class of society. You weren’t fully appreciated until you had reached a certain age of adulthood. Until then you were simply a nuisance, a liability, insignificant, you got in the way. The disciples didn’t realize that they were no better than them and they didn’t have a clue that they were somehow to imitate them. So parents were bringing their little kids to Jesus to have him bless them by laying his hand on them and “when the disciples saw this, they rebuked them” (v. 15b).

It’s nice to see that they were taking Jesus’ advisement to rebuke that we looked at about a month ago seriously. But as it is today, so it was back then – our efforts to rebuke are sometimes misguided. Don’t let that stop you from rebuking, but be open to having your rebuke corrected. The disciples hadn’t figured out yet that Jesus was the “friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’” (7:34) and therefore the friend of all the lowly and rejected and ignored, including children (cf. 9:47-48).

“But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them’” (v. 16a). Jesus excluded no one. He wanted no one to hinder a child from coming to him. Now let’s just think about that truth briefly and think if it has any application to us. Most of us live in a sub-culture that may not say so, but in practice ignores children. Young, urban professionals and their likes caught up in their career-focused, self-focused pursuits subtly disdain kids. Pregnancy is looked on as an inconvenience, children are looked on as a burden/something to be avoided or among some aborted. This is definitely the thinking of our culture and I’m afraid it creeps into the church.

High-school and college women are not encouraged to grow up and be stay-at-home mothers and focus on their children; that’s not an honorable goal in society’s eyes. Marriages are not expected to always involve children. When they do the kids are confined to daycares and passed off to babysitters. Even in the church ministry to children is often looked on as a second-class ministry, not as important as ministry to adults. Well, I think there’s a direct application in v. 16 to IBC – we must not, in the hubbub of all the attention we put on the ministries we do to adults, drop the ball on reaching kids for the kingdom and training up the ones that God has given to us. There’s a temptation to see that as somehow less important. It’s just as important and we should think that way. Let the kids come to Jesus and do not hinder them – Jesus said so.

Why is Jesus so open to children? Why, part of it is because he sees in them a great picture of what following Christ should look like. Let them come, “for [because] the kingdom of God belongs to such as these” (v. 16b). Entrance and residence in the kingdom is for those who have childlike faith. “I tell you the truth,” Jesus concludes, “anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (v. 17). Something about children makes them a perfect picture of what it means to be a follower of Christ, a member of God’s kingdom.

What is it? Is it their gullibility? Or should I say willingness to believe anything you tell them? So as to say, “Just believe on blind faith like a little kid believes his parents when they tell him there’s a Santa Claus.” No I don’t think so. Is Jesus remarking about a child-like innocence? Well again, I don’t think so because even
though Jesus never had kids of his own, he knew very well that they’re not innocent. Kids are born, or even as David confesses, conceived (cf. Ps. 51:5) with a sinful nature. That’s a modern, Hallmark myth.

So what is Jesus referring to? He’s referring to a child’s complete and total dependence. Rachael and Anna are entirely at the mercy of Michael & Nam Mee and JT & Grace. Entirely, right? They depend on their parents for everything. The picture of a child being picked up and carried is a picture of what it takes to enter the kingdom of God. Think of it this way: It would be utterly ridiculous for Anna to attempt to change her own diaper. Can you picture it? Or to pretend that it’s not dirty. That would be utterly foolish. She has to cry out, “Mom!!” and let her take away her smelly, messy diaper and put on a clean one.

So it is with those who would enter the kingdom. You can’t get in with soiled pants and we’ve all made a royal mess. Interestingly, many people are content to pretend it doesn’t exist or are really good at wiping it off our legs when it seeps out, but that doesn’t cut it. We need a diaper change and we’re completely impotent to change it.

I’m talking about sin. We all live in a world that reeks of sin. Sometimes the stench gets to us, but mostly we’ve grown use to it. We don’t want to admit that we have a problem. So we cover it up with the perfume of good works or finding someone else that we think stinks worse than we do. The only way to be cleansed of our sin is to humbly cry out to God with the trust and dependence of a child and say, “I can’t do it. I can’t fool you. You know me through and through. I need your help. Have mercy on me, a sinner.” If you do that, he is delighted to take your sins away, put them on Jesus, and credit his righteousness to you. In this way are you a child at heart?

Conclusion

It seems so simple and yet it’s so unnatural, so many people refuse to do it. We much prefer to earn our salvation, to manufacture our own righteousness, to put others down to justify ourselves, to refuse to admit we’re dependent children. History teaches us that even those who are told to relate to God through faith and not works often slip into works righteousness. Israel was mercifully redeemed from slavery and then given the law follow but by the time of Christ they pursued righteousness “not by faith, but as if it were by works” (Rom. 9:32).

The Christian church was founded on the gospel of justification by faith on the basis of God’s objective work on the cross, but even within the first generation some were toying with reverting back to a works righteousness mode. Paul writes to these people in Galatia, trying to steer them away from that dead end street – “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (3:1-3).

After several centuries of church history had elapsed almost all of Christendom had succumbed to such ludicrous notions of works righteousness – indulgences, penance, purgatory, people showing up every Sunday to ritualistically take the body and blood of Christ. By the 16th century the church was in dire need of reformation. And by God’s grace there came a movement of godly men who reread the Bible again and noticed that it
was the humble tax collector who went home justified and not the other. *Sola fide. Sola gratia.* It was a simple cry, but the only one God hears.

That ineffective, alluring method is still so easy to fall into today. So we can never remind ourselves too often of the need to humble ourselves like a child, eschew all notions of being righteous in ourselves, stop feeling better than others, and simply cry out every moment of every day, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner. Look on Jesus and pardon me.”

Are you feeling tired today? Tired of pretending nothing’s wrong? Tired of trying to measure up? Tired of feeling guilty? Tired of chasing after an elusive sense of self worth by comparing yourself to other people? Tired of working? **The only way to live the Christian life is to humbly throw yourself at God’s mercy.** Look to God, see his mercy as displayed in Christ, believe, and be saved.

**Benediction**
May you know God to be merciful and find your acceptance with him solely through Jesus and may you go home from here today justified before God, your heavenly Father.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday afternoon, February 27, 2005. It is not meant to be a polished essay or substitute for personal Bible study. The vision of Immanuel Baptist Church is to transform sinners into a holy people who find fulfillment for their hunger for beauty, meaning, and eternal satisfaction in the glory of Christ alone.

End notes: