

Fighting Self-Righteousness

One of the things people misunderstand about Jesus is they think of him as a sort-of “don’t worry, be happy,” live-and-let-live hippie, who never took a side and never said a harsh word to anyone. Well, we’re doing this series to dispel this notion once and for all, because any cursory reading of the gospels, you’ll find that there were times when Jesus put the gloves on (so to speak) and went toe to toe with people.

Now, that’s exciting to many Christians because we think of ourselves as being in Jesus’ corner. We’re fighting with him, because we’re on Jesus’ side and he’s on ours. Here’s the problem. In the Bible, when Jesus faces off against people, more often than not, he punches the hardest (figuratively speaking, of course) against the religious establishment and the good religious people like you and me.

Over the next few weeks, we’re using Jesus’ diatribe against the Jewish religious leaders as our springboard. You might remember last week that Keith did a great job of addressing the issue of hypocrisy, which is a thread that runs through this whole chapter. He said that hypocrisy is *pretending to be morally upright in order to boost your image for other people*. In other words, you know you’re not morally upright, but you pretend you are. This week, I want to shift gears and talk about the sin of self-righteousness.

Self-righteousness is different than hypocrisy because self-righteous people can't see or won't admit their shortcomings. *If you're self-righteous, you believe you're 100% righteous and morally superior to others.* At the heart of self-righteousness is comparison. You're not just righteous, but you're *more* righteous than other people.

Now, I'm talking about it in terms of righteousness, but we see this same attitude creep up on other areas. Yesterday, my wife and I were at Sam's Club. Now, I have the Sam's Club app, where you can scan in all your items and pay right on your phone and walk right past the lines at the checkout. Well, Sam's was crazy busy yesterday, but when we got our items and I checked out on my phone, I have to admit, I was disappointed to see that even though the store was crazy busy, there weren't any long lines.

As we were walking out, I told my wife, *"I'm a little disappointed there weren't super long lines. I was looking forward to laughing at those chumps when I walked by because I'm so smart for using the app."* She was appalled. That's self-righteousness.

We know religious people can be self-righteousness. But irreligious people can too? We just have different definitions of righteousness. For Church people, righteousness means being faithful to our religious rituals like going to church, tithing and devotional time and avoiding the "standard" sins like murder, lying, stealing and adultery.

Growing up, I remember looking down on people who didn't go to church or if I saw someone light a cigarette. Although, now that I think about it, things have come back

around and today our whole society shames smokers. So, people accuse Christians of being self-righteous. But irreligious people do it, too.

For instance, there's a lot of self-righteousness in *politics* today. In fact, self-righteousness was a key factor in the election last year. One of the critical moments of the campaign was when Hillary called Trump supporters his "basket of deplorables." That moved the needle for a lot of people because people are so turned off by self-righteousness, that people were willing to overlook Trump's obvious short-comings.

People outside the church name sins, too. Their list includes things like destroying the environment, using GMOs, and having obscene wealth. I'm not taking a side here, I'm just pointing out that this is an issue for ALL of us, Christian or non-Christian, liberal or conservative. So, this will be good for all of us. Turn with me to Luke, chapter 18:9-14.

Since we're in church today, I'm going to talk primarily to church people. It's easy for us to condemn the sins of people "out there," but it's more useful and more in line with Jesus to pay attention to our own sin. Jesus said in Matthew 7, "**Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?**" Today we're paying attention to our plank.

[read Luke 18:9-14] "**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else...**" Remember that's our definition of self-righteousness. This is who Jesus is speaking to. "**He told this parable. ¹⁰Two men went up to the Temple**

to pray, one a Pharisee (religious leader) **and the other a tax collector.**” Let me pause there for a moment. In Jesus’ day, tax collectors were despised, but not just because they collected taxes. Tax collectors were traitors—Jews who conspired with the Romans.

They were opportunists who took advantage of people for financial gain. They would bid with the Roman government on the amount of taxes they could collect in a certain region and as long as they gave the promised amount to the government, they could collect any amount they wanted on top of that. Tax collectors were rich, but they were hated and marginalized. They were considered by Jews among the greatest sinners.

So those are the two characters—Pharisee (the respected religious leader) and tax collector (professional swindler). Verse 11, **“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.’”**

“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.’”

“I tell you that this man (the tax collector), 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.” That’s the parable.

Last week, Keith preached a 9-point sermon. So today, I’m going to preach a 9-point sermon of my own. From this passage, we’ll see the *marks* of self-righteousness,

the *problem* with self-righteousness, and how to put on the gloves and *fight against* self-righteousness. Let's start with the marks.

The first mark of self-righteousness is *when you think you deserve God's acceptance because of your goodness*. The impression we get is that the Pharisee walked right up to the altar and acted as if he owned the place. Then, his prayer was really a prayer at all. He starts out like he's going to thank God, but ends up thanking himself that he's so awesome. Verse 12, **"I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."**

Now fasting and tithing are good things, just like resisting sin and being nice to your neighbors, but according to the Bible, doing these things isn't what causes God to accept you. In fact, good works can become a way to manipulate God. *If I'm good enough, then God will have to accept me*. We don't focus on God's mercy, but on our goodness. Now, none of us would be so bold as to consciously think that kind of thing. So, how do we recognize self-righteousness in ourselves?

I think a practical way to do it is to look for that attitude in relationship to other people. For instance, a moment of confession here...Have you ever thought to yourself that your spouse is lucky to have someone as great, and kind and thoughtful and humble as you? If you're a parent, have you ever thought that your kids are really blessed that you're their parent? If you ever think that in your relationships with other people, then chances are, you struggle with self-righteousness. That's one mark.

The second mark of self-righteousness is that you *feel superior to others because of what you think, do or don't do*. This is where Jesus' parable makes me throw up in my mouth. Listen to the Pharisees' prayer in verse 11. **"God, I thank you that I'm not like those poor excuses for humanity."** Isn't that ugly? The pretense is staggering.

But it's easy to judge the Pharisee, but watch out because it might be you, too. If you ever use the phrase "*those people,*" you might be self-righteous. "What those poor people need to do it just get a job." "If those black people would just stop shooting each other..." "Those liberals don't care about God." "Those conservatives don't care about people." If you ever say things like that, check yourself for self-righteousness.

The third mark of self-righteousness is related to the second...when you *identify others by their sin and yourself by your good qualities*. In his prayer, the Pharisee stuck a label on people. Robbers. Evildoers, adulterers. Or even "this tax collector." There's no acknowledgement of their value, only their sin.

In the last series, we talked about the fact that the Bible says we are all God's masterpiece, but we're covered in the mud of sin. The message of the gospel is that Jesus transforms us to reveal the masterpiece God intended.

Self-righteousness can't see past the mud and oftentimes forgets that God created every person in his image. That's when people become their sin in our mind. They're adulterers, liars, atheists, or drug addicts. They don't just commit sins, they're sinners.

But a self-righteous person doesn't apply the same standard to himself. He elevates other people's sin and minimizes his own, *"It's just a little something I need to work on. It's not really a big deal."* So, do you compare yourself and your character, accomplishments or knowledge to other people's? Does it make you feel good to hear about other people's failures or sins? You might be self-righteous.

OK, so you might have started to identify self-righteousness in yourself. But you might not be convinced it's as bad as the "big" sins like stealing, and cheating, and sexual sins. But Jesus seems to say that sins like self-righteousness are just as dangerous.

But why would self-righteousness be so harmful? Let me just briefly mention three things. *First is that it blinds us to our sin and makes growth impossible.* Self-righteousness always focuses us on other people's sin. Do you ever sit in church and think, *"I wish so and so was here to hear this?"* What's the problem with that attitude? You're so busy applying a sermon to someone else's life and forget all about your own.

But we all have an incredible ability to maintain blind spots in our own lives, so we can't waste our time and mental energy diagnosing other people's sins. We need to apply all our resources to ourselves.

The second problem is that self-righteousness erodes compassion. Loving people is impossible when you're sizing them up. Compassion is the ability to see ourselves in other people's situation. But self-righteousness focuses us on what's *different*. We *blame*

addicts rather than having compassion. We *judge* prostitutes, but never consider the hopelessness (or trafficking) that got them into the situation. We blame and separate ourselves, rather than try to understand the underlying causes of the sin and lend a hand. That's why Jesus says the Pharisees, **“tie up heavy, loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”**

Finally, self-righteousness sabotages actual righteousness. You might get the impression that I don't think the “traditional” sins are a big deal or that we shouldn't strive for purity or practice things like tithing or church attendance. If that's what you're hearing me say, you're under the wrong impression. I believe that we are called to live lives of purity, free from sin and full of self-discipline.

But no matter how tall we build our tower of devotion, purity and good works, self-righteousness will be a bomb at the foundation that blows the whole thing up. Or you can think about it as the hole in the bucket of holiness.

What's interesting about this parable is that Jesus uses salvation language. Verse 14, **“I tell you that this man (the tax collector), rather than the other (the Pharisee) who went home justified before God.”** “Justified” is about right relationship with God. So, Jesus seems to imply that self-righteousness erodes our relationship with God.

When we make Christianity solely about being a good person, we plant the bomb of self-righteousness at the foundation of our faith. Most of us have it backwards. We

look around the room at the religious people—the ones who do everything right and know their Bible by heart and we think they’re definitely right with God. That’s how the other people in the Temple would have viewed the Pharisee.

At the same time, we might look with pity or disdain at the person who just can’t seem to get their stuff together. We think, “if they only knew Jesus.” But what we don’t realize is that when someone recognizes their sin and acknowledges their need for grace, they know Jesus in a way the self-righteous religious person does not.

So, how do we put on the gloves and fight against self-righteousness?

First, embrace *humility*. This is prescription Jesus gives at the end of the parable.

Verse 14, **“For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”** Now, it’s easy to misunderstand humility. Some people equate humility with low self-esteem. You don’t like yourself. You’re disappointed with yourself. You’re embarrassed to be in front of people.

But that’s not humility, that’s low self-esteem. Remember, **“You are God’s masterpiece created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance (and, by the way, gave you gifts) for you to do.”** (Eph 2:10) In fact, Paul gives maybe the greatest description of humility in Romans 12:3, **“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”**

Paul says to think of yourself with “sober judgment.” Sober means “clear-thinking.” Not only can you see your short-comings, but you can also see your gifts and you’ll use them where they’re needed. It’s knowing that God loves you and values you, but that God doesn’t love you *more* than he loves other people.

Practically, that means be thankful for recognition or compliments, but don’t seek them out. Don’t do good things just to boost your reputation. Be OK with being last or letting someone else get the credit. All this is possible when you understand that your value doesn’t come from the good things you’ve done, but they come from your status as a person made in God’s image.

Second, practice *confession*. If self-righteousness blinds us to our sin, then confession brings it to light. But the point isn’t to make you miserable with guilt. It’s more like cancer screening. If you don’t realize it’s there, you can’t deal with it. So, the regular practice of confession—and maybe even asking the people close to you about blind-spots—will give you a realistic picture of who you really are. It’s admitting that you don’t have all your stuff together and you are still in need of God’s grace and forgiveness.

It’s easy to forget that there are two characters in this parable. Of course, there’s the self-righteous Pharisee. But there’s also the humble tax collector. And while Jesus told this parable to the Pharisee type, there are probably many in this room or watching

online who, in all honesty, are more like the tax collector. If that's you, I want to talk to you for the next minute or so.

If that's you and you're someone who is already fully aware of your short-comings and sins and you're haunted by them...If you're someone who wonders why God would ever love someone like you, this parable is great news, because it tells you that God loves you and is *for* you. Whatever you've done in the past. Whatever your reputation or how you think about yourself. Understanding that you don't deserve God's forgiveness is the prerequisite for receiving God's forgiveness. You're half-way there. The rest of the way is simply to learn to trust and follow Jesus.

Third, *cultivate a heart of gratitude*. Luke 7 tells the story of a woman who "lived a sinful life," who interrupted Jesus' meal with some Pharisees, coming into the house and pouring an expensive jar of perfume on his feet. The Pharisees were appalled that Jesus would allow this sinful woman to touch him, but Jesus was moved by her gratitude. In verse 47 after a short conversation, he says this, **"This woman has been forgiven much, so she loves much, but the one who has been forgiven little, loves little."**

The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector says something about self-righteousness, but it says even more about God's character. The reality is that God has forgiven all of us much. But until we understand and acknowledge the depth of our sin, we will never know the depth of God's love. We don't deserve it and we can't earn,

but God longs to give it anyway. When we know this about God, and admit we're not that great, we can let go of the show and let go of the moral competition and simply trust God.