

The good man, the bad man and the verdict

Luke 18:9-14

We have a deep need for people to approve of us. And deep down we fear that if they really knew us, they wouldn't accept us. We can find ourselves living for the verdict of others.

In this parable Jesus tells us about the verdict of Another, and it's the one verdict that really matters. It's about how we can know God's acceptance of us, and hear Him say of us, 'I love you' now, and at the end.

The good man goes wrong

Jesus aims this parable at the self-righteous. We don't have to look too long at ourselves before we realize He's talking to us! You see, this Pharisee wasn't a bad man. He's a good man: he prays, fasts, takes his religion seriously, is generous to the poor and faithful to his wife. But there lies his problem. You see, in seeking the approval of God, he has concentrated on the externals. It's all about external behavior, obeying the rules and doing the right thing. It's not about his heart, or inner character. He trusts that his behavior is good enough. That if he lives morally upright, God will be in his debt. That is a path so many take.

But it comes at a price:

Judgmentalism: we always set the bar a little lower than ourselves and we become critical and judgmental of those we think don't pass the test.

Separatism: The Pharisee stands and prays apart, because he thinks he is in a league of his own, so he separates himself from others. That's what happens when we think acceptance before God depends on external stuff.

Self-centredness: The Pharisee's prayer is all about himself. When you try and earn favour with God by what you do, life will inevitably end up being about you.

The bad man goes right

The way these two men approach God is as opposite as their position in life. The Tax Collector stands far off – he knows he is not worthy to approach God. He calls himself a sinner – literally 'the' sinner. He doesn't compare himself to anyone else. He just comes asking for mercy. He knows his only chance is God.

His prayer for mercy is a prayer that God would atone for his sin, and turn away his wrath. He knows that if he is to approach, God must do it for him.

The Verdict that Counts

Jesus turns our thinking on its head when he says it is the tax collector who goes home justified, not guilty and righteous in God's sight, rather than the Pharisee. How can that be? Because that verdict of being accepted and welcomed in God's sight, is God's free gift to us. We can never be good enough to deserve it. It's his gift, because Jesus became THE sinner to save you and me 'the sinners'. At the cross Jesus became the sacrifice of atonement, whose death in our place, turns away – propitiates – God's wrath. We can know and experience God's mercy towards us because someone else paid the price.

What the Tax Collector prays God would do for him, Jesus does by dying for us. We can know God's love, mercy and acceptance, not because we get our act together like this Pharisee, but because of Jesus and what He has done for us.