





Week 9: The Way Down Is the Way Up Luke 18:9-14

GOAL: Help us learn to rely on God's mercy rather than our righteousness.

CHECKLIST

- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- ☐ Take a moment during the week to reach out to your group's Inreach Coordinator. Ask them how it's going, and let them know how much you appreciate their ministry to your group.
- Invite your group to sit together with you at the Table to the Cross service on Thursday, March 28, at 7pm. This will take the place of your group meeting March 25-31.
- ☐ Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members. Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, I bow before you humbly today, recognizing my own sinfulness and desperate need for your grace. With the tax collector from today's parable, I pray: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' Forgive me for the times I have compared myself to others, looking down on them with an air of superiority. Replace my attitude of entitlement and pride with a spirit of true humility, recognizing that your mercy is my only hope. And may this spirit of humility propel me to live a life of love, mercy, grace, and kindness toward others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

CONNECT

- Use this time to connect with your group relationally both formally and informally.
- Invite your group to share one way that they have seen God at work in the past week, and one way they're praying for God to move in the week to come.
- Spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today, including any praises or prayer requests from your previous conversation.

COORDINATE

Spend a few minutes covering any details the group needs to know:

- Mar 20, 6-8pm The Great Exchange, a Bible study for adults from Isaiah 61 re: hope in difficulty
- Mar 28, 7pm Table to the Cross service. Ask your group to attend and sit together.
- Mar 31, 9:30am Easter service.
- Apr 3, 6pm Pray First. Childcare provided.

DISCUSS

• What stood out to you this week from the Growth Guide readings about the unexpected people Jesus blesses?

Read Luke 18:9-14.

• What reason does Luke give for Jesus telling this parable? In what ways do you see this kind of attitude in our culture? In your social circles? In yourself?

Leaders: Luke says that Jesus told this parable to those who 1) were confident in their own righteousness, and 2) looked down on everyone else. This gives us a big clue about why Jesus told the parable! His point was that this attitude is inconsistent with life in God's Kingdom. In God's Kingdom, we are meant to rely on God's mercy rather than our righteousness.

Talk with the group about some of the ways this attitude permeates our culture, our social networks, and even our own hearts. It might be easy for people to distance themselves from the Pharisee, because most of us wouldn't dream of saying what he says...at least out loud! We may be more subtle, but this attitude of superiority runs rampant in our culture and in us.

In the culture, criticizing others is practically a way of life. Wherever you look (news, social media, radio, etc.) you see and hear people criticizing other people. And this is a natural response to our innate desire to be seen as people of value. When we criticize or judge others, we distance

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ourselves from them, thereby putting ourselves (we subconsciously hope) in a higher position. Ask the group for examples they've seen of this in the surrounding culture.

But of course, it isn't just the culture – it's us! As much as we may not want to admit it, this is often our posture toward the world. It's such a normal way of life for us, we often don't even recognize it. Think about how you view that person at work who always seems to rub you the wrong way. Think of the other drivers on the road who often pull out in front of you or follow you too closely. Think of the people who vote differently from you. Think of the people at your kids' school who make decisions you disagree with. In all these situations and countless others, it is our nature to be "confident in our own righteousness" (don't think just spiritual righteousness here...think about "being right") and to "look down on everyone else."

• Read verses 11-12 again. Describe how the Pharisee acts and what he says in your own words. What do his words reveal about the way he thinks about himself, others, and God?

Leaders: The Pharisee listed out things that he wasn't doing (robbing, committing adultery, doing evil, cheating others by being a tax collector) and things he was doing (fasting, giving). Notice that all of these things are external actions. Notice also that everything he says is described in comparison to other people, and that he "stands alone" in the Temple. This reveals a few things about the way he thinks:

- In his eyes, outside actions are what's most important.
- How you compare with others is more important than how you compare with God or some other objective external standard.
- He views himself as the cream of the crop, separated from others.
- God must be impressed by his good actions.
- Read verse 13 again. Describe how the tax collector acts and what he says in your own words. What do his words reveal about the way he thinks about himself, others, and God?

Leaders: The tax collector acts exactly opposite of the Pharisee. He stood at a distance and wouldn't even look up at heaven...presumably because he felt unworthy to face God. He beat on his chest as an expression of sorrow and simply begged God for mercy, calling himself a sinner. This reveals the following:

- In his eyes, who he is on the inside ("a sinner") is most important.
- He values how his character and actions compare with God and his standards more than how they compare with others.
- He views himself as unworthy of any praise.
- His only hope is for God to have mercy on him.

• Read verse 14 again. Describe what Jesus says in your own words. What do his words reveal about the way things work in the Kingdom of God?

Leaders: Jesus makes a statement about which of these two men was "justified," and it's exactly opposite of what his listeners would have assumed. Everyone assumed the Pharisees were the "good guys" and the tax collectors were the "bad guys." As the Pharisee listed his accomplishments, Jesus' listeners would have been impressed. As the tax collector begged for mercy, they would have likely thought something like, "you should have thought about that before you decided to become a tax collector!"

But Jesus says it's actually the tax collector that goes home justified, not the Pharisee. And then he gives the moral of the story: "all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." In other words, "the way up is the way down." The way to find favor with God isn't to tell him (and everyone else) how good you are, but instead to recognize your need. We might wrap this up with the statement: In God's Kingdom, we rely on God's mercy rather than our righteousness.

• What impact (both general and specific) should the truth about God's Kingdom that this parable reveals have on our prayer lives?

Leaders: On first glance, we might think this parable won't impact our prayer lives too much. After all, how many of us would actually pray the kind of prayer the Pharisee prays? Hopefully not many! But at the same time, how many of us regularly carry the kind of humble confession of the tax collector into our prayer lives? I (John) know for me, it certainly isn't as regular as I'd like.

By nature, we tend to be pretty self-centered, and this impacts our prayer life. It's easiest to pray about things we need (or think we need) or want. So our prayers often sound like, "bless me, help me, strengthen me, give me, etc." And to be clear, it's great to ask God for what we need! Jesus teaches us to do that! But, we are called to bring our needs to God in a spirit of humility, not an attitude of entitlement. So in a general sense, you might say that this parable should help us pray more humbly, recognizing that God doesn't owe us anything, and that anything we receive from him is a pure gift of his mercy.

Thinking specifically, here are a few ideas to get you started on ways this might impact our prayer life:

- Incorporate confession into your prayer time on a regular basis.
- Try the "Prayer of Examen." Pick a time during the day (generally in the evening) to sit quietly for a moment, recognizing God's presence with you, then think through the previous 24 hours together with God, asking him to reveal any areas where you fell short of his good plan for you. Confess these areas of sin and ask for his forgiveness.
- Use Psalm 139:23-24 as a prompt for prayer, asking God to search your heart and reveal areas of sinfulness for you to confess and repent.

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- Every time you ask God for something, acknowledge that he doesn't owe you anything and that anything you receive from him is a gift of grace.
- Experiment with using "The Jesus Prayer" in your personal prayer times. Here's how it works: find a quiet place and time, and as you breathe slowly, pray this prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner" multiple times. You might even want to try praying the first half as you inhale and the second half as you exhale.
- How might this parable transform the way we interact with others within the church? Outside the church?

Leaders: The default position that this parable addresses is our tendency to compare ourselves to others, especially those to whom we feel superior. When we adopt this attitude, it leads to judgmentalism, a lack of empathy, and isolation from them.

If the Holy Spirit were to transform us by the renewing of our minds in this area, it would lead to a radically different way of interacting with others, both inside the church and outside the church. Instead of comparing ourselves with others, we would compare ourselves to God's standard of holiness, recognizing that we all fall short and we are all sinners. If we fully recognized and believed this, it would become impossible to look down on others because we realize we aren't higher than them!

As we interact with people inside the church, we would see them as fellow sinners who are also fellow recipients of God's grace and mercy. Instead of becoming isolated from them, we would build relationships with them based on our shared experience of grace. Instead of judging their weaknesses, we would celebrate their Spirit-fueled growth. Instead of criticizing their failures, we would encourage them and spur them on to new levels of discipleship.

As we interact with people outside the church, we would see them as people who are created in God's image, dearly loved by Him, and potential brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead of avoiding them, we would pursue them, inviting them to follow Jesus together with us. Instead of judging their weaknesses, we would empathize with their weaknesses. Instead of criticizing their lack of morality, we would lovingly share the ways Jesus has changed us and encourage them to experience his goodness for themselves.

 How might the Pharisee's prayer have been different if he had a relationship with the tax collector and was investing personally in him?

Leaders: It's much harder to judge someone you're regularly praying for and investing in! If the Pharisee had been actively developing a relationship with the tax collector, praying for him and encouraging him in his faith, I have a feeling that his prayer wouldn't be one of pridefully comparing himself to him, but one of lovingly asking God to draw him closer to him for his good and God's glory.

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One of the beautiful truths about God's kingdom is that when you choose to act lovingly toward someone, your emotions tend to follow. If you act lovingly (pray for, encourage, invest in), you eventually begin to think and feel lovingly. Tim Keller gives a great example of this from WWII: He says "At first, the Nazis killed the Jews because they hated them. But eventually, they hated the Jews because they killed them." In other words, the way they treated them impacted the way they viewed them and felt about them. And the same is true for us – if we choose to act lovingly toward people, God will expand our heart toward them and fill us with love for them.

PRAY

Today's prayer time will be split into two parts:

Part 1: The Jesus Prayer

Ask the group to sit quietly for a moment, acknowledging God's presence with them. Then, encourage them to spend a few moments silently repeating the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Some people find it helpful to connect the prayer to their breathing, praying one or two clauses as they inhale and one or two as they exhale.

After giving the group about a minute or so to do this quietly, move on to part 2.

Part 2: Prayer for humility

In this section, encourage the group to pray out loud that the Holy Spirit would take the truths the group has discussed today and use them to transform you by the renewing of your minds. Encourage multiple people to pray for the group, using the Scripture and today's conversation as a guide.