

The Most Deadly Sin of All

Sunday, January 24th, 1988

Luke 18:9-14

“And he spake this parable unto certain, which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

I would like you to get your Bible and open it to Luke 18. I am going to speak to you today on this subject: “THE MOST DEADLY SIN OF ALL SINS.” That ought to be interesting and I know what I am talking about. There is no guesswork, or speculation involved at all in this message. I am talking about the most deadly, destroying, destructive sin of all.

Let me read you a familiar Scripture. Are you familiar with this? It is found in Luke 18:9, *“And the Lord Jesus spake this parable unto certain who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others.”* He said, *“Two men went up to the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, the other a Publican.”*

The Pharisee, a religious man, stood and prayed thus with himself, *“God I thank Thee that I am not as other men are. They are extortioners; they are unjust; they are adulterers and I am not like them. I am not even as this Publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all I possess.”*

“The publican, (the other man), standing afar off would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven, but he smote upon his breast saying; God, be merciful to be the sinner.”

The Lord Jesus continued, *“I tell you, this publican who prayed, God be merciful to me the sinner, went down to his house justified, (saved, pardoned, cleared of sin), justified before God rather than the other, but not the Pharisee for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”*

Now, why don't you just hold your Bible there if you have it open, and let us look back at verse 9. If words mean anything at all, it is quite evident to whom the Lord is speaking. In fact, it tells us the people to whom He spoke in this parable. It says plainly and you

can read these words, *“He spake this parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, (that they were holy; that they were good).*

They were not sinners like others. They had no need of righteousness. They were good people. They were moral and they were religious. They were people who served God. They said that they were a holy people. The Scripture says, *“They justified themselves.”*

In fact, our Lord in speaking this parable to these who justify themselves, who felt that they needed no righteousness, he gives them their champion. He says, *“Here is one like you.”* He went to the temple and justified himself. He said, *“I’m not like other men, other men are extortioners, (mean, evil and unjust). They are adulterers and I am not like them.”*

They justify themselves before God. Listen to what their champion said here, *“I thank God I am not like other people.”* He brings God into his self-righteous conspiracy. He then starts comparing himself with others.

Here is how he arrived at this morality, self-righteousness, and holiness; he arrived at it not comparing himself with God, but with his fellow man. He said, *“I’m not like that Publican.”* Paul said something about comparing ourselves with ourselves; he said; *“That is not wise.”* Our Lord said, *“You are they that justify yourselves before men, but God looks at your heart. That which is highly esteemed among your fellow man is an abomination to God Almighty.”*

I’ll tell you something else about these people; they justify themselves, even justifying themselves before God by comparing themselves with others. They despise others whom they think aren’t as good as they are.

You see this around you all the time, even in the church to which you go. You’ve never met a moral, self righteous, so-called holy person who was not critical, super critical of the lifestyle, conduct, and conversation of other people. All self righteous, holier than thou, moral people, enjoy pointing out the weaknesses of others.

They delight in finding fault. They delight in gossip. No man is ever quick to criticize, judge or condemn another, unless he has a very high opinion of himself. That is the pinnacle from which he sits in judgment. That is the high and lofty place from which he looks down on others. He is holier than thou.

Our Lord spake this parable to these people. The Scripture says, *“He spake this parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous.”* They were self-righteous.

They trusted in their works; they trusted in themselves; they trusted in their religion, and they despised others.

I am here to tell you my friend, there is no sin, I don't care what it is, so deadly, so dangerous and so soul destroying as self-righteousness. Did you know that? I will tell you why; there are three or four reasons.

First, the Word of God plainly says; *"There is none righteous, no not one."* Why do people claim to be righteous? They claim to be righteous because they do not believe God's Word. God's Word plainly says; *"There is none good, no not one."*

The Scripture in Psalm 14 says, *"The Lord God looked down from heaven to see if there were any that did do good."* He said, *"there is none good; they are all gone out of the way. Man at his best state is altogether vanity."* Why do we keep talking about how good people are? Why do we keep talking about how good our children are, how good our fathers are, how good our mothers are, how good our preachers are, and how good we are? *"There is none good."*

God is good (good in God's sight). There is none good, but God. *"All have sinned and come short of the glory of God."* Isn't this what the Scripture says? People always say, "Well, I'm not a sinner." Well, what are you?

In this thing of goodness, there is only God and sinners. Are you God? In this thing of righteousness, there is nothing but God and unrighteousness. Anything that is not God is unrighteous. Only God is good. Only God is Holy. *"Man at his best state is altogether vanity."* Yet, you just can't shake them loose from it.

Men look to their outward deeds, their outward works, their outward morality, their outward veneer of religion and they call themselves, "good." They even claim to have holiness. Some denominations even call themselves, "holiness people." Now, what do you think about that?

That is what these old Israelites did over in Romans 10. Paul said, *"My hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. I bear them record; they have a zeal of God but it is not according to knowledge for they are ignorant of God's righteousness and they are going about to establish a righteousness of their own, not knowing that Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believeth."*

So I will tell you this; I would much rather be charged before God with murder than self-righteousness. God has saved some murderers. God has forgiven that sin many times over. No self-righteous man has ever entered the Kingdom of Heaven, and never will.

Christ has to be our righteousness. The robe of righteousness is the wedding garment. To enter heaven, one must be as good as God. There is only one place to be as good as God and that is in Christ. To enter glory, a man has to have holiness that is as holy as God.

There is only one place for that holiness to be found, and it is not at an altar, or at a law. Holiness is not found in a church standard or church rules declared from the pulpit. Holiness is found in Christ Jesus. *“He is our sanctification and our righteousness and our holiness.”* He perfectly worked it out, by obeying the Law in the flesh as a man and imputed to those who believe that perfect righteousness.

I will tell you this, there is no sin so deadly, so dangerous, so destroying as self-righteousness. You may be sitting there thinking how good you are and saying, “I thank God that I’m not like those people out there in the West Virginia coal mines, those people in the Kentucky foothills, the Appalachians and those in Lexington and Charleston.”

You might be saying, “I’m not like those extortionists, unjust people and those adulterers running around everywhere; I am good.” I go to church, I tithe, I sing in the choir, I teach Sunday school and I mind my own business and pay my bills. I am good!

You are going to hell, my friend, because God is looking at your heart. He doesn’t see any goodness in there. Most of our deeds are self-righteous deeds. Our Lord encountered a lot when He walked this earth. He encountered publicans, harlots, drunkards, sinners, and all kinds of wicked sins.

I want you to hold your seat a minute; I may shock you, do you know the people for whom our Lord had the harshest words? I mean the harshest, sharpest words. It was the self-righteous, moral, holy, religious people. You read Matthew 23 that is exactly right!

Listen to Him, *“Woe unto you scribes.”* These people translated and transcribed the Bible. *“Woe unto you Pharisees.”* These men taught in the temple. This fellow standing in the temple is one of his Pharisees. Saul of Tarsus said, *“I was a Pharisee and I was blameless before the Law.”* He was so moral, good, righteous, religious, holy, strict and a straight theologian.

He said, *“Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees; you do your works to be seen of men.”* Can that be said of you? You do your religious works. You preach, you teach, you tithe,

you give, you go, you witness, you pray long prayers on the street corners to be seen of men. How much private praying do you do?

He said, *“You Pharisees, you love to be called Rabbis; you love to be called master, you love to be called reverends and doctors. You love to sit in the chief seats.”* You like the offices down at the church. You might say, “Give me an office; give me a title.” Our Lord says, *“Call no man Rabbi, one is your Master. Call no man Father, your Father is in heaven; you are brethren. He that is greatest among you, let him be your servant.”*

He said, *“You Pharisees make long prayers and you make proselytes through your religion.”* You win souls to your ritual and to your denomination so you can brag about how many decisions you have had. You pay your tithes; you strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. *“You make clean the outside of the cup.”*

You quit drinking; you quit dancing and playing cards. You quit going to the picture show, watching television and all of these things on the outside. *“On the inside you are full of extortion and excess and dead men’s bones.”* You are rotten to the core!

Our Lord didn’t say that to the woman at the well who had been married five times. He didn’t say anything to the woman found in adultery and cast herself at His feet. He never said that to Zaacheus. Zaacheus was a little cheat, a fraud, a tax collector who climbed up the tree. He never said that to the blind Bartimaeus. He said that to the good, religious, self righteous people.

When He got through with them, He said; *“You are a generation of snakes; how can you escape the damnation of hell?”* My friends, this is the deadly, prevalent sin of our day. I’m talking about multitudes of church people. There are more than you can number.

I’m talking about old grannies, old daddies, old mommas, and young people. I’m talking about the ones who have their hair a certain length, their clothes look black, and their rituals and regulations, rules and standards are all set. They are right and everybody is wrong.

They are good and they are moral. They are righteous and they are holy before God. They are establishing righteousness and are trying to earn a reward. “He has gone to his reward.” You will hear them say that.

They read the Bible; they go to church every Sunday. They sing in the choir and they teach Sunday school. They pay their tithes; they live moral lives and when they die, the preacher says, “He’s gone to be with the Lord.” It is heart breaking.

I will tell you men who have never been lost claim to be saved. Men have been lifted up who never have been brought down. Men are saved who have never been lost. They are raised to life when they have never been dead. They are exalted who have never been humbled.

My friends, according to the Bible; I've been looking into it for a long time. I've been preaching from it for almost 40 years. According to the Scriptures, salvation is for sinners. It says, *"This is a faithful saying; Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners."* Is there a sinner out there? I haven't seen one in a long time.

Where are these sinners? Where are these people? The angels said to Joseph, *"Thou shalt call His name Jesus; He will save His people from their sins."* I don't know of anybody that has any; they are all good people, especially in Ashland.

In Luke 19:10, the Scripture says; *"The Son of man has come to seek and to save the lost."* He is come to seek and to save lost people. Do you have any lost people up your way? You have many good, moral, church members. Do you have any lost people?

In Romans 5, *"Christ died for the ungodly."* He died for whom? He died for the ungodly. *"God commended His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* First John 1:8 says, *"If any man says he has no sin, he is a liar and the truth is not in him. If any man say he hath not sinned, he makes God a liar."*

One day our Lord was eating with a group of publicans and sinners. These religious church folks, the synagogue people, the Pharisees were standing back and they saw Him eating with sinners and talking to them. They said to the disciples, *"Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners?"* Why isn't He up here eating with us good people and, righteous people? He is down there eating with those sinners.

The Lord heard them and knew their thoughts. He said, *"The well have no need of a doctor, but they that are sick. Go learn what this means. I am come to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance."* I ask you, where are these sinners? It is so hard to find a sinner. *"A sinner is a sacred thing; the Holy Ghost has made him so."* Yet, my Lord came to save sinners.

Read this parable. Our Lord spake this parable to these moral, holy, good, self righteous people; *"Two men went to the temple to pray."* One was a moral, righteous, holy Pharisee the other was a publican, a sinner. The contrast is great. Ask a Jew who was the

most moral man and he would say, "A Pharisee." Ask him who was the most immoral man and he would say, "A publican."

Both of them believed in one God. Both of them were sons of Adam. Both of them went to church and both of them prayed. They had some things in common. This is where the comparison is different. They approached God in an entirely different manner.

Here is the moral religious man and I can hear it today; he made his way to the front of the tabernacle, the temple. He was familiar with the temple. He was familiar with the worship and he was familiar with all of these things. He felt like he belonged.

The publican, the Scripture says; "*Stood far off,*" (way back and unworthy). Like Israel of old, he was putting distance between them and Sinai. One writer said, "Room for a mediator." The Pharisee lifted his arms. That was a custom and a ritual way back then. He felt moral; he felt holy and he felt good. So he lifted his arms to heaven.

"The publican would not so much lift his even his eyes," let alone his arms, to heaven. He didn't let his eyes fall back in his head like some self-righteous person trying to look religious. *"He bowed his head and smote on his breast."*

That is where the trouble was. You see; he had heart trouble. His heart was desperately wicked. He had a stony heart, a double heart and evil heart. The Pharisee prayed with himself. It wasn't a prayer at all; it was a self-centered ritual and that is all; it was just words, old and rehearsed. The words were dead, cold words. He was talking to himself and God didn't hear him. He didn't pray; he talked to himself.

That publican prayed. He cried to God. Oh, how he cried to God! That Pharisee talked about trivial matters. He talked about himself. He said, "*O God; I am not like other men and I thank you that I am not like other men.*" I'm so glad that I'm not like other people. He said, "*I fast*" as he waved his arms in the sky. "*I tithe, and I give alms to the poor. I'm sure not like that publican.*"

Do you know what Isaiah called all of that? He called it, "*filthy rags.*" Isaiah the Prophet said, "*Our righteousnesses are filthy rags.*" This Pharisee, this holier than thou, moral, and religious man came before God with his filthy rags, his dripping, dirty, filthy rags and waved them in God's face. He waved them in God's face!

Do you know what Paul called it? Paul called it, "*dung.*" Paul named all of the things he had done, his fasting, praying, giving, and going. He said, "*I counted it all but dung that I may win Christ and be found in him.*"

This publican, who was broken over sin had nothing to do with such things as second rated, self righteousness and filthy rags. He talked with God about the two most important things between God and a sinner. Do you know what they are? Do you know what he talked about? He talked about his sin and God's mercy.

I would like to just close this Book and let it go right there. He talked about his sin and God's mercy. God heard him! He went straight to God. He didn't go to the bishop, he didn't go to the priest, or a preacher and he didn't put a call into the counselors that are in the TV studio; he went to God. That is a pretty good place to go, if you need help.

You had better side track some of the folks who are playing God, and go straight to Him. He went straight to God with his head bowed and smote on his breast and cried, "*O God, be merciful.*" I'm not asking for justice; I'm not asking for a reward; I am asking for mercy because I am guilty.

When a man's soul is at stake, it is sure good sense to listen, especially when the Lord Jesus is talking. That is who is speaking in this parable. He cried for mercy. "Let thy blood be propitiation for me on the mercy seat." That is what he is saying. You can ask anybody who knows anything about the Bible.

He confessed his sins like David did in Psalm 51 "*Have mercy upon me O God.*" Listen to David, the man after God's own heart. "*Have mercy upon me O God, according to thy loving kindness, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin. I acknowledge my transgression. My sin is before me.*" That is the way this man prayed.

Can you see today's religion in these two men? I see a lot of today's religion in one of them. I wish I could see more of the other. I see the Pharisee, the holier than thou, the self righteous, the good people and the people trying to earn God's acceptance. I don't see many sinners. I don't hear many sinners.

I don't hear many people crying for mercy. I don't hear of many people suing the throne of grace for forgiveness and mercy and grace in time of need. Grace is for the guilty. Mercy is for the miserable. Salvation is for sinners.

Well, these two men left church. One of them came in rich, in his own works, and he left poor toward God. He came in confident; he came in full of self esteem and self-righteousness and he went out rejected.

The other one came in empty; he went out full. He came in a sinner and went out forgiven. He came in poor, and went out rich. He came in lost, and he went out saved. My God is plenteous in mercy and my God delights to save.

You see, my friend; the Pharisee justified himself and God condemned him. The publican, the sinner, justified God and condemned himself and God justified him. *“Whosoever confesseth his sin, shall find mercy. Who so covereth his sin shall not prosper.”*

The most deadly sin of all is self-righteousness.