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Ask the bigger questions

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Humble dependence

A cost benefit analysis of following Jesus:

What does Jesus require of me? Is it worth it?

- Session 7

Understanding that to be accepted by God requires a disciple to depend on God for mercy, rather than thinking they can save themselves - from Luke 18:1-17

The words of Jesus

Luke 18:9-17

9 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

13 "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.'

14 "I tell you that this man, 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."

15 People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

Jesus tells this parable with great brevity but it packs a punch – it would have shocked Jesus' original audience. That is because in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were a reform movement, very devout in following the requirements of the law, and considered the good, moral, upright people in society – the pillars of the community. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors because they were Jewish but collaborated with the Romans in collecting taxes for the Empire. To the audience in Jesus' day, the Pharisees were the ones whom everyone thought were acceptable to God. However that is not the conclusion Jesus draws.

It might be helpful to know that the law required fasting once a year (on the Day of Atonement). The practice of the Pharisees was to fast once a month. The tithing of products such as oil, seed and wine was expected.

Q1. What do we learn about the Pharisee in the parable? (verse 11)

- With a prayer that starts off as “God I thank you...” you would expect a whole list of things that God has given the person. But the Pharisee instead lists what he gives to God. He’s a particularly impressive Pharisee, even by the standards of the Pharisees! In his prayer, the Pharisee mentions himself five times – he does mention God but it is more like he is praying to himself.
- The Pharisee is confident in his achievements. His confidence or pride is expressed in two ways – his stance in prayer, and the way he looks down on everyone else – robbers, adulterers and tax collectors.

Note that when the tax collector asks for “mercy”, he’s not using the word generally used for showing kindness. He’s using a word used to describe the “mercy seat” in the tabernacle in the Old Testament. The “mercy seat” was where the blood of the animal sacrifices was splattered, in order to provide “atonement” for sins. “Atonement” is the restoration of relationship between God and his people when God’s anger at human sin is satisfied as the punishment for sin is poured out on a substitutionary sacrifice.

Q2. What do we learn about the tax collector in the parable? (verse 13)

- The focus of the tax collector’s prayer is God. He asks God for mercy. He’s asking God for more than just showing him kindness or giving him a break, he’s asking God to do something for his sin. The tax collector knows that he is a sinner – someone who has no right to claim or demand relationship with God.
- The words the tax collector prays are exemplified in his actions. He stands at a distance, he doesn’t look up to heaven, he beats his breast. He knows he’s not acceptable before God.

The words “justified” or “righteous” come from the same root word, which means to be declared right according to the demands of God’s law – to be legally acceptable or approved.

Q3. The twist...what is Jesus saying about who is acceptable before God? (verses 13-14)

- The one who is accepted (the tax collector) is the one who asks for mercy because they recognise they are sinner (fall short of the requirements God demands in his law). The one who is not accepted (the Pharisee) might perform well (even by the standards of God’s law) but their confidence is based on their own performance. The purpose of God’s law was to show people they were sinners, not become the standard for performance to earn acceptance (God’s law demands perfection – to love God with your whole heart and love your neighbour as yourself is exacting – and every human being, including the Pharisees, falls short of that). This would have stunned Jesus’ audience because they would have expected the opposite conclusion: the Pharisee to be accepted and the tax collector rejected. But that is just to look at outward appearances, and not really understand what God requires.

Q4. Why is Jesus telling this parable?

- The reason is made explicit - he tells this parable to those who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on others (verse 9). In other words, to those in Jesus' audience who think, like the Pharisee in the parable, that they will be accepted by God based on their own performance.
- Those who think they will be accepted by God based on their own performance don't ask for God to save them because they don't think they need saving! And the evidence they are relying on their own performance to save them is they look down on others.

Q5. Are there parallels between the Pharisee and the tax collector and the disciples and babies? (verses 15-17)

- In Jesus' day, society did not dote on young children. Young children didn't have any rights. The disciples are like the Pharisee in that they look down on the babies. They think that Jesus shouldn't be wasting his time on them - which is why they rebuke parents.
- The young children are a bit like the tax collector in that children too are dependent. Babies and young children are completely dependent on adults to look after their needs. (While the tax collector is humble, children aren't necessarily humble...many a child has proudly declared "I can do it"). The way to enter God's kingdom - and to stay in it - is to recognise, like the tax collector, that you need God's mercy.

Q6. If it's all about asking God for mercy doesn't that sound a bit too easy?

- It does sound easy. To say "I've stuffed up - please forgive me" doesn't sound like much of an incentive to change behaviour - if you know you can keep asking God for forgiveness.
- However that is to acknowledge Jesus as saviour, but not as Lord. Jesus is both saviour and Lord - see the passage from Luke below. It's a package deal. You can't have Jesus as saviour but not as Lord. Jesus lived, died and rose again to provide forgiveness for sins - the means of God's mercy. The living Jesus is now Lord. Subjects obey their Lord (which can be difficult for Australians to hear because they are traditionally anti-authority). That Jesus is Lord is a great incentive for those who trust Jesus as saviour to change and to live his way!
- What makes obedience easier are two things:
 - 1) trusting that the way God/Jesus wants us to live is the best way for us (because he made us and loves us); and
 - 2) thankfulness that God would offer us mercy when we don't deserve it, and that Jesus would die for us to provide forgiveness. Gratitude can be a very powerful motivation!

Words about Jesus

Luke 2:11 (Angels speaking to the shepherds about the birth of Jesus)

Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

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