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NO MORE HYBRIDS Luke 18:9-14

The next generation of Myatts has a somewhat inaccurate view of me. To be honest I've done a number of things that have caused this view. I fear they see me as a semi-Luddite, stuck in twentieth century technology. I'm kind of proud of the fact that I have actually adapted to some of the newer electronic devices. For instance, I now use a tablet computer instead of paper notes on Sunday morning. I am rather proud of the fact that I made this transition in light of the fact that it was not all that easy. At first I couldn't get the software to work, but I figured out what the problem was and got it to work. I use a Bluetooth keyboard with it and that didn't work at first either, but I also figured that one out.

On the other hand, I recall the early days of personal computers. I was one of the first pastors to adopt the use of a computer although I had a less than auspicious beginning. When I got my first personal computer I brought it home and went about setting it up. I had to find the power cord for the computer itself and plug that in. Then I had to find the power cord for the monitor and plug it in. I had to connect the monitor to the computer plus making all the connections for the printer, the keyboard and the mouse. I followed the directions carefully and when I was certain I had it all set up I eagerly hit the power button to turn the computer on. I was rewarded with an indicator light that showed it was on and that whirring noise computers often make. Then came the disappointment. Nothing popped up on the screen. I checked again and verified that I had all the cables connected properly, but nothing showed up on the monitor. I reviewed the directions, checked all the connections again and it all was correct. The computer clearly was on, but still nothing. Finally I called the store that I had purchased the computer from and explained the problem. I was quite sure it was defective and I was going to have to take it all apart, box it up and take it back to the store for a replacement. The guy from the store asked if I had everything plugged in and if I had the cables connected. I assured him I did. Then he asked, "Did you turn the monitor on?" I said, "I have to turn the monitor on?" Patiently he said, "Yes, you'll see a switch on the front on the lower right corner." I found the switch, hit it, and bam, the computer was suddenly talking to me.

Toby worked for a couple of years in IT. He has told me that the most common issues he had to deal with were, did you plug it in and did you turn it on? These are matters of fundamental importance. If you don't do those nothing will work

properly. Today we are going to consider an issue that is in that league. It is fundamental importance for human beings, and if we don't deal with it we will never work properly. This issue comes up in Luke 18:9-14.

THERE IS A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION FOR US ALL

Verse 9 says that Jesus addressed the parable we are looking at today to some people who were "confident of their own righteousness." The Greek text literally says, "who have been persuaded that they are righteous on their own account." So what Jesus wanted to talk about was the question of who is righteous, and what makes them so?

This is confirmed by the fact that at the end of the story in verse 14 he said, "this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God." The word translated "justified" is the verb form of the same word translated "righteous" in verse 9. The story is introduced and concluded with the question of who is justified before God, or who is righteous.

But who cares about righteousness? People in Jesus' day cared a lot about it. In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, (p. 345), Kenneth Bailey points out that the idea of righteousness was rooted in the Old Testament where it "is of supreme importance." If something is of supreme importance that means it matters more than anything else. Years ago we had a friend who wasn't a great swimmer, but still loved the ocean. A group of us went to the beach and our friend went swimming. The surf was up and there was a strong rip that day so he soon found himself in trouble. He was struggling but could not get back to shore. Before long he was becoming exhausted. He realized that he was actually in danger of losing his life. Fortunately a nearby surfer noticed that he was in distress. He asked our friend if he needed help. He told him to grab on to his board and the surfer paddled him to shore. He said it was humiliating having to be rescued like that. But at that point being embarrassed took a distant back seat to the matter of supreme importance, which was preserving his life. A matter of supreme importance takes precedence over everything else. First century Jews understood that righteousness was a matter of supreme importance.

But is that true of most people today? Absolutely not. People today don't care much about righteousness. The subject reminds me of the big hoopla over the Holy Grail back in ancient times. The Holy Grail was supposed to be the cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper. Legend had it that the Grail had supernatural power. The search for the Holy Grail was the primary quest of King Arthur's knights.

Do you know anybody who is searching for the Holy Grail? The last person I've heard of that did was Heinrich Himmler, head of the Nazi SS organization. He was sure that the grail was real and powerful, and that it was hidden at the Montserrat Abbey in Spain near Barcelona. He went there looking for it. That was the inspiration for the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. But we don't believe in such things anymore and no one cares about that. In our society most people see righteousness before God as being in that category. We don't think about the Holy Grail and we don't think about righteousness. It's not relevant to our daily lives. Certainly no one thinks it's the fundamental question of life.

Actually being justified, being judged to be righteous, is one of the most basic, profound desires of the human heart. It is a drive that is ever present and is behind much of what we feel and do. This desire for righteousness is important on at least two fronts. The first is that it has eternal significance. To be righteous is to be judged right, good, approved. Humans have a sense that if there is life after death somewhere in there will be a judgment of our lives that will determine our eternal destiny. People vary on what that judgment will entail, but we have that sense that it is coming. And it matters that we be judged right, or righteous, so that we might experience the good of whatever the next life may be. In the most basic of terms, we sense that we must be judged right to get into heaven. The Bible says this is absolutely correct. So righteousness is important to us at that level.

There is a second earthly significance of righteousness. Righteousness is crucial to our spiritual, emotional and psychological well-being even on this earth. All of us have a desperate need to feel like our existence is justified, that there is a "rightness" about our lives. We need to feel that we have not been a total waste of DNA. We desperately need to believe that there is worth to us and our existence. In fact, this is perhaps our most basic psychological need. Righteousness is essential to that. To be justified, declared righteous, is to say that yes, this life is worthwhile. This person is "right."

We were created to be connected to God. Colossians 1:16 says of Christ, "By him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him." We were created to be connected to God. We will never know who we are, will never be at peace, will never be whole until we are connected to him. But for that to happen we have to know that he accepts us, that in his eyes we are approved, justified. We need to know that we are right before him. The reason that there is so much unrest and unhappiness in this world is that people are not

connected to God. They don't know that they are justified before him. They are trying to be justified, but they don't even know that's what they need.

Perhaps you don't think you do, but you do and you may find that out some day. Bill Farrington told me that in the days just before his father died he would be sleeping or unconscious but his brain was clearly active. His eyes were moving and he would mumble. The hospice person told Bill this is very common. His dad was remembering, reviewing his life. He was essentially saying, "Am I a good man? Have I lived a good life?" Have I lived well? Am I justified?

We give ourselves away. In their book, *Mistakes Were Made*, Carol Tavris and Elliott Aronson wrote (p. 2), "As fallible human beings, all of us share the impulse to justify ourselves." The book goes on to discuss the huge relational devastation we cause by our dedication to the cause of self-justification. We cannot get away from it. This need to justify self is literally irresistible. That's because if we ever come to the place where we think there is no justification for us it would completely disintegrate our lives and our personalities. This is not just a dogmatic statement of religious belief, it is also the judgment of modern day psychologists like Tavris and Aronson.

I've seen this in my own life. Not long ago Laurie and I were driving home late one night. We were low on gas so I decided to stop at the Shell station in Encinitas Ranch to fill our fuel tank. We were going north on El Camino Real so I pulled into the left turn lane at the entrance to Encinitas Ranch. There are two lanes that turn left there, and I was in the left hand one. Because it was so late there were no other cars around, so when the light turned green I pulled out and swung into the right lane because I needed to turn right quickly to get to the gas station. As I did so Laurie urgently said, "Rick, what are you doing?" I wasn't paying attention and didn't notice a car had pulled up next to us in the other left turn lane, so when I swung wide I cut him off. I hate it when people do that to me. I think they are terrible drivers. And I had just done it to someone else. What is interesting is that my instant reaction was to search for some excuse for my mistake. I tried hard to come up with some reason to justify myself. I want to do so badly. Unfortunately all I could come up with was that I wasn't paying attention. The issue here is that in that little incident I saw again that enormous desire to justify myself.

Consider the example of former baseball player and manager, Pete Rose. He would normally be a slam dunk to be in the baseball Hall of Fame. He holds the records for most games played and most hits in a career. But he was banned from baseball for gambling on baseball games. Major League Baseball's Rule 21d categorically

states that any player, umpire or baseball official who bets on a game they have anything to do with shall be permanently banned. Rose denied he had violated that rule, protesting his innocence and his ban from baseball for 15 years. He only admitted that he had gambled on his team's games in a book he wrote in 2004, reversing 15 years of denials. But listen to what he said in the process of admitting that he had indeed bet on his team's games, "I knew that I'd broken the letter of the law. But I didn't think I'd broken the spirit of the law, which was designed to prevent corruption...I never allowed my wagers to influence my baseball decisions. So in my mind, I wasn't corrupt." Do you hear the rationalization? Do you see the need to justify himself? We all do it to a degree that we recognize in others, but often don't see in ourselves.

In his book, *Antifragile* (p. 164), Nassim Taleb wrote about how his friend, Nero Tulip, befriended a scientist of legendary status. This man is a world recognized giant in his field and Nero has great respect for him. But Taleb says about him, "Although the fellow was...as prominent as one could get in his field...he spent his time focused on the status he had that week in the scientific community. He would become enraged at authors who did not cite him or at some committee granting a medal he had never received to someone he judged inferior." That man, with all his great intellect and accomplishment, is trying to be righteous!

Every single human being, without exception, is looking for a sense of rightness that is immune to the vagaries, variations and insults of one's reputation, the opinions of others, status, circumstances or one's own performance and foibles.

Unfortunately we try to found that sense of rightness in our reputation, the opinions of others, status, circumstances, and our own performance. We need to feel there is something right about us. Ultimately that is because we long for justification before God. That's why the need to defend, explain and justify ourselves never completely goes away. It's because these are just small manifestations of a much deeper and much bigger matter.

THERE ARE TWO APPROACHES TO THE ANSWER

As mentioned earlier Jesus told this story because there were people who were confident that they are righteous, they are approved and justified on their own account. They thought they were good, worthy, deserving of God's acceptance and approval and therefore welcome in his kingdom. The Pharisee in the story depicts that kind of thinking.

The Pharisee comes to the temple to pray. He stands before God and prayed “with reference to himself.” He ostensibly thanks God, but what he really does is crow about himself. He thanked God that he was not like everybody else. He thinks he is better than everyone else. In the process of doing this he trashes most of the human race. Other people, he says, are robbers, evildoers and adulterers. He has just categorized the entire human race as a bunch of reprobate thieves and unfaithful sexual predators. He’s so glad he’s not like them.

He’s not an adulterer, he’s not a thief, he’s not a tax collector, and look at the religious things he does. He fasts twice a week. The ancient Jewish Law of Moses only required that the Jewish people fast once a year, but he fasted twice a week. He faithfully gave a tenth of everything he owned just as the Law said. He can see what’s wrong with everybody else, but thinks he’s got no issues. He has earned God’s stamp of approval.

The Pharisees, though they had some serious holes they couldn’t see, were actually pretty impressive people. They were serious about their faith and scrupulous about keeping what they perceived to be its demands. They were mostly honest, sincere, very religious people.

But what is this guy doing when he prayed? Was he thanking God for some blessing? No. He started off saying, “thanks” but he only talks about himself. He doesn’t confess any sin. He doesn’t make any requests of God. So what is this prayer really about? He’s preaching to others disguised as prayer. He was praying out loud so other people could hear that they don’t measure up, that they’re lousy sinners and they ought to be more like him. Have you ever heard someone start to pray, but then lapse into actually trying to deliver a message to other people?

The other person in the story is a big contrast. He knew that there was no way anyone would ever justify his life, including himself. We’ve seen repeatedly in this study of Jesus’ stories that tax collectors were the scum of the earth. They were despised by everyone. They lived with flagrant disregard for God’s Laws. This man knew that God would not declare his life to be a worthy one. He was despised and rejected by people and he was certain that he deserved the exact same response from God.

This man stands far from others knowing that he was unclean and that merely by coming into contact with him they would be defiled. He feels his unworthiness so deeply he won’t even lift his eyes to God. Jesus said he beat his chest. He didn’t mean he was pounding it like an ape or like a basketball player after a thunderous

dunk, a way of crowing about his great deed. In that day beating the chest like this was a sign of grief and despair. I was watching a hockey playoff game on television recently. The Pittsburgh Penguins were playing in a tightly contested game against the New York Islanders. Their goalie, Mark Andre Fleury was having a bad game. He let in a couple of just awful goals. Still the game was close. As it came down to the final minute an opposing player came skating toward the goal. A defenseman cut off his route to the goal, so he skated by. As he did so he flipped the puck softly in the direction of the goal. The puck was going to just slide harmlessly past the goal, but Fleury reached out and tried to stop it. Instead he knocked it into his own net. It was about as bad a goal as I've ever seen a goalie cough up. After the game the camera caught Fleury on the bench banging himself on the head with his glove. He was beating himself up for what he had done. That's kind of like the tax collector in this story. He was beating himself up because of his guilt. Fleury knew he had messed up and there was no disguising it, no blaming anyone else. This man was like that. There was no disguising or excusing his life. He knew he had no hope.

His prayer to God is brief, only 6 words in Greek. He literally did not say "have mercy on me." What he actually said was "please make atonement for me." He is admitting that his only hope is that God would somehow make up for all the wrong that was in him.

Jesus said that only one of these two men gained what all humans need and seek. Only one was justified, declared righteous by God, given his stamp of approval. It was the religious guy, right? Wrong. The one who was approved was not the religious Pharisee, but the criminal tax collector who threw himself on God's mercy.

This story would have caused quite a reaction among Jesus' audience. Most of them would have been shocked and more than a little bewildered by such a story. The Pharisee did all the right things and avoided doing all the wrong things. He was moral and respectable. The tax collector was reprehensible, dishonest, selfish and immoral. If two people like those two were running for office today, which one would you vote for? Suppose that these two both wanted to date your sister or your daughter. Which one would you tell her that she should date?

How could Jesus say that the terrible tax collector was justified in God's eyes and the good Pharisee was not? To the people of Jesus day this was totally mystifying and downright objectionable. Making the tax collector the hero of the story was

abhorrent. They would have been incensed by the idea of a tax collector justified in God's eyes. This was an invitation by Jesus to reject him.

These two men represent two different approaches to obtaining what every human being absolutely must have. These are two different ways of trying to gain righteousness, trying to be justified. The first is confidence in one's own rightness, the other is confidence only in God's willingness and ability to make some provision for one's abject failure. ***At every moment of our lives we are operating out of one or the other.*** Let me emphasize these two represent two approaches: ***One is confidence in my ability to be right and live right.*** ***The other is confidence in God's mercy alone.***

These two approaches are mutually exclusive. The way our brains think, the way the whole world works, nearly all of every religion is utterly steeped in that first approach. In his book, *The Parables of Grace*, Robert Capon wrote (p. 183), "our love of justification by works (being righteous by my own merit and effort) is so profound that at the first opportunity we run from the strange light of grace straight back to the familiar darkness of the law."

It is common for Christians to fall into the trap of living as though they are like a hybrid vehicle. We are now familiar with hybrid cars that have both an electric motor and an internal combustion engine. It still seems weird to me when I am near a hybrid that starts and moves away with essentially no engine noise. Once it gets rolling the gas engine takes over. It's awfully easy for us to think that we live like that. We put faith in God's mercy given to us through Jesus, but then we have to take over and live by our own righteousness. That's not how it works. You can have an all electric car or an internal combustion engine car spiritually. It is either/or, it cannot be both.

Paul wrote a letter to the Christians of Galatia because they had bought into the hybrid heresy. His theme of that letter is there is no hybrid. It's one or the other. It's your own righteousness that will justify your life or its God's mercy and his mercy alone. In Galatians 5:4 he wrote "you who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus started with this astounding statement. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). Who is justified before God? Those who, like the tax collector, understand that they don't measure up and never will so their only hope is God's mercy. He went on in verse 20 to warn that if you want to go the other approach you will have to be more righteous than the Pharisees. If you go that way you won't make it.

IMPLICATIONS

Why is depending on God's mercy alone such a big thing? Why would God make admitting our sin and trusting in Christ alone be the critical component? There are many reasons, but I want to remind you of 5.

IT IS TRUE

It is always better to live by the truth. When we choose to live by lies or illusions we are setting ourselves up for disaster. On January 28, 1986 NASA officials held a conference call with engineers from Martin Thiokol, the company that built the Solid Rocket Boosters used on the Space Shuttle System. Several engineers demanded that the launch scheduled for that day be postponed. Rubber O-rings on the joints of the SRB's likely had lost their flexibility due to exceptionally cold weather at the Cape Canaveral launch facility. In the end the NASA people rejected this demand, believing that the O-rings would be just fine. Which was better, to live with the illusion or know the truth? The world knows now because those O-rings did indeed fail leading to the destruction of the Shuttle Challenger and the loss of 7 lives.

We are imperfect. We are flawed. We all know it. We know that we cannot justify ourselves. That's why we keep trying so hard to do just that. It is much better to admit the truth. If we keep holding on to the illusion at some point the disaster that will befall us is that we will face judgment by God and will not measure up. We will experience consequences so horrific to contemplate. Even in the meantime the illusion creates a life and a character that are not to be envied.

IT MAKES IT POSSIBLE TO LOVE GOD

When we live with the illusion we take the approach of trying to earn approval, by God and others. Unfortunately we cannot gain approval from a perfect, holy God. Knowing that we will resent him.

Have you ever had to deal with someone who disapproved of you? How did that affect you? You might have tried all you could to gain that person's approval. But what happens if that didn't work? How did you feel about that person? I'll tell you. You didn't like him or her. In fact you resented that individual and eventually wanted nothing to do with that person.

What do you think is going to happen when you try to win God's approval and fail no matter what you do? You're going to experience the same effect. You will get to the place where you don't like him. You resent him and want nothing to do with

him. If we are to love God our only hope is to throw ourselves on his mercy and find the acceptance that is offered there.

IT ENABLES US TO BE AUTHENTIC

The Pharisee prayed, “I thank you that I am not like other people. I fast and I tithe everything I own.” What does that cause you to feel about that person? It makes me ill. You’re not like everybody else? You think you’re better than other people because you fast and tithe? That’s a joke. Who cares? You’re no better than anybody else.

This is the problem with the justify yourself approach. It inevitably makes you live with pretense and trivial externality. The effort to justify ourselves inevitably involves a cover up and a serious public relations. We will get focused on what we think will make us look good. The only way we can be set free from that pretense is when we give up that approach and trust what God gives us in Jesus.

In high school I played on a baseball team with a guy who played shortstop and was pretty good, but he was not nearly as good as he wanted to believe he was. He unfortunately kept proving evidence that he wasn’t all the good to himself and to others by making errors in the field on routine plays, making bad throws or striking out when at bat. Every time he did so he came up with an excuse. The ball took a bad hop, a runner distracted him, the throw may not have been perfect but the first baseman should have caught it. He made a continual effort to excuse himself. We all saw through it quickly. I wished that just once after blowing another routine play he would just say, “Wow, I really butchered that one.” He couldn’t be real about such things because he was always trying to justify himself.

IT ENABLES US TO LIVE

Last week Carolyn Colbert shared a little incident that happened in her family. Her son, Matthew, asked how long he has to go to church. In other words, when do we graduate from church so we don’t have to go anymore? Carolyn said we never do. He asked, “why do we have to go?” She was about to answer “so we can go to heaven,” when it hit her that this is not right. We don’t go to church so we can go to heaven, we go because we have already been given the gift of heaven.

That is a profound insight. As long as we think we have to perform, to behave, to gain God’s approval and acceptance, life will be a burden. All that we do will be a duty. There was once a guy who came to our church that I don’t think ever really grasped the good news of Jesus. He came to church and wouldn’t sing most of the songs and would sleep through the entire sermon. I know there are people who fall

asleep in church because they have a physical problem, and there are those who fall asleep during the sermon because it bores them to death. But I figured out in the end that this guy found no joy in church. He was doing his duty. If you are going to measure up God says you have to go to church. So he was punching the clock. He may not have ever worshiped for even a second, but he was there, and so he could check off that box.

Which is better, to go to church because you are so full of joy in what God has done for you that you can't wait to sing those songs and to hear something from God no matter how dull this preacher might be, or to go to church because God says you have to? It may be boring, even annoying, but you put in your time because you have to? Can we all agree that it that the first alternative would be much better?

Now apply that principle to everything you do in life. In God's grace we are free. We come alive because we have his approval and acceptance and we have the certain hope of eternal life. Suddenly we are free and our souls come alive with joy. The alternative is death.

IT ENABLES US TO LOVE OTHERS

Pay attention to what the Pharisee did to other people. He had to be better than them. So he painted them with a broad brush as robbers, sinners and adulterers. He wrote off the vast majority of the human race. In order for us to "earn" our justification before God we are going to have to be better than other people. It will be important then for us to find out what is wrong with them and to put them down. Life will be a great competition. It's the old story of the two guys who are out in the bush and are confronted with a hungry lion. One starts running. His buddy says, "You can't outrun a lion." So he says, "I don't have to outrun the lion. I just have to outrun you." The simple truth is that we cannot compete with people and love them at the same time.

How many people do you figure the tax collector looked down on? My guess is that number is zero. When we know that the only boast we have is in God's mercy we are going to become way more accepting of people and way more gentle with them.

These two approaches are going to create two very different kinds of people. One is going to be trying to prove how much better he is than others, quick to judge them and living on a treadmill because he must constantly be working to prove that

he measures up. The other is going to be at peace, will be deeply humble and authentic, and will be quite gentle with fallen people.