



WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS VS. GIFT RIGHTEOUSNESS

Part 73 of Luke's Gospel: Investigating the Man Who Is God

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Luke 18:9–14 | May 15, 2011

Luke 18:9–14

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

HOW CAN WE BE RIGHTEOUS?

God becomes a man, the Lord Jesus Christ, and during his life on the earth, Jesus said and did many things. And as we’re discovering in Luke, he often told parables, which are little stories that teach big truths, usually answering one question. And today, Jesus is going to have for us a parable that, for the original hearers, would have been quite disorienting. He says that a seemingly holy man, a religious leader, a Pharisee, goes to a holy place, the temple, to do a holy thing, that is pray, and it was all very unholy. Very perplexing.

We find this in Luke 18:9–14. And as you’re finding that place in your Bible or on your app, here’s the question that the parable seeks to answer. How can we be righteous? That’s the question. Jesus is going to use the word “righteous.” And when it comes to righteous and righteousness, that is, in fact, an attribute of God. God, the Bible says repeatedly, is righteous. This means that he is holy, that he is good, that he is right, that he is without sin. To think of it in terms of a legal metaphor, God is one who rules rightly and justly and honorably and nobly and faithfully and truthfully.

And the Bible says that we were originally created, male and female, in the image and likeness of God. That’s why Genesis 1:31 said that God made us, quote, “very good.” It’s why Ecclesiastes 7:29 declares that God made us upright, that he made us righteous. But through sin we are all unrighteous. That’s where the Bible says no one is righteous, not one person is righteous.

And this leads to a real problem. God is righteous and we are unrighteous. How could God declare us to be righteous? How do we remedy this sin problem? And the issue of God declaring us righteous, to use theological language, is “justified.” That is when God declares a sinner who is unrighteous to be righteous. That is justified. Jesus is going to use these words in this parable. He’s going to talk about sin, he’s going to talk about righteousness, and he’s going to talk about one man being justified, though sinful, declared righteous in the sight of God.

OPTION #1 – WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS

And there are two ways in which the human heart and life pursues righteousness. To long for righteousness is not a bad thing. We simply need to pursue it in the right way. And in this story, Jesus is going to introduce us to two men, one man who pursues what we will call works righteousness, another man who will receive gift righteousness. And everyone in the history of the world falls into one of these two categories: pursuing works righteousness or receiving gift righteousness. So as we unpack the story, it is incumbent upon you and us to ask, “Which person do I most identify with? Who am I most like? Am I pursuing works righteousness of my own or receiving gift righteousness from God?” And furthermore, God is going to negate the first and he is going to affirm the latter.

And so we will start with option number one, works righteousness, in Luke 18:9–12. “He,” that is Jesus, “also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous,” there’s our word, “and treated others with contempt.” And so the story goes, “‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’””

So this man here is operating under works righteousness. He wants to be declared righteous in the sight of God, so he is going to live his life in such a way that he anticipates and expects, though wrongly, that God will be impressed with him and that God will bless him. And there are varying ways that we pursue works righteousness. Not all of them are religious. You don’t have to be necessarily religious to be one who pursues works righteousness.

I’ll give you a few examples of ways that people commonly pursue works righteousness. Some just assume, “I don’t need to exert any additional effort. I’m a good enough person. I’m sure in the end, when I stand before God and he judges me, he’ll think, ‘Pretty good person. I’m okay with you. You’re

not as good as some. You're not as bad as most. We're grading on a curve. Lo and behold, you've made the cut.'"

Some of you feel that way. You don't have the sense of urgency like, "I need to try harder and do better so that God would be pleased with me." You say, "Ah, I'm not too bad. I haven't done anything too catastrophic. I'm sure when all is said and done, God will be fine with me."

Some of you as well will wrongly assume that because you have suffered in this life, you cannot suffer after this life. Your life has been hard physically, emotionally, spiritually, financially, and as a result of perhaps abuse or neglect or sin committed against you, you think, "Well, when I die, perhaps God sort of owes me. He can't judge me and send me to hell. My life on earth has already been a little bit hellish. I've suffered enough. I don't need to do any more. I'm sure that I'm a good person in God's sight and he'll have favor upon me in the end."

There are also those who are cause-oriented crusaders. And they would say, "I am a good person because I do blank." And fill in the blank with whatever you want. And you don't even need to be religious to do this. "I am better than you because I take the bus. I drive a hybrid vehicle. I ride a bike. I work at the local pea patch. I recycle. I use all of my rain water. I have a low carbon footprint. I only feed my pet organic treats. I'm a good person because I made this list of what good people do, and I keep the list of all my own rules. I don't necessarily go to the Word of God, but I act a little bit like God and I make a little list of dos and don'ts and I give myself a high score on performance." Right?

And this is what some of us do. "I'm better than most people because I blank." And then we get very moral and self-righteous and judgmental. "Do you do what I do? You don't? You should. I'm going to make you feel very ashamed and I'm better than you and I'll show you why." And this is why people get so addicted to their little causes.

Sometimes the causes aren't bad. Sometimes they're weird. Weirdest one I've ever seen? Glad you asked. I'll tell you what it is. I saw it recently on a bumper sticker. It said, quote, "Save the wolves." The wolves. Have you not read *Little Red Riding Hood*? We need to be saved from the wolves. You know you're officially out of causes by which to distinguish how righteous you are when you end up at "save the wolves." And I'm sure one of you is part of that organization. You're going to send me an email with all of the reasons why I should join "save the wolves" and publicly apologize for criticizing "save the wolves." And my point is you're self-righteous. And God made wolves and he loves 'em and so do we, but at the end of the day, no one is holier than another person because of the cause that they have chosen. No one will stand before God and have God say, "Why should I declare you justified and righteous in my sight?" And it will not be sufficient to say, "I was pro-wolf." That's a totally different topic.

And this sometimes, as well, plays itself out with what we'll call self-esteem. Sometimes works righteousness manifests itself in self-esteem. And you're taught since you're a little kid, "Have a very high self-esteem." And so you think very highly of yourself. You think, "Well, of course God loves me. Look at me. Of course God is impressed with me. I'm pretty impressive." We have a very high self-esteem, even though sometimes we have a very low morality.

Now, how many of you like Leo Tolstoy? You like his works? He's a good author. He made this statement. I'll give you an example of works righteousness and high self-esteem. He says, quote, "I have not yet met a single man who was morally as good as I." Pray for his wife. I mean, that's amazing.

See, and some of us, we hear that and we laugh at that and we say, "I can't believe he thinks he's better than everybody else." Many of us think that, but we just don't write it down. Right? You think that. You think, "I'm better than most people." The people you work with, do you not think, "They are stupid. They are all stupid. It's a good thing I'm here." Right?

How about in traffic? You're in your car—and you don't put it on your bumper sticker. You know, "I have not found anyone as fantastic as me." You wouldn't Twitter that. But truly, when you're driving in your car in traffic, you think, "I'm the only person on the road who's not stupid. I'm the only one."

And what happens is we consider ourselves morally superior to others. We look down on others. Some of us just say it. Some of us just say—some of you have said this. Somebody will look at you and say, "So you think you're better than me?" You're like, "Yep." Right? Some of you have just said it and others of us wouldn't say it, but we think it and we believe it.

And the worst, perhaps most common and nefarious kind of works righteousness of all is religious works righteousness. And this can be Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, whatever version of religion you're into, Jehovah's Witnessism, Mormonism, whatever it is. But it's this disposition, it's this proclivity to see God as a judge and we as performers seeking to impress God with our religious performance.

This can be truth righteousness, where I'm better than everyone because I read all the right books, I've memorized the verses, I can answer the questions. This can be morality righteousness. "I'm better than everyone because I don't do bad things and I do do good things." This could be ministry righteousness. "Of course I'm better than everyone. Look at all the things I do for the Lord. I've done so much." Maybe it's even giving or serving. And these are not necessarily bad things, but they do not cause us to be seen by the God of the Bible as acceptably righteous in his sight.

And that is this story. This man is very devoutly religious, pursuing works righteousness. We're told that he's a Pharisee. That was a very strictly devoted sect in that day. Today, it would be like a preacher, a pastor, an elder, a deacon, a theologian, a noteworthy Christian speaker, leader, or author. He is very devout, very serious, very committed. Everyone looked up to him and respected him. And Jesus says, "God is not pleased with him." Disorienting.

And some of us would be that way. "Look at how zealous they are. Those people go knocking door to door. Three times a day, those people face east and pray. Those people carry a rug with them for the special prayer time. Those people get on an airplane and go to a sacred place. Those people don't

eat pork. Those people don't eat, drink, do certain things. Look at how serious they are. I could never be that self-disciplined. I am so impressed."

WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS IS UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

And because we tend to be wrongly impressed by those people, Jesus introduces one as a villain and not a hero. Because works righteousness is unrighteousness. Works righteousness is unrighteousness. Now, pulling from the story, I'll give you eight reasons why works righteousness is unrighteousness.

Number one, it's man centered, not God centered. In the story, the guy prays, "Dear God," so he says God once, "I, I, I, I, I." He says "I" five times in one prayer. "God, I, I, I, I, I am really fantastic. You're welcome." That's basically the prayer. That's not a prayer. That's a boast. That's all that it is. And we have in our day even theologies, those who would claim to teach the Bible, who say, "You don't exist to obey and glorify God. God exists to obey and glorify you so you can be all you can be, do all you can do, have all you can have. God's in it for you to make you a winner." Not true. We exist for God, God does not exist for us. The center of human history is not humanity, it is the creator God of the Bible. And this man sees himself as the center of his life and God exists to be impressed with him.

Number two, works righteousness compares us to someone other than Jesus. This man in the story, he says, "God, thank you, I'm not like the unjust and the adulterers and thank you that I'm not like other men and thank you, I'm not like the tax collector." He's comparing himself to others. And those of us who are prone toward works righteousness, and let me say this, friends, we all are. This is not a lesson you're going to learn today, this is a lesson to learn every day, because this is something we continually gravitate toward is works righteousness. We compare ourselves to other people. "Oh, they're horrible, they're terrible, they're not as good as me, they're not as smart as me." Friends, we are to compare ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. And as we do, we realize we're not righteous. We realize that we're not righteous.

Number three, in works righteousness, our performance establishes our worth. That's exactly what this man says. "I fast twice a week," which is a big deal because according to the Old Covenant, you were only required to fast once a year. So twice a week is a big deal. Many of you don't even know what fasting is. You're like, "I eat fast food, what's the big deal?" No, fast food is different than fasting, it's different. Fasting is where you don't eat. Somebody'll be like, "I didn't eat." That's 'cause you were working and you skipped lunch so you had two dinners, that's not fasting, right? Fasting is where for a whole day, you don't eat out of devotion to God to discipline yourself because to be a disciple is to be disciplined. That's the root intent of fasting, among other things.

And he says, "Two days a week, I don't eat at all." How many people would be impressed with this? How many of you would be impressed with this? "You don't eat two days a week?" "Yeah, every Tuesday and Thursday, I don't eat anything at all and I spend the whole day in prayer." "Wow. That's amazing. I couldn't do that. I couldn't do that. You're fantastic—that's crazy. Once a year I fast for one day, that's it."

And he says, "I give a tenth of all that I have," so all this money comes in, off the gross, not off the net, 10 percent to God, 10 percent to God, 10 percent to God. First check he writes, "Every month, I give money to God." His performance establishes his worth, not, "God made me, God saves me, God loves me, God adopts me." None of that, nothing related to God. In this works righteousness orientation, God is simply keeping score for my fantastic life.

And number four, it focuses on the external and it also then subsequently ignores the internal. So Jesus literally says, "They trusted in themselves." Friends, we all have faith. The difference is the object of our faith. I'm asking you to trust in Jesus, and if you don't, you are trusting in yourself. And so they don't trust God who is external from them, they trust themselves internally. They trust their gut, their opinion, their perspective, their view, their proclivity, their inclination. As a result, the only authority that they see is themselves. And so they put themselves in the position of God. "I know my heart, I know my life, I know my deeds, I render a verdict, I declare myself righteous." Nothing external. "Is there a God? Will I give an account to him? What will his verdict of my life be?"

Additionally, number five, why works righteousness is unrighteousness. In that false system, God is not our judge, people are. That's why he prays publicly. He wants everyone else to hear it. He wants everyone else to know it. "God, thank you that I don't lie. Thank you that I don't steal. Thank you that I don't commit adultery. Thank you that I'm better than everyone else." And he wants them all to hear it. And he wants the crowd to agree, "Yes, you are morally superior. Yes, you are fantastic. Yes, we are all impressed with you."

Number six, it leads to pride. Inevitably, it leads to pride. Some of you don't know this: Pride is a sin. You can call it self-esteem, it's still pride. It's the sin that got Satan kicked out of heaven. Augustine, the church father, says that pride is like a mother who is pregnant with all sin. All sin ultimately comes from pride. The first sin was to be like God. That's pride. That's pride.

Would you say this man is proud? We read in the story that he goes close to the presence of God. He feels like he should just walk right up to God. He lifts his head, he doesn't look down. He raises his voice, he doesn't mumble. And he prays out loud, "God, I, I, I, I, I." Massive pride.

Again, put yourself in the story, friends. Who are you like? Me, I'm like this guy. I'm like this guy. I don't know about you, with me, even if I overcome a sin, then I get proud of my overcoming of my sin and all that is is picking up a new sin. What a piece of work your pastor is. How many of you have done that? You say, "I used to smoke and now I don't. Now I look down on people who smoke 'cause they're all stupid and I'm better than they are. Wait a minute, pride's worse than smoking, d'oh." To quote the great theologian, Homer Simpson, "D'oh," right? You're just like, "Man." But we do that, right? We do that in our works righteousness. We get filled with pride.

Number seven, it causes contempt, not compassion. Jesus says that exactly. They trusted in themselves, they looked down on other people, and he uses

that word “contempt,” they had contempt for other people. Who do you have contempt for? And we all do. “Oh, they’re stupid, they’re lazy, they’re undeserving. They’re ridiculous. They’re annoying.” Contempt. See, works righteousness leads to contempt. He doesn’t have any compassion for the tax collector, right?

If he understood the gospel, the good news of Jesus, he would look at the tax collector not with contempt, but with compassion. He’d walk up to him, “I’ve never seen you here before. What are you doing here?” “Well, you know, I’m a tax collector, I’m a thief, I rip people off. God’s really shown me who I truly I am and I feel pretty embarrassed to be here, but you know, it looks like everything’s going good for me. I’m making a ton of money. I live in a big house and I got a nice job, but I can’t live with myself. I can’t wake up and look in the mirror and be proud of the man that I see every day. And so I’m here to see what God would have for me. Things need to change.” “Really? That’s why I’m here.” “Oh, that’s why you’re here? But you’re very religious.” “Yeah, that’s my problem. Yeah, my sin is religion. I’m all proud and self-righteous and arrogant and judgmental. How about, brother, I pray for you, you pray for me? Maybe we become accountability partners and we help each other with our stuff ‘cause we’re both sinners needing the grace of God. I understand where you’re at. I’m there just on different issues.” It would lead to humility and compassion, right?

But no, he says, “God, thank you I’m not like him or him or him or him or especially him, amen.” Contempt. Who do you have contempt for? Not if, who. Who? Who do you have contempt for? Let the Holy Spirit highlight that for you, reveal to you what’s really in your heart. I don’t know who it is, maybe it’s an individual, a kind of person, a category of person, maybe it’s a body type, a race, a gender, a socioeconomic background, a lifestyle choice, I don’t know what it is for you, but the Holy Spirit will highlight some person or group of persons and say, “You have contempt for them rather than compassion for them. You don’t understand the gospel.”

And ultimately, number eight, it offends God. That’s the point of the story, that God is offended by this kind of behavior, right? The temple in that day (it was destroyed in 70 A.D.) contained the Holy of Holies, the very presence of God the Holy Spirit on the Earth. And this man in the story, he gets close to the presence of God and rather than crying out to God for forgiveness, he boasts of his own righteousness, his works righteousness and his performance.

Friends, you need to know this, that works righteousness, either in its secular form or in its religious form, is nonetheless an abomination, it is deplorable to the God of the Bible. When we come to God, friends, we are to come empty-handed to receive a gift, not bearing all of our works righteousness as if God were to be impressed.

And to impress this upon us, the Bible uses two images, metaphors that are particularly cringe-worthy. One is in the Old Testament, one is in the New. I’ve shared them with you before, and I’ll share them with you again today, not for shock value, but to give us the disposition of God when we bring to him works righteousness as a gift. The first is in Isaiah 64:6, I’ve used it before. He says that our righteousness is like filthy menstrual rags. The other one is in Philippians 3:8 where Paul says that our works righteousness is like a steaming pile.

Okay, now how many of you, this would be a weird birthday. Your friend comes to you with a box and says, “I have something for you and I made it myself. No one else is gonna give you what I’m gonna give you.” You take the lid off and you see one of those gifts, or perhaps both of those gifts. “Oh, you did make it yourself. That is handmade.” You would say, “That’s no gift. It’s disgusting to look at. I don’t receive it as a treasure. And it’s a stench in my nostrils.” God says, “That’s what works righteousness is to me.”

Now, people in hats, people in suits, committees, preachers in dresses, it all looks very official, they can all get together and vote and say, “We declare that this is a really nice gift that the God of the Bible will love,” and put it in a box and put a bow on top. And God is saying, “When I take the lid off, you need to know that’s no present for me. That’s actually offensive and disgusting. That’s actually offensive and disgusting.” That’s our works righteousness to a holy, righteous God.

So there are two options for how we pursue righteousness, and Jesus here is absolutely condemning works righteousness. He says that when this man leaves the temple, he does not leave justified in the sight of God. God does not say, “He’s righteous.” God says, “He’s unrighteous.”

OPTION #2 – GIFT RIGHTEOUSNESS

The second option is the second man, the tax collector. So option number two is gift righteousness. If it’s not works righteousness, the only option is gift righteousness. Luke 18:13–14, ““But the tax collector, standing far off,” not drawing near, ““would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast.”” This is like mourning in a funeral. ““Saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”” I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other,”” here’s the big idea, ““For everyone who exalts himself,”” with works righteousness, ““will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself,”” for gift righteousness, ““will be exalted.””

Now the tax collector, friend, in this story, he’s a monster. He’s an absolute monster. The way it worked is the Roman government took over God’s people, basically nearly enslaved them. They would hire fellow members of God’s people to collect taxes. These are extortionists and crooks and thieves. They bankrupt people, threaten them. This is horrible what they do. Today, for us categorically, we would put those who deal drugs to kids. We would put those who enslave people in sex trafficking, we’d put the abortion doctors who work overtime ‘cause they love their job into the same category that they would have placed a tax collector.

That the tax collector would even walk into the temple, that was scandalous. This man is a monster. But what does he do? He stands far back; unlike the works righteousness man, he does not draw near. Rather than, with a haughty gaze, raising his head, he hangs his head low, looking at the ground in conviction and shame, right shame, good shame. And rather than talking about everybody else’s sin, he talks about his own sin. He talks about his own sin. “God, I’m a sinner. I’m not gonna try and justify the life that I’ve lived or the way I’ve behaved.”

And he asked for a gift, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Have mercy on me.” He’s asking for gift righteousness. And Jesus said, “That guy nailed it. That guy left justified, declared righteous in the sight of God.” But he didn’t fast twice a week. But he didn’t give 10 percent. But he couldn’t answer all the theological questions. But he hadn’t read the Bible cover to cover. But he hadn’t been baptized and he didn’t speak in tongues and—but he received gift righteousness. So he was justified, declared righteous in the sight of God.

HOW TO BECOME RIGHTEOUS

How to become righteous. Pull a few things from the story. First, friends, start by comparing yourself to Jesus and the Word of God so you could see your sin. Too often we spend too much time and energy comparing ourselves to one another. And if we look at the Word of God and we look at the Son of God, we see that we’re unrighteous.

How many of you think you’re pretty good till you start learning about Jesus? You’re like, “Oh, man, I’m not like Jesus, that’s for sure. He says stuff like love your enemies, oh, man. Be generous, help those in need, look out for those who are marginalized, weak, suffering, obey the Lord, live by faith. Oh, man, I’m not like Jesus. I’m unlike Jesus.” See, as we read the Word of God and we look to the Son of God, we see how unrighteous we are. And then we can say, like this man rightly did, “God, here is where I’m at, a sinner. Let me just make it real simple. I’m a sinner.” That’s a good place to start.

Then, number two, despise and do not excuse, tolerate, or celebrate your unrighteousness. Now the works righteousness man, he’s boasting and celebrating in his unrighteousness. “Here’s all the amazing things I do so that others will be impressed and think I’m closer to God.” Jesus says, “Not like that, like this.” The tax collector, he despises his sin. Are you at the point where you don’t just hate the consequence of your sin, you just hate your sin? Just need to change. Who you were needs to die and someone new needs to rise.

Number three, humbly repent to God. He does so humbly, right? He stands far back. He doesn’t approach near to God. He hangs his head low. He doesn’t hold his head high. He speaks in a softened tone. He doesn’t raise his voice. He doesn’t talk about everyone else’s sin, just his sin. And Jesus tells us that those who are proud and raise themselves up, that God must bring them down. That’s the story of the works righteousness man. Those who are humble and repent of their sin and come to God, in time, he will lift them up to be honorable leaders with changed lives and stories of God’s grace at work in their midst.

Number four, receive grace from and place your faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the teller of the story. Jesus Christ gives the mercy of God. That’s what he asked for, “God have mercy on me.” He’s asking, “God, forgive my sin. Don’t bring me the punishment I deserve. Please, do me a loving favor as an act of kindness.” That’s grace. And he asks this in faith, trusting that God can and does hear this kind of request from a guilty sinner who’s not just undeserving but ill-deserving.

And Jesus, the one who’s telling the story, he’s the one who makes this mercy possible. In the context of the story, he’s on his way from a rural area to the city of Jerusalem. It says in Luke 9:51, which is like a hinge on which the story swings, that he set his face toward Jerusalem. So at this point in the story, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem, where he’s going to die on a cross in our place for our sins as our Savior paying our debt so that God could give us mercy because there was also justice through his suffering.

And so friends, when we come to God and we ask, “I’m a sinner. Have mercy on me.” The answer is Jesus. Grace comes from him and we ask by faith in him to receive this great mercy. So that the enemies of God would be made friends of God.

Number five, receive the righteousness of Jesus Christ and be declared justified. See, he repents of his sin, he receives the gift of God’s mercy, and the result is Jesus said, “He left there justified, declared righteous in the sight of God.” You know what’s more exciting than people saying you’re righteous? God saying it, ‘cause ultimately it’s only his estimation that counts.

And what this man didn’t do, he didn’t come to God and ask, “God, what should I do to impress you? Where is the punch list for righteousness so that I can get a high score through my performance?” Instead, he came to God and said, “I need a gift. Have mercy on me.” And I would invite you to that as well, to receive the gift of the righteousness of Jesus Christ. And I’ll unpack that a bit more thoroughly in just a moment.

And then some of you will ask, “So what? God doesn’t care about our works? God doesn’t care about how we live? God doesn’t care about what we do?” He certainly does. He certainly does.

So, number six, you can then be sanctified by the Spirit of God to do your good works. Friends, we’re not saved by our good works, we’re saved to our good works. That’s totally different. We are saved by works. The question is, whose works? Our works or Jesus’ works? Whose works save? Jesus’ works. It’s his life, not ours. His perfection, not ours. His obedience, not ours. His death in our place for all that we have failed to be and do. So yes, something was done but it’s not done by us, friends, it’s done for us by Jesus.

This is such good news. We would never understand this apart from the revelation of the Bible. We would all end up even treating the Bible as just another works righteousness document. A list of things to do and not do, we will set up a set of leaders who just sort of keep score and render verdicts and then we’ll get all smug and self-righteous and proud because we did good things, we didn’t do bad things. We’ll look down on others, have contempt, not compassion, be filled with pride, get harsh, and then start adding rules to God’s rules and enforcing them and then it goes on and on and on until you murder God because he’s not as righteous as you are.

Or you realize that you’re unrighteous. You realize that Jesus is your righteousness. And you repent not only of your sin, but also your righteousness.

And you come like the tax collector. “God, I’m a sinner. Give me mercy. Don’t tell me what to do. Remind me of what Jesus has done.” And when Jesus says it is what? Finished, all the work is done. And I receive the gift.

Now this is a huge theological idea. Protestant Reformation had this as its fault line. Even today, there’s a massive debate raging. There are some Christian scholars who have done some good things, like a man named N. T. Wright. Get a little bit into theology. He’s written what’s called a new view on these sort of issues. And then a dear friend of mine, Dr. John Piper, has written a book against him. Lots of books are being published and conferences being held and debates being held about how can we be righteous in the sight of God? Which is a big, important question, the same one that’s asked even in the Bible in Job 9:2. How can a man be righteous in the sight of God? Hugely important question. One of the most important questions we can ask.

And without getting into all the complexity and all of the theology, because I love you and I’m a pastor and I’m a Bible teacher, I drew you a picture. So I’ll show you. Here it is. This is it, right? Here it is, all boiled down to one picture. Okay, you’re on the left. You are unrighteous. You can say it. You are unrighteous. Raise your hand if you’re unrighteous. Okay, if you didn’t raise your hand, you’re the most unrighteous of all, okay? You are—and I raise both my hands, okay? I’m unrighteous too. So you are unrighteous.

Over here is Jesus. He is righteous. That’s why we put a crown on him. Yay Jesus, all right? So, now working with Luke—now Luke wrote Luke and Acts, and then the other man who contributes the majority of the New Testament is a man named Paul. Paul originally was Saul, very much devoted to works righteousness. He talks about this in his testimony, for example in Philippians 3: “I was born to the right family, right tribe, circumcised on the eighth day, went to the right schools, studied under the right rabbis, got straight As in Pharisee school. I was graduated ‘most likely to make martyrs.’ I nailed it. That was me. And I had an amazing resume. And then I met Jesus and I realized it’s all garbage and righteousness is not something I work for, it’s something that he gives as a gift.”

And so then Saul becomes Paul and he goes on to write much of the New Testament. His traveling companion, his close buddy, his near and dear friend, and I think his personal physician, is Luke. And so when Luke here records gift righteousness from the lips of Jesus, Paul echoes this repeatedly, repeatedly in his teaching in the New Testament. I’ll give you one place that is my favorite verse, perhaps, in the whole Bible, 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who knew no sin, Jesus, to become sin,” that would be our sin, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

I tell you this verse all the time because it is so amazing. Martin Luther called it the great exchange. And let me show you exactly what it is saying. Paul here is echoing Luke and they’re both echoing Jesus. God made him, Jesus, who is righteous and knew no sin, to become our sin, to become our sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Theologically, we call this double imputation. My sin goes to Jesus. Jesus’ righteousness comes to me.

Say, “How do you do that?” You don’t. It’s a gift. You receive it empty-handed. This is how it works. This is where Christianity is not another religion. This is where Christianity is not another punch list of dos and don’ts to receive a declaration of righteousness in the sight of God. This is altogether different and it’s really good news and I really like teaching this and I really get excited about it and we really will forget it, and so someday I will tell you again.

JUSTIFIED

Okay, but perhaps in summary, and I say perhaps because I’m never exactly sure when I’m done, but I want to share with you a couple things about this. And I want you to see you can’t become any more righteous than the righteousness of Jesus Christ. His sinless, perfect, Spirit-filled, obedient, biblical life of submission is altogether and only perfect, and he gladly gives it to you. And he takes all of your sin and he suffers and dies. He declares that it’s finished and all the work is concluded. That’s what Jesus does for us. That’s why we love him so much and that’s why we’re so excited.

[Congregation applauding]

So a couple things in closing. It’s not about you. It’s all about Jesus. Additionally, it’s not about what you do for Jesus. It’s about what Jesus does for you. That’s what justification is about. Furthermore, God is not impressed with you. God is not impressed with you, but God loves you. That’s even better. Because if God is impressed with you, you need to keep performing. But if he loves you, he loves you no matter what.

Additionally, you do not have any righteousness. Whatever you put in the box, it’s not awesome. It’s awful. You do not have any righteousness, but Jesus will gladly give you his. Right? So that when you stand before God the Father for judgment at the end, you don’t say, “Here’s my resume and all the nice, good things I did.” You look at Jesus and you say, “I’m with him. I’m with him. He has a large reservation. I’m with him.”

Additionally, regarding our motivation for change, we do not change so that God will bless us. We do not change so that God will love us. We do not change so that God would accept us. Rather, we change because in Jesus Christ, God has blessed us. In Jesus Christ, God has loved us. In Jesus Christ, God has accepted us. Christianity then is not what we have to do. It’s what we get to do. And because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, it’s ultimately what we want to do. We want to follow Jesus, we want to be like Jesus, not so that God would love us, but because he’s already loved us in Christ. The motivation is very different. It leads to joy and not duty or burden. It’s a bunch of get-tos, not a bunch of have-tos. That’s the Christian life.

Additionally, we do not change so that people will be impressed by us. “You’re amazing. You’re fantastic.” “Yes, I know. You’re welcome.” No, rather, we change so that people would be impressed with the work of God the Holy Spirit in us. “You are changing. God is really working on you. I am so glad for the work of the Holy Spirit in your life.” It’s not to deny, “Oh, nothing’s happened. Nothing’s changed.” No, no, that’s a false humility. We should boast in the Lord. “Yeah, God is working on me. God is convicting me. God is changing me. I know he’s not done, but it is pretty cool what he’s already been able to do in spite of me.” And so we change not so that people would be impressed with us, but that they’d be impressed with the

God who changes us. Additionally, we do not change to feel better about ourselves. We change because we want to glorify God, because we want to glorify God.

Additionally, I'll close with this, perhaps. Don't leave here saying, "Thank you, Lord, I'm not like the religious man." You get that? Then you are the religious man. So we need to even be careful when we criticize religious people to acknowledge that we're religious people. So rather than saying, "Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like that religious man," we have to say, "God, thank you for showing me how I'm like that religious man. And thank you for convicting me of that sin so that I too can repent of my righteousness, and by your grace leave here declared justified, made righteous in your sight."

And here's the good news. I've got good news for all of you. You can walk in here not righteous, not justified in the sight of God because of sin you've committed, stuff you're embarrassed about, ashamed about, enslaved to, stuck in, controlled by, haunted for. Or some of you would walk in unrighteous, haughty, proud, you're overachievers, you're do-gooders, you're cause-pursuers, and you're smug and self-righteous and proud like the devil. And you're unrighteous too. And we all walk in here in some kind of unrighteousness. And the good news is this. Like that man left the temple, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, that man was declared justified, made righteous in the sight of God." You can leave here today justified, declared righteous in the sight of God through faith in and righteousness from Jesus Christ. Absolutely.

So there is no one here whom God would turn away if they would turn to him. Don't trust in yourself as this works righteousness man did. Trust in the Lord as the repentant, humble sinner who received the gift righteousness did. So confess your sin to Jesus. Receive the righteousness of God in Christ. And then celebrate with joy. What good news is it to have the God of the Bible look at you and say, "Justified! Justified! Justified! Righteous in my sight! Righteous in my sight! Righteous in my sight!" That is good news.

Father God, I thank you so much for the Bible. Holy Spirit, thank you for inspiring the writing of the Bible. And God, on this day I want to thank you. I love my job. This is the best job. I get to open the Bible and talk about Jesus. And Lord, I really, really, really, really like this job. And I thank you for the people of Mars Hill Church that they want to hear the Word of God, that they want to know the Son of God, they want to be filled with the Spirit of God. God, I confess to you, as I read this story, I'm a works righteousness man. Even when I do see progress, I like to take credit for it and get proud and I'm right back where I started. God, I pray for my friends who are like me, that God, we would see, we would see there is righteousness. It's in Christ, not in us. When we boast, may we boast in you, Lord Jesus, and not in ourselves. And Father, I pray, as well, for my friends who are here and they feel like this tax collector. They're guilty, they're dirty, they're ashamed, condemned, they have a hard time even thinking that you love them and that what they've done could be forgiven. Maybe, God, this is even a hard word for them to hear because all they hear is condemnation and accusation from Satan, their enemy, who is also a liar. Holy Spirit, I pray that you would encourage their heart and that you would let them know that Jesus died for them, that Jesus rose for them, that Jesus takes away their sin, and Jesus gladly, not ungladly, gladly gives them his righteousness. Father, may we all experience this great exchange and may we leave here with that glorious word, "justified," ringing in our ears. In Jesus' name, amen.

[End of Audio]

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.