

Pastor Jim Lloyd

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Title: The Great Debate

Text: Luke 18:9-14

I've entitled this morning's sermon, "The Great Debate." Anyone watch a debate lately? More than 80 million were reported to have watched the first presidential debate between Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump. Over 71 million watched the one this past Wednesday. Personally, I'd just as soon not watch another debate anytime soon. Does anyone here love debates? I love a good debate, it's just that I'm not so sure I've seen a good one lately. What is it that you DISLIKE about any debates you've watched recently? There is something nauseating to me about watching two grown people telling me and everyone else who will listen how great they are and how terrible their opponent is. It's like how many times do we need to hear "I'm really good and you're really bad." Even if it were true, I don't know that I'd care to hear it. Besides that, I suspect it's almost NEVER true.

This morning we aren't going to look to any recent debate (thank God). We're going to Luke chapter 18 where, believe it or not, one of the candidates has an inflated opinion of himself and probably an underinflated opinion of someone nearby. The debate we are looking at this morning had an audience of way less than 84 million. It was an audience of ONE. The audience was God Himself. It was a MUCH, MUCH more important audience.

Today we'll look at a story that Jesus told about two men who SUPPOSEDLY came to the temple to worship and to pray. Jesus, in this story, teaches essential principles about living the Christian life, namely – how we should view OURSELVES, how we should view OTHERS, and EVEN how that should affect the way we approach God. It's possible that there's someone here today who is convinced that they are the WORST person in the room – you somehow got mixed in with a bunch of saints, but you don't think you really belong here. You look around you and most everyone else seems to have it all together, and you know deep down inside that you don't have it all together – you're not who you SHOULD BE and you're not who you WANT TO BE. To this person I would like to say: Our text today has some good news for you, so stick around for the rest of the sermon. There's also the possibility that someone here today may have entertained the thought that they just MIGHT BE the BEST person in this room – the most knowledgeable, most enlightened, most discerning, most committed, hardest working, most talented, best looking, etc. You look around the room and you see OUR faults and defects and OUR many shortcomings, and you think, "I'm far beyond that." And, of course, you don't think you're perfect, but you suspect that, as Christians go, YOU should be counted among the ELITE. If this is you, then today I have some BAD news for you. Actually, not me, but Jesus – because He had some things to say about such an attitude. But, the bad news doesn't have to be bad news forever. You can make the bad news – good news, if you want. So, stick around.

Jesus told a story about two types of people, and the story didn't end the way most thought it might. Let's take a look. Turn in your Bible to Luke 18. ⁹"And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a PHARISEE and the other a TAX COLLECTOR. ¹¹The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who EXALTS HIMSELF will be humbled, but he who HUMBLER HIMSELF will be exalted.'" I wish there was a way to implement verse 14 at the start of every presidential debate. If I were the host or moderator, I'd suggest devising a point system. Say start with 100 points. Every time one brags inappropriately, he loses 1 point. Every time he attacks his opponent, he loses 2 points. When one is out of points, the debate is over, and he or she is declared the loser. It might not work, but at least the debate should be shorter. This story shows us both the RIGHT WAY AND the WRONG WAY to look at ourselves and to look at others; it shows us the RIGHT WAY and the WRONG WAY to approach our RELATIONSHIP TO GOD. This story makes rather clear how we can approach God the right way and NOT the wrong way. If you have ever thought, "There's NO hope for me," then here's the good news: there IS hope for you! If you have ever thought, "I'm too far gone," the good news is that you're NOT too far gone. To every person in this room this morning, no matter WHO you are, no matter WHAT KIND OF PAST you've experienced or WHAT MANNER OF BAGGAGE you brought with you, you can leave this service today in right relationship with God. Even if you have doubts about yourself, even if you've been going about it the wrong way all your life, you can leave here today fully justified before Almighty God. So, let's take a closer look at the story. First of all, Jesus talks about...

1. **THE WRONG WAY TO APPROACH GOD.** We see that the Pharisee, Mr. Holier-than-thou, made THREE big mistakes. **His FIRST mistake was making himself the center of his prayers.** The Pharisee came to the temple to pray, he stood up in front of everyone front and center, but his prayer wasn't a GOD-centered prayer. It was more like an IPrayer. Jesus said... *"The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself:"* (Luke 18:11 NIV). Elsewhere its translated "to himself" or "with himself." In other words, his prayer was an "ALL ABOUT ME" kind of prayer. He wasn't thinking about losing himself in the adoration of a holy and merciful God. Read the prayer – His MAIN concern was establishing his place in the starting lineup. LOOK AT ME! Even though he began his prayer with the phrase, "God, I thank you," his prayer was really just a self-congratulatory pat on the back. He wasn't REALLY praying to God. He wasn't even thinking about God. He was focused on HIMSELF. ILLUSTRATION: I recently read the story of a man who had gotten in the habit of beginning his prayers with declarative statements of who he was in Christ. He'd start something like, "I'm the righteousness of God in Christ, I'm more than a conqueror, I can do all things through Christ, Greater is He that is in ME than he that is in the world," – and so on. Let me quote him. He said, "And I realized that my prayer life had become all about me, and what's in it for me. All the time I was quoting Scripture and making theologically correct statements – but, still, it was ALL ABOUT ME!" Over a period of time, this realization challenged him to completely change his approach to prayer. Now his focus is about entering the presence of God and worshipping GOD more than anything else. I want to make it clear that we can talk about ourselves in prayer, and we can rejoice in what God has accomplished in our lives – but there's a BIG difference between making our requests known to Him and making our prayers about nothing more than ourselves. I am saying: When you pray, don't make the mistake of praying the IPrayer. There's a much better way to approach God. Instead, put God at the CENTER of your prayers. Really – it's NOT all about you! Let's continue looking at Mr. Holier-than-thou. **His SECOND mistake was comparing himself favorably to others.** The Pharisee prayed: *"God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."* There's a tactic that RELIGIOUS people often use, and business people often use, and children use with their parents, and spouses use on one another. We've also seen it run rampant in political campaigns and debates. The common tactic is this: the best way to build oneself up is to knock someone else down. While I'm emphasizing my GOOD deeds, I'll also emphasize your BAD deeds. And, I'll focus specifically on those areas in which YOUR FAULTS are more conspicuous than MY FAULTS. Have you ever heard someone defend themselves by saying, "Well, MAYBE I did *this*, but at least I DIDN'T do *that*." ILLUSTRATION: Recently the pastor of a large church was asked to step down from ministry due to a long-time dependence upon alcohol. In his statement to the public he said, in effect, "Yes, I do have a problem with alcohol, but I didn't commit adultery and I didn't steal money from the church." In other words: I made SOME mistakes, but not the WORST mistakes. My intention here is NOT to have a go at this guy for the way he phrased his public apology. My intention here is to have a go at ALL OF US – myself included – in the way we're tempted to MINIMIZE our OWN mistakes and MAXIMIZE the mistakes that OTHERS have made. Here's what I'm saying. If your best defense is "at least I never" – you're on shaky ground spiritually. This attitude will also likely put you on shaky ground in your work and in your relationships. We need to get past the idea that God grades on the curve, and the curve is set by our best standards, not our worst. Recently I heard someone say that we tend to judge ourselves based on OUR BEST INTENTIONS, while we judge others based on THEIR WORST ACTIONS. ILLUSTRATION: A certain pastor didn't hire a particular associate because the man didn't pass the QUOTE "integrity test." What this pastor meant was that the potential associate was a little slothful, a little disorganized, not so good with money, and not known for being prompt. Those are things that you need to consider when making a hire, but I find it interesting that the pastor called it the "integrity test." That particular pastor is organized, disciplined, efficient, and financially responsible AND...he also has a FEROCIOUS temper that he has, at one time or another, unleashed on everyone who works for him and everyone who lives with him. You never know from day to day what mood he'll bring to the office or what tiny infraction might set him off. Interestingly, he doesn't believe HIS behavior FAILS the integrity test. He would say, "I'm just intense...the people who work for me need to understand that. But AT LEAST I'VE NEVER been disorganized." A grave danger in the spiritual life, as well as in the workplace and among family members, is to get in the habit of comparing yourself favorably with others: Yeah, maybe I did this, BUT...at least I NEVER did that. What the Pharisee needed to do as he looked at the sinner across the room is to say, "Me and you, brother, we're on level ground. Maybe some of your sins are more conspicuous than mine, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're worse. We're more alike than we are different. We're BOTH sinners in need of a Savior." If your best defense when you come before God is to say, "At least I NEVER," you need to change your

approach. It would be a waste of time to point your finger at what Mr. Trump said or what Mrs. Clinton did. Know that God is not given to distractions like we may be. One more observation about the Pharisee. **His THIRD mistake was to approach God with a smug sense of SELF-satisfaction.** His prayer was, basically, “Look at all the good things I do. Not only am I better than other people, also...” *“I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.”* He goes from putting others down, to LIFTING himself up. Really, he presents a rather short resume. Fasting and tithing. That’s it? What about ALL the other commandments? What about ALL the other requirements of the law? This is just the second part of the tactic I mentioned earlier: you build yourself up in whatever way you can. “I’m not saying I’m perfect, but I do fast and tithe...And, of course, at least I never...” We make the mistake of thinking that someday we will be good enough to approach God on the basis of OUR resume – but it will NEVER happen. Neither you or I or anyone will EVER get to the point where we can impress God with our list of accomplishments. Our goal, of course, when we stand before Him on that final day, is to hear Him say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.” DON’T GET ME WRONG HERE! It’s not like what you accomplish in life makes NO difference at all. It DOES make a difference. HOLINESS matters. OBEDIENCE matters. FAITHFULNESS matters. But there’s a distinction – and it’s an important distinction because it draws the line between BAD RELIGION and a RIGHT RELATIONSHIP with God. This is the distinction: **You will never ever earn your place in the kingdom of God based on the good things you do.** This is a good thing, because if salvation was based on what you deserved, you wouldn’t make it. NONE of us would. While Mr. Holier-than-thou was congratulating himself for his success in fasting and tithing, he forgot to consider something that the Scriptures he professed to believe plainly teaches. *“For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment...”* (Isaiah 64:6). That’s the difference between sinful man and a holy God: the BEST of what WE do is no better than a dirty rag. If you’re entertaining the idea that you can get to the place – or that you’ve arrived at the place – where you can say, “God, I’m really on a roll these days. I don’t really need to ask for forgiveness, and I made some significant gains this week, so let’s just make today a celebration of all the good I’ve done” – you need to understand: this will NEVER happen. You will NEVER be able to rightly approach God on the basis of ANYTHING other than HIS MERCY and HIS GRACE. And so, in these few minutes that we have remaining, let’s take a quick look at the prayer of the PUBLICAN (tax collector), the wretched sinner that Jesus talked about, because he shows us...

- 2. THE RIGHT WAY TO APPROACH GOD.** The Pharisee did THREE things wrong. The tax collector did ONE THING RIGHT – and that one thing was WHAT MATTERED MOST. He made it ALL ABOUT MERCY. When it comes to getting right with God, this is your only hope: that the God of grace in His infinite goodness will choose by HIS mercy to wipe away YOUR sin. Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector came before God with no pretense or sense of entitlement. While the Pharisee stood up in the temple front and center, the TAX COLLECTOR stayed at a DISTANCE. It appears that the Pharisee WANTED first and foremost to be recognized by everyone. I suspect that the tax collector FEARED first and foremost that he might be recognized by someone, so he just stood at a distance. Why? Because he wasn’t kidding himself. Unlike the Pharisee, HE KNEW WHO HE WAS. And I want you to notice that the tax collector made NO DEFENSE for himself. He, too, could have compared himself to a lesser man and said, “Well, I never...” He, too, could have found some good deed he had done and declared it so. Rather, he offers NO EXCUSE for himself. He didn’t say, “Hey God, I realize I’m guilty of a little economic exploitation, but at least I never...” He knew that his standing with God was NOT about how anyone else might or might not measure up. He knew it was NOT about where he might fit on the curve. He knew that his standing with God was a matter between HIM and GOD ALONE. And...HE knew where HE stood. He prayed for God’s mercy. Most translations say, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.” But...that doesn’t really do justice to the original Greek. The New American Standard Bible translates this best, because what he actually said was... *“God, be merciful to me, the sinner!”* The sinner. He was saying, in effect, “God, I’m not going to play this silly at-least-I-never game with You, because I know who I am, and YOU know who I am. I’M A SINNER, and I just might be the worst of the bunch.” Paul echoed this same idea in 1 Timothy 1:15 when he referred to himself as *“the chief of sinners.”* There is a sense in which we should all feel that way. The ONLY way we can come to God is to say, “No games. No masks. I know who I am. You know who I am. I have NO defense and NO excuse. I am a sinner. THE SINNER.” From a human perspective, maybe we all land in different places on the good vs. bad spectrum. From God’s perspective, we’re on LEVEL ground. We’re more ALIKE than we are different. Even our most RIGHTEOUS deeds have the stench of filthy rags. We’re ALL sinners in need of a Savior. If you came here today already aware of this, already convinced that you just might be the worst of the bunch, then I want you to know that all you have to do is reach out to God today, and ask for His mercy, and you will be made right with Him. *“If*

we CONFESS our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from ALL unrighteousness [ALL sin]" (1 John 1:9). Even if this isn't the first time you've prayed this prayer of despair, there is MERCY in the presence of God. This is where healing begins. This is, and will always be, square one in your relationship with God. In the Psalms, King David said that God is not interested in religious rituals, but instead... "A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). When you come to the end of yourself, and you have no defense to offer and no excuse to make, if you will surrender yourself to the mercy of God, HE will receive you, HE will forgive you, and HE will accept you. On the other hand, maybe you're one who has been approaching God like the Pharisee for far too long. Your prayers have become IPrayers, and your best defense is "at least I never," and you've deceived yourself into thinking you're something you're really not. You, too, can leave justified today – but only if you're willing to take your place alongside the tax collector. The Pharisee stood front and center in the temple so that all could see him praying to himself, "What a good man am I," while the tax collector stood at a distance in the back of the room. That's where the Pharisee should have been.

- 3. Conclusion.** During the invitation, we sometimes ask people to come forward, to come to the altar, to profess your commitment to following Christ at the front of the room. Today I'm asking everyone here – symbolically – to move to the back of the room, to stand at a distance with the tax collector. And...to say with him, "No games, God. No defense. No excuse. I know who I am and you know who I am. I NEED YOUR MERCY." When you pray this prayer, you will leave today justified, cleansed, right with God. How is it possible? Because 2000 years ago God sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world to live a perfect life, and to die a violent death on a Roman cross. And as He hung upon that cross, His blood, His death, paid the price for our sins. Through him, we receive what we could never earn for ourselves: A right relationship with God. It is NOT based on who you are – It's NOT by works, as the Bible says, lest anyone should boast – but it is the FREE GIFT of God. Do you want to be right with God today, and every day? When you come to God, make it ALL ABOUT MERCY. "No games, God. No excuses. I know who I am. You know who I am. I need your mercy today."