

MANUSCRIPT OUTLINE: Luke 18:9-14

Parables of the Kingdom

by Peter Craig

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Cambodia to film a story about a man named Kang Kek Iew. I'm sure this name doesn't ring any bells. But if you're Cambodian, you would know this man, but under a more ominous title: Comrade Duch, a former high-ranking leader of the Khmer Rouge regime whose four-year campaign led to the genocide of an estimated 3 million Cambodians in the late 1970s. When the regime fell in 1979, the leaders of the party went into hiding, but three decades later, they were finally placed on trial. So far four Khmer Rouge leaders have had their day in court, each defending their innocence. Except for one...Comrade Duch. While others denied any wrongdoing, he remorsefully acknowledged his guilt and took full responsibility for his actions.

I share this story, because Jesus' parable in Luke 18 has a similar theme. Two men enter the temple to plead their cases before a righteous judge. One defends his innocence while the other admits his guilt and pleads for mercy. But why is Jesus telling this parable? Who's His audience? Is it another rebuke of the Pharisees like we've seen other teachings? The author, Luke doesn't let us off the hook that easily. **Verse 9: "He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt."** The net is cast uncomfortably wide. This parable isn't just aimed at religious leaders living in the first century. It's aimed at those of us who exalt ourselves, often at the expense of others. Could this parable be meant for you this morning? I hope and pray that your heart might be open to hearing what Jesus has to say as we take a look at His three lead characters: the pharisee, the tax collector, and the judge, God Himself.

The Pharisee

1. Opposites

- a. As we've seen in other parables, Jesus sets the stage for His story in a way that's going to turn cultural norms on end. He does this first by introducing his two leads...
 - i. **Verse 10: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."**
- b. As mentioned in earlier sermons, these two men were on opposite ends of the first-century, religious spectrum. As much as pharisees were revered for their scrupulous efforts to obey God's law, tax collectors were fellow Israelites disdained for their dishonesty, corruption, and allegiance to the oppressive Roman empire. In short, they were seen as lying, stealing, back-stabbing, traitors.
 - i. So think the best of society in one role and the worst in the other. A respected non-profit worker and a corrupt politician. A ministry leader and a convicted criminal. As you might imagine, a prejudice has immediately grown in the hearts of Jesus' listeners even before the first prayer is lifted up, and that honor goes to the pharisee...

2. Self-centered Prayer

- a. **Verses 11-12: "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.'"**

- i. First, we have to acknowledge that the Pharisee is a praying man, devout. Going to the temple to pray would be a daily routine for him.
 - 1. This is the type of guy who would sign up for prayer nights at our church, memorize Scripture, show up early for city group, and maybe even bring the guacamole. Everyone respects the guacamole guy.
- ii. On the surface, the pharisee looks as good as it gets and his prayer even starts out on right on track. “God, I thank you...” Four words in, he’s doing well, but his words quickly betray him and expose his true motives.
 - 1. “God, I thank you...that I am not like other men.” Suddenly, we begin to see that this isn’t a prayer focused on God and His greatness at all. It’s about the pharisee and his own reputation.
 - 2. He enters the courts of true greatness and immediately fills the airwaves with his own praise. It’s like going to the Grand Canyon and missing the view because you’re too busy taking selfies.
 - a. His prayer is not upward in heart, but inward. It’s all about him. In fact, in this short prayer alone, the pharisee says “I” fives times.
 - b. Have you ever fell into the “Five I” trap? You come to spend time with God in prayer and make it all about you? Maybe you’ve even approached Scripture or community this way. Your grievances, your convictions, your timing, your desires...
 - c. What does the Pharisee want? He wants God’s approval. Is that a bad thing? No. Don’t we all want that? To be accepted by God? His desire isn’t the problem. His strategy to attain it is...
- iii. He thinks he can justify himself based his own track record of obedience and to Jesus’ listeners, his list would look quite impressive.
 - 1. He doesn’t blackmail, he’s not unjust, he doesn’t commit adultery. He gives more than is required by God and fasts just the same. And he’s certainly not like the detestable tax collector hiding himself across the temple. So many “I’s”!
- iv. This isn’t a prayer about God. It’s a self-congratulatory speech fueled by comparison.
 - 1. It’s both inward facing and sideways glancing. Where else would his righteousness come from? If he was solely focused on God and His holiness, sovereignty, and timeless glory, we’d have a much different prayer on our hands.
 - 2. But his measuring stick for righteousness isn’t God. It’s other people, which has both distorting and devastating effects.

3. Self-righteous Prayer

- a. You see, when the seed of comparison grows in the heart, it blossoms into self-righteousness.
 - i. My wife is a teacher and this week I’ve been helping her prepare her classroom for the first day of school. In the process, I’ve been hanging a lot of artwork, which I enjoy. I like the precision nature of it. I love seeing that little bubble on my level land dead center on each frame. When that happens, I know I’ve got it right.
 - 1. But what would happen if I attempted to level the artwork based on what I see around me? The slightly slanted whiteboard...the sloping ceiling. Everything will be angled out of whack.

- ii. This also true for our lives. When we compare ourselves with others, it might feel right at the time, but our lives are left askew.
 - 1. For some of us, we might compare spiritual “to-dos” like the pharisee. “I attend city group more than him. I read my Bible more than her. I pray more, serve more, encourage more, care more, lead more...”
 - 2. For others of us, the topic can be anything else. You name it. “We’re better than those parents. We don’t fight as much as that couple. We eat better than that family. At least I’m not a republican...or a democrat”. Suddenly, we’re name-dropping just like the pharisee.
 - a. Is he telling the truth when he says that he’s not like extortionists, adulterers, and the unjust? Probably. But it doesn’t matter. Comparison has clouded his judgment and he has lost the horizon of true righteousness.
 - iii. He’s forgotten that God is the Perfect Level that he must look upon to see himself clearly.
 - iv. And if he had his eyes fixed on God and His Law, the pharisee would see something glaringly missing in his life that’s at the very center of God’s heart...and that’s Love. And love isn’t just missing here. It’s fully moved out and contempt has taken over its lease.
- b. Comparison had blossomed into self-righteousness and self-righteousness has now fully matured into contempt for others.
- i. Just look how the pharisee, a devout man of God, treats the tax collector. He condemns his fellow Jewish believer as he beats his chest in remorse across the temple.
 - ii. He doesn’t see him as an equal. He sees him as inferior. The pharisee thanks God that he’s not like the tax collector, which, if you follow the logic, means that he believes that it’s a shame that the tax collector isn’t like him.
 - 1. Suddenly, the pharisee has become the bar...the Perfect Level to which everyone must align. Not only that, but he’s also chosen to dethrone God as the judge of others.
 - 2. Does he know what’s going on in the tax collector’s heart? No. He doesn’t even know what’s going on in his.
 - iii. And that’s the problem. Sure, many of us don’t pray like this. But is this sort of thing happening in our hearts and minds?
 - 1. What thoughts begin stirring when people don’t share the same beliefs, passions, opinions, convictions, politics, or even spiritual maturity as you? We might not congratulate ourselves in a prayer like the pharisee, but we do act...
 - 2. We subtly judge, boast, gossip, slight, tweet/post/comment/unfollow, and eventually distance ourselves from anyone who doesn’t measure up in whatever category we choose.
 - iv. Now this isn’t fun to admit, but apart from God’s continual work in my life, I’m this guy...I’m the pharisee. I didn’t get into much trouble growing up, I was a straight-A student, I won awards at film school, faithfully went to church, and was respected by others. I was a doer and I did things pretty well. I share this because my efforts defined me, provided me the acceptance I wanted, and eventually spilled over into my walk with Christ. I often glanced around the room like the pharisee. Why don’t people appreciate Scripture like I do, pray like I do,

have a heart for the nations or orphans like I do. In my heart, I justified myself by own efforts, puffed myself up, then glared down at everyone below...a really fun guy to be around, right?

4. Forgetful Prayer

- a. It's a slippery slope and if we aren't careful, we can all fall into the same trap as the pharisee. What was his problem? He had forgotten who God is.
 - i. Sure, he knows facts about God and he certainly knows God's law. But he doesn't know God's heart.
 1. In Matthew, a lawyer asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment and Jesus responds by saying that the law and the prophets hang on two commandments: Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.
 - ii. Not blackmailing, living justly, giving faithfully, praying, and fasting...all of these laws weren't given so that a person can establish his own righteousness. They were meant to reveal God's character, expose our sin, and reveal our need for His mercy.
 1. The pharisee prides himself in his obedience to God's law while patently disobeying its two greatest commandments.
 - iii. How could this happen? It happens when a person goes through all the religious motions, yet neglects to allow the life-changing Truth of God penetrate his heart.
 1. Maybe you come to church or city group as a routine. It's what you do. You hear a sermon, but you rarely let it change you. You read the Bible, but never let it define your life.
 2. Jesus describes people like this in Matthew 13, ***"For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them."***
- b. The good news is healing awaits those who hear God's voice and humbly turn to Him for mercy. We see this in Jesus' second character in His parable...the tax collector.

The Tax Collector

Verse 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!'"

1. God-centered Prayer

- a. After all the pomp of the Pharisee's prayer, Jesus now directs our attention across the temple, most likely to the outer edges of the Court, to another prayer occurring at the same moment. But this prayer is different in both its petition and its posture.
- b. Unlike the pharisee who seeks attention as his eyes roam about the temple courts, the tax collector approaches God broken, humble, and without procession.
 - i. Jesus specifically notes that he's "standing far off". He doesn't assume a prominent place in the temple like a Pharisee might. In fact, with his reputation, he runs the risk of public shame for even showing up.
 - ii. For him, the temple is not a place to see and be seen. No. His heart is fixed on one thing...meeting with God. And look how Jesus describes him. His head is bowed, not even daring to lift his eyes to heaven, but beating his chest in remorse.

2. Self-Aware Prayer

- a. This man knows who he's talking to. He has no strategy to make a defense. There's no "Five I" prayer to lift up. Only a simple and desperate plea. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"
 - i. Notice, there are only two parties mentioned in this prayer. No comparison or finger pointing. Sure, tax collectors had a bad reputation, but isn't there always someone else in the room worse off than you?
 - ii. And what about good deeds? I'm sure he tithed every once in a while. Couldn't he had mentioned some of the good things he's done? I mean, even coming to the temple to pray has to count for something, right?
- b. No. He doesn't fall into that temptation. Why? Because the stakes are too high and the reality is too stark. He knows that he stands before a holy, just, and all-knowing God, a sinner and that's that.
 - i. If you're a thief standing before a judge, you can't compare yourself to a murderer and expect to get off for your crime? Sin is sin no matter what size or shape you choose and, apart from a miracle of God, like the tax collector and the pharisee, the verdict is the same for all of us: guilty.
 - 1. Tim Keller puts it this way, "Imagine three people try to swim from Hawaii to Japan. One man can't swim and drowns after 30 feet. An average swimmer drowns after 5 miles. Another is a championship swimmer and dies after 30 miles. But they all drowned because, though one was 5,000 times stronger than the other, none of them could come a fraction of the way to Japan. Is one more drowned than the others?"
 - ii. The tax collector could compare himself, but what's the point? Apart from God's mercy, no matter how far each of us swim, expert or novice, religious zealot or hardened criminal, our sin leaves us all dead in the water.
- c. It's no wonder that the tax collector is so serious. His life is on the line. But unlike the pharisee, he doesn't assume that God's grace is his for the taking. The only assumption he brings into the temple is that he is able to approach God to plead for mercy and maybe, just maybe, God would give it.
 - i. Scripture depicts another man in a similar situation. King David, after having an affair with a woman and killing her husband to cover his tracks, prays this in Psalm 51, **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."**
 - ii. And unlike the pharisee, David also knows his "good works" won't save him. He later continues, **"For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."**
- d. The tax collector is in good company. King David was known as a man after God's own heart and he found himself in the very same courtroom standing before the very same judge with nothing to offer but the one thing God wants...a broken and contrite heart.
 - i. When is the last time you prayed like this in response to your sin? Desperate and humble. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner?" Do you take your sin seriously? Gossip, anger, lust, jealousy, self-righteousness?

3. God-infused Prayer

- a. The tax collector, he takes his sin seriously. Why? Because he takes God seriously. Unlike the Pharisee, he seems to know something about God at a deeper level.

- i. First, we see it in his prayer. He knows that God is holy and just. As a Jewish man, he would have heard this in God's Law and he would have witnessed this first hand in the very temple where he's come to pray.
- ii. You see, most Israelites visited the temple at 9 in the morning and 3 in the afternoon when animals were sacrificed to atone for the people's sins. This would have been a stark reminder that sin is grievous, death-dealing, and must be paid for with precious blood.
 - 1. A few years ago, I traveled to the bush of Western Mali to document how God is moving in the country. We arrived in a small village and, to celebrate our arrival, a goat was purchased to cook for lunch. Now I should note that this goat was alive and, for reasons I still don't quite understand, I was chosen by the Malians to be the one to kill it. For context, I'm not a hunter and I personally have a no kill policy for insects at our house, so needless to say, I was nervous. I remember holding the goat down with a few Malian men, and with my heart racing, I placed the blade of the knife to its throat. There was a moment where he looked up at me and, I promise you, he bleated as if pleading for his life...and, doing what I was asked to...I cut...
- iii. A life lost, so that life might be given. Yes. The tax collector would have known the serious nature of sin. He would have heard it throughout the temple courts.
 - 1. But where the sights and sounds of sacrifice are bleak, there is also reason for great hope...a pathway toward forgiveness.
- b. You see, there's more that the tax collector knows about God's character than His holiness and justice and we see it in his prayer...**God is merciful.**
 - i. In Exodus, God passed before Moses and proclaimed, ***"The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,..."***
 - 1. Surely, David recalled these words in his prayer for mercy in the Psalms and that would have given the tax collector great hope. "If God showed David, a murderer and adulterer, mercy, maybe...just maybe...he'll do the same for me, a sinner."
- c. In the bright, leveling light of God's character and Word, the tax collector knows who he is...a sinner in need of mercy.
 - i. What about you? Do you know yourself like this? Do you know your sin and the things that tempt you to sin? And I'm not asking about five or ten years ago, I'm asking about today?
 - 1. If you struggle to answer these questions, you need to take the time to seriously reflect on them. You need to know yourself and your sin to truly understand your desperate need for God.
 - ii. I'll confess, apart from the Holy Spirit's work in me, I'm self-righteous, judgemental, and cynical (among other things). That's me in my flesh today. I desperately need God's mercy and the Spirit's help every single day.
- d. And the good news is, God wants to give it. In His grace, He continues to respond to my prayers. He also responded to Comrade Duch's...
 - i. You see, a decade before his trial in Cambodia began, Duch heard the Gospel. He recognized who God is (just and merciful) and who he is (a sinner). And like the tax collector, he pled for God's mercy, in his case, by placing his faith in

Jesus. This eventually influenced his decision to confess to personally overseeing the brutal torture and execution of at least 16,000 people in a death camp known as S-21. Over the span of his 18-month trial, he remorsefully recounted the gruesome realities of the prison. And I promise you, you can't imagine the horrors inflicted by Duch and those under his command. If you want a provocative replacement for the role of the tax collector, Duch is your man.

1. But, sure, you might think, "Yeah, I sin, but I'm not that bad. A judge a little. Get angry with my kids, gossip here and there, but I'm not like Duch or the tax collector."
 2. To that I would respond, "You're thinking a lot like the pharisee." Don't compare or downplay your sin. And don't forget what God says about it, **James 2:10: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it."**
- e. The reality is, you stand guilty of breaking all of God's law alongside the pharisee, the tax collector, me, and Comrade Duch.
- i. So what hope do we have? We find out in Jesus' jaw-dropping, twist-ending....

The Judge

1. The Verdict

- a. **Verse 14a: "I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified, rather than the other.**
 - i. To the shock of Jesus' listeners, the lying, stealing, back-stabbing traitor is justified, (which means here, "acquitted") while the revered and seemingly faultless religious leader stands guilty.
 1. Feel the upside-down nature of God's Kingdom breaking in with this stunning verdict! All the Comrade Duch's of the world who plead for God's mercy through faith in Christ are acquitted!
 - ii. God isn't looking for a man or woman seeking to establish their own righteousness. He's looking for people who acknowledge His holy perfection and realize that they have nothing to offer but their need for Him.
 1. If your gut response to this verdict is "that's not really fair". You'd be right, but maybe in the wrong way. If absolute fairness is what you seek, then there are only guilty parties in this parable. No mercy. Just judgement for all sinners, including us, and that's the end of the story.
 2. You don't want fair. You want and need God's mercy. And the good news is, He's quick to give it..
 - iii. The parable states that the tax collector went home justified! Didn't he have to immediately right all of his wrongs? Didn't he have to commit to fasting twice a week or to giving extra to pay God back? No. He simply went home justified, not by his works, but by God's grace. It's done to Him by God not by him for himself.
 1. The reality is, true exaltation comes from above. We don't justify ourselves. He justifies us. We don't lift ourselves up. He does. Anything else is temporary and counterfeit.
- b. You see, Jesus' parable is a beautiful revelation of God's heart of mercy. Not only that, but it's a beautiful revelation about Jesus Himself.
 - i. From the audience's perspective, I'm sure it looks like Jesus had gotten it wrong. One guy looks pretty great and the other, a complete mess. Like a straight-A

student and a mass murderer. But God doesn't judge by appearance. He judges the heart. And that's what Jesus is doing? Why?

- ii. Because Jesus is the judge! He is the righteous judge who humbled Himself by leaving the throne room of God to put on flesh to do what neither the pharisee or the tax collector could do...fulfill the law of loving God and others perfectly all the way to His brutal death on the cross!
 1. Take a moment to breathe in this shocking reality. It's as if one of the judges in Comrade Duch's trial disrobed and stepped down to serve his life sentence in his place!

2. The Judge is the Sacrifice

- a. And that's exactly what Jesus is offering anyone who would follow His example and humble himself under God's mighty hand today. Because He's not only the judge, He's also the sacrifice!
 - i. I don't have the most detailed of memories, but I vividly recall the day I was asked to kill the goat in Mali. I remember the fear and helplessness of the goat as he was brought forward, bound, and held on the ground. I remember the shrill sound of his bleating as I nervously lowered the knife to its throat. And not trying to sound too graphic, but more than anything, I clearly remember the dark blood spilling out onto the red dirt at my feet as his life drained out of him. That image stuck with me. Why? Because it's just a sliver of what Jesus willingly endured for you and me.
 1. He was bound and taken away without putting up a fight. He was held down while his hands and feet were secured, not to the ground, but to a cross. He cried out in agony as his blood fell at the feet of those who mocked Him, both the sinners and the self-righteous.
 2. You see, the sacrifices that took place at the temple were pointing forward to something much more glorious than the temporary justification they provided the people of Israel. They were pointing to the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. They were pointing to a day when a spotless lamb, the sinless Son of God, the Judge of the living and the dead, would lay His life down to secure eternal acceptance for all the pharisees and tax collectors, the self-righteous and the immoral, who would humbly turn to Him to be healed.
- b. Will you turn to Jesus to be healed? Will you turn from comparison, self-righteousness, and contempt for others and receive God's free gift of grace?
 - i. How do we receive this gift? Know your desperate need and ask for God's help. In short, humble yourself. Jesus tells us in **Verse 14: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."**
 - ii. The acceptance that the pharisee sought from God is within reach, but he never had to lift himself up to attain it. Jesus is showing us once again the upside down nature of His Kingdom. In order to be lifted up, we must follow His lead and lower ourselves.
 - iii. But we can't just grit our teeth and be humble. It's not something you do. It's someone you become.
 1. So how do we even begin to humble ourselves when humility is a matter of the heart? We must ask for the Holy Spirit's help as we follow the tax collector's example...

3. Humble Ourselves

- a. First and very practically, we must know God.
 - i. Draw near to Him. Seek His presence in His Word, in community, and in prayer. Let His truth, character, and love sink into your heart and change you. Remember, He is the one True Level that we must look to in order to align every aspect of our lives. There are no comparisons.
- b. Secondly, as I mentioned before, we must know ourselves.
 - i. Take time to honestly reflect on your sin and what tempts you to sin. Anger, lust, jealousy, lack of love for God and others. Whatever it is, don't hide it or compare it. Confess it in your city groups and fight clubs, and turn from it in repentance by bringing your need to God daily.
- c. Finally, we must remember the sacrifice.
 - i. There is no greater picture of God's perfect justice and steadfast love than the cross of Christ. Our comparison, self-righteousness, and contempt for others put Jesus there.
 - 1. How can we even begin to boast in ourselves when we gaze upon the tragic consequences of our sin? How can we begin to show contempt for others in light of the unshakable love poured out on us? How can we begin to judge those around us when, apart from Jesus' death and resurrection, we're all equally drowned in the water way short of the goal.
 - ii. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is the perfect display of God's love for us and our need for Him. What else can we do but humble ourselves in its shocking, yet beautiful shadow.

CONCLUSION

To conclude my story in Cambodia, I met Comrade Duch in a UN detention center with the pastor who had led him to Christ. I filmed as the two friends chatted, laughed, and sang hymns in Khmer. Later we had communion with small crackers representing Jesus' body and small cups of juice representing His blood. So there we were in a Southeast Asian jail remembering the greatest moment in human history...the righteous Judge's brutal death in our place.

You see, by God's grace and design, this is where we all get to humbly meet...the pharisee and the tax collector, the self-righteous and the sinner, the straight-A student and the murderer...at the foot of the cross, where there's no place for self-righteousness, no room for contempt, and where there's only one person lifted up and it's to die in our place. Let's humble ourselves, church, so that Jesus, our risen King, might lift us up.