

Series: Life As Christ Sees It, #2 adapted
Valley Community Baptist Church
Avon, CT 06001

Text: Luke 18:9-14
Father's Day June 20/21, 2026
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Knowing Who We Are

A number of years ago, "60 Minutes" ran a story about park rangers in a South African wildlife preserve who were investigating the slaughter of 39 white rhinos. It turned out that the rhinos were not killed by poachers but by juvenile delinquents – not boys, teen elephants.

It all began a decade earlier when the park tried to reduce the elephant population by killing off the adult male elephants whose young were, by the park rangers' estimation, old enough to survive without them. So, the young elephants grew up fatherless.

As time went on, these young elephants literally began to roam in gangs and do things that elephants normally do not do. They threw sticks at rhinos and tried to bully them. They became sexually active way too early and also increasingly aggressive. A few were so out of control, because of the lack of a dominant male presence to keep them in line, that they began to knock over rhinos and kneel on them until they died.

The final solution was that the elephant gang leader was removed by the park rangers. Then, they brought in a dominant, older male elephant who put the young bulls in their place. The killing stopped, the young males settled down, and the rhino herd was saved. (By the way, the rhinos were a lot happier as well!)¹

If America won't listen to the teaching of Scripture on the importance of fathers, will it learn a lesson from the elephants of Africa? Today nearly one quarter of American children – about 18 million – do not live with their fathers. That percentage has doubled in 40 years. Girls without fathers are 2 ½ times more likely to get pregnant. Boys without fathers are 37% more likely to abuse drugs. Both girls and boys without fathers account for 71% of kids who drop out of high school, 90% of runaways, and 63% of youth suicides.²

The statistics I just quoted are from a report by the Department of Health and Human Services. Men, Scripture and science agree: you are a critical linchpin to your children's emotional stability, your family's health and the community's well-being. So, why are so many men running from their responsibilities as fathers?

Jesus begins the parable we're studying today with these words:

Two men went up into the temple to pray ...

Two men, two very different men. Two men, however, who typify the challenges men have faced throughout the centuries. On this Father's Day, we need to examine these two men. Ladies, put your phones down, don't check out, because what's true for these men is also true for you, not in a gender-blind way, but in a soulishly similar way. These two men faced three critical life questions. The first question was this:

I. Do I Know Myself?

In verse 9 we are given the context of this parable. It says:

He (Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt.

Did you catch the key phrase: ... *who trusted in THEMSELVES that they were righteous*? Do you see the focus? First, this was not a generic teaching. This parable had some names on it. The first man was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the classic example of those who did not rely on God for their identity, but who relied on themselves for their identity. They believed that their position as religious leaders in the community defined their relationship with God. And they despised those who didn't acknowledge this, people like Jesus.

Guys, do you know anybody who might fit into that target audience? How about men in the Frank Sinatra generation who define themselves as those who "I did it MY way"? Or, how about the Sylvester Stallone groupies who say, "Yo, I'll do it myself." Or, how about the rapper generation who despise anyone who would even suggest that a person over 25 might have an idea worth listening to? How about 95% of the American male population who just can't ever bring themselves to say the words, "I think I need some help?" Guys, WE are the target audience of this parable, not because we're mass murderers, not because we're drug dealers. We're the target audience because we rely on ourselves, as our culture has taught us, to define our own identity!

It was a Greek philosopher 500 years before Christ who said, "Know thyself." But it was King David, 1000 years BEFORE Christ, who said:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

**And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.** (Ps. 139:23-24)

Men, do you see this? This is David, the greatest warrior, the greatest leader Israel ever knew. Not a mama's boy. This guy as a teenager killed lions with a sling shot. This is the guy who took on Goliath when no one else would. This guy was a man's man and THIS GUY demonstrated courage by asking God to search him and know him. Are you man enough to do that? Only God can reveal your true identity.

This Pharisee in Jesus' story was a coward. He went to pray in the temple with an agenda. His agenda was to try to convince God that he was something that he was not. He tried to con God! He prayed:

"... 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'" (Luke 18:11)

THAT WAS A LIE! Why do I say that? Because the Pharisee was basing his analysis on his OWN view of himself, not on God's view. He came before God, not to be examined, but to declare his self-made identity.

How have you come before God here today? Have you come to TELL God something, to try to help Him UNDERSTAND who you really are? Or, do you have the courage to pray as David prayed. David was essentially saying to God, "Father, You show me who I really am. As painful as that might be, don't hold back! Show me myself. I can't discover it on my own. Show me the truth about myself." I believe that if we will pray that prayer, He will answer that prayer. And THAT is the first step toward our being the man (or ladies, the woman) that God created us to be.

The second critical question we see in this parable is this...

II. Will I Throw Myself?

Verse 13 describes the tax collector's very different approach to God. Jesus said:

“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!’” (Luke 18:13)

One of the criticisms of Christianity today is that it’s a crutch for the weak. In other words, those who believe in God do so because they’re trying to compensate for a weak ego by inventing or wishing God into existence to compensate for their weakness.

Dr. Paul Vitz, professor of Psychology at New York University, studied the opposite view, i.e., he wondered if perhaps it was atheism that practiced wishful thinking. In other words, is it possible that it’s the atheist who’s trying to compensate for some weakness in his or her life rather than the Christian?

Dr. Vitz scanned more than a dozen of the world’s most influential atheists over the last 400 years. He discovered that they all had one thing in common. Guess what it was? A defective relationship with their fathers.

Sigmund Freud wrote that his father was a sexual pervert. Voltaire fought constantly with his father, causing him later to change his surname. Both Bertrand Russell and Nietzsche lost their fathers at age four. Hitler’s father was an extremely violent man who unmercifully beat young Adolf and his mother. Stalin’s father was just as brutal as Hitler’s.

Dr. Vitz’s conclusion was simply this: “It is the Atheist who is truly practicing unconscious wish-fulfillment. They desperately wish they had a father who loved them.”³

Rather than coming to tell God something or to try to get God to understand what he was going through, the tax collector accepted the baseline reality of his life. He acknowledged the fact that he was a sinner. You know, confession like that demonstrates a certain belief about God. It demonstrates that you understand that our God is a God of love and forgiveness. If you didn’t believe that, you would never confess, would you?

Friends, what kind of a relationship did you have with your father? If it wasn’t good, if your father wasn’t forgiving, then you probably spent your childhood trying to duck the blame for things you’d done because you knew you’d be harshly punished or shamed. Is it possible that you are so reluctant to confess to God because you think you will receive the same treatment from God that you received from your earthly father? The Bible is clear: God is very different from our earthly parents. And no matter how good your parents were, they still were not perfect. But God is perfect. Isaiah 49:15-16a:

**“Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.**

Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands ...”

You see, the fact that sin is our problem is not bad news. Not with a loving father. With a loving Father, it’s good news. John Alexander puts it this way:

Sin is the best news there is ... because with sin, there’s a way out ... You can’t repent of confusion or psychological flaws inflicted by your parents – you’re stuck with them. But you can repent of sin. Sin and repentance are the only grounds for hope and joy, the grounds for reconciled, joyful relationships.⁴

A preacher of another era, Dr. F. E. Marsh, was preaching on this subject of confession. He was urging his listeners not only to confess to God, but to confess and make restitution, if necessary, to anyone that their sin had affected.

After the service, a young man came up to him and said, “Pastor, you’ve put me in a tough spot. I’ve sinned against my boss and I’m ashamed to admit it because, as a Christian, I’ve been witnessing to him about how much he needs the Lord. Now, if I confess to him, he’s going to think I’m a hypocrite.”

Dr. Marsh asked the young man what exactly he had done. The young man said that he was a boat builder and had decided to build a boat at home for himself. He wanted to use copper nails because they don’t rust, but he couldn’t afford them. So, he began stealing copper nails from work, a handful at a time. He tried to sooth his conscience by telling himself, “My boss is so rich, he’ll never miss these. Besides, he’s not paying me half what I’m worth, so basically, he OWES me these nails.”

But no matter how he justified it, he said, “... those copper nails are digging into my conscience and I know I’ve got to make things right.”

Dr. Marsh prayed with the young man that he would have the courage to do what he needed to do.

A few weeks later, the young man came into his office beaming from ear to ear. Dr. Marsh said, “So, what’s that grin all about?”

The young man said, “I did it! I confessed my sin and paid back my debt.”

Dr. Marsh said, “Well, what about your boss? What did he say?”

The young man said, “Well, he looked at me funny for a while; then he said, ‘George, I always did think you were a hypocrite, but this changes things. Any religion that would make a dishonest workman come back and confess ... and offer to settle things up, [that person’s religion] just might be worth examining.’”⁵

Got any copper nails digging into your conscience today? What I’m telling you isn’t bad news, it’s very, very good news because sin can be dealt with. So, deal with it now. Once you know yourself as God knows you, you can throw yourself on His unending mercy. He is a loving Father. Get right with your Father in heaven and He’ll give you the power to make things right with the persons you’ve sinned against as well. But don’t wait, don’t wait. Get rid of those nails in your conscience today.

Finally, as is always true when we deal with God’s Word, the news just gets better and better. First, we Know Ourselves, then we Throw Ourselves, and finally, we’re ready to ask this final question...

III. How Do I Show Myself?

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles

himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)

Have you noticed how sin makes you want to hide? Very few people are proud of their sin, even when they deny that what they did IS sin. Have you noticed this? A spokesperson for Arthur Andersen Accounting said that they did nothing wrong in the Enron scandal of 2001. Really? Then why did they shred bales of documents? Scott Peterson said that he had nothing to do with the murder of his wife, Laci. Really? Then when they arrested him, why had he grown a beard, dyed his hair, and have a ticket to Mexico in his wallet? Sin always makes you want to run and hide.

But moral purity makes you unafraid to show your ‘Google-search’ history to the world. Do you know what the word *exalted* really means? It literally means to be *lifted up*, to be *put on display* or **put where all can see**. In a moral sense, it refers to being honored. So, now we see what Jesus is driving at in the punchline to this parable.

... **“For everyone who exalts (puts on display, honors) himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted (will be honored by God).”**
(Luke 18:14)

Eugene Peterson, who wrote the paraphrase *The Message*, translates this last verse this way:

“If you walk around with your nose in the air, you’re going to end up flat on your face, but if you’re content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself.”

But is it possible for us as Christians to be more like this Pharisee, with our nose in the air, than like this tax collector, “... who would not even look up to heaven”? It happened in Matt Redman’s church in England. Matt was the worship leader of a church just outside of London. He’s written a number of worship songs that we sing here like, *10,000 Reasons* and *Better Is One Day*. Matt thought things were going along fine in his church when one day the Pastor, Mike Pilavachi, walked into his worship band rehearsal and said he thought that the people in the church were worshipping worship rather than God. So, as pastor, he wanted to worship WITHOUT any music for a while. He basically canceled the band.

How would you react if a staff member of this church showed up in your ministry meeting and canceled your ministry for period of time? Well, the members of Matt Redman’s band reacted by quitting. They took it very personally and said, “If that’s how you feel about me, I’m out of here.” All of them, all of them left the church except Matt. Listen to how he described it:

If I’m honest, at first I was pretty offended by the whole thing. The worship was my job! But as God softened my heart, I started to see [God’s] wisdom all over these actions. ... we soon learned how to bring heart offerings to God without any of the external trappings we’d grown used to. By stripping everything away, we slowly started to rediscover the heart of worship.

It was at the end of this season of music-less worship that Matt wrote these words:

*When the music fades, all is stripped away,
And I simply come;
Longing just to bring something that’s of worth
That will bless Your heart.
I’ll bring You more than a song,
For a song in itself is not what you have required.
You search much deeper within through the way things appear;
You’re looking into my heart.
I’m coming back to the heart of worship,
And it’s all about You, All about You, Jesus.
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it,
When it’s all about You, All about You, Jesus.*

Because Matt was willing to be humbled, literally to humble himself, God has greatly exalted him. His music now has a depth and substance that are leading us all into deeper levels of engaging worship with God.

So, do you know who you really are, this morning? Are you the Pharisee, it’s all about you? Or, are you the tax collector, it’s all about Jesus? If you know yourself and

throw yourself on God's mercy, you won't have to work so hard to show yourself because God will do it for you. **He who humbles himself will be exalted.** Amen.

¹ "60 Minutes," aired 1-20-99

² Health and Human Services fact sheet, Fatherhood Initiative (6-18-99), Fatherhood.org and afathersplace.org

³ Sources: Professor Paul C. Vitz, "The Psychology of Atheism," *Truth Journal* and his lecture, "The Psychology of Atheism," delivered at Columbia University (9-24-97); Anne Morse, "Atheism and Its Link to Bad Dads," *Boundless*.

⁴ John Alexander, quoted in *leadership* (Summer 2000)

⁵ H. A. Ironside, Illustrations of Bible Truth, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1945), p. 104-106.