

“Am I in the Kingdom?”

Luke 18:9-17

When our children were young they loved when my wife or I would read stories to them. One book I remember was called “The Other Side.” The setting is a town of yesteryear that was divided by a fence, separating the whites from those of African descent.

The story is told from the perspective of a young African American girl named Clover whose mother tells her not to climb over the fence when she plays because it isn’t safe. (Obviously, the roles here could easily be reversed. I know because I’ve seen it firsthand.)

Everyday when the Black children were out playing, the neighbor girl, Annie, would climb up on the fence and watch. She seemed to have no one to play with and no one ever joined her on the fence. Once, when the black girls were jumping rope together the white girl asked if she could join them. One of them quickly said no before the others had a chance to respond.

To Clover, everything on the other side of the fence seemed far away. When she asked her mother why, her mother said “because that’s the way things have always been.” But that answer didn’t satisfy Clover.

It rained a lot that summer. But every day through the summer, rain or shine, Annie would come to the fence; sometimes in a raincoat or sometimes in a dress that was soon soaked. She danced in the puddles, splashing and laughing while Clover watched from her window.

One morning after the rains had gone and the world was bathed in glorious sunlight Clover walked outside. She stretched her hands high in the sky. She enjoyed the feeling of freedom. When she looked toward the fence, there was Annie. So Clover went closer and the girls smiled at each other and introduced themselves.

Annie said to Clover “a fence like this was made for sitting on.” Clover responded “my mama says I shouldn’t go over on the other side.” Annie said “my mama says the same thing; but she never said I couldn’t sit on it.” That summer Annie and Clover often sat together on that fence. Clover waited for her mama to tell her to get down off the fence; but she never did.

One morning mama said to Clover, “I see you made a new friend.” Clover nodded and mama smiled. One day Clover’s friends were jumping rope near the fence and the new friends asked if they could join in. “I don’t care,” came the answer. So they jumped rope together; all of them. When they were tired they all climbed up on the fence and sat there in a row.

And then Annie said, “Someday, somebody’s gonna come along and knock this old fence down.” And Clover nodded; “Yeah, someday.”

All of us have fences in our lives. Fences separate things. Some are necessary; like keeping my cattle out of your yard. Some are unnecessary and need to be torn down; like the one in Annie and Clover’s neighborhood. Some are visible; some are imaginary. Some are literal, others are figurative. Sometimes we put fences where they shouldn’t be; and don’t put fences where they should be. And sadly, fences don’t just exist in our culture; they exist, too often, within the Church.

The Bible text for our consideration today is Luke 18:9 to 17. Most of the text is a parable given by Jesus, and like the previous one, He explains beforehand the reason for giving it. As I read and meditated on this portion of Scripture I was convicted and challenged. So let me read our text, Luke 18:9 to 17.

In this text Jesus introduces three kinds of PEOPLE who illustrate those seeking to enter the kingdom of God. Observing these people will help answer the question “Am I in the Kingdom?”

The First Kind of PEOPLE (seeking to enter the kingdom) are,

The Self-righteous

It’s this group of people that motivated the giving of this parable. Notice how the self-righteous are described. “They trusted for righteousness in themselves and were treating all others with contempt.” I don’t know about you, but my first reaction to this is to say, “That’s not describing me.” But my immediate reaction may indicate the presence of the very thing I deny!

Jesus opens the parable by introducing two men; a Pharisee and a publican, or tax-collector. In the Jewish mind-set of the day, these two men were on the opposite ends of the scale of respectability; they were qualitatively different. Both of them went up into the Temple to pray. The text indicates there was both a religious and physical distance between them. The normal posture of prayer in that time was to stand and raise one’s face toward the heavens.

So the Pharisee standing to pray is not, in itself, significant; but he did strike an ostentatious pose in order to be noticed. He addresses God - but has a soliloquy with his own soul. He gave a recital of his own virtues.

Now notice what he said. “God, I thank you that I am not like [the rest of] men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even (horror of horrors) like this tax collector.” To the Pharisee, this tax collector was a bottom feeder; the lowest of the low. The Pharisee attempted to elevate himself in the eyes of God by denigrating everyone not like him. His moral standards set him apart from all others. Too often I find in myself this tendency.

If God has protected you and me, and prevented us from experiencing the depths of sinful degradation, we should certainly be thankful. But it’s not because we were so good that we escaped these things; it’s only the mercy of God! Knowing this should motivate us to share with others how Christ can lift them up; not how we can put them down.

The Pharisee went on to remind God that he fasted twice a week; even though the Law required only one annual fast on the Day of Atonement. And furthermore, I give tithes of all my increase (or income). Pharisees would not eat in the home of a common person because they could not be sure that the food served had been properly tithed; according to their regulations! Their concept of righteousness was to separate themselves completely from the common people.

This Pharisee was a pretty good fellow – at least in his own eyes! He was extra pious. Not only did he not (openly) engage in the behaviors mentioned; he went beyond the requirements of the Law. And it’s obvious he thought God should be duly impressed. He’s filled with his own self-righteousness.

I confess I see too much of this attitude of self-righteousness in my own heart. I tend to exaggerate my strengths and minimize, hide, or even dismiss my failures and weaknesses. I tend to look down on those who don’t meet my standard of righteousness. And then God’s Holy Spirit reminds me that it’s not my righteousness that makes me acceptable with Him; it’s Christ’s righteousness. I have nothing to boast of outside of Christ.

The Next Kind of PEOPLE (seeking to enter the kingdom) are,

The Unrighteous

In contrast to the Pharisee, the tax collector stood afar off; that is, he stood at a distance from the Pharisee. This was because the Pharisee had set himself apart; he had stood in a prominent place where he would be noticed as one of the righteous. The tax collector has no illusions about his own worthiness to occupy such a place.

And even though it was common practice to pray with face uplifted, the tax collector refused to even lift his eyes to heaven. But smiting his breast repeatedly he prayed, “God be merciful to me, THE sinner.”

What a stark contrast in the attitudes and posture of these two men. When the Pharisee prayed his focus was on all the “other” men, the sinners. He was proud that he wasn’t like them. He had no need of forgiveness, of propitiation, because in his mind he was not a sinner.

But notice the focus of the tax collector. Maybe you caught it as I read. His focus was on himself. When he thought about sinners he saw himself first and foremost! “God be merciful to me THE sinner.” When he entered the presence of God he didn’t see others; he saw himself and his own great need.

His cry for mercy is one you and I should emulate. He understood the need for his sins to be propitiated; that’s the word he used. The same word is translated as “reconciliation” in Hebrews 2:17. He understood that his cleansing from sin could only be attained when the satisfaction demanded by God’s justice was provided. His appeal for mercy shows he understood that provision could only come from outside himself – from God. His prayer might be paraphrased, “Be toward me as you are when you look upon the atoning blood. The Bible knows nothing of divine forgiveness apart from sacrifice.”

Now look at what Jesus said in verse 14. “This man,” who is derided by the Pharisee in verse 11 as “this publican,” is now declared righteous and the Pharisee is not. Why? Because the one who exalts himself, using the righteousness of others as his standard, will be brought low. But the one who humbles himself under God’s standard of righteousness will be lifted up.

How is it with you my friend? Do you claim your place in God’s kingdom based on the good life you live? Many people do - just like this Pharisee. If you ask them how they expect to enter heaven they will say things like “well, compared to others I’m not so bad. In fact, I’m better than most. I don’t steal; at least not big things. I’ve never killed anyone or committed adultery. I go to church almost every week. I think God will accept me into heaven.”

But no, that won’t work. This parable and many other Scripture passages are clear; “God be merciful to me a sinner” is the only way into the kingdom. In the words of the song writer “nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy Cross I cling.” The blood of Jesus Christ is the only thing that satisfies God’s holy wrath against our sin. Without that blood applied to our hearts our sins are not expiated; they are not atoned for. And we will not be pronounced righteous!

There is one more group of people Jesus mentions who are seeking to enter the kingdom.

The Final Kind of PEOPLE (seeking to enter the kingdom) are,

The Unassuming

The final verses of our text show us how easily the previous teaching is missed. Even in light of what Jesus had just taught, the disciples still retained a mindset foreign to Jesus.

People were bringing infants and young children to Jesus so He could lay His hands on them and invoke a blessing. This was not something out of the ordinary. Jewish parents of that day often brought their children to the rabbis for a blessing. But evidently, Jesus' disciples thought He had more important things to do and they repeatedly rebuked those who were bringing the children to Jesus.

Jesus was grieved by their conduct and lack of understanding. Mark's record says Jesus was greatly displeased. The disciples mistakenly thought these children were incapable of receiving anything from Jesus. What He had was for adults, for grownups. But as so often was the case their actions were directly opposite to the mind of Christ.

So Jesus called the parents and their children close to Him and said, "Let them alone and do not hinder them from coming for such as these are of the kingdom of God." This, I believe, is a strong evidence for the "safety" of children before the age of accountability. They don't know pretense like the Pharisee. They don't know how to act self-righteously. Nor do they know the depth of their own depravity. They simply are what they are with a simple faith and trust in those who guide them. They make no assumptions of goodness or badness.

Jesus further states that unless we adults are willing to exercise this same mindset of humility, faith, and trust we cannot enter the kingdom of God. You see, the disciples mistakenly thought that until the children became like them, that is, grownups, they couldn't receive the kingdom. But Jesus reversed the order and told the disciples that if they wanted to enter the kingdom they needed to become like these little children.

You see, to receive the righteousness of Christ we must humble ourselves to admit that we have nothing to offer Him. That's hard for us. We are so conditioned to view love and acceptance as based on performance. Like the Pharisee we want God to be impressed with our efforts at holy living. Holy living is not wrong; it is commanded for Jesus followers. However it is the result of our acceptance with God through Jesus, not the basis of our acceptance.

As I reflected on this text the opening verses of Romans chapter four came to mind. I believe they serve as a fitting conclusion to this teaching. *“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness...”*

My friend, I stand today with the tax collector and say “God be merciful to me THE sinner.” It is the only way for me to be sure I am in the kingdom. It is the only way for you too!