

Approaching God

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

14 “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” LUKE 18:9-14 (NIV)

There are three different persons spoken of in this passage of Scripture. One of them is a Pharisee; the second is a tax collector the third is God himself. Which one, of these three, do you identify most closely?

Hopefully, prayerfully it's not God! In which case you have missed the point of the passage altogether!

Please notice, I didn't ask, what you thought the right answer was. There was no need to do that, because Jesus has already given us the right answer.

Approaching God

Most of us will not completely identify with either the Pharisee or the tax collector. Rather, we will find ourselves somewhere in the middle.

We should be more like the tax collector, but, in fact, maybe we are a little too much like the Pharisee for comfort.

Both of these men were presenting themselves before God. They both, for one reason or the other, were offering some type of prayer. Jesus teaches clearly that just because you desire to be in the presence of God it doesn't mean he will accept you.

What do you think you need in order to approach God? What does it take, what are the requirements for entering into God's presence.

For my purpose, I will not differentiate between entering God's presence in prayer in private; and coming before God in a public place. Just, what does it take to acceptably come before the Lord?

Is it perfection, royalty, religious rightness or some other possible outward trait? Do we have to be sinless and holy? Must we have a perfect track record?

In Luke, chapter 18 verses 9-14, we're given at least five components found in the right attitude of those who would like to present themselves before God's presence. These characteristics are required of God anytime and anywhere that we would seek his company.

The first is recognition that we have failed to earn the approval of

Approaching God

God. We comprehend that in no way do we deserve the privilege of His audience. The Bible makes this clear.

ROM 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (NIV)

JOB 13:16 He also shall be my salvation: for an hypocrite shall not come before him.

One of the things we all have to see is that we have not met the conditions that would warrant our access to God's throne. By simple virtue of the fact that we have deviated from God's plan for our lives, we have given up any possibility of deserving a meeting with God.

For me to fail to recognize that I have not met any condition; nor can I meet any condition; that would give me a right to stand before God is in itself unacceptable. God is holy and I'm not. The gulf that exists between God and man is more than mere distance. It is more than the difference in size and power.

The greatest measurable gap between God and myself can be stated in one word. And that one word is holiness. The Bible says the angels stand around is drawn and they saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

Though we may have erased the word sin from our vocabularies, and replaced it with more acceptable terms; God still calls it sin. We have "affairs" God still says that it is adultery. And the price to be paid for sin the same remains the same.

Second, in order to come into God's presence I must clearly understand that my sin has separated me from Him. It is not

Approaching God

sociological, physical or psychological separation; it is a spiritual separation.

ISA 59:1 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. 2 But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (NIV)

To imagine that I can receive the blessings of God, and yet reject his purpose is unacceptable according to the Scriptures. And yet, I find that people regularly speak of things like praying, and the blessing of God, while they are living in exile because of disobedience.

It is foolishness to think that I can go in and out of the presence of God like I might go in and out of a Wal-Mart store. There are conditions and I have not, in my own human effort, met them.

Third, there must be an attitude of deep humility; to the point of self-humiliation. There should be a lowering of my status and a rising of his. Seeing myself as God sees me is sobering and should bring me down a notch, or two.

Pride and arrogance have no place in the Throne room of the Almighty. We must learn that our relationship with God can never exist beyond our willingness to put aside our sense of dignity.

LUKE 18:13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" (NIV)

Approaching God

In the case of the Pharisee, the Bible says in verse 11 that he stood up and “prayed about himself.” Quite literally, he was praying to himself because God was not listening. He boasted of having not being like other men; robbers, evildoers, adulterers or even like that tax collector over there.

I wonder how often we have prayed to ourselves while imagining that we were praying to God? When our focus was completely on ourselves and not on our relationship with God at all. Filled with arrogance and pride instead of humility.

Fourth, there must be knowledge of just how badly I need God’s mercy.

MARK 10:47 When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (NIV)

The Bible says of the blind man in this verse that, he as the tax collector, does asks for the very same thing, mercy. Mercy means to not get what you deserve.

Much of what we pray about and talk about is getting our “just dues.” Making sure that we get what belongs to us. We tend to stand up for our rights, but fall down on our responsibilities.

In fact, we do not want to get what belongs to us if we want to get into God’s presence. As I have before stated, we are sinners and the price of that sin is death. Not just physical death, but ultimately permanent separation from God for eternity.

Approaching God

Finally, there has to be an understanding that God has offered the very mercy that I need. That he, based on his own will and desire has reached out to me to show not only sympathy, but also compassion. And that compassion is demonstrated in the cross of Jesus Christ.

ROMANS 5:8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

1 JOHN 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (NIV)

The Bible teaches us that our relationship with God is based on faith. Faith in what God himself has said and done. It is a believing or trusting in the nature of God's promises.

This faith is what you put in a parachute once you have cleared the airplane; it is not a feeling, but reliance. It is on the merits of the work of Jesus that I have a right to obtain mercy according to Romans chapter 5 verse one.

ROMANS 5:1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ:

Scripture teaches here that we are absolutely inexcusable when we judge someone else, or condemn someone else, and yet do the same things our selves. It assures us that the judgment of God is going to be according to truth against everyone who does such things. Then concludes with a question, how do you think that you're going to get away with your sin and escape the judgment of God?

Approaching God

An unjust man with an indictment against the holy God is like a thief complaining about the IRS. Some of us stay away from the presence of God for that very same reason; the reasons that a thief doesn't call the police on his own self. We know, that we are guilty.

ROMANS 2:1 Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. 2 But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. 3 And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God?

In order to enter the presence of God we must not only recognize that in sin we have failed, and that our sin has separated from the Lord. We must come with a sense of true humility, because of the realization that we must have the mercy of God.

Then we must take one more step. That step is to believe that God has indeed offered this mercy, by His grace, through Jesus Christ.

What does it take to approach God? The question can be answered in one word the word is honesty. There must be honesty with God and myself.

To come before God I must come as I really am. I must come in faith believing in a holy, but gracious God who loves men and gave himself for me. Or else, I try to begin a relationship with an all-powerful, all knowing completely holy God based on a lie!

Approaching God

ISA 66:2 Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the LORD. "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.