

## Justification for the Back Pew Crowd

Preached October 27, 2019

Luke 18:9-14 and Romans 3:19-31

I recently read an article that contained a tongue-in-cheek list of justifications for not sitting in the front pew in church on Sunday mornings. Since the front pews are the least populated neighborhood in the sanctuary, I have paraphrased a few of these justifications for you.

- **If you sit in the back pew, there will already be money in the offering plate when it gets to you, so no one will even notice how much you put in.**
- **When you sit up front, the preacher and the choir will know when you aren't singing along with the hymns.**
- **More people sit in back so you're more likely to be seated among friends there.**
- **Sitting in back lessens the odds of the preacher making eye contact with you at the moment he or she gets to the fire and brimstone climax of the sermon.**

As good as these justifications for sitting as far back in the sanctuary as possible may be, none of them top the justification for the back-pew crowd that Jesus gave in this parable, which opens with a line that sounds like a lead in to one of those jokes that start "Two guys walk into a bar..."

In the parable, two men—a Pharisee and a tax collector—walk into the Temple to pray. The Pharisee marches straight up to the front of the Temple, while the tax collector hunkers down in the back. Both of them begin to pray.

The Pharisee in the front of the Temple thanks God that he is not like most people, especially the tax collector lurking in the back of the Temple behind him. At the same time, in the back of the Temple, the tax collector prays by beating himself up about not being more like the Pharisee.

In a way, both prayers are right on the money.

Pharisees were exactly the kind of people that churches would love to have in the congregation. They would be the sort of members who prayed up and down the prayer list every day, could quote the Bible chapter and verse, came to church all the time, and tithed a tenth of their income without batting an eyelash. In other words, they would almost certainly be front pew folks.

The tax collector, on the other hand, has good reason to berate himself. His was a dishonorable occupation that profited from the exploitation of others. And yet, Jesus says that it was the

back-pew tax collector and not the front-pew Pharisee who went home from the Temple justified! What Jesus meant by “justified” was, having a right relationship with God. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector came to the Temple to be justified. The tax collector found what he came for, while somehow the Pharisee missed it. The tax collector receives God's mercy because he knows he needs it, and so he asks for it. The Pharisee misses out because he thinks he deserves it.

Luke tells us that Jesus “told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” The Pharisee was guilty on both counts. He assumed that his own virtuous behaviors already made him righteous in God’s sight, so he sees no need to ask for justification. And he regarded others, like the tax collector who was a blatant sinner, with contempt.

Jesus concludes the telling of his parable by warning that “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Which is shorthand for what the Apostle Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.”

What Jesus wants us to learn from this parable is that lack of humility is a barrier between us and God, and an obstacle to our healthy relationships with each other. Humility doesn’t mean feeling like we are less than anybody else. It does mean seeing ourselves as we truly are, without any self-delusions about being superior to others.

Sometimes, like the Pharisee, the good that we do can blind us to our own need for God’s grace. We can easily dismiss our “minor sins” by comparing ourselves to others whose sins are more obvious than ours. When in worship we pray together a prayer of Confession it applies to everyone, no matter which pew you call home. We all need to be reminded in a direct but loving way and in the awareness of God’s grace; that no matter how we might think we favorably measure up to others, every one of us share one big thing in common, and that is that we all fall short of the glory of God. But thanks be to God, as soon as we humbly acknowledge our dependence on God’s grace, the door is opened to receive it. That is why the Prayer of Confession is followed by Words of Assurance, that send us home in the knowledge that we are justified; our relationship with God has been set right again. Not because we deserve it but because God desires it.

But humility is a slippery concept. Such is human nature that in the instant that you experience humility, that humility is turned into something to be proud of, and we are right back where we started. The confessional moment in this parable arrives as soon as we judge the Pharisee for being judgmental towards others. And so, we all need to step back to the rear pew where the tax collector stands and ask again for God’s grace to restore the rightness of our relationship to God and to one another.

There is a little of the Pharisee and the tax collector-a little front pew and a little back pew-in all of us. While you or I can never achieve a perfect humility or completely resist comparing ourselves to others, it is possible to make progress towards those goals by paying attention to the characters in the parable.

The Pharisee, when he prays, is focused on his positive qualities and comparing himself to the tax collector with all his faults. God's place in the prayer is just to be an audience for the Pharisee's self-promotion. He asks nothing from God because he feels like his salvation is a given based on his exceptional good deeds.

Back in the rear pew section, there is no indication that the tax collector notices the Pharisee, or that he is comparing himself to him. He dares not even lift his eyes to heaven for fear of seeing God's wrathful gaze locked in on him. His focus is entirely on the brokenness of his relationship to God, and the sins he has committed against others. But for that very reason, he is also keenly aware of his only hope being God's mercy. And, he wholeheartedly asks for the mercy, without any pretense that it is owed to him.

What we can learn from this parable, is to recognize ourselves as being equal parts sinner and saint but also 100% saved by grace when we acknowledge how we all need God's help. Against all expectations, in this parable, justification-right relationship to God-comes to the back-pew crowd, which is all of us.

This "salvation by grace alone" was the treasured truth that the Reformation movement rescued from where it had gradually become buried beneath a doctrine of salvation through our own good works. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled when they discover that salvation is not a competition where we come out ahead by comparison to others who we think of as our moral inferiors. Salvation is a communion, where we drop all our self-exaltation in the awareness that when the Bible says we *all* fall short of God's intended glory, *all* really means *all*; the front-pew as well as the back-pew people. Because no matter where we *sit*, we *stand* in need of grace.

Down in Houston, Texas there is a place that seems to have figured this message out in their own unique way. And it's not a church. It's a brewery. This brewery produces two lines of beer. One is named the Sinners Line and the other is the Saints Line. The menu of beer blends offered includes one called "Sweet Salvation." This place where under one roof you will find saints, sinners and servings of sweet salvation is named, aptly enough, The Back Pew Brewery.

Martin Luther, the Reformer who championed the doctrine of justification by grace and not by works, was known to enjoy a good beer with friends at a local Ale House from time to time. If Luther was still around, you might see him and a friend walk into the Back Pew Brewery together, to have a seat in the back, and savor some sweet salvation.