

“Beyond Goodness to Trust”

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Dr. Kipp Wolfe

Luke 18:9-14

Recently while driving here in the city I noticed a church sign that had one of those messages on it. It was the kind of sign that had removable letters. The message that was on the sign was signed by God. It said, “Don’t make me come down there.”

Have you ever thought about what the world outside the church thinks about the slogans we use in the church? I looked in the Yellow Pages to find some other slogans that some churches use. As you might imagine, some churches mention their denominational affiliation: “We are associated with the Southern Baptist Convention.” Other churches are quick to point out that they have no denominational affiliation. They might say, “We are *not* affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.” Many churches today don’t call themselves “church.” They’re a worship center or some kind of temple—denying anything to do with an old-fashioned understanding of church.

One of my favorite slogans that I read in the Yellow Pages was this: “Our church feels like home.” That’s kind of good, isn’t it? A church where you go attend and be welcomed, even as you are welcomed at home. Another favorite of mine was “A helping, healing place.” My very favorite was this: “We’re making it hard to go to hell in the city!” Don’t you just love that?

I have heard this (I haven’t seen it myself), about Westminster Abbey: As you enter Westminster Abbey, above the door is a sign that says, “You are entering a conversation that began before you were born and will continue after you are dead.” Think about that. Think about the size of the church. It is larger than any of us individually; a conversation that began before we were here and a conversation that will continue long after we are gone.

Have you thought about the kind of slogan the two men in the parable would have for their church? Picture this, if you will. The Pharisee goes into the temple and stands in the very middle of the temple where everyone can see him. He shakes his

finger at God and reminds God what God needs to do. Then the tax collector kind of sneaks in, goes to the corner and bows down on his knees and says, "God, be merciful to me, please." The First Church of the Pharisees would have as their slogan, "We're not like other people." The First Church of the Tax Collectors would have as their slogan: "Our common need: God's uncommon grace." What kind of slogan would you have for your church?

We need to be careful when we look at this picture, however, as Rabbis often exaggerated in their teaching. This parable is really a caricature of what a Pharisee was and what a tax collector was. Honestly, a tax collector was a corrupt person, despised by the Jews. He was an agent of the Roman government, but he still cheated people, charging them even more than they owed and then keeping some of the extra for himself. If you were starting a church, which of these two would you rather have in your church? Think about it. The Pharisee would do anything you asked. He would teach the Junior High boys' Sunday School class. He would serve on any committee. He would go and visit inactive members and, on Consecration Sunday it's important to remember, he would give a tithe and beyond. The tax collector was corrupt. If you were starting a church, which of these two men would you rather have in your church?

In preparing for this sermon, I read a wonderful story about two other men. They were stranded on the proverbial deserted island. As soon as they arrived, one of the men went to work immediately. He built a large fire, he collected stones and coconuts to make a message on the beach: "S.O.S" Hopefully it would be seen by anyone flying overhead in an airplane. The other man just sat back and relaxed with a smile on his face. After a while, the first man, who was working so hard, went to the second man. He was a little irritated. "Why aren't you helping?" The second man said, "I'm not worried at all." The first man said "Why not?" The second man said, "Let me tell you something. My business last year grossed over a million dollars. I'm having an even better year this year. On top of that, I give more than a tithe to my church. I know my minister will find me."

I don't know if this man trusted more in God or his minister, but there's not

much doubt about the two men in the parable is there? Do you see what's going on here? The Pharisee trusted his goodness more than God's goodness, while the tax collector was completely dependent upon God's mercy.

This year we've used the theme "It's All About God" for our stewardship campaign. In this parable, we see that it really is all about God. Often the main obstacle between us and God is our own pride. Last week we studied the parable of the persistent widow. I said the word for that parable was *tenacity*. It is the best word to describe faith that never lets go. The word for today is *humility*.

Take a moment where you're seated and look around—beside you, in front of you, at some of the other people who are here today. Do that right now. Look at some of the other people who are here this morning. It's a pretty good looking group this morning, isn't it? How do you "stack up" with the other people who are here today? How do you compare to them? Is your faith stronger? Are you a better person? Do you look at some of these people honestly and say, "Thank God I'm not like them!"

Now imagine this. Look around the Sanctuary. It might be more difficult to find him. Look for the one with the beard, the one who's wearing the sandals and the robe. You will notice him most by the scars in his hands and feet. How do you compare with him?

As Christians, our standard is not the person who sits next to us or beside us, in front of us or behind us. Our standard is Christ. It really is All About God. We are called to witness our faith in such a way that others are drawn to Christ, not driven away. It can be so difficult at times, it seems, when we look down our noses with contempt for those who are not only outside the church but even those inside the church. Even those within our own family. It becomes so easy just to write them off. I have known family members who have done that. Some cross words, someone did something or didn't do something and someone else was disappointed. It is as if one family member says to another, "You are dead to me. I want nothing to do with you ever again." Contempt. No humility at all.

There is a true story of a man by the name of Bill Wilson. In true life, he was a very successful businessman. He wrote a book titled, "My name is Bill W." If you have ever been associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, you will recognize that name. He was the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. He was the one who would get up in the meeting and say, "My name is Bill. I'm an alcoholic." A first step. A first step toward living our faith the way Christ expects us to live our faith, is to be able to say, "My name is Kipp. I'm a sinner." I want you to do something right now. I want you to repeat that phrase, but I want you to use your own name. Will you stand up at this time please? Will you repeat those words using your own name? My name is _____. I'm a sinner. You can be seated now.

As one sinner to another, we can be honest with each other now, can't we? There is something of both men within each of us. It is just as wrong to say "I thank God that I'm not like that Pharisee" as it is to say, "I thank God that I'm not like that tax collector. A word for parents of young children especially. We live in a world in which some families seems to kind of revolve around the schedule of the children; Little League activities, school activities, one thing after another, until everyone in the family is almost exhausted. Parents, one thing you can do for your children is to teach them that they are not the center of the universe. At the same time, you can say to your children, "You're not only my child, you're God's child. You have been created in God's image."

I can look out the window in my office and see a Bradford Pear tree. Several days ago, maybe even three or four weeks ago, I noticed some of the leaves were starting to turn red. One day I counted the ones I could see on my side of the tree There were 29 leaves that were beginning to turn that deep, rich red, the way those Bradford Pears do. I think if you went out there and tried to count now it would be almost impossible because so many are beginning to turn red. Eventually that entire tree will seem to be ablaze with color. You remember the science lesson about how the leaves turn color. It doesn't have so much to do with the temperature, with it getting cooler. It's more to do with a lack of sunlight. As the sunlight lessens, the chlorophyll that is present in all

of the leaves is cut off and begins to seep away. Then the true color, the red, the gold, the yellow—the true color of the leaf begins to show. Do you hear that lesson? As we begin to remove the sinfulness from our lives, our true selves begin to show—we are indeed created in God’s own image.

Two lessons from the parable. One is this: “Why try? If God is going to forgive us no matter how we live, why try? What difference does it make?” That seems to be a fair question. The answer to that question is, “God doesn’t forgive us or love us because we are good. God forgives us and loves us because that’s the way God is, and that’s the way God expects us to be. We serve out of gratitude for that love and grace.

The second lesson is this: “Where’s the Good News in this parable?” The Good News of this parable is this: “God loves sinners.” Which is another way of saying “God loves each of us.” We don’t need to pray a prayer to a God who says, “Don’t make me come down there,” because God is already here with us. We can become aware of that presence if we will simply pray a prayer that says, “Come into my heart.”

Amen