

# Competitive Entry Scores

*A sermon on Luke 18:9-14 by Nathan Nettleton, 27 October 2019*

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## Message

God delights to welcome everyone, and is not interested in who is better or worse, but we imagine God to be an elitist who mirrors our tendency to pick and choose and only accept the best.

## Sermon

The story we heard Jesus tell in tonight's gospel reading has probably inspired many disastrous sermons today. It is so tempting, and such fun. The elitist arrogance of the Pharisee's prayer, and his overblown confidence in the purity of his own exemplary religious practices easily inspire all manner of delighted comparisons. Private school boys defending their school chants come to mind.

There are so many holier-than-thou types of all different stripes and colours. There are ultra-conservative fundamentalist types on the right wing, trumpeting their faithfulness to the Bible and crusading against every moral failing, especially if it has anything to do with sex. And there are smug, supercilious liberals on the left wing who are oh-so-sure of the intellectual superiority of their blandly enlightened theologies.

And it is such fun to point the finger and laugh over the comparisons between our chosen targets and the bad guy in this story. It is a hoot. But if we do that, the joke is on us, and it's not very funny.

You see, any reading of this parable that sets about identifying someone else as being as bad as the Pharisee, and thereby identifies us rather comfortingly with the repentant tax-collector, is in fact falling into the exact same error that is being exposed in the Pharisee.

It is important to notice that the characteristics for which this Pharisee is identified are both his "trust in his own righteousness" and "regarding others with contempt." And it is way too easy for us preachers to enthusiastically point at our chosen enemies trusting in their own righteousness while thus casting ourselves headlong into regarding others with contempt.

You see, the most important distinguishing characteristic of the repentant tax-collector in this story is that he doesn't retaliate in kind. Most of us – well maybe not you, but me at least – would have been unable to resist the temptation to retaliate. Hearing the Pharisee loudly praying "Thank you God that I am not like that miserable scumbag over there", as he looked contemptuously down his nose at me, I'd have been raising my voice so everyone could hear me pray, "Thank you God that you have spared me from becoming an arrogant, holier-than-thou prat like that stuck-up bigot over there who wouldn't know if a tram was up him till the bell rang." And the moment I retaliated like that, I would have made myself the equal of that arrogant Pharisee.

One of the things that helps illuminate what is going on in this reading is to note how it follows on immediately from the one we heard last Sunday. I didn't preach on the gospel reading last Sunday, so I'll remind you of it. It was the story Jesus told about the poor widow who kept pestering the local magistrate, asking for him to vindicate her against her opponent

in some legal dispute. And the magistrate, although corrupt and without caring a hoot about the widow's situation, eventually deals with the case just to get rid of her.

So part of what Jesus is pointing to, when he follows up with this story of the arrogant Pharisee and the repentant tax-collector, is a similarity in their quests. The poor widow wants to be vindicated, and the tax-collector, we are told, does go home vindicated.

But the problem that is thus illumined is our tendency to always think of vindication as competitive. We want the judgement to come down for us and against them. It is always one against the other. And so that's exactly what we see going on in the Pharisee's prayer. He sees himself as standing before God who he imagines as a judge who will vindicate one and reject the other, and having thus imagined God, he stands proud and confident that he has the case well and truly won.

For the Pharisees, rigorous compliance with the religious law was everything, and this bloke was as good as any and better than most on that score. We have no reason to think he was boasting idly. For him, and indeed for many of us, the purpose of the religious law was to give us clear guidance to enable us to see whether or not we were making the grade, and to see whether or not others were making the grade.

We look to the law to provide an assurance of our own goodness, and a measure of our status in relation to those around us who are not doing nearly so well in complying. Just as it does in the law courts, the law thus becomes a way of dividing us up into winners and losers, the vindicated and the condemned.

This unmasks a fundamental misunderstanding of who God is and what God is like. It shows that we are thinking of God as being picky and choosy. We think that God is a bit like a university admissions department who only wants to accept the top performers. We think that entry into the love of God is thus a bit like VCE Enter scores: places are limited and God is only going to accept those who score better than others.

The Pharisee in our story is a perfect reflection of the God he believes in. He looks around him, and rejoices to see that very few others can match his level of compliance with the law because that assures him that his competitive enter score will be more than adequate to assure his acceptance into the love of God. He is quite sure that God is just like him, dividing us up and looking approvingly on a few winners while despising the losers and rejects.

And as ugly as it sounds when I put it like that, most of us are still caught up in that understanding to some extent. We vary in what it is that we imagine that God is measuring about us, but most of us think that we ultimately have to qualify, make the grade, get an entry score.

Some of us think that God is measuring our Sabbath-keeping and our church attendance and our sexual modesty, and others think that God is measuring our parenting skills and our physical fitness and our patriotism, and still others think that God is measuring our recycling and sustainable energy use and checking our shopping trolleys for organic fair-trade produce.

And while most of us wouldn't stand up in public like this Pharisee and congratulate ourselves for proving ourselves more worthy of God's acceptance than everyone else, we nevertheless

look around us and readily note to ourselves how poorly others are doing in living up to our standards.

Thus, “the law”, whichever version of it we have subscribed to, has been turned into a tool of exclusion and oppression. It divides us up, and condemns some while vindicating and rewarding a precious few. Which, as Jesus showed us and the Apostle Paul banged on about repeatedly, is a far cry from what the law was intended to do.

The Biblical law was intended to show us that it is utterly impossible to earn God’s acceptance. Even if you could prove that you were twice as good as the next person, that would only show that you had achieved a grade of 2% to their 1% while the cut-off pass mark still sat at 99%. The point of the law was not to provide us with a means to divide ourselves up as better and worse, but to show us that we are all pretty much in the same boat and all utterly dependent on the grace and mercy of God.

The purpose was to show us that our one and only hope of being accepted into the love and life of God is if, having shown us that we are all in the same boat, God says, “Guess what? I’ll take the whole shipload of you! You’re all in!”

And that, my friends, is precisely what Jesus came to make known to us about God. He lived and died trying to get us to see that although God cares intensely about what’s good for us and how we treat each other, God is not the least bit interested in who is the best. God does not want only the best or the brightest or the healthiest or the wealthiest or the most frugal or the prettiest or the most responsible or the most careful and conscientious. And God certainly doesn’t wish to spend eternity surrounded by none but the upper echelon of anal retentive law-keepers!

God wants everybody. Absolutely everybody. No matter who you are or what you’ve done or what you are yet to do, God longs to welcome you in and seat you in honour at the banqueting table of God’s love and life. God is not the least bit interested in measuring your worth and testing you to see whether you deserve it. You don’t, and that’s a given, but it is also a complete irrelevance because neither does anybody else and God wants all of you.

But, you might be thinking, doesn’t Jesus say that one man went home justified rather than the other? Doesn’t that mean that somehow the repentant tax-collector made the grade and the arrogant Pharisee didn’t, and so it is still a competitive entry system but the Pharisee misread the conditions.

Well, good question, and thanks for asking! But the answer is no. The tax-collector in this story doesn’t do anything to qualify for God’s love and acceptance. It’s not a humility competition either. The only reason the tax-collector in this story goes home justified is that he puts his trust entirely in God’s mercy. He knows he’s got nothing to offer if it is a competition, and that his only hope is the merciful love of God. And so he despises no one and makes no attempt to prove that his humility should trump someone else’s piety. He simply puts himself at the mercy of God and accepts whatever God gives him, which turns out to be love and grace and freedom and life, and if you want a score, here’s a hundred percent for free.

And the reason that the Pharisee ends up cut off from God is not because God has rejected him, but because he has rejected the God who would accept the tax-collector. He has demanded the right to prove himself worthy of God's love, and to earn God's acceptance on the basis of a higher qualifying score than the losers who surrounded him.

Those who demand the right to prove themselves worthy always end up despising those around them who have proved themselves unworthy, and they insist on special recognition and special treatment, and are absolutely scandalised by any suggestion that they might enter alongside everyone else as though they were the equals of everyone else. And thus scandalised, they refuse the offer point blank. They turn down the gift and demand that God raises the standards.

And Jesus shakes his head sadly and says, "I'm sorry, but there is only one door. I'd love you to come in, but you've got to come in with this lot because I'm not turning them away. We're not going to introduce a competitive entry system. We love and welcome all who will come and we're handing out hundred percents for free. No favourites."

That's the reality we aim to reflect here as we gather around this table. There is no qualification system. Jesus issues invitations to all, and we'd be failing him if we turned away anyone who accepts his invitation. Does that mean that God doesn't care and we don't care how anyone lives or behaves or treats one another? No. God cares and we care because we want the best for everyone.

But it is when we know ourselves accepted and beloved that we are freed to live up to the righteousness that is given to us as a gift. Jesus promises us that we are already loved and accepted by God and nothing can ever take that away, and therefore we have nothing to fear and we are liberated to live with freedom and flair and to freely and recklessly express all the love and grace that we have been so freely given. The enter score is zero. God accepts the whole top one hundred percent. And the bottom hundred percent too! So every one of us can eat and pray and give thanks and know ourselves forgiven and beloved and go home justified. Thanks be to God!